From 2005 to 2009, we were engaged in a longitudinal study of high school classes that included deliberations about controversial political issues. The purpose of the study was twofold: to examine what students experience and learn from classes that engage them in high-quality discussions of political issues, and to identify the effect of those experiences on their future political and civic engagement. Unbeknownst to us at the time, the study coincided with a significant shift in the political landscape. At the time data collection began, George W. Bush was beginning his second term as president, the United States was engaged in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage (in 2004)—at a time when 13 others had recently defined marriage as between one man and one woman. By the end of the study, Barack Obama had just been elected president, and the Tea Party movement was emerging in opposition to federal responses to the economic crisis. Iowa and Vermont had joined Massachusetts in granting marriage licenses to same-sex couples, while 27 states had passed “defense of marriage” amendments to their constitutions. Just a few months later, in summer 2009, Congressional town hall meetings devolved into yelling matches over the proposed health care bill. In one famous exchange illustrative of the political climate at the time, a constituent interrogating Representative Barney Frank (D-Massachusetts) about his support of the Affordable Health Care Act asked why he was “supporting the Nazi Party.” Frank called the question “vile, contemptible nonsense” and finished the exchange with the indictment, “Ma’am, trying to have a conversation with you would be like arguing with a dining room table.”

Frank’s dining room table comment circulated widely at the time, and was clearly born out of his frustration in the moment. But as absurd as the
exchange is, it does reflect the intertwined, and deeply troubling, trends of political polarization and increased vitriol in the public sphere. One need only look at titles of recent publications to see that polarization has become a concern: *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide* (Sunstein, 2009), *The Spirit of Compromise: Why Governing Demands It and Campaigning Undermines It* (Gutmann & Thompson, 2012), and *It’s Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided With the New Politics of Extremism* (Mann & Ornstein, 2012). Yet while politicians, pundits, and bloggers were simultaneously denouncing and participating in highly divisive political discourse, the most skilled teachers in the classrooms we observed were effectively teaching students to engage in “civil discourse.” When we asked teachers why they were using deliberation in the classroom, they most often said that it was to prepare students for democratic life—not only helping them become more informed citizens, but teaching them to talk about politics, an important democratic skill. However, to some extent they also saw this approach to discussion as purposely designed to counteract contemporary political discourse. Mr. Henderson, a teacher at Adams High, explained:

I think students should be able to carry out an intelligent conversation using civil discourse to express themselves and not to be simply a political pundit . . . and express themselves in an appropriate manner and have honest, genuine discussions with one another about these issues. I think what they see a lot of times, in the media today, it is not really modeling civil discourse.

Teachers like Mr. Henderson recognize that they want students to behave better than the adults they see in the larger public beyond the school. This is a goal that is well represented within the literature on social studies education. Stanley (2010), for example, argues that one important tension in social studies education is between engaging students in activities that “transmit” the social order (preparing students for the world as it is) and those that “transform” (preparing students for the society that ought to be). This tension is evident when teachers engage students in discussions about politics and controversial issues.

In this article, we review the theoretical and social science literature that supports the pedagogical practice of engaging students in discussions and deliberations about controversial political issues. We first outline the theoretical underpinnings of deliberative democracy and explain how it has appeared in the field of education for the past 25 years. We supplement this section with a discussion of how we understand high-quality classroom discussion of controversial political issues, and we provide a case study from our research to illustrate what this looks like in practice. We then present a brief analysis of the political science literature on political polarization and its effects on discussion and political participation in order to show that the aims of deliberative democracy are both
challenged by, and perhaps the solution to, a highly polarized and nasty political climate.

In the final section, we offer recommendations for how teachers might change their approach to classroom discussion when they are teaching during a time of intense political polarization. We argue that during such a time, teachers should resist the temptation to avoid engaging students in discussions of controversial issues in an attempt to create a “politically safe place.” We recognize that a certain degree of political stability is needed for schools to include deliberations of controversial political (or historical) issues, but the United States is not unstable, though it is contentious. It is during times of political stability with extreme political polarization that teachers’ obligation to engage in political education becomes heightened. We call for teachers to create a political classroom that engages students in the pedagogical practice of deliberation so that young people are provided a meaningful, challenging, and authentic democratic education.

We use the concept “political” in the most basic, and in our view, honorable way: we are being political when we are collectively making decisions about how we ought to live together. By extension, the political classroom is one that helps students develop their ability to collectively make decisions about how we ought to live. When teachers engage students in deliberations about what rules ought to be adopted by a class, they are teaching them to think politically. Similarly, when teachers ask students to research and discuss a current controversy such as “Should there be laws against the private ownership of assault weapons?” they are engaging in politics. When a nation is deeply polarized, we will argue, the political classroom takes on some special challenges. To meet them, teachers should teach about issues that are authentic and powerful representations of conflicts between fundamental values; focus explicitly on the difference between empirical issues and policy issues; take full pedagogic advantage of the ideological differences among students; and be especially cautious of their own teaching behavior so they are not engaged in partisan proselytizing.

Bringing politics into the classroom can create a highly engaging experience for students, but the practice is also challenging, not least of all because it is so influenced by the political climate outside the school. We argue that teachers need to continually refine the practice of classroom discussion in light of the ever-changing political climate. We are not simply saying that the issues brought into class should be current, but rather that when teachers bring controversial issues into the classroom, they should carefully tailor their practices to counteract rather than reify political practices that are damaging to democracy. To highlight the complexity of this issue, we consider interactions between the current polarized political climate of the United States and the practice of classroom discussion and deliberation. We use the United States as an illustrative case for what is a phenomenon that has periodically occurred in other democratic states, and that most likely will continue to do so.
DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

In *Controversy in the Classroom*, one of us (Hess, 2009) argues that schools ought to teach young people to engage in discussions and deliberations of controversial political issues. Learning to talk about political differences is a “democracy-sustaining” approach to education, because learning to talk effectively about the issues of the day is the cornerstone of a healthy and well-functioning democracy (Hess, 2009, p. 5). The approach to democratic education that supports the book’s thesis is strongly influenced by Parker’s (2003) ideas about the need to align classroom goals and practices with the aim of “enlightened political engagement.” Building on theories of deliberative democracy, Parker (2003) conceptualizes enlightened political engagement as both an aim and a strategy that is designed to combat idiocy—which in Greek translates to “private, separate, self-centered—selfish” (p. 2). In contrast, the non-idiot is a member of the public and is politically engaged in activities that include voting, contacting public officials, and practicing civil disobedience. Parker argues that these activities are not “enlightened” unless they are motivated by the “moral-cognitive knowledge, norms, values and principles” of democracy (p. 34). In other words, “Enlightened action is enlightened because it is aimed at the realization of democratic ideals. Unenlightened action undermines them” (p. 34).

In justifying enlightened political engagement, Parker builds on the notion of deliberative democracy, a theory whose roots are deep but which attracted more attention beginning in the 1980s through the work of political scientists such as Benjamin Barber (1984), Joseph Bessette (1980), and Jane Mansbridge (1983) as well as philosophers such as Joshua Cohen (1989), Jürgen Habermas (1962/1989), and John Rawls (1971). The theoretical project that these scholars undertook revolved around the question, “What makes government legitimate?” Their answer, in short, was that policy making is considered legitimate when citizens have engaged in public deliberation of the issues with each other and with lawmakers. This was a departure from the view that dominated the post–World War II era of interest group pluralism, which viewed the practice of democracy as aggregating individual preferences, usually through the ballot box (Arrow, 1963; Dahl, 1956, 1961; Riker, 1962). These theories focused on decision making within governing bodies and how competing interest groups exert their influence on policy decisions. Consequently, they saw a minimal role for the average citizen, who was periodically asked to communicate preferences to political actors.

