

# Educating the Electorate:

## The Political Implications of Social Studies Curricula and Models of Citizenship

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**ABSTRACT:** Social Studies education is politicized, powerful, and highly contentious. Scholars have long debated about the content of Social Studies curricula, interest groups have historically tried to influence its material, and in recent years headlines have highlighted controversial subjects like Critical Race Theory and Indigenous reconciliation. This paper argues that it is impossible to teach a neutral Social Studies curriculum, and so educators must be mindful of the impact their content will have on young minds and future citizens of their society.

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**KEYWORDS:** Citizenship, curriculum, democracy, education, social studies

## Introduction

Social Studies education shapes society's future citizens, who in turn shape society itself. How Social Studies curricula teach those students to feel about democracy, participation, and power structures has a massive impact on the worldview, and therefore the actions, of those students. In this paper, I will explore the variety of approaches taken to this question and how each of them influences the outcomes for students. First, I will explore the reasons why Social Studies education is so highly politicized, and why it's impossible to have a fully "neutral" Social Studies curriculum. With that in mind, I will show how the approach to citizenship taken by a Social Studies curriculum will shape the way it teaches its content, which in turn shapes the understanding that students take away from that content and apply it to their lives.

I will detail approaches that various theorists have taken to these subjects, culminating in an application of Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne's three models of citizenship. Examining these three models, I will illustrate how each model would impact the teaching of Hitler's rise in Germany and the fighting of World War II, and the impact each of these models would have on students' long-term worldviews, including, in particular, their views of democracy. While I do not aim to advocate for any specific model of citizenship in this paper, I do wish to demonstrate how significant the choice of which model to emphasize is, and therefore how seriously educators should consider the model they are applying and the impact it will have on their students. While I'll be primarily speaking about Social Studies curricula in Canada, I will also draw upon some research from the American context and use some examples from the US. As Geoffrey Milburn's research demonstrates, Canadian curriculum changes have often paralleled curriculum changes in the States, and American research has influenced Canadian curriculum development (Milburn 1976, 215). We can also see many thematic similarities between the two systems. Both countries explicitly state that the primary goal of their Social Studies education programs is to prepare students to become good citizens. Both countries have also seen similar debates in recent years over how that goal should manifest in terms of content. There are massive disagreements between people about what makes a good citizen, and these are reflected in both countries in debates over curriculum. The answer to the question of what makes a good citizen, as I will demonstrate later, shapes how content will be delivered and how students will be taught to apply that content in their own lives.

On a final note of introduction, I want to clarify the terminology I will be using in this paper. While some countries teach a variety of subjects under a similar banner, including Geography, History, and Civics, in the Canadian context and in a majority of American states, "Social Studies" refers to the subject that encompasses education about society, government, and history. For this reason, I will use the term "Social Studies" throughout this paper.

## The Myth of a Neutral Curriculum

A country's educational system is foundational to its society and the future of its citizens, not only because it prepares them to exist productively in that society, but also because it shapes the way they feel about society itself and their place within it. Social Studies, in particular, moves beyond content about how the world is toward content about how the world should be and how individuals should act to shape that world. While other subjects also teach about values and beliefs alongside facts and knowledge, Social Studies most explicitly guides students to develop particular feelings about government, and those who hold leadership in society. This is why Social Studies education and access to information about history and government is so heavily manipulated in authoritarian countries, as seen in Stalinist Russia, Nazi Germany, and Communist Vietnam, among others.

The influence that Social Studies education has on the future of a country is also the reason why this subject has been, and continues to be, such a site of controversy in Western liberal democracies. Social Studies curriculum decisions are often massively politically charged, and various interested parties vie for influence over the outcome. Many of these competing interests have picked high-profile fights with one another in recent years. National headlines lamented a British Columbia school district's banning of the beloved Dr. Seuss book *Yertle the Turtle* -- whose moral takeaway is encapsulated in the line "I know up on top you are seeing great sights, but down here on the bottom, we too should have rights" -- on the grounds that it was "too political" (Ross and Vinson 2014, 98). The discovery of unmarked graves at Residential School sites across Canada has drawn a renewed attention to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, which include demands to better educate Canadians about the history of Indigenous relations in this country, but there is widespread disagreement on how best to do so (Miles 2020, 47). In the US, battles rage over the introduction of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in classrooms.

