The Role of Educational Censorship in Georgia Social Studies Curriculum

(4,710 words)

Abstract

History, the foundation for societal progress: It is the force that shows us where we have been, so we can appreciate where we are now, and better prepare for the future of tomorrow. It creates shared identities. It facilitates societal cohesion. Hence, within global society, a comprehensive social studies curriculum is vital for prosperity, and with that, a huge responsibility for us to handle.

Introduction

Specifically within the United States, a comprehensive understanding of American history is of utmost importance. Due to its democratic form of governance, education bringing informed citizens into society is essential for functionality. This is due to democracy causing America to be, as stated by Abraham Lincoln, “of the people, by the people, for the people,” with common citizens being the deciders of government officials who decide all of our policies. Without having a comprehensive understanding of history, citizens can not understand past failures, our government structure, or the impact of government policies. Hence, Pandora's Box will open, and the stable democracy America has known for so long will crumble.

However, due to democratic freedoms within American society such as the First amendment, Americans have been able to gain a holistic, multidimensional historical understanding because of the enrichment from the diverse array of perspectives America allows to spawn and thrive. Because of this freedom, America is a melting pot country- a country of migrants, all with unique stories and ethnic backgrounds. History allows Americans to embrace

this diversity and find common ground. It allows them to find a shared identity, on top of ensuring the stability of our democracy.

Unfortunately, this comprehensive historical education America once knew is currently under siege. The root of this dilemma: modern culture. America is now a society plagued with polarization and emotional fireworks that dominate all aspects of life. Whether it is the emergence of an online cancel culture that critiques individual's every move, a massive increase in political protest, or hostility in the realm of politics, it seeps into all facets of life, including history. No longer is it about true understanding of issues, it is about being "politically correct" or "inclusive." It is about emotions. Hence, today's history curriculum is no longer holistic or multidimensional. It is chronological, dominated by facts, and valuing basic understanding of America's successes or household events like World War 2 over true historical understanding. Sadly, the American government has caved to this culture and is enforcing this new interpretation of history curriculum. It is causing a shift from being a government "of the people, by the people, for the people" into a government omitting many events and contexts, borderlining the development of censorship. And history shows us what happens when societies in the past began censoring education:

The Ming Dynasty (Ended in 1644)

The Roman Empire (Collapsed in 476 AD)

Nazi Germany (Ended in 1945)

The list is endless, but what do all of these have in common? They were once prosperous, thriving societies that all have two overlying similarities: They enforced educational censorship, and they're gone. They valued ethnocentric history with gilded, glorified interpretations over true understanding, and because of this creating uninformed, unprepared citizens, the societies

collapsed. As George Santanyana states, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” With America’s current trajectory, soon it could just be another name on the list.

However, many are making active strides to ensure that doesn’t happen. Whether it’s teachers coming out exposing the deficiency of true historical understanding or historians evaluating the transformation in historical curriculum, it is something currently being addressed in today’s society. The overall consensus by experts is that the new form of history being forced upon students is diminishing historical understanding, and hence deteriorating their understanding of national identity. However, due to the emotional cultural climate, there are still many who believe the objective, fact-based history is the best foot forward. This is because they believe discussing America’s raw history, including both the good and the bad America has done, could be triggering to students affected by America’s wrongdoings and could further exacerbate their predisposition due to curriculum exposing their hardships and singling them out which causes them to be treated differently.

Literature Review; Finding My Gap

To get a sense of the broader stakes of this turn in history education, I dug into the research that already exists — a rich, burgeoning literature on historical censorship and its national effects. In various fields of scholarly inquiry it has been clearly established, how, that educations do not only work as handovers of facts but as a powerful means to form national identity, as well as to teach civic ideology.

