



September 2023

Teaching Students about the Fragility of the Republic

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Recommended Citation

McCorkle, William (2023) "Teaching Students about the Fragility of the Republic," *The Councilor: A National Journal of the Social Studies*: Vol. 86: No. 1, Article 2.

Available at: https://thekeep.eiu.edu/the_councilor/vol86/iss1/2

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Illinois Council of Social Studies

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Teaching Students about the Fragility of the Republic

The topic of the stability of the republic has been on the minds of many people in the United States after the chaos that occurred following the 2020 election. While the current threats to our republic, there are connections to our past that should be considered by teachers and students in understanding the current fragility of our republic. This article outlines some of the broader arguments about that fragility, how it relates to history, and lesson ideas that could be implemented by the classroom teacher.

The Attempted Coup

I was in Washington DC on the fateful day of January 6th, 2021. I had made the trip because I thought there would be some important footage to document, and I wanted to document the perspective of individuals at the protest. Even though I knew it was going to be somewhat chaotic, I did not imagine that it would lead to an attack on the Capitol. As I reflect back on that day, in some ways I am actually grateful that it occurred. Talking with individuals who were speaking pretty openly about citizens militarizing and arresting the “traitors,” I am afraid it could have been much deadlier if Trump had not had at least a temporary reprimand after that day. What could have occurred on Inauguration Day? I fear it could have been a bloodbath.

In regard to the social studies classroom, the events of January 6th, 2021 showcase something even more concerning. It shows a reality that has been true throughout our history, but was put on full display that day – the fragility of our republic. This is a theme that social studies teachers and teacher educators need to continually stress to their students. This emphasis should not be done in order to simply cause fear or pessimism, but rather because we need to understand the reality in order to address the root causes of a continuing fracturing of our nation.

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Our republic is not as strong as we would like to believe, and the harsh truth is that we are always just a few years away from its collapse. In some ways, this is not a novel or modern concept. There have been ample warnings and historical examples that demonstrate this danger. Though January 6th is perhaps the most relevant framework to talk about the fragility of our republic in a modern context, there are multiple ways to discuss this theme throughout our history.

Literature Review

There is substantial scholarship on the relationship between social studies education and the cultivation of democratic citizenship and thus a more stable republic. Journell (2010) found that state standards often presented a very conservative view of citizenship that left out other viewpoints on citizenship. He argued that it is therefore important that educators seek to establish a more balanced approach to citizenship. This approach is particularly relevant when looking at the fragility of the republic and seeking to avoid a more pollyanish, anti-critical view of the government. Hess (2008) argues that democratic education can help lessen the partisan division. She contends that this is especially important for more disadvantaged populations who are often not given the same access to democratic education as their wealthier peers. She states the need for this democratic education to include the country's successes but also to be honest about its failures. McAvoy and McAvoy (2021) found that a classroom deliberation was more successful in helping to bridge some of the partisan divide between students as opposed to a debate which could actually cause them to be more politically divided as their position became more entrenched.

Kahne and Westheimer (2003) suggest some ways that schools can help cultivate this democratic education is through giving students opportunities for civic action and to work on public policy solutions. They also propose giving space for students to learn about civic role models that they could emulate. Their warning that "democracy won't run on autopilot" (p. 66) is especially relevant in the current

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discussion about the fragility of the republic. This is similar to Parker's (2005) contention that it will take democrats to actually make a democracy successful and that these democrats will not come about naturally but will have to be cultivated by the school system. He is particularly worried that the self centerdness of the U.S. society creates a weak foundation for these democratic values.

The Fragility of Republics Past and Present: An Inquiry Based Unit Plan

These ideas about the fragility of the republic could be formed into one larger unit plan broken into 4-5 days. This unit could be taught in a World History, U.S. History, or perhaps most ideally a U.S. government course. An overarching compelling question could be: *What do national and international events in both the past and present show us about the fragility of republics and what lessons can be learned to ensure their vibrancy?*

Day 1: Our Fragility and the Education System

Many students may not be aware of some of the early proponents of public education in the United States and their emphasis on public education in the preservation of the society. The writings of both Thomas Jefferson and Horace Mann highlight the rationale for public education related to the preservation of the republic. The supporting question for this day could be: *What did the early proponents of public education believe about education and the preservation of the republic?* Horace Mann's 12th Report from 1848 is perhaps one of the quintessential documents students could analyze, particularly the section he has on politics and government. One especially poignant quote that teachers could highlight from the report is,

The establishment of a republican government, without well-appointed and efficient means for the universal education of the people, is the most rash and fool-hardy experiment ever tried by man. Its fatal results may not be immediately developed,--they may not follow as the thunder follows the lightning,--for time is an element in maturing them, and the calamity is too great to be prepared in a day; but, like the slow-accumulating avalanche, they will grow more terrific by delay, and, at length, though it may be at a late hour, will overwhelm with ruin whatever lies athwart their path. It may be an easy thing to make a Republic; but it is a very laborious thing to make Republicans;

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and woe to the republic that rests upon no better foundations than ignorance, selfishness, and passion.

