

Teaching About Schooling: Integrating Education Politics into Political Science Curricula

Cameron J. Arnzen, *Brown University* (cameron_arnzen@brown.edu)
Chloe O'Neill, *Teachers College, Columbia University* (cbo2111@tc.columbia.edu)

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“Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship.”

~ U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren in *Brown v. Board* (1954)

Abstract

Education is a vital tenet of a democratic society, equipping citizens with the skills necessary to self-govern. Individuals also experience K12 education policy consistently throughout their lives, as a student, a parent, a taxpayer, and/or a community member. For these reasons, we argue for the inclusion of education politics in political science education. We highlight the importance of this integration for students, the discipline, and democratic ideals. We emphasize that education, a crucial public good, has always been a political institution, yet political science curricula often overlook this aspect. By incorporating education politics into political science courses, we believe we can enhance students' understanding of democratic processes, prepare them for various professional opportunities, and foster civic engagement. Our paper provides a framework for political science educators to integrate education politics into their curricula, illustrating the connections between education politics and key political science concepts.

Introduction

In a 2020 podcast, former White House Chief Strategist and Senior Counselor to President Donald Trump, Steve Bannon acknowledged the implicit connection between schools and society as he laid out a right-wing plan for social change. He noted, “The path to save the nation is very simple — it’s going to go through the school boards.” (Bannon 2020). In acknowledging the wide-spread frustration with local school board decisions regarding critical race theory and COVID-19 related protocols such as vaccine and mask mandates, Bannon made clear the sheer importance of the most local elections in America: school board elections. The waves of politicization and nationalization that have engulfed American education in recent years caught many off guard, however, education politics is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, as Bannon notes, schools play a pivotal role in democracy and politics whether that is widely recognized or not. In this paper, we argue that political science education should further incorporate the study of educational institutions and processes into its standard curriculum. Doing so has benefits for students and graduates, for the discipline of political science, and for democratic ideals.

Political scientists are increasingly interested in studying education. Some scholars cite as early as 1959 calls regarding the need for a beginning of a field of research for education politics (Kirst & Mosher 1969). In 2020, the American Political Science Association recognized the creation of Section 51: Education Politics & Policy. This organized section reflects the recent recognition of the importance of understanding schools and educational institutions alongside other political institutions and phenomena. However, while scholars are increasingly recognizing the value of studying education within political science, education has garnered little serious

attention within political science curricula. Few political science departments have courses on education politics.

This lack of focus on education politics is likely due, in part, to disciplinary “terfs” with departments of education. However, few departments of education, many of which focus exclusively on credentialing educators, offer courses on politics. Further, in many education spaces, politics is regarded as an inequitable and inefficient means of shaping education. Of course, the belief that education is too important to be political (Tyack 1974) is a political belief in itself that carries particular ideas of governance structures, and policy goals. To the extent that education is a public good with competing ideas and conceptions, it serves as a uniquely valuable focus to teach political science.

In this paper, we aim to provide instructors in political science with the foundations and scope of knowledge to incorporate education politics into political science curricula. **In the first section**, we detail how education is political, outlining both the ways in which education has always been political and how the politics of education have changed in recent decades. We extend the relevance of education politics in political science education to discuss the benefits to students, to education, and ultimately to democracy. **In the second section**, we define the scope and field of education politics, detailing how various associations, academic programs and education politics-specific courses approach the overlap between education and politics. This section serves to connect individuals interested in engaging with education politics with important groups engaging in this work as well as examples of this work. **In the third section**, we detail explicit connections between education politics and other topics of political science as a way to both document the broad relevance of education politics as well as provide on-ramps for individuals teaching in other subfields to incorporate education politics into their classes. **In the**

fourth section, we describe a novel course syllabus created for easy use and integration into existing departments and politics programs at the undergraduate level.

Why is Education Politics Important?

Education politics should be considered more important and relevant among political science curricula. From our cursory review of academic programs and courses, education has garnered relatively little attention in the political science curricula. Very few political science programs have a course that specifically focuses on the politics of education.¹ Similarly, few (if any) political science job postings in recent years have mentioned education politics as a desired substantive focus. We argue that this gap has major implications for society writ large, as students of politics often graduate having taken no courses about one of the largest public goods in society or even having generally thought about school as either a political and a governmental institution. As graduates of political science programs go on to work in various sectors and in numerous capacities, the lack of substantive interest and knowledge of education represents missed employment opportunities for graduates.

In response to democratic backsliding, many elected officials, policymakers, and scholars have increasingly turned to education as a source of civic engagement and democratic attitudes. The democratic purpose of public education is not new, though it is rarely explicitly covered in political science programs. Incorporating education politics and policy into political science curricula can both support traditional student learning outcomes for the discipline while also teaching democratic purposes and democratic norms.

¹ While many courses may discuss education in at least some capacity, it is difficult to assess the extent to which a course on bureaucratic theory, for example, may discuss K-12 schooling without access to a wide selection of syllabi.

How is Education Political?

