Forging Civic Armour Against Toxic Populism: An Affect-First Approach to Fostering Reflective and Resilient Citizens

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Populism is rising worldwide and takes various forms in response to local, national and global concerns.

Teachers in Alberta who are seeking to address populism in their classrooms will recognize that this topic relates to various topics in the social studies program of studies (Alberta Education 2005–07)—particularly, civic and political institutions, participation, and deliberation.

In this article, I argue for and provide strategies for an affect-first approach to civic discourse in the classroom.

The focus is on toxic populism in Canada and the United States, but the approach I detail also applies to Brazil, Germany, Hungary, India, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Zambia and other places struggling to address this phenomenon.

What Is Populism?

Defining *populism* is difficult, because populism is not an ideological stance. Unlike an ideology, "populism can offer neither complex nor comprehensive answers to the political questions that modern societies generate" (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 6).

Nor does populism belong uniquely to either the political right or the political left. In Canada, populism has manifested as both the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) (social progressivism) and the Reform, Social Credit and Wildrose parties (social conservativism).

Thus, it is more helpful to think of populism as a political technique that can be mapped onto ideologies or as a set of tools that established doctrines use as a framework for action.

The common thread in populist movements is the establishment of politically useful binaries that pit those who are deemed common, pure, honest and hard-working (often referred to as "the people") against the elites, who are seen as corrupt. Who is considered to constitute the elite, however, varies (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017).

Take, for instance, the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States, which defined the elite economically, as the 1 per cent who siphoned wealth away from the hard-working 99 per cent (Anderson 2021). We can also look at various Alberta premiers who have blamed the federal Liberals for supporting Central Canada on the backs of "hardworking Albertans" (Russ 2023). Or we can see how the populist movement in Quebec has long identified the Anglo elite in Montreal and stoked resentment—and, ultimately, legislation—directed at racialized, non-Christian Quebecers, who are seen as threats to Québécois culture (Johnson 2007; Mann 2024).

Although we can find examples of populism from the left wing of the political spectrum, today's populism is almost without exception a right-wing phenomenon, with distinctive characteristics. Specifically, in addition to demonizing the elites, right-wing populism has a strong tendency toward authoritarianism, antiestablishment sentiment, and often nationalist/separatist and nativist/antipluralist inclinations that target vulnerable others (such as racial, ethnic, religious, or sexual and gender minorities).

The Economic Conditions Argument

Readers are likely familiar with both of the following historical examples of populism in North America.

For many history teachers in the United States, the word *populism* conjures the agrarian People's Party movement at the end of the 19th century. This movement drew from the energy of farmers who felt that the wealthy elites (mercantile middlemen) were siphoning off their wealth, growing fat while the livelihoods of farmers grew leaner. Moreover, the farmers believed that the country's two major political parties were failing them (Ostler 1993; Winsboro and Musoke 2003).

In Canada, the CCF was founded in the early 1930s and rose (primarily in Saskatchewan) in response to concerns that the economic elites were prioritizing profits over people, which led to growing support for the foundations of our modern welfare state (McDonald 2013). At the same time, the Social Credit Party of Alberta rose to prominence, demonizing the same economic elites but with more authoritarian tendencies (Rettie 2009), which is common in right-wing populism.

It would be instructive for Canadians to consider the recent history of deindustrialization in the American heartland (Kendzior 2018). Decades of globalization have stripped the American working class of stable livelihoods, as jobs have been automated or shipped overseas. This has led to speculation that working-class disaffection (particularly among white people) spawned, or at least fuelled, the rise of populism in the United States (Packer 2016; Pieterse 2018). Moreover, this economic destabilization has occurred in significant swing states (such as Pennsylvania, Ohio and Michigan), meaning that it has shaped national politics.

Given this context, one could be forgiven for believing, as I did, that economic disparity or dislocation has been the driver of populist upheaval in the United States, particularly given that left-wing populism typically takes on an expressly economic mantle.

