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The Impact of Polarization on the Political Engagement of Generation Z Elementary Preservice Teachers and Their Teaching

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Abstract

This instrumental case study of Generation Z preservice teachers enrolled in elementary teaching methods courses in social studies and literacy explores the impact of polarization on their political engagement and teaching. Using the 2020 presidential election as a teachable moment, participants developed and taught literacy-infused civics units in order to bring to light their understandings of their role in preparing elementary students as political actors. This study has important implications for how teacher educators can better facilitate elementary preservice teachers' own political engagement, thereby ensuring equitable democratic learning opportunities for students.

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Introduction

RECENT LEGISLATIVE EFFORTS to ban critical race theory (CRT) in K–12 classrooms, including when and how to teach about systemic racism in the United States, have once again brought to the fore the politicized nature of schooling in America (Pollock et al., 2022; Zimmerman, 2022). A growing area of research explores how elementary social studies teachers prepare their students as political actors during highly partisan times (Payne & Journell, 2019; Rodríguez & Swalwell, 2021). While studies have demonstrated that young children are capable of identifying and resolving problems of democratic life (Alarcón et al., 2017; Swalwell & Payne, 2019), many elementary teachers believe their students are not developmentally ready to learn about social injustice in their communities (Husband, 2010; Marri et al., 2014) and refrain from teaching about political topics that spark controversy (Buchanan, 2015; Shear et al.,

2018). Therefore, instead of providing students with opportunities to engage in political topics with peers, examine the root causes of injustice, and develop the necessary skills to take informed action as citizens, elementary teachers often focus on themes of personal responsibility (Fry & O'Brien, 2015; Patterson et al., 2012).

In this article, we investigated elementary preservice teachers' (PSTs') understandings of what it means to prepare young children

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as political actors amid hyper-partisanship. Whereas prior research has shown that elementary teachers' abstract conceptualizations of what it means to be a "good" citizen influence their teaching practice (Marri et al., 2014; Patterson et al., 2012), we posit that elementary teachers' own beliefs about politics in a polarized political climate influenced how they mediated and modeled democratic processes for their students (Reichert et al., 2020). Additionally, our study targeted elementary PSTs who identified as members of Gen Z, who are generally defined as anyone born after 1996 (Dimock, 2019). We chose this generation of PSTs as participants in our study because they were recent products of K–12 civic education amid increasing partisan animosity and political disinformation (Knoester & Gichiru, 2021). Gen Z youth have come of political age amid active shooter drills at school and Black Lives Matter protests in their communities. As instructors, we noticed that many of our elementary PSTs were disengaged from politics and showed a lack of awareness of national policy discussions (Jeffries & McCorkle, 2020). We saw the 2020 presidential election as a teachable moment to learn about the effects of hyper-partisanship on Gen Z elementary PSTs' views of politics and their role in preparing elementary students as democratic citizens.

Literature Review

Defining Political Education

It is critical to the health and legitimacy of democracy that citizens make their voices heard. Gaining the right to vote and ensuring equal access to the ballot box has been an ongoing civil rights struggle in the U.S. that continues to the present day (Anderson, 2018). It is not surprising, therefore, that a large focus of K–12 political education has been preparing young people to exercise their fundamental right to vote. We use the term "political education" to intentionally draw attention to the "dynamic and contested dimensions inherent in a democracy" (Hess, 2009, p. 14). We understand political education to be "a form of civic education that purposefully teaches young people how to *do* democracy" (Hess, 2009, p. 15). In order to experience democracy firsthand, children need opportunities to wrestle with disagreement and conflict that naturally arise when making political decisions about living together (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). This definition of political education is rooted in the agonistic conception of the political, which views controversy as inherent to political life because unequal power relations in society result in competing conceptions of justice and liberty (Mouffe, 2005; Ruitenberg, 2009). Children can gain experience doing democracy by seeking solutions to everyday controversies that arise in elementary classrooms, such as negotiating the use of limited classroom resources, deciding whether classroom rules and routines are just, and caring for the needs of others in the broader community (Marsh et al., 2020).

Forms of Young Adult Political Engagement

Engaging in authentic democratic processes in school is necessary preparation for a variety of forms of political participation, including formal and informal processes. Although young adults turned out to vote in 2018 and 2020 at historic rates,

18-to-24-year-olds have historically trailed all other age groups in voter participation (Kiesa et al., 2022). While some scholars see low voter turnout as a threat to democracy, others have argued that young people take part in non-traditional forms of participation that reflect evolving norms of citizenship (Dalton, 2009; Zukin et al., 2006). However, especially for younger Americans, the decision to vote is not the only measure of their commitment to the common good. Drawing upon two nationally representative surveys, the General Social Survey (GSSS) and the Center for Democracy and Civil Society (CDACS) survey, Dalton (2009) identified two dimensions of citizenship, citizen duty and engaged citizenship. At the time of Dalton's work, younger generations (turning 18 years of age in the 1960s, 1980s, and Gen X) were found to identify more closely with engaged citizenship, which considers "buying products for political reasons . . . and [being] willing to challenge political elites" to be important indicators of "good citizenship" (pp. 27–28). Previous generations of Americans (turning 18 years of age before and immediately after World War II) were more likely to align themselves with the principle of citizen duty, which places a higher priority on obeying the law, voting, and serving in the military.

Measures of political engagement must also consider the role of new media in youth political engagement (Cohen et al., 2012; Kahne et al., 2016). For example, a report by the Youth Participatory Politics Research Group (Cohen et al., 2012) defined participatory politics as "interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern" (p. vi). This definition of participatory politics expands what counts as political engagement, including "starting a new political group online, writing and disseminating a new blog post about a political issue, forwarding a funny political video to one's social network, or participating in a poetry slam" (Cohen et al., 2012, p. vi).

