

Student Comfort Levels during Political Discourse in High School Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Growing political polarization has led to intense debate over political discourse in the high school classroom setting, leading to questions about if students feel comfortable during political discussions. Traditionally, it has been thought that politics should not be in the classroom to avoid indoctrinating students. However, recent research has cast doubt on the reality of indoctrination through classroom political discourse. Additionally, studies have shown that there are benefits to the introduction of politics in the classroom as students grow tolerant towards opposing beliefs. However, research has not explored the comfort levels of students during political discourse, a factor to consider when discussing political discourse in the classroom. To explore this issue, this study used an electronic survey to gather if a student is aware of their teacher's political beliefs, whether they agree with them, and then five questions to receive a score on the Comfortability in Learning (CIL) Scale. Then, a correlation was performed between the CIL Score and the student's knowledge and consensus with their teacher's beliefs. Contrary to popular belief, this study showed that if a student is aware of their teacher's beliefs, there is not a significant difference in comfort levels. However, if they disagree with their teacher's beliefs, then there is a moderate difference in comfort levels. These findings indicate that political discourse in high schools is not a fundamental issue, but rather the way that teachers present political discourse and ostracize dissenting students. This calls for additional training for educators to promote positive political discourse.

Introduction

As polarization in America reaches unprecedented levels, the degree to which political discourse should be a part of the curriculum in public schools has been highly debated. While teachers claim that it is within their realm of freedom to introduce political discussion and ensure that students are educated, a near majority of parents believe that teachers only share their political beliefs to influence the beliefs of students (Carolina Journal 2022). In the wake of this increased sensitivity towards political discussions, many teachers have found it easier to avoid any mention, or even suggestion of politics. Those who have not faced serious consequences including losing their jobs. As Wayne Journell, an Associate Professor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, presents, this has led to an issue regarding parrhesia, or boldness in freedom of speech, as teachers are scared that they will lose their livelihood if they present any form of political discussion (Journell, *Teacher Political Disclosure* 2009). However, multiple studies have shown that students can benefit from political discussions in the classroom, gaining skills that include tolerance of opposing beliefs, critical thinking skills, and interpersonal skills. In addition, research has shown that high school students have stiff beliefs that will not change regardless of any political discussion in the classroom, putting aside fears of indoctrination. However, the effect that these political discussions have on the emotional well-being of students, along with the overall classroom atmosphere is often overlooked. This begs the question, to what extent does political discourse in the high school classroom setting affect the comfort levels of students? To create a full perspective of this issue, this study aims to be the first to measure the effect that political discussions have on the atmosphere of a high school classroom, and if students feel uncomfortable as a result of these discussions.

This study intends to use surveys and semi-structured interviews in order to analyze the degree to which students feel uncomfortable in a classroom setting with common political discourse and to examine specific strategies teachers utilize in order to ensure students feel comfortable. Although there is extensive research regarding the degree to which political discourse in a university benefits or harms students, there is a clear lack of research regarding the effect that it may have on high school students. Additionally, any research that has been done on high school students has centered around whether political discussions may indoctrinate students, whereas this study will focus on the effect that they have on the classroom atmosphere. In the fragile political world that currently exists, teaching tolerance is an utmost priority that schools must prioritize. Research has repeatedly shown that the easiest way to do so is by exposing students to opposing political perspectives through debates and conversations over controversial topics. However, if students truly feel uncomfortable upon the introduction of politics, a different form of teaching tolerance should be explored. It is predicted that this study will show that there is a difference in comfort levels in the classroom between students who have active political discussion and those who do not because of a lack of training provided to teachers that results in harmful political discourse. It is vital to ensure that students are well informed through controlled political discourse, but also that they feel comfortable in their classroom atmosphere, as will be explored in this study.

Literature Review

In order to comprehend the importance of exploring whether students feel comfortable with political discourse, the benefits of political discourse and the validity of claims regarding indoctrination must be explored. To do this, one must first understand the degree to which teachers maintain academic freedom and therefore the ability to hold these political discussions from a legal stance. Then, it must be further explored whether claims of indoctrination have any practical basis, and whether political discourse has any positive effects. Furthermore, strategies that can be utilized in order to limit the effects of the previously mentioned phenomena could assist if this study reveals a large amount of students feeling uncomfortable during political discourse in the classroom.