This conclusion, if correct, would lead us to believe that social studies teachers, in teaching about populism, should foreground the economic realities of people struggling with poverty. In Canada, this might mean featuring displaced workers in the oil and gas sector, who experienced a 34 per cent decline in employment from 2014 to 2021 (Roach 2022). This approach would give students ways to think about how we might remediate the situation by various means.

Likewise, considering the consequences of American tariffs on Canadian industries, teachers might want to take special care in addressing the economic dislocation of working-class people in order to prevent the further rise of populist grievance. At the same time, they might want to emphasize the importance of building empathy toward those struggling economically.

Although these approaches are economically and ethically warranted, this instrumental approach may lead us to miss a more important educational aim when confronting surging populism.

The economic explanation for the rise in populism does not hold up to scrutiny. Analyses of voters in the United States, the United Kingdom and the European Union demonstrate no or a very weak correlation between class and support for right-wing populists. To illustrate, shifts toward support for Donald Trump and Boris Johnson were even across class lines (Mols and Jetten 2016; Mondon and Winter 2019). This is also evident in recent federal and provincial election trends in Canada (Graves and Smith 2020). The consistency of these findings fundamentally undermines the argument that economic dislocation is the critical driver of right-wing populism.

Further undermining the economic conditions argument is the finding that the strength of support for right-wing populists does not even correlate with a country's or state's economic strength or with actual (as opposed to imagined) patterns of immigration (Lincicome 2021).

Even if the economic conditions argument did hold up, we should stop to think critically about why right-wing populism has surged but left-wing populism has not. Diamond (2018) concludes that although economic pressures can lead to openness to populist appeals, "they do not explain why it is specifically nativist, xenophobic parties and politicians who successfully mobilize [voters'] feelings of anxiety and resentment."

This leads us to consider not economic conditions or class but, rather, a more existential sense of economic peril.

Economic Peril and Why It Matters

The fact that right-wing populism in the United States features economic peril as a central trope is not, as it turns out, about class. Class is a red herring. What is significant is the strong correlation between support for right-wing populism and the belief that the economic system unfairly advantages the economic elite at the expense of the general populace—a view shared by the progressive left (Pew Research Center 2021).

These same political correlations bear out in research on western alienation in Alberta politics: Albertans who feel that the province is being unfairly disadvantaged,

exploited or disrespected are much more likely to support the United Conservative Party (UCP) than the New Democratic Party (NDP) (Environics Institute for Survey Research 2023).

Thus, the economic realities of class in North America (as well as Europe and elsewhere) do not appear to drive populism on either the left or the right. Rather, perceived unfairness in the economy leads to a sense of economic peril, which would-be populists exploit for their political advantage because it drives fear and anxiety.

The perception of economic peril is important and urgent where the promise of economic security is the reward for hard work. Imperilling this promise threatens the American dream (Rank and Hirschl 2014), as well as the similar, but more expansive, Canadian dream.[1] This ethos is an example of an ontological construct—a belief about how the world is and how it ought to work. Our ontological security is our "sense of confidence and trust that the world is what it appears to be" (Kinnvall 2004, 746).[2] This sense of confidence is woven into our personal and collective narratives, which help us make sense of who we are; what communities, nations, countries or regions we belong to; whose ideas and desires matter; and who maintains control over cultural and political norms.

When this narrative about how the world should work is threatened, people can lose that sense of security. Perceived threats could include increasing diversity, the departure of stable blue-collar jobs, a sense of declining patriotism or national or regional prestige, alienation from the mechanisms of influence over one's life, loss of trust in social institutions, a sense that the elite are "making out like bandits," and so on.

When our ontological beliefs are shaken, we tend to look to sources of ballast to relieve our existential anxiety. In the current political context, which is characterized by polarization, straightforward explanations (for example, "Immigrants are taking your jobs") are often more effective than nuanced explanations (such as the explanation that a variety of changes related to policy, global supply chains, profit motives and technology have displaced some workers while benefiting other workers). Straightforward explanations offer diagnoses and responses that are easier to grasp and remember—even if they are fundamentally wrong. In contrast, nuanced arguments alienate even sympathetic audiences while doing little to draw support from adversarial audiences (Siev et al 2024). In short, when individuals and groups suffer from ontological insecurity, they are vulnerable to the narrative simplicity of populist rhetoric (Bolton 2021).

