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Table of Contents

Research

Rebecca G.W. Mueller, *A Conversation Too Late: An Examination of Early-Career Teachers' Experiences with New Social Studies Standards* 1

Practice

James D. Nunez, *An Egalitarian Path To and From the 1619 Project* 16

Jeremiah Clabough, *Civic Agency: The Lifeblood of a Healthy U.S. Democracy* 34

Ricky Mullins, *A Government for Distracted People Isn't by Distracted People: Re-Examining Technology Use in Terms of Active Citizenship* 45

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Civic Agency: The Lifeblood of a Healthy U.S. Democracy

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Abstract

In this article, I discuss an activity for the middle grades social studies classroom exploring the civic agency used by Hubert Humphrey to cause change at the 1948 Democratic National Convention. First, a brief historical overview of the Civil Rights Movement after World War II is provided. Then, the article transitions to give a brief synopsis of best teaching practices in civic education. Finally, an activity is focused on where middle grades students analyze the impact of Hubert Humphrey's speech leading to a civil rights plank to the 1948 Democratic Party Platform. The steps and resources needed to implement this activity are provided.

Keywords: Agency; C3 Framework; civic thinking; Hubert Humphrey; civil rights issues

Many Americans are skeptical about the impact that their voices can have on the U.S. political discourse. They see how the political hyper-partisanship over the last 30 years has caused public policies to be stalled in Congress and resulted in issues being kicked down the road with little being accomplished (Dovere, 2021; Halperin & Heilemann, 2013; Kornacki, 2018). On top of this, public policies over the last 40 years have disproportionately benefited the most affluent in U.S. society, with poorer Americans' wages often being stagnant (Bartels, 2016; Frank, 2004; Halperin & Heilemann, 2013; Perlstein, 2020). Regardless of these issues, social studies teachers should design classroom activities to show middle school students that their voices can lead to change. This is a key part of undoing the quagmire of contemporary American politics. Middle school students need learning opportunities where they can see historical and contemporary Americans causing positive change. One ideal historical example that might be examined is Hubert Humphrey's speech at the 1948 Democratic National Convention resulting in a civil rights plank being added to the party platform.

In this article, I provide an activity for the middle school social studies classroom examining the agency used by Hubert Humphrey to cause change at the 1948 Democratic National Convention. First, a brief historical overview of the Civil Rights Movement in the aftermath of World War II is given. Then, the article shifts to focus on a synopsis of best teaching practices in civic education. Finally, an activity is discussed where middle school students examine the impact of Hubert Humphrey's speech leading to a civil rights plank to the

1948 Democratic Party Platform. The steps and resources needed to implement this activity are provided.

The Civil Rights Movement in the Aftermath of World War II

World War II reenergized the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. The hypocrisy that the United States would fight for freedom abroad while having racial segregation laws at home was a glaring contradiction. Returning African American servicemen were determined through the Double V campaign after winning the war for freedom abroad to win their freedoms at home. Unfortunately, the entrenched Jim Crow segregation laws in the South and de facto segregation laws throughout the United States would not be removed so easily (Caro, 2002; Mann, 1996; McCullough, 1992). It would take a coordinated effort by civil rights activists and U.S. politicians to address racial discrimination in the 1940's (Pietrusza, 2011).

The Democratic Party in the wake of World War II faced an existential identity crisis with the death of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. FDR had minimized in-fighting among factions within the Democratic Party until his death in 1945. The warring factions within the Democratic Party, civil rights activists and Southern segregationists, were bound to be at odds sooner than later (Caro, 2002; Mann, 1996; McCullough, 1992; Pietrusza, 2011). For President Truman, this came sooner when a relatively unknown Minneapolis mayor and Democratic Senate candidate in Minnesota at the time took the stage at the 1948 Democratic National Convention.

Hubert Horatio Humphrey built a reputation within Minnesota as an advocate for equality by working to curb anti-Semitism as the Mayor of Minneapolis (Humphrey, 1976; Solberg, 1984). Humphrey's speech at the 1948 Democratic National Convention went against the political grain of the time by advocating for the Democratic Party to support civil rights over states' rights. Despite potentially causing President Truman to lose the 1948 presidential election, Humphrey eloquently argued that the adoption of the civil rights plank was consistent with the values and principles espoused by the Democratic Party (Humphrey, 1976; Offner, 2018; Solberg, 1984). Humphrey's 10-minute speech was so moving that the Democratic Party added a civil rights plank to its party platform. Humphrey's short, but pivotal, speech played an important role with starting the Democratic Party on the path of advocating for civil rights.