Education is one of the largest governmental priorities in the United States. Each year the United States spends over \$850 billion dollars to educate roughly 44 million students in public schools spread across 13,000 school districts governed by locally elected school boards (NCES 2024). This spending, second only to the amount spent on national defense, comes from local (~45%), state (~45%), and federal (~10%) dollars (Chingos & Blagg 2017a; Chingos & Blagg 2017b) allocated through political processes along with various strings attached. The historically decentralized nature of U.S. schools, each with their own situations, often means that federal and state education policies clash with local realities in the friction of federalism (Manna 2006; Manna 2010). Similarly, because of the U.S. history of racial segregation, local school districts have diverse needs that are often unmet by state and federal policy. If one were to wonder about the challenges that America will face as it becomes a multiracial democracy, they need only look at increasingly diverse schools for guidance and cautions (Turner 2018). Additionally, while education has remained somewhat resistant to electoral and partisan politics (Henig 2013), this boundary has all but disappeared in recent years.

Education, as a political and public good, has always been a political institution, yet it is rarely considered alongside other American institutions in political science such as Congress, the Presidency, the Judiciary, or the bureaucracy in political science education. While courses on other institutions are often core features of political science curricula, it is rare to find even electives that focus on education politics. However, K12 education is a wide-reaching, complex political institution that shapes much of society as we know it. Alexis DeTocqueville, upon observing early America's institutions and culture, acknowledged the connection between America's system of schooling and political participation: "In the United States politics are the

end and aim of education; in Europe its principal object is to fit men for private life.”
(DeTocqueville 1835).

Similarly, Benjamin Franklin articulated his ideas of basic necessities for a thriving society, noting, “A Bible and a newspaper in every house, a good school in every district--all studied and appreciated as they merit--are the principal support of virtue, morality, and civil liberty.” (1778). Franklin specifically underscored the importance of a “good school” in every district being studied and appreciated. Countless philosophers, scholars, and policymakers have recognized the unique position and capacity of education throughout history. This ubiquitous recognition is evidenced by the fact that schools have been tasked with solving a variety of social problems including poverty, crime, and economic development.

In many ways, schools are the foundation of democracy (see, Dewey 1916; Gutmann 1987 for examples). This symbiotic relationship between democracy and education is essential for the success of a representative government, the very foundation of what many political scientists study. Despite how essential education is for democracy, education politics continue to receive little attention in the scope of political science education. In this paper, we make the case that education politics’ centrality to many of the political phenomena and processes the discipline cares about warrants further consideration in what departments teach.

Education can greatly benefit from being considered alongside political phenomena and political processes. To the extent that politics is “who gets what, when, and how,” (Lasswell 1936), teaching about education in political science can serve as a critical method of teaching democracy. Democratic education, which has been defined in innumerable ways (Brezicha et al. 2023), considers how we structure schools to cultivate citizens, often manifesting as scholarship on how schools teach civic education, model democratic processes, develop critical thinking

skills, or even instill classical liberal values. In a democracy, what constitutes education has to be decided through democratic processes. While schools do a lot for society, their civic mission has often been considered paramount throughout history (Rebell 2018). Because of the important role that education plays in shaping citizens, political science education can also better contribute to democracy by further examining education through a political lens.

The New Education Politics

In recent years, however, education's exceptionalism has begun to erode (Henig 2013; Shapiro et al. 2021; Houston 2024). Increasingly, mayors, governors, and presidents are carving out stances on education (Manna 2005; Henig 2013). Similarly, state legislatures have begun to draft and enact laws chipping away at historically-respected local control of curriculum, hiring, and firing decisions. Similarly, public attitudes toward schools diverge along partisan lines (Houston 2024) while the public increasingly wants state and federal levels to take action in education politics (Arnzen & Houston 2023). Further, local decisions regarding the COVID-19 Pandemic and the pitched debate over critical race theory in schools has thrust education politics into a national spotlight, resulting in heated school board meetings across the country, unparalleled education laws passed in state legislatures, and increasingly polarized attitudes regarding schools. Education, for better or worse, has become explicitly political.

While education has always been political, the discipline of political science has not entirely reflected this (Kirst & Moser 1969; Collins & Reckhow 2024). While many prominent political scientists indeed have studied and written about schools (E.G. Chubb & Moe 1998), schools and education governance has not received nearly as much focus as other American institutions. This is contrary to the fact that school boards are among the most numerous governance units in American politics, levy considerable taxes on local communities, and are

arguably the most accessible application of democracy to most citizens (Anzia 2013). The sheer centrality of education for American society begs the question why more political scientists aren't generally conversant in the educational institutions, their purposes, and their practices.

Education is one of the largest public goods in the U.S. and employs countless individuals in the policy side of education. Additionally, education is a primary function of government in every local, state, and national government across the world, providing countless opportunities across geography to graduates who might be interested in education politics. Additionally in the U.S., with the nationalization (Henig et al. 2019) and polarization of education politics (Houston 2024), it is increasingly the case that education needs individuals with knowledge of electoral politics, campaigns, elections, interest groups, bureaucracy, and public policy to bring evidence-based understandings of politics to bare on education.

The Value of Teaching Education Politics

Relevance for Students

The study of education politics is highly relevant for today's students, who increasingly seek to understand the practical applications of their education (APSA 2021; Purcell 2020). Political science as a discipline is facing declining interest among undergraduates, with the percentage of political science majors in the U.S. dropping from 2.11% in 2011 to 1.78% in 2020 (NCES 2024). In response, the 2021 Presidential Task Force on Rethinking Political Science Education (APSA 2021) emphasizes the need for curricula that resonate with students' experiences and aspirations.