While these may be particularly politically charged examples, Social Studies has always been political. As E. Wayne Ross and Kevin Vinson write, “Anyone who has paid attention to the debates on curriculum and school reform knows that schooling is a decidedly political enterprise. The question in teaching (as well as teacher education and school reform) is not whether to allow political discourse in schools or whether to advocate or not, but the nature and extent of political discourse and advocacy” (Ross and Vinson 2014, 101). Ross and Vinson also point out that although educational orthodoxy has often held that teaching neutrality means teaching the status quo and that teaching critique and change is inherently political, this idea is now being challenged, as maintaining the status quo is an equally political objective to changing it (Ross and Vinson 2014, 100).

Any Social Studies curriculum will have to make choices about what to prioritize. Any student coming out of a Social Studies education will have particular ideas about their society and how they should behave as a citizen of it, which will always have political implications for the future of that society. It is therefore insufficient to argue that a Social Studies curriculum should be “non-political” or “neutral”. Choices will always have to be made, and those choices will always have political implications, which is why the pedagogical conceptions that underlie those choices are so important.

### **What is Social Studies?**

In order to examine the approaches that are most commonly used to make these choices within Canadian curriculums, it is important to understand what the focus of Social Studies is in terms of content. I argue that the dominant source of content in Canadian Social Studies is history, while the main professed goal of Canadian Social Studies is to develop citizenship. In exploring the relationship between the two, I aim to demonstrate how history education will always be shaped by the approach a Social Studies curriculum takes -- those choices about what to prioritize and which aspects to emphasize -- and how those approaches are shaped by the curriculum’s conception of citizenship. In this way, the teaching of historical concepts and the conveying of moral values about citizenship may both be held as goals of a Social Studies curriculum, but the approach to the second goal (citizenship) will massively impact the presentation and outcomes of the first (history content).

While Social Studies can technically include a wide variety of subjects from anthropology to economics, the majority of content will be linked to a particular historical time period (like an anthropological exam-

ination of a particular society, or an exploration of how economics impacted certain historical events). Generally, each year of a Social Studies curriculum will focus on a few major historical events and explore other concepts surrounding that time period. For example, the 8th grade Social Studies curriculum in British Columbia centres around feudal Japan, the Renaissance in Europe, and civilizations in Mesoamerica such as the Aztecs (BC’s Curriculum 2018). A major theme of the 5th grade Social Studies curriculum in Ontario is “early societies to 1500 CE” (The Ontario Curriculum 2018, 22). Elementary Social Studies in Quebec focuses on the Iroquois, the development of New France, and other themes in Canadian history (Social Studies - Elementary 2021, 198-202). History plays a major role in Social Studies education across the country and is often used as a vehicle for exploring broader themes such as colonization, migration, and the evolution of ideas and value systems.

The role that history education should play within the larger discipline of Social Studies is a matter that theorists have disagreed about over time, as C. Gregg Jorgenson outlines in his chapter “Social Studies Curriculum Migration: Challenges in the 21st Century”. As Jorgenson introduces, history being taught as a subcategory of Social Studies more broadly is not universally supported. Diane Ravitch, an American writer, argues that “history has gotten submerged and smothered by social studies,” to the detriment of students’ overall knowledge (Ravitch 2005). Precisely because authoritarian societies rely so heavily on manipulation of the past and erasure of historical events, Ravitch argues that reducing the amount of time spent learning history is a major problem (Jorgenson 2014, 7). Her worry, then, is that the more educational systems in Western liberal democracies reduce the amount of time spent on history alone in their classrooms, the more students are at risk of not understanding the past and therefore being able to serve as stalwarts against authoritarianism in the future.