From both this quote and the larger report, teachers could form class discussion based on this idea from Mann including: *(1) In what ways does Mann link the survival of the republic and the education of the populous? (2) What do you feel about Mann's analogy to the destruction of the republic to an avalanche? (3) Mann discusses the dangers of a republic founded on ignorance, selfishness, and passion. How prominent do you think these elements are present in our current society? (4) How well do you think the education system is preparing the populace to continue the ideas of the republic?*

The work of Thomas Jefferson also relates to this interplay between the education of the people and the stability of the republic. Though people like Jefferson are certainly problematic in many regards (particularly in regard to his hypocrisy on slavery), his timely warnings about the fall of the republic should be explored. One of the ways Jefferson believed we could counteract the fragility of the republic was to have students examine world history and how leaders had turned towards tyranny (Jefferson, 1779). Students could read the first section on his bill for public education in Virginia and its rationale for its establishment . Some questions that teachers could have students answer either individually or collectively are: *(1) What type of education did Jefferson believe would help to lessen the threat of tyranny? (2) Why were people like Jefferson so concerned about the issue of tyranny, what was the possible hypocrisy in their statements? (3) What does this document show about Jefferson's views on human nature and the nature of government? How does this perhaps relate to the Enlightenment thinking that influenced his ideas?*

A follow up activity or discussion could involve having students describe what Jefferson and Mann would think of the current state of the U.S. society, education system, and republic. Students could create a chart of ways in which they think the U.S. is currently succumbing to the threats that they warned about and what ways it is avoiding them.

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Day 2: Examples from World History

Building on Mann and Jefferson, students could then examine how some republics have fallen across the world. The supporting question would be: *What were some of the factors that led to the fall of past republics/democracies?* The most prominent example that students could look at when studying world history is the fall of the Roman Republic and the rise of the Roman Empire. This is a complex topic, but some of the themes certainly resemble the American Republic, whether that be the tendency of a populist leader to draw appeal even if they undermine the norms of the republic, the role of political corruption in easing this transition, and the role of populist rhetoric in undermining the actual values of the Republic.

A helpful source for students to examine would be Cullen Murphy's (2021) article, *No, Really, Are we Rome?* One of the central comparisons she points to is the danger of thinking "the adults in the room" will actually keep an authoritarian figure in check. She also points to the danger of the seeming continuity of the dressings and formalities of the republic. She points out how the Roman Senate continued to meet even after real ideas of a representative republic had been abandoned. In this way, as she highlights, the U.S. republic would not necessarily have to end the appearance of a republic (for example, disbanding Congress) while still losing the republic for all intents and purposes.

Some questions that teachers could ask from this source include: (1) *Why would an authoritarian want to keep up the appearance of a republic even if the government is no longer one?* (2) *Why are many people willing to give up the republic to a populist figure like Julius Caesar, Napoleon, etc.?* (3) *Are there any other historical examples on the disintegration of the republic that would compare to some of the dangers we face in the United States?*

Teachers could also look at more recent examples in places like Hungary which would still consider itself a democratic state but one in which the real principles of democracy have already died. A

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relative brief but strong source on this topic is from the Journal of Democracy (Scheppelle, 2022). The article lays out the more strategic and often more drawn out way Victor Orban has been able to hold onto power. Some questions that students could consider after reading this article are: (1) *How has Orban been able to undermine democracy in the country while still keeping the name?* (2) *What are some similarities between Hungary and the Roman Republic, the current U.S. government?* (3) *What role does control of the media play in Orban's hold on power? What are the similarities to our current system?*

Day 3: Examples from U.S. History

For day 3, the supporting question would be: ***What were some examples from U.S. History where the republic was particularly endangered? How did these events either cause the public to react to re-instill democratic norms or how did they permanently weaken these norms?***

There were numerous times in our history where this republic was deeply endangered and shaken. The most obvious case is the Civil War. A lesser discussed example could be the events that led to the first impeachment, when Andrew Johnson sought to undermine the decisions of Congress and encouraged Southern states to resist reconstruction policies. Earlier, there was the example of Andrew Jackson ignoring the ruling of the courts in expelling Native Americans that led to the Trail of Tears.

