

Education for Democracy in an Age of Political Polarization

Elizabeth Anderson

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

POLITICAL ROOTS OF CHALLENGES TO FREE DISCUSSION IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

Public education in the U.S. today faces challenges to free discussion from multiple actors. As of May 2023, public officials in 44 states had attempted to limit how public schools can teach about racism. Eighteen states succeeded in doing so by passing bills or taking other actions censoring teachers, usually by banning instruction in what the laws call “critical race theory.”¹ Eight states have passed laws banning teachers from mentioning LGBTQ people or issues.² Members of various school boards have received hundreds of anonymous letters threatening their lives and safety, based on objections the letter writers have toward their purported policies concerning critical race theory, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Angry parents at school board meetings have also threatened board members and teachers for similar reasons.³ At colleges and universities, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) has documented 553 calls to disinvite speakers, or disruptions of a speaker’s event, since 1998.⁴ It has also recorded 1093 calls to sanction scholars for their speech since 2000, from activists, students, alumni, corporations, administrators, the general public, politicians, and other scholars.⁵ Various actors have also demanded the cancellation of courses and censorship of curricular materials and art displays on campus.

Actors from both left and right have engaged in such activity. Threats to open discussion in K-12 schools overwhelmingly come from the right. Calls to censor scholars in higher education most often come from the left. Whatever their ideological origins, many such calls share a common rationale: that certain kinds of speech harm students by hurting their feelings. On the left, we hear of microaggressions and speech that makes students feel unsafe. On the right, many curricular bans forbid teaching that “any individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or

her race or sex.”⁶ Implicit in these complaints is the presumption that students have the right not to feel uncomfortable by campus speech. One might be tempted to sneer that *everyone* now is a “coddled snowflake,” claiming a right to “safe spaces” and “politically correct” indoctrination. But sneers do not supply understanding of these challenges to education.

Threats to open discussion in public schools have increased in frequency and severity in the past several years. Increasing levels of partisan polarization partially explain this trend. Political scientists distinguish two types of polarization. Issue-based or ideological polarization refers to high levels of policy or ideological disagreement between members of rival political parties. Affective polarization refers to increasing levels of antipathy toward members of rival political parties to one’s own. In the U.S. today, affective polarization has outrun issue-based polarization. Cross-party animus is increasing even among members of rival parties who don’t strongly disagree on policies.⁷ Substantial majorities of Republicans and Democrats say that members of the other party are more close-minded, dishonest, and immoral than other Americans.⁸

Extreme partisans often express their antipathy toward political rivals with toxic discourse. They insult, mock, troll, harass, and threaten members of the other party. They demonize their rivals by spreading disinformation about them. Toxic discourse further enrages opponents, leading them to attempt to silence their harassers through grassroots mass shaming, heckling, or censorship. This cycle of recrimination further propels affective polarization.

I propose that we view toxic political discourse today as a vehicle of group status or esteem competition. Group insults, slurs, and demonization obviously function in this way. They raise the relative standing of certain identity groups by demeaning their rivals. Such behavior presumes that group esteem is zero-sum: that one group can secure its status only at the expense of other groups. Group-based trolling functions similarly. Trolls aim to dominate groups they consider inferior by getting them upset. They “win” by derailing conversations among members of rival groups, making themselves the center of attention, and filling the psychic space of their rivals, thereby demoralizing them and even driving them out of public discourse.

Intergroup distrust further inflames toxic discourse. Suppose group P views group Q with deep suspicion. Members of P will not accept statements by members of Q as sincere, but interpret them as hostile moves against P. In particular, they may systematically interpret statements by Q as moves in a zero-sum competition for superior esteem against P—as insults or affronts against P. I will argue that this interpretive frame drives many of the threats to free discussion and inquiry in schools today. To judge how to respond to these threats, we need first to consider what values ought to govern speech among citizens in democracies. Given the pivotal role of public schools in educating students to be citizens in democratic states, these values should also inform the norms of discourse and pedagogy in public schools.