“Social studies teachers treat history as only one of a dozen different ‘studies’ that they cover,” writes Ravitch, “and by no means the most important.” (Ravitch 2005). She argues that rather than lumping a variety of disciplines together under the banner of Social Studies, history should instead stand on its own and historical facts should be prioritized for their own sake. Ravitch, then, would disagree that a conception of citizenship should guide the teaching of history. She would instead posit that the priority should always be historical information without the lenses of the additional “studies” Social Studies necessarily includes.

I would argue that it is simply impossible to teach history without those additional studies, for similar reasons that it is impossible to teach an entirely “neutral” curriculum. Stephane Levesque gives a few examples to illustrate how problematic it can be to deliver historical information without context and perspective: “To be able to understand, for example, why World War I is important to Canadian identity or what makes Louis Riel a ‘traitor’ for some English Canadians and a ‘hero’ for the Métis demands more intellectual rigour than remembering a story of the past,” he writes, “which typically appear to students as socially uncontested and historically self-evident.” (Levesque 2005, 2). Levesque’s argument is very important here: students will generally accept what they have been presented by their teachers as fact, but historical information is not as simple as separating fact from fiction. The approach to presenting that historical information will impact the understanding students have about those concepts -- whether Riel was a traitor or a hero, to use Levesque’s example -- and to present any single approach to that information as the only possible approach would simply be inaccurate. There will always be other facts to consider, or other perspectives to evaluate when analyzing a historical figure or event, and the choices that are made about which to include in a student’s education will have massive implications for what that student actually learns. A student who learns that Riel was a traitor who hindered the confederation of Canada will likely end up feeling very differently about their country than a student who learns that Riel was a hero who resisted the colonial project. Neither of these is necessarily the “correct” teaching of Riel, but neither of them is neutral either, and any presentation of facts about Riel’s life and struggles against the Canadian government is likely to lead students to one conclusion or the other.

The key problem with Ravitch’s argument is that even if we were to remove all the other “studies” from Social Studies, there would never be enough time to cover every possible important historical event, every stakeholder in that event, and every perspective on that event’s implications for the world. You could spend years studying Riel alone and never be sure to have the full truth of his life and his legacy. History requires evaluation and history education requires prioritization, and the method of that evaluation and prioritization is generally shaped by bigger questions about society and how it should function - the very question those other “studies” help to answer.

Jorgenson explains that Edwin Fenton made an argument along these lines in 1971, premised on the idea that historical teaching will always be limited by

the flaws in historical sources and historical writing (Jorgenson 2014, 8). Fenton argued that any analysis of history will be impeded by the necessity of emphasizing certain people, events, or areas of the world over others (Jorgenson 2014, 8). For this reason, Fenton believed it was more important to focus on answering these three questions: “What is a good man? What is a good life? And what is a good society?” (Jorgenson 2014, 9).

I agree with Fenton that the answers to these questions fundamentally impact how we interact with history -- who we celebrate and who we condemn, for example. In the modern world, composed of nation-states, the answers to questions of goodness often come down to one’s conception of citizenship. This is because citizenship is the lens through which most people exist in a collective society -- they have a passport, a status, and an ability to exert power over their government and the other people living among them (to different extents, depending on the systems of power in their country) all through their role as a citizen. An international



system that views nation-states as the primary actor on the global stage tends to think of individual people primarily in terms of citizenship. Because of this, how we teach history is often shaped by the lessons about citizenship that we are aiming to convey. In the following section, I will explore the focus on citizenship in Canadian curricula, and how the various conceptions of citizenship impact the way Social Studies content, including history, is taught.