Moreover, a persistent civic debt (Lo, 2019) disadvantages youth from minoritized backgrounds, who have fewer opportunities than white students and students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds to engage in school practices that are known to boost political knowledge, such as open classroom discussion of controversial issues (Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2013; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). In addition, research on activism among youth of color highlights important forms of civic engagement that are not captured by traditional measures of political participation (Ginwright, 2007). Unlike earlier generations, who believed it was their civic duty to obey authority, scholars have demonstrated that minoritized youth engage civically to challenge the status quo and bring about greater social justice for their communities. The focus on formal political activity overlooks important ways youth of color are civically active (Watts & Flanagan, 2007) and seek out civic resources outside school that are more relevant to their lived experiences as racialized citizens (Clay & Rubin, 2019).

Gen Z Political Engagement

The increasingly polarized political context presents researchers with an important opportunity to reexamine young adults' views of

politics and engagement. Nationwide civic unrest and reckoning with the United States' prolonged history of racism and colonialism have sparked youth-led movements that challenge the narrative of young adults as being politically apathetic (Abowitz & Mamlok, 2019). Young people today are taking to the streets, and the ballot box, to make their voices heard on such issues as systemic racism, climate change, and LGBTQ+ rights (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). Galvanized by social injustices, Gen Z voters indicate that they "see themselves as part of a rising political force, poised to have a dramatic impact on our democracy" (CIRCLE, 2018).

Cynicism about the government's inability to solve the nation's most pressing social problems also influence Gen Z's political engagement. A 2018 poll found that 18-to-24-year-olds who reported feeling more cynical about politics were more likely to say they were voting in the midterm elections (CIRCLE, 2018). In other words, feeling frustrated and angry about the current state of politics is an important driver of youth political engagement. The political engagement of 18-to-24-year-olds is also shaped by having grown up in the digital age with extensive exposure to social media (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). According to Kahne et al. (2016), the affordances of digital media provide new avenues of participation, ranging from "blogging and circulating political news, to starting a new political group, to creating petitions, to mobilizing one's network on behalf of a cause" (p. 2).

Influence of Views of Politics and Engagement on Teaching Practice

If Gen Z youth see racial injustice, climate change, and LGBTQ+ rights as social problems in need of political solutions, how might this impact their teaching practice? Previous research has sought to explain how teachers' own political engagement and conceptions of citizenship influence their teaching practice (DiGiacomo et al., 2021). The bulk of this research has focused on in-service teachers at the secondary level. For example, Knowles (2018) studied how middle/high school teachers' civic education ideology manifested in social studies classrooms, and found that teachers with conservative views of civic education were more likely to employ teacher-directed instructional practices (e.g., lecture, worksheets, taking notes) than teachers with a liberal civic education ideology, who were more likely to facilitate class debates, student-led discussion, and group projects.

A small number of studies have gone beyond teachers' professed ideological beliefs or conceptions of citizenship to investigate the implication of teachers' own political engagement for their teaching practice. Rogers and Westheimer (2017) found that teachers who self-reported having a conservative political ideology were no more or less likely to teach about economic inequality than teachers who had politically liberal views. However, teachers who reported being more politically engaged (e.g., following the news, talking about politics with friends, participating in organizations that seek to make a difference in the community) were much more likely to discuss economic inequality with their students. Rogers and Westheimer (2017) concluded from their research that "the degree to which a teacher is politically

engaged outside the classroom . . . is a strong predictor of how often he engages his students with issues related to economic inequality," and recommended that teacher education programs encourage future teachers to follow the news and engage in civic discussion of social and political topics (p. 1054). In a cross-national study of teachers in 12 countries in Europe and Asia, Reichert et al. (2020) found that teachers who were civically involved in social and political activities outside the classroom were more likely to engage their students in role-playing and discussion of controversial issues.

Our review of the literature demonstrates the need for additional research on the effect of elementary PSTs' views of politics amid polarization on their teaching. In the next section, we discuss some of the challenges to facilitating political discussions in elementary classrooms and how PSTs' limited conceptions of the political compound these difficulties.

Political Education in Elementary Classrooms

Prior research has documented that social studies as a school subject is marginalized in the elementary curriculum (Hawkman et al., 2015; Heafner & Fitchett, 2012). Confronted by heavy testing requirements in language arts and math, many elementary teachers dilute the social studies curriculum by integrating it with literacy (Hinde, 2009) and do not feel knowledgeable enough about public policy and current events to engage their students in potentially sensitive political discussions (Payne & Journell, 2019; Silva & Mason, 2012). Encouraging PSTs to become active in organizations that address political issues in their communities would bolster their confidence and provide relevant experience and knowledge needed to lead political discussions with young children.

Another factor affecting PSTs' ability to prepare their students as citizens is their limited conceptions of the political in the elementary grades. Several studies find that elementary social studies teachers primarily adopt a personally responsible conception of citizenship (Marri et al., 2014; Patterson et al., 2012), emphasizing patriotic values and dispositions, obeying the law, and helping others in need, rather than addressing issues of systemic injustice. Younger students are often treated as citizens-in-formation because they are not old enough to vote or participate in formal political activities (Swalwell & Payne, 2019, Payne et al., 2020). Civic education for young children that stresses obedience to rules and authority can be rooted in a view of children as developmentally incapable of solving complex social problems (Payne et al., 2020) or identifying the root causes of injustice in their communities and taking action (Picower, 2012).

Swalwell and Payne (2019) proposed a framework of "critical civic education" that challenges this narrow view of children's capabilities and includes opportunities for students to engage in collective forms of social action (p. 127). Models of civic education premised on adult-led activities, such as voting, can obscure how young children engage in everyday civics. Instead, Payne et al. (2020) argued for an embodied form of civic action premised on communitarian conceptions of citizenship (Etzioni, 1993), which recognizes "multiple ways across the school day that young

children act civically for and with other people in their communities" (p. 37). Examples of civic action in early childhood settings include sharing food, resolving disagreements, and caring for one another's physical and emotional needs. Payne et al. (2020) posited that a singular focus on public political participation as the measure of civic action neglects how children build community in the elementary classroom.

