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Social Science Teachers' Comfort Teaching a Variety of Controversial Issues

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SOCIAL SCIENCE TEACHERS' COMFORT TEACHING A VARIETY OF
CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

by

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ABSTRACT

Inclusion of discussion concerning controversial issues has been a part of education in the United States since the advent of public education. Using an online, social media platform, the researcher investigated demographic, environmental, and personal characteristics of social science teachers to determine their willingness and comfort levels in discussing controversial issues in a social science classroom. This study of 91 participants included teachers' age, gender, race, educational history, religious and political beliefs, and the developed environment of each school to determine how teacher and school demographics influenced teachers' willingness and comfort levels discussing controversial issues in classrooms.

The independent variables accounted for over 50% of the variance in the teachers' willingness and almost 60% of variance in their comfort levels discussing controversial issues. Teachers' willingness to discuss controversial issues was statistically significant for both their personal political ideology, as well as the type of secondary school (middle or high school). Concerning a teacher's comfort in discussing controversial issues, the number of years teaching, whether or not teachers taught an Advanced Placement course, if they held an education degree, if they were Caucasian or African-American, their political ideologies, and their religious identities were all significant predictors in the model.

Results of this quantitative study using a multiple linear regression suggested that teachers' background influences how and what controversial topics are discussed in the classroom, a key component of socialization. The classroom, as a political space, models

democratic characteristics for students, and the teaching of discussion becomes a vital part

in the socialization of students for a democratic society.

To my father, Michael J. Bittman

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

According to the National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS] (2010), the

purpose of social science education is to "help young people to make informed and

reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic

society in an interdependent world" (p. 7). This purpose, and the subsequent 10 themes

provided by NCSS (2010) for social science educators, have been intended to address the

needs of a pluralistic society. In their 2016 position paper, NCSS argues that social science

education is the most effective area of knowledge to teach students how to navigate these

complexities and that the "vital task of preparing students to become citizens in a

democracy is complex" (NCSS, p. 180). In their position paper, they also state that

students should participate examining multiple viewpoints through discussion.

Additionally, students should be able to examine society, its history, and its effect on the

"other" (NCSS, 2016). In other words, the purpose of social science education has been to

assist with the development of young people's capacity to successfully exist, navigate, and

critically understand various cultures, communities, and environments (NCSS, 2010).

This definition encourages critical evaluation of the status quo and provides space

for multiple perspectives and discursive language (NCSS, 2016). Foucault (1997) called

on educators to open up space for resistance in the classroom, where students are allowed

to challenge and be challenged. By allowing students a space to challenge authority in the

classroom, teachers are modeling a process that is required for a constitutional democracy

(Foucault, 1997). Furthermore, showing students how to discuss the current socio-

economic order is necessary for the continual existence of a constitutional democracy (NCSS, 2016). Social science education should prepare students for alternative viewpoints and give students the skills to argue, debate, and discuss the merits of public policy, cultural mores, and their own experiences in a thoughtful and non-violent way (NCSS, 2016). Considering the NCSS is the preeminent national social studies education organization, their definition and focus on educating students towards democratic participation is the focus of this research study. The recent focus of civic mindedness in education is mirrored in NCSS's creation of the C3 Framework, a series of standards that are intended to prepare students for college, career, and civic life (NCSS, 2010). In order for students to develop a mature sense of judgment, they must be taught the art of criticism, which is especially vital in a democratic society (Olssen, 2005). Schools represent one of the most powerful socializing institutions in society, and social science education and classrooms provide an appropriate environment to teach citizenship skills (Kahne, Crow, & Lee, 2013).

<div align="center">Democratic Education</div>

The term, democratic education, has been consistently discussed throughout social science education literature (Biesta, 2015; Dewey, 1938; Evans, 2004; NCSS, 2010). Although the purpose of democratic education is the development of citizenship skills in students, any definition of democratic education must be broad enough to encompass a multicultural society (Biesta, 2007). Simultaneously, the definition needs to be narrow enough to address citizenship skills. The Institute for Democratic Education in America (IDEA) defines democratic education as an "environment where people of all ages,

<div align="center">2</div>

especially youth, are immersed in the values, practices, and beliefs of democratic societies and human rights" (Bennis, n.d.). Westheimer and Kahn (2004), delineate citizenship skills into three categories. The first is personally responsible citizenship, whereby students participate based on their moral character. The second, participatory citizenship encourages community engagement and political participation. The third category of citizenship is social-justice citizenship; where students are activists and try to attempt to correct political and social injustices (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Miller-Lane (as cited in Russell, 2011) defined democratic education as "a purposeful form of education that provides individuals with the skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary for their continued, self-directed growth as individuals, and the skills, knowledge and attitudes they need to contribute to and, define the public good" (p. 35). The concept of democratic education as a cornerstone of education is not new, appearing in Plato's *Republic* and the writings of Thomas Jefferson and Horace Mann. In *The Social Science Wars*, Evans (2004) called for the purposeful instruction of students in citizenship skills.

Democratic education is predicated on the student's participation in shaping educational experiences for him or herself (Dewey, 1938). John Dewey (1938), in *Experience and Education*, argued that the students should help determine what is taught and the instructional methods used. A student's educational experiences should focus on the skills and knowledge that leads to further an their growth. The teachers' responsibility, as Dewey (1902) had earlier argued in *The Child and the Curriculum*, was not to force students to learn subjects but to frame education in a way that the child and teacher work together to learn from experience, as opposed to a teacher being the sole arbiter of

knowledge in the classroom.

By focusing on the development of the child as an active participant in their own education, democratic education protects society from damaging forms of education, such as rote memorization, lack of critical thinking, and the focus on standardized testing (Monty & Medina, 1989; Pine, 2010). Education systems can develop and promote democratic ideals by focusing on the development of the student's civic identity (Biesta, 2007; NCSS, 2010). The inclusion of student focused discussion, especially concerning controversial issues, models democratic practice in the classroom that young adults will experience in society at large, and help them develop their citizenship identity (Journell, Beason, & Ayers, 2015).

The Political Classroom

Hess and McAvoy (2015) argued that the classroom is a "political site" where teachers "help students develop their ability to deliberate political questions" (p. 4). When teachers introduce controversial topics, most often in social science classrooms, they are engaging in political speech with their students (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). This does not mean that teachers are engaging in partisan behavior, but rather, they are introducing a fundamental skill to their students: the ability to examine and debate issues of public importance (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). When teachers ask students to research, learn about, and debate controversial issues, they are preparing students for their future roles as citizens (Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

According to Parker (2003), the purpose of discussion in the classroom was to create a shared understanding of topics that are undecided in the public sphere. Parker

believed that teachers should encourage open discussion by providing students with a multitude of differing opinions upon which they can freely deliberate. The classroom should provide a space for students to not only gain knowledge, but for them to challenge their peers' views and opinions in a rational manner (Parker, 2003). By teaching students to deliberate controversial issues, social science teachers model debates for students that occur in the public arena (Parker, 2003). Controversial issues are defined as issues where a "significant numbers of people argue about them without reaching a conclusion" (Oulton, Dillon, & Grace, 2004, p. 411).

<div align="center">The Political Classroom and Alternative Perspectives</div>

Deliberately teaching controversial issues in a staid and respectful manner, however, does not always reflect the current trends in political discourse in American society. When creating an open space for students to discuss and deliberate, an emphasis on equality of opinions often occurs (Sanders, 1997). Sanders (1997) argued that the focus on equality in debate did not reflect the current sociopolitical state of American society. Arguments from marginalized populations are often disregarded, namely "women; racial minorities, especially Blacks; and poorer people" (Sanders, 1997, p. 349). When political discourse systematically disregards arguments from disadvantaged people, encouraging critical discussion ignores the lack of power found within the groups (Sanders, 1997). Teacher must be aware of the divisions in society to navigate different cultural cleavages when encouraging debate in the classroom (Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

At the time of the present study, the current political climate of party polarization has caused difficulties for teachers to teach controversial issues in the classroom

(Washington & Humphries, 2011). Political polarization, or the shifting political ideological views away from the center and to the extreme, has increased since the 1970s (Evans, 2012). The polarization of the political elite reflects the polarization of red state and blue state voters, the religious and secular voters, as well as the "most interested, informed, and active citizens" (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008, p. 554). Social science teachers are educating students in an environment of political distrust, which only makes the responsibility of teaching democratic ideas more difficult (Hess, 2004).

The role of public education in the United States, outside of educating students for the workforce, emphasizes the creation of citizenship skills necessary for democratic education (Evans, 2004). As the National Council for the Social Studies argues, preparing students to negotiate civic life is one of the purposes of social science education (NCSS, 2010). Students must be taught how to effectively engage in controversial topics within the classroom so that the skills remain when they fully participate in a democratic society (Hand, 2008). However, teaching controversial issues is oftentimes difficult for teachers, ignoring perspectives from marginalized groups, which can be politically polarizing (Bickmore & Parker, 2014; Byford, Lennon, & Russell, 2009). In the present study, the researcher explored the gap between idealized classroom discussions discussed in social science education research and teacher's classroom practice.

<center>Social Science and Democratic Education</center>

Educating young adults about the structure and functions of a democratic society can take many different pedagogical forms. Students participate in classroom simulations, conduct debates on a wide variety of topics, formulate hypotheses and research, or

participate in class discussions regarding controversial issues (NCSS, 2016). If schools

are expected to prepare students for a democratic society, keeping political divisions and

disagreements in mind, classroom discussions on controversial topics will benefit future

generations' political discourse (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Schools prepare students for

life as citizens in a stable yet contentious political arena, but quantitative research on the

process by which teachers' specific demographic characteristics affects classroom

discussions has been lacking.

Despite researchers having shown the benefits of having in-class discussions

around controversial topics, the modern high stakes testing movement, as well as

sociopolitical concerns, has prevented social science teachers from including these types

of discussions in their classrooms (Hess, 2002). Political discussion in the classroom

often covers sensitive subjects, including religion, social class, race and culture, power,

and privilege (Hess & Gatti, 2010); and teachers have often been caught between

opposing ideologies as political polarization increases in the United States and political

rhetoric becomes more strident (Abramowitz, 2010; Rhodes, 2014). Furthermore,

teachers have found that including discussions of controversial issues in their classrooms

can have a negative effect on their professional teaching careers (Hess, 2004; Hess &

McAvoy, 2015).

Despite the restraint's teachers feel concerning facilitating classroom discussions

around controversial issues, the nature of teaching democratic discourse has necessitated

the inclusion of these types of classroom discussions (Evans, 2004). Furthermore, the

inclusion of such discourse in elementary and secondary classrooms socializes students to

become active participants of a democratic society (Ehman, 1980). The purpose of this study was to expand upon the body of knowledge concerning discussion of controversial topics in social science classes. This study fills a void in the relevant research by providing a national view, considering developed environments and demographic differences in teachers' willingness and comfort in teaching controversial issues.

Statement of the Problem

With the preponderance of qualitative studies regarding democratic education and the teaching of controversial issues, few quantitative studies exist regarding teachers' instructional methods used in the classroom to expand social science researcher's knowledge (Avery, et. al., 2013; Schuitema, et. al., 2018). Furthermore, scholars have identified several challenges to addressing controversial issues in the classroom, including (a) pressure from parents, administrators, and the community; (b) fear that students will be ostracized for their beliefs; and (c) concern that teachers could inadvertently influence their students' beliefs (Kuş, 2015; Misco, 2014; Misco & Shiveley, 2016; Washington & Humphries, 2011). Despite the number of studies concerning controversial topics, the claims made by these scholars cannot be generalized to larger populations due to the nature of qualitative research.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the variety of controversial issues discussed and how comfortable social science teachers were discussing controversial issues. Additionally, this study was conducted to identify differences in teachers'

instructional practices regarding controversial issues based on teachers' demographics and developed environments of the school. Lastly, the researcher sought to identify the relationships between the independent variables and the willingness and comfort of teachers to talk about social, political, and/or economic issues within their social science classrooms. Lastly, the researcher sought to identify the relationships between the number of controversial issues and the comfort of teachers to talk about social science classrooms and teacher and school characteristics. These characteristics included: the type of school in which the teacher was employed (i.e. high school or middle school), the number of years teaching experience, whether or not AP courses were taught, the subjects teachers taught, school location (rural or urban), and the teachers' political ideology, religion, race, gender, education level, degree type (i.e. education specific), and age.