Deliberative theorists critiqued this view by arguing that interest group pluralists were working from an overly individualistic conception of the citizen and ignored the fundamentally social nature of democratic decision making (Pildes & Anderson, 1990). As Mansbridge (1991) argues,
“Democracy involves public discussion of common problems, not just silent counting of individual hands” (p. 122). Much like Dewey’s (1916/2004) assertion that “democracy is a way of life,” deliberative theorists sought legitimacy in the process of public deliberation. This means that when the public discusses policies, knowledge is expanded, self-interest is diminished, and the result is a policy that a community or polity can legitimately expect members to follow. Gutmann and Thompson (1996) argue that this process is primarily about “reason-giving”; they explain:

We define deliberative democracy as a form of government in which free and equal citizens (and their representatives) justify decisions in a process in which they give one another reasons that are mutually acceptable and generally accessible, with the aim of reaching conclusions that are binding in the present on all citizens but open to challenge in the future. (p. 7)

This return to a more populist model marks a step toward what Barber (1984) calls “strong democracy.” That is, democratic systems can be evaluated along a continuum from strong to thin, with “strong” describing systems that include more voices and greater participation from the public as a whole, while “thin” ones demand less from citizens and gives more decision-making power to elected representatives. In contrast to an aggregative view of democracy, which focuses on maximizing individual preferences, a strong democracy should be evaluated on whether there are deliberative opportunities for people to exchange ideas and participate in the project of policy making.

Empirical researchers have found that there are positive social effects when people live in conditions of “strong democracy.” Putnam’s (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* used extensive survey data and case studies to show how “social capital,” or the strength of our community interactions through organizations like parent–teacher associations and bowling leagues, declined in the past 40 years. In times of high social capital, there is more personal interaction in communities, which builds civic trust, a willingness to consider other points of view, and increased political engagement. When social capital declines, this undermines the foundation for democracy. In addition, Fishkin and Farrar (2005) found that in facilitated deliberations among adults, when participants read and deliberate competing views on a political issue, they experience a significant increase in political knowledge and willingness to change one’s mind. This gives some support to the idea that individually making up one’s mind is less desirable than considering an issue with others. Finally, in Mutz’s (2006) study of moments of “natural” deliberation, like those one might have with a coworker, she found that “cross-cutting political talk” among people who disagree with each other promotes political tolerance, or the willingness to extend rights to people who are socially and politically different than oneself. Unfortunately, she
also found that politically diverse networks may discourage political participation, an issue that we will address later.

There are clearly competing understandings about what constitutes a healthy—and legitimate—democracy, and education will have different aims depending upon how they understand the role of citizens within the political process. For example, if democracy is primarily about understanding an issue and independently coming to a conclusion about which policy option or candidate one prefers, then lecturing to students and having them do research is likely to be a fine approach to democratic education; independently understanding an issue is all that is expected for democratic participation. However, if democracy is enhanced when people deliberate—particularly with people with whom they disagree—then schools ought to teach students to share their reasoning with each other, to listen to competing points of view, to consider new evidence, and to treat each other as political equals. This deliberative view is the one that has gained a fair amount of support among democratic education theorists, and has also become part of the relatively mainstream thought in the past 10 years. For example, during that time, a number of nonprofit organizations that develop curricular materials for social science, civics, and history courses have infused controversial political issues in their materials; the federal government has funded a major teacher professional development project on controversial issues; and such discussions were listed as one of only six recommended practices in a consensus document about what constitutes high-quality civic education (Gould, Jamieson, Levine, McConnell, & Smith, 2011).

DELIBERATION IN THE CLASSROOM

Researchers and practitioners have identified classrooms as one of the most promising sites for teaching the skills and values necessary for deliberative democratic life (Dewey, 1916/2004; Gutmann, 1987; Hanson & Howe, 2011; Hess, 2009; Parker, 2003). In classrooms, students interact with others who may see the world quite differently than they do, and when they are allowed to engage in discussion, they are likely to become more politically tolerant, more informed, and more interested in politics (Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE, 2003; Gould et al., 2011; McAvoy, Hess, & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2011; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schultz, 2001). In addition, engaging students in classroom deliberation is important for developing democratic dispositions in which people see each other as political equals, value other points of view, weigh evidence, and become more informed about the political issues they will confront in the public sphere.

Like the society outside schools, classrooms need to have particular characteristics to promote deliberative values. To begin, students need to
talk in particular kinds of ways about particular kinds of questions. That is, they need to discuss and deliberate questions for which there are multiple and competing views, what Hess (2009) labels “open” questions. Parker (2003) draws a distinction between the aims of classroom discussion and deliberation. “Discussion,” he argues, “is a kind of shared inquiry, the desired outcomes of which rely on the expression and consideration of diverse views” (p. 129). The purpose is to create “shared understanding” through listening, questioning and working through ideas “in progress” (p. 129). Deliberation is a more specific type of discussion, one that aims “at deciding on a plan of action that will resolve a shared problem. . . . The opening question is usually some version of, ‘What should we do about this?’” (p. 131). To clarify this difference, students might discuss the meaning of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but deliberate the question, “How should our country fulfill the right to personal security?” Both types of talk have democratic value, because, when done well, students will practice reason giving, listening, perspective taking, evaluation of views, and treating each other as political equals. But deliberation is particularly important for the formation of democracy supporting dispositions and values because it requires students to consider the larger question, “How should we live together?” When students engage in this type of talk, it encourages them to move from the self-interested thinking of aggregative democracy (“What is best for me?”) to the deliberative question, “Which option seems best/most fair given varied views and perspectives?”

Another feature of the deliberative classroom is that teachers create a class culture that encourages students to share competing viewpoints and to disagree respectfully with their teachers and fellow students. This is commonly identified in the literature as an “open classroom climate.” The 1999 International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Civic Education Study (Torney-Purta et al., 2001) measured open classroom climate through items such as “teachers encourage us to discuss political or social issues about which people have different opinions” and “students feel free to disagree openly with their teachers about political and social issues during class.” This construct measured the “extent to which students experience their classrooms as places to investigate issues and explore their opinions and those of their peers” (Torney-Purta et al., 2001, p. 138). The study found that an open classroom climate for discussion was an especially significant predictor of civic knowledge and political engagement, as measured by whether young people say they will vote when they are legally able (Torney-Purta et al., 2001, p. 155).

In our study, mentioned at the opening of this article, we found that allowing students to talk at all was enough to create a fairly open classroom climate, but there are certain practices that caused a significant jump in this measure. We call these Best Practice Discussions, and they have the following characteristics: 1) students discuss and deliberate controversial political issues; 2) students were usually asked to prepare in advance of the discus-
sion, which often included things like completing a set of readings, watching a video, or doing a writing assignment; 3) most of the class participates in the discussion and the teacher is not satisfied by hearing from the same few students; 4) teachers encourage students to talk to each other and not direct all of their comments to the teacher. We would not expect all classroom discussions to hit this standard, but Best Practice teachers know how to develop their students’ discussion skills so that they are able to have these types of deliberative experiences in the classroom.

Unfortunately, despite a rich literature promoting discussion as an important component of democratic education, it is still a relatively rare practice. Several large-scale observational studies report virtually no classroom discussion of any sort. Nystrand, Gamoran, and Carbonaro (2001) analyzed student talk in 106 middle and high school social studies classes in the United States and found that “despite considerable lip service among teachers to ‘discussion,’ we found little discussion in any classes” (p. 178). Instead, much of what observers found was recitation, a practice in which students were asked simple recall questions. Even more discouraging, in a study of 200 eighth- and ninth-grade classes, Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, and Long (2003) found that discussion was used for less than 7% of instructional time, and when it was seen, it was almost entirely in courses for academically high-achieving students. Kahne, Rodriguez, Smith, and Thiede (2000) described similar findings in their secondary analysis of observers’ reports of 135 middle and high school social studies classes in the Chicago Public Schools. In over 80% of classes there was no mention of a social problem, and even when problems were mentioned, there was rarely any discussion of possible solutions, connections to contemporary life, or actions that could be taken to address the problems.

It is not entirely clear why so many teachers do not include discussion or deliberation in their courses. Our study suggests that teachers who primarily use lecture have an individualized or “thinner” view of the demands of democracy and that they primarily see their role as getting students “informed.” That is, democratic citizens should have good information and be able to defend a position, usually practiced in written work. Others do not think that high school–age students are really capable of deliberation. Mr. Xanders, who teaches in what he calls a “working-class” Christian school, explains why he rarely allows students to discuss with each other and prefers all comments to be directed toward him:

I don’t think kids at the high school level have enough between their ears to have a purposeful deliberation. I think they have to have some stuff in their heads first before they start hollering at each other and discussing it back and forth.