Education politics is uniquely positioned to address these demands. All students have direct experience with education, whether as students themselves, as parents, or as community

members. This universal connection makes education politics an ideal entry point for engaging students with the broader implications of political science. Additionally, education politics is globally relevant, offering opportunities for students to explore international and comparative perspectives on education as a human right, public good, or vehicle for democratization.

Integrating education politics into political science curricula can help students see the direct impact of their studies on their lives and society. By understanding how educational policies are shaped, students gain tools to critically engage with one of the most far-reaching policy areas that they will continue to engage with as parents, taxpayers, community members, and citizens. This approach aligns with the broader educational goals of preparing students for a diverse and interconnected world, where education plays a central role in shaping societal outcomes.

The benefit of engaging education in political science curricula is not just because of the numerous political connections that education offers, but additionally from the accessibility and importance of education for democracy generally. Today's students are tomorrow's citizens, and in that vein, today's political science students are tomorrow's policymakers, researchers, and citizens.

Importance for Democracy

Incorporating education politics into political science education is also essential for fostering a well-rounded, civically engaged citizenry. Political science aims to promote democratic values and encourage active participation in civic life (APSA 2021). Understanding the politics of education deepens students' awareness of how educational systems are governed and empowers them to influence these systems to promote equity, access, and quality. Education politics—which heavily includes consideration of starkly different ideas about the purposes and

practices of schooling—also offers great opportunities to help students consider competing interests and perspectives. For example, education is a means of economic development, but it is also a means of instilling certain values and norms for society. In the face of limited resources and time, discussions about how we prioritize these aims within education politics can demonstrate the importance of democratic discourse and reasoning.

The study of education politics is vital for democracy because it also addresses the foundational role that education plays in shaping civic engagement and political participation. Schools are where future citizens first encounter the principles of democracy and civic responsibility. By focusing on education politics, political science departments can help students understand the broad impacts that K-12 institutions have on democratic engagement and the ways in which education policies influence political behavior broadly.

Moreover, centering education politics in the curriculum can stimulate greater interest and participation in local school politics, an area often marked by low engagement and significant democratic deficits (Kogan et al. 2018). Increased involvement in school board politics, the most numerous form of government in the U.S., can lead to more equitable and representative decision-making. Unlike state capitols, bureaucratic agencies, and federal entities, the locality of school boards offers more equitably opportunities for students of political science to engage with democracy. Attending school board meetings, as an assignment for example, can be a valuable and accessible learning experience for students. For students, engaging with school boards offers accessible opportunities to practice civic skills and apply their political science education in real-world settings, thereby enhancing their understanding of and commitment to democratic processes.

Integrating education politics into political science education not only enriches students' academic experience but also contributes to the health of democracy. By equipping students with the knowledge and skills to engage with education politics, political science departments can play a crucial role in developing informed citizens who are prepared to shape the future of democracy through active and meaningful participation.

What is Education Politics?

Associations & Groups

Two professional associations have standing groups that focus on the study of education politics: the American Education Research Association (AERA) and the American Political Science Association (APSA). However, founded in 1969, the Politics of Education Society (PES) predates both of these groups. The PES brought together scholars from various disciplines interested in the study of education as the result of political processes and phenomena. The group grew and became affiliated with the AERA in 1978, changing its name to the Politics of Education Association (PEA). With increased interest in the study of education politics, the PEA successfully lobbied the AERA to develop an entire division devoted to sharing research on education policy and politics. Division L is devoted to the study of education policy and politics and is considerably larger, however the PEA still exists as a smaller unit that specifically focuses on the politics of education.

The American Political Science Association, the largest professional association for political scientists with roughly 11,000 members in more than 100 countries (APSA 2024), also has an organized group (referred to as a section) devoted to the study of education politics.

Founded in 2020, this group brings together scholars and educators within political science who are interested in education politics and policy.

Table 1. Summary of Professional Associations for Education Politics			
<i>Association</i>	<i>Approach to Education Politics</i>	<i>Founded</i>	<i>Link</i>
American Educational Research Association (AERA) Division L: Educational Policy and Politics	“Division L stimulates informed and systematic analysis, research, evaluation, and debate about the education policy, including political, economic, legal, and fiscal issues.”	1987	https://www.aera.net/Division-L/Educational-Policy-Politics-L/Who-We-Are#gov
Political of Education Association (PEA)	“The AERA Politics of Education (PEA) SIG aims to foster and support the conduct, dissemination, discussion, and application of research on the political functions and outcomes of education at all levels.”	1969	https://www.aera.net/SIG152/Politics-of-Education
American Political Science Association (APSA) Section 51: Education Politics & Policy	“The purpose of the Education Politics and Policy Section is to bring together political scientists interested in the political causes and consequences of education policy and education systems; produce rigorous empirical and theoretical knowledge on these themes; and promote the application of that knowledge to critical debates on education.”	2020	https://members.apsanet.org/section51

As professional academic associations, they each focus on elevating and disseminating scholarly research on the politics of education in some manner. While there is no consistent or clear definition of education politics among these professional associations, they each prioritize broad understandings of the interplay between politics and education. In terms of longevity, education scholars have created specific spaces and dialogues for education politics nearly 50 years before political scientists, reflecting the general exceptionalism of education policy among other social and economic policies (Henig 2013). While political science had a recognized section for environmental politics in 1986, sexuality and politics in 2007, and health politics in 2008, it wasn’t until 2020 that the education politics and policy group was chartered (APSA 2024).