Some researchers have sought to draw a sharp distinction between "political education" and "civic education" to emphasize a preferred set of democratic dispositions or skills (Biesta et al., 2009; Flanagan, 2013; Niemi & Junn, 1998). Arguments for political education, for example, more often focus on knowledge about the political system, including election laws and procedures, or how to cast a ballot (Kiesa et al., 2022). Proponents of civic education emphasize community-led, grassroots engagement that is less constrained by political elites. However, we contend that narrowly defining political engagement as participating in formal political processes, such as voting, positions young children as incapable of tackling political topics and as citizens-to-be not citizens already. We also assert that civic education, as a form of political education, should not shy away from conflict as a necessary aspect of democratic life, including resolving disagreements about how to ensure freedom or equity in the classroom. In other words, it is the job of the elementary teacher to draw connections between everyday civics and fundamental disagreements over ethico-political values and the power relations that make up the classroom space (Ruitenberg, 2009). In the next section, we further tease out the distinctions between different forms of political activity in a democracy.

Theoretical Framework

To understand how elementary PSTs' views of politics and engagement influenced how they prepared children as political actors, it is necessary to distinguish political activity from other forms of civic action. According to the Educating for Democracy Project (EDP), a study of 21 college and university courses and cocurricular programs that prepared students for democratic life,

> what makes a given activity political . . . rests on the political nature of the goals or intentions animating the activity: goals connected to individual and group values, power, and choice or agency, and the desire to sustain or change the shared values, practices, and policies that shape collective life. (Colby et al., 2007, pp. 31–32)

The EDP's definition of the political distinguishes between political engagement and civically motivated action. For instance, community service or volunteerism may, or may not, lead to political engagement depending on what political skills are acquired or if the service was tied to a policy issue, or political goal. For example, donating canned goods to the local food pantry helps alleviate food insecurity, but it need not advance the political goal of addressing the root causes of hunger (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

Hess and McAvoy (2015), in their book *The Political Classroom*, take a somewhat broader view of the political. Hess and McAvoy contended, "We are being political when we are democratically making decisions about questions that ask, "How should we live together?" (p. 4). Importantly, the authors argue that

"schools are, and ought to be, political sites" (p. 4). As public spaces, schools are uniquely situated to impart the necessary skills and dispositions for democratic life because they bring together youth with a diversity of social positions and perspectives (Parker, 2003). According to this conception of the political classroom, schools are ideal spaces to teach youth to weigh evidence rationally, engage in civil discussions across differences, and consider multiple perspectives. However, there are significant limitations to a focus only on evidence-based argumentation as a strategy for civic engagement. Crocco et al. (2018) demonstrated how we often neglect to account for how students' sociocultural identities and classroom contexts influence deliberation. As Hess and McAvoy (2015) acknowledged, social inequality challenges the deliberative ideal in the political classroom. Critics of liberal democratic theory have argued that those who engage in democratic deliberation rarely, if ever, have equal social status and respect due to power differentials in society. Classroom deliberation is often premised on middle-class, heteronormative speech that privileges certain types of discussion, causing some voices and types of engagement to become marginalized and silenced (Fraser, 1992; Gibson, 2020). Further, Garrett et al. (2020) identified how a focus on deliberation and evidence-based argumentation often neglects "affective forms of knowing" (p. 312). The authors argued that classroom-based political discussions need to "accommodate, rather than dismiss" the "emotional, non-conscious, and dynamic processes at play in our ideological lives" (p. 321).

To recognize alternative forms of, and preparation for, political engagement, our study draws from theories of political education that embrace emotion as part of democratic participation, including agonism (Mouffe, 2005) and communitarian conceptions of citizenship (Etzioni, 1993). According to the agonistic conception of the political, "mobilization requires politicization, but politicization cannot exist without the production of a conflictual representation of the world, with opposed camps with which people can identify, thereby allowing for passions to be mobilized politically within the spectrum of the democratic process" (Mouffe, 2005, pp. 24–25). Collective identification (e.g., partisan identity) provides an impetus for young people to engage in the democratic process of voting. Mouffe (2005) argued that the rationalist approach to democratic politics fails to grasp the affective dimension of voting. Empirical research on political motivation bears this out. Abramowitz (2010) found that engaged citizens are more likely to identify strongly with one political party, and partisan alignment also correlates with knowledge of the political process, and engaging in informal political activities.

The agonistic view of political life reflects how many Gen Z PSTs approach politics in an era of hyper-partisanship. A CIRCLE (2018) poll conducted prior to the midterm elections found that among Gen Z, "81% believe that as a group, young people have the power to change things in this country, and two-thirds (66.8%) believe that 'dramatic changes' are possible if people demand change" (para. 3). Rather than "eliminate the passions from the sphere of the public" in order to deliberate rationally, social studies classrooms rooted in an agonistic model

of democracy would prepare students "to mobilize [their] passions towards democratic designs" (Mouffe, 2005, p. 103). Political anger, for instance, can be a powerful motivator for engagement, as evidenced by the political campaign to end gun violence led by youth activists, known as #NeverAgainMSD, which drew upon moral indignation to shame politicians for their lack of action (Abowitz & Mamlok, 2019). When the values of fairness and justice are violated by a member of the community (e.g., a child is excluded from a game at recess), students in elementary classrooms should be taught to harness their political anger to derive a democratic solution to the problem.

Research Design and Methods

To build on existing research on elementary PSTs' political knowledge and conceptualizations of citizenship, we employed an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) of 20-to-24-year-old PSTs enrolled in two co-requisite elementary teaching methods courses, one focused on social studies and the other literacy. As the authors of this study, we were both the instructors of the courses and field supervisors; however, in this study, we focused on participants' attitudes as captured in a survey of their political views and course assignments that included reflections on their political engagement and their unit planning. As such, PSTs' implementation of the lessons and their pedagogical practices are beyond the scope of this analysis.

PSTs were tasked with developing 3–6 interdisciplinary lessons that infused literacy skills and lessons focused on civics. PSTs implemented their lessons in a variety of K–6 schools. While some of our PSTs were placed in a local middle school where there was support for a schoolwide mock presidential election, more than half of our PSTs were placed in classrooms in K–6 schools without a schoolwide civics project. Thus, the grade level of the students, as well as the curricular focus of the school in which they were placed, influenced PSTs' lessons. Further, this project was completed during the coronavirus pandemic. Depending on the policies and practices of their host schools, PSTs were teaching virtually, in person, or delivering hybrid instruction. As such, civics lessons were developed in a variety of contexts. Table 1 lists the unit topics and the corresponding grade levels.