Without a doubt, discussion is a challenging pedagogical undertaking for teachers and students, and even the most skilled discussion teachers in our study considered it to be the most difficult pedagogical strategy that they
use. Yet despite these difficulties, some classrooms do achieve discussions that are consistent with the demands of deliberative democracy. Although we do not aim to report the findings of our study here, we present one case study of a school that exemplifies such practices.

**Adams High**

Adams High is located in a suburb of a major Midwestern city. During the past 10 years the community has changed from being almost entirely White and working class to being home to a large Hispanic population. In 2007, the school had 2,100 students: 52% White, 40% Hispanic, 2% Asian, and 2% African American. All seniors at Adams are required to take one semester of American Government, a nontracked course structured around an extensive legislative simulation. The Social Studies Department at Adams High is committed to (and has had to defend) this course, because they believe that discussing an issue such as immigration—particularly given the demographics of this school—requires that students hear from people who are affected differently by various policies. Teachers feel strongly that tracking students in a class designed to model democratic values reinforces an elitist view that some are more worthy and capable of participation.

The legislative simulation begins with discussions of current issues to help students understand how their views align with the platforms of the major political parties. Teachers model how to run committee meetings, and they teach the rules of “civil discourse,” which include addressing each other as “Representative X” and learning how to disagree with an idea without attacking a person. A few weeks into the semester is “D Day,” when all students publicly declare their political party affiliation. Next, the majority and minority parties elect their house leadership from among the students taking government that semester. Each class section then becomes a legislative committee.

For several weeks, groups of three students research and write a bill, which then gets passed to the appropriate committee for a hearing, run by the appointed committee chairs. Twice each semester all students gather in the cafeteria for a “general session.” Here, students run a legislative day in which bills that passed through committee are presented, debated, and put up for a vote. During the entire simulation students lobby for and discuss their bills on an online discussion tool. Party politics come into play, and leaders may put some pressure on their members to vote a certain way, but often students vote their consciences.

In our observations of preparation and general sessions we found students to be highly engaged and truly taking control of running committees and floor debates. Writing a bill that becomes a law is viewed as a major accomplishment—with hugs and high fives for the authors. Students
describe a deliberative climate not seen in any of the other schools in our study. As one member of the Republican Party explains:

Senior year is big. Everyone is talking about politics. On the volleyball game bus last week we were talking about the immigration bill. It was the hot topic in class. It is just fun because the sophomores and freshmen are looking at us seniors like, ‘What are you guys talking about?’ We are back there and having a debate on the bus.

When students reflect upon what they took from the experience, they report an increased interest in politics, a desire to vote and become more politically engaged, and more confidence discussing issues. This school was also unique within the study in that several students said they had a new appreciation for how difficult it is to be a politician:

But I think, kind of being a part of it and seeing it more close up, you have more respect for the people that run our country, just all of the long drawn out processes that have to go on. And sometimes we bash the people that run our country when actually, it is not an easy job, and there is so much behind-the-scenes work that goes on that nobody really knows about until you kind of experience something like this.

Related to that was an appreciation for listening: “You have to really try and keep an open mind and try . . . to listen to the other side.”

This program has been going on at Adams for more than 10 years, and Ms. Heller has taught the legislative semester 28 times over her 16-year teaching career. She explains that it “has really become part of the culture of Adams High School. It is sort of the senior experience that the kids really look forward to.” To cultivate this climate, the three teachers who run the simulation practice what Parker and Hess (2001) call “teaching with and for discussion.” That is, they use discussion as an activity that teaches content, but they do not assume that students already have the skills to discuss well. Instead, they scaffold the curriculum so that students slowly develop their skills in both discussion and deliberation. In fact, the simulation is so much a part of the school that the Social Studies Department works together to prepare students in the lower grades by structuring the curriculum to develop public speaking and discussion skills. As the semester progresses, students slowly take charge of the deliberations until the teachers become observers on the side. As one of the other government teachers explains, “It is not so much traditional teaching but we are facilitating a class. We are sort of saying, ‘Here is the framework, kids. If I yield the floor to you, I can’t get the floor back, and you guys have it now.’”

Adams High is able to do what no other school in our study was able to do—create a deliberative climate in the school. They do this by designing an inclusive, mandatory activity that engages all students (not just those in honor classes) in high-level policy discussions, that move from the classroom to the hallways, the volleyball bus, and the dinner table.
Theoretical and Practical Critiques of Classroom Deliberation

If the only aim of democratic education were to get students comfortable and able to engage in political talk, then the program at Adams High might be the gold standard. But the program does not come without its challenges and critiques. Teachers have to closely monitor discussion boards and have pulled down personal attacks; at one point they even suspended students for posting racist anti-immigration posters around the school.

One important critique of deliberation is that it begins from the flawed premise that people in the body politic are actually treated as political equals. Sanders (1997) argues that the liberal attachment to deliberation “between equals” as necessary for legitimate decision making in democratic societies overlooks the reality that we do not live in a society of equals. Instead, we live in a political culture with citizens who are “already underrepresented in formal political institutions and who are systematically materially disadvantaged, namely women, racial minorities, especially Blacks, and poorer people” (p. 349). Consequently, “some citizens are better than others at articulating their arguments in rational, reasonable terms” making their views more respected and powerful (p. 348). Sanders argues that when we do not begin with a situation of mutual respect and equality, attempts at deliberation are “often neither truly deliberative nor really democratic” (p. 349).

Acknowledging this issue complicates the deliberative ideal. Some theorists argue that education is the key to achieving mutual respect, because once children have developed the skills of deliberation they will be treated as equals—or they will be better able to participate as equals. But Sanders (1997) argues that this view ignores “systematic patterns of exclusion,” and that some people are disregarded in deliberation, not because of their arguments but for who they are (p. 351). This was certainly an issue that the teachers at Adams High occasionally had to contend with, but their responses to the racist posters and other instances of inappropriate and bullying behavior speaks to our view that teachers ought not to see their classrooms as “pure” deliberative spaces in which any position, no matter how offensive or wrong it may be, should be allowed. Instead, they should see their classrooms as “regulated deliberative spaces” and explicitly teach and enforce appropriate behavior. In other words, in classrooms there is a tension between openness and inclusion/fairness, and teachers who allow students to talk will have to negotiate between these two values. Ms. Heller explains why she thinks allowing students to write about the issues they care about is important—as long as they are discussed in a “safe, structured” (inclusive and fair) environment:

When I have talked to other schools [they say], “You let them talk about what?! You let them write a bill about what?! You let them express what opinion?!” Well, if you
don’t do it in a safe, structured environment here, they are still doing it at the lunch table. They are still doing it. And if people are still talking about it . . . this at least gives them an appropriate context and a structure with which to sort of deal with some of those charged issues and maybe get an understanding of both sides of the issue.

While Ms. Heller acknowledges the tension between openness and fairness, it does not totally get away from the problem that some views can be disregarded even in “fair” classrooms. It is important to acknowledge that a central part of Sander’s (1997) critique is that deliberative theory is overly rational and privileges certain kinds of (White, middle-class) talk. She argues that personal testimony ought to be recognized as a valuable contribution to deliberative spaces.

The teachers at Adams agree with this view and encourage students to include personal experiences when making their arguments. Indeed, part of the power of the simulation is that students do stand up in a room of several hundred of their peers and share things like how their family members were treated in prison, how they have felt as a Mexican American or as a gay person, and how not having health care has impacted their family. Oftentimes, these are the most persuasive arguments in the simulation.

Another important critique of the deliberative ideal, and the one that we will focus on for the remainder of this article, is that teaching students to value deliberation makes little sense when the political culture outside school is highly polarized and does not appear to value deliberation at all. One way to think about polarization and the aims of democratic education is by considering the tension that Stanley (2010) identifies between transmitting the political world as it is and transforming the public sphere through the education of children. Though tempting to think that schools could transform the public space through education, we find it unrealistic to think that schools can be the remedy for what is a deep and multifaceted social problem. This does not, however, mean that we think that teachers ought to give up the deliberative space of the classroom to the values of thin democracy, or highly partisan politics for that matter. That would be tantamount to transmitting a dysfunctional status quo. Instead, we argue that it is most helpful to think of polarization as a feature of modern democracies that will surface and resurface when conditions allow. The challenge for teachers who want to include political issues in the classroom is that, just as disrespectful behavior contaminates deliberations in ways that need to be eradicated, they must similarly address the ways in which political polarization undermines the conditions for deliberation. In other words, deliberation has a social value regardless of what happens beyond the school, but in a polarized political culture teachers will have to attend to a different set of concerns if they want to promote a fair exchange of ideas in the classroom.
POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND ITS CHALLENGES

Political polarization refers to moments in time when political discourse and action bifurcates toward ideological extremes. This causes a crowding out of voices in the middle, leaving little room for political compromise. Polarization has occurred at various times in the United States (such as during the period leading up to the Civil War) and in other modern democracies, and it is a feature of democracy that likely will ebb and flow with the times (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006). Scholars are suggesting that the United States is currently polarizing once more, causing a reevaluation of fundamental principles, especially with respect to the role of the government in individuals’ lives (Bishop & Cushing, 2008; Gutmann & Thompson, 2012; McCarty et al., 2006). In addition to the crowding-out problem, another consequence of polarization is the way in which it threatens the likelihood that people will engage in high-quality political discourse. Sadly, at just the moment when we most need productive and public political talk, the political climate of polarization is making it extremely difficult.