Throughout the last century, the right to academic freedom at the high school level has constantly evolved and has often been extremely ambiguous. First, as described by Todd A. DeMitchell, a Professor Emeritus of Education Law at the University of New Hampshire, and Vincent J. Connelly, a Senior Counsel at the firm Mayer Brown, although the right of teachers to speak in the classroom derives from their right to free speech as private citizens, the “borders [of academic freedom] remain stubbornly indistinct and blurred” (DeMitchell, Connelly 2007). Generally, the courts have ruled that as long as speech is related to the curriculum and is not inappropriate or improper, teachers can speak about it. However, the overall ambiguity of this language, has left “lower courts, teachers, administrators, and school boards to winnow the chaff to find their own constitutional protections.” (DeMitchell, Connelly 2007). This has led to highly politicized conflicts that have put teachers in a sensitive position regarding their ability to hold political discussions, as showcased by recent controversy surrounding Critical Race Theory (CRT). In certain states, governing bodies claim that it is inappropriate to teach CRT as it makes white children feel as if they are responsible for the suffering of all minorities, which in their opinion falls under the domain of improper speech (Lawrence, Hylton 2022) (Harrison et. al 2021). However, to others, an attack on CRT is an attack on the academic freedom of teachers. The fight over this issue has highlighted the ambiguity of the current legal status of academic freedom, the social tension that it has caused, and the fragility of academic freedom. Overall, it is clear that the status of academic freedom is extremely ambiguous, endangering teachers who express their political beliefs.

While it is debated whether teachers have a legal right to freedom of speech within the classroom, a simultaneous ethical debate occurs to conclude whether teachers are capable of indoctrinating students. In the past, mainstream belief has overwhelmingly leaned towards the theory that political discussions in the classroom can be too easily manipulated by teachers to indoctrinate students. This concern was shown by a study performed by Cygnal, a center-right polling organization named #1 most reliable by the New York Times, which showed that 72% of parents

believed education had become too political, while 47% also believed that teachers only shared their beliefs to influence those of their students (Carolina Journal 2022). To further this theory, in a study performed by Wayne Journell, it was revealed “that teachers who claim to be politically neutral are not so in practice.” This was proven by his observations of a teacher in the wake of the 2008 election who claimed to be neutral, yet, when students were interviewed and asked who they believed he was voting for, nineteen out of twenty-six students correctly guessed that he was voting for Obama (Journell, *Making a Case* 2009). From this study, it is clear that teacher neutrality is a myth, but it is still heavily debated whether the revelation of beliefs even has any influence on the beliefs of students. Through a study conducted by Abigail Camp and published in the Journal of Student Research, only 22.2% said their teacher’s beliefs made them question their beliefs, whereas a higher percentage of 35% said the revelation of their teacher’s beliefs strengthened their own beliefs while opening them up to new beliefs (Camp 2020). It is important to note that questioning their beliefs does not entail indoctrination, but rather could be due to exposure to additional information that was not previously available to them. With this in mind, it is clear that political discourse does not always lead to indoctrination and may actually lead to an opposite scenario of stronger viewpoints. So, although teacher neutrality seems unrealistic, the revelation of a teacher’s beliefs only affects the beliefs of students in very limited cases, paving the way for the implementation of political discourse in the classroom.

In order to comprehend the necessity of political discourse in the classroom, the benefits must be stated. Although Mr. Journell recognized clear signs of implicit bias when observing discourse in a classroom setting, he brushed this off by asserting that it is necessary so as to provide students with “a model for tolerant political discourse,” and therefore prepare them to defend their political beliefs in a respectful manner. Additionally, in the book, *Educating for Deliberative Democracy*, author Nancy L. Thomas discusses how political discourse provides an opportunity for “student learning and democracy,” as students are exposed to both viewpoints, and therefore allowed to form their own opinions free from any interference (Thomas 2010). This is most notable when a debate format is utilized, as students are able to listen to both viewpoints, and therefore have as much information available to them as possible. Taking this into consideration, the benefits of political discourse seem to be vast, as increased tolerance and well-informed, independent beliefs are of great need in the current, polarized political climate.