Table 1. PSTs' Unit Topics and Grade Levels

Participant	Grade Level	Unit Topic
1	1st	Characteristics of Good Citizenship
2	5th	Organization/Functions of Government with a Focus on the Electoral Process
3	5th	Election Unit with a Focus on Current Presidential Candidates
4	3rd	Electoral Process with a Mock Election about Favorite Superheroes
5	4th–6th grades	Civic Virtues and the Presidential Election
6	Kindergarten	Civic Responsibility
7	Kindergarten	Electoral Process with a Mock Election about Favorite Ice Cream Flavors

Participant	Grade Level	Unit Topic
8	Kindergarten	Electoral Process with a Mock Election for Characters in an Election-Themed Book
9	Kindergarten	Community Helpers
10[*]	5th	Electoral Process with a Mock Election of Current Presidential Candidates
11	4th	Organization/Functions of Government
12[*]	5th	Electoral Process with a Mock Election of Current Presidential Candidates
13	4th–6th	Civic Responsibility with a Focus on Current Issues
14[*]	5th	Electoral Process with a Mock Election of Current Presidential Candidates

[*] Participants were placed in a school in which the mock election was part of a schoolwide initiative.

Participants and Context

We conducted our study at a public regional university in the Midwest. Because of the small sample size and our desire to protect the confidentiality of participants, we did not ask for demographic information. The Midwestern regional institution where this research took place has approximately 10,000 students, with a majority of white students (57%) and including 20% Hispanic/ Latino, 10% African American, and 7% international students. Consistent with national trends regarding the overrepresentation of white women in teacher education programs, more than 80% of preservice teachers were white and more than 80% were women. In this respect, the participants in our study were not representative of the increasing diversity of Gen Z, of whom 48% are racial or ethnic minorities (Parker & Igielnik, 2020).

PSTs enrolled in the social studies course were invited to participate in the study. Twenty-nine students were enrolled, and 16 students provided their consent to participate. Of those 16 students, 14 completed the course. It is important to note that all students completed the same course assignments, but we analyzed only the work of those who consented to participate. Participation was not required and did not influence students' grades.

Data Collection and Analysis

At weeks 2 and 15, we administered an identical survey that included questions about characteristics of "good" citizenship, levels of interest in various political issues, levels of political involvement, and beliefs about teaching civics in the elementary classroom. While our survey was not directly linked to an existing survey, we consulted the literature on previous measures of civic involvement to identify a variety of ways PSTs could be engaged in democratic life (Szarleta, 2021). We asked about traditional forms of political activity like "voting" and "obeying the law" that are aligned with a "citizen duty" conception of citizenship, as well as "supporting people worse off than yourself" and "signing a petition," which are aligned with "engaged citizenship" (Dalton, 2009). We analyzed the survey results by creating a frequency chart noting how many PSTs were "very interested," "somewhat inter-

ested," "a little bit interested," or "not interested at all" in each of 12 political issues, including education, gun control, racial justice, reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ rights, climate change, immigration, and healthcare. We also recorded the number of times PSTs reported discussing politics with friends and family, as well as how they sought out political information and what sources they used to become informed (e.g., newspapers, personal research, or discussions).

Additionally, we completed a content analysis of two course assignments from the social studies methods course (McKinney, 2007). In the first assignment, PSTs completed a discussion after watching a video answering questions related to characteristics of Gen Z voters and the civic engagement of young people. In the second assignment, PSTs reflected in writing on what they learned while completing their interdisciplinary civics unit. We conducted our first round of open coding of the video transcripts together, creating "in vivo" codes that came directly from the words of participants (Glesne, 2011, p. 195). Each researcher then coded half of the remaining documents independently, adding to the codes we generated together. In our second round of analysis, we read the documents each other had coded, adding additional codes and writing analytic memos (Saldaña, 2016). In our final round of analysis, we merged and consolidated codes until we agreed upon 35 axial codes (Glesne, 2011, p. 197). Finally, we determined associated codes, and analyzed our data to identify themes.

Researchers' Positionality
In this project, we "acknowledge how the subjective and objective components of knowledge are interconnected and interactive" and that our own experiences and positionalities influence our instruction and research (Banks, 1998, p. 6). We are both white middle-class college professors who previously worked as K–12 literacy and social studies teachers. While we did not share our political or electoral beliefs with PSTs, we both have strong partisan identities and believe that the role of public education includes preparing students to participate in our democratic practices. Because we believe that all education is political (Freire, 1997) and that becoming politically engaged requires engagement with politically relevant topics, we did not approach this project as neutral researchers but as educators committed to preparing future teachers to engage meaningfully in democratic education.

Findings
Participants' beliefs about politics in a highly partisan context influenced how they saw their role in preparing young children as democratic citizens. First, participants expressed feeling overwhelmed by the amount of political information on social media, while at the same time, they were committed to becoming better informed about the political process. As a result, many PSTs' units focused on facts about government processes and procedures, which they viewed as necessary to being an informed political actor. Second, participants avoided any hint of bias in their teaching. Rather than tap into their own political interests or current events directly impacting students' lives, multiple participants described avoiding political topics that were likely to elicit

emotional responses. Finally, several participants viewed young children as developmentally unable to engage in authentic political activities. Participants struggled to make a connection between their roles in preparing children as political actors and the everyday problems of democratic life arising in elementary classrooms, such as resolving issues of fairness (Lee et al., 2021). Instead, applying an adult-led lens to what could be considered political activity, PSTs either sought to modify political processes like voting to make them "relevant" and "age-appropriate" or avoided political discussion altogether.

The Political as Foundational Knowledge
When reflecting on their own political engagement as members of Gen Z, several participants said they lacked sufficient political knowledge. Participants were aware that political decisions affected them directly, which in some cases sparked their desire to become more politically informed. For instance, one participant said, "So I feel like we're the next ones to be wanting to learn more about politics, because it's going to involve [our] generation and affect us no matter what." Ruitenberg (2009) proposed several changes to how young people are prepared as informed citizens based on an agonistic theory of politics. "Political literacy" would extend beyond the teaching of facts, such as how many seats are in the House of Representatives, to include teaching youth how "to read the social order in political terms, that is, in terms of disputes about the interpretation of liberty and equality and the hegemonic social relations that should shape them" (p. 278). In discussions, several participants told us that not knowing what the Democratic and Republican Parties stood for prevented them from making informed political decisions and casting a vote in presidential elections.

