

Why do we teach history?

Behind the curriculum debates lurks a deeper question about what it means to form citizens.

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A spate of state bills directing the teaching of history and civics has obvious political aims: energize conservative voters in time for the midterm elections by convincing them that children are being indoctrinated with strange or unwelcome ideologies. But if we look deeper, this controversy raises important questions about what it means to be a citizen—and what kind of education citizens need.

One such bill, in Texas, says that teachers should draw from “diverse and contending perspectives” when exploring “current events or widely debated and currently controversial issues of public policy or social affairs.” Who doesn’t want their children or their students capable of discussing “controversial issues” and understanding “diverse and contending perspectives”?

But the bill reflects a much deeper question: How should the story of our country be told? It says that schools should teach “the history of white supremacy” alongside “the moral . . . foundations of the United States.” But they must not teach that “an individual, by virtue of the individual’s race or sex, is inherently racist, sexist or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously”—and teachers must avoid teaching history in such a way that students might feel “distress or anguish” about that history.

The Texas bill perhaps represents a certain consensus that existed not long ago about how US history should be taught. We agreed that slavery was what the bill calls an “aberration” of our ideals of liberty and equality—and that we, as individuals, take no blame for it, so long as we do not perpetuate racism today. We should feel pride in our nation’s founding and history and proud of the progress we’ve made.

This story has been powerfully challenged in recent years, not least by the 1619 Project. In this alternative telling of the nation’s founding, slavery was not an aberration; it was integral to the economic and political foundation of the nation. It is at the heart of our founding documents’ compromises. It is essential to our understanding of who we are and how we came to be. To understand this, we have to go beyond individualism to grapple with systemic racism. We have to grapple with the meanings of liberty and equality in the founding documents and ask hard questions about how the nation formed and how it functions today.

The Texas bill specifically forbids the use of the 1619 Project. For all its talk about diverse perspectives, it will not allow the perspective that challenges the narrative of foundational goodness with slavery as mere aberration. It disallows the deeper conversation we need to have: Why do we study US history? To avoid the mistakes of the past? To undo centuries-old systems of social control? To instill a love of country?

While consensus is hard to imagine right now, perhaps we could begin by agreeing that the teaching of history is fundamentally about shaping citizens for participation in democracy. This requires the ability to see from diverse perspectives. It also requires knowing the story of social change in this country and dealing honestly with the complexities of our founding.

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