Existing Programs & Courses

Education politics is a broad concept that encapsulates a variety of subfields and sub-interests. These expansive connections make the consideration of education within the context of political science valuable for its broad scope. While there has been a dearth of programmatic focus on education politics in the United States, some exceptions exist. First, Teachers College, Columbia University, the top-ranked graduate school of education in the United States (U.S. News, 2024), has a program that specifically brings political science and education together to generate an understanding of education politics. In this lens, education politics can be defined as the study of governance institutions, political ideologies, and competing interests that exist both within and outside of the education community that impact the content, the form, and the function of schooling (Teachers College, Columbia University, 2024). In this approach, knowledge of education systems and processes benefits from explicit consideration of broader political dynamics that shape public policy.

The Teachers College program offers a Ph.D., an M.Ed. and an M.A. specifically in Politics & Education, and includes core courses on American Politics & Education; Politics of Centralization & Decentralization; Urban Politics & Education; Race, Ethnicity, and U.S. Educational Policy; and Educational Aciticism in New York City. Students in these programs are encouraged to additionally enroll in courses offered by the political science department at Columbia University to supplement their knowledge. The basic structure of the program is further outlined in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Politics & Education Program at Teachers College, Columbia University
<i>Degrees Offered:</i> Ph.D, M.Ed., M.A.
<i>Program Description:</i> The Politics and Education program serves students who wish to study the ways in which

governance institutions, political ideologies, and competing interests, both within and outside of the education community, influence the content, form, and functioning of schooling. Schools represent a powerful instrument for shaping the development of future generations of citizens and workers as well as an important source of jobs and investment in many communities. How do societies handle conflicting visions of what schools should and should not be doing, and what are the specific changes in political and governance processes that might facilitate better decision-making and policy implementation? Students will study in depth the ways power and politics affect and are affected by such issues as reform and innovation, centralization and decentralization within federal systems of governance, privatization and school choice, race and ethnicity, poverty and inequality, professionalization and bureaucratization, testing and accountability.

Faculty contributing to the program are drawn from throughout the College and possess research and teaching interests in urban, suburban, state and federal levels of school governance, as well as in cross-national and other comparative settings. The balance of control and cooperation, coalition building and competition, resistance and bargaining in each of these settings, as well as the central roles of power and agency in the political science discipline inform the perspectives of faculty and students in this program.

Course	Description
American Politics & Education	Introduction to the basic analytical categories of political science as they apply to the politics of education, including the influence of federal, state, and local governments in school policy-making, decentralization, school finance, and desegregation.
Politics of Centralization & Decentralization	Analyzes the political underpinnings and consequences of centralization versus decentralization at various levels of governance with special but not exclusive attention to educational decision-making.
Urban Politics and Education	Politics in the nation's largest cities with a particular focus on educational politics and policy.
Race, Ethnicity, and U.S. Educational Policy	Examination of the impact of race and ethnicity on the formation and implementation of policies such as desegregation, affirmative action, bilingual education, and choice.

Source: Teachers College, Columbia University
[\(https://www.tc.columbia.edu/education-policy-and-social-analysis/politics-and-education/\)](https://www.tc.columbia.edu/education-policy-and-social-analysis/politics-and-education/)

The unique structure of the Politics & Education program at Teachers College benefits from being housed within a school of education while drawing from the faculty expertise at Columbia University’s top-ranked Department of Political Science. Few other programs nationwide include education and politics to the extent of the program at Teachers College. New York University has an Educational Leadership, Politics, and Advocacy masters program, and Stanford University has a research focus on the politics of education. Notably, the programs that do exist are almost exclusively housed in schools of education. While this makes sense from a disciplinary perspective, as graduates of these schools and programs often go on to work in the

field of education in some capacity, these programs feature few courses specifically on politics and are less likely to supplement their curriculum with political science courses in general.

These programs are also often linked to particular philosophies of education: beliefs that often translate into education being considered more in isolation than in connection with other political phenomena. This school of thought often emphasizes that education is too important to be political as was the general belief of the Progressive Movement (Tyack 1974). Including education more within political science curricula would mean considering education among the complex policy priorities within public policy. This includes consideration of the tradeoffs of policy decisions about education and other social policies. Centering education within political science can also elevate the ways in which political phenomena such as elections, partisanship, and political institutions shape educational goals and educational policies.

While there are few programs that focus on education politics, a number of courses in both education and political science do. There are a variety of graduate-level courses on education politics in both schools of education and departments of political science. For example, the University of Pennsylvania has such a course exploring education as a form of political action and specifically considering school governance, societal trust and relationships with schools, nationwide socio-economic conditions and education through academic lens and research from education, political science, and political theory. George Mason University offers the Politics of American Education as an undergraduate course exploring the American political system through interactions across various levels and branches of the government with education. Several additional institutions and scholars are at the forefront of this intersection including Stanford University, Michigan State University, the University of Michigan, as well as many others, however did not explicitly include programs or coursework online.