<div align="center">Significance of the Study</div>

The results of this study provide an overview of teachers' current instructional practices regarding the teaching of controversial issues. This study provides an understanding of how teachers address controversial issues in the classroom as well as environmental characteristics that influence teachers' behavior. This information may benefit researchers by allowing them to understand the differences among teachers across the nation. More importantly, this study allows teachers to understand how their own demographic characteristics may influence the teaching of controversial issues.

Furthermore, this study adds to social science education research within democratic education by providing an alternative perspective. Considering the role that schools play in socializing students to a democratic society, it is important for researchers

to understand the factors that influence teacher behavior regarding controversial issues in the classroom. The significance of teachers' demographic characteristics needs to be addressed in pre-service teacher training to ensure that students are not unduly influenced by an individual teacher's personal beliefs.

This study fills a gap in existing social science education research. Almost all the research conducted regarding controversial issues and discursive speech in the classroom consists of qualitative research. This national sample provided social science education researchers a quantitative perspective regarding discourse in the classroom, compared with the number of qualitative studies conducted. Furthermore, this study has policy implications for stakeholders. Considering the importance of citizenship education to the nation, this study illustrates the necessity of encouraging debate within secondary social science classrooms.

<u>Research Questions</u>

1. To what extent does social science teachers' religious identity, political ideology, type of college degree, and developed environment explain the total variety of controversial issues discussed in secondary social science classrooms?

It was hypothesized that teacher's willingness to discuss controversial issues could be explained by these factors.

2. To what extent are social science teachers comfortable discussing controversial issues in the classroom explained by their religious identity, political ideology, type of college degree, and developed environment?

It was hypothesized that the variety of topics discussed by teachers could be explained by these factors.

Study Assumptions

      In conducting the study, the researcher made several assumptions, including that participants answered the questionnaire truthfully and without bias.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study the definitions below reflect common usage.

Advanced Placement: college-level courses that are offered in high school.

Controversial Issue: a topic that results in dispute and disagreement due to a difference of opinion.

Developed Environments: human settlements, classified metropolitan areas and non-metropolitan areas.

Gender: based on self-reported as either male or female

High School: a school that encompasses grades 9-12.

Middle School: a school that encompasses grades 6-8.

Political Ideology: a set of ethical ideals and principles that direct beliefs regarding the political and social order.

Race: a self-identified portion of the population identified by having a common heritage, defined in this study as African-American (non-Hispanic), Asian/Pacific Islander, Caucasian (non-Hispanic), Latino or Hispanic, Native American or Aleut, and Other.

Religious Preference: a person's self-identification of their affiliation with a religious denomination, group, sect, or other religiously defined system of belief.

Social Science: any of the topics taught in the U.S. educational system focused on social science and humanities, including but not limited to American government, U.S. history, world history, economics, geography, law studies, psychology, sociology, philosophy, and world religions.

Organization of the Study

This report of the present study has been divided into five chapters. The first chapter provides an overview of the topic, statement of the problem, purpose and significance of the study, the research questions and null hypotheses, dependent and independent variables, study assumptions, limitations of the study, and the definitions of terms. Chapter 2 is a review of related literature. Chapter 3 contains a description of the methods and procedures used to conduct the study. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the study's results and how they will impact the broader, social science education community.

CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Classroom discussion, as a topic of research, has been studied thoroughly by

educational researchers, with several researchers examining teachers' instructional

methods and students' responses. In his 1933 work, John Dewey, an early proponent of

classroom discussion, stated:

No one can tell another person in any definite way how he *should* think, any more

than how he ought to breath or to have his blood circulate. But the various ways

in which men *do* think can be told and can be described in their general features.

Some of these ways are better than others; the reason why they are better can be

set forth. The person who understands what the better ways of thinking are and

why they are better can, if he will change his own personal ways until they

become more effective. (p. 113)

Dewey's emphasis of doing and practice within the classroom moved classroom

pedagogy from rote memorization to an active-learner environment (Harnack, 1968).

Dewey claimed "individuals will undergo greater moral transformation and political

growth as they increasingly interpret their seemingly private problems in terms of their

public origins and consequences" (as cited in Kosnoski, 2005). By having students

discuss sensitive topics that may be personal to them openly in class, they develop their

political viewpoint on that particular issue. Discussion, as a vital component of

deliberative democracy, encourages students to model their future behaviors as citizens.

As Hess (2011) observed, "discussing controversies about the nature of the public good

and how to achieve it is essential if we are to educate for democracy; it's not going too far to say that without controversy, there is no democracy" (p. 69).

<div align="center">Civics Education</div>

Students with higher self-efficacy are more willing to participate in politically driven activities and vote, thus leading to a positive effect on voter turnout (Condon & Holleque, 2013). Civics education improves students' understanding of the political processes and their participation in democratic activities; however, the continuing existence of the achievement gap has troubling implications for the democratic process and representation for racial and socioeconomic minorities (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2012). Schools act as agents of political socialization, shaping students' knowledge of politics and helping to establish ideals. However, within schools, discourse concerning politics and controversial issues is avoided for fear of offending classmates, teachers, and other stakeholders. By allowing students to discuss controversial issues in a controlled format, some of the fear of speaking in class regarding difficult subjects can be moderated by the teacher (Martin, 2013).

In 1992, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) established a new definition of "social science education" to "the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence" (NCSS, 1992, p. 7), replacing the broader "the social studies are understood to be those whose subject matter relate to the organization and development of human society, and to man as a member of social groups" (Saxe,1991, p. 204). The renewed focus on civics education as a vital component to

democracy has been seen as warranted due to the changing global environments (Waters & Russell, 2011).

Worldwide, the rise in technology and access to the Internet has made it easier for social science teachers to prepare students for the challenges associated with globalization in the 21st century (Merryfield, 2011). In promoting citizenship, civics education should be grounded not just in content and standards but also in discourse and inclusion in the classroom to ensure that marginalized students are represented within the democratic system (Santora, 2011). To be competitive within the global marketplace, students need to be prepared to confront controversial issues and analyze different points of view, as required by participatory democracies and the current state of globalization (Ehman, 1969).

<div align="center">Political Socialization</div>

When creating open spaces for students to develop as citizens, teachers need to be aware of the influence classrooms have on developing political attitudes through political socialization. As defined by Jones (1971), political socialization is the process that both fosters the acceptance of traditional political norms and values and encourages the development of skills and abilities that enable one to adapt to a rapidly changing society. This process occurs through agents, including but not limited to one's parents, religious beliefs, socioeconomic level, and educational systems (Neimi & Sobieszek, 1977; Torney-Purta, 2006). As student's progress through their education, secondary classrooms become more significant as agents of political socialization when compared to the socialization process in one's elementary years (Ehman, 1980), and several

pedagogical techniques are effective helping students develop their own political

identities (Kahne, Crow, & Lee, 2013). Kahne and colleagues found that "open and

informed discussion of societal issues" (p. 435) encouraged students to become more

aware of the larger political arena, particularly elections and current issues. However,

poorly managed discussions where students do not respect the viewpoints of their peers,

interrupt one another, and talk over other students within a classroom can discourage

students from participation and learning, particularly if students perceive their teachers'

political attitudes as different from their own (Kelly-Woessner & Woessner, 2008).

The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement

(IEA) Civic Education Study (1999) reported that most students discussed political or

social issues in their classes and those students were encouraged to share their opinions

with their classmates (68.7%). Avery, Levy, and Simmons (2013) examined the

Deliberating in a Democracy (DID) Project $(n=20,000)$ which led the creation of an

outline for teachers to follow when discussing controversial issues. The deliberations

within classrooms must be created, led, and articulated by all students, using questions

that have no correct answer (Avery, Levy, & Simmons, 2013). The DID Project used a

Structured Academic Controversy (SAC) model, where students read a common text, the

teacher introduced a question, students presented pro and con positions, the class

deliberated the of the question, and the class as a whole discussed and debriefed the topic.

When following the DID Project's model, students were engaged and attentive,

understanding that differences in opinion are inherent in democracies. Students become

active learners when they are engaged in discussion that goes beyond simplistic rote

memorization and requires students to analyze for deeper meaning (Rubin, 2007).

However, students from low-socioeconomic, immigrant, and urban backgrounds have

often not experienced complex, in-class discussions within their classrooms. Instead, they

have experienced surface-level discussion with little deep analysis by students

(Wilkenfeld & Torney-Purta, 2012).

   Martin (2013) examined the efficacy of an online format in discussing

controversial issues in a case study with 12th grade students from a secondary English

classroom. Participating students engaged in online discussions in a face to face class.

Data collection included observational field notes, student surveys, interviews with

students and teachers, and complete transcripts of forum discussions. Students reported

that they (a) felt more comfortable with the anonymity inherent in the online format, (b)

participated with more students outside of their social circle when compared to a

traditional classroom, and (c) were less reliant on the teacher to direct the discussion.

Furthermore, the teacher did not interact extensively with the forums, instead limiting

involvement to a few posts on each topic. This led students to develop their own

interaction rules concerning the discussion. The online format for discussions translated

well from traditional classrooms to online space, following the DID Project protocols;

however, at the time of the present study, the effectiveness of this format using

controversial subjects remained to be seen. To prepare students for an increasingly global

world, teachers need to be aware of how their teaching prepares students to encourage

competent, thoughtful analyses of controversial issues to develop individuals who can

participate fully in democratic systems of governance, regardless of the format for debate.

Classroom Discussion of Controversial Issues

Classroom discussion, according to Bridges (1979), requires the following to occur: (a) putting forward more than one point of view upon a subject; and (b) at the very least, to be disposed to examine and be responsive to the different points of view put forward with the intention of developing students' knowledge, understanding and/or judgement on the matter under discussion.

Social studies education can play a role in challenging how students think about society (Ross, 2017). In his book, *Rethinking Social Studies: Critical Pedagogy in Pursuit of Dangerous Citizenship*, Ross (2017) argued that the meaning of citizenship has shifted in the social studies classroom. Social studies classrooms are a space for students to determine their understanding of citizenship. Historically, discussions were teacher led, with few student contributions. Ross argued that classroom discussions should be reimagined, to help students challenge society and the role individual members play in it. Social studies classrooms have responded to the shift away from teacher-generated discussions to methods based on inquiry (Kohlmeier & Saye, 2014). A pluralistic democracy requires conflict when discussing controversial issues and teachers can model the conflict inherent to public deliberation in the classroom effectively (Kohlmeier & Saye, 2014).

When teachers address controversial issues in social studies classrooms, there is an increase in civic knowledge and in political efficacy; and students become more politically aware (Knowles & McCafferty-Wright, 2015; Parkhouse & Massaro, 2019; Quinn & Bauml, 2018). Teachers who encourage an open classroom climate, in which

discussions of sensitive topics are a part, produce students with increased civic knowledge and political efficacy, which, according to Knowles & McCafferty-Wright (2015), is the belief that a person has they can effect political change. The inclusion of discussions concerning controversial issues also leads to students becoming more politically aware, as well as students who have increased intellectual confidence and citizenship skills (Parkhouse & Massaro, 2019). Even when discussions with school age children are not teacher generated, but rather by guest speakers, open discussion generates an increase in civic action and civic knowledge (Quinn & Bauml, 2018).

