



Tasking Middle Level Students with Disciplinary Thinking and Civic Engagement Using Inquiry and Zoom

Jeremiah Clabough^{*a}, John Bickford^b, & William Russell^c

* Corresponding author

Email: jclabou2@uab.edu

a. The University of Alabama at Birmingham, Alabama, USA.

b. Eastern Illinois University at Charleston, Illinois, USA.

c. University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL, USA.



10.46303/ressat.2026.8

Article Info

Received: December 16, 2025

Accepted: March 07, 2026

Published: July 5, 2026

How to cite

Clabough, J., Bickford, J., & Russell, W. (2026). Tasking Middle Level Students with Disciplinary Thinking and Civic Engagement using Inquiry and Zoom. *Research in Social Sciences and Technology*, 11(2), 32-52.

<https://doi.org/10.46303/ressat.2026.8>

Copyright license

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC BY 4.0).

ABSTRACT

This case study situated middle level students to experience inquiry through best practices in social studies education pedagogy and cutting-edge technology. The curricular unit positioned students to engage in close reading, text-based writing, and critical thinking about accessible, age-appropriate texts using discipline-specific strategies and effective scaffolding. Findings included students' civic engagement with complicated material, criticality using political thinking skills, and appreciation for the Zoom experience. Students developed, refined, and communicated evidence-based conclusions about an important public issue, the Freedom to Vote Act. This case study serves as one pathway for social studies teachers to help develop middle school students' political thinking skills about public issues.

KEYWORDS

Public issues; Freedom to Vote Act; Zoom technology; Edward M. Kennedy Institute; political thinking.

INTRODUCTION

American citizens inhabit a polarized, partisan nation, which is only becoming more separated (Kaysen & Singer, 2024). Recent elections have divided residents along party lines; after decades of gerrymandering, political factions are hardened (Corsaniti & Wines, 2025). Pollsters reported a record-high level of partition between parties and voters (Anderson, 2024). One area of heightened discord is over state voting laws passed after the Supreme Court's 2013 *Shelby v. Holder* decision, which nullified the federal oversight derived from the Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965 (Crayton & Verhovek, 2023). This federal oversight ensured state and local governments do not pass laws that deny American citizens the equal right to vote based on race. The VRA of 1965 determined which jurisdictions—based on their history of race-based voter discrimination—had to *preclear* changes to their election rules with the federal government before implementation (Bullock et al., 2016; Rhodes, 2017). Preclearance became law of the land until it was recently challenged with the *Shelby v. Holder* case.

Immediately after the Supreme Court's *Shelby v. Holder* decision struck down preclearance requirements, many states passed restrictive voting laws (Crayton & Verhovek, 2023). Within a day of the ruling, Texas implemented a new strict photo ID law while Mississippi and Alabama soon began to enforce photo ID laws that had previously been barred under Section 5 preclearance of the VRA of 1965. In the decade after the Supreme Court's *Shelby v. Holder* ruling, resistance has gathered to strengthen and revise the VRA of 1965 (Bullock et al., 2016; Rhodes, 2017). In March of 2025, the *John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act* was reintroduced in the House of Representatives by Representative Terri Sewell, an Alabama Democrat (Verhovek, 2025). Voting rights, like other public issues, are hotly contested in America's partisan political context. Public issues over the last century have been a vital part of the social studies education movement (Evans, 2004; Schul, 2023).

Teaching public issues is central for social studies classrooms like laws pertaining to voting rights. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) has consistently argued the purpose of K-12 schools is to position students to experience their future roles as democratic citizens (NCSS, 2013a). Doing so enables social studies teachers to equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary for citizens' civic duties (NCSS, 2013a). This includes helping to prepare students to deal with a polarized political climate through both in person and digital means.

Modern technology enables social studies teachers to do their jobs more effectively than in the past. Zoom software, for instance, enables computer conferencing and video dialogue between people separated by distance. Zoom software empowers teachers to bring experts from around the world into social studies classrooms to help students learn about and discuss public issues (Whitford, 2022). Zoom software can play a vital role in helping prepare students to deal with our current polarized political climate.