It is not a stretch to assume that the economic conditions currently straining Canadians (such as inflation, housing shortages and tariffs) will foment feelings of economic peril here. We, too, will likely see pressure from populists, even if the surge in anti-American sentiment temporarily tempers it.

It is important to note that economic peril is not always a negative impetus. We should remember that the failure of political action to respond to real or perceived grievances drives populist impulses (Laclau 2005). When populist rhetoric catalyzes political action that offers redress, these positive political changes can dispel populist tailwinds.

For example, the agrarian populism of the late 19th century ushered in a wave of legislation that defined the Progressive Era in the United States.[3] Similarly, in Canada in the 1940s, the rising popularity of the CCF in the west led Liberal prime minister William Lyon Mackenzie King to adopt some of its platform proposals, including an old-age pension, employment insurance and family subsidies (Bonikowsky 2013; McCracken 2019). Moreover, nearly two decades later, the introduction of universal health care in Saskatchewan, by CCF premier Tommy Douglas, led to the federal *Medical Care Act* of 1966.[4] What Canadians today view as the signature accomplishments of the welfare state were responses to populist concerns and pressures, and they served to dissipate the antipathy that populist rhetoric engendered.

Left unaddressed, however, populism can take a frightening turn. Today, right-wing populists in Canada, the United States and elsewhere use rhetoric to explain their supporters' feelings of insecurity. In addition to blaming the elites, they point to a defined other (or others), whom they blame for destabilizing the lives and well-being of their target audience, even though the people they are blaming have less power than the aggrieved group. Worse still, in a move to harness resentment, they frequently attempt to connect the two groups—the elite and the vulnerable other—in a way that paints a picture of a conspiracy against the interests of the "right kind" of people.

There is perhaps no clearer example of this than the MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement, which offers receptive Americans both an elite oppressor (the liberal elite) and targets toward whom they can channel their rage (typically, racial, religious, or sexual and gender minorities). This movement represents an entirely different kind of populism—a toxic populism more characteristic of nascent fascism than of economic populism (Albright 2018). Canadians are certainly not immune to this toxic populism (Leman-Langlois, Campana and Tanner 2024).

From a psychological perspective, having targets to blame for one's feelings of insecurity is satisfyingly easy—much easier than building coalitions of politically diverse people who share a belief that the economic landscape has shifted against everyday people (Kwak 2020; Saul 2017; Williamson and Gelfand 2019).

However, the consequences for those who become the targets of this manufactured rage can be devastating (Bhattacharyya, Gabriel and Small 2016; Orlowski 2011; van Kessel 2019). Moreover, the data clearly show alarming increases in hate crimes, perpetrated overwhelmingly by white people against religious, racial, or sexual and gender minorities, which often mirror the right-wing political rhetoric against those vulnerable groups (Kwak 2020; Royal Canadian Mounted Police 2024; Statistics Canada 2025).[5]

Schools and Toxic Populism

Schools are not immune to toxic populism. The trends discussed here also affect our students and school environments.

In a study for the Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA), Rogers et al (2017) found that high schools in the United States had seen increased levels of polarization, incivility and hostility toward minorities and other vulnerable groups, related to political rhetoric. As Westheimer (2019) notes, this has a negative impact on student learning and well-being, as well as students' confidence in both democracy and the rule of law.

Although I have not seen similar research in Canada, one would be hard pressed to argue that Canadian classrooms are immune to those pressures.

The pressing challenge is what teachers should do in the classroom to counter the threats to democratic norms and to our students' ability to talk across differences. Sperry (2018) and Westheimer (2019) offer some excellent cognitive strategies. In the next section, I go beyond this to offer ideas for emphasizing an affect-first approach to civic discourse.