One of the reasons participants gave for not knowing more about politics was the challenge of sifting through political information shared on social media and determining what sources were reliable. A defining characteristic of Gen Z is growing up with unprecedented access to digital media (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Half of the participants surveyed said they sought political information through social media. However, rather than opening up new avenues of participation (Kahne et al., 2016), participants reported feeling overwhelmed by the amount of political information available to them. In explaining why 18-to-24-year-olds trail other demographic groups in voter participation, one participant stated, "I think the easiest answer to that is social media. We have so much confusion and very unclear facts or opinions." According to another participant, "Not knowing what is actually factual and what is just made up, what words have been twisted . . . I think that also adds to the reasons why less people are voting, especially Gen Z because they are so active on social media."

Not feeling sufficiently informed to make political decisions in their own lives affected how participants prepared to teach their civics units. Some PSTs treated the instructional planning process as an opportunity to become more educated on the political process themselves. One participant explained,

I was a bit hesitant to teach some of the content in this unit solely because I had limited knowledge about some of the topics (e.g., voting

amendments, the electoral college, the election process, etc.). I didn't want this to prevent me from teaching so I did research on the subjects I was unsure of so I felt more comfortable presenting the material and answering any questions the students had.

Another participant described how learning alongside their students made them more aware of the voting process: "I do not get into politics or the election process, so the voting process was new for me. As I walked the students through the different steps of voting, I was teaching myself too." Therefore, through the process of planning a civics unit, participants' political knowledge increased.

As noted by participants, many were also motivated to teach about the electoral process and functions of government because they understood from their own experiences as political actors how insufficient knowledge can lead to confusion about the political process. As one participant explained,

It's really hard for me because I feel like I don't really understand government and politics all that much, so I'm going to pave that foundation of government and politics for my students . . . because I know the feeling of being confused and not understanding it, so I feel like it is important to include those conversations with your students.

That comment illustrates how some PSTs made room for necessary civics content despite their hesitancy and lack of confidence. To provide an element that they reported had been missing from their own civic preparation, participants focused on imparting foundational knowledge about government facts and processes, rather than engaging students in conflictual debate over the interpretation and implementation of democratic values, such as liberty and equality, and the hegemonic social relations that shape them (Ruitenberg, 2009).

The Political as Negative

As the National Council for the Social Studies position statement, *Promoting Teacher Civic Engagement* (2021) highlights, social studies teachers serve as civic role models for youth by engaging in activism in a variety of forms, such as "sending emails to the principal or superintendent, writing letters to the editors of hometown newspapers, participating in labor organizations, or running for political office" (para. 6). However, a prevalent theme in participant reflections on their views of politics was their characterization of politics as "negative." Rather than view the political arena as a means to effect social change and hold the government accountable to the needs and interests of their generation, partisan vitriol caused many PSTs to disengage from politics altogether. The following comments reflected the views of several participants:

"I really don't get into politics because . . . it's just kind of negative and everyone has an opinion on it and nobody can really respect anybody else's opinion."

"I know it [politics] affects my life, but it's such a negative thing to me and I don't like to really be in negative situations."

"There are so many negative connotations with everything involved with voting . . . I think this causes people our age to not be involved because we have no idea what's going on."

We are especially concerned about the effects these views have on the Gen Z PSTs in our study. Participants were also less likely to engage in political discussion with friends or family; just 20% of participants said they discussed politics with family or friends often. Whereas civics content knowledge and classroom strategies are critical forms of preparation for teaching in democratic classrooms, we also see it as necessary that teachers engage in political discussions with other adults in order to prepare their students effectively as political actors.

The prevalent view of politics as "negative" affected how the participants planned their civics instruction. Some participants avoided all discussion of the presidential election, opting instead to focus on the different branches of government or democratic processes like voting. According to these participants, they wanted to protect their students from the negativity of politics. For example, one participant stated,

Unfortunately, this election has led to a lot of anger and hate in our country. I want to make sure my students feel safe in their learning environment and did not feel it was appropriate to bring the negative impact the election has had on the country this year into the classroom.

As will be discussed in a later finding, both the age and demographic profile of students also contributed to the desire to avoid conflict. Yet the attempt to avoid conflict while preparing youth as political actors is a problem from the standpoint of agonism, which views conflict as inherent to the democratic process (Mouffe, 2005). According to Ruitenberg (2009), political education must educate political emotions, not remove passionate debate from the classroom. The desire to make the classroom "safe" from conflict reflects the entrenched view that emotion is an impediment to learning or makes the classroom unsafe (Boler, 1999). However, avoiding topics that invite controversy or disagreement denies students the opportunity to learn about the role of emotion in combating social injustice.

Moreover, while that participant's comment suggests that "anger and hate in our country" can lead to a disaffection with politics, political emotions such as anger can also spark political reengagement when harnessed toward democratic ends (Mouffe, 2005). Ruitenberg (2009) defined political anger as "the anger or indignation one feels when decisions are made and actions are taken that violate the interpretation or implementation of the ethico-political values of equality and liberty that, one believes, would support a just society" (p. 277). Rather than label anger as necessarily "negative" and avoid it in the classroom, elementary teachers can instead help students reflect on the sources of their anger in developmentally appropriate ways. For example, anger arises when the value of fairness is violated by a member of the classroom community who is unwilling to share resources with someone who needs them (Lee et al., 2021). Lessons that do not

include authentic political debate about fundamental democratic values are likely to ring hollow with students.

The Political as Containing Unwanted Bias

Another way participants sought to avoid conflict and emotion in the classroom was by attempting to reduce bias. The desire to remain neutral was encapsulated by a participant who stated: "I will teach the facts and help my students form their own opinions without pushing something on them." The importance of teaching only the "facts" and not allowing their personal opinions to influence their teaching was brought up frequently by participants. A participant went so far as to claim that not being knowledgeable about politics would allow them to be more objective in the classroom:

> My lack of knowledge of politics is beneficial because I don't have that bias that some people may have who are more into politics than I am, and that bias could unintentionally sway their students to think or believe what they do instead of giving their students an unbiased look into each political party and allowing them to form their own opinions.