Inclusion of discussion concerning controversial issues can also benefit a few specific groups of people. Although many schools and school districts require diversity as a part of citizenship activity, many teachers struggle in addressing deep-rooted causes of inequality (Sincer, Severiens, & Volman, 2019). Furthermore, the traditional concept of citizenship, focused on personal responsibility, patriotism, and national identity, often excludes feminist perspectives (Vickery, 2015). By allowing teachers to explore alternative notions of citizenship, the classroom becomes a space where alternative notions of citizenship are promoted, discussed, and reconceptualized (Vickery, 2015). Controversial issues in the social studies classroom can also benefit social movements by connecting history to the present for students (Hawley, Crow, & Mooney, 2016). When teachers and students explore controversial topics, teachers can emphasize social justice issues to students, increasing their understanding and prompting action (Hawley et al., 2016).

The importance of discussing controversial issues lasts long after a student leaves secondary school. Clark (2017) found that political extremism could be tempered by "high quality civic education experiences and a highly democratic school climate" (p. 220). Data gathered in a 2012 Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE) survey were analyzed to examine the relationship between educational pedagogies and political ideology. Students who participated in classes that were open and democratic, as well as of high quality, had less of a chance of extreme political ideology. Another benefit of open discussion regarding controversial issues is the increased likelihood of voting as a young adult (Siegel-Stechler, 2019). By including civic education in secondary schools, schools can increase the number and frequency of young people voting (Siegel-Stechler, 2019).

Why and How to Teach Controversial Issues?

Classroom discussions encourage students to express a diversity of viewpoints, engagement by participants, and the free exchange of opinions. Each is required for true learning in a discussion to occur. Discussion is the preferred and most common method of teaching controversial issues for two reasons (Hand & Levinson, 2011). The first concerns the students' personal identities and beliefs. Oftentimes, when students are discussing controversial topics, personal experiences are brought in, resulting in creating a space for empathy. Second, classroom discussion also opens space for opposing viewpoints to exist, and students emerge from a discussion with a deeper understanding of their own viewpoints. Both the development of empathy and the more complete

understanding of their own point of view are beneficial consequences of discussing controversial issues.

Research into classroom discussion as a pedagogical tool has been shown to assist with students' political identity development; however, effective discussion in the classroom can be difficult for teachers to facilitate. Discussions around controversial issues require teachers to have a clear rationale for why they introduce a topic to the class and have clear expectations for student behavior, outside of discussion arising spontaneously as a teachable moment (Misco, 2012; Washington & Humphries, 2011). Scaffolding discussion into the classroom has been an effective tool, beginning with less controversial subjects in order to model proper discussion techniques, with more controversial discussions included later (Washington & Humphries, 2011). Furthermore, successful discussion requires a diversity of viewpoints among discussants (Hand & Levinson, 2012). It often becomes necessary for teachers to play the devil's advocate to continue or deepen student debate.

Although researchers have shown the benefits for students in having regular classroom discussions, many factors prevent the widespread use of controversial topics in these discussions (Parker, 2010). With the advent of Common Core State Standards and a renewed focus on high stakes testing, teachers have often been encouraged to focus on content rather than analysis (Avery et al., 2013). Many controversial issues include concepts such as religion, race, ethnicity, class, and socioeconomic status, and these concepts are vital to students' identities and must be handled sensitively by other students and teachers (Evans, Avery, and Pederson, 2000; Hess, 2004; Journell, 2011).

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Controversial issues, however, are not the focus of this study, rather the variety and the comfort teacher have discussing topics in secondary social studies classrooms. Despite the need for a diversity of viewpoints, discussing controversial topics is less likely to occur in schools, particularly urban, whose students are from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds and/or are immigrants (Conover & Searing, 2000). If teachers are to encourage democratic thinking in students, as they become active citizens, models of democratic engagement should occur within the classroom.

<div align="center">Controversial Issues and Socialization</div>

The inclusion of controversial issues assists with the development of political values in secondary social science classrooms. The classroom acts as a public place where political socialization occurs (Schmidt, 2013). Interactions with the space, and engagement with the content, are ways to shape students' political negotiation of public spaces (Schmidt, 2013). Young peoples' use of dissent and challenges to the teacher suggest that students shape the school environment through civic processes (Schmidt, 2013). Teachers often shape students' political socialization through specific instruction methodologies, specifically teaching norms of behavior in seminars, consistently using discussion in the classroom, allowing students to discuss topics with one another, and directing students' focus to value issues (Kohlmeier & Saye, 2019).

Conversely, teachers can have also have negative effects on students' development of civic identity outside that of their families and culture (Callahan & Obenchain, 2016). In a study examining immigrant youths' civic self-formation, teachers appeared to have a significant role, beyond that of immigrant parents, in shaping the

student's political potential (Callahan & Obenchain, 2016). Beyond teachers' ability to restrict students' political potential, teachers can also marginalize their political development depending on the level of government, with teachers focusing more on national politics as opposed to state or local politics (Hilburn & Maguth, 2015). Hilburn and Maguth found, in their 2015 qualitative study that teachers emphasized different levels of government differently, focusing on transmitting knowledge and values at the national level and focusing on political behaviors while disregarding knowledge acquisition at the local level. They found that globalization was barely addressed by secondary social studies teachers. The focus on the national political arena and away from the global, state, or local level influences students to then focus on national politics once graduated from high school.

<div align="center">Strategies for Controversial Issues</div>

Including controversial issues in the classroom, while challenging, can be taught to practicing and pre-service teachers. Oftentimes, pre-service teachers are unfamiliar or uncomfortable discussing controversial issues in the classroom (Nganga, Roberts, Kambutu, & James, 2019; Washington & Humphries, 2011). In a recent study from 2019, researchers found that 80% of pre-service teachers were never introduced to controversial issues in college course work before taking a social studies methods course (Nganga, Roberts, Kambutu, & James, 2019). After taking the course, the pre-service teachers were able to intellectualize the use of controversial issues in the classroom and include them in their planning for their future classroom.

When using controversial issues as topics for discussion in the secondary classroom, teachers can plan for a specific content related topic or they can allow students to choose the topic discussed. When teachers prepare for specific discussions, the content quality improves and there is more participation from students, compared with when students direct the debate (Schuitema, Radstake, van de Pol, & Wiel, 2018). A teacher's implicit biases must also be considered when teaching controversial issues, specifically those concerning race, gender, and religion (Journell, 2011; Washington & Humphries, 2011).

The role teachers take when addressing controversial issues in the classroom can help students feel engaged with the political process, encourage political thinking, and help develop students into justice-oriented citizens (Journell, Beeson, & Ayers, 2015; Lo, 2017; Sheppard, Ashford, & Larson, 2011). Social studies teachers that use the tools of political scientists in their classroom, particularly the methodologies and critical thinking skills, allows students to better develop their political participation skills (Journell et al., 2015). Political participation can also be developed when teachers utilize simulations and role-playing (Lo, 2017). The use of specific teaching pedagogies provides students with ways to engage with the political process and increase their political efficacy (Lo, 2017). Teacher's use of controversial issue discussions, including explicit discussion of what is controversial, assists student's ethical development (Sheppard et al., 2011).

Challenges Teaching Controversial Issues

Teachers are faced with a number of challenges when using controversial issues discussion in the classroom. Even when teachers explicitly include content knowledge

and conflicting viewpoints in classroom lessons, the discussion may not develop into a truly democratic dialogue, nor disrupt the prevailing dogmas of the classroom (Bickmore & Parker, 2014). Teachers are often wary of including controversial issues, even in a historical context, due to fear of criticism they might receive (Iglesias, Aceituno, & Toledo, 2017). While teachers understand the value of including controversial issues in the classroom, they often limit their inclusion for fear of consequences (Byford et al., 2009). Further contributing to teachers' struggles, the complexities of teaching controversial issues, can inhibit their addition to the classroom. Depending on the topic, teachers employ different strategies for instruction (Leib, 1998); and depending on classroom demographics, teachers may avoid inclusion of controversial issues (Engebretson, 2018).

Schools are often hesitant to encourage controversial topics in classroom discussions. The very nature of schools is one of power relationships, with teachers disseminating information to the student. In this role, students are passive and not participating in their own education. Alternatively, discussions regarding controversial issues function in an equal environment (Foucault, 1997). If teachers use discussion to lead students to knowledge and understanding, it is not a true discussion. Rather, it is a scenario in which an expert is altering the opinions of non-experts (Hand & Levison, 2011). An alternate method involves teachers acting as impartial facilitators to allow autonomy into the classroom. Yet, guiding questions often illuminate power relationships where teachers steer the topic towards a goal. Controversial issues allow teachers to step out of the power position. Controversial issues are unsettled and without a clear answer to

right or wrong. Best practices encourage teachers to divorce their personal beliefs from the discussion in the classroom (Hand, 2008; Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

Despite the advocacy of social science researchers in the field of controversial issues, few quantitative studies existed at the time of the present study. Theoretical frameworks abound, with researchers providing outlines for best practices (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Parker & Hess, 2001). Qualitative studies regarding controversial issues have shown barriers for implementation because teachers fear negative consequences to their careers (Parker & Hess, 2001; Washington & Humphries, 2011), have classroom management concerns (Allen, 2010), or fear that marginalized groups of students will become disaffected through discussion (Tamir, 2015). These studies support the concept that teachers avoid controversial issues in the classroom and do not feel comfortable hosting discussions or debates in the classroom. However, these studies also provide a very narrow perspective of the challenges faced by social science teachers.

<u>Social Science Teachers Demographics</u>

A teacher's demographic characteristics have been shown to be related how they teach all social studies, how they relate to students, and student achievement (Passe & Fitchett, 2013: Alter, Walker, & Landers, 2014; Okpala, Smith, Jones & Ellis, 2000). Using nationally represented data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), Fitchett (2010) found that the majority of social science teachers were male (67.0%), White (90.3%), and more likely to have a subject-specific degree or a degree in the subject taught (71.6%), compared with an explicit general education degree or some other alternative degree. Passe and Fitchett

(2013) sent a national survey to social science teachers ($n = 11,295$). Although the survey did not directly address controversial issues, it did examine teachers' use of controversial issues. The findings suggested that three-quarters of high school social science teachers integrated controversial issues frequently or daily, primarily because they wanted students to understand the world in which they live.

Teacher demographics, including gender, race, grade level taught, and years of classroom experience, have been found to have a statistically significant relationship between on a teacher's perception of student behavior (Alter, Walker, & Landers, 2013). While the nation's students have been getting more diverse, in 2015-2016 80% of teachers were (Musu, 2019). A link between teacher characteristics and student achievement has been shown, encouraging stakeholders in the education system to support smaller class sizes, experienced teachers, and high quality education, including discussions in class (Okpala, Smith, Jones, & Ellis, 2000).

Regional Differences

Social studies education research has not focused on regional differences, although other social science disciplines, specifically political sciences, have studied the cultural difference of different regions of the United States of America. In his seminal work concerning regional differences, Elazar (1972) identified three separate political cultures in the United States. Moral political culture, primarily in the Midwest, sees government as a positive force, and society is viewed as more important than the individual. The second, individual political culture, found traditionally in the Northeast, is characterized by a practical approach to government. As such, government should be

restricted to areas that encourage, but do not restrict, private enterprise. Third, the

traditional political culture, found mainly in the South, sees government as an actor with

a positive role in the community but one that it is limited to the maintenance of society.

These characteristics, though not definitive of each state, reflect characteristics that affect

the political culture, which in turn has the potential to affect the political role of

schooling. Despite the large analysis of social science teachers' demographic

characteristics and practices conducted by Passe and Fitchett (2013), regional

comparisons in national studies are limited in social science education. Little to no social

science educational research has been conducted comparing teacher behavior with

regional differences, research had been restricted to educational policy amongst regional

differences (Wirt, Mitchell, & Marshall, 1985; Wirt, Mitchell, & Marshall, 1988;

Vandenbosch, 1991).

