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Want to Teach about SuperPACs? What We Can Learn from Stephen Colbert

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Abstract

The emergence of the SuperPACs in American politics is a major issue in the current election. SuperPACs, and the media campaigns they fund, also present a major challenge for media and democratic education. This article explores the issues surrounding SuperPACs and the rise of media in elections and politics in general, and presents some starting points for addressing these challenges in K-12 school curriculum and policy. Key areas addressed include: the need for more issues - centered and deliberative curriculum that engage students in examining the complexities of contemporary issues; a focus on media literacy in the social studies curriculum; and the potential for using popular culture, such as Stephen Colbert's segments on SuperPACs, to engage students in current debates.

Keywords

social studies education, media education, popular culture

There is a lack of media education and student engagement with controversial issues in American schools. This seems to run concurrently with a lack of in-depth curricula and teaching about the dynamic nature of our political system in general and the evolving issues in this country.

The creation of an informed citizenry that questions the status quo, as envisioned by some like Thomas Jefferson, seems to have been replaced by memorizing facts and figures needed for a high stakes test.

Dissent, questioning, and strategizing solutions to ill-structured problems are fundamental goals of educators to prepare citizens to participate in a democracy and engage in a media rich world. These are also knowledge and processes that cannot easily be measured on a selected-response exam.

This current context of education, and social studies education in particular, has led to a narrowing of the curriculum with a focus on static sets of facts as the measured outcomes, and an overall reduction of teaching social studies in those states that do not require end of course or graduation high stakes social studies assessments (Au, 2009).

As a result of the focus on tested subjects teachers have less control over what they can teach and, in some cases, how they are able to engage students in the classroom.

Similarly, media education is also marginalized, often placed in the English Language Arts curriculum, in isolated moments in the social studies curriculum, or not addressed at all, as it is a skill that is difficult to assess using a selected response (multiple-choice) exam. This is especially problematic as students likely encounter important issues of

the day, such as the ongoing war in Afghanistan and the upcoming presidential election, superficially as a current event and not through sustained and engaged inquiry and deliberation. It is difficult for our future citizens to question the status quo of current politics if they do not study it deeply.

SuperPAC

Another timely current issue not discussed in meaningful ways in social studies classes, and the one that I focus on in this article, is the rise of the “SuperPAC” in American politics.

These SuperPACs, which have emerged from the US Supreme Court *Citizen’s United* ruling, present a major challenge for voters and the US political system. Despite the importance of this issue, it is lightly covered on the nightly news, and is likely not presented as an issue of importance in social studies classrooms.

The US Supreme Court decision, officially known as *Citizen’s United v. Federal Election Commission* (FEC) (2009), poses a major challenge to our democratic processes and institutions and amplifies the need for media and democratic education.

In *Citizen’s*, the court ruled that corporations have the rights of citizens during an election and that money is akin to speech and should not be limited. This enables corporations, unions, and other organizations or wealthy individuals to support issues campaigns and candidates with unlimited funds through “SuperPACs” or super political action committees (501(c)(4)) with less transparency than traditional donations.

The impact of the *Citizen’s* ruling is omnipresent in the current presidential election, as a small group of wealthy individuals is able to sustain candidates and attempt to influence the electorate through broadcasting

advertisements and documentary films.

Candidates and their partner SuperPACs spent at least twenty million dollars in the Florida Republican primary alone, and Newt Gingrich's campaign was kept alive through millions of dollars provided by one long-term supporter to the "Winning our Future" SuperPAC (Confessore, 2012).

Not just national elections are being influenced by wealthy individuals' donations to these SuperPACs. Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker was able to raise approximately twenty-five million dollars to fight against his recall from office, with two thirds of this money coming from donors outside of the state (Kaufman, May 24, 2012).

This is unprecedented money for a gubernatorial race in the state and on par with the fundraising of some presidential candidates.

Citizen's is a complex ruling that has led to complex and serious implications for our political system. Further, this issue has been largely absent from the mainstream media and the high school social studies curricula.

Most K-12 social studies curricula focus on a theoretical or "textbook version" of the election processes and devotes a little time to election advertising.

The curriculum and textbooks often do not provide the materials or experiences necessary to equip students with the critical media literacy skills; these are skills needed to separate fact from fiction or to develop an understanding of the dynamic ways in which special interest groups and candidates use the media in the 21st century.

Further, students often view this theoretical textbook version of our current elections system as dull and irrelevant. The

SuperPAC topic is perfect for engaging students in deliberation and media literacy activities.