For some participants, political polarization contributed to the commitment to being unbiased. In their study of PSTs and critical media literacy, Garrett et al. (2021) found preservice teachers "expressing desires to take a neutral, middle, objective position in relationship to anything that tinges of controversy or emotional cargo" (p. 58). The perceived "dangers of engaging with content that can enliven passionate responses in students" is a form of self-preservation in the broader social and political landscape of teachers' professional lives today, which includes being vulnerable to accusations of indoctrinating students into particular political beliefs (Garrett et al., 2021, p. 58).

Additionally, some participants focused on unbiased facts about government due to their own difficulties in, as one participant described, "knowing what is actually factual and what is just made up." Unfortunately, the decision to focus merely on government procedures represents a lost opportunity to teach about the effects of bias on the media and how to assess the credibility of different news sources (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017; Sullivan, 2015).

Another reason several participants gave for not discussing the election was not wanting to anger parents. Due to the pandemic, many PSTs were planning and implementing online lessons, which gave parents a front-row seat to class discussions and teacher instruction. Having students attend class from their bedrooms, kitchen tables, and living rooms blurred the distinction between the public space of school and the private sphere of the family and added a unique dimension of concern about the ability of parents to influence their children's political beliefs. Several participants expressed the view that children were unable to form political views of their own and merely repeated what they heard from parents. Participants worried that creating space in the classroom for students to discuss and question one another's political beliefs and opinions could be interpreted by parents as an overreach into the private sphere of the home. One participant said they tried to

stay away from discussing the candidates in the election and focus more so on the content, process, and functions within the government. I did not want parents becoming offended or being upset, or pushing their opinions onto their child because of what we were discussing at school.

Nonetheless, at least one participant conducted a mock presidential election despite the risk of upsetting parents. While they recounted, "Some parents were not happy that I was teaching this unit to their kids because it was too controversial," they also acknowledged that they found value in teaching students facts about the election. They asserted, "My opinion has changed with teaching controversial topics now. I think it is essential to teach them."

A final way that participants sought to limit bias in the classroom was to not teach about political issues about which they were personally interested. Based on the results of our survey, the top three political issues participants were "very" or "somewhat" interested in were (1) education, (2) gun control, and (3) racial justice (see Table 2). However, the participants who led mock presidential elections chose to teach about education, which as a group was the topic in which they were most interested, and climate change, which ranked low as a topic of interest, as campaign topics. According to participants, they avoided topics about which they or the students had strong beliefs or that affected them personally. For instance, one PST conducting a mock election in a school that was predominantly African American chose not to examine the topic of racial justice because "one of the major issues discussed has been racial injustice that has occurred in our country." This participant felt their African American students would have "already formed opinions about the candidates because of family or societal influence." Rather than develop lessons that were socio-politically relevant to students' lived experiences as racialized citizens (Clay & Rubin, 2019) and leverage their political anger at systemic racism, this participant chose topics they believed would not evoke strong emotions or personal feelings. Furthermore, they sought to limit their own bias by "remaining neutral and positive about both candidates." Therefore, this PST sought to control and manage the emotions of students, and their own, with respect to the presidential candidates.

Table 2. PSTs' Interest in Political Issues

Percent who said they are "very" or "somewhat interested"
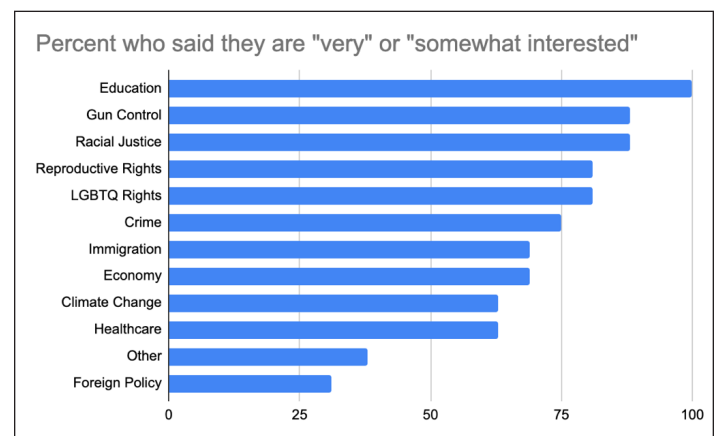
Participants' attempts to avoid emotional topics and maintain neutrality in the classroom reflects a conceptualization of the political that treats emotion as a hindrance to achieving democratic consensus. Rather than harness student emotion toward democratic designs, such as moral indignation at racial injustice, participants avoided passionate discussion. Participants sought to create a "safe" learning environment for students that shielded them from the political sphere, which they conceptualized as overwhelmingly "negative." As we discuss next, the desire to protect students from political conflict and the undue influence of adults was also rooted in a view of young children as innocent and having limited civic capabilities.

The Political as Too Complex for Young Children to Understand

Conceptualizing the political sphere as a space free from emotion, where individuals act on their civic knowledge to make reasoned political decisions, also had an effect on how the participants planned their lessons with young children. PSTs in K–3 classrooms often referred to the political system as too complex for young children to engage in authentic political discussions or form political views independently from teachers and parents. As Payne et al. (2020) wrote, "More often society has viewed children through a protectionist stance . . . that limit[s] children's civic agency because they frame children as lacking the reason necessary to participate in public life" (p. 37). Several participants in our study sought to protect students from parents or other adults because they believed that young children were unable to reason about civic matters on their own. According to two participants who taught in kindergarten classrooms:

> These kids have no idea what's going on so they're just going on what they heard at home and I don't want to mess with that.

> I did not want to be the one to upset a parent that I was influencing their child at such a young age . . . I would love to do a unit on the presidential election [when] they are able to think a little more on their own and they will be at an age to understand the content better.