### **Social Studies as Citizenship Education**

“The primary goal of social studies instruction is to nurture the development of students’ civic sensibilities and provide a place to refine their ideas and understanding of the social world, in all its complexity,” writes Christopher Leahey (Leahey 2014, 66). This is an attitude commonly held in Western liberal democracies, where citizenship is seen as both a right and a responsibility. Democracies tend to convey citizenship as both an identity and a mechanism of power, and so teach students both to conceptualize themselves as citizens and to consider what kinds of exercises of citizenship they can partake in. Social Studies curricula generally include an explicit focus on citizenship and civic education. In Canada, as Susan Gibson identifies, citizenship has been the primary goal of Social Studies programs for a long time (Gibson 2011, 43).

A focus on citizenship comes with some inherent political implications; it assumes a world in which individuals belong as official members of nation-states, for example. Most conceptions of citizenship implicitly support liberal values, though I will explore the nuances of this in a later section. Leahey notes that “there has been an ongoing struggle between social reconstructionists who view social studies as preparation for challenging the status quo and working for progressive change and conservative educators who view social studies as focused on transmitting historical knowledge and imparting reverence for American institutions and traditional values” (Leahey 2014, 55-56). Ross and Vinson draw similar conclusions that traditionally a “good citizen” was seen “as a knower of traditional facts”, but there are movements to reform the good citizen into “an agent of progressive (or even radical) social change or from some other competing view” (Ross and Vinson 2014, 102). These kinds of debates about citizenship play out in many of the struggles over curricula that we see today. The CRT debate in the US is a clear example of this divide, where proponents of CRT argue for the importance of challenging the traditional narrative of American history while its critics argue that CRT distorts more “traditional facts” about the kind of country the US was founded to be.

Aside from some particularly clear partisan divides on the issue of what makes a good citizen, the variety of conceptions of citizenship do not fit so plainly onto the political spectrum. It is not quite as simple as presenting a good citizen who upholds norms versus a good citizen who challenges them. Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne, after surveying hundreds of examples of curricula, identify three models of citizenship, none of which necessarily and by definition hold a specific partisan leaning. The three conceptions of citizenship Westheimer and Kahne identify are: personally responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented (Westheimer and Kahne 2004, 238). They use the example of addressing hunger to illustrate the differences between the three; the personally responsible citizen donates to a food drive, the participatory citizen organizes a food drive, and the justice-oriented citizen interrogates the root causes of hunger (Westheimer and Kahne 2004, 240).

Importantly, the conception of good citizenship that is adopted by a curriculum shapes both the descriptive content of that curriculum and the prescriptive content of that curriculum. This means that both the lens through which information is presented (for example, what parts of history are emphasized) and the takeaways students are encouraged to apply to their own lives (for example, what lessons we should retain from a given historical event), are influenced by this conception.

In order to demonstrate the power of these conceptions, I will further explore each of Westheimer and Kahne’s three models. For the sake of illustration, I will show how each of them would impact teaching about a major part of the Canadian high school Social Studies curriculum: the rise of Hitler in Germany and the fighting of the Second World War. While it is not necessarily the case that an individual Social Studies curriculum would only focus on one particular aspect of this time in history, the application of each model of citizenship would guide which particular aspects were emphasized and what students were therefore guided to take away from the material. I will demonstrate the impact of each application on the content that is likely to be emphasized, and how this would in turn impact a student’s view of themselves as a citizen and shape their future actions within a democratic society.

The personal responsibility model of citizenship centres on the importance of individual morality and values that make people good citizens and community members (Westheimer and Kahne 2004, 240). Westheimer and Kahne argue that this often manifests in the pro-

motion of values like hard work and the importance of being “honest, responsible, and law-abiding members of the community” (Westheimer and Kahne 2004, 240). That being said, this model of citizenship could promote a variety of personal values. The key to this model of citizenship is that it emphasizes individual responsibility and character as opposed to larger systems or how individuals may be impacted by those systems.