Table 3. Sampling of Undergraduate Education Politics Courses

<i>Course</i>	<i>School</i>	<i>Discipline</i>	<i>Course Description</i>
Politics and Education	University of Pennsylvania	Political Science	How is education a form of political action? In this course we look at the governance of schools, the trust in them and their relations to socio-economic conditions in society, among other topics, using research in education, political science, and political theory.
Politics of American Education	George Mason University	Education	Focuses on the study of the American political system. Explores how interactions between various levels and branches of government affect education. Informs students studying the American political system and students interested in careers in education.
Education Politics & Policy	Pomona College	Political Science	Elementary and secondary schooling in the contemporary United States. The politics of school reform and conflicts among competing purposes, including schools as preparation for democratic citizenship, for economic productivity and for academic learning.
Politics & Public Education	Brown University	Education	Who exercises power in public education? This course examines the key institutions (e.g. school districts, states, Congress, and the courts) and actors (e.g. parents, teachers, interest groups, and the general public) shaping American K-12 education in order to understand recent policy trends and their consequences for students. Major policies discussed include school finance, textbook adoption, school accountability, and school choice. Particular attention is given to the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and debates over its reauthorization.
Politics & Education Courses	Michigan State University	Education	This course is an introduction to the complex and often contested field of politics and education. The purpose of the course is to provide students with an understanding of the forces that shape educational policy, with an emphasis on governance structures, stakeholders, public engagement, and current policy issues and political contexts.
The Politics of American Education	Harvard University	Political Science	This course examines historical and contemporary forces shaping American K-12 education policy. It also reviews research and commentary on contemporary issues: class size, fiscal policy, teacher recruitment, compensation and tenure, accountability, school vouchers, charter schools and digital learning.
Education & Politics	Davidson College	Political Science	This course examines the proper political and moral education of aspiring leaders in works by Plato, Machiavelli, and Shakespeare.
Education, Inequality, and Politics	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	Political Science	With a focus on the United States, Europe, and Latin America, discusses how education around the world profoundly affects individual economic mobility, social inequality, and national development, making it a high stakes policy area. Analyzes the contentiousness of education policy as government reformers, parents, business, NGOs, teacher unions, and other stakeholders vie for influence.
Politics of American Public Education	Lehman College	Political Science	The interaction among state, local, and national governments and interest groups, and their effect upon education policy, including the purposes, structure, funding, standards, curriculum, and student populations of public schools.
Comparative Education, Policy, and Politics	Lehman College	Political Science	Education policy and practice studied comparatively and from a social justice perspective.
Education Politics and Policy	University of North Texas	Political Science	In this course, we will explore some of the major policy debates that have shaped the American school system. There have long been heated debates about what the education system should look like in the United States. For example, some believe there should be more integration between black and white students, others think there should be more school choice, while still others believe curriculum is far too race conscious, to name just a few major education policy debates. In each of these debates, there are active, committed interest

			groups made up of parents, teachers, civil rights activists and others on both sides that believe in the correctness and effectiveness of their proposed solution.
Political Economy of Schooling	Michigan State University	Education	Impacts of education on economic outcomes; impacts of student socioeconomic status on school outcomes. Multiple goals of public education. Historical development of the public school system. Workplace skills, occupational structure, social mobility. School governance and education politics. Alternative policies to improve education outcomes.
Politics of Education	Davidson College	Political Science	The United States is constantly stalled in a never-ending debate over the role of governments in schools, colleges, and universities. This course will explore that debate by examining the political dimensions of the major educational issues of our time including, but not limited to, the school choice movement, gun violence in schools, sexual assault on university campuses, school desegregation, and policies related to college affordability. The course will draw on methodologies from political science and economics and will focus on power dynamics and political action in education and society. In addition to traditional writing assignments and assessments, students will produce a white paper for a state or local legislator, non-profit organization, or other policy-related client on an educational policy issue of interest.
Education Law & Policy	Notre Dame	Political Science	This course focuses on selected legal and policy issues related to K-12 education in the United States. A central theme is the intersection of K-12 schooling and the state, with a particular focus on Constitutional issues of religious freedom and establishment, student speech and privacy, parental choice, educational opportunity, and education reform trends such as charter schools and accountability measures. Questions examined over the course of the semester include: What are the most basic obligations of the state with regard to its regulation of K-12 education? What are the most basic rights of parents in this regard? In what ways does the 1st Amendment protect - and limit - the speech and privacy rights of K-12 schoolchildren? In what ways may the state accommodate K-12 schools with an explicitly religious character? What are the Constitutional requirements with regard to religious speech or expression within K-12 public schools? To what degree is the principle of equality manifest in the form of educational opportunity? How has this changed over time? In what ways have education reform trends such as charter schooling and increased accountability changed the policy landscape of K-12 education?
Political Philosophy of Education	Notre Dame	Political Science	From Plato's Republic to Rousseau's Emile to John Dewey's democracy and Education, political philosophers have understood that education is arguably the primary way that political and social values are articulated, realized and conveyed. In this course we will examine a variety of philosophies of education, ranging from ancient to contemporary authors, exploring contending ideas and ideals of education, with particular attention to higher education and implications for our own institution, the University of Notre Dame.
The Politics of Education Reform in a Comparative Perspective	Notre Dame	Political Science	Access to quality educational opportunity is arguably the most important vehicle for social mobility available to citizens in any country. A central goal of this course is to explore current debates and relevant policy developments surrounding increasing access to, and enhancing the quality of, K-12 education in a variety of national contexts. Though the cases studied will revolve mostly around education debates and reform experiences drawn from countries within the Americas, particularly revealing experiences from other national cases from regions outside the Americas will also at times be considered. The course is organized around two central conceptual dimensions: Educational Freedom, on the one hand, and Educational Autonomy, on the other. Along the first key dimension, Educational Freedom, a central question that will drive our exploration will be to what extent does the policy environment in a given country context extend, or limit, the range of educational options, or freedom, experienced by families and students to choose the school which they might find most appropriate. Along the second key dimension, Educational Autonomy, we will examine closely the degree to which the policy environment in a given country provides an environment of relative autonomy from the instructional and normative requirements of the state. The course will take advantage of rich contrasting comparisons within the hemisphere. We will explore, for example, the many ways in which the forces that shape educational policy in the United States, in general, and the resulting degrees of educational freedom and autonomy, contrasts sharply with the educational policies and