While we agree it is premature to discuss a national presidential election with five- and six-year-olds, we challenge the view that young children lack civic agency and must wait until they are older to participate in democratic life. Models of civic education that are based on a view of young children as citizens-in-formation fail to recognize the ways in which they presently engage in civic action in their communities.

Multiple participants also spoke about the goal of making their lessons engaging, relatable, fun, and entertaining for young children, even in virtual or hybrid settings. For example, instead of conducting mock presidential elections, several participants held elections about topics they thought would be more relatable to young children, such as ice cream flavors, cookies, and superheroes. The following participant reflected on what she learned by adapting lessons about the electoral process for younger students:

> I realized how you could manipulate the information on the election to fit every age group. This was a big concept I walked away with and I really enjoyed seeing how much they really could understand if you make the information fit them, even by changing the candidates to cookies and teaching them the simplest form of voting.

While we commend this PST for trying to teach the political process of voting to young children, this approach to preparing students as political actors ignores children's everyday civics and limits conceptions of the political to adult constructs of what counts as political participation. Payne et al. (2020) highlighted embodied forms of civic action that young children took with and for their classroom communities that were rooted in communitarian conceptions of citizenship (Etzioni, 1993). The communitarian conception of citizenship "affords young children a means of participating as citizens in society and draws on capabilities to act in society now—to care for each other and their communities in meaningful, non-adult led ways that children create and execute" (Payne et al., 2020, p. 38). Examples of embodied civic action from the Civic Action and Young Children study included resolving interpersonal classroom conflicts and showing care and concern through actions that benefited the common good (Payne et al., 2020).

Conducting a mock election about ice cream flavors illustrates how modifying an adult-led form of political engagement (e.g., voting) to "fit" the understandings of young children does not prepare them as political actors in a meaningful way. Identifying the best ice cream flavor is not a democratic problem of how should we live together. Rather, teachers can build on the ways that young children are currently engaged in civic acts on a daily basis, such as showing care and concern for others or distributing resources equitably (Lee et al., 2021). Moreover, we challenge the assumption that young children were not interested in or developmentally capable of learning about issues of injustice impacting their community (Marri et al., 2014). Children from minoritized backgrounds frequently experience the effects of injustice in their lives outside the classroom, including racism, homophobia, or xenophobia (Swalwell & Payne, 2019). Instead of ignoring such issues, or deeming them inappropriate for discussion, teachers can provide safe spaces for students to process their emotions and engage their students in direct action to address injustice (Sondel et al., 2018; Swalwell & Payne, 2019).

Discussion

Gen Z PSTs are coming of political age during a time of civic unrest, contentious electoral politics, and political trauma. Since the conclusion of our study, the political landscape has become even more fraught for educators attempting to teach controversial issues (Pollock et al., 2022). In the state where we carried out our research, legislation was introduced but failed to pass in 2021 that would have limited teaching about "divisive" concepts, or U.S. history that could make students feel uncomfortable or cause psychological distress (Herron, 2022). More recently, Florida passed the "Parental Rights in Education Bill," or what opponents have called "Don't Say Gay," which bans any instruction on sexual

orientation or gender identity in grades K–3. Parents "are given the option to sue a school district" that violates the new law (Diaz, 2022). It is reasonable to expect that in the current political environment, elementary teachers will be even more reluctant to broach political topics with students. One study "identified 894 school districts that have experienced media-documented local actions related to the campaign [to ban CRT]. These impacted districts . . . enroll 35% of all K–12 students in the United States" (Pollock et al., 2022, p. 11). Even in states or districts that have not yet passed anti-CRT legislation, teachers have been left feeling "terrified, confused, and/or demoralized" (Pollock et al., 2022, p. 8).

For the participants in our study, confusion and fear over what topics are "safe" to teach to students is compounded by their perception that their K–12 civic education experiences did not adequately prepare them as critical consumers of political information. For example, multiple PSTs found it difficult to determine "what is actually factual and what is just made up" on social media. In addition, some participants in our study were already avoiding any hint of bias in the classroom. The fear of being biased is also seen in national news coverage about teachers remaining silent on issues related to race/racism or gender, or taking a 'both sides' approach to teaching about historical wrongs, such as genocide and slavery (Pruitt-Young, 2021).

Within this article, we analyzed how elementary teachers' beliefs about politics influenced their curricular choices. It is important to note that there were multiple factors that contributed to such beliefs and practices that are outside the scope of this analysis. The divisive presidential election, combined with PSTs' media literacy skills and teaching during a pandemic, created a complex pedagogical environment beyond the scope of this study to adequately address. We further recognize that PSTs were guests in their classrooms and modified their units to fit certain requirements of their clinical placement. Although our findings should not be generalized to all of Gen Z, or all elementary PSTs, we do offer several recommendations for how teacher education programs can better prepare future elementary social studies educators. We hope these recommendations serve as a call to action beyond teacher education to address these complex political challenges. For example, local education leaders and school administrators have an important role to play in supporting new teachers' use of curriculum on politically sensitive topics (Kahne et al., 2021). How such "higher-ups" respond to parent pushback or prohibitions on teaching shapes educators' decision-making, especially less-experienced and younger teachers (Pollock et al., 2022).

While national polling data indicates that Gen Zs see themselves as part of a political force for change in this country, the participants in our study largely adhered to traditional conceptualizations of the political and how best to prepare children as citizens. In their civics units, participants focused on laying a foundation of knowledge about government processes and functions instead of inviting discussion about political topics that would have been relevant to students' civic lives outside the classroom. Participants argued that by teaching civics knowledge

and skills, their students would be better prepared to make informed political decisions in the future, positioning their students as citizens-in-formation, rather than as already engaged political actors. An important step social studies teacher educators can take to prepare elementary PSTs is to push beyond traditional conceptualizations of the political to highlight ways that young children do participate in civic and political life in their classrooms, communities, and family contexts. For example, when conflicts arise in the elementary classroom over sharing resources, teachers can connect discussions over how to care for members of the classroom community to political concepts like the common good, equity, and fairness (Rodríguez & Swalwell, 2021).