DEMOCRATIC VALUES, FREE SPEECH, AND DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

I stand with John Dewey in affirming that democracy is a way of life. It is not merely a legal order defined by institutions such as periodic election of officeholders. For democracy to work, ordinary people must be engaged in public affairs. Their perspectives and concerns on matters of public interest—not just their votes—must be taken into account by officials. To even count as matters of *public* interest, they must be shaped in public discussion. As Dewey argued in his best short work of public philosophy, “the heart and final guarantee of democracy is in free gatherings of neighbors . . . to discuss . . . what is read in uncensored news of the day.”⁹

Democracy is a way of life based on an ideal of public problem-solving based on discussion rather than force or coercion. Such discussion must involve the citizens, who are acknowledged as equals by their fellow citizens—not just in enjoying equal rights, but in having something to contribute to discussion. Everyone has something to contribute because democratic societies are inherently socially differentiated—by occupation, residential location, life circumstances, lifestyles, social identities, and much more. Such social differentiation entails that the social order and public policies will have asymmetrical impacts on different people. Different citizens will have different experiences of society and diverse perspectives on it. These diverse experiences and perspectives must be able to

shape public understandings of the problems the public faces, as well as public policy solutions to those problems. Such diverse inputs are needed to ensure that public policies are effective and equitably distribute the costs of solutions.¹⁰

Democracy as a way of life is founded on the following commitments. First, we must respect “the fact of reasonable pluralism”—that, due to inherent social differentiation of free societies, different individuals will reasonably affirm different values and lifestyles.¹¹ Second, individuals must be free to express their views to shape others’ conceptions of the problems we face together and the kinds of policies that could effectively address those problems. Third, for such speech to be able to perform this function, others must be ready to listen and be open to changing their minds. Fourth, such formative discussions open possibilities for creative, positive-sum solutions to public problems. Finally, citizens must be willing to fairly share the burdens of public policies, rather than singling out some groups for unreciprocated sacrifice.

Given these commitments, it is easy to see how toxic discourse—including harassment, insults, slurs, trolling, and demonizing disinformation—gravely undermines democracy. As Dewey argued,

Intolerance, abuse, calling of names because of differences of opinion about religion or politics or business, as well as because of differences of race, color, wealth or degree of culture are treason to the democratic way of life. For everything which bars freedom and fullness of communication sets up barriers that divide human beings into sets and cliques, into antagonistic sects and factions, and thereby undermines the democratic way of life. Merely legal guarantees of the civil liberties of free belief, free expression, free assembly are of little avail if in daily life freedom of communication, the give and take of ideas, facts, experiences, is choked by mutual suspicion, by abuse, by fear and hatred.¹²

It doesn’t follow from Dewey’s argument that speech that is “treason to the democratic way of life” should be censored by law. In most cases, the

law is too heavy-handed and unable to draw appropriate distinctions, and the state cannot be trusted with the power to censor.¹³ It does follow, however, that not all legal speech constitutes a legitimate contribution to public discourse. Toxic discourse silences others. Whenever some utterance hijacks discussion for purposes of esteem competition or dominance display, it displaces the evidence-based, cooperative, constructive problem-solving that is properly central to democratic discourse. Moreover, discourse that insists that the other side *is* the problem, or that politics is inherently zero-sum, threatens democratic attempts to seek common ground as a basis for exploring solutions to shared problems.

Democracy as a way of life requires a democratic ethos of communication that repudiates toxic discourse. If legal enforcement of this ethos is inappropriate, the main alternative is regulation by social norms. Yet certain kinds of informal sanctions on speech are themselves toxic. For example, mass shaming or denunciation of individuals for crossing lines that are not common knowledge, that exclude sincere (even if misguided or ignorant) attempts at inquiry, or that enforce a narrow, rigid dogma violate the democratic ethos. Such sanctions are also typically self-defeating. Ostracizing people for their possibly bigoted opinions is a poor way to persuade them to reconsider. It may even lead them to double-down on their utterance in ego self-defense, or drive them into the arms of bigots who welcome them. It deters others from engaging the issues out of fear of similar treatment. For these reasons, as Loretta Ross has argued, “calling in” such people—respectfully (and often privately) explaining to them how their speech may be ignorant or prejudiced—is usually better than calling them out.¹⁴

Mass shaming is not even advisable for ordinary trolls. It gives them the attention they crave. On college campuses, it plays into the hands of careerist conservative students, who are paid by outside conservative organizations to provoke outrage among left-wing students. Those who succeed in provoking an episode of left-wing “cancel culture” that is covered in the mainstream press are rewarded with jobs in conservative organizations upon graduation.¹⁵ To discourage such toxic discourse, it is better to starve than feed trolls’ appetite for notoriety.