Purpose

The C3 Framework is designed to direct quality social studies pedagogy that prepares students with necessary knowledge and skills for their future responsibilities as citizens in a democracy (NCSS, 2013b). The C3 Framework integrates literacy through its connection to the four core social studies disciplines: civics, history, geography, and economics. Disciplinary literacy, critical thinking, and text-based argumentation are represented within indicators of grade level bands for each discipline (Swan & Griffin, 2013). The C3 Framework's Inquiry Arc is based on developing meaningful questions for inquiry, applying discipline-specific concepts, evaluating relevant sources, and communicating refined conclusions while taking informed actions (NCSS, 2013b). The C3 Framework was designed to integrate inquiry, literacy, and criticality through social studies content (Grant, 2013; NCSS, 2013b). The C3 Framework is an ideal means through which to teach public issues that are currently creating division in U.S. society.

In this case study, we positioned students to examine the Freedom to Vote Act and its implications. Our two week research study can best be described as a case study because our extensive emphasis was on how this particular civics teacher's students would research the contents of the Freedom to Vote Act, articulate competing politicians' beliefs about this potential piece of legislation, and communicate their views on whether this possible bill could address voting rights issues in the wake of the *Shelby v. Holder* Supreme Court ruling. We purposefully created different assessments for students to complete after analyzing primary and secondary sources to gain an in-depth knowledge with how they articulated the potential impact of the Freedom to Vote Act on protecting all Americans' right to vote (Creswell, 2013, 2014). We relied upon the best available evidence to enable students to generate meaningful insights, cutting edge technology to bring experts into the classroom, and best social studies teaching practices to engage students in discipline-specific ways. In doing so, students were tasked with unpacking the Freedom to Vote Act, analyzing competing claims about the Freedom to Vote Act, and communicating through a summative essay their thoughts on this potential piece of legislation. The goal of our case study was to show how the C3 Framework could be applied to teach a vital public issue—voting rights—in contemporary U.S. society to middle school students. This case study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do the students articulate the significance of the Freedom to Vote Act?
2. How do the students wrestle with competing beliefs about the Freedom to Vote Act?
3. When on Zoom among experts and peers, how did students express their understandings about the Freedom to Vote Act?
4. How did students, if at all, justify their conclusions about the merits of the Freedom to Vote Act?

These research questions were shaped by the theoretical framework, which directed this study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We selected and utilized social constructivist and political thinking theories. These became inextricably intertwined in our study as one hand figuratively washed the other. This is because

students actively unpacked political sources and constructed meaning in discipline-specific ways about the sources examined. We unpack each theory below.

Social Constructivism

Social constructivist theory informed this case study. Within social constructivist theory, students build their understandings through novel experiences and social dialogue (Kohlmeier & Saye, 2019). According to social constructivist theory, students process new material through the schematic optics of prior learning experiences and assemble knowledge through synthesis of previous understandings and current analysis of topics (Van Hover & Hicks, 2017). Technology, it has been argued, is one central pathway to heightened engagement and criticality (Berson et al., 2021; Doolittle & Hicks, 2003).

Students deploy social scientists' heuristics and background knowledge in their examination of new sources. Interpretations fluidly emerge as students analyze new content that complicates their previous beliefs while refining their understandings about public issues (Cowgill & Waring, 2017; Parker, 2023). In doing so, students move from a passive to an active role as they create and communicate conclusions about public issues (Nokes, 2019; Wineburg, 2018).