If the concept of politics in the classroom is promoted, it must be done with specific training and techniques considered. As stated in the *Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies*, by Heather M. Reynolds, an Associate Professor of Teacher Education at the SUNY Empire State College and Douglas Silvernell, an Assistant Superintendent at Saratoga Spring City School District, a lack of training for teachers has led to their inability to adequately hold political discussions in a non-polarizing or demeaning manner (Reynolds, Silvernell 2020). Further, they assert that students are inexperienced at expressing their political beliefs, and therefore tend to present it in a manner that invites negative disagreement. To avoid this, many students avoid presenting at all because they are unaware of how to express themselves without marginalizing those around them. Therefore, this leaves classrooms in an inherently negative situation, as some students present their views in a polarizing manner, and others do not present them at all, leaving very few who can present them in a respectful manner (Reynolds, Silvernell 2020). Moreover, in order to foster positive political discourse, Diana Hess, the Dean of University of Wisconsin’s School of Education, discusses strategies that teachers and students can utilize. First, Hess discusses how a teacher must orient the discussion towards the students, and steer away from overtly involving their beliefs in the discussion. She then discusses how as the moderator of the discussion, the teacher has multiple responsibilities. First, they must recognize the overall culture of the school and orient the discussion to be compatible with the culture (Hess 2022). For example, bringing up a two-sided debate about LGBTQ+ rights at a mostly liberal school would not be sensitive nor invite positive discourse, as it would most likely make a group of students uncomfortable. In addition, the teacher must ensure that each student feels comfortable to state their views. However, most significantly, Hess mentions how students cannot be graded on their opinion, but rather on their argument techniques and proficiency (Hess 2022). Overall, it is clear that high schools have a duty to train their teachers and students on how to foster positive political discourse. By utilizing the strategies and guidelines for teachers to foster positive political discourse, many controversies that surround political discourse in the classroom can be avoided.

Overall, through the aforementioned studies, it is evident that academic freedom in high schools is extremely ambiguous and largely leaves the extent to which teachers retain academic freedom up for interpretation. Moreover, social pressure against political discourse exists, as parents fear that their kids will be indoctrinated by teachers if political discourse occurs. However, studies have painted a different outcome, as students fail to be influenced by their teachers beliefs, and oftentimes have their own beliefs strengthened if they hear a contrasting belief in the classroom and grow tolerance towards opposing viewpoints. Finally, it was presented how there are certain strategies that teachers can implement in the classroom in order to maximize the odds that students feel comfortable and are not influenced by these opinions. Through this literature, it has become clear that if it is revealed in this study that students largely feel comfortable in classrooms with political discourse, then there is no reason why political discourse should not be implemented on a larger scale, as the positive effects of political discourse have largely been made apparent, while the chances of indoctrination have been shown to be minimal. However, if there is a sizeable percentage of students who are revealed in this study to feel uncomfortable when their teachers have open political discourse, then it is clear that society is not ready to implement additional political discourse into the classroom, and rather should focus on educating the next generation of teachers on how to promote positive political discourse.

Methodology

In order to test the hypothesis of this study, quantitative data was collected through an electronic survey, while qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews. To explain and confirm the results of the quantitative data, these data sets were then triangulated.

Quantitative Data

In order to investigate the aforementioned hypothesis, this study needed to examine whether students felt comfortable in the classroom based upon their degree of knowledge, and consensus of their teacher's beliefs. It was determined that an electronic survey released to all students within a particular high school in New Jersey could gather the necessary information in the most efficient manner, and gather the most responses as it required little time commitment from participants. In this particular instance, this survey was based on a previous study conducted by Abigail Camp, in which three independent variables were gathered, and then compared to several dependent variables, most significantly the degree to which their political beliefs were changed (Camp 2020). Similar to that study, the present study gathered three independent variables: level of knowledge of the beliefs of their teacher, level of consensus with the beliefs of their teacher, and gender. Two of these variables, level of knowledge and level of consensus, were used due to the fact that they are considered strong indicators of the presence of political discourse in the classroom, while the third, gender, was used in order to account for assumed differences in comfort levels by gender, as existing studies have shown that females tend to feel less comfortable in the classroom setting (Nadile 2021). For the dependent variable, the researcher aimed to find the comfort levels of respondents in their history class. The Comfortability in Learning Scale (CLS), designed by Michael Kiener, a professor of rehabilitation counseling at Maryville University, was determined to be the best fit to determine the classroom atmosphere. The CLS asked seven questions, with likert-scale fashioned answer choices, that focused on the actions taken by teachers to support students, "even those with differing viewpoints," a key point of this study (Kiener 2013). To receive this score, respondents were asked seven questions, all asking about their experiences in the classroom with five options, each corresponding with a numerical value. These responses were Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Neutral (3), Disagree (2) and Strongly Disagree (1). Their responses were then added up, and then divided by five to get their average response. Therefore, a higher response corresponds to a higher rate of comfort in the classroom.

In order to determine if there was any correlation between the three independent variables and the composite score on the Comfortability in Learning Scale, the Pearson Correlation Coefficient (r), measured from $-1 \leq 0 \leq 1$, was

used. As explained by Dr. Patrick Schober from the Department of Anesthesiology at VU University Medical Center in Amsterdam, this test of correlation is effective to establish a linear relationship between two quantitative variables, and measure the strength of such relationships (Schober et. al 2018). Using this method, an R value of less than $|.3|$ is considered a weak correlation, while between $|.3|$ - $|.6|$ is considered a medium correlation, while greater than $|.6|$, is considered to be a strong correlation (Schober).