One of the reasons polarization is so troubling is that it reduces trust between citizens. In Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education, Allen (2004) argues that trust is fundamental to democratic life:

Trust in one’s fellow citizens consists in the belief, simply, that one is safe with them. This trust can be registered cognitively, as when one believes that a particular fellow citizen is unlikely to take advantage of one’s vulnerability . . . or it can be registered emotionally, as when one feels confidence, or lack of fear, during a moment of vulnerability before other citizens. (p. xvi)

Allen explains that living in a democracy requires citizens to accept political losses; however, these losses can only be acceptable to the public if the losers trust that the winners will continue attending to the interests of the minority and resist operating from the position of “rivalrous self-interest.” Distrust, when it takes hold, “paralyzes democracy; it means that citizens no longer think it sensible, or feel secure enough, to place their fates in the hands of democratic strangers” (Allen, 2004, p. xvi). This accurately describes the political climate today; when there is no willingness to compromise the message is that our political rivals cannot be trusted to govern with an eye on the nation’s general interest, and politics becomes a game of winner-take-all. The research on why this is happening suggests that distrust and polarization fuel each other—polarization causes distrust and distrust causes polarization.

The current literature on the rise of political polarization suggests multiple contributing factors. McCarty et al. (2006) described the emergence of polarization as a “dance” between economic factors and the behavior of politicians. They found that political polarization in the last 100 years has
been tightly aligned with the growth of income inequality. In the years following World War II, there was not only less economic disparity but also low polarization as measured by Congressional roll-call votes. Since 1977, however, this trend has reversed: economic inequality has increased alongside growing political polarization. They argue that this relationship fuels the fire of polarization because as wealth moves into fewer—and often more powerful—hands, political parties divide on the issue of the social safety net. Their research found that the Congressional stalemate that occurs around redistributive issues like taxation and health care, issues whose handling could promote public trust and address growing inequality, ends up exacerbating the income gap, which in turn fuels more polarization.

Intertwined with the story of economic inequality is an increase in immigration. In their study of polarization, McCarty et al. (2006) found that both periods of high polarization in the last century (just before World War I and the one the United States is experiencing today) also had higher percentages of noncitizens living in the United States. Prior to World War I, the percentage of foreign-born was between 13% and 15% and today it is about 11%, three times as high as it was in 1972 (McCarty et al., 2006, p. 120). The current change is mostly due to an increase in legal immigration caused by legislation passed in 1965 and 1990, though the researchers also note that during this time the “United States did little to contain illegal immigration” (p. 138). In their analysis of why this might increase polarization, they found that even though those just arriving to the United States were poorer than the average American, their effect on economic inequality was small because the gap between the rich and poor was already on the rise. They concluded that “immigration cannot have been a driving force in the onset of the increase in income inequality and political polarization” (p. 138). Instead, when they looked at voter trends by income, they found that as immigration increases median income voters become more resistant to redistributive social policy (McCarty et al., 2006, p. 138). This finding aligns with a recent study of members of the Tea Party movement. Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin (2011) polled members of the Massachusetts Tea party and found that 78% were concerned about immigration and border security—second to their highest concern of deficit spending (p. 33). This view of immigration is significantly higher than national surveys that show 60% of Americans are concerned about immigration (p. 34). The Tea Party attracts the more conservative members of the Republican Party, and these researchers found that although members seem to be motivated by libertarian ideology, they are generally supportive of well-established government programs like Social Security and Medicare that “they feel legitimately entitled to” (p. 26). Their major concern is new programs like the Affordable Care Act that they believe are “‘handouts’ to ‘undeserving’ groups, the definition of which seems heavily influenced by racial and ethnic stereotypes” (p. 26). The Tea Party views illustrate McCarty et al.’s
general finding that economic inequality and a rise in immigration reduces the willingness of the more well-off to support redistributive policies. In part this resistance is motivated by a belief that those on the bottom are undeserving and in part it is a worry that if the government attends to the interests of the poor it will not also be looking out for the interests of middle-class workers (p. 33).

In addition to the “dance” between the economy and politics, three other political trends have contributed to increased partisanship. For one, in the last 35 years the two major political parties in the United States have ideologically purified so that ideological differences between the two parties are clearer, and further apart, than they have been at any time in the recent past. Democrats are solidly the party of the left and the Republicans the party of the right (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002; Mann & Ornstein, 2012; McCarty et al., 2006). It is important to point out that what is labeled a “leftist” perspective in the United States would be considered center or even center-right in many other nations. The ideological fracture between the two parties is primarily due to conservative Southern Democrats shifting to the Republican Party, ending long-standing coalitions within the Democratic Party. The move was due, in part, to the second political trend to inform political polarization: the rise of evangelical Christians and their influence on the Republican Party. This movement, which began in the early 1970s, further marked the Republicans as social conservatives who saw themselves in opposition to what they perceived as a takeover of U.S. society by secular humanists (Green et al., 2002; Putnam & Campbell, 2010). This fueled the flame of the “culture wars” as wedge issues like abortion, same-sex marriage, and school prayer became defining issues for each party. Third, was a new Republican strategy to gain control of Congress by using oppositional, parliamentary-style politics. The charge was led in the 1980s by Representative Newt Gingrich, who encouraged the use of hyperbolic language and created a well-organized, unified Republican Party that eventually did win back control of Congress in 1994 (Abramowitz, 2010; Mann & Ornstein, 2012). The Democrats, for their part, have certainly not been innocent when it comes to playing oppositional politics, but in many ways this unwillingness to negotiate and compromise across party lines can be traced to the change in Republican strategy (Mann & Ornstein, 2012; McCarty et al., 2006). The unfortunate consequence is that Congress as a whole has become less willing to work through differences and more interested in maintaining political power (Mann & Ornstein, 2012; McCarty et al., 2006). Gutmann and Thompson (2012) argue that another important contributing factor to this trend is that the ever-increasing amount of money necessary to run for political office lands politicians on an exhausting and expensive treadmill of continuous campaigning. Good campaigners, they note, appear firm in their convictions. Good legislators, however, need to be willing to compromise. This conflict of roles exacerbates the “do nothing” culture of Washington,
resulting in a more polarized and suspicious citizenry that is growing skeptical of the political system’s ability to address the most urgent problems facing the nation.

These political trends are further intensified by social changes “on the ground.” In *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart*, Bishop and Cushing (2008) draw upon social science research to show that since the 1980s the public has been “sorting” itself into more politically homogeneous communities. When we live and work among people who generally think like we do, our views tend to become more extreme and less tolerant (Mutz, 2006; Sunstein, 2001, 2009). As a result, people in like-minded social networks are more likely to vote, but they are largely motivated by the fear that, in their view, the irrational other side cannot be trusted to govern from a position of goodwill. Conversely, Mutz (2006) has shown that people who socialize in ideologically mixed groups are more politically tolerant but also less likely to vote. This means that, in general, people showing up to the polls are likely to hold more extreme views.

