

How Educators Can Choose Controversial Political Issues Ethically

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▶ Identify the Type of Issue



01

Open Empirical

An issue that can be answered with facts, but a debate is still occurring because the evidence is conflicting or lacking.

Example: Are self-driving cars safer than traditional cars?

02

Settled Empirical

An issue that has been answered with facts.

Example: Are opioids addictive?

03

Open Political

A public-policy issue that has multiple, opposing viewpoints.

Example: Should the United States implement single-payer health care?

04

Settled Political

A public-policy issue that is no longer considered controversial or open for debate.

Example: Should women have the right to vote?

Caution



Don't present settled issues as open issues.



Don't confuse empirical and political issues.

▶ Consider the Criteria for Controversy



01

Behavioral

This criterion considers an issue controversial if sizeable numbers of people in society disagree on the issue regardless of empirical evidence.



Upside: This standard reflects what society thinks.



Downside: This standard may ignore empirical evidence. If sizable numbers of people believe in a conspiracy theory, despite the evidence, is it ethical to present this as a controversial issue?

02

Epistemic

This criterion considers an issue controversial if sizeable numbers of people in society disagree on the issue, and there are multiple, logically grounded viewpoints on the issue.



Upside: This standard reflects what society thinks while also considering reasonable, evidence-based viewpoints.



Downside: People disagree on what is considered reasonable, which suggests that educators should ignore controversial political issues if viewpoints are considered unreasonable.

03

Politically Authentic

This criterion considers an issue controversial if it is being debated in the political sphere (e.g., legislation, political campaigns, and protest movements).



Upside: This criterion addresses current issues being debated in the political sphere, which prepares students for life in a democracy.



Downside: Viewpoints on politically authentic issues are not always grounded in logic.

Verdict



Politically authentic criterion has the edge.

Source

Hess, Diana E., and Paula McAvoy. The Political Classroom, edited by Diana E. Hess, and Paula McAvoy, Taylor and Francis, 2014. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/demo-myproquest/detail.action?docID=1843517>.

More Information

SIRS Issues Researcher is a pro/con database that helps students understand today's controversial political issues with editorially selected analysis and opinions that cover the entire spectrum of viewpoints. Don't have SIRS Issues Researcher? Free trials are available.