Qualitative Data

To establish a causation for any effect shown by the quantitative data provided by the survey, this study performed a series of semi-structured interviews on survey respondents in order to gain deeper insight into specific strategies that teachers used to foster positive political discourse. As described by Dr. Catherine Dawson, the author of *Introduction to Research Methods*, through a semi-structured format, an interviewer is able to ask a set of questions, while also retaining the ability to ask follow up questions within a set of predetermined confines (Dawson 2007). Five interviews were conducted, consisting of three males and two females. Based on their survey responses, the five interviewees all had different experiences regarding political discourse in the classroom. The diversity in the group of interviewees allowed for a plethora of opinions, as well as an explanation for discomfort regarding political discourse. This allowed for specific strategies that teachers took to ensure positive political disclosure to be explored.

The participants were asked a series of questions, divided into three categories. The first focused on their own comfort in the classroom during political discourse. The next section of the interview focused on their impression of the comfort levels of other students in the classroom, mainly by asking about body language or phrases that would indicate high levels of discomfort. The final section asked about specific strategies that their teacher used to promote positive political discourse. Despite the organized structure, the interviewee was given latitude to speak freely, while the interviewer often asked follow up questions to delve deeper into relevant topics that were not explicitly asked about.

To analyze the interviews, a thematic analysis was performed in order to identify and analyze different patterns in the data (Kiger, Viper 2020). The thematic analysis aimed to focus on specific strategies that recurred, and behaviors that seemed to indicate a level of discomfort. This would help the researcher uncover reasons for harmful political discourse, as well as possible methods of improvement.

Data Triangulation

Finally, the quantitative and qualitative data were triangulated in order to ensure the accuracy, and mitigate the weaknesses of the two methods (Dawson 2007). In this instance, data triangulation was used for two purposes. First, in order to establish convergence within the two data sets, and therefore confirm their results, and second, in order to establish complementarity, or to allow for the qualitative data, which focused on strategies utilized by educators, to explain the phenomena of the quantitative data. In addition to confirming the results of the quantitative data, triangulation can minimize the effect of biases that could have impacted survey results, mainly pre-existing biases surrounding the classroom that are due to a factor unrelated to the topic at hand (Dawson 2007).

Results

Quantitative Results

Using the data gathered from the electronic survey, which had one hundred twenty-two respondents, a Pearson correlation test was utilized to determine if there was any relationship between the Comfortability in Learning Scale score,

and three dependent variables: gender, degree of knowledge of their teacher’s political beliefs, and degree of consensus with their teacher’s beliefs. To measure the significance of the correlation, the following chart was used:

Coefficient Value	Strength of Association
$0.1 < r < 0.3$	Small correlation
$0.3 < r < 0.5$	Medium/moderate correlation
$ r > 0.5$	Large/strong correlation