Contributing to citizens’ distrust of political opposition is a sea change in journalism and the ways that people access information. While the 1980s marked the beginning of 24-hours news channels that often fill time with partisan commentary, the 1990s marked the shift away from newspapers to the Internet. The Internet has certainly produced an explosion of alternative news sources—in many ways democratizing information—but it also allows people with more extreme views to find each other and strengthen virtual communities of like-mindedness (Sunstein, 2001). The Internet has also changed the rules of journalism. *Atlantic Monthly* contributor Mark Bowden (2009) describes how partisan bloggers operate with what he refers to as a “winner-take-all” view of democracy:

> I would describe their approach as post-journalistic. It sees democracy, by definition, as perpetual political battle. The blogger’s role is to help his side. Distortions and inaccuracies, lapses of judgment, the absence of context, all of these things matter only a little, because they are committed by both sides, and tend to come out a wash. Nobody is actually right about anything, no matter how certain they pretend to be. The truth is something that emerges from the cauldron of debate. No, not the truth: *victory*, because winning is way more important than being right.

When the media adopts a “winner-take-all” strategy it becomes difficult for the public to sort through the noise of constantly disputed facts to form opinions based on reliable information. The result is a political sphere in which deliberation comes to a standstill. If, for example, the public cannot agree about the existence of climate change, we cannot discuss how to effectively address the problem. Further, the public will necessarily sort into polarized “believers” and “nonbelievers.” Indeed, Gauchat (2012) showed that trust in scientific sources has become a partisan issue. He found that, since the 1970s, liberals and moderates have had a consistent trust in the
scientific community, but conservative trust has steadily declined since the 1980s, with the most significant drop among educated conservatives. Gauchat posits that the solution to this partisan divide is not likely to be more or better information, because the divide appears to be grounded in ideology rather than a lack of information (p. 182). Of course, these changes in media and journalism are not operating in a vacuum, and indeed they complement the dynamic behavior of a political order that is playing by the same rules.

It is clearly not possible to point to a single cause of political polarization, and thus there does not appear to be any easy solution to what we see as a crisis in democracy. What is clearer is that the most destructive feature of this political reality is the loss of public trust. The multiple trends of economic inequality, partisan polarization, residential sorting, and ideological news sources work together to confuse the public and undermine their ability and desire to talk to one another. In such a climate, the government ceases to be an effective place to address social problems. McCarty et al. (2006) agree:

It is not hard to speculate how declining trust can lead to policy stalemate. If the two parties cannot agree how to solve a problem, it is hard to mobilize the public around any policy response. It is even worse when one side says the proposed policy ameliorates the problem when the other says it exacerbates it. (p. 180)

We began this article with a discussion of competing views of democracy. On one side there are advocates for a thicker, more deliberative democratic society in which public policy is collectively considered, and this is the view that provides the theoretical underpinning for the pedagogy of classroom deliberation of controversial political issues. There is another thinner view of democracy that is more adversarial, but we are living in a time that is more than just thin democracy. What we are experiencing is a cultural and political shift that undermines political compromise and feeds public distrust.

We turn next to how we think teachers can best address the pedagogical challenges that arise when they teach about political controversy in a polarized time. Given that we are concerned with how teachers create a political classroom in which young people learn how to deliberate controversial political issues in schools, it is crucial to understand not just how the overall political climate has become more polarized and challenging, but also to explore what possible effect these trends have on how individuals relate to conflicting points of view, whether that be in the classroom or in the larger political landscape. Specifically, questions of how individuals within the political system normatively view the political times in which they are living and what they see as the best ways to engage in the political discourse and discord that swirls around them become paramount.
HOW POLITICAL POLARIZATION IMPACTS SCHOOLS

Even though the causes of political polarization are complex, and although the “big sort” plays out differently in various communities, it is clear that polarization has a dramatic influence on how schools can and should go about their business of educating young people for civic and political participation. By far the most common—and in our view, problematic—impact of polarization is that it causes teachers to be fearful of including controversial political issues in the curriculum. But before we explain that consequence in any detail, it is important to review why polarization affects schools.

First, as polarization increases public distrust, this transfers onto schools because some people begin to view them as yet another dysfunctional public institution. This skepticism fuels a debate about what role schools should play in preparing students for political life. As a case in point, the 2009 school year opened in a storm of political controversy in the United States. As the summer ended, newly elected President Obama announced that he would make an opening day speech to U.S. schoolchildren, delivered in a high school in Virginia and broadcast live on the White House Web site. According to official White House releases, the speech was meant to be motivational and “challenge students to set goals, work hard and stay in school.” Though he was not the first president to address school children (in 1991 President Bush Sr. had made a similar address, broadcast on live television), Republican politicians, parents, cable news commentators, talk radio hosts, and the blogosphere erupted in opposition to the speech. The New York Times reported that some parents “were concerned because the speech had not been screened for political content” (McKinley & Dillon, 2009). One parent explained, “I don’t want schools turned over to some socialist movement,” a comment alluding to the highly contentious health care debate playing out at the same time. Others felt that the president’s speech was appropriate classroom content, and that “telling children they should not hear out the president of the United States, even if their parents dislike his policies, sends the wrong message—that one should not listen to someone with whom you disagree” (McKinley & Dillon, 2009). Though the controversy intensified, the speech continued as planned. Some parents kept their children home for the day, and others demanded that the school provide an alternative activity for their children.

In 1991, President Bush’s speech also received some critique from the Democratic Party, primarily for using $27,000 in public money for the event. But the Democrats also argued that there was something unethical about preparing a speech for schoolchildren. The then Democratic House Majority leader Richard Gephardt explained, “The Department of Education should not be producing paid political advertising for the president; it should be helping us to produce smarter students” (Cooper & Pianin, 1991). Republican Newt Gingrich defended Bush’s speech: “Why is it
political for the president of the United States to discuss education? It was
done at a nonpolitical site and was beamed to a nonpolitical audience”
(Cooper & Pianin, 1991).

The controversy over these two speeches highlights how schools are
influenced by the broader political climate. And while Gingrich may view
schools as nonpolitical sites (and students as a nonpolitical audience),
clearly others disagree and seem to believe that schools should operate not
just as nonpartisan spaces within the political environment, but as spaces
stripped of any political content whatsoever. Moreover, given that the
actual content of both presidents’ speeches was about as nonpartisan as one
could imagine, these examples illustrate that the level of distrust is so high
that some critics could not imagine that a nation’s president could ever be
anything other than political in a partisan way.

We recognize that to readers in many nations, the very idea that a
president, legislators, or other elected political leaders could ever engage
in nonpartisan, or even bipartisan or cross-partisan activity, may seem odd.
When political scientists in the United States go to great pains to carefully
document, and in many cases lament, the growing lack of bipartisanship, it
most likely has little resonance to people more familiar with political
systems in which electoral and governance structures are not based on the
necessity of parties working together on proposed legislation, bill by bill, to
ensure that they satisfy both major parties. In parliamentary systems, coa-
lications between and among parties are often built on the front end when a
government is being formed. More frequently, the party in control in a
parliamentary system has almost complete control of legislation and policy
decisions; in the United States, on the other hand, it is rarely the case that
a single party holds both the presidency and large enough majorities in
both houses of Congress to so completely control the course of the nation.
As a result, there is much more of a need for bipartisan agreements to get
legislation passed and signed into law. This is why political polarization has
such dramatic, and we argue, negative consequences in the United States
compared to many other democracies.

Moreover, because the president and many other political leaders in the
United States have both political and ceremonial functions, it has tradition-
ally been accepted that they can and should engage in many activities that
are literally nonpartisan. The president, for example, is frequently in the
role of the nation’s cheerleader or mourner-in-chief, and state governors
and local mayors perform similar functions in their jurisdictions. For this
reason, when the accusation is made that presidents are engaging in politi-
cal instead of nonpartisan behavior by speaking to schoolchildren about
the importance of hard work, it is evidence that political polarization has
reached dangerous levels, with one consequence a heightened level of
wariness about what is a legitimate relationship between the political system
and the political leaders who lead it and what young people are exposed
to in school. If clearly nonpartisan speeches by presidents can trigger
accusations of political indoctrination, then it is easy to understand why many principals and teachers are wary of doing anything in schools or classes that seems political. Instead of following our call to purposely create a political classroom, they may instead want to strip the curriculum of anything that could be remotely controversial, even when empirical evidence shows that some teachers can and do educate young people for enlightened political engagement in a way that fully respects and embodies the difference between political education and political proselytization (Hess, 2009; Rubin, 2012).