Dewey rightly argued that public schools are critical institutions for promoting democracy as a way of life. They are key sites for teaching young

people the skills of citizenship. These skills are essentially relational. In a well-run school, students learn to treat others as equals. They learn to communicate respectfully across differences of opinion, perspective, and social identity. They learn to listen to others' perspectives. Serious listening helps students recognize the limitations of their own perspectives and experiences, and to revise their own perspectives in light of others' views. Well-managed classroom discussions can facilitate empathy with diverse others by facilitating analogic perspective-taking. While not everyone has experienced exclusion and contempt on the basis of their social identities, most have experienced these things for one reason or another. Recalling those experiences often helps people to relate to those who suffer exclusion and contempt for systematic, identity-based reasons.¹⁶

To develop and exercise the skills of democratic citizenship, individuals need to avoid the toxic discourse of zero-sum social identity-based status competition. We can sharpen this requirement by distinguishing two different levels of moral claim. In democratic contexts, first-order moral claims attempt to answer the following questions: "what are *our* problems?" and "what should *we* do about them?" Second-order moral claims attempt to answer the question: "who is better than who?" A democratic ethos of communication demands that we focus on first-order claims to the exclusion of second-order claims. Attempts to create identity-based hierarchies are fatal to the democratic way of life.

To teach the skills of citizenship, educational content should therefore relentlessly focus on first-order claims. Especially relevant are those first-order claims relevant to promoting democratic social relations. When relating historical facts—including especially failures of the country to live up to its own professed ideals of freedom, equality, and democracy—there is no need to preach. The teacher's job is rather to guide class discussion of these facts in accordance with a democratic ethos.

With these conceptions of the citizenship skills and ethos of democratic education that students need to practice in public schools, let us now reconsider contemporary challenges to freedom of speech in educational contexts.

STATE BANS ON “CRITICAL RACE THEORY” AND DISCUSSION OF LGBTQ ISSUES

State laws banning so-called “critical race theory” and mention of LGBTQ people and issues have had dramatic effects. PEN America reports that from July 2021–June 2022, 1648 titles were banned in schools across the U.S. Of these titles, 41% contained LGBTQ themes or characters, 40% contained characters of color, and 21% dealt with issues of race and racism.¹⁷ The authors banned are disproportionately people of color and/or LGBTQ. Florida’s Stop Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees (W.O.K.E.) Act and “Don’t Say Gay” bill (which prohibits discussion of sexual orientation or gender identity in early grades) are responsible for a large proportion of banned titles. Due to Florida’s substantial share of the U.S. textbook market, its decisions about approved textbooks affect public school choices in other states.

Florida’s ban on “divisive concepts” is so vague that school officials are left guessing how to apply it. The penalties for violating the laws are so severe—including loss of jobs and teaching licenses, civil liability, and even a felony conviction for distributing purportedly “pornographic” material—encourage school officials to ban legally permitted materials. The state’s own guidance instructs school officials to “err on the side of caution” in banning materials. Hence, books that depict people of color facing racial discrimination have been removed, as well as an elementary reader about two male penguins who adopted a baby penguin.¹⁸ Florida’s laws effectively erase the viewpoints, history, and even existence of people of color and LGBTQ people from the curriculum. They make teachers afraid to engage in good-faith discussions of race and gender issues.

What material remains in the curriculum after the history of racism and the struggle against it are whitewashed, and LGBTQ people are removed? Left standing are representations of race and gender that are flattering to white, racially resentful, heterosexual parents. By keeping the stories, perspectives, and existence of other citizens out of the schools, conservative censorship laws leave uncorrected negative stereotypes against other groups that pervade U.S. culture. Students will still know that Blacks, for example, are disproportionately poor, unemployed, on public assistance, and incarcerated. But if schools are forbidden

to present evidence of historical and continuing systematic racism in the U.S., it will be hard for students to arrive at any other conclusion than that Blacks' disadvantages are all their fault.