Comfortability in Learning Scale Score

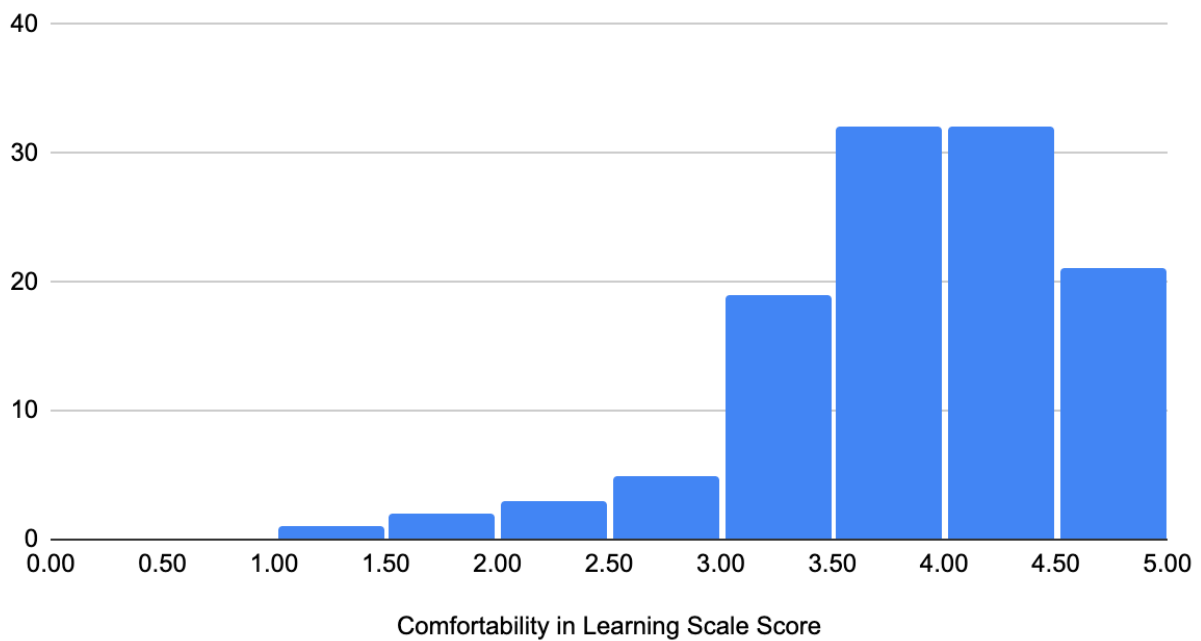


Figure 1: Comfortability in Learning Score

Depicted above are the scores respondents received on the Comfortability in Learning Scale, a series of questions that aim to measure the level of comfort that a student feels within a certain academic setting. As seen, most respondents scored between 3.50 and 4.50, indicating a high degree of comfort in this set of respondents.

	<i>Comfortability in Learning</i>	<i>Male/Female</i>
<i>Comfortability in Learning</i>	1.00	
<i>Male/Female</i>	0.06	1.00

Figure 2a: Gender vs Comfortability in Learning (Pearson Correlation Coefficient Chart)

Gender vs. Comfortability in Learning

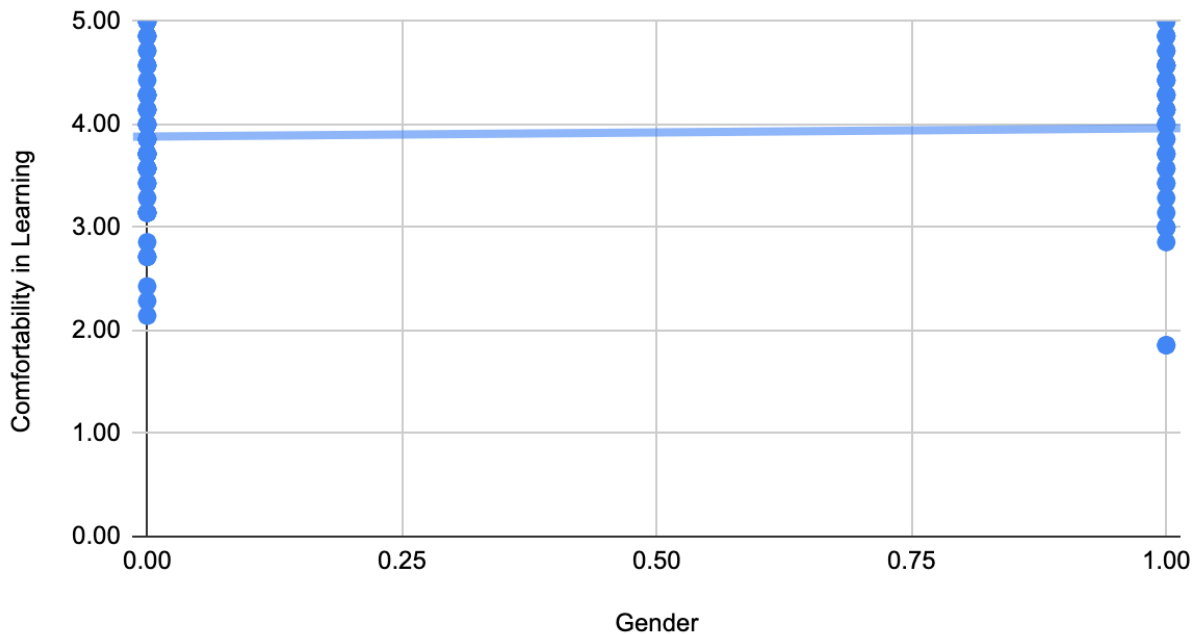


Figure 2b: Gender vs. Comfortability in Learning (Linear Regression)

As seen in Figure 2a, there was a low, positive correlation, $r=.06$, between Comfortability in Learning and gender, only accounting for .36% of the variation in scores on the Comfortability in Learning Scales. This is additionally seen in Figure 2b, which shows a small difference in scores between males (1) and females (0) on the trendline. Respondents were given three options for gender: male, female and prefer not to say. If respondents chose male, they were assigned a numerical value of 1, whereas females received a numerical value of 0. Those who preferred not to say, two respondents, were ignored for this correlation.