In *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, James W. Loewen takes us into the shaping of our history and the way it is taught, shining a light on how education fails to confront historical nuances and teach students to be critical consumers of information. Textbooks, Loewen contends, tend to whitewash resistance to slavery, minimize the brutal impact of foreign policy misreadings and

mythologize national leaders. He argues that these omissions are not accidental but part of a conscious effort to create a morally clear version of the past — one that suppresses critical consciousness and civic doubt.

Not Just a Textbook, by Madalyn Minnick, continues that conversation and contends that not only does what students learn inform their knowledge, it informs their identities. Minnick concentrates on the whitewashed stories' impact on students' conceptions of democracy, justice and national identity. And when curriculum favors one version of history over another, particularly one that prioritizes whiteness and American exceptionalism, it attempts to marginalize other identities and dissuades questioning, according to her research. This impacts students' understanding of their responsibilities as citizens, and continues the message that patriotism is equivalent to silence.

In *The Cult of the American Consensus*, the historian John Higham shows us how this narrative impulse really took off in the wake of World War II. He demonstrates how policymakers and historians, meanwhile, have presented a vision of American history that stressed unity, downplayed conflict, and glossed over the hard truths about labor, race and imperialism. As Higham explains, this sanitized consensus emerged from Cold War anxieties, which in turn grew out of the necessity of intimidation through projected ideological unity (i.e., to combat communism), whose echoes can still be heard in modern textbooks.

As Dana Goldstein shows in *The Teacher Wars*, the battle over the historic curriculum has been highly charged. Goldstein demonstrates how school boards, particularly in more conservative states, have become ideological gatekeepers promoting revisions that conform to

partisan aims. Her analysis shows that curriculum does not develop in an academic vacuum, but in politicised spaces of conflict where power, culture and education intersect.

Similarly, Jonathen Zimmerman's *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools* presents a broad look at how history teaching reflects much larger cultural battles in the United States. Zimmerman shows that arguments over curriculum, whether about slavery and civil rights or immigration and L.G.B.T.Q.+ history, have come to stand in for broader national anxieties. His concern for what this means on the ground for teachers and students underscores the reality that these battles are played out not only in policy but in classroom culture, where identities, memories and power are worked through every day.

The economist and historian Bethany Moreton has written about the curricular economy in Texas — described in *To Serve God and Wal-Mart* — and how economic forces, such as the textbook market, determine what students are taught. She uncovers how corporate and religious lobbying frequently determine the content of textbooks in influential states, such as Texas, which then influences what's taught around the country on account of market size. Moreton shows just how censorship is not simply ideological but also economic, and raises questions about whose ideological aims are served in public education.

Adding a phycological facet, *Teaching What Really Happened* by James W. Loewen (not to be confused with his earlier book) explores the psychological effects of what gets left out of history. Loewen explores how teaching students an incomplete or dishonest version of history can produce cynicism or disillusionment, particularly when individuals find themselves confronted later in life with the truths left out of everyone's education for them. Students who

learn critical, inclusive history tend to become more engaged citizens, he argues, whereas those taught mythologized history are liable to feel betrayed, and to disengage from civic life.

Lastly, *Letting Go of Literary Whiteness* by Carlin Borsheim-Black and Sophia Tatiana Sarigianides challenges the perpetuation of Eurocentric historical and literary canons in secondary classrooms. Their argument is literary, but it's a broader case they're making: for the ways that racially exclusive choices about what to put in curriculums serve to advance one set of dominant narratives and suppress another. They offer some suggestions for breaking out of this pattern, and integrating more historically underrepresented voices within a new curriculum. And their findings indicate that even when teachers are well-meaning, white-centered historical narratives are often perpetuated unconsciously, unless systemic change is achieved.

Bridging The Gap

Together, these eight works make a compelling case: the American school system is not simply miseducating students by omission — it is constructing national identity through selective memory. Whether driven by politics, economics, or cultural fear, this sanitized curriculum disorients students, obscures injustice, and undermines civic engagement. Scholars have rightly scrutinized the College Board, textbook publishers, and postwar ideological shifts. Yet even the most thorough critiques remain focused at the national level, rarely zooming in on how censorship plays out in individual states or classrooms.