How Should Teachers Pivot Toward an Affect-First Approach?

Social studies teachers must first recognize that political and social antipathy is not primarily a cognitive issue. A growing body of evidence across multiple disciplines reveals that cognition takes its cues from affect, not vice versa (Justice 2021; Neumann 2019; Petty and Briñol 2015).

In practical terms, this means that we make decisions based, at least partly, on our emotional states—both acute emotional reactions related to discrete moments in our lives and chronic conditions of stress and discomfort. Therefore, when mediating difficult conversations, teachers must be prepared to meaningfully address affect.

Moreover, there is a growing recognition that in ignoring affect, teachers are not setting students up for success in the civic sphere (Keegan 2024). If teachers want to address ontological insecurity or other emotions that have emerged in response to feelings of economic peril or the rhetoric of toxic populism, we must approach the issue from multiple affective fronts, in addition to the cognitive approaches we engage in as a regular part of our practice.

Here, I provide strategies to help teachers more effectively confront the toxic aspects of populist rhetoric.

Emphasizing Relationships

Relationships are at the heart of empathy.

Rogers and his team at IDEA (Rogers et al 2017, 30) have put forth several suggestions for fostering empathetic engagement:

- Build relationships
- Establish norms
- Model and practise
- Structure opportunities for participation
- Monitor and respond

Teachers must not assume that students in our classrooms know anything about one another. At the beginning of the school year, I use a get-to-know-you activity in which students share the important people in their lives and the activities they like to engage in. This enables them to forge connections with each other—often in ways they did not anticipate. Similar activities throughout the year can initiate and reinforce bonds of fellowship between students.

To be sure, as Eppler-Wolff and Martin (2021, 306) note, the process of relational development does "not materialize overnight," but over time teachers can foster in our classrooms the emotional safety students need in order to engage effectively in difficult conversations.

In Alberta, we would do well, too, to draw upon the relationally rich kinship teachings of Indigenous Peoples. For example, Blackfoot kinship teachings (Bastien 2004; May-Derbyshire 2019) are beginning to shape my thinking.

This kind of relational work can have wide-ranging benefits in building the social capital that strengthens trust within our communities and, subsequently, strengthens our democracies (Putnam 2000, 2020). I have seen firsthand how engaging in political talk before building relationships can be damaging, because students come to see their peers in a two-dimensional way based on political caricatures rather than recognizing the complexities of their identities.

Addressing the Affective Domain

Social studies teachers and students must become adept at identifying how populist rhetoric uses tools of misinformation and misdirection to manipulate and take advantage of our emotional states.

Teachers must shift their practice to meaningfully address the affective domain as part of an effort to foster affective citizenship, which recognizes that we all wrestle with how we feel and how we believe we ought to feel about a range of issues and people. Affective citizenship also considers how we cope with difference and discomfort and how emotional discourses shape how we engage with issues of civic importance that often hold key elements of disagreement (Keegan 2021).

The tools teachers use to address the affective domain often fold into socioemotional learning (SEL). However, also required is a critical engagement that goes beyond the individual response in order to critically evaluate the political sphere that can trigger certain feelings. So, although SEL skills may be helpful, teachers must consider how affective responses and the messaging intended to elicit them are endemic in a polarized society and how the capacity to reflect critically about affective responses in real time is essential to effective civic reasoning and discourse. This affective learning is essential because it fosters a focus on emotional reactivity, self-regulation, relationship development and executive function in the context of issues that are meaningful to students' identities and concerns about the world (Fullmer et al 2022; Immordino-Yang et al 2024).

Effectively engaging students in this work means taking the time to unpack their emotional responses so that they will not be attempting to understand or respond to contested issues while in a hot emotional state. It also means overcoming student apathy driven by the feeling that "it is not worth the persistence, frustration and exhaustion that inevitably comes with addressing political discord" (BridgeND 2023).