Classroom discussion has been a common instructional strategy used in teaching

from the very beginning of the U.S. educational system (Dewey, 1933). In particular,

civics education acts as an agent of socialization, helping to develop the common

language of political discourse (Martin, 2013). Civic education has been a focus of the

NCSS since the genesis of the C3 Framework (NCSS, 1992). Including controversial

issues in the secondary social science classroom helps prepare students to fully engage in

civic life, although practicing teachers oftentimes feel ill prepared and intimidated

including the topics in their classroom (Kahne, Crow, & Lee, 2013; Hand, 2008; Hess &

McAvoy, 2015, Washington & Humphries, 2011).

Chapter two begins with an introduction, a discussion of civic education, and political socialization, followed by an examination of the research regarding classroom discussion of controversial issues. The efficacy and validity for including controversial issues in the classroom is included, as is how controversial issues contribute to the political socialization process. The literature review also includes an explanation of the most commonly researched strategies for controversial issue discussion in the secondary social science classroom, and a discussion of the challenges faced when teaching controversial issues. Social Science teacher demographics, as well as regional differences are examined and conclude the second chapter.

CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter describes the research methods that were used in the current study. It reviews the research questions. To clarify, this chapter explains the research design, the instrument development process, the dependent and independent variables, a description of the sample, the data collection process, the statistical test, and the limitations and contributions of the study. This study used descriptive and inferential statistics using the *IBM SPSS* version 24 statistical program.

Research Questions

1. To what extent does social science teachers' religious identity, political ideology, type of college degree, and developed environment explain the total variety of controversial issues discussed in secondary social science classrooms?

2. To what extent are social science teachers' comfortable discussing controversial issues in the classroom explained by their religious identity, political ideology, type of college degree, and developed environment?

Research Design

The research design for the present study was a non-experimental, correlation study, which used surveys as a data collection tool.

<center>Data Analysis Plan</center>

Two multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to determine the extent to which demographic and nondemographic characteristics of social science teachers were predictors of (a) the practice of teaching controversial issues and (b) their attitudes about teaching controversial issues. In the multiple linear regression, the predictor variables, religious identity, political ideology, type of college degree, and developed environment were entered into the model.

<center>Description of Population and Sample</center>

The initial proposal for this study consisted of the researcher contacting the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) and using the organization's membership list to contact random secondary social study teachers. Significant problems prevented the initial proposal from becoming a viable study. First, the NCSS membership did not represent the current makeup of social studies teachers, either demographically or by population, at the time of the present study. The number of members of NCSS in 2015 was 13,459 teachers, compared with the total number of social studies teachers, estimated by the National Center for Education Statistics to be 232,000 (Binford, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Furthermore, NCSS had neglected Black and Hispanic teacher concerns during the annual conferences (Garcia & Madden, 2012).

The second issue that prevented use of the NCSS membership rolls was twofold. First, the organization focused much of its attention on the northeast United States. This was reflected in the location of annual meetings from 2019 to 2009. During that 10-year period, the conference has been hosted equally in the northeastern and western states,

<center>31</center>

with three visits apiece. The Midwest, however, only hosted two conferences; the south three visits. Moreover, NCSS visits Washington D.C. every five years.

Considering problems associated with using the NCSS membership as survey respondents, the researcher chose to focus on secondary social studies teachers who used social media. Social studies teachers use social media accounts as an ad hoc professional development community (Carpenter & Krutka, 2014a). They find the use more personalized, immediate, and positive than traditional professional development through a district or school (Carpenter & Krutka, 2014b). The use of social media bridges formal and informal learning, where teachers can seek out learning communities of interest to their specific needs (Greenhow & Levin, 2016). Thus, the use of social media as a survey panel design is becoming vital for social science researchers (Tach & Cornwell, 2015).

Participants in the present study totaled 91 social science teachers who volunteered from 37 states throughout the United States. The population from which the sample was drawn included social science teachers who were members and users of the social media platform, Facebook. There were no data available to the public regarding the number of teachers who used the platform; however, the USDOE estimated a population of 232,000 secondary social science teachers (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2018).

A total of 91 teachers who participated in social science related Facebook groups completed the online survey. The groups that were invited to participate in the survey ranged from 334 members to over 65,000, for a total of 133,864 members asked to participate. Fifteen groups total were included in the sample (Appendix D). Invitations were extended through a simple post within each individual group. The researcher

answered comments made by members. The response rate was less than 1% of the total

members invited. Data collection began in May of 2018 and was completed in June of

2018.

<u>Instrumentation</u>

The survey was designed to measure two constructs of social science teachers'

instructional practices regarding discussion of controversial issues. The purpose of the

survey was to measure the controversial issues social science teachers discussed with

their students and their comfort in having the discussions.

Validity and Reliability

Content validity evidence was examined first by identifying what topics would be

considered controversial by major newspapers, then confirmed and adjusted by

experienced secondary social studies teachers. Two constructs of social science teachers'

instructional practices were examined. The first construct, topics teachers discuss in class

with their students, was measured through a list of controversial issues. As society

changes, what is considered controversial shifts generation to generation. With the

societal change in mind, topics were chosen using a two step-process.

First, the researcher looked at the opinion pages of four major newspapers with

differing political ideologies to identify currently debated events for the public.

Conservatism is defined as a political philosophy "calling for lower taxes, limited

government regulation of business and investing, a strong national defense, and

individual financial responsibility for personal needs (Merriam-Webster, n.d.a)

Liberalism is defined as a political philosophy "that considers government as a crucial instrument for amelioration of social inequities" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.a). The papers were the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *LA Times*, and *Wall Street Journal* (Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley, & Matsa, 2014). The opinion pages for these papers were examined to create a list of 12 topics written about in the previous 12-month period.

After creating this list of current divisive topics, the researcher gathered a focus group of six expert social science teachers to discuss the list. The social studies teachers met at a private home to discuss topics that should be added. The demographics of the focus groups are outlined below.

- 65-year-old white female. Former principal of an urban elementary school in south Florida with 30+ years of experience teaching K-12 students. Taught intensive reading and world history to 10th grade students.

- 42-year-old white male with 13 years of teaching high school. Taught AP world history and general world history classes to 10th grade students in a large metropolitan area in Central Florida.

- 38-year-old white male with 9 years of teaching high school. Former member of the Florida National Guard. Taught AP economics and general economics to 12th grade students in a rural community outside Central Florida.

- 27-year-old black female. 5 years of experience teaching middle and high school social studies. Taught American history to 11th graders in a rural community outside Central Florida.

- 62-year-old white male. 20+ years of experience teaching middle and high school social studies. Taught AP Geography and general geography to 9th grade students in both rural and urban communities in Central Florida.

- 31-year-old white female. 9 years of experience teaching high school. Taught AP U.S. History and general American history to 11th graders in a rural community outside Central Florida.

Following their discussion, teachers added four additional topics. The type of courses taught by the focus group included the major courses taught in social science education, and the teacher's cumulative experience was over 80 years of experience teaching in the K-12 system. By using a focus group of current social science teachers with extensive experience in teaching social science at the secondary level, the instrument reflected the current state of social science instruction.

The topics were shared with a group of graduate education students twice during a three-month period to test the reliability of the list: once in September, at the beginning of a graduate survey class and again at the end of the course in November. The reliability score for the test-retest reliability scored $r > 0.81$, well within the range for stable responses.

<center>Data Collection</center>

For this study, the researcher joined 12 social studies-specific Facebook groups shown in Appendix D, varying from subject specific, to grade specific, to general education groups. If the groups were closed, meaning members must ask to join, the

researcher used her personal Facebook profile to join the group. The profile identified the researcher as a social studies teacher in Florida who was then a graduate student.

The researcher searched Facebook for social science teacher groups. Around 20 groups were found. After the researcher identified the Facebook groups relevant to this research study, she placed a post advertising the research study which can be found in Appendix E. The survey identified the university associated with the research and the topics that were to be surveyed. Two posts were made in each group, seven days apart. Within two weeks, the researcher gained the required sample size. Posts remained on the Facebook page for one additional week to allow participants to join. After the two weeks of recruitment, and one week of response time, the survey was closed to participation and the posts were inactivated.

The survey implementation followed the Tailored Design Method to produce high-quality information and high response rates. Prospective participants were recruited from closed Facebook groups of social science teachers. All participants were recruited from the existing pool of users. A total number of 91 teachers were recruited. Participants gave their consent to take the survey. Both the consent and survey are displayed in Appendix A. Responses were collected using the survey program, Qualtrics. Survey data were confidential, and no identifying pieces of information that would link participants to their responses were collected. Location data was collected using the participants' IP addresses but were not used in the analysis of the data. IP addresses were also used to ensure that a single teacher did not take the survey multiple times.

Research Question 1

To what extent does social science teachers' religious identity, political ideology, type of college degree, and developed environment explain the total variety of controversial issues discussed in secondary social science classrooms?

Survey Question Operational Definitions

For the purpose of this study, the variety of controversial issues discussed in the classroom was operationally defined as the sum of 15 binary controversial issues, where 1 represented discussion during the 2017-2018 school year, and 0 represented no discussion. The topics were the following: (a) abortion, (b) affirmative action, (c) government censorship, (d) euthanasia, (e) feminism and the #metoo movement, (f) LGBTQIA+ rights, (g) gun rights/control, (h) immigration, (i) Islamophobia, (j) the legalization of drugs, (k) the legalization of marijuana, (l) racial bias in the judicial system, (m) transgender rights, (n) wage gap between men and women, and (o) wage gap among racial and ethnic groups. The categories were summed to determine the teachers' willingness to discuss controversial issues in the classroom.

Research Question One Instrumentation

Independent variables were included to identify which of the teachers' characteristics influenced their willingness to discuss controversial issues in the classroom. Concerning the participants, demographic information was collected, including race, religion, gender, and number of years teaching. Race was measured using dummy coding of six categories, including African American, Asian, Caucasian, Hispanic, Native American and Other. Religion was divided into the following eight

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categories and dummy coded: (a) atheist/agnostic, (b) Catholic, (c) Jewish, (d) Mormon, (e) Muslim, (f) no preference, (g) other non-Christian religion, and (h) Protestant/other Christian. Gender was measured using two categories, male and female. Male was coded one and female coded zero. The number of years teaching was a scale score of teachers' years in the classroom. Teachers wrote in how many years they had working in K-12 schools. Information regarding teachers' political ideology was also collected and dummy coded. Modeled after the American National Election Survey [ANES] (2014), the participants were asked their political ideology on the following spectrum: (a) extremely liberal, (b) slightly liberal, (c) moderate or middle of the road, (d) slightly conservative, (e) extremely conservative, or (f) haven't thought much about it.

Other independent variables focused on the educational history and courses taught by the teachers. As such, teachers were asked if they attended graduate school (1) or not (0) and whether or not they majored in Education (1) or not (0). The courses taught were classified into four categories, including history, civics, economics, and other. The courses were dummy coded. Additionally, participants were asked if they taught an Advanced Placement class (1) or not (0).

The developed environment independent variable was determined using the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (2013) and the reported zip code of the school from where the teachers worked. The zip code was converted into Federal Information Processing Standards (FIPS) codes which identifies unique counties. The FIPS codes were then used to identify the type of developed environment from which the schools were located. The codes were divided into two categories, rural and

urban. Urban areas were defined as population centers with 1,000,000 people or more, 250,000 to 1,000,000, and less than 250,000. These areas were coded as urban areas. Rural areas included areas of 20,000 people or less near a metro area, areas greater than 20,000 not near a metro area, urban areas 2,500 to 19,999 near a metro area, and areas 2,500 to 19,999 not near a metro area. The Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (2013) determined these codes.

Research Question One Data Analytics

A multiple linear regression was generated to answer Research Question 1. The dependent variables were the sum of controversial issues discussed during the 2017-2018 school year. The independent variables were the religious identity, political ideology, type of college degree, and developed environment of the school. The dependent variable consisted of the teachers' responses to a survey of topics which they had or had not discussed in the classroom.