			goals in a country like Chile, and then explore how both the countries compare with the educational reform dynamics of other cases in the Americas, such as Mexico. The central normative question that underlies the course is the contention that gaping inequalities in the access enjoyed by different social classes to quality educational opportunity comprises one of the most pressing social justice issues of our times. The analyses undertaken within this course will place in high relief questions about the moral issues that face policymakers and other stakeholders within this critically important policy arena.
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Table 3 provides a sampling of undergraduate education politics courses² from various universities and the course descriptions. These course descriptions are those that were easily available on the university website, rather than the often more specific description on a syllabus.

Below are some themes emphasized in the undergraduate courses included:

- **Education Policy and Reform:** Many courses, such as those from George Mason University, Brown University, Pomona College, and Notre Dame, focus on how education policy is shaped by political institutions, interest groups, and societal forces. Topics like school finance, accountability, school choice, and educational reform (e.g., the No Child Left Behind Act) are commonly explored.
- **Governance and Power Structures:** Courses like those from Michigan State University, Lehman College, and Davidson College delve into the governance of education, examining the roles of different governmental levels and branches in shaping education policy. Power dynamics, including the influence of various stakeholders such as parents, teachers, and interest groups, are also emphasized.
- **Political Philosophy and Moral Education:** Some courses, particularly those from Davidson College and the College of the Holy Cross, explore the intersection of political philosophy and education. These courses often focus on the moral and political education of leaders, referencing historical and philosophical texts.

² This convenience sample was collected through a combination of google searches for “politics of education course” and “education politics course” as well as selective searching based on the authors’ knowledge of institutions with education politics courses. This list is, in no way, comprehensive, but rather is illustrative of the ways in which undergraduate curricula can and do center education politics.

- **Comparative and International Perspectives:** The courses from MIT, Lehman College, and Notre Dame include a comparative approach, analyzing education systems and policies across different countries. Themes of social inequality, economic mobility, and access to education are often central to these discussions.
- **Legal and Constitutional Issues:** Courses like those at Notre Dame focus on the legal and constitutional aspects of education, particularly K-12 education in the United States. Issues such as religious freedom, student rights, and state obligations in education are explored in depth.
- **Social Justice and Inequality:** Several courses, including those from MIT and Notre Dame, highlight the role of education in perpetuating or addressing social inequalities. The impact of education on economic mobility and the moral implications of educational policies are central themes.

These courses collectively provide a comprehensive look at the intersections between education, politics, policy, and society, addressing both domestic and international perspectives. The breadth of connections between education politics and the various subfields and topics within political science is discussed further in the following section.

Connections to Political Science Curricula

A less acknowledged benefit of considering education politics in the context of the study of politics is the plethora of connections between education politics and other established fields of study. Whether manifesting as a single education politics course or a case study in a course with a different focus, education politics coincides with central concepts in political science curricula. Considering that all students have both personal experience with and knowledge of the K-12 education systems in some capacity, incorporating education politics into the political

science curriculum can provide students with accessible and relevant considerations. In what follows, we detail several of the connections between education politics and established political science themes. While this list is far from exhaustive, it offers tangible and explicit connections between education politics and what is already being taught and studied in political science departments.