	<i>Comfortability in Learning</i>	<i>Knowledge of Teacher's Beliefs</i>
<i>Comfortability in Learning</i>	1	
<i>Knowledge of Teacher's Beliefs</i>	-0.1588698406	1

Figure 3a: Knowledge of Beliefs vs. Comfortability in Learning (Pearson Correlation Coefficient Chart)

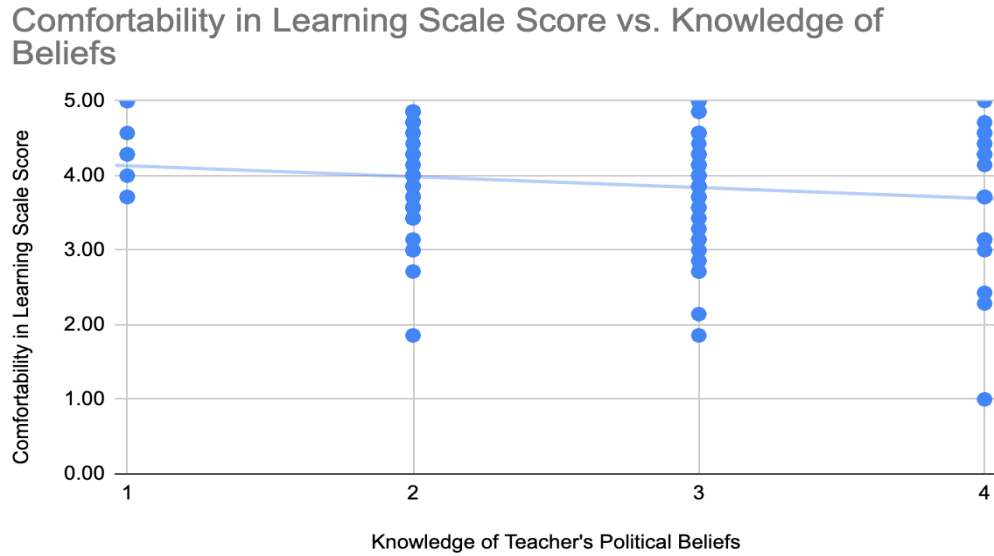


Figure 3b: Knowledge of Beliefs vs. Comfortability in Learning (Linear Regression)

As is seen, there is a positive low correlation, $r=-.159$, between Comfortability in the Classroom and Knowledge of a Teacher’s Political Beliefs, accounting for only 2.5% of the variation in the scores received on the Comfortability in Learning Score.

	<i>Comfortability in Learning</i>	<i>Consensus with Teacher</i>
<i>Comfortability in Learning</i>	1	
<i>Consensus with Teacher</i>	0.447243387	1

Figure 4a: Consensus with Beliefs vs. Comfortability in Learning Score (Pearson Correlation Coefficient)

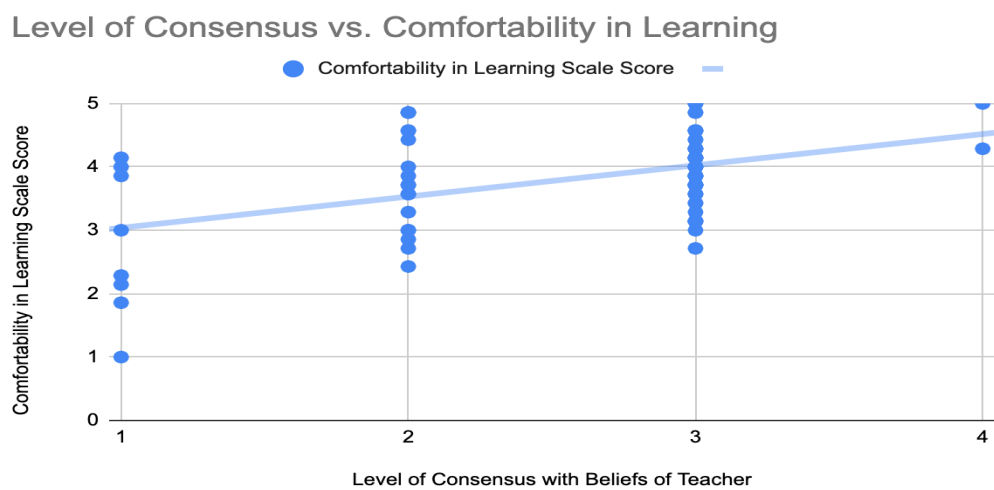


Figure 4b: Consensus with Beliefs vs. Comfortability in Learning Score (Linear Regression)

There was a moderate-to-high positive correlation, $r=.447$, between the level of consensus with the beliefs of the respondent's teacher and the score on Comfortability in Learning Score, which explains 20% of the variation in the scores on the Comfortability in Learning Scale. In the survey, when respondents were asked about the degree to which they agree with the beliefs of their teacher, they were instructed to not answer if they were not aware of the beliefs of their teacher, as asked by the previous question, resulting in only seventy-nine responses that were examined in this correlation.

