



Tiptoeing Through the Politics of 2020

By Wes Eby, Global Representative

This is an election year. No one can deny it unless you have been living in a bubble, totally isolated from our world. Whether by the TV or on your preferred electronic device, everyone is confronted with the reality that 2020 poses one of the most controversial elections in our nation's long history.

As a teacher—and more importantly, as a Christian teacher—how do you handle political controversy? How do you deal with this challenge when you hear strong “voices” in the teacher's lounge or in the school hallways or in the parking lot? What do you do when your students ask questions, even provocative ones, that you really prefer not to answer? Do you find yourself tiptoeing through rhetoric and controversy, even with people you love and respect in your job as a teacher? Honest questions. Valid questions. Not-always-easy-to-answer questions.

Seventh Graders Can Be Political

I had to answer these questions from a sharp group of seventh graders many years ago in my third year as a teacher. The location? South Alabama. The election? 1960: Nixon vs. Kennedy. While the political atmosphere was not as volatile as the current one in 2020, it was intense, even heated. The issue? Religion. John F. Kennedy came from a Roman Catholic background. The rhetoric, which often included hyperbole, spread fear into the hearts of the folks living in the Bible Belt, the wide geographical area that swept across the Southeast into middle America where evangelical Protestants were the majority. The opposition stirred up the loyal churchgoing, conservative believers with such threats that the

Catholics would run the USA and the Pope would be the de facto president. I heard plenty of “hate speech” in those days, and my feet became sore from the tiptoeing.

On the other hand, the majority of the people in Alabama at that time were registered Democrats. The ones who were evangelical Christians were torn between their loyalty to the party or their faith. Naturally, politics became an everyday subject of conversation in the homes of the students, who then brought their thoughts and questions, primarily from their parents, to the classroom. My challenge was to determine the best way to deal with their queries and issues.

A Mock Election

My ultimate decision was twofold: (1) stay neutral; (2) hold a presidential mock election. After I mentioned the latter to the class, the students became excited. Two opposing sides developed quickly. The Republicans and Democrats organized their campaigns. Soon the classroom became a political arena, a hubbub of activity . . . making posters and signs . . . decorating with red, white, and blue . . . conferring in huddles and meetings . . . recruiting parental assistance . . . planning the election details. Each “party” selected a person to represent its candidate: Kennedy or Nixon. The candidates prepared and rehearsed their speeches.

Election day, November 8, arrived. At the scheduled time for the big vote, a few parents showed up to lend support to their children. “Mr. Nixon” and “Mr. Kennedy,” attired in slacks, white shirt, tie, and jacket, looked quite presidential. Each candidate gave an impassioned plea for their classmates’ votes, mentioning the key issues of the day—religion and the Cold War. The students, one by one, then walked into our large walk-in closet (known as a cloak room) to cast a secret ballot. We waited, eagerly anticipating the results.

The Election Results

Then the big announcement came: Nixon was the victor, winning by a narrow vote. (Kennedy won the popular vote in Alabama by 14 percent while winning the national popular vote narrowly by less than .2 percent.) The students cheered and applauded. They congratulated the two candidates for running a great race. Refreshments added to the celebration and festivities.

I loved what this class did. They taught this novice teacher the importance of becoming involved in politics and how to do it without being confrontational. There were no fights or mudslinging throughout this classroom political event.

Recommendations

An instructional activity such as this can be as simple or as elaborate as desired, depending on the level of the students. But from this experience and others over the years in the classroom, I will offer five

recommendations.

1. Establish ground rules at the beginning. After God used Moses to give the Israelites the Ten Commandments, He saw that His people needed other rules or laws or principles by which to live. God said to His faithful servant: *“These are other rules and guiding principles that you must present to the Israelites”* (Exodus 21:1, VOICE). The same is true in the classroom. While you have already established rules as part of classroom management and organization, engaging in political debate requires some additional rules or guiding principles. The students need to know exactly what their limits are—what they can and cannot do. Keep the rules as positive as possible. Whether a fifth-grade or a college class, the ground rules will vary according to the maturity of the students. Once the rules are in place, be consistent in applying them.

2. Notify the parents. Again, this would depend on the students’ level. But I believe parents in elementary, middle school, and high school should know that you are dealing with politics as part of your instruction. In fact, my experience has been that most parents desire to know. I like the translation of this proverb: *“Everyone with good sense wants to learn”* (Proverbs 18:15, CEV). Parents have good sense and are eager to know what their children are learning and what they are being exposed to. By informing the parents, you can gain their support and prevent possible problems. This was certainly true for me in the above scenario. It was a wise decision I never regretted. How neat to have the parents present so they could observe exactly what their students were doing and how engaged and excited they were in the learning process.

3. Remain neutral. It would be so easy to become embroiled in arguments, which must be avoided at all costs. In the classroom, teachers lose credibility once they become partisan and step aside from neutrality. Above all, keep your cool. Allow the students to debate the issues in a positive way. In fact, encourage it. They need to learn how to listen to different viewpoints and choose for themselves what they believe and how they will vote. This is healthy and fun learning. I love the advice of this proverb: *“A wise **teacher** makes learning a joy”* (Proverbs 15:2a, LB, emphasis added). And, yes, this requires tiptoeing at times, but put on your most comfortable footwear and delight in the learner’s growth and engagement in the political process.

4. Deal with facts only. I realize this is difficult and may seem impossible on the surface. Today, people receive a plethora of information on their devices, pounding the brains with what appears to be truth. Students now rely on their hand-held computers (also known as cell phones, tablets, etc.) for communication. There is no way they can avoid this deluge of information, some of it worthless, some of it false. Guide the students in learning how to sort fact from fiction. Teach critical thinking skills. Use sources that deal with fact and fiction. One that I often use is www.truthvsfiction.com. Yet I encourage teachers to use more than one source. A search engine can easily help you find those sites. For example, try typing in “websites that help children determine fact from fiction.” The Word of God speaks to this issue: *“Truthful words stand the test of time, but lies are soon exposed”* (Proverbs 12:19, NLT).

5. **Be fair to all.** Do I even need to say this? Probably not. But I add it here as a vital reminder for every teacher. Certain students, because of their personality, academic excellence, or model behavior, can capture a teacher's attention. When moderating open discussion about politics in the classroom, teachers should carefully avoid any hint that certain students' opinions are more valued or accepted. At the same time, the teacher should help students realize when their expressed opinions violate biblical principles and Christian values. This must be dealt with judiciously

I trust my experience has been helpful as you wade into the elections of November 2020. While I am now retired and no longer a classroom teacher, here is my declaration: "If I were in that important role today, I would take my own advice." Any success was due to trial and error (learning from mistakes) and the grace and help from the Lord. I cannot imagine facing the responsibilities of teaching today without the assurance of God's presence and guidance. The Psalmist David says it so well: *"Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and **teach** me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long"* (Psalm 25:4-5, NIV, emphasis added).

Now breathe this prayer: "Lord, teach me how to tiptoe!"

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