Table 4. Political Science and Education Politics Curricular Considerations		
<i>Political Science Topic</i>	<i>Education Politics Connections</i>	<i>Suggested Sources</i>
Privatization	Charter schools; private schools; democratic accountability; school choice; school governance	<i>American Public education and the Responsibility of Its Citizens</i> (Stitzlein 2017); <i>Between Public and Private</i> (Bulkely et al. 2010); <i>Spin Cycle: How Research Gets Used in Policy Debates: The Case of Charter Schools</i> (Henig 2008); <i>Rethinking School Choice: Limits of the Market Metaphor</i> (Henig 1995); <i>Politics, Markets and America's Schools</i> (Chubb & Moe 1990);
Bureaucracy	Centralization; education governance; institutions; policy implementation; federalism; administrative capacity; regulation of schools	<i>Reforming the Reform: Problems of Public Schooling in the American Welfare State</i> (Moffitt et al. 2023); <i>No Child Left Behind and the Transformation of Federal Education Policy, 1965-2005</i> (McGuinn, 2006); <i>The Ordeal of Equality: Did Federal Regulation Fix the Schools?</i> (Cohen & Moffitt 2010); <i>The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education</i> (Tyack, 1974);
Race	Segregation; inequality; institutional racism; civil rights; political organizing	<i>The Color of Civics: Civic Education for a Multiracial Democracy</i> (Nelsen 2023); <i>Closed for Democracy: How Mass School Closure Undermines the Citizenship of Black Americans</i> (Nuamah 2022); <i>Takeover: Race, Education, and American Democracy</i> (Morel 2018); <i>The Color of School Reform: Race, Politics, and the Challenge of Urban Education</i> (Henig et al. 1999)
American Political Development	Historical institutionalism; political history; political culture; political ideology; political behavior; institutions; federalism	<i>From the New Deal to the War on Schools: Race, Inequality, and the Rise of the Punitive Education State</i> (Moak 2022); <i>The Power of Black Excellence: HBCUs and the Fight for American Democracy</i> (Rose, 2024); <i>Degrees of inequality: How the politics of higher education sabotaged the American dream</i> (Mettler, 2014)
Civic Engagement	Civic education; political participation; civics curriculum; democracy and education	<i>The Color of Civics: Civic Education for a Multiracial Democracy</i> (Nelsen 2023); <i>Should School Boards Be in Charge? The Effects of Exposure to Participatory and Deliberative School Board Meetings</i> (Collins, 2021); <i>Flunking Democracy: Schools, Courts, and Civic Participation</i> (Rebell, 2018); <i>Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education</i> (Dewey, 1916)
Elections, Public Opinion, & Voting Behavior	School boards; curriculum wars; books bans; local politics; special interests	<i>Public Opinion and the Political Economy of Education Policy Around the World</i> (West and Woessmann 2021); <i>Teachers Versus the Public: What Americans Think About Their Schools and How to Fix Them</i> (Peterson et al. 2014); <i>Timing and Turnout: How Off-Cycle Elections Favor Organized Groups</i> (Anzia 2013); <i>Special Interest:</i>

		<i>Teachers Unions and America's Public Schools</i> (Moe 2011); <i>Ten Thousand Democracies: Politics and Public Opinion in America's School Districts</i> (Berkman & Plutzer 2005); <i>Besieged: School Boards and the Future of Education Politics</i> (Howell 2005)
Democratic Theory	Civic education; education as a public good	<i>Publicization: How Public and Private Interests Can Reinvent Education for the Common Good</i> (Gyrurko, 2024); <i>No Citizen Left Behind</i> (Levinson 2012); <i>The Democratic Dilemma of American Education: Out of Many, One?</i> (Shober 2012); <i>Democratic Education</i> (Gutmann 1987); <i>Democracy and Education</i> (Dewey 1916)
Federalism	Centralization; decentralization; nationalization; education funding	<i>Outside money in school board elections: The nationalization of education politics</i> (Henig et al. 2019); <i>The end of Exceptionalism in American Education: The Changing Politics of School Reform</i> (Henig 2013); <i>Collision Course: Federal Education Policy Meets State and Local Realities</i> (Manna 2011); <i>School's In: Federalism and the National Education Agenda</i> (Manna 2006)
Law and Courts	Plessy v. Ferguson; Brown v. Board; De facto segregation; education funding equity; No Child Left Behind	<i>An Education in Politics: The Origins and Evolution of no Child Left Behind</i> (Rhodes 2012); <i>From Schoolhouse to Courthouse: The Judiciary's Role in American Education</i> (Dunn & West 2010); <i>Schoolhouses, Courthouses, Statehouses</i> (Hanushek & Lindseth 2009); <i>Funding Public Schools: Politics and Policies</i> (Wong 1999)
Federal Government	Implementation; policy regimes; presidents' education policies; No Child Left Behind Act	"Education Policy Trump Style: The Administrative Presidency and Deference to States in ESSA Implementation" (Wong 2020); <i>No Child Left Behind and the Transformation of Federal Education Policy, 1965-2005</i> (McGuinn 2006); <i>School's In: Federalism and the National Education Agenda</i> (Manna 2006)
Public Policy	Social policy; implementation; school reform; teachers unions	<i>Reforming the Reform: Problems of Public Schooling in the American Welfare State</i> (Moffit et al. 2023); <i>Evidence, Politics, & Education Policy</i> (McDonnell & Weatherford 2020); <i>Beyond Standards: The Fragmentation of Education Governance the Promise of Curriculum Reform</i> (Polikoff 2021); <i>Special Interest: Teachers Unions and America's Public Schools</i> (Moe 2011)
State Politics and Policy	Common Core State Standards; curriculum reform; education funding; state governance structures; state education policy	<i>Beyond Standards: The Fragmentation of Education Governance the Promise of Curriculum Reform</i> (Polikoff 2021); <i>Evidence, Politics, & Education Policy</i> (McDonnell & Weatherford 2020); <i>Education, Equity and the States: How Variations in State Governance Make or Break Reform</i> (Dahill-Brown 2019); <i>Collision Course: Federal Education Policy Meets State and Local Realities</i> (Manna 2011)
Urban and Local Politics	School reform; mayoral control; school board politics; metropolitan fragmentation; suburbanization	<i>Outside Money in School Board Elections: The Nationalization of Education Politics</i> (Henig et al. 2019); <i>The End of Exceptionalism in American Education: The Changing Politics of School Reform</i> (Henig 2013); <i>Besieged: School Boards and the Future of Education Politics</i> (Howell 2005); <i>Spinning Wheels: The Politics of Urban School Reform</i> (Hess 1999); <i>City Limits</i> (Peterson 1981)