So what happens at the *state* level? What happens in **Georgia** — one of the first states to enact a full suite of curriculum censorship laws?

In 2022, Georgia passed three key laws that have fundamentally altered the educational landscape:

- The **Divisive Concepts Law**, which restricts the discussion of so-called "controversial" topics, particularly around race, identity, and systemic oppression.

- The **Parents' Bill of Rights**, granting parents veto power over what their children learn — even if that means removing entire units or banning specific books.

- And the **Harmful to Minors Law**, which enables content removal based on broad, subjective definitions of what's "inappropriate" — language increasingly wielded against texts addressing gender, sexuality, or racial injustice.

These laws aren't symbolic. They are actively reshaping what's taught, how it's taught, and what's left out in Georgia classrooms. And yet — despite national concern over academic freedom and civic literacy — almost no research has directly examined how such laws are impacting students' civic development. What do students learn — or unlearn — in this climate of restriction? How do teachers respond when asked to dilute or erase history? What happens to young people's sense of democracy when the truth is curated for comfort?

This is the research gap I aim to fill.

By focusing on **Georgia**, a state on the frontlines of modern curriculum censorship, my study investigates how these legal constraints are enforced at the classroom level — and how they affect the civic identity of students navigating this shifting educational terrain.

In order to explore this, this research paper intends to analyze this dilemma, answering the question *"**How does educational censorship in K-12 history curriculum due to Georgia's censorship laws affect Georgian students' understanding of national identity and civic responsibility?**"* By focusing on this critical issue within the local context of Georgia, my study aims to illuminate the broader implications of educational censorship on students' perceptions of their history and their roles as engaged members of society.

Methodology

The only method of data collection selected for the research was a student survey to consider the consequences of educational censorship mandated in the censorship laws of Georgia in this law to K-12 history curriculum on students' attitudes toward national identity and civic responsibility. This approach allowed me to assess the historical knowledge and the attitude about history teaching, but also the sense of citizenship of students in the presence of reform upon reform of the curriculum.

Student Survey: I conducted a detailed survey of the students in a large suburban high school in Marietta, Georgia and was able to obtain both qualitative and quantitative data pertaining to students' knowledge and understanding of historical events, what students know about history, as well as students' own beliefs as to what it means to be American. The survey itself was a combination of close- and open-ended questions in order to open up an expansive view of how students integrate historical narratives and apply them to their roles as citizen.

The survey was disseminated online through Microsoft Forms in order to assist in recruitment, while also keeping participants anonymous. This permitted respondents to respond to these questions without social desirability bias, by providing them with an opportunity to express their true attitudes. They were asked about their acknowledgement of past injustices, their interpretations of what they see as inadequate curriculum teaching, and their own views about what it means to be a citizen.

Quantitative statistics were used to analyze the responses to the closed ended question to provide trends and patterns of student responses. These measures also gave a baseline view of what students knew overall and allowed the facilitator to see if misunderstandings matched with curriculum changes. Not primarily but secondarily, it might be the case that the open-ended responses also provided additional qualitative (i.e., contextually rich) insights that complemented what was found in the quantitative analysis by providing us with how the students described the situation in their own words.

By only examining student responses, the study sought to privilege the voices of the ones most impacted by curricular changes. The survey results offer a telling glimpse of how censorship laws influence not only classroom content, but students' wider understanding of national identity and democratic values. Through this process, the study provides a rich student-focused account of history education as shaped by Georgia's legislative control.

Data and Analysis

In order to assess the effects of Georgia's censorship laws on students' understanding of national identity and civic responsibility, 103 students were surveyed. The survey yielded substantial quantitative insights on perceptions of historical education, whether exposure to controversial historical events or lesser-known events reinforces civic awareness, and if students believe censorship impacted their curriculum.