Research Question 2

To what extent are social science teachers comfortable discussing controversial issues in the classroom explained by their religious identity, political ideology, type of college degree, and developed environment?

A multiple linear regression was also generated to answer Research Question 2. The dependent variable was a sum of participant responses to items from a Likert-type scale. The scale was coded as follows: 5 – very comfortable, 4 – somewhat comfortable, 3 – neutral, 2 – somewhat uncomfortable, and 1 – very uncomfortable. The scale scores

were summed to identify which teachers were more comfortable discussing controversial issues and how the independent variable influenced the variation.

Research Question Two Instrumentation

Independent variables were included to identify which of the teachers' characteristics influenced their comfort discussing controversial issues in the classroom. Concerning the participants, demographic information was collected, including race, religion, gender, and number of years teaching. Race was measured using dummy coding of six categories, including African American, Asian, Caucasian, Hispanic, Native American and Other. Religion was divided into the following eight categories and dummy coded: (a) atheist/agnostic, (b) Catholic, (c) Jewish, (d) Mormon, (e) Muslim, (f) no preference, (g) other non-Christian religion, and (h) Protestant/other Christian. Gender was measured using two categories, male and female. Male was coded one and female coded zero. The number of years teaching was a scale score of teachers' years in the classroom. Teachers wrote in how many years they had working in K-12 schools. Information regarding teachers' political ideology was also collected and dummy coded. Modeled after the American National Election Survey [ANES] (2014), the participants were asked their political ideology on the following spectrum: (a) extremely liberal, (b) slightly liberal, (c) moderate or middle of the road, (d) slightly conservative, (e) extremely conservative, or (f) haven't thought much about it.

Other independent variables focused on the educational history and courses taught by the teachers. As such, teachers were asked if they attended graduate school (1) or not (0) and whether or not they majored in Education (1) or not (0). The courses taught were

classified into four categories, including history, civics, economics, and other. The courses were dummy coded. Additionally, participants were asked if they taught an Advanced Placement class (1) or not (0).

The developed environment independent variable was determined using the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (2013) and the reported zip code of the school from where the teachers worked. The zip code was converted into Federal Information Processing Standards (FIPS) codes which identifies unique counties. The FIPS codes were then used to identify the type of developed environment from which the schools were located. The codes were divided into two categories, rural and urban. Urban areas were defined as population centers with 1,000,000 people or more, 250,000 to 1,000,000, and less than 250,000. These areas were coded as urban areas. Rural areas included areas of 20,000 people or less near a metro area, areas greater than 20,000 not near a metro area, urban areas 2,500 to 19,999 near a metro area, and areas 2,500 to 19,999 not near a metro area. The Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (2013) determined these codes.

Research Question 2 Data Analytics

A multiple linear regression was generated to answer Research Question two. The dependent variables were the sum of controversial issues discussed during the 2017-2018 school year. The independent variables were the religious identity, political ideology, type of college degree, and developed environment of the school. The dependent variable consisted of the teachers' responses to a survey of their comfort discussing controversial issues.

<u>Summary</u>

Chapter three began with an introduction and research questions. The chapter also described the research design, data analysis plan, a description of the population and sample, and implementation of the study. The chapter also provided information explaining the data collection process, as well as how reliability and validity evidence was obtained. Operational definitions for the regression, as well as instrumentation, were also included in this chapter.

CHAPTER 4
RESULTS

Introduction

Within this chapter, the research questions, the null hypotheses, an overview of the data analysis employed, and the results from the multiple linear regression, are presented. The chapter contains two sections. The first section examines demographic characteristics of the sample, including the teachers' demographic statistics, beliefs, comfort level, and the variety of controversial topics discussed. The second section presents the results from each of the two hypotheses tested.

Descriptive Sample

Table 1 presents the personal and professional demographic characteristics of participants. Of the 91 teachers surveyed, the mean age was 43.8 years old. The average number of years teaching was 12.8. Of the teachers, 62.6% were female, and 43% taught high school during the 2017-2018 school year. Of the participant teachers, 82% ($n = 75$) identified as Caucasian, 6.5% ($n = 6$) as Hispanic, 3% ($n = 3$) as African-American, and 5.5% ($n = 5$) as other. A majority of teachers, 84.6% ($n = 77$), taught in a metropolitan area, and 15.1% ($n = 15$) taught in a rural area. Examining education demographics, 44% ($n = 40$) teachers earned a bachelor's degree, 47.3% ($n = 43$) earned a master's degree, and 5.5% *($n = 5$)* earned a doctoral degree. Of the teachers surveyed, 76.9% *($n = 70$)* held a degree in education, and 20.9% *($n = 19$)* held a degree outside of education. Subjects taught by the participants varied, with the highest percentage (48.4%) of the teachers *($n =$ 44)* teaching U.S. History and only 25.3% *($n = 23$)* teach an Advanced Placement course.

Table 1

Participants' Personal and Professional Demographic Characteristics

Descriptor	N	Percentage
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	75	82.0
African-American	3	3.0
Hispanic	6	6.5
Other	5	5.5
Gender		
Male	34	37.4
Female	57	62.6
Years teaching experience (Mean)	91	12.8
Geographical location		
Metropolitan	77	84.6
Rural	15	15.1
Education		
Bachelor's degree	40	44.0
Master's degree	43	47.3
Doctoral degree	5	5.5
Degree type		
In education	70	76.9
Outside education	19	20.9
Subjects taught[a]		
U.S. History	44	48.4
Other Social Science Course	33	36.2
Civics/Government	24	26.4
World History	23	25.3
Multiple Subjects	30	33.3
Advanced Placement Course	23	25.3

Note. [a]Percentages do not total 100% due to participant's multiple responses for different classes.

As shown in Table 2, teachers' political and religious beliefs varied considerably. An individual political ideology did not dominate, with 45% *(n = 41)* identifying as either

extremely or slightly liberal and 34% *(n = 31)* identifying as extremely or slightly

conservative. Religious identity was similarly varied, with 57.2% *(n = 52)* characterizing

themselves as Christians, 35.2% *(n = 32)* as atheist/agnostic/no preference, and 7.7% *(n =*

7) as non-Christian religious.

Table 2

Political and Religious Beliefs of Teacher Participants

Beliefs	N	Percentage
Political beliefs		
Extremely or slightly liberal	41	45.1
Extremely or slightly conservative	17	18.7
Moderate, middle of the road	31	34.1
Religious beliefs		
Protestant or Christian	37	40.7
No religious preference	16	17.6
Atheist or agnostic	16	17.6
Catholic	15	16.5
Non-Christian	3	3.3
Jewish	2	2.2
Mormon	2	2.2

Participants' responses regarding the topics that were discussed are shown in

Table 3. The topics most frequently cited by respondents were immigration (77, 84.6%)

and government censorship/monitoring (66, 74.7%). Less frequently discussed were the

legalization of drugs other than marijuana (29, 31/9%) and physician-assisted suicide (29,

31.9. The least frequently discussed topics were spoken of in class less than half the time

as the most frequently discussed.

Table 3

Teachers' Responses: Controversial Issues Discussed in 2017-2018

Topic	Frequency	Percentage
Immigration	77	84.6
Government Censorship/Monitoring	68	74.7
Gun Rights/Gun Control	67	73.6
Wage Gap – Gender	65	71.4
Feminism, #metoo	63	69.2
Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual Rights	63	69.2
Islamophobia	60	65.9
Legalization of Marijuana	59	64.8
Racial Bias in Judicial System	57	62.6
Affirmative Action	51	56.0
Wage Gap – Racial	47	51.6
Abortion, Pro-life, Pro-Choice	40	44.0
Transgender Rights	40	44.0
Euthanasia, Physician Assisted Suicide	29	31.9
Legalization of drugs other than marijuana	29	31.9

Table 4 contains responses as to the levels of comfort teachers had in discussing the topics. Teachers' comfort levels in discussing the topics, though mixed, largely mirrored the frequency of discussion. Teachers were most comfortable discussing immigration and government censorship and least comfortable discussing the legalization of drugs other than marijuana and physician-assisted suicide. The means ranged from a low of 3.14 to a high of 4.39, which indicated that teachers mostly felt somewhat comfortable and very comfortable discussing the topics in their classes.

Table 4

Teachers' Responses: Comfort in Discussing Controversial issues in 2017-2018

Topic	Frequency	Percentage
Abortion and the Pro-Life, Pro-Choice Debate		
Very Uncomfortable	11	12.1
Somewhat Uncomfortable	12	13.2
Neutral	18	19.8
Somewhat Comfortable	20	22.0
Very Comfortable	29	31.9
Affirmative Action		
Very Uncomfortable	5	5.5
Somewhat Uncomfortable	5	5.5
Neutral	14	15.4
Somewhat Comfortable	23	25.3
Very Comfortable	43	47.3
Government Censorship and/or Monitoring		
Very Uncomfortable	4	4.4
Somewhat Uncomfortable	2	2.2
Neutral	7	7.7
Somewhat Comfortable	25	27.5
Very Comfortable	52	57.1
Gun Rights/Gun Control		
Very Uncomfortable	5	5.5
Somewhat Uncomfortable	7	7.7
Neutral	4	4.4
Somewhat Comfortable	25	27.5
Very Comfortable	49	53.8
Euthanasia and/or Physician Assisted Suicide		
Very Uncomfortable	10	11.0
Somewhat Uncomfortable	14	15.4
Neutral	18	19.8
Somewhat Comfortable	21	23.1
Very Comfortable	27	29.7
Feminism, #metoo		
Very Uncomfortable	5	5.5
Somewhat Uncomfortable	5	5.5
Neutral	11	12.1
Somewhat Comfortable	22	24.2
Very Comfortable	47	51.6

Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual Rights

Very Uncomfortable	4	4.4
Somewhat Uncomfortable	9	9.9
Neutral	12	13.3
Somewhat Comfortable	19	20.9
Very Comfortable	46	50.5

Immigration Policy and/or Illegal Immigration

Very Uncomfortable	2	2.2
Somewhat Uncomfortable	4	4.4
Neutral	6	6.6
Somewhat Comfortable	22	24.2
Very Comfortable	55	60.4

Islamaphobia

Very Uncomfortable	5	5.5
Somewhat Uncomfortable	4	4.4
Neutral	12	13.2
Somewhat Comfortable	21	23.1
Very Comfortable	48	52.7

Legalization of Drugs other than Marijuana

Very Uncomfortable	11	12.1
Somewhat Uncomfortable	13	14.3
Neutral	21	23.1
Somewhat Comfortable	18	19.8
Very Comfortable	27	29.7

Legalization of Marijuana

Very Uncomfortable	7	7.7
Somewhat Uncomfortable	7	7.7
Neutral	11	12.1
Somewhat Comfortable	26	28.6
Very Comfortable	39	42.9

Racial Bias in the Judicial System

Very Uncomfortable	4	4.4
Somewhat Uncomfortable	7	7.7
Neutral	17	18.7
Somewhat Comfortable	17	18.7
Very Comfortable	45	49.5

Transgender Rights

Very Uncomfortable	11	12.1
Somewhat Uncomfortable	14	15.4
Neutral	11	12.1
Somewhat Comfortable	21	23.1
Very Comfortable	33	36.3

Wage Gap between Men and Women

Very Uncomfortable	5	5.5

Somewhat Uncomfortable	3	3.3
Neutral	11	12.1
Somewhat Comfortable	13	14.3
Very Comfortable	58	63.7
Wage Gap amongst Racial Groups		
Very Uncomfortable	6	6.6
Somewhat Uncomfortable	4	4.4
Neutral	10	11.0
Somewhat Comfortable	24	26.4
Very Comfortable	46	50.5

Research Question 1

To what extent does social science teachers' religious identity, political ideology, type of college degree, and developed environment explain the total variety of controversial issues discussed in secondary social science classrooms?