Public issues—important topics that dominate discussions in a time period—create divisions within a population because people have various solutions. These alternate solutions to public issues are often due to their different regional, social, cultural, political, economic, and religious values, biases, and beliefs. Due to people's differences in addressing these topics, public issues often drive public discourse for years, decades, and in some cases centuries (Oliver & Newmann, 1992; Oliver & Shaver, 1966). For example, the issue of making healthcare affordable for all Americans has been a driving issue in U.S. politics throughout the 21st century (Halperin & Heilemann, 2013). Public issues are ideal topics that social studies teachers can utilize to develop students' heuristics as emerging social scientists, which includes being able to analyze pertinent topics of performing the duties and responsibilities of democratic citizenship. NCSS has consistently advocated that the purpose of K-12 schools is active and informed democratic citizenship (e.g., Clabough, 2021; Barr et al., 1977; Evans, 2004; NCSS, 2013a; Nelson, 1995). Preparing students to examine public issues in social studies classrooms helps to equip them with the knowledge and skills to be future democratic citizens that can make informed decisions about issues and political candidates to support or oppose. This helps to ensure that issues will be addressed and not linger (e.g., Clabough & Bickford, 2025; Engle, 1960; Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Evans et al., 1996; NCSS, 2013a).

Political Thinking

Limited scholarship exists on disciplinary literacy, thinking, and argumentation skills for civics as outlined in the C3 Framework (Clabough & Russell, 2025). One promising approach is Wayne Journell's scholarship on political thinking. By political thinking, Journell argues students need to utilize political scientists' tools, thought processes, and stratagems to research public policies in U.S. presidential elections (Journell et al., 2015). Journell's political thinking skills connect well

with the educational outcomes with civics advocated for in the C3 Framework (Clabough & Bickford, 2025). Journell's scholarship on political thinking skills argues for students analyzing political tactics and issues utilizing evidence to communicate the effectiveness of candidates and their campaigns' strategies. This type of teaching with civics mirrors the type of political analysis advocated for in the C3 Framework (Clabough & Bickford, 2025; Journell, 2017; Journell et al., 2015; NCSS, 2013b).

Wayne Journell's scholarship on political thinking played a central role in the design of our project. However, our focus on political thinking was different from Journell's scholarship. We wanted the seventh graders to examine the potential with a piece of legislation from the U.S. Senate, the Freedom to Vote Act, to address voting rights policies from state laws in the aftermath of the Supreme Court ruling in the *Shelby v. Holder* case. As Caro (2002) argues, political power used by members of Congress is not understood or examined to the same degree as the political power exercised by the President of the United States. There is also limited scholarship in the last few years on teaching with Congress (Clabough & Bickford, 2025; Parker & Lo, 2019; Stoddard et al., 2019). Therefore, we designed classroom activities for students to analyze the contents of the Freedom to Vote Act and summarize how this potential piece of legislation could help or fail to address contemporary issues connected to voting rights.

METHODS

Participants and Design

This case study featured a seventh-grade classroom during a nearly two-week curricular unit. Ms. Janeway's (pseudonyms are used throughout) classroom was selected because she volunteered when the researchers inquired at the school and had four years of teaching experience at her school. Students were 88% African American, 7% Hispanic, and 5% White. Nearly four-fifths of her students receive free or reduced lunch. Half of Ms. Janeway's seventh-grade students read at or above grade level while half of the students were markedly below reading level. The students had prior learning experiences examining historical documents as they had previously unpacked primary and secondary sources and made text-based conclusions. The researchers thought an exploration with the history of voting rights was pivotal based on the demographics of Ms. Janeway's classes that were predominantly students of color; potential public policies connected to voting rights will impact their futures as democratic citizens.

Using qualitative content analysis, we coded students' handouts, graphic organizers, and a summative writing assessment while contributing dialogue during the Zoom meeting (Creswell, 2013; Krippendorff, 2013; Maxwell, 2010; Saldaña, 2013; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). We collected students' graphic organizers and essays, which were analyzed through open coding and axial coding (Krippendorff, 2018). Open coding, which was the first step, was accomplished when both researchers analyzed student work independently. During the second step, or axial coding, all students' work samples were examined for the presence, absence, and frequency of the codes. Researchers collected and analyzed the data to refine the codes into

meaningful themes (Dinkelman & Cuenca, 2017). Patterns are articulated and unpacked in the findings section. Pseudonyms are used throughout to ensure participant confidentiality.