Westheimer and Kahne identify that this model of citizenship is not inherently democratic. The personal responsibility conception is more centred around contribution to the community than democratic participation. Westheimer and Kahne argue that authoritarian governments also want citizens who do not steal or litter, as maintaining social order is important to maintaining political order (Westheimer and Kahne 2004, 244). While this is true, it does not mean that the personal responsibility model cannot be democratic, particularly because personal values can extend past not littering into values like compassion, responsibility, and helping others. It is possible, therefore, for a personal responsibility model to be applied within a strictly pro-democracy curriculum, but, as I will explore later, it is debatable whether this model of citizenship encourages students to do the work required to maintain democratic institutions and processes as explicitly as other models.

### **Citizenship Lenses in Action**

We can see how this might look in a Social Studies unit on the rise of Hitler and the outbreak of World War II. An examination of Nazi Germany through the lens of a personal responsibility model of citizenship might emphasize the moral failings of Germans who did not speak out against the gradual escalation of violence and the atrocities that eventually took place in concentration camps. It might highlight and celebrate Germans who did resist, openly opposing the regime, hiding Jewish people in their homes, or committing other heroic acts. An examination of Canada’s involvement in World War II through this lens might emphasize the sacrifices of individual soldiers, perhaps encouraging students to learn their names and their stories. It might highlight the sacrifices made by Canadian families during the war, buying war bonds and living with rationed goods.

While this approach does not fully negate the ability to convey to students that there are larger forces at work beyond any individual person, a personal responsibility model of citizenship will always return to a focus on individual people and values. This focus will generally encourage students to look inward, consider their own

beliefs and actions, and consider the kind of character they would like to embody in their citizenship. It may not focus as much on students’ ability or motivation to enact broader-scale change, and for that reason, it is more likely to enforce the status quo or community-level change. The critique therefore of this model is that it does not inherently reinforce the importance of maintaining democracies by engaging in collective action or by protecting institutions -- at least not to the same extent as other more active models. While students educated under this model may not necessarily be pro-authoritarian, they may be less likely to pay attention to the warning signs of authoritarianism or maintain a high level of vigilance against it if they are not encouraged to do so during the course of their Social Studies education. Although models that focus on the individual are often associated with libertarianism and personal freedoms, the important thing to note about a personal responsibility model of citizenship is that it will rarely examine larger structures that might constrain individual freedom (like government regulation) and instead focus on individual characteristics and moral values. This is the key limitation of this model.

A participatory model of citizenship promotes the importance of engaging with one’s government by being an active and informed citizen (Westheimer and Kahne 2004, 240). Under this conception, a good citizen is one who gets involved both in their immediate community and in their broader society through collective actions and organized advocacy (Westheimer and Kahne 2004, 241-242). This model of citizenship is associated very closely with democracy, focusing on citizen action to shape government, and encouraging specifically democratic actions like voting, writing to elected officials, and attending protests. Under a participatory model, students are taught practical skills like how to organize and run meetings and encouraged to use those skills within their communities to advocate for specific goals (Westheimer and Kahne 2004, 242).

John Dewey, an early 20th-century philosopher and pedagogical theorist, was an early proponent of this model of citizenship, believing that “schooling should both embrace the democratic process and promote democracy itself by exemplifying on a daily basis the principles of democracy.” (Jorgenson 2014, 5). Dewey’s proposed method of Social Studies education was that students should start with problems they see in society and be encouraged to seek out solutions to those problems that they themselves could get involved in (Jorgenson 2014, 10). A participatory model generally emphasizes institutions, organizations, and actions that allow citizens to go beyond themselves as individuals

and work to address those larger problems.

Approaching the rise of Hitler and the breakout of World War II through a participatory model of citizenship would emphasize these same themes in the context of that time period. It might put a heavier focus on the election of Hitler and how his initially democratic election eventually led to a decline in institutions and the erosion of civic rights for many. It might encourage students to understand the Nazi Party as an organization and how its inner workings shaped its ability to enact the kind of policy that it did. A lens of participatory citizenship might also emphasize the underground organizations that organized resistance both within Germany and in other occupied countries.