The independent variables included religious identity, political ideology, type of college degree, and developed environments.

Research Question 1 Assumptions

The assumption for multiple linear regression include independence of observations, sample bias, linearity, homoscedasticity, multicollinearity, outliers, and normality.

The assumptions for multiple linear regression models include independence of observations. Although a traditional random sample for the population would have been preferable, time and monetary issues prevented it. Instead, a sample was purposely and conveniently found in social studies specific Facebook groups. Non-representative samples have been used in prior social science research and have been found to result in the same statistical relationships as traditional sampling procedures (Bhutta, 2012). An

examination of the residuals find that there is no correlation between the regression

standardized residual and the regression standardized predicted value
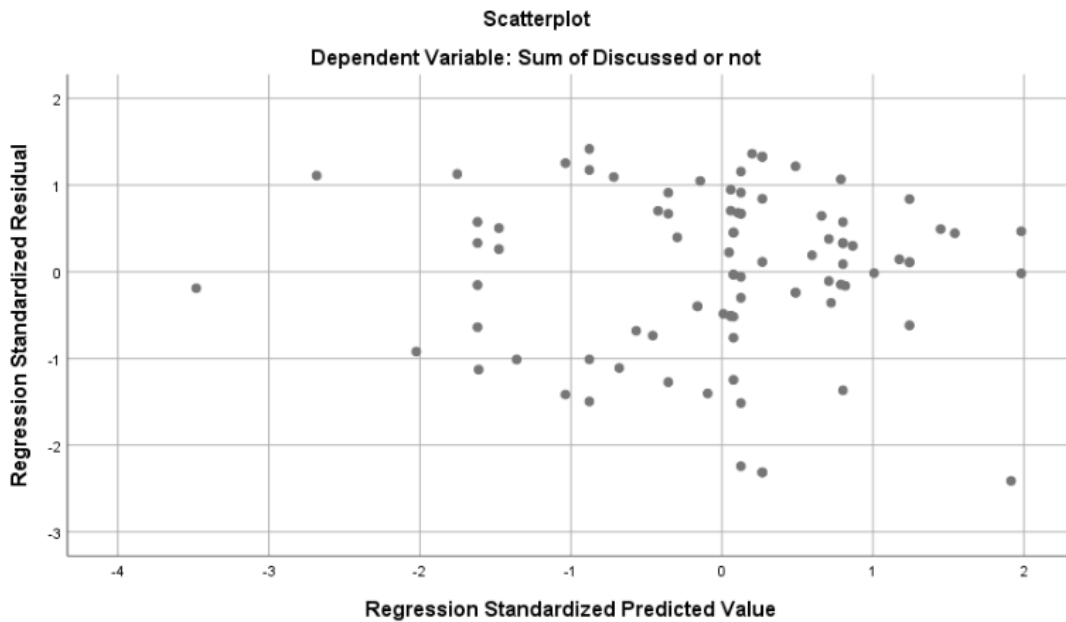
Figure 1: Scatterplot of Regression standardized Residual and Regression Standardized

Predicted Value

The fourth assumption of linearity was examined using box plots of standardized

residual and unstandardized predicted variables, as well as box plots of each independent

variable and dependent variable. Linearity was observed in both plots with cases

appearing among the predicted line. A plot of standardized residuals with unstandardized

predicted values also indicated homoscedasticity, the fifth assumption for multiple linear

regression. The case values were scattered amongst the plot.

Multicollinearity, the sixth assumption for a multiple linear regression, indicated a few issues with the data. An examination of the Pearson correlation between the independent variables illustrated no correlations larger than 0.7, which would have indicated multicollinearity. An examination of tolerance and VIF did indicate, however, a few independent variables with a collinearity problem. The dummy variables for political ideology, slightly liberal (VIF = 10.64) and moderate (VIF = 11.31) showed a VIF over 10. The dummy variables for religion, atheist (VIF = 20.30), Catholic (VIF = 17.78), no preference (VIF = 16.81), and Protestant (VIF = 34.31), also showed a VIF over 10. The nature of the hypothesis required each of the previous independent variables to remain. Due to the multicollinearity, special care was taken by the researcher to emphasize model fit over significance of individual dependent variables.

The seventh assumption for a multiple linear regression is an examination for outliers. No case had a standardized residual greater than plus or minus three standard deviations. No cases had a standardized deleted residual greater than plus or minus three standard deviations. Approximately one-third of the cases had leverage values greater than plus or minus three standard deviations. Using Cook's Distance to examine influence, no case value was over one; therefore, the cases remained in the data set.

The eighth assumption that must be met for multiple linear regression is checking for normality. Normality was checked examining a histogram of standardized residuals (Figure 1) which appeared normally distributed.

Figure 2. Histogram Dependent V. Regression Standardized Residual
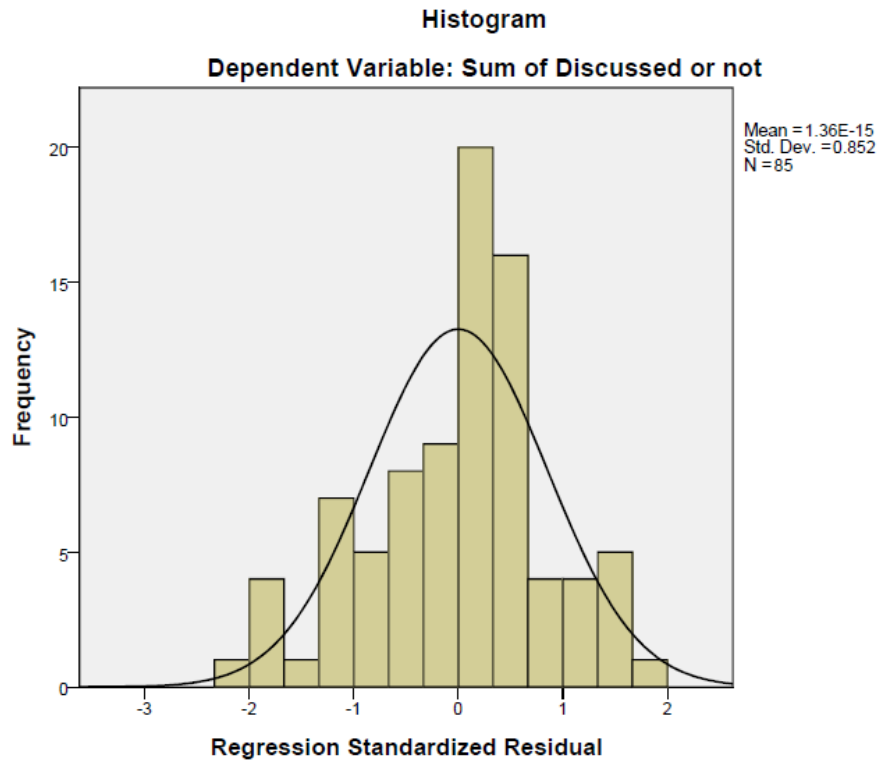
The P-P plot (Figure 2), created to examine the observed and expected cumulative

probability, did not appear normally distributed; however, this was expected with the

small sample size. A Shapiro-Wilk test, which was conducted to examine the normality

of the dependent variable, (i.e., the sum of discussed topics), was not statistically

significant ($p > 0.05$).

Normal P-P Plot of Regression Standardized Residual

Dependent Variable: Sum of Discussed or not
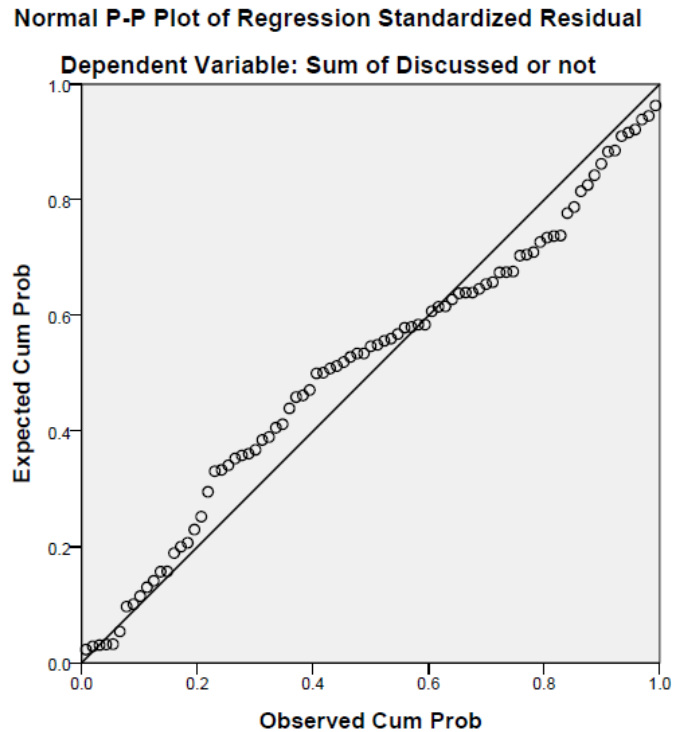
Figure 3. P-P Plot: Sum of discussed or not

Research Question 1 Results

The number of controversial issues social science teachers' discuss in the classroom, as measured by the total topics discussed in class, cannot be explained by a statistically significant model including the independent variables ($F_{26, 58} = 1.50$, $p = 0.21$). Only 6% of the variation in the teachers' willingness to discuss controversial issues was accounted for by the independent variables ($R^2 = .0.067$). Standardized and unstandardized Beta values are presented in Table 5. When the standardized coefficients were examined, both political ideology and religious identity were shown to affect teachers' willingness to discuss controversial issues. Ideologically liberal and moderate

teachers were more likely to be willing to discuss controversial issues, but teachers who

identified with a particular religion were less likely to discuss those topics.

Table 5

Number of Topics Discussed: Multiple Regression Analaysis (n = 91)

Variable	B	SE B	β	t	df	p
Constant	9.69	1.62		5.98	4	.00
Rural Area[a]	-.508	1.28	-.043	-.40	90	.69
Extreme or Somewhat Political Ideology[b]	1.74	.99	1.76	1.76	90	.08
Christian Religion[c]	-.794	.94	-.09	-.844	90	.40
Education Degree[d]	-1.20	1.11	-.12	-1.08	90	.28

Note. Dummy coding was employed with [a]coded rural, [b] coded moderate and no

preference, [c]coded non-Christian and no preference, and [d]coded no education degree

Research Question 2 Results

To what extent are social science teachers comfortable discussing controversial issues in

the classroom explained by their religious identity, political ideology, type of college

degree, and developed environment?

The independent variables included religious identity, political ideology, type of

college degree, and developed environments.

Research Question 2 Assumptions

The assumption for multiple linear regression include independence of

observations, sample bias, linearity, homoscedasticity, multicollinearity, outliers, and

normality.