The point of the bans appears to be to ensure that curricular representations are flattering to white conservative parents and implicitly disparaging to other groups. When advocates say they are only banning "hatred of America," they mean that the ideology of American Exceptionalism must trump evidence of systematic racism. When they worry that "critical race theory" teaches "divisive concepts," they really worry that teaching the history of racism in the U.S. will make "them" (people of color) dislike "us" (white people). When they worry that learning about racism will make (implicitly white) children feel guilt or shame, they are defending the myth of white innocence, on which their own sense of status relies. In all of these cases, second-order concerns about protecting white status superiority override first-order claims relevant to what our problems are and how we should address them.

Advocates justify bans on teaching "critical race theory" and mentioning LGBTQ people in the name of "parents' rights" to direct their children's education. Yet in some cases, materials have been removed on the complaint of a single parent. Pinellas County, Florida schools removed the Disney film "Ruby Bridges" after an objection from just one parent. The film depicts the first grader who integrated a New Orleans school with the help of U.S. marshals protecting her against angry white parents. The objecting parent feared that students might learn "that white people hate Black people."¹⁹ Yet, as other parents in the Pinellas County complained, that parent ended up directing the education of other parents' children against their wishes. The "parents' rights" claim is not just contradictory but authoritarian and undemocratic. It is undemocratic not only procedurally but substantively. Education for citizenship inherently involves learning to engage with people who have different experiences, perspectives, values, and social identities from one's own. *If students are not encountering ideas that are dissonant with their parents' ideas, they are not learning the skills of citizenship.*

Nearly a century ago, W. E. B. Du Bois argued that the distortion and obliteration of African American history is "part foundation of our present

lawlessness and loss of democratic ideals,” and that it reinforces racism, “mutual hatred and contempt.” In the wake of the January 6 insurrection, his words speak to us today. Du Bois also argued that the use of history “for inflating our national ego and giving us a false but pleasurable sense of accomplishment” defeats the scientific aim of “accuracy . . . which will allow its use as a guidepost for the future of nations.”²⁰ In my terminology, Du Bois was arguing that, to practice democratic education and science, we must repudiate identity group esteem competition.

PROBLEMS WITH CURRENT ANTI-RACIST PEDAGOGY

Educators at all levels should consider whether their own anti-racist pedagogy, however unwittingly, plays in to the group status-competition game to the detriment of democratic and scientifically rigorous education. I have already noted that the endless cycle in higher education of right-wing provocation, left-wing outrage and censorship, and right-wing grievance over the censorious left feeds this toxic status-competition game. Some staples of anti-racist pedagogy also fall into the same trap.

Consider the common definition of racism as “prejudice plus power.” To the extent that the “power” in this formula aims to direct our attention to the *structural* features of racism in the U.S, this is vitally important for grasping problems of racial injustice today. However, the formula goes wrong insofar as (1) it is simultaneously attempting to erect criteria for when an *individual* is racist, and (2) it is interpreted as using “racist” as a second-order term of moral denunciation. Among most white people, “racist” is not a first-order term of social analysis. It is a second-order term of vilification. The “prejudice plus power” formula thus appears to instruct students that only white people are racist, since they are the ones with power. It does no good to reserve another moral term, such as “prejudiced,” applicable to people of color when they express bigotry against white people. Calling someone “prejudiced” does not carry nearly the same opprobrium. The formula still reads to many white people as saying that people of color are exempt from an extremely grave moral vice that is pervasive among white people, hence implying that people of color are morally superior

to white people on account of their racial identities. No wonder so many whites are outraged. The provision in many CRT laws, banning the idea that one race is inherently superior to another, appears to be a reaction to the “prejudice plus power” formula.

The formula is also analytically flawed. To the extent that individual racism is manifested in actions that reproduce racist institutions, every member of society is implicated. We are all complicit because individuals can meet their needs only through participation in racist institutions. Moreover, it is not true that individuals can only be racist against out-group members. Colorism exists within Black and Latinx communities. Black police often use excessive violence against Black suspects.