Perceived Importance of Comprehensive Historical Education

One foundational question the survey asked was whether students think that a broad understanding of history is crucial in order to participate civilly in society. More than eight in 10 of those who responded (87%) strongly agreed (38) or agreed (52) with this. Only 6% of students were neutral (7), while 6% disagreed of some level (4 disagreed, 2 disagreed strongly), This data shows largely corroborated agreement among students that historical literacy is essential for civic engagement, bolstering the idea that any contraction of historical content may come at the cost of democratic participation.

Perceptions of Bias in History Education

When asked whether their current or previous history classes offered a balanced and inclusive view of U.S. history, 56 students (54 percent) reported their education was only "somewhat" balanced, and 15 students (15 percent) believed their curriculum was "not really"

balanced. Only a small minority — 3 students — said it was "not at all" balanced. At the same time, only 25 respondents (only 24%) said they had received a fully balanced education. These results indicate a widespread feeling that history education is either incomplete or tilted, mirroring the worry that recent laws mandating the censorship of teaching about race and racism are having a chilling effect on the historical record.

Exposure to Lesser-Known Historical Events

One of the most revealing survey findings was the level of exposure students had to lesser-known historical events. For instance:

- **The Philippine-American War (1899-1902):** Covered in 46 students' history classes.
- **U.S. Intervention in Guatemala (1954):** Covered in 44 students' history classes.
- **U.S. Occupation of Haiti (1915-1934):** Covered in 50 students' history classes.
- **The Overthrow of Salvador Allende in Chile (1973):** Covered in only 22 students' history classes.

This data points to a significant historical gap in education, as events that shine a light on the United States' equally controversial foreign policy choices are frequently excluded from standard curricula. And since several of these interventions helped define global relations as well as national identity, their omission would likely further a narrow comprehension of America's role in the world.

Censorship's Influence on Student Awareness

A key part of the survey looked at whether the presence of censorship laws affected how history was taught. If they thought Georgia's censorship laws or similar cultural fears had changed their education:

- 39 students (38%) replied "Yes, significantly."

- 39 other students (38%) chose the answer “Somewhat.”
- 24% of students (25) reported that censorship had “Not at all” influenced their curriculum.

This shows that most student respondents (76%) somehow believe they are being affected by censorship, and coincides with worries that education about history has been changed because of political and cultural forces.

Impact of Omitted History on Civic Responsibility

When asked about how exposure (or lack thereof) to lesser-known historical events shaped their civic consciousness:

- Fifty-five students (53%) said such exposure led to increased civic awareness and greater criticism of government policy.
- Twenty-nine students (28%) stated they had never been exposed to such events in their education.
- 19 students (18%) stated that their perspective was not significantly impacted.

These findings also point to a central worry: students who miss a broad exposure to key historical events may not learn the same level of civic awareness as those who do. In the absence of a complete historical narrative, some students may find it difficult to be engaged with representative democracy.

The Effect of a More Comprehensive Curriculum

The last question the survey asked was whether focusing more on lesser-known moments from history would change students' perceptions about the United States. An impressive 86 students (83%) said this would enhance their understanding of the U.S.'s complex global role and challenge their views, while only 16 students (15%) reported it would not affect their thinking. The finding underscores the power of lessons in history to mold how a young person identifies as a nation, making the case that censorship and restrictions on curriculum have a material impact on a student's understanding of their country.

Discussion of Data

The results of the survey demonstrate a clear correlation between censorship in education and students' understanding of national identity and civic responsibility. The decline of a balanced approach to historical topics fits into a more widespread concern — that educational policy emphasizes political sensitivity over accuracy. The results indicate that in these omissions lie challenges to students' critical engagement with their own country's history, producing a citizenry with context skimped and discursive engagement raised with less access to interrogate the past in the context of democracy.