Issue-Oriented Curriculum

Teachers should use contemporary issues to engage students in the content and concepts of the curriculum. The study of issues can make content more relevant and help to model to students one aspect of how to become an informed citizen.

Teachers could use the issues that arise from the *Citizen's* case to engage students in examining the history and policies of election finance and the role of the media in politics as part of a civics or government course.

Or, *Citizen's* could be used as a relevant entrée to examine the history of elections and the influence of money in such comparison cases as the Tammany Hall era of corruption in politics in New York and the role of 19th century industrialists who attempted to sway the political process for personal gain.

Aspects of the *Citizen's* case and aftermath could serve as examples to teach concepts such as political speech and electioneering communication, or to investigate how the ruling in the case reflects particular political ideologies.

Resources for SuperPACs

Given the difficulties of finding curriculum to teach about current events and issues, and the lag that occurs as formal curriculum producers develop materials, where can teachers go to find information and resources to help teach about SuperPACs and the *Citizen's* ruling?

Although there has been a recent rise in the mainstream media coverage of SuperPACs, the best source for learning and even teaching about the ramifications of *Citizen's* may be Stephen Colbert, comedian and faux news

anchor. Colbert is not in the business of education, at least not in the traditional sense.

However, he and fake news counterpart Jon Stewart might serve a more powerful role than the “real” news they satire by exposing the technical functions and severe implications of *Citizen’s*. His show, *The Colbert Report*, is also extremely popular with young demographics.

In 2011 Colbert introduced Trevor Potter, “former FEC Chair, general counsel to John McCain’s 2008 presidential campaign, and my personal lawyer,” to announce and explain the formation of his Colbert SuperPAC, “*Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow*” (Moreschi, March 30, 2011).

This episode was one of a number of stunts used to illustrate the powerful impact of the *Citizen’s* ruling and the lack of regulation and transparency in campaign financing that has resulted. His “Heroes,” primarily audience members, have donated over a million dollars,

and several days before the Iowa Republican Caucuses his SuperPAC ran its first ads.

In later episodes, Colbert handed over control of the SuperPAC to Stewart so that he could explore running for “the President of the United States of South Carolina,” with Potter again explaining the technicalities. This clip illustrates that Stewart, despite working in the same building and being a business partner of Colbert’s, could legally run the SuperPAC without “coordinating” with the candidate.

In a later clip Potter explained that Colbert does not need to disclose any of his donors to the IRS until after the 2012 election under current law for 501(c)(4) “social welfare organizations.” This clip highlights the more limited transparency under the post-*Citizen’s* election campaign.

The clips with Mr. Potter get to the heart of the issue and are richly informative (See Table 1 for a list of linked clips from the *Colbert Report* related to SuperPACs).

Table 1

Colbert Report Selected SuperPAC Episodes

Date	Clip Description	Link (copy and paste into web browser)
March 30, 2011	Potter sets up ColbertPAC.	http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/379369/march-30-2011/colbert-pac---trevor-potter
May 11, 2011	Potter files an exemption so Colbert can talk about his PAC on air.	http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/386086/may-11-2011/corp-constituency---trevor-potter
May 31, 2011	Colbert files for a SuperPAC.	http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/386467/may-16-2011/stephen-files-super-pac-request
September 29, 2011	Potter helps Colbert set up a shell corporation to make SuperPAC donations secret.	http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/398531/september-29-2011/colbert-super-pac---trevor-potter---stephen-s-shell-corporation
January 12, 2012	Colbert transfers control of his SuperPAC to Stewart.	http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/405889/january-12-2012/indecision-2012---colbert-super-pac---coordination-resolution-with-jon-stewart
April 3, 2012	Potter explains that Colbert's SuperPAC does not need to disclose donors with the IRS until after the election.	http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/411674/april-03-2012/colbert-super-pac-shh----501c4-disclosure---trevor-potter

These clips also present a perspective on *Citizen's* and SuperPACs that are an alternative to the “horse race” coverage of national polls and fundraising tallies that too often dominate national news coverage of elections, coverage that does not help viewer-citizens to really understand the issues in the election or to reflect on the powerful role that this media framing has on the national political stage.

Instead of reporting how much money candidates and their surrogate SuperPACs raise, Colbert and Potter provided an insider view as to how these organizations can operate within existing policies legally in ways that also strike many Americans as being antithetical to our beliefs about fair elections and political speech.

