



## Holding the Trump Card:

### How Should Schools Address Controversial Issues in the 2016 Presidential Election?<sup>1</sup>

#### *FACILITATION GUIDE*

Dan Covino and Meira Levinson

<https://justiceinschools.org>

U.S. citizens and residents are confronting unusual, even unprecedented, choices in the 2016 presidential election, heightened by rhetoric and content from Donald Trump that are unique for a major party presidential candidate. As a result, social studies educators are also confronting novel choices this fall about how to teach the election. Social studies teachers normally embrace an ethic of non-partisanship, while also teaching the substantive values of democracy, rule of law, constitutionalism, liberty and equality, and anti-discrimination. In most election years, educators tend to view these commitments as compatible. They find ways to teach substantive civic values while also remaining non-partisan about the election, setting up learning opportunities in which students can determine for themselves which candidate is most likely to realize the values they believe in. Given the tone and content of the current Republican candidate, however, many educators are questioning their capacity to maintain both goals simultaneously. They wonder whether they can square the circle. At the same, teachers can feel as if they are committing a tremendous breach of educational ethics if they either take a partisan stand or downplay the foundational values of American democracy. Educators' choices also may have profound social, political, legal, and institutional consequences.

We have created this Teaching Guide to help educators, administrators, and community members address these challenges with one another in a structured, focused, and nuanced way. We envision that those leading 1½ -3 hour professional development sessions with social studies teachers within a school or across a district, or with whole school faculties, will be the most frequent users of this Teaching Guide. But we also anticipate it will be of use to other pre-service and in-service teacher developers, to those leading professional development with school and district leaders, and even to PTA leaders who are trying to help parents, teachers, and administrators engage with one another about these issues. Finally, experienced high school teachers may use this plan with their own students across 1-3 class periods.

#### **Case Overview/Synopsis**

"Holding the Trump Card" explores the complicated challenges educators face when they teach about controversial issues. The case focuses on whether Sutton High School should continue "You Choose," a complex mock election activity, during the 2016 presidential election season. Specifically, Sutton High's principal, Kevin Foster, must weigh issues of school censorship of student speech against potential harms of open debate. The case also addresses challenges of creating a safe school culture, fostering discussion in diverse settings, clarifying the goals of civic education, modifying cherished school traditions, meeting parental and community expectations, fulfilling ambiguous legal requirements, and achieving consensus on curricular and pedagogical decisions in the face of competing conceptions of the aims of education.

---

<sup>1</sup> This case is a work of fiction, drawing on questions, examples, and concerns from educators around the country. It does not, however, refer to any particular school, district, or curriculum.

## Agenda

Below is a suggested plan for using the case in a professional development session (or college or high school class) of between 1½ and 3 hours. Different options accompany some agenda items. Use the option(s) that serve your professional development/teaching goals, the interests and inclinations of your participants, and the time you have available.

- 1) Read the Case – Participants read the case in small groups or individually. (This is likely to take about 10-12 minutes. Or distribute the case ahead of time and ask participants to read it in advance.)
- 2) Small Group Character Assignment – The purpose of this portion of the session is to help participants identify and closely analyze each character’s teaching objectives, values, and position on You Choose (Part a)) and then put these perspectives in dialogue (Part b)).
  - a) Divide participants into small groups. Assign each small group one of the following characters from the case: Sharon Hadinger, De’Andre Cooper, Parker Hathaway, Trisha Swenson. Ask each group to review the case study to answer the following questions about their character:
    - i) What recommendations does your character make to Principal Kevin Foster? Why?
    - ii) Identify your character’s pedagogical objectives. According to him or her, what purpose(s) should You Choose—or an alternative approach to teaching the election— serve? Why?
    - iii) Different characters in the case prioritize some values and principles over others. (For example, Sharon seems to value teacher impartiality over students’ feelings of safety, in part because she seems to embrace the liberal principle that democracy is achieved by unconstrained debate over controversial issues. De’Andre arguably prioritizes student safety over teacher impartiality, in part because he seems to embrace the egalitarian principle that democracy is achieved by people who recognize one another as civic equals.) What principles or values does your character hold? How do these get expressed?
    - iv) What pragmatic concerns does your character raise? How do these influence her or his view?
    - v) How does your character’s values, principles, pedagogical objectives, and pragmatic concerns shape what he or she recommends Mr. Foster do?
  - b) Create “jigsawed” groups by grouping one member from each small group with one member from the other three groups so that all four characters are represented in each new small group. In the “jigsawed” groups, participants should discuss their character’s

teaching objectives, identify their character's values, and articulate their character's views about You Choose. (Encourage participants to use first person pronouns as they represent their character's views.)

If there is time after each participant has presented their own character's perspective, the jigsaw group may then move on to discuss how their different characters might come to consensus (while staying in character). Or they may come out of character and begin discussing the strengths and weaknesses they perceive in each character's perspectives.

- 3) Whole Group Conversation – This portion of the session has two purposes. First, each participant must decide what he or she would do about “You Choose” in the Sutton High School context. Second, each participant will reflect on their own beliefs, values, objectives, and priorities in the context of deciding with colleagues how to teach the 2016 election in their own school or district setting. Participants may also reach conclusions about more general principles or practices for teaching controversial issues or doing civic education.

- a) Four Corners (variant): In five different corners/areas of the room, post signs saying “Implement You Choose as is,” “Modify You Choose,” “Replace You Choose with classroom-centered election study,” “Do not teach the presidential election this year,” and “Do something entirely different.” Explain to participants that they are now “released” from the perspectives of the characters in the case; they can (and should) respond as themselves by standing under the sign that best represents their point of view about what choice Principal Foster should take.

Once participants have sorted themselves, give them 2-5 minutes to confer as a group and create a list of arguments to support their position. Then invite each group to make their arguments to the whole group, as well as to question and challenge others. Encourage participants to move around the room if they are persuaded to join another group as they listen to the arguments given. This is likely to turn into a whole-group conversation across groups, which is good.

- 4) Personal and Whole Group Reflection: Ask all participants to return to their seats. Give them 3-5 minutes to write individually in response to one or more of the following question, then invite whole group discussion. (If you have time, you might have small groups discuss their written responses before you move to the whole group discussion.)
  - a) *What goals, values, or principles do you think are most important to achieve in teaching the 2016 election (or teaching about elections or civics in general)?*
  - b) *What do you feel sure about? What tensions are you wrestling with?*
  - c) *How will you teach the 2016 presidential election?*
  - d) *How should we (as a school or district) address this election?*
  - e) *What lessons, principles, or practices should we carry with us (or will you carry yourself) beyond the 2016 election?*

**To cite this facilitation guide:**

Covino, D. & Levinson, M. (2016). Holding the Trump Card: How Should Schools Address Controversial Issues in the 2016 Presidential Election? Facilitation Guide. *Justice in Schools*.

<https://www.justiceinschools.org/Trump-card>

*This work is openly licensed via [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)*