Best Teaching Practices in Civic Education

Best teaching practices in civic education over the last decade have been largely defined by arguments found in the C3 Framework by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). The C3 Framework is focused on developing K-12 students' disciplinary thinking, literacy, and argumentation skills in the four core social studies disciplines: civics, economics, geography, and history (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2013; Swan & Griffin, 2013). Historical thinking has received much attention over the last several decades as scholars

have argued that social studies teachers need to help their students engage in the heuristics employed by historians to examine the root causes of issues, explore an historical figure's values, biases, and perspectives, and to contextualize the dynamics within a time period (Nokes, 2013; VanSledright, 2014; Wineburg et al., 2011). What has been underexplored is how to develop K-12 students' civic thinking skills.

Civic thinking does not mean the same thing as historical thinking. Civic thinking is focused on developing students' ability to apply the heuristics of a political scientist (Clabough, 2018; Journell, 2017; Percy & Clabough, 2020). For example, a political scientist can deconstruct arguments within presidential commercials designed to sway voters to support a candidate, analyze the strengths and weaknesses of public policy plans, and apply their agency to draw attention to and help address an issue in their community.

One of the most misunderstood parts of civic thinking is grasping the agency of democratic citizens. Agency is the idea that democratic citizens possess the power to impact and cause change in social, cultural, economic, and political institutions through their actions (Barton, 2012; Levstik & Barton, 2015). This is one of the fundamental tenets that U.S. democracy was built upon. The United States was born from colonists taking civic action to oppose Great Britain's policies that they believed curtailed their democratic rights and liberties. There are numerous functions within U.S. democracy that are dependent upon democratic citizens applying their agency. Some of these functions include democratic citizens electing officials to public office, voting to pass or reject issues on a local ballot, and leading rallies to draw attention to social injustices in their communities. The idea of leading rallies to draw attention and address social injustices is especially important because the U.S. has not lived up to the democratic principles outlined in our founding documents. Slavery in U.S. democracy is a contradiction but nonetheless existed at the founding of this country. Women were treated as second-class citizens, as they were denied the vote for much of U.S. history. Unfortunately, U.S. history is replete with numerous other examples and even in contemporary society where the United States has not lived up to its democratic principles and values. Therefore, social studies teachers need to design learning opportunities where students are equipped with the skills and knowledge to address issues in their community (Barton, 2012; Clabough, 2018; Journell, 2017).

In the next section, I provide an activity showing how Hubert Humphrey used his agency to impact the party platform at the 1948 Democratic National Convention. Humphrey's speech provides middle school students a straightforward example of how a citizen's agency leads to change. Students need to examine examples like this to see concrete situations where historical figures' actions caused positive change. The steps to implement the activity are discussed.

Exploring Hubert Humphrey's Agency to Advocate for Civil Rights Issues

First, students explore the push within the African American community during and after World War II to address civil rights issues. Handout 1 in the Appendix contains a flyer during

World War II explaining why African Americans should march for their rights. In pairs, students read Handout 1 and answer the following analysis prompts:

1. What is the meaning of A. Philip Randolph’s phrase, “Winning democracy for the Negro is winning the War for Democracy”? Use evidence to support your arguments.
2. Why would A. Philip Randolph use the phrases, “Free from want! Free from fear! Free from Jim Crow!” in the flyer? Use evidence from the flyer to support your arguments.

The examination of the flyer in Handout 1 and answering the two analysis prompts helps students to conceptualize arguments espoused by African Americans during and after World War II to end racial discrimination. Specifically, Randolph’s statements capture how World War II impacted civil rights activists’ thinking. It also shows how civil rights activists articulated the contradiction of fighting for democracy abroad while being denied basic democratic rights at home. As the flyer points, African Americans are “Americans too,” which means that they are entitled to the same basic rights and privileges that all democratic citizens enjoy.

After students read Handout 1 and answer the analysis prompts, there is a class discussion. Students add onto their responses based on peers’ comments. The teacher asks the following extension question. What was the purpose of creating this flyer? This extension question allows students to discuss how Randolph is trying to recruit other civil rights activists to take civic action to win the war for African Americans’ rights.