The assumptions for multiple linear regression include independence of

observations, as well as several tests for normality of data. The third assumption required

an independence of observations due to the random selection of cases. As previously

stated, although the sample was a convenience sample, the statistical assumption still held

(Bhutta, 2012). An examination of the residuals find that there is no correlation between

the regression standardized residual and the regression standardized predicted value
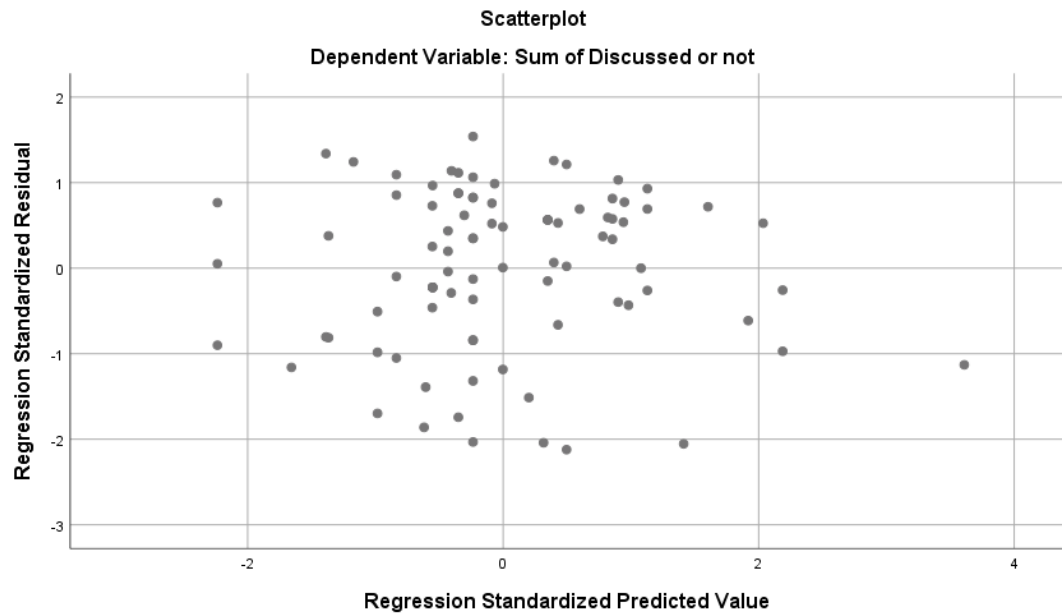
Figure 4: Regression Standardized Residual with Regression Standardized Predicted

Value

The fourth assumption of linearity was examined using box plots of standardized

residual and unstandardized predicted variables, as well as box plots of each independent

variable and dependent variable. Linearity was observed in both plots with the predicted

values following a line. A plot of standardized residuals with unstandardized predicted

values also indicated homoscedasticity, the fifth assumption for multiple linear

regression, with the scatterplot showing no clumping or linear tendencies.

The sixth assumption for multiple linear regression, multicollinearity, indicated a few issues with the data. An examination of the correlations between the independent variables illustrated no correlations larger than 0.7, which would indicate multicollinearity.

An examination of tolerance and VIF did indicate a few independent variables with a collinearity problem. The dummy variables for political ideology, slightly liberal (VIF = 10.64) and moderate (VIF = 11.31) have a VIF over 10. The dummy variables for religion, atheist (VIF = 20.30), Catholic (VIF = 17.78), no preference (VIF = 16.81), and Protestant (VIF = 34.31), also had VIF over 10. The nature of the hypothesis required each of the previous independent variables to remain. Due to the multicollinearity, special care was taken by the researcher to emphasize model fit over significance of individual dependent variables.

The seventh assumption for multiple linear regression is an examination for outliers. No case had a standardized residual greater than plus or minus three standard deviations. No cases had a standardized deleted residual greater than plus or minus three standard deviations. About a third of the cases had leverage values greater than plus or minus three standard deviations. Using Cook's Distance to examine influence, no case value was over one, so the cases remained in the data set.

The eighth assumption that must be met for multiple linear regression is checking for normality. Normality was checked examining a histogram (Figure 3) of standardized residuals, which appeared normally distributed. A Shapiro-Wilk test for normality was not statistically significant, also identifying the data as normally distributed ($p < 0.05$).

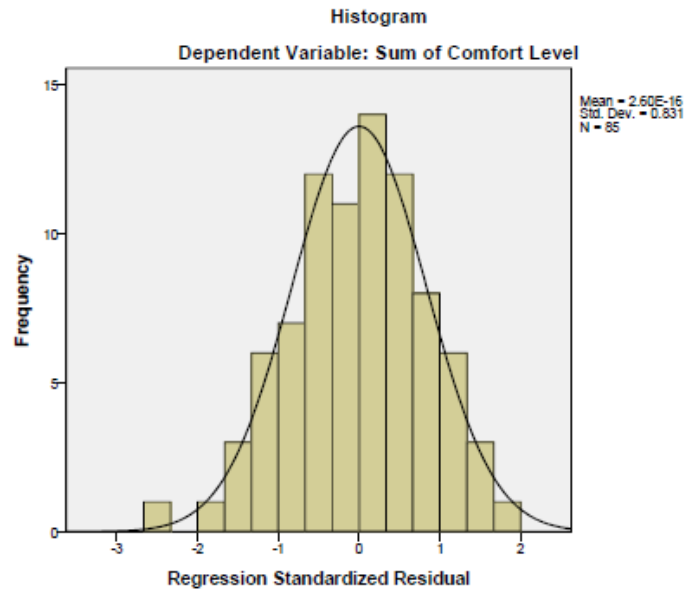*Figure 5*. Histogram Dependent V. Regression Standardized Residual

A P-P plot (Figure 4) was created to examine the observed and expected cumulative
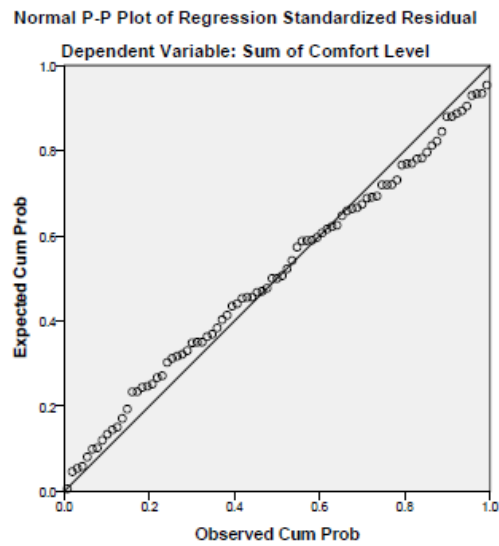
probability, which appeared normally distributed.

Figure 6. P-P Plot: Sum of comfort level

Research Question 2 Results

As shown in Table 6, social science teachers' willingness to discuss controversial issues in the classroom can be explained by the statistical significance with which the independent variables included in the model ($F_{26, 58} = 3.22$, $p = 0.017$). About 13% of the variation in teachers' willingness to discuss controversial issues was accounted for by the independent variables ($R^2 = .133$).

Table 6

Comfort Discussing Controversial Issues: Multiple Regression Analysis (n = 91)

Variable	B	SE B	β	t	df	p
Constant	64.02	4.84		13.23	4	.00
Rural Area[a]	1.97	3.82	.054	.52	90	.61
Extreme or Somewhat Political Ideology[b]	3.86	2.95	.14	1.31	90	.19
Christian Religion[c]	-2.31	2.81	.09	-.82	90	.41
Education Degree[d]	-9.61	3.30	-.30	-2.91	90	.01

Note. Dummy coding was employed with [a]coded rural, [b] coded moderate and no preference, [c]coded non-Christian and no preference, and [d]coded no education degree

Examining the standardized coefficients from the multiple regression analysis presented in Table 6, both political ideology and religious identity had similar results as those found for Hypothesis 1. Teachers with liberal and moderate political identities were more comfortable discussing controversial issues than were conservative teachers.

Teachers religious identities had a negative association with their willingness to discuss controversial issues. High school teachers were less comfortable discussing controversial issues, as were teachers with a degree in education. Teachers who taught Advanced Placement courses were also more comfortable, as were older teachers, in discussing controversial issues. Male teachers, teachers with graduate degrees, and those in urban areas were also more comfortable discussing controversial issues. History and civics teachers were less comfortable discussing controversial issues, and economics teachers were more comfortable.

This chapter began with an introduction of the research questions. A description of the sample followed with Table 1 describing participants' personal and professional demographic characteristics. Participants political and religious beliefs followed in Table 2. Table 3 illustrated teachers' responses to controversial issues discussed during the 2017-2018 school year. The chapter also showed participants responses regarding their political and religious beliefs in Table 3. A breakdown of the individual hypotheses focuses on each hypotheses' assumptions, either the teacher's comfort or willingness discussing controversial issues, as well as the results.

CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study was conducted to determine the influence that social science teachers' demographic characteristics had on their willingness to discuss controversial issues in secondary classrooms. Additionally, the researcher examined social science teachers' comfort levels in discussing controversial issues in secondary classrooms. Furthermore, the study was designed to examine if the independent variables, the developed environment, and teachers' personal beliefs and characteristics, influenced social science teachers' willingness and comfort levels in discussing controversial issues in a statistically significant model.

This chapter has been organized around five sections. The first section contains a discussion of the findings, including a discussion about the effect political ideology and religious identity had on the dependent variables. The second section explains the limitation inherent in this research study. The third section looks at the implications of the research, and the fourth section provides recommendations for future research. Finally, a summary of the research study is presented in the fifth section.

Results

Research concerning the inclusion of controversial issues in the classroom has been focused, for the most part, on its effect on student's performance. The investigation of teachers' perspectives has been limited to the challenges inherent in discussing topics that have not been decided by society (Byford et al., 2009; Iglesias et al., 2017; Journell,

2011; Washington & Humphries, 2011). Journell (2011) and Washington and Humphries (2011), in researching teacher demographics, did not examine the effect teacher demographics had on their practice regarding controversial issues in the classroom.

The first hypothesis presented in this research was structured to examine how teachers' religious identity, political ideology, type of college degree, and a school's developed environment affected the number of controversial issues discussed in in their social science classrooms. The multiple linear regression model was found not to be statistically significant, suggesting that teachers' demographics and school environment does not influence their decision to discuss controversial issues in the classroom.

The second hypothesis supported the examination of how teachers' religious identity, political identity, type of college degree, and the school's developed environment affected their comfort levels in discussing controversial issues in the secondary classroom. The second multiple linear regression was also found to be statistically significant, suggesting that the independent variables influenced how comfortable teachers were when discussing controversial issues.

Political Ideology

Although the overall fit of the model was the focus of this research study, two of the independent variables were statistically significant in both models: (a) teachers' political ideology and (b) teachers' religious identity. Participants' predicted willingness and comfort discussing controversial issues was influenced by the teacher's political ideology. Knowles (2017) suggested, in previous research, that a teacher's political ideology impacted instructional strategies. The model in the present study suggested that

63

teachers who were more liberal were more willing and more comfortable discussing controversial issues in the classroom than teachers who were more conservative. This difference between liberal and conservative teachers has been reflected in social science education research, such as that of Journell (2017) and James (2010). Both of these researchers suggested that conservative pre-service teachers enrolled in social science education courses do not speak up, or are silenced, when controversial topics are discussed in class.

This study suggests that the marginalization of the viewpoints of conservative social science education teachers does translate into classroom practice. Liberal teachers were more willing and more comfortable discussing controversial issues than their moderate and conservative colleagues. The nature of liberal political ideology, one that emphasizes the viewpoints of marginalized peoples, could translate to a more active teacher seeking out marginalized viewpoints than conservative teachers. Conservative teachers also encouraged students to discuss controversial issues, just to a lesser degree than liberal teachers. Conservative teachers do not restrict the discussion of controversial issues in their classroom, and the model indicates that they are still willing and comfortable discussing controversial issues.

Religious Identity

The model also indicated that social studies teachers' willingness and comfort discussing controversial issues was affected by their religious identity. In a qualitative study, White (2010) found that a teachers religious identity affected their classroom

practice in elementary schools. Their religious identity affected how they developed the community of their classrooms, the progress of the teacher-student relationship, and their classroom management strategies. Religious identity played a statistically significant part in the model of this research study. Teachers religious identity had a negative impact on teachers' willingness and comfort discussing controversial issues in the classroom. A teacher who identified as atheist/agnostic, Catholic, no preference, and Protestant had a greater negative relationship than teachers who identified as Jewish, Mormon, or non-Christian.

Teachers can struggle in their efforts to include religious instruction in the school, even when explicitly teaching religion as a part of the social studies curriculum (Nelson, 2010). Even during pre-service teacher training, religious identity can affect how teachers discuss controversial issues (Subedi, 2006). Considering the number of controversial issues that were included in the dependent variable of this study and were focused on topics affected by religion, it is not surprising that religious identity had a negative effect.