The Role of Censorship in Historical Omission

By far the most salient take-away that emerges from the survey is that 76% of students think censorship laws have changed what they are being taught in history classes. This has profound implications. If students feel that their education is inauthentic or manipulated, these students' trust in historical narratives — and by extension, democratic institutions —could be diminished. Historical patterns suggest that such censorship erodes public trust in government institutions — i.e., the late Ming Dynasty or the decline of the Roman Empire.

At the same time, the fact that 28% of students said they had never been introduced to lesser-known historical events indicates a systemic problem in the teaching of history. This gap in exposure to historical flaws also directly correlates to civic responsibility; when students have little context regarding past governmental blemishes or controversial choices, they are less inclined to thoughtfully question modern mandates.

The Discrepancy Between Student Perception and Policy Justifications

Supporters of censorship laws claim that by banning certain truths about the past, they are avoiding discomfort and cultivating a safe learning environment. But that claim is not supported by the data. Almost half (53%) of students reported that learning about lesser known historical events had made them more aware of their own civic responsibilities, implying that increased knowledge about past events does not just have negative effects, but rather serves to enhance critical thinking skills. In addition, 83% of students supported a more comprehensive curriculum, calling into question the idea that a standard, traditional approach to American history is enough.

These differences between legislative aims and student realities indicate censorship laws may not be fulfilling their publicized objectives. Instead of facilitating a more neutral learning space, they could also be sowing distrust and disengagement amongst students that know they are getting an incomplete historical education.

Implications for National Identity

The data supports the notion that a wide-ranging history education contributes to the building of national identity. When students are exposed only to parts of American history —

especially the parts that speak of triumphs and minimize atrocities — that may only reinforce a completely distorted view of their country it could result in:

State disillusionment as students find out about these passed-over events for the first time beyond the classroom.

And then polarization, because it's easier to pass ideas as political pawns in a generation without history.

Reduced civic engagement, since students who cannot read history critically may find it hard to imagine their place in a common future.

These findings add to the evidence for the study of history and how to maintain a healthy democracy.

Limitations

The study aspires to serve as an honest and bold reflection of what impact educational censorship has on students' thinking about civic duty and national identity._Y But it is not without drawbacks. First and most important, the survey was restricted to a single public high school in Georgia — Pope High School — which, while illuminating, probably does not entirely represent the state. Georgia is varied in demographic makeups, political climates, and school district policies, and what works in one classroom might not in another.

Beyond that, the approach was heavily reliant on self-reported student information. While measures were implemented to ensure anonymity and minimize bias, surveys are prone to the problem of social desirability — students are likely to answer the questions in a manner that

they perceive as “correct” rather than wholly indicative of their perspectives or experiences. The current study also centered only on students, privileging their voices — which was the intent — but this also meant that the voices of teachers, administrators, and policy makers were not heard in the report despite the fact they play critical roles in determining curricular content.

Finally, because the topic is sensitive and politically divisive, some of the students may have been reluctant to report dissenting opinion or lack of knowledge. This could make the data on that one dimension a bit more unified than it is in bigger, less restrictive dimensions. Still, the results provide a powerful indication of how legislative choices at the state level can reverberate even into the minds of the very people education is meant to serve.

Conclusion and Future Directions

This study realizes a troubling trend: the disquieting evidence that Georgia’s censorship laws, and similar cultural pressures, are transforming historical education in ways that threaten students’ understanding of the nation and civic responsibility. Many students believe their history curriculum to be unbalanced and admit that censorship has played a role in their education. And with survey data showing that 76% of students think their history curriculum has changed under censorship laws, the students were reminded that the impact of these legislative measures is not theoretical, but is shaping the historical knowledge and perspectives of today’s youth.

This study’s impact reaches far beyond Georgia. Similar laws are proposed or passed across the United States, which aim at the teaching of history in the name of halting divisive discourse. If this keeps up, the country risks having a generation of students who are uninformed about their country’s past — creating questions about how they will act as citizens down the road. Will they have adequate historical context when it comes to voting? Will they see patterns

of government overreach or systemic injustice? Students without a normative historical education may find themselves passive players in democracy, ill equipped to counter disinformation or argue for needed reforms.