With this background knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement during and after World War II, students are ready to examine how Hubert Humphrey’s speech helped to serve as the impetus for the Democratic Party to assume a leadership role on civil rights issues. They read excerpts from Humphrey’s speech found in Handout 2 in the Appendix and answer the following analysis prompts. Students can also listen to the entirety of Humphrey’s speech at American rhetoric (<https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/hubertthumphrey1948dnc.html>).

1. How does Humphrey argue that advocating for civil rights issues is consistent with the identity of the Democratic Party? Use evidence from the speech excerpts to support your arguments.
2. One famous quote from Humphrey’s speech is that, “The time has arrived in America for the Democratic Party to get out of the shadow of states’ rights and to walk forthrightly into the bright sunshine of human rights.” How would this quote from Humphrey’s speech cause members of the Democratic Party to want to support civil rights issues?

The examination of the excerpts from Humphrey’s speech allows students to explore how he passionately argued for civil rights issues. The discussion of the first analysis prompt above helps students grasp how Humphrey aroused a sense of pride and purpose for the Democratic

Party to be true to its character and values by adding a civil rights plank to the party's 1948 platform. Students need learning opportunities like this to deconstruct a politician's public policies in order to see whether an elected official's policy solutions are in the best interests of their local communities (Journell, 2016; Oliver & Shaver, 1966).

After pairs read the excerpts from Humphrey's speech and answer the analysis prompts, there is another class discussion. Again, students add onto their responses based on peers' comments. Then, the teacher asks the following extension question. How can people's words cause others to take positive action? This discussion allows students to grasp how people's words can motivate others to take action to address unresolved issues (Levinson, 2012).

People's words can have ripple effects that lead to change in American society. In this case, Humphrey's words played an instrumental role in leading to the 1948 Democratic Party Platform containing a plank supporting civil rights. Students in the same groups as earlier read Handout 3 in the Appendix and answer the following analysis prompts. Handout 3 contains excerpts from the 1948 Democratic Party Platform that focus on civil rights issues that were discussed in large part due to Humphrey's speech.

1. How did Humphrey's arguments directly shape the wording of the Democratic Party platform on civil rights issues? Use evidence from Humphrey's speech and the 1948 Democratic Party platform to support your arguments.
2. Why is it so important that the Democratic Party platform contain this language about civil rights in 1948, and how can this section on civil rights impact future Democratic Party platforms?

The examination of Handout 3 allows students to see how Humphrey's speech impacted and shaped public policies with civil rights issues for the Democratic Party during the 1948 presidential election. In this way, students also develop the ability to corroborate similar arguments found across multiple sources (Nokes, 2013). This learning experience helps students grasp the importance of democratic citizens exercising their political voices by seeing the change that is possible (Journell, 2017).

After pairs complete this activity, hold another class discussion centered on how Humphrey's words impacted the civil rights plank for the 1948 Democratic Party Platform. The teacher can ask the following extension question. What does Humphrey's impact on civil rights issues say about how democratic citizens can impact their country? This extension question helps students use evidence across multiple sources to see how like Hubert Humphrey they can positively impact and cause change.

Finally, students use evidence from sources examined to complete the following summative writing prompt to summarize the impact that Humphrey's speech had on the Democratic Party and civil rights issues in the United States.

Assume the role of a newspaper writer in Philadelphia that is covering the 1948 Democratic National Convention. Summarize the civil rights plank in the 1948 Democratic National Convention along with how Hubert Humphrey's speech played a vital part in getting this plank added in a short newspaper story. Use evidence from primary sources examined in your newspaper story. Your newspaper story should be a half page in length.

Students draw on evidence from sources examined to complete this summative writing prompt. The steps of this activity are designed to allow students to grasp the cause and effect relationship of Humphrey's speech to the civil rights plank in the 1948 Democratic Party Platform. By completing this writing prompt, students are able to articulate the impact that an unknown politician at the time made on shaping public policies (Levinson & Levine, 2013; VanSledright, 2013).