Qualitative Data

To analyze the results of the qualitative data, four key themes were chosen from the transcripts of the interview, and then sought after. These four key themes, all related to political discourse, were: (1) Excessive Teacher Involvement (2) Positive Strategies (3) Negative Strategies (4) Lack of Student Involvement. These themes were picked based on their recurrence in the form of code words, and their relevance to the overall research question. The four themes are defined below with their frequency.

Theme	Definition	Number of Interviews with this Theme
Excessive Teacher Involvement	A degree to which a teacher is involved in political discourse beyond their role as mediator and inputs their own opinions, and is an active participant.	4
Positive Strategies	Specific strategies that a teacher utilized that resulted in students feeling more comfortable during political discourse	3
Negative Strategies	Specific strategies that a teacher utilized that resulted in students feeling less comfortable during political discourse	3
Lack of Student Involvement	A degree to which students of different ideologies (particularly different to that of the teacher) do not feel comfortable enough to voice their opinions and be involved in discourse.	4

Figure 5: Thematic Analysis Chart

Discussion

As previously stated, the main focus of this study is to examine the impact that political discourse in high school classrooms has on the classroom atmosphere, and the comfort levels of students. In the literature review, it was established with a degree of confidence that political discourse generally does not indoctrinate students, and has critical benefits such as establishing tolerance for opposing beliefs. With this in mind, the researcher determined that if this study showed that political discourse did not impact the comfort of students, then political discourse should be implemented in high schools. To find the answer to this question, the Comfortability in Learning scale was used to show the degree of comfort that a student obtains in the classroom, and compared against three factors: gender, the degree of knowledge a student has of their teacher's political beliefs, and the degree to which a student agrees with the political beliefs of their teacher.

The first correlation compared the difference in Comfortability in Learning Scores between males and females. The result of this correlation was shown in Figures 2a and 2b, which displayed that there was a statistically insignificant correlation, meaning there is very little difference between males and females in terms of comfort levels in the classroom atmosphere. Although gender was not expected to be a large source of variation in scores on the Comfortability in Learning Score, there was an expectation that females would be less comfortable in the classroom, and therefore a factor to consider when discussing discomfort during political discourse. This was backed up by previous research, specifically a study performed by Erika M. Nadile, a researcher for the Inclusive STEM Education Center at Arizona State University, who found that females had a tendency to display signs of discomfort in the classroom such as a hesitancy to participate, and nervous behavior when answering questions (Nadile 2021). However, when political discourse was added as a factor in this study, gender ceased to be a significant factor in comfort levels in the classroom. From this, it can be concluded that the gender of a student does not have any impact on their comfortability during political discourse.

Through observations in a classroom setting, Professor Wayne Journell established the fact that in almost all of the classes he examined, whenever any issue concerning politics was discussed, the political beliefs of the teacher were apparent. To see if this has an effect on the comfort levels of students, this study looked for an association between the revelation of a teacher's political beliefs and scores on the Comfortability in Learning Scale. Comparing the score received on the Comfortability in Learning scale against the student's degree of knowledge of their teacher's beliefs showed a low correlation ($r = -.157$) that only accounted for 2.5% of the variation in scores on the Comfortability in Learning Scale. This low correlation means that the degree to which a student is aware of their teacher's beliefs has a statistically insignificant effect on their comfort in the classroom. Through the qualitative data, a thematic analysis showed that the revelation of a teacher's belief was not referenced by any students as a source of their discomfort. This runs contrary to mainstream belief which frowns upon any indication of bias on behalf of the educator during political discourse in the classroom, despite the fact that numerous studies such as that of Ms. Abigail Camp revealed that hearing the opposing beliefs of an educator had a higher likelihood of strengthening the beliefs of a student rather than altering their beliefs. Overall, this leads to the conclusion that the revelation of a teacher's political beliefs does not have any impact on the comfort levels of a student.