<div align="center">Limitations of Study</div>

As with every research study, there are limitations that readers should be aware of and take into consideration when reviewing the results of the current study. The following limitations will put the research study in better context for all readers:

1. Only teachers who saw the Facebook page and were willing to participate were surveyed, thus resulting to a small sample of the total number of secondary social science teachers. This study only reflects the behavior and

<div align="center">65</div>

beliefs of similarly minded teachers, who participate in online activities, and
are willing to discuss their beliefs in a survey.

2. The survey only asked participants to examine their practice during the 2017-
2018 school year, thus allowing no calculations of previous years' practice to
occur.

3. This study was concerned with structured discussion in the classroom. It did
not ask participants to examine accidental or casual discussions in the
secondary classroom. Therefore, the results may be deflated when compared
to the number of discussions, both informal and formal, in the classroom.

4. This study required self-reported data, via a survey, that was dependent on
both the honesty and reliability of respondents.

<u>Implications</u>

The research study, and its corresponding results, provide information that would
benefit several groups invested in education. Teachers should be made aware of a wide
variety of topics discussed in secondary classrooms, so they can feel more comfortable
discussing controversial issues with their students. Showing teachers that many of their
counterparts across the United States discuss controversial issues could decrease the
stigma attached to discussing potentially sensitive topics and lead to an increase in
classroom discussions. School administrators would likewise benefit from learning how
common discussions of a sensitive nature are in the classroom. They would also
understand how a teacher's personal characteristics might impact the topics discussed.
This information could be used to better inform teachers of the benefits of controversial

issues discussion, and what best practices can be implemented in the secondary classroom.

Based on the findings in this study, it would also behoove teacher educators to further invest in their mission to improve teacher candidates graduating from teacher preparation programs. This study suggested that teachers who graduated with degrees in education were less likely to discuss controversial issues in the classroom. Cautionary approaches currently being taught in teacher preparation programs may prevent novice teachers from being comfortable in discussing potentially sensitive topics in the classroom (Fitchet, 2010). This study illustrated how a person's demographic characteristics affect whether or not teachers are comfortable discussing controversial issues in the classroom. Furthermore, for members of the general public, understanding the school as a place of socialization could mitigate some of the rhetoric surrounding these topics. Assuming teachers properly introduce the topic and structure the discussions in the classroom, the general public, including parents, can see secondary schools as a training ground for participatory democracy. Teachers, school administrators, parents, and students could all begin a civil dialogue concerning these topics with less rancor and malice than is currently used.

Future Studies

The goal of this study was to examine how the personal characteristics of secondary social science teachers influences the controversial topics discussed and the comfort levels in discussing controversial issues in the classroom. This research was focused on how teachers' backgrounds, political and religious beliefs, and developed

environment were related to the topics what topics were discussed in the classroom. This study, as with all studies, would benefit from further research. In particular, a multi-level hierarchical regression model, comparing different regions of the United States, would increase the sensitivity of the model. This could be valuable in learning more about the cultural differences of different geographic areas around the United States of America. Furthermore, considering that nearly 50% of the model explained the variance in teachers' willingness and comfort levels in discussing controversial issues, additional independent variables should be added for further clarification.

Another avenue of research that would benefit the field of education would be a study including students' perceptions, comfort levels, and willingness to discuss controversial issues in their classrooms. A study that included students could examine a number of questions raised by the research. First, a study could be designed to investigate if students' religious, political, and demographic backgrounds influenced students' willingness and comfort levels in discussing controversial issues. A comparison could be made between teachers' and students' personal beliefs in order to examine if diametrically opposed viewpoints increase or decrease the number of topics discussed. Furthermore, researchers could also examine if teachers and their students who have opposing political views are more or less comfortable talking about individual topics. This could provide additional and current evidence that schools act as agents of socialization for the democratic, discursive process.

Summary

This research study was intended to fill in a missing piece in social science education research. Research into how personal beliefs and identity affect instruction has been the focus of qualitative research for decades. It is only recently that quantitative examinations have been conducted. Although limitations inherently exist with self-reported data, the present study provides a snapshot of the relationship between what teachers talk about in the classroom, their comfort discussing difficult topics, and their backgrounds, beliefs, and environments. Social science teachers' political, racial, and religious identities have a relationship to their comfort levels and the number of controversial topics discussed, as do demographic and environmental characteristics.

In the present study, teachers who identified with a particular political ideology were more likely to be willing and comfortable in discussing controversial issues. Religious identity generally predicted that teachers were less likely to discuss controversial issues. Middle school teachers were more comfortable and willing to include controversial issues in their classrooms than high school teachers. Teachers who taught AP courses were more comfortable discussing controversial issues, but teachers with degrees in education were less comfortable.

No statistically significant distinction was found between rural and metropolitan areas, nor was there a difference amongst subjects taught. Similarly, the teachers' gender and age had no statistical significance. These results fall in line with Knowles' (2017) study regarding political identity and civic education.

Teachers need help understanding how the classroom acts as a factor of socialization, modeling participatory activities for students to prepare them for a democratic society. One of the cornerstones is the open and civil debate of controversial and sensitive topics. The incorporation of controversial issues in the classroom, especially concerning issues with multiple valid perspectives, is a vital role social science courses can play in K-12 education. Teachers need to be aware of how their personal beliefs affect how and what they teach. Irrespective of their willingness or comfort, it is the duty of social science teachers to incorporate controversial issues into their classrooms in order to prepare students for the democratic process that awaits them.

APPENDIX A
SURVEY

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

The purpose of this study is to examine what controversial issues social science teachers discuss in their classroom. This research will help illustrate what political, social, and/or economic topics are being talked about in classrooms around the nation. By understanding what topics are being discussed, this research can illuminate the classroom as a method by which democratic values are taught to K-12 students.

You will be asked to answer a series of questions, identifying the topics you have discussed with your students, demographic information, and your political ideology and religious beliefs. The zip code of your school will also be asked. You do not have to answer every question or complete every task. You will not lose any benefits if you skip questions or tasks.

Time require: The survey should take no more than 15 minutes to complete.

Completion of the survey implies consent to participate. Survey responses will be collected using a robust, secure, web-based tool (Qualtrics). Once given access by the University of Central Florida, the survey tools and data will be limited for use by the investigators. Data from the survey tool will be collected and stored on a local, secure server.

If you have any questions or would like to have your responses deleted from the study, please contact Bonnie Bittman, Graduate Student, Social Science Education, PhD program, College of Education, (407) 474-5331 or by email at bbittman@ucf.edu. Thank you.

I understand and consent to the survey   _

Have you discussed the following topics in your class?

	Have Discussed	Have Not Discussed
Abortion and the pro-life, pro-choice debate	-	-
Affirmative action	-	-
Government Censorship and/or Monitoring	-	-
Euthanasia and/or physician assisted suicide	-	-
Feminism and/or the #MeToo Movement	-	-
Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual Rights	-	-
Gun rights vs. gun control	-	-
Immigration policy and/or illegal immigration	-	-
Islamaphobia	-	-
Legalization of drugs besides marijuana	-	-
Legalization of marijuana	-	-
Racial Bias in the Judicial System	-	-
Transgender Rights	-	-
Wage Gap Between Men and Women	-	-
Wage Gap Amongst Racial Groups	-	-

What is your comfort level discussing the following topics?

	Very Comfortable	Somewhat Comfortable	Neutral	Somewhat Uncomfortable	Very Uncomfortable
Abortion and the pro-life, pro-choice debate					
Affirmative action					
Government Censorship and/or Monitoring					
Euthanasia and/or physician assisted suicide					
Feminism and/or the #MeToo Movement					
Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual Rights					
Gun rights vs. gun control					
Immigration policy and/or illegal immigration					
Islamaphobia					
Legalization of Drugs other than Marijuana					
Legalization of Marijuana					
Racial Bias in the Judicial System					
Transgender Rights					
Wage Gap between Men and Women					
Wage Gap amongst Racial Groups					

How are controversial issues usually taught in your class?

- Informal Discussion
- Structured Discussion
- Teacher Assignment

- Other _____

Who is more likely to bring up controversial issues more often?

- About equal
- The students
- The teacher

What grade did you teach during the 2017-2018 school year?

- _____

How many years have you taught?

- _____

What subjects did you teach during the 2017-2018 school year?

- U.S. History
- AP Government and Politics: Comparative
- AP Government and Politics: United States
- AP Human Geography
- AP Macroeconomics
- AP Microeconomics
- AP United States History
- AP World History
- Civics/Political Science
- Criminology/Legal Studies
- Economics/Personal Finance
- Human Geography
- Psychology
- Sociology
- World History
- Other _____

What is your political ideology?

- Extremely Liberal
- Slightly Liberal
- Moderate: Middle of the Road
- Slightly Conservative
- Extremely Conservative
- Haven't thought much about it

What is your religious preference?

- Atheist/Agnostic
- Catholic
- Jewish
- Mormon
- Muslim
- No Preference
- Other non-Christian religion
- Protestant/other Christian

To what racial or ethnic group(s) do you most identify?

- African-American (non-Hispanic)
- Asian/Pacific Islander
- Caucasian (non-Hispanic)
- Latino or Hispanic
- Native American or Aleut
- Other

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female

What is the highest level of education you have attained?

- Bachelor's Degree
- Master's Degree
- Doctoral Degree

Do you have a degree in education?

- Yes
- No

What is your year of birth?

- _____

What is the zip code of the school you teach at?

- _____

APPENDIX B
PARTICIPANT ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Thank you for your participation in the survey conducted by Bonnie Bittman at the University of Central Florida. Your participation is greatly appreciated. The purpose of this research study is to examine what controversial issues social science teachers are discussing in their classroom. This research will help illustrate what political, social, and/or economic topics are being discussed around the nation. By understanding what topics are brought up in classrooms, researchers can assist teachers, instructional coaches, and other stakeholders in developing K-12 classrooms as models for democratic participation.

If, for any reason, you would like to withdraw your responses from the survey, please feel free to contact Bonnie Bittman, Graduate Student, Social Science Education, PhD program, College of Education, University of Central Florida, (407) 474-5331, bbittman@ucf.edu or Dr. William Russell, III, Faculty Supervisor, College of Education (407) 823-4345 or by email at Russell@ucf.edu.

Thank you again for your participation in this research.

Bonnie L. Bittman

University of Central Florida

APPENDIX C
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board
Office of Research & Commercialization
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276
www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html

Determination of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1**
          FWA00000351, IRB00001138

To: **Bonnie Bittman**

Date: **January 31, 2018**

Dear Researcher:

On 01/31/2018, the IRB reviewed the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Exempt Determination
Project Title:	Current Events Discussions in High School Social Studies Classrooms
Investigator:	Bonnie Bittman
IRB Number:	SBE-17-13572
Funding Agency:	
Grant Title:	
Research ID:	N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

This letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Gillian Morien on 01/31/2018 10:54:55 AM EST

Designated Reviewer

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APPENDIX D
FACEBOOK GROUPS AND MEMBERSHIP TOTALS

Facebook groups and Membership Totals

Facebook Group	Total Membership
AP Government Teachers	5,627
AP Human Geography Teachers Page	2,187
Badass Teachers Association	65,375
FL Civics Teachers	334
Florida Teachers Unite!	3,731
High School Teachers of Sociology	1,399
International Baccalaureate Economics Teachers' Group	784
Louisiana Council for the Social Studies	452
Secondary Social Studies Teachers Collaborative Group	7,619
Teachers Helping Teachers	6,090
Teachers Who Slay	31,071
Teaching Social Studies	1,238
Texas History Teachers	1,018
U.S. History Teachers	5,244
We the People (Who Teach Civics/Government)	1,695

APPENDIX E
FACEBOOK GROUP POST

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