Teachers could also discuss the original Alien and Sedition Acts under John Adams, where there were attempts to limit speaking out against the government even though this endangered the newly formed First Amendment—particularly the Freedom of Speech and the Freedom of the Press. Similarly, in the 20th century, the Espionage and Sedition Acts under the Wilson Administration prevented anyone from speaking out against World War I. Authoritarianism can also be linked to executive orders, which have increased in both Republican and Democratic administrations. That this has become the primary way that many policies are enacted is problematic both in the expansion of the executive branch and the

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negation of duty in the legislative branch. The same dynamic can be seen with the expansion of war powers in the 20th and early 21st Centuries (Sjuerson, 2018). Despite these authoritarian and anti-democratic measures throughout our history, it could be argued that we have never had a power play as extreme as the 2020 election where the sitting president sought to undermine the whole electoral process to stay in power.

The teachers could pull from any of these examples in which they feel most comfortable, however, two specific sources that they could have students analyze are a secondary source (“Remembering the time,” 2015) describing how Andrew Jackson allowed Georgia to defy the rulings of the Supreme Court in their attempt to illegally expel the Cherokee people from their lands. Some questions from this source could include *(1) How did Andrew’s Jacksons’ actions in regard to the Cherokee put in jeopardy the ideas of the Separation of Powers (2) How easily do you think a president could simply “ignore” the courts today, what would be the consequences? (3) How did racism/greed allow this form of a power grab to take place?*

Two related sources that could be used from Section 3 from the Sedition Act of 1918, which specifically outlines the limitations on political speech in relation to the war, military, and the Constitution. Some guiding questions that students could consider from this source include. *(1) What type of restrictions did the Sedition Act put on speech? (2) How are these restrictions problematic in relation to the Bill of Rights? (3) What type of affect do you think this law had on speech and protest?*

Day 4: January 6th the 2020 Election

There are many ways that teachers could discuss the events of January 6th. Perhaps teachers can show a short film like Day of Rage (The New York Times, 2021) to reintroduce students to what occurred that day. The further we move away from the day, the more faint it will be in students’ memories, particularly those who may have been young when the events occurred. However, beyond the

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actual events of people breaking into the Capitol, teachers can discuss the broader movement to undermine democracy in 2020 and the often problematic reaction to it.

For this lesson the broader supporting question for the unit would be, *What were the events that led to the insurrection on January 6th, 2020. What does this event show or not show about the health of our republic?* In addition to showing some initial footage from January 6th and perhaps asking students what they remembered about the day, teachers could then have students examine some of the earlier rhetoric about fraudulent elections that led to it. One speech that teachers could have students examine is the speech from Trump on December 2, 2020 about voter fraud. If this source is too controversial, another source could be used that makes similar arguments. This source could then be paired with the statements from Attorney General Bill Barr about the actual legitimacy of voter fraud. Some possible questions that could be used with these sources include: (1) *What were some of Trump's core arguments, what evidence is he basing these arguments on?* (2) *What does Barr state about the possibility of widespread voter fraud?* (3) *What did Trump's pre-election discussion about voter fraud reveal about this discussion?* (4) *What is the instability that this type of language can cause?*

If there is additional time, teachers can also show some later footage from the January 6th Committee or have students expand upon what January 6th symbolized in the history of the United States.

Lesson 5: The Aftermath of the Insurrection

In the final election, students can examine what has occurred after January 6th and our republic responded to what happened. The supporting question would be: Did U.S. government and society responded adequately to what occurred in the 2020 Election and January 6th in particular?

Even after the events of January 6th, there is still often a glib or Pollyanna attitude about everything being on track- that our republic remains strong despite what occurred under Trump and the

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2020 election. After the election, this might be summed up best in the comments of the former Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, from the fall of 2021, where she states that she cried on January 6th, but we should look forward and focus on the things that impact the lives of American families. She gives credence to the idea that this was the past and we should move on (Dorman, 2021). Some questions that students could use based on this argument include *(1) What do you think of Secretary Rice's statement what is the possible good or danger of moving on from events like January 6th? (2) What do you think are the motivations of those who want to move on from January 6th?*

Teachers could then show some footage or sources showing how the discussion about the stolen election is both being used by the former president himself (Wise, 2021) and by other of his supporters, especially through social media (Scott & Kern, 2022).

Another aspect, especially with the Trump administration, that students can analyze is the quick concession to power once an individual is in place. Students could examine the early days of Trump's rise, when even getting one member of congress or senator to support his presidency was difficult. Now, even after Trump lost the election and almost overturned the republic, why is there still almost unanimous support for him in the Republican Party over a year later (Hagen, 2021)? A year after the election, only 21% of Republicans believed Biden legitimately won the election (in a decision that was not even that close by many historical measures). How do authoritarian leaders change the dynamic not only with the populace, but with elected leaders? What happens to anyone who dares to resist? The example could be given of Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger being marginalized in their party for daring to stand up to Trump (Vakil, 2021). Students can analyze the opening speech of the January 6th Commission made by Liz Cheney (Politico, 2022) and take out some of the specific portions that might be most relevant to the class. Some questions that could be asked from this include: *(1) How does Cheney move the blame from the actual protestors on January 6th to Trump himself, what do you think of*

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this move? (2) Why does Cheney believe it is so important to continue to pursue what occurred on the 6th? (3) What does Cheney distinguish as legitimate ways to question election results and illegitimate ways?