I am not necessarily advocating that we should start showing the *Colbert Report* in middle school or high school civics classrooms. Much of the content is inappropriate for young people, and teachers would have a hard time justifying viewing clips that are more politically partisan or vulgar in nature.

Teachers need to be thoughtful about the curriculum and media that enter their classrooms. Being thoughtful, however, does not mean banishing popular culture and political satire from the classroom, as we know this is the way that many young people learn about politics and political issues.

Media and Issues

Instead, we need to think about what role media such as the *Colbert Report*, *The Daily Show*, or even animated but politically savvy series like *The Simpsons* might play in teaching students media interpretation and the concept of political satire and social criticism. Older series, such as the *Twilight Zone*, serve as historical artifacts of this same concept and reflect issues from the early Cold War era.

The use of media to raise and examine the coverage and representation of issues can help students learn important concepts from the social studies.

Similarly, teachers and parents could learn several things from Colbert's election coverage: 1) democracies like ours are ever evolving, dynamic systems and need to be taught as such, even with the complexities they present; 2) young people need to be engaged in controversial issues in an informed way, and teachers need to take advantage of media that can help them engage students actively in these important current debates; and 3) humor can be a powerful and motivating medium for engaging in important content, especially if the humor is not directed at one political group or another but instead functions to illustrate the issue itself with the goal of understanding and hopefully advocating change.

Too often teachers select videos or documentary films that present a particular perspective, often matching their own views, but show them as unquestionable fact (Stoddard, 2010). These are often not radical films but films that are approved by school administration or follow district policy.

Teachers, students, and the public in general tend to selectively view politically related media and select out what they want to see or what supports their existing beliefs (LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009; Stoddard, 2009). This is largely the result of the way that we view media, and documentary style media in particular, as a form of knowledge that is objective instead of as a value driven perspective supported by evidence (Stoddard, 2013).

School administrators and boards often rely heavily on network web filters or the use of educational video databases such as

Discovery Streaming to limit access to media deemed inappropriate for the classroom. These policies, however, may increase and not decrease the beliefs of teachers and students that media from sources such as Discovery are objective or more legitimate and can be used without question or critique.

Instead, we should focus on developing students' abilities to critically view and critique media, thus also promoting students' understanding of media as constructed knowledge that contains particular viewpoints (Buckingham, 2000; Hess, 2007).

In essence, the *Colbert* clips and SuperPAC produced media are great mediums for both learning concepts and content as well as for developing skills in media literacy and deliberation.

Conclusion

The *Citizen's United* ruling and rise of the SuperPACs provides opportunities for social studies teachers to help students develop skills in engaging in discussions of controversial issues and in critical media literacy.

Having students "vote" in class or fill out voter registration cards are useful activities for training the next generation of citizens.

In today's media saturated political environment however, we also need to go a step further by asking students to research, analyze, and engage in deliberations of the issues surrounding the elections, and to gain an understanding of how campaigns use media to sway voters.

Deliberations engage students in viewing an issue from different perspectives and using evidence to take or support a position, key habits and skills for effective citizenship (Hess, 2009).

The development of media literacy includes both teaching explicit skills in decoding and analyzing the veracity of media as well as examining the media within a particular historical, social, and political context (Hoechsmann & Poyntz, 2012).

For example, media produced by SuperPACs could be examined in a dynamic way by asking students to research the production of the media: (a) Who made it and who paid for it?; (b) What is the purpose of the media?; (c) Who is the intended audience and what is the intended message?; (d) How have audiences responded to the media?; (e) How has the news media and other groups responded?; and (f) How does the media reflect particular cultural influences in society? (Adapted from Hoechsmann & Poyntz, 2012, p. 66).

Students should then produce media of their own and advocate for evidence-based positions that emerge out of these activities, either about a particular issue or about how they view the current role of SuperPACs or the role of media in politics.

School administrators, curriculum directors, and teachers should consider how popular media may serve as sources for engaging students in important and relevant debates in ways that will benefit them as 21st century citizens. Thoughtful policies and curriculum should be constructed that incorporate 21st century media analysis and production skills with content that is relevant and vital for an informed citizenry.

Teachers should be held accountable for their media and curricular choices, but must be given leeway to use media in their classes to engage students in constructive activities focused on developing these knowledge and skills necessary for the future.

Shows like the *Colbert Report* should not be treated as trustworthy news sources, but sometimes they get to the heart of an issue in a

way that provides entrée to teaching concepts such as advocacy, propaganda, objectivity, and “truthiness” like no other sources can.

Author Biography

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