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Emotions and Politics: Ideas and formats for citizenship educators

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Abstract

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Title: Emotions, Media and Politics: Ideas for Citizenship Educators

This presentation will consider key priorities for citizenship educators engaged in teaching about the challenging relationship between emotions and politics. The presentation will open with setting out a key tension that has always informed thinking about the role of emotions in political life: On the one hand, liberal theory has always viewed emotionality as the polar opposite of rationality, and it has therefore been viewed as an enemy of liberal citizenship. On the other hand, scholars across a range of humanities and social sciences fields have, over the past few decades, turned to the serious study of emotions. In doing so, they have determined that citizens are, in fact, motivated to engage with political life on the basis of emotional engagement, and that such engagement does not preclude a rational approach.

My own work has focused on the relationship between emotions, politics and media (e.g. Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018). The media - whether in the form of conventional news organisations or social media - are particularly important to consider in this context because they serve as the key means by which citizens learn about political life. It is therefore of vital importance to understand how emotion shapes the production, texts and audience engagement with media.

My research has demonstrated that emotions play a vital role in shaping mediated public life, for better and for worse. On the one hand, journalistic storytelling at its best links the large and often abstract news of major social and political importance with concrete, embodied narratives that help to foster compassion for others whose experiences might be very different from ourselves, but whose emotions are both recognizable and universal. On the other hand, some forms of emotional language, channeled through the media, may also contribute to division, intolerance and hatred. This has become an increasing worry in the wake of the rise of populist movements that often seek to exclude those who are perceived as different. This tension between uses of emotion that may bolster liberal ideals and those that may undermine them suggests the need for a nuanced analysis not only of which emotions circulate in mediated politics, but also how they do, and to what effect. In particular, it demonstrates the need for students, as future citizens, to develop an awareness of how media operate in the context of an increasingly polarised and fragmented information ecosystem.



To draw on these insights in citizenship education, the presentation will consider how to use concrete - and contrasting - examples of media coverage in teaching. It will look at stories ranging from Pulitzer Prize winners to tabloid journalism to provide ways of helping citizenship educators to work with students in developing a careful analysis of the constructive and dangerous uses of emotion in the media. In particular, the examples used in the presentation will illustrate how some award winning stories mobilize compassion for those affected by social problems including drug use and poverty. At the same time, it will illustrate how to identify xenophobic and/or exclusionary language in journalistic coverage.

References

Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2018). *Emotions, Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