The public, however, seems not to have read this research, and many are deeply suspicious of teachers of history, government, social studies, and related areas in particular. Lautzenheiser, Kelly, and Miller (2011) fielded a large comparative survey of teachers and the public that illuminated deep differences in their ideas about what should be taught, to what ends, and in what ways. With respect to civic education, their study showed that the public places a greater priority on teaching students facts and dates than do teachers. Compared to members of the general public, teachers are more likely to prioritize teaching young people to be tolerant of people and groups different from themselves, and more supportive of teaching critical-thinking skills related to evaluating information for bias and credibility. Most significant, nearly half of the public feels that “too many social studies teachers use their classes as a ‘soap box’ for their personal point of view” (Lautzenheiser et al., 2011, p. 4). Because of this, the public is much more likely than teachers to urge the avoidance of controversial topics. This study also provided evidence of how political polarization influences what the public thinks about the legitimate aims of schools with respect to civic education. It revealed some fairly deep partisan divisions between members of the public who identified as Republicans or Democrats: the former are more likely to support understanding of how the U.S. government works, while the latter want schools to emphasize internalizing core values such as tolerance and equality. These findings caused the researchers to issue an important warning: “Attempts to reemphasize or reform citizenship education in our high schools may trigger traditional fault lines in American politics” (Lautzenheiser et al., 2011, p. 6).

WHAT TEACHERS SHOULD DO IN RESPONSE TO POLITICAL POLARIZATION

It is not surprising that teachers frequently say they are shying away from deliberations of political issues in their classes, given these differences of opinion between what teachers and the public think should be taught in civic education, as well as partisan-based differences within the public about what curricular aims deserve priority. Teachers’ positions are made even more difficult by the charge that many are using their classrooms as
soapboxes for their own views. Moreover, many teachers say they avoid controversial political issues because they do not believe their school administrators will support their purposeful inclusion. This is particularly the case in communities that are ideologically diverse and in which there is considerable political controversy, although it is important to note that in like-minded communities there is often push-back when teachers expose students to views that are different than those of the community. Many teachers recognize that teaching about highly politicized issues can be controversial, and they question whether such teaching is appropriate in times of intense polarization.

Additionally, there is powerful evidence that confidence in U.S. public schools has seen a steady decline over the past several decades. According to the Gallup Polls’ 2011 annual update on the confidence in institutions, only 34% of Americans express “a great deal” of confidence in the nation’s public schools (Morales, 2011). That is a decline of 24% since 1973, when confidence in public schools was at its highest. (It was not until the 1980s that the majority of Americans began to lose confidence in public schools.) Given the nature of partisanship in the United States, it is not surprising that the percentage of those who did express high levels of confidence in Gallup’s 2011 survey varied significantly with political affiliation, with 43% of Democrats expressing high levels of confidence, compared to 33% of Republicans (Morales, 2011). These data about how schools are viewed make it even more likely that teachers and administrators may want to “play it safe” by stripping the curriculum of controversies that could anger parents and perhaps contribute to the public’s waning confidence in schools.

We have considerable sympathy for this perspective. As former high school teachers we recognize that it is extremely challenging to engage young people in discussions of controversial issues, even when the political environment outside school is considerably less polarized than it is today and public support for teachers much stronger. But shying away from the pedagogy of classroom deliberation is not the right choice. Young people need, and for the most part want, to learn how to deliberate about such issues, and evidence shows that there is a powerful connection between such learning and political engagement (Gould et al., 2011; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Moreover, when schools fail to teach young people how to engage with controversial political issues, or worse, suppress, ignore, or deny the important role of controversial issues in the curriculum, they send a host of dangerous and wrongheaded messages. One is that the political realm is not really important, especially in comparison to other content on which schools traditionally have focused. Another is that such issues are “taboo” and therefore dangerous for young people to encounter. Yet another misleading message is that people in the United States and the larger world fundamentally agree on the nature of the public good and how it can be fostered.
Furthermore, a school that shuns political controversy is not taking advantage of some unique deliberative assets that make schools an especially good site for learning how to talk about highly controversial issues. One of these features is the opportunity the curriculum can provide for including such issues. We have seen many teachers who are using required courses in history and government as the setting for powerful deliberations of contemporary political controversies. A second feature is teachers, who have developed (or can develop) expertise in fostering deliberation and inquiry among students. Another asset is the ideological diversity among students. When we surveyed classes of students about their political beliefs we found that most classrooms are places in which there are many competing views about political issues (Hess, 2009). This is both because students are in the process of forming their political opinions and usually have not fallen ideologically in line with one side of the political spectrum, and because public schools are often institutions that bring together diverse groups of people. Moreover, even classes that are homogeneous along a number of dimensions (like race or class) likely encompass broader ideological diversity than students encounter in their own homes (Hess, 2009). The relative diversity of schools makes them particularly good places for controversial issue discussions. Students likely will be exposed to views different from their own and have to explain their views during such discussions. This kind of “cross-cutting” political talk is markedly different from talk that occurs in an “echo chamber” of similar views.8

For these reasons, teachers have not just the right, but also the obligation to engage students in deliberations about genuine public controversies to help students learn discussion skills and also to introduce them to the range of views they will encounter as they move into adulthood. Addressing public controversies in schools is not only more educative than quashing or ignoring differences but also more likely to enhance the quality of decision making by ensuring that multiple and competing views about controversial political issues are aired, fairly considered, and critically evaluated. These are powerful reasons for encouraging teachers to develop a political classroom and providing them with the support necessary to do so. However, we are mindful of the need to take seriously the political times in which we are living, and this requires teachers to tailor the teaching of controversial political issues to adequately respond to some of the most challenging trends in political discourse.

Four Recommendations

In this final section, we propose four recommendations for teachers in the United States who teach about controversial issues during this period of intense political polarization. The first two derive from what is clearly one of the most important “core” questions for teachers: What should we teach?
While there is a plethora of political issues from which to select, those that most clearly represent tensions between fundamental values have special power in a time of political polarization, when such values are being debated. Thus, our first recommendation is to teach about issues that are authentic and powerful representations of perennial issues that embody conflicts between fundamental values (such as security vs. freedom). Our second recommendation is to help students sort through the noise of the public sphere by teaching them to see the difference between open and closed empirical questions and open and closed policy questions. Teachers should also understand these distinctions and focus on engaging students in discussions of open policy questions.

Third, given the ideological diversity that exists in many schools and in light of the fact that few young people have views that consistently align with a single political ideology, teachers should take full advantage of these inter- and intrapersonal differences by engaging students in best practice deliberations. Fourth and finally, we take up the question that so many members of the general public seem to be concerned about—the ways in which teachers’ political views enter the classroom. Although we believe there are times that it is appropriate for a teacher to share his or her view with the class, we are critical of political proselytizing and urge teachers to carefully monitor their own behavior so they are not interfering with the deliberative potential in the classroom by adopting the divisive practices of polarized politics.

1. Selecting the “Right” Issues

Earlier we defined controversial political issues as questions of public policy that spark significant disagreement among people. These are authentic questions about the kinds of public policies that should be adopted to address public problems, involve different policy actors and multiple stakeholders, and are likely to generate multiple and competing answers. Some, but not all, political issues are particularly clear examples of perennial issues, meaning that they cross time and space. Such issues will never be fundamentally resolved, and from time to time we can expect to see concrete examples of how a fundamental question is being deliberated in the present. It is not difficult to find historical examples of issues that have transcended time, and there are also contemporary issues likely to arise in the future that will remain relevant long after they are first generated. For example, in the Public Issues Series set of curriculum materials, Donald Oliver and Fred Newmann (1967) distinguished between general topics (e.g., The New Deal, Revolution, Organized Labor), perennial issues (e.g., Under what circumstances should the government intervene in the economy?), and case issues (e.g., Was the New Deal justified?). Notice that the case issue is not perennial because
it emanates from a specific controversy in a particular time and place. But the question about when government intervention is justified is perennial—there were certainly many examples of it before and after the New Deal, and it is clear from recent polling data in the United States that many of the core understandings and agreements that were forged during the Great Depression and afterward are now contested. As suggested earlier, one of the contours of the current political polarization in the United States is growing and sharp disagreement about how much power the government should have in the lives of people, how much regulation of the economy is warranted, and what should be done to diminish growing income inequality. We are not suggesting that there used to be complete agreement about these questions, but the cleavages that exist in the general public’s views on these questions today is much greater than it has been in decades. Because of this, we are encouraging teachers to select controversial political issues that are powerful “cases” of perennial issues they deem important for their students to experience deliberating.