Afterthoughts

Hubert Humphrey's speech and the addition of a civil rights plank to the 1948 Democratic Party Platform caused some Southern Democrats to form an independent party, the Dixiecrats. The Dixiecrats focused its campaign on states' rights to preserve segregation laws throughout the United States. Strom Thurmond was nominated as the presidential candidate for the Dixiecrats but was unsuccessful with President Harry Truman being reelected in 1948. The Dixiecrats returned to the Democratic Party after the 1948 presidential election, but this was a preview of what was to come as many Southerners left the Democratic Party with the passage of civil rights legislation in the 1960s (Feldman, 2015; Frederickson, 2001).

Mainly through Congress, Southern Democrats would use the 1950s to block progress on civil rights issues (Caro, 2002; Fite, 1991; Mann, 1996). Regardless of this fact, Hubert Humphrey's speech put the Democrats on a collision course with a political reckoning about civil rights issues that could not be avoided. This collision course would realign the U.S. political landscape and play an instrumental role in turning the South into a Republican stronghold (Carter, 2000; Perlstein, 2008). It is important to remind students that change does not just happen. Instead, change occurs as people use their agency to advocate for issues as generations continue to address the changing contours of a public issue (Clabough, 2021; Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

Middle school social studies teachers can create learning opportunities for their students to examine other lesser known historical and contemporary figures that influenced the outcome of events through not only their words but their actions. For example, students can examine Jumal Tarbir and others that protested for the employees of McDonalds to get a pay raise to \$15 an hour in 2016 and how this movement that started in New York City spread to other parts of the country (Sanders, 2018; Smith, 2016). This protest has been instrumental in drawing attention to the minimum wage and setting in motion President Biden signing an Executive

Order that federal contractors have to pay workers a \$15 an hour minimum wage (Clark, 2021; Wise, 2021). It also shows that change can occur not only by eloquent words as demonstrated by Hubert Humphrey but by being actively involved to challenge public policies as the McDonalds' workers were.

Agency to impact and change U.S. society is not reserved for the more affluent. All democratic citizens have agency, regardless of the color of their skin, income level, religious beliefs, gender, or sexual orientation. Middle school social studies teachers need to set up learning activities that allow their students to analyze issues and take part in developing a democratic society that is equitable to all its citizens (Ochoa-Becker, 1996). In order to accomplish this, middle school social studies teachers have to allow students to see historical and contemporary examples of how people's actions can cause change to help address public issues. After all, democratic citizens applying their agency is the lifeblood to ensure a functioning and healthy U.S. democracy.

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Appendix

Handout 1: Flyer *Why Should We March?*

WHY SHOULD WE MARCH?



15,000 Negroes Assembled at St. Louis, Missouri
 20,000 Negroes Assembled at Chicago, Illinois
 23,500 Negroes Assembled at New York City
 Millions of Negro Americans all Over This Great
 Land Claim the Right to be Free!

**FREE FROM WANT!
 FREE FROM FEAR!
 FREE FROM JIM CROW!**

*“Winning Democracy for the Negro is Winning the War
 for Democracy!” — A. Philip Randolph*

440

“Why Should We March?” March on Washington fliers, 1941. A. Philip Randolph Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (8-8) *Courtesy of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, Washington, D.C.*

Handout 2: Excerpts from Hubert Humphrey's 1948 Democratic National Convention Address

From the time of Thomas Jefferson, the time when that immortal American doctrine of individual rights, under just and fairly administered laws, the Democratic Party has tried hard to secure expanding freedoms for all citizens.

My friends, to those who say that we are rushing this issue of civil rights, I say to them we are 172 years late. To those who say that this civil-rights program is an infringement on states' rights, I say this: The time has arrived in America for the Democratic Party to get out of the shadow of states' rights and to walk forthrightly into the bright sunshine of human rights.

Hubert Humphrey, *1948 Democratic National Convention Address* (Philadelphia, PA: July 14, 1948).

Handout 3: Excerpts from 1948 Democratic Party Platform

The Democratic Party is responsible for the great civil rights gains made in recent years in eliminating unfair and illegal discrimination based on race, creed, or color.

The Democratic Party commits itself to continuing its efforts to eradicate all racial, religious, and economic discrimination.

We call upon the Congress to support our President in guaranteeing these basic and fundamental American Principles: (1) the right of full and equal political participation; (2) the right to equal opportunity of employment; (3) the right of security of person; (4) and the right of equal treatment in the service and defense of our nation.[1]

Democratic National Party, *1948 Democratic Party Platform* (Philadelphia, PA: July 12, 1948).