“White privilege” is another staple of anti-racist pedagogy. Instead of focusing on how institutions systematically disadvantage people of color, white students are taught to examine how the system systematically advantages them. As a precaution against whites presuming that whatever advantages they enjoy over people of color are due to their superior merit, there is nothing wrong with this. Yet the stress on white privilege, manifested in such exercises as asking individual white students to generate lists of the ways institutional racism advantages them in particular, suffers from several moral and political flaws. To many whites, white privilege pedagogy looks like an attempt to guilt-trip whites into a leftist partisan political agenda. No wonder anti-CRT laws ban any teaching that an individual “should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress” because of their race.

Hard questions should be asked about whether a guilt-inducing privilege frame for understanding racism has the salutary effects hoped for. How is inducing consciousness in white students of their own racial privilege expected to help people of color? To the extent that they feel manipulated into feeling guilty, individuals tend to resent such treatment, dig in their heels, and distort their own interpretation of facts to defend themselves against denigrating judgments. The privilege frame thus tends to invite the group ego defenses of positional esteem competition that are central to the dynamics of contemporary white attacks on “wokeness.”

To the extent that privilege pedagogy represents all white privilege as on-net beneficial for whites, it teaches bad moral lessons. It encourages an atomistic conception of well-being divorced from the value of living in just social relations with others.²¹ Moreover, to receive undeserved superior esteem from others simply because of one's race is not a genuine benefit, even if it feels that way. It induces a kind of morally disabling narcissism and psychic fragility that depends on others' unjustified esteem for oneself. It makes people injure others as well as twist themselves in psychically costly ways in order to keep up illusions. James Baldwin understood this better than anyone else. He stressed the psychic and moral damage whites inflict *on themselves* as well as on Blacks from erecting and stubbornly upholding anti-Black institutional racism.²² Consider, for instance, how the demonization of Black people that is needed to legitimize violent anti-Black racist policing stokes terror in white people, especially white police officers. Consider how anti-Black propaganda spread by white politicians and their right-wing media allies is *intended* to make white people terrified of Blacks in order to gain their votes. Whatever baseless feelings of terror are, they certainly are not a privilege.

The privilege frame induces white students to examine other dimensions of identity on which they are *not* privileged—for example, by class, rural identity, or membership in a stigmatized religion—to cast off the opprobrium of undeserved privilege. To the extent that anti-racist instructors double-down on insisting that every white student identify their white privilege, they miss a vital opportunity to convert a second-order ego-defense strategy into a first-order examination of how racism against people of color also undermines whites. Anti-Black racism in particular was not designed to uplift all whites. It was intended to serve wealthy elite whites at the expense of everyone else. In the post-Reconstruction era, poor rural whites suffered disenfranchisement *under the same laws* that were explicitly tailored to disenfranchise Blacks.²³ Poor white sharecroppers also suffered severe economic disadvantages under a sharecropping system tailored to racist stereotypes about Blacks' abilities.²⁴ The claim that anti-black racism uplifts all whites was a propagandistic strategy to get poor whites to endorse the white supremacist social contract. Post-Reconstruction white supremacist policies provide outstanding

examples of how *poor whites suffered from anti-Black racism*. Today, Republican politicians offer poor whites a deal in which, in return for opposing Obamacare (under which they would gain affordable health insurance), they can deny Blacks a policy that propagandists have framed as “Black reparations.” Whites are dying as a result of accepting this deal.²⁵

The white privilege frame implicitly accepts at face value the zero-sum logic of white supremacy, according to which all whites gain by keeping down other groups. This obscures the ways racism against people of color *materially* harms whites, too. From Du Bois to Heather McGhee, actual critical race theorists (*contra* the caricatures depicted in anti-CRT bills) have rightly insisted that anti-Black racism hurts white people too—not only psychologically but materially, by impeding the multiracial coalitions needed to promote policies that help everyone.²⁶

A PATH FORWARD FOR TEACHING ABOUT ISSUES RELATED TO SOCIAL IDENTITY CONFLICT AND AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

Current threats to free discussion in education are partially rooted in affective polarization. Polarization drives and is driven by toxic discourse that aims to raise or secure the social status of some identity groups by suppressing and distorting the speech of other groups. In educational settings, this group-based status competition has generated repeated cycles of toxic speech, recrimination, censorship, and grievance expressed in further toxic speech. John Dewey appealed to an ideal of democracy as a way of life to distinguish legitimate contributions to open discussion from authoritarian speech that silences and coerces by insulting, harassing, and threatening others.