Moreover, history has repeatedly shown that societies that repress discussions about the past usually run the risk of turmoil. The examples of history are numerous: The Ming Dynasty's fierce censorship limited education and stifled creativity, contributing to its stagnation and decline; the Roman Empire's destruction of competing historical narratives contributed to cynicism and a general disengagement from civic life; Nazi Germany's intentional rewriting of history led to a shocked population that absorbed state propaganda as unchallengeable fact. As Americans, citizens of a nation that boasts of democratic ideals and the free exchange of ideas, we must ask ourselves if we are willing to take that risk ourselves.

These data suggest that students overwhelmingly see the value of a complete and honest historical education. As 83 percent of respondents indicated that exposure to lesser-known historical events would provide deeper understanding of the United States' complex and often troubling global legacy, one thing is certain: Students want a curriculum that portrays history full-spectrum — both accomplishments and failures. This undermines the rationalization for censorship laws that suggest to protect students from discomfort. If the students most affected by these laws are writing an op-ed calling for greater exposure to history's complexities, then whose best interests are these policies serving?

More generally, this study's results have wide-ranging implications for the nature of education in shaping a national identity. A national identity should not be constructed out of selective history that celebrates victories and erases injustice. A healthy democracy depends on

citizens who are armed with the knowledge they need to honestly reassess their country's past, recognize both accomplishments and failures, and forge a fairer and more just society. But the current trend in historical education seems to be moving in the opposite direction. By downplaying darker chapters of American history, policymakers are, perhaps unintentionally, promoting a version of national identity that is brittle — one that can't hold up under scrutiny, or the truth of history's complexity.

It additionally highlights the impact of historical censorship on civic duty. Sample survey data suggested that 53 percent of students experienced increased civic awareness by studying lesser-known historical events and developed a more critical perspective on government policies as a result, which underscored the role of honest historical education in developing engaged citizens. This begs a crucial question: If censorship legislation is restricting such exposure then is it indirectly creating a generation that is less likely to challenge authority, contest injustice, or becoming involved in democracy?

These findings mark a significant advance, suggesting but also themselves highlighting important areas for future research. Future research should concentrate on the impact of historical censorship, especially in states that passed similar laws. Focus areas need to include:

Student civic engagement outcome studies — Are students who receive a censored historical education less likely to vote, protest, engage in political activism, or work on policy issues?

Comparative analysis on the difference between states with and without censorship – How do students in states without censorship laws perform on understanding national identity and civic responsibility versus students in states like Georgia?

Censorship is also impacting how teachers teach — are history teachers changing the way they teach for fear of backlash, and how does this affect the quality of education students are getting?

If history has anything to teach us, it's that censorship makes societies weaker in the long run. Recently, a new study has found that America may well be on a dangerous trajectory—a trajectory where select histories lead to less civic engagement, less democratic participation, and ultimately, national instability. The question is whether policymakers and educators will see this trajectory before it's too late.

Education is fundamentally a vehicle for empowerment. It lends itself to giving people the tools to think for themselves, to engage in thoughtful conversation with others, and to fight for the change they want to see in the world. And if historical censorship continues to dismantle the very basis of this empowerment, this could lead to far-reaching effects. Will future generations inherit a democracy that flourishes through informed and relevant participation, or will they inherit an undemocratic system, benefiting from the suppression of history, enabling political apathy?

In the end, the struggle for a well-rounded education in history is not only about the past — it's about the future. What we choose to teach in classrooms today shapes our leaders, voters and citizens tomorrow. As the old saying goes, it is not enough to throw the baby out with the bathwater; those on The Hill should think past the political ramifications of historical censorship to its broader implications for democracy itself. For generations, America has prided itself on being a free-thinking, open-discussing society — which one will it be: a continuer of that, or the

next name on the long list of civilizations that collapsed under the heavy burden of their own suppression?

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