In the third correlation, which compared the score received on the Comfortability in Learning scale against the degree to which the student agrees with the beliefs of their teacher, there was a medium to high association ($r = .447$), which can be seen in Figures 4a and 4b. Through this, it was presented that if a student disagrees with the political beliefs of their teacher, they are more likely to be uncomfortable in the classroom setting. This is corroborated by the graph depicting the linear relationship between these two variables. In this graph, it is also clear that there are multiple extremes, who heavily disagreed with their teacher and felt extremely uncomfortable in the classroom. Through the thematic analysis, a full picture was painted, as excessive teacher involvement was cited as a source of discomfort in the classroom. Interviewees repeatedly discussed how when their teacher was involved in political discourse, they felt as if they could not freely express their opinions. This led to the second recurring theme, which was reduced student participation, as students did not feel comfortable to speak freely because of the perceived dominance

of their teacher. When examining this in conjunction with the previous correlation, which conveyed no difference in comfort levels when the degree knowledge of an educator's beliefs was taken into account, it becomes clear that there is not an issue with the revelation of an educator's beliefs, but rather with excessive teacher participation and the ensuing inflammatory language that the educator uses to support their beliefs or stifle opposing viewpoints, therefore making dissenting students uncomfortable.

These conclusions have serious real-world implications when combined with pre-existing literature. First, it can be concluded that as a whole, political discourse in the classroom cannot happen quite yet, despite the fact that Camp and Journell both laid out the positive aspects of political discourse and suggested that there is no validity to the theory of indoctrination within the classroom setting (Camp 2020) (Journell, *Making a Case*). This is due to the fact that a majority of teachers have been proven to not be ready to lead inclusive political discourse, as there was a high association between discomfort and disagreement with the beliefs of the teacher. Additionally, many students expressed discomfort with the degree to which their teacher was involved in political discussions, and with how they behaved. However, the other implication is that society could be ready in the near future if a series of strategies are taught to educators through teacher education programs. This can be synthesized because students are not made uncomfortable by the discussion of politics, but rather by the polarizing or offensive language their teacher uses. In particular, many of the strategies that Diana Hess explores could be used to improve political discourse in the classroom, such as cultural appropriation and orienting the discussion towards students (Hess 2022). This gives hope for students in the near future to reap the benefits of political discourse.

Although the researcher uncovered a clear correlation between discomfort and the level of consensus with the beliefs of an educator, there were several limitations that existed in this study. First, students were expected to report their comfort levels in the classroom through a series of seven questions asking their opinion on several factors in the classroom with likert-scale fashioned answer choices. According to Robert Rosenman, a professor at the Washington State University School of Economic Sciences, self-reporting bias "occurs when individuals offer self-assessed measures," with reasons "ranging from a misunderstanding of what a proper measurement is to social-desirability bias" (Rosenman et. al 2011). In this case, the main concern would be social desirability bias, which Rosenman asserts can occur even if it is clear that the results are anonymous, as was made clear with this specific survey. Due to the fact that as a result of social-desirability bias, respondents rate their experiences higher than reality, in the instance of this survey, self-reporting bias would have resulted in higher scores on the Comfortability in Learning Scale, and lower correlations between discomfort in the classroom and political discourse. Another limitation was the fact that in the high school that this study was performed, there is a heavy liberal lean, as evidenced by the fact that the township has not voted for a republican presidential candidate in the last twenty years. As a result of this lean, the researcher was not able to ensure that conservatives were adequately represented as respondents. This uneven political distribution deviates from the political demographics of the country as a whole, which is split even. This could have had an effect on scores of the Comfortability in Learning Scale, as Mario F. Mendez, a behavior neurologist, reports that conservatives tend to be perceived as more powerful than liberals, who tend to be more timid (Mendez 2017). From this, there is a strong possibility that liberals inherently express higher rates of discomfort, as they are more likely to feel overpowered and intimidated by an educator. Both of these factors had the possibility to affect scores on the Comfortability in Learning Scale, and in turn, the correlation between discomfort and political discourse.

While valuable insight was gathered towards the discussion of political discourse in the classroom, future research could focus on the comfort of students during political discourse in the presence of their peers. While this study focused mainly on the comfort levels of students in the classroom with an educator leading the political discussion, it would be significant to determine if students feel uncomfortable when they are in an environment without an educator, and just amongst their peers. Additionally, further research could focus on the comfort levels of students during political discourse in an evenly divided classroom in terms of political beliefs. As mentioned, a major limitation of this study was the overrepresentation of liberal students. Due to the neurological differences between conservatives and liberals, as conservatives tend to be more outspoken and therefore comfortable in polarizing settings, it is possible that liberals could have accounted for variation in the Comfortability in Learning Scale scores. If political discourse

in an evenly divided classroom was explored, this limitation would be removed and a more definite answer to the question of how political discourse affects comfort could be revealed.

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