As course instructors, we reflected on whether our decision to use the 2020 presidential election as a teachable moment could have focused too much attention on voting as the preferred means of engaged citizenship, thereby limiting what PSTs recognized as political activity in their elementary classrooms. In our teacher education programs, PSTs can be encouraged to look for examples of civic involvement occurring spontaneously in early childhood classrooms without adult assistance and tap into those interests of children, rather than treat relevant experiences of racial injustice or systemic inequality as taboo or too controversial for children to comprehend. As Swalwell and Payne (2019) argued, "A civic education that validates these experiences and helps children learn more about them is foundational to equipping them with the skills and knowledge to effectively disrupt oppression" (pp. 128–129).

Our study also found that some of our Gen Z PSTs were not engaging their students in political discussions because they lack critical media literacy skills themselves. Several participants attributed their lack of political knowledge to not being able to detect bias in news media. Teacher educators can address this lack of civic preparation by assigning critical media analyses in their methods courses so that PSTs can develop political literacy. There are multiple studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of teaching critical literacy in teacher education courses. For instance, Murray-Everett and Coffield (2020) implemented a news-group project in an elementary social studies methods course, with the goal of guiding PSTs "in recognizing biases inherent in the media" (p. 3). PSTs can become more politically literate in their methods courses by learning about current political topics, national, and global issues so that they are informed enough to lead discussions on these topics with their own students.

The emphasis participants placed on remaining neutral and unbiased also raises significant challenges for democratic education (Journell, 2016). As the campaign to ban teaching about racism, social-emotional learning, and diversity/equity/inclusion efforts demonstrates, it is increasingly difficult to select topics related to "how should we live together" that have not become politicized in the public sphere. Some of our participants asserted that not having a strong partisan identity allowed them to be neutral and teach all sides of an issue. While we do not argue that teachers should use their position in the classroom to advance a partisan agenda, making space for political discussion in the elementary classroom is critical to preparing youth as citizens. Without guided experiential civic education (Levinson, 2012),

youth will not acquire the skills, dispositions, and knowledge to engage as political actors and solve democratic problems in authentic contexts.

As social studies teacher educators, we can begin dismantling the myth that teaching is not political by modeling for our PSTs our own pedagogical decision-making with respect to what knowledge is of most worth, for whom, and who gets to decide (Schubert, 1996). Schroeder et al. (2021) and colleagues recommended that instructors conduct "'syllabus audits,' or a critical analysis of one's own syllabus to . . . ensure we are assigning a variety of authors of differing identities and perspectives, a wide-range of topics and counter-narratives" (p. 114). Teaching as a political act does not require aligning our teaching practice with a particular political party or set of partisan beliefs, but it does mean providing children with opportunities to wrestle with the conflicts that naturally arise when deciding how to live together in a democratic society.

Few participants in our study cultivated students' civic knowledge and capacities as a means to build their sense of agency to confront systemic injustice (Sondel et al., 2018) but rather created spaces in the classroom "safe" from political conflict. Participants also sought to separate emotion from their classrooms by avoiding topics that could evoke strong feelings and tried to control their own emotions as well (Sheppard & Levy, 2019). In this paper, we have drawn from political theories of agonism and communitarianism to suggest ways PSTs could incorporate emotion and conflict in and outside the classroom. As teacher educators, we can invite PSTs to express the vulnerability they feel in the face of public debate about how teachers prepare youth as political actors. PSTs could be given space to reflect on how their own anxiety and worry about the socio-political context of schooling today shapes their views of politics and their pedagogical choices to "protect" their young students.

We can also invite PSTs to reflect on the negative feelings they have about democratic politics today. As Zembylas (2021) has argued, "negative" or "ugly" feelings toward politics can be both mobilizing and immobilizing forces for change. Social studies teacher educators can help PSTs channel their skepticism and discontent into political action. Moreover, we can help PSTs draw the connection between problems with our political system and the power they have to bring about necessary change and restore accountability to our democratic politics. For example, anger is a political emotion that too often is viewed negatively or as threatening to rationality and democratic consensus. After witnessing the anger and hate in our country, participants sought to shield their students from such "ugly feelings." However, while anger and hatred have the power to inspire prejudice and oppression, they also can be legitimate sites of political resistance and mobilization when directed towards democratic designs. Finally, as social studies teacher educators, we can acknowledge democracy's imperfections and failures to deliver on the promise of equality and justice for all. Acknowledging the ways in which systemic racism, injustice and oppression have led to alienation from politics is a necessary step towards promoting critical hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009) for our democratic future.

Conclusion

Our case study contributes to the work of teacher educators in improving elementary PSTs' own political education. We agree with Ruitenberg (2009) that political education "must go also 'upstream' into teacher education: students cannot be taught political literacy by teachers who, themselves, have been educated to believe that the political left/right is no longer relevant" (p. 279). Despite increasing scholarship on social justice-oriented elementary social studies, much of elementary social studies teacher education is "information-based" and lacks "an explicit or implicit focus on equity, counter-narratives, or transformational approaches to education" (Schroeder et al., 2021, p. 109). Besides imparting civics content knowledge, teacher preparation programs must bolster the political engagement of their teacher candidates. PSTs need opportunities to reflect on their own political values and ideological commitments in order to think critically about how they are preparing their students as political actors. PSTs must also have the opportunity to practice critical media skills so that they can facilitate critical media literacy with their students.

We recognize that the work of ensuring equitable and democratic learning opportunities for young children must extend beyond teacher preparation programs. Facilitating the political engagement of elementary PSTs is a significant challenge given the competing demands placed on social studies methods instructors to prepare PSTs for the challenges of classroom teaching. PSTs often take a single social studies methods course as part of their teacher preparation program, in which they must learn social studies content, disciplinary strategies, lesson planning, and inquiry-based approaches. Therefore, we hope this study's findings will spur a wider conversation and call for collective action, not only among teacher educators, but also political science instructors who teach PSTs. Neoliberal teacher education policies and accreditation requirements further constrain methods instructors' abilities to explore PSTs' political identities and engagement (Zeichner, 2010). Without opportunities for critical reflection, however, elementary social studies will not move beyond personally responsible conceptualizations of citizenship and engagement and toward empowering children as knowledgeable social actors capable of enacting democracy in their everyday lives and contexts.

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