Moreover, during a time when fundamental agreements are splitting apart, it is important to engage young people in the very deliberations that form the heart of contemporary political debate. By doing so, teachers can give students concrete experiences wrestling with the value tensions that so often undergird and are embedded in perennial issues—tensions between freedom and security for example, or between autonomy and equality. Doing so in the context of a specific issue is helpful because the deliberation is more focused. For example, a deliberation about when a nation is justified in going to war tends to fall flat unless there is a specific case of the question to deliberate. But it is enormously helpful for teachers to select controversial political issues that exemplify the perennial issues that they want to engage their students in deliberating. For example, one could engage students in a discussion of whether they support the Affordable Care Act, but embedding this discussion within a unit of study that is centered around the question, “What is the relationship between the individual and the state?” would place this issue within a larger study of public debates about the social safety net and the tension between individual responsibility and social responsibility. Such a unit would need to include background about economic and political theories like deliberative democracy, aggregative democracy, capitalism, libertarianism, and socialism. Especially powerful learning can occur when teachers are able to help students move inductively and deductively between cases and the perennial issues they exemplify.

Framing questions in this way is always effective but particularly important in times of polarization, because it places the discussion in its larger historical context and pulls it away from partisan bickering. Further, students should see that this issue is not just a simple question of distribution of health care (which, of course, is not at all simple) but part of an ideological debate about what kind of government and society we want to have.
2. Distinctions That Matter

While there are many ways to differentiate among issues, the current political climate makes four classifications particularly important for teachers to both understand and teach: open, closed, empirical, and policy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Type</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Open Empirical Question:</strong></td>
<td>Does food irradiation cause public health problems?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>question that can be answered with evidence, but for which there is a scientific debate happening because the evidence is conflicting or insufficient.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Closed Empirical Question:</strong></td>
<td>What is the cure for strep throat?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>question that has been sufficiently answered with evidence.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Open Policy Question:</strong></td>
<td>Should the United States continue sanctions against Iran?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>question about a policy for which there are multiple and competing views.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Closed Policy Question:</strong></td>
<td>Should women in the United States have the right to vote?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>question that is currently settled, considered noncontroversial.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The open–closed distinction rests on whether there are multiple and competing reasonable answers (open) or whether there is an agreed-upon answer (closed). The empirical-policy distinction is whether an issue can be resolved with empirical evidence or is it a political issue that requires people to consider questions about how we want to live together. The categories on the chart can be sorted into four possible quadrants. First, policy issues may be open (e.g., should sanctions be imposed on Iran?) or closed (e.g., should women in the United States have the right to vote?). Deliberation of closed policy questions might occur in history classrooms, as for example when students debate women’s suffrage from the perspective of people in the 19th century. In other courses, such as government, teachers are unlikely to open up policy questions on which there is practically universal agreement. There is little justification, that is, for asking students whether we should return to policies that have been discredited.

More confusing, though, is the role of empirical issues, which can also be either open (e.g., such as what is the cure for AIDS?) or closed (e.g., does smoking cigarettes cause cancer?). Both open and closed empirical issues have a place in the classroom, but we argue that they should be taught quite differently. As an illustration of the difference between teaching about open and closed empirical issues, consider how students should be taught about climate change. We begin with the well-warranted claim that the scientific community (comprised of scientists who publish their results in peer-reviewed journals) is in agreement that the question of whether climate change is happening is closed, as is the secondary question of whether it is caused, at least in part, by human behavior. That is, scientists believe there is ample, reliable evidence to show that the climate is chang-
ing, and that is due in large part to human activity. There are others, however, who point to “alternative theories” or spurious studies that throw doubt on the findings from the scientific community. For them, the question of climate change might also be closed—because they believe the evidence “proves” that humans are not responsible for any perceived change in temperatures or other natural disasters. Or, they might think that there is no evidence that the climate is changing in any new or remarkable way, or they might think the question is open and that there is a live scientific debate happening.

These differences of opinion create challenges for teachers. Consider the following situation: A teacher would like to have students discuss whether their state should enact a policy to reduce carbon emissions as a way to combat the effects of climate change and improve air quality. Some students in her class may be climate-change deniers and believe there is considerable, reputable evidence that human activity—such as carbon emissions—has no effect on climate change. One approach for a teacher in this situation is to “teach the controversy” and let students decide which theory they believe. Teachers often think that this approach is the most fair and that doing otherwise would stifle students’ freedom of thought. This comes from the view that good teaching is “neutral” and acknowledges all the perspectives students bring into class. But we argue that teachers do not need to be neutral to views that are empirically unfounded. We do not expect history teachers to give a “fair” hearing to Holocaust deniers and similarly, it is irresponsible for schools to present questions as empirically controversial when in fact they are not. A better approach—and one that still allows for student disagreement—is to acknowledge that some people doubt the science of climate change but to explain that for the purposes of this discussion students are to start from the position that carbon emissions is a problem that must be addressed. Further, this is a case in which a teacher should openly explain why she is taking this approach, despite the disagreement in the class. This would include explanations of the difference between the empirical question and the open political question that she is asking the class to consider, peer-reviewed scientific research, and evidence about why this perceived scientific controversy is ideologically charged. That is, this is not a controversy among scientists, but a case in which the scientific evidence is being miscast for political reasons.

This approach will certainly sound partisan to those who are convinced that there is a live empirical debate happening around this issue. However, we think the more “balanced” approach of “teaching both sides” is a mistake, in part because in the long run it could serve to increase polarization around arguments that can actually be resolved by empirical evidence (this is the very nature of an empirical question). Further, it could reinforce the idea that empirical questions are matters of belief rather than evidence. These questions should be the easiest to depolarize if people can be taught to recognize that while many empirical questions are open, and
should be taught as such, when a question is closed, it is irresponsible to
treat it otherwise—especially in schools, where, by definition, we are
charged with developing knowledge. Teaching closed empirical questions
as open miseducates students, which is wrong intellectually, morally, and in
the long run, politically.

3. Embracing Ideological Diversity

As explained above, one of the most striking deliberative assets of schools
is that they are typically more ideologically diverse than the communities in
which they are located, and that notwithstanding the recent trend toward
resegregation in schools along dimensions of race and class in the United
States, they still are probably the most diverse environments that young
people inhabit. As a case in point, in our study of controversial issues
teaching and learning we have examined the degree and impact of ideo-
logical diversity present in high school social studies courses (Hess, 2009).
Even in classes that appear to be extremely homogeneous, students consist-
tently reported that they were able to recognize and appreciate the ideo-
logical diversity in their midst if their teachers included discussions of
controversial issues in the curriculum. Many students stated that the range
of opinions expressed in their classes was far wider than in their homes, in
part because there were simply more participants, and therefore a greater
diversity of viewpoints. But students also noted that teachers made a differ-
ence, especially when they were skillful at teaching students how to respect-
fully disagree and engaged them in issues for which students had genuine
differences of opinion.

In ideologically diverse communities, teachers have a deliberative asset:
students naturally disagree. While some teachers may worry that these
conditions will cause discussions to get uncomfortably heated, we found
that when teachers, like those at Adams High, use best practices and set and
enforce clear guidelines for civility, students find these classes to be highly
engaging (Hess, McAvoy, Smithson, & Hwang, 2008; McAvoy et al., 2011).
Further, these experiences provide an important counterexample to the
divisive climate outside of school.

More challenging is using deliberation in politically like-minded commu-
nities. We define like-mindedness as schools in which 80% or more of the
surveyed students would have voted for the same presidential candidate, and
as a group they had views on political issues that fell in line with one political
party. Elsewhere we have explained in some detail what teachers who are
effective at teaching their students to engage in high-quality deliberations of
controversial political issues do differently in response to the nature and
range of ideological diversity within their classes (Hess, 2009; Hess et al.,
2008). In brief, our research clearly shows that like-mindedness is an enemy
of both critical inquiry and robust deliberation, because students easily
dismiss views that do not align with their communities. Further, when students see their schools as places in which “we all think alike,” it is difficult to find issues that bring out genuine disagreement.