The participatory model of citizenship is the one most directly linked to liberal democracy, with its belief in the power of the ballot box and the responsibility that democratic rights imbue in citizens. In this way, it will generally return the focus to liberal values and practices like expressing one's beliefs, exercising the right to vote, and holding elected officials accountable. A limitation of this approach is its implicit belief in the liberal democratic institutions that it inherently vests power on.

Those who advocate for more systemic change often argue that institutions like legislative assemblies and traditional media outlets are prone to corporate capture and rule by elites, an idea that is unlikely to be captured within a participatory model of citizenship. This model's emphasis on the importance of having direct citizen involvement at every level of power means that it will always be a strong proponent of democratic values, but not everyone would agree that those democratic ideals are more important and should be valued more highly than other values, such as justice.

The justice-oriented model is less commonly applied in curriculums in Canada presently, but has gained a lot of attention lately and is supported by many who feel that the Social Studies curriculum should better prepare students to think critically about the systems that comprise the society they live in. Some argue, for example, that it is “nearly impossible to teach democracy without placing the pursuit of social justice and the examination [of] existing social, economic, and political structures at the center of the endeavor” (Jorgenson 2014, 13). While this kind of structural examination is often associated with the left-wing of the political spectrum, who often advocate for the teaching of concepts like systemic racism, a justice-oriented model of citizenship is not by definition a product of any particular part of the political spectrum, and does not have to operate as such. As Westheimer and Kahne point out with their own example of the food drive, the justice-oriented

citizen's question of “why do people go hungry in the first place?” might prompt a variety of answers that could land anywhere on that spectrum (Westheimer and Kahne 2004, 243). What is important in any justice-oriented model of citizenship is that inquiry must always go beyond individuals or their communities and into an examination of larger structural forces, broad historical trends, and long-term themes.

In the example of the rise of Hitler and the start of World War II, this might look like a deeper discussion of the economic conditions created by the Treaty of Versailles and how the impact of those conditions shaped voting trends and attitudes of German citizens towards the Nazi Party. It might include an emphasis on the roots of anti-Semitism within Germany before the Nazi Party came to power and the influence that “racial science” and other prejudiced views have had in various time periods. When looking at World War II, it might look like exploring the complexities of the global alliances that made the war truly worldwide, and the forces that shaped countries' decisions to get involved in the war or not.

A justice-oriented model of citizenship sees the world as a series of complex systems, shaped by longstanding history and power dynamics. By nature, an examination of structures and systems will often be critical, encouraging students to question the institutions and organizations they might take for granted. Critics of this approach may argue that an overly critical view of democratic societies can lead students to question democratic values themselves and not prioritize democracy as an outcome in and of itself. It is telling that as this kind of systems-oriented critical thinking becomes more prominent, young people are increasingly less likely to report that they feel satisfied with democracy (Foa et al. 2020, 2). While a justice-oriented focus can encourage students to be critical of institutions in a way that translates into holding those institutions accountable and being vigilant in ensuring their robustness, this model can also lead to a critical lens on the existence of democracy itself, to potentially detrimental outcomes.

## Conclusion

Any Social Studies curriculum will need to take a stance on what is most important because there is only so much time any student can spend in their Social Studies classroom. Certain events, people, and angles will always have to be emphasized to the detriment of others. These decisions about what to prioritize will always have political implications, as they shape what students understand about their society in the past and

in the present, but also how students would like to see society move forward. Crucially, the lens that a Social Studies education takes will have a major impact on how students feel about democracy itself and their role as advocates, practitioners, and critics of democracy. A personal responsibility model is more likely to make students feel like their personal values and character shape their society. A participatory model is more likely to make students feel like they should engage first and foremost as voters and democratic citizens. A justice-oriented model is more likely to make students feel like they need to examine the scaffolding that makes up their societies in the first place, how those systems came to be, and how they might revolutionize those systems. Each of these approaches has significant implications for the health of a democratic society, which is why Social Studies education is so important, and so very contested. Particular consideration should be taken by those in control of Social Studies education to select approaches with these significant impacts in mind.



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