In educational settings, as Dewey stressed, we need to adopt a democratic pedagogy to teach the skills of citizenship to all students. Democratic pedagogy *requires* that students encounter diverse perspectives and viewpoints held by people in the wider society. Such encounters enable students to recognize the parochiality of their own perspectives, the range of alternative perspectives, and the facts they cannot easily assimilate into their current views. This recognition will likely induce discomfort. The teacher’s job is neither to protect students

from such discomfort, nor to prescribe what kinds of discomfort they ought to feel. It is to foster the conditions of good-faith, respectful discussion across differences of social and political identities and opinions, *in order to enable each student to expand their cognitive and emotional horizons to include others*. Under respectful conditions, discomfort can spur students to do this. Such expansion of concern to include others is critical for the kinds of intellectual and moral growth, the acquisition of the skills and dispositions of citizenship, that are central to democracy as a way of life.

Ego-defense and group-based esteem competition, especially when conceived as a zero-sum game, suppress the respectful discussions across difference that are central to learning the skills of citizenship. Hence, teachers must make every effort to guide discussions away from second-order evaluations of groups and toward first-order concerns, focusing especially on concerns that could be shared by all. I shall illustrate how this works with two courses offered by colleagues at University of Michigan:

Victor Lieberman is a historian who teaches a course on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Harassing and threatening discourse pervades campus discussions of this issue from both sides. Yet Lieberman's course is one of the most popular and successful courses in the liberal arts college, attracting the enthusiastic participation of students from all perspectives. He uses several strategies to prevent toxic discourse from derailing the course. He presents the conflicting narratives of different sides in detail, "so that students who enter the course with fervently partisan assumptions feel that their views have been adequately and sympathetically expressed." He helps students understand how global forces shaped each side's options, and how polarizing actions on each side became mutually reinforcing. He exposes the ways the "partisan assumptions" of each side are "mirror images" of each other, even when they reflect distinct values and goals. He acknowledges students' criticisms of his own perspective, "readily conceding . . . failures and omissions and seeking always to encourage dialogue." The point of the course is not to arrive at any particular political settlement. It is to foster mutual understanding by enabling students to recognize the parochiality and superficiality of the "narratives that dominate campus discussion," the dynamics

that push each side to extremes, and facts that are inconvenient to each side's narrative.²⁷ He thereby enables students to engage in respectful discussion across differences of opinion so wide that they carry existential stakes for the contending parties—including passionate advocates of Hizballah and of Israeli settlers.

Arthur Lupia is a political scientist who teaches a course entitled “Beyond Partisanship.” He designed this course to enable students from both political parties to transcend the rancor of campus speech wars and think constructively together. Students work together in small bipartisan groups to identify a political problem that at least 80% of voters from each party agree needs some policy solution. Each group empirically investigates its chosen problem and proposed solutions. Students work together to create consensus proposals. By maintaining a rigorous focus on forging empirically responsible ways to address shared first-order concerns, Lupia's course enables students across the partisan divide to creatively construct consensus solutions.²⁸

I invite K-12 teachers to consider how pedagogical strategies based on a democratic ethos of open and respectful discussion, such as those deployed by Lieberman and Lupia, might be adapted for educating younger students. Doing so may restore Dewey's “democratic faith . . . in the possibility of conducting disputes, controversies and conflicts as cooperative undertakings in which both parties learn by giving the other a chance to express itself.”²⁹

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28 Arthur Lupia, “Beyond Partisanship” (lecture delivered to chairs and directors at University of Michigan, 2018). A brief video describing the course can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7LKIVdOyScM>.

29 Dewey, “Creative Democracy,” 228.