In our study, we had four teachers in three schools that fit our like-minded category—one public “liberal” school and two evangelical “conservative” schools. Mr. Kushner at left-leaning Academy High and Mr. Walters at right-leaning Church High were both discussion-promoting teachers who saw their role as trying to get students to question the political views they may have unreflectively adopted from their communities. To do this they developed a warm rapport with students, created an open classroom climate and then challenged students to take seriously other points of view by bringing in respectable readings, videos, and guest speakers. We note that both teachers were generally in line with the political views of their students and they were not trying to get students to change their minds, though that was a possibility. At the same time, both wanted students to listen to and see the reasonableness of other points of view. When interviewed, students in these classes noted that this was often the first time that they had seriously considered opinions from the other side of the political spectrum, and importantly, they found it valuable and engaging.

Generally, we have found that it is much easier to take advantage of existing ideological diversity that exists within classes than it is to deal with the problem of like-mindedness. That being said, it is not an insurmountable problem, as long as teachers are aware of and committed to the need to ensure that students are exposed to views that are different than their own.

4. Avoid Political Proselytizing

Deciding whether it is appropriate for a teacher to share her view with a class is a controversial issue for teachers. We know from our research that some teachers are sharing their political opinions with students, especially when they teach older adolescents. Further, we have found that, when done with care, teachers can share their views in ways that are educational and not detrimental to learning or independent thought (Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, in press). In short, our study did not find that students were adopting their teachers’ views. At the same time, we have shown that many members of the general public suspect that teachers are using their authority at the front of the room to push their own political views, and often believe that sharing any political view is an ethical violation.

Given that many members of the public seem to be concerned that students will be unduly influenced when teachers share their views on issues that are being deliberated, teachers may want to avoid criticism by deciding not share their views. We have encountered many teachers who
have made that decision, even when they believe that there could be some value to the educational process if they were more forthcoming about their own views. In many cases taking such a position is simply not necessary, as long as the teacher is careful to ensure that her voice is just one of many, and not presented or viewed as the dominant, or “correct,” view. However, in communities in which the level of polarization is extremely high, and in which there are especially important issues that should be infused into the curriculum, it may be that the teacher should sacrifice her opinion to maintain public support for the practice of deliberation. In other words, we view teacher disclosure as a pedagogical tool that a teacher may employ when it serves a particular educational aim. For example, Mr. Walters at Church High personally questions whether the Republican Party’s resistance to redistributive policies is in line with Christian values. He occasionally shares this view with his students so that they will give it serious consideration. Conversely, when a teacher has good reason to believe that sharing a view will shut down discussion, then it would be best to avoid sharing so that students will stay engaged.

What is never appropriate is politically proselytizing—purposely trying to cause students to adopt one’s own view on open policy questions. We have observed very few teachers who do this, although we are concerned that the public’s perception seems to be that this is the norm. What we think is more common, and just as problematic, is teachers who use vitriol and sarcasm to denigrate political leaders or institutions they do not support. For example, in a recent study of six high school government courses in upstate New York, Niemi and Niemi (2007) reported that while five teachers did not explicitly share their opinions on controversial issues (including voting preferences), they were hardly neutral or silent in their views of the political system and politicians. Teachers regularly made derogatory remarks about political leaders and communicated impoverished views of how individuals can or should participate politically. Niemi and Niemi (2007) express concern that this form of “teacher disclosure” is antithetical to the goals of democratic education:

But the extent to which teachers made derogatory comments about the knowledge and ability of ordinary citizens, about political leaders, about governmental institutions, and about political processes (campaigns, law-making) was at times overwhelming. That a presidential debate made you “dumber,” that Kermit the Frog was the best candidate, that our “wonderful” Congress was “idiotic,” and so on, hardly suggest healthy, serious-minded criticism. That teachers and even a superintendent resorted to name-calling is even more indicative of a degree of cynicism greater than one might wish for among those teaching about democratic governance. (p. 20)

In our study we found that while some students find this type of sarcasm entertaining, they are also aware that the teacher is creating a climate that excludes particular points of view. Joking in this way contributes to the
ethos of polarization and oversimplifies complex political issues: The “good
guys” have the answers and the rest are “idiotic.”

We encourage teachers to aim to create a strong deliberative climate in
their classrooms that embodies and teaches political fairness—by which we
mean a classroom that is rich with important issues, supported with the very
best available curricular resources, and using teaching strategies that
enable all students to participate. We are not suggesting that teachers
should never share their views, but that they should not use their power in
the classroom to try to convince students that their views are correct, or to
engage in potshots against political leaders with whom they disagree. We
believe that the 50% of the public that thinks social studies teachers are
using their classrooms as soapboxes have an empirically unwarranted view.
That being said, in a time of intense political polarization teachers need to
be even more careful about both the reality and perception of a politically
fair classroom, hold themselves to the very highest standards, and hold
their colleagues to those standards as well.

CONCLUSION

We began this article with the theory of deliberative democracy and its
relationship to the pedagogy of engaging students in discussions of con-
troversial political issues. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the
question “What kind of democracy do we want?” is an important perennial
question. Teachers often teach that the United States is a democracy as if
that is a fixed political category. Democratic theorists, on the other hand,
usually see democracies as always in flux, moving along Barber’s (1984)
continuum of strong to thin. For the past 30 years, young people have been
raised in a political climate that is getting continually thinner and danger-
ously polarized. Given this reality, it is even more important for young
people to learn that the question “What kind of democracy do we want?” is
an open question and the one that is in the background of nearly all of the
public policy debates we are having today. In other words, young people
should learn that they are living in a polarized time and understand how
the social conditions of economic inequality, immigration, residential
sorting, and changes in mass media greatly affect which issues are taken up
in the political sphere.

We reiterate that we do not think that schools are the institution that can
transform the political climate, but we also hope that they will not become
part of the problem by contributing to the ethos of polarization. We
recommend that in polarized times teachers think carefully about which
questions they ask students to deliberate and how they frame the discussion
so that they move students from the closed-minded thinking of partisan
politics to an understanding of where this policy question fits within a
broader historical and ideological context. Further, we hope that teachers
do not shy away from political controversy and instead see their job as helping students to develop the skills and dispositions of deliberation so that young people are able to practice reason-giving, listening, and considering how their views impact others. Finally, we encourage teachers to take a pedagogical Hippocratic oath to “do no harm.” That is, we see polarization is harming democracy by causing public distrust, which prevents the nation from addressing pressing socioeconomic problems. Teachers must be careful that they keep the deliberative space of their classroom fair and open by resisting the urge to mock or dismiss competing views about open political questions. On this point, teachers need to remember that classrooms are unusual political spaces in which the participants are a captive audience of young people who are forming their political views. They deserve the opportunity to puzzle about the political issues that they are inheriting in a way that models good thinking and reasoning. In our view, it is these experiences that best prepare future citizens to answer the question “How do we want to live together?”

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NOTES

1. Data collection began in spring 2005 and was completed in spring 2009. The sample includes 1,001 students in 35 classes in 21 schools in three states (Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin). This is one of the largest democratic education studies in the nation, and the only longitudinal study that includes robust qualitative data from teachers and their students and follow-up data from students after they have left high school. We have administered pre- and post-course questionnaires to 999 students and their teachers. The bulk of other data comes from observing classes and issues forums attended by multiple classes, interviewing teachers about their educational philosophies, and interviewing a large subsample of students \((n = 226)\) during the last 2 weeks of the course. We contracted with the UW Survey Center to conduct two rounds of follow-up telephone interviews. The first was completed in 2007 with 402 participants. The second was completed in 2009 with 369 participants.

2. We have adopted Parker’s (2003) distinction between discussion and deliberation (explained on p. 15 of this article), and will use both terms throughout the paper.

3. For more on political stability and classroom practice, see Hoepken (1998).

4. The idea that deliberation is an important part of political decision making has been around since Aristotle’s Politics; however, these theorists were repositioning deliberation as a central feature of democratic life.
5. The only tracked course is one section for English Language Learners.

6. Abrams and Fiorina (2012) argue that Bishop’s work may overemphasize the extent to which people have geographically sorted themselves, but they do not dispute the fact that some sorting has occurred and that political amplification is happening.

7. To see the press release and the text of the speech go to http://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/academic/bts.html (retrieved September 26, 2010).

8. The previous two paragraphs have been adapted from Hess (2009).

9. We are grateful for Eric Plutzer (personal communication, May 16, 2012), who pointed us in the direction of the empirical-policy distinction.

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