Day 6: Social Media and Social Division

Role of Social Media

For this final day, the students can examine some of the concerning trends related to the health of republic related to social media and social division. The supporting question would be: ***What role does social media play in the partisan divide and misinformation. What steps can we take to avoid these pitfalls?*** An intriguing film that could be used to analyze this theme is Netflix's *The Social Dilemma* (Orlowski & Rhodes, 2020), which addresses the role that social media has played in creating more polarized politics and an echo chamber. The film also highlights how social media has allowed for the rise of false conspiracy theories, caused people to become more cynical in their views as they go down rabbit holes of false information, and threatened the very foundations of democracy, not just in the U.S., but around the world. Social media did try some forms of restrictions and regulations after January 6th, but as the Facebook whistleblower has highlighted, it was not often sufficient and it was short-lived (Looft & Ferris, 2021). Teachers could examine the portion of the film specifically related to conspiracy theories and the rise of social unrest (which ironically came out before the 2020 election). Some questions that students could answer/discuss in relation to this include: *(1) What does the film discuss about the ease of social media making it easier for conspiracy theories/false information to spread? (2) How can social media lead to “information bubbles”? How does these bubbles possibly cause conditions that could endanger democratic functions?*

A related topic that students could analyze is the current division in the U.S. society. A very troubling aspect that students could analyze is a recent poll that looked at the reality that 52% of Trump

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supporters and 41% of Biden's supporters think that the nation should possibly break apart (UVA, 2021). What does it mean for a nation if a significant portion of the country does not think it should stay intact anymore? Finally, students can analyze perhaps the most concerning aspects of the current republic, which is the movement of some state legislators signaling their willingness to overturn the election outcomes if they do not like the results and allegations of fraud are made (Gross, 2021). This is what Trump was pushing for in the 2020 election, most notably in the state of Georgia with their Secretary of State recording the call (and later testified to the January 6th commission about it) (Cohen et al., 2021).

It is now not only possible, but probable, that individuals will be in power who will be willing to simply overthrow the election. It may not take individuals storming the capitol for the end of the republic to occur. It may simply happen in a legislative way. It is deeply important that teachers discuss this information with students. Some questions that teachers could introduce include *(1) Why do you think that many in the U.S. have given up on the idea of the country staying together? (2) Do you think a legal "coup" would be more or less likely than an actual violent revolution? (3) What are some steps that can be taken to unify the country again?*

Rationale for This Focus

Our republic is in many ways on the precipice, and because of this, social studies teachers and teacher educators need to take on a more active role. This is sometimes where a distorted view of a Deweyan model can be ineffective, as it often becomes distorted into a type of post-truth reality where there is no actual answer and everyone just has a different opinion. Though this may be relevant when it comes to some issues of values and ideologies, it has moved into the realm of denying reality altogether. The most extreme example of this could be seen in a Texas administrator who recently told her teachers that if they are going to teach about the Holocaust, they also need to teach about an alternative

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perspective (Pruitt-Young, 2021). As historian Timothy Steiner points out, in a post-truth society, you cannot have a stable democracy. The ultimate end is a type of tyranny (Illing, 2017).

It is also essential for teachers to point out this reality about our republic to ensure that their students are politically engaged. There are many issues to become engaged with today. Unfortunately, sometimes, the focus is more on symbolic and relatively insignificant conflicts than some of these more concerning structural realities. People will be fighting about a Twitter comment, while legislators completely demolish the republic.

Likewise, media literacy is perhaps more important than ever. It is important for teachers and teacher educators to show students how to be critical of the media they pursue and read. The media bias chart could be analyzed showing how the validity of sources is much more of a spectrum than a dichotomy (Ad Fontes Media, 2022). This does not mean that this source itself is the ultimate truth, but rather, a guide showing that some sources go through more rigor and have more integrity than other sources. It is important for students to critique all resources but also have a guide in understanding what sources tend to be more valid than others.

Conclusion

We should not just assume (nor should our students) that our republic will inevitably survive this current threat it faces. There are many warning signs that it may not. We have to prepare our students to try to stop this inevitable decline. This goes beyond just political critique and involves individuals getting to know their neighbors and finding common ground (Thomas, 2021). This will not be easy in the current environment, but it is something for which we should be striving. This also means building as many bridges as possible. While creating a caricature of your opponents may make individuals feel good or make their side feel righteous, it does nothing to actually change perspective and actually signals a deeper dive into a polarized society. Our republic is fragile; however, if social studies teachers

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and teacher educators can join in the struggle, perhaps there will be a chance that the republic could be preserved not only for our generation but for our children's and grandchildren's generations as well.

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