Fostering students' capacity to reflect on what has caused them to become affectively activated and responding in ways that help bring them back to a cool emotional state appear to be necessary for fruitful engagement with emotionally challenging civic conversations (Bass 2022). As Immordino-Yang et al (2024, 2) argue, "This means that educators must consider how students will connect and relate emotionally and intellectually to the curriculum, along with, or as part of the question of, what [they] should know and be able to do." Indeed, affect almost certainly must be addressed before evidentiary proceedings can begin to be useful (Zembylas 2020, 2022).

The capacity to help students navigate these challenges is an area for growth for many teachers, especially considering that they may not possess those skills themselves. According to Brown (2021), most people do not. Nevertheless, in the context of increasing polarization and reduced resilience in the face of ideological conflict (Haidt 2024), teachers may be called upon to be more-effective mediators of affective and relational development as a core function of preparing students to be effective citizens.

The goal, ultimately, is to help students become more cognizant, capable and resilient in managing and responding to their emotions in the face of ideas that evoke affective responses. This will help them respond more effectively, even when doing so is difficult (Haidt 2024; Magness 2022).

Setting Students Up for Discursive Success

When teachers establish a foundation for good relations and begin building the capacity to navigate the affective terrain of the civically minded classroom, they create a basis of trust upon which to have the kinds of conversations we want civically engaged students to have.

Students, however, need guidance and structure for these conversations. Teachers should establish norms for engaging in political conversation, including teaching listening skills. These skills involve listening for what is being said instead of framing a rebuttal; demonstrating understanding of both the content and the intention of what has been said by summarizing, asking clarifying questions and requesting elaboration; and reading body language.

Various models may be helpful. One straightforward approach is using accountable discussions, which require evidence-based arguments, respect and polite conversation.[6] Teachers can help students do this work by modelling conversation for and with them. This can involve scripted role play in which the teacher or observing students may intervene at critical moments to provide feedback or suggestions for responding more effectively.

Once students have had whole-group practice, teachers should provide them with structured opportunities to have conversations, with support. These conversations might take the form of structured academic controversies, fishbowl discussions or Socratic seminars. Teachers can be present to model, reframe and demonstrate various ways of phrasing statements or to offer suggestions about how students might respond to their peers.

Being fully present throughout these conversations allows teachers to reinforce high-quality discussion and reframe areas where students struggle. In time, students will become more efficacious without this continuous scaffolding. This is the essential work of social studies—to help secure the quality of discourse necessary for a

functioning democracy. Once the foundational norms are established, addressing affect head-on becomes easier to accomplish in a supportive manner.

Conclusion

Through an affect-first approach, teachers can help students recognize how toxic populist rhetoric makes them feel, as well as how that rhetoric is designed to manipulate their feelings. Students can then learn how to step back in order to regulate their affective states so that they can more readily engage cognitively. This will help them engage in productive political discussions, even across divisive topics, as well as navigate an increasingly complex and contentious world.

Developing these skills and dispositions is necessary not only for the healthy functioning of democratic societies but also for remediating the toxic state of political discourse. Social studies teachers are on the front lines of preparing students—indeed, forging their civic armour—so they can confront an increasingly perilous world without falling prey to the viciousness that these times often bring to the fore.

Notes

1. "Has the Canadian Dream Replaced the American Dream?," Path to Canada, https://pathtocanada.com/has-the-canadian-dream-replaced-the-american-dream/.

2. See also Valente and Pertegas (2018).

3. "Populism and Progressivism, 1890–1918," PBS LearningMedia, www.pbslearningmedia.org/collection/us-history-collection/era/populism-and-progressivism-18901918/.

4. "The Honourable Thomas Douglas," Canadian Medical Hall of Fame, www.cdnmedhall.ca/laureates/thomasdouglas/.

5. "Facts and Statistics," US Department of Justice, www.justice.gov/hatecrimes/hate-crime-statistics.

6. "Accountable Discussions," The Teacher Toolkit, www.theteachertoolkit.com/index.php/tool/accountable-discussions.

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