Politics & Education Course Example

Having studied and taught within the Politics and Education program at Teachers College, Columbia University, we also include and review a syllabus for a core course of the program: "American Politics & Education." This course, which was designed and tailored for masters students in education, would also be appropriate for advanced undergraduate students.³ The syllabus, included in an online appendix, provides a comprehensive framework that integrates key themes of political science with the study of education politics, highlighting the interconnectedness of these two fields. The course is structured to emphasize the role of education as a critical domain within American politics, where governance, policy-making, and ideological conflicts converge.

The course was structured to specifically center student voice in discussion. Generally, students came to class having read assigned readings that presented contrasting/differing views on political questions of education such as, "what is the purpose of education?" or "how do we recruit and retain good teachers?" Each course session would have a short political science-focused lecture from the instructor, followed by a socratic discussion from the students. Socratic discussion is an important way for students to engage with one another's ideas while also developing critical thinking skills. What was unique about this course - which also underscores the value of teaching education politics - is that all students had different and valuable experiences of their own within an education system. So the purpose of the readings and the lecture was to provide them with contrasting ideas and framing of some political questions of American education, while the subsequent discussion allowed them to engage more with one another's ideas and experiences.

³ This was a course designed and taught by Cameron Arnzen at Teachers College, Columbia University during the summer term. The course enrolled 18 students and took place over the span of May 2024 to July 2024.

The discussion was always concluded with a comment from the instructor along the lines of, “Teachers must go into the classroom tomorrow to educate their students. What have we changed? What needs to change? How does politics help or prevent us from this change?” These centralizing questions aimed to bring the conversation back to the idea of competing interests. This notion of competing interests and pluralism serve as a consistent foundation for the course (and the other courses in the Politics and Education program at Teachers College). Within American education, policy is set at various levels across the system of federalism, with different groups more/less organized at each level. This results in various collisions of interests and clashes of groups along spectrums absent in many other policy areas. Thus, the first two weeks of the course emphasize themes that Additional themes of the course are summarized below.

Theme 1: Governance and Federalism. The course addresses the institutional foundations of American education, with a focus on federalism and partisanship. This mirrors broader political science discussions on how power is distributed across different levels of government and how partisan politics shape policy decisions. By examining the role of federal, state, and local governments in education, the course elucidates the complexities of governance and the dynamic nature of political power in the United States.

Theme 2: Political Actors and Interest Groups. The syllabus includes an in-depth analysis of the various political actors involved in education, such as school boards, teachers' unions, and advocacy groups. This aligns with political science theories on organized interests and venue shopping, offering students an opportunity to explore how different stakeholders influence policy outcomes and how political strategies are employed in the education sector.

Theme 3: Democracy and Public Participation. The course's focus on democratic approaches to education and the role of public participation in schooling connects directly to

political science debates on democratic theory and citizen engagement. The exploration of how education systems can support or hinder democratic values offers students a practical understanding of the challenges and opportunities for fostering civic education and participatory governance.

Theme 4: Competing Values and Ideological Conflicts. Through topics such as LGBTQ+ inclusion, race, and racism in education, the course examines how competing values and ideological conflicts manifest in education policy. This is a critical area of study in political science, where the negotiation of public values and the management of social conflicts are central themes to what we study and teach. By analyzing these issues within the context of education, students can better understand the broader implications of cultural and ideological battles in American politics in addition to the immediacy of navigating these issues to produce education policy.

Theme 5: Policy Analysis and Impact. The final project component of the course encourages students to develop reports on contemporary education issues, similar to those produced by policy or advocacy organizations. This task not only reinforces their understanding of specific education policies but also equips them with the analytical skills necessary for evaluating the impact of political decisions—a key competency in political science.

By integrating the study of education politics into the political science curriculum, this course highlights the importance of education as a policy domain where political science theories and concepts can be easily and actively engaged. It demonstrates the value of examining education policy through a political lens, providing students with a richer, more nuanced understanding of both fields. This approach not only broadens the scope of political science but also prepares students to engage with democracy in different ways.

The assignment structure for this course was minimal, as the reading was heavier and the summer term provides less time for longer projects. However, the assignments could be easily amended into smaller units. The structure of lecture then discussion centered on a specific question also lends easily to intentional reflections. Additionally, this course would offer a variety of opportunities to engage students with high impact practices such as attending school board meetings, observing school board elections, and drafting policy projects.

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Appendix

The syllabus for the American Politics and Education course described above can be found at the following link:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/17ryzYKddC_wOPjugWe4AlMoJly3SsewQ/view?usp=sharing

Additional questions about the syllabus can be directed to the authors.