Sources and Procedures

On the first and second days, students considered Georgia’s Election Integrity Act of 2021, originally known as the Senate Bill 202. This legislation added voter identification requirements, limited the use of ballot drop boxes, cancelled sending unsolicited absentee ballot request forms, and made it a crime to give food and water to voters waiting in line, among other things (Corsaniti & Epstein, 2021). The appendices (labeled A, B, & C) contain the scaffolding and prompts and sources for the six-day unit. Students watched a short video about the Freedom to Vote Act, read sections of the Freedom to Vote Act, and unpacked arguments—supporting and opposing—the Freedom to Vote Act before they answered text-based writing prompts about its goals (Appendix A). On the third and fourth days, students read and unpacked arguments in support of and opposition to the Freedom to Vote Act using analysis prompts (Appendix B). These texts and tasks positioned students to better understand the maelstrom surrounding Georgia’s Election Integrity Act (Kendall, 2023).

On the fifth day, students engaged in a Zoom class with experts from the Edward M. Kennedy Institute (EMKI) for the United States Senate. EMKI, according to its website, is a non-partisan organization that is “dedicated to educating the public about the important role of the Senate in our government, encouraging participatory democracy, invigorating civil discourse, and inspiring the next generation of citizens and leaders to engage in the civic life of their communities” (EMKI, 2025). The representative from EMKI led students in whole-class dialogue about arguments in support of and opposition to the Freedom to Vote Act.

On the sixth day, students reflected on their previous days’ learning experiences and articulated their emerging ideas supporting and opposing the Freedom to Vote Act. They then selected a summative assessment prompt that would take four days to complete using a structured writing process. Students were given expectations of a text-based response of a half-page or full page; they could write a speech for a two-minute social media video as a Senator to support or oppose the Freedom to Vote Act. This writing activity helped to develop students’ civic identities as they use evidence examined to determine for themselves the merits of this potential bill (Clabough, 2017; Lo, 2017). With this goal clear in mind, the teacher deployed scaffolding to structure the students’ answers to ensure they made evidence-based responses (Appendix C). On the seventh day, students drafted their essay through free writing; they used notes from previous classes and the evidence-based arguments developed on Day Six (Appendix C). On the eighth day, students engaged in peer review, which informed their work revising and resubmitting their work on the ninth day.

FINDINGS

Days One and Two: Summarizing the Freedom to Vote Act

The students, during the first two days of the unit, consistently articulated the contents of the Freedom to Vote Act, which is a vital part of political thinking. Students need to be able to

synthesize content into their own words before they can construct understandings to render judgment. For example, Zhymeria argued that, “The Freedom to Vote Act attempts to expand voter registration by creating a bill that addresses voter registration, voting access, election integrity and security, and campaign finance.” Zhymeria’s statement shows that she grasped one of the goals and many of its facets with this potential piece of legislation. Amarie’s arguments mirrored Zhymeria’s arguments by expanding on the goals of this potential bill. “It (the Freedom to Vote Act) expands voting by automatic and same day registration and voting access by mail and early voting. Also, it limits removing voters from voter rolls.” Amarie’s arguments show how components of a bill can be designed to address existing voting rights issues. These two students’ comments—originating from unpacking the Freedom to Vote Act using political thinking skills—were reflective of their peers’ statements.

The students were able to articulate the reasoning behind parts of the Freedom to Vote Act, which is a component of political thinking by seeing the designed intentions for part of a bill. In this case, making election day a federal holiday was intended to make it easier for more potential voters to exercise their right to vote. For example, Arianna said, “The Freedom to Vote Act wants to establish election day as a federal holiday because they want to gather more votes for election day...” Camille’s argument echoed Arianna’s argument, which were both derived from political thinking logic. “Because if they made this (election day) a holiday maybe people would get a day off and could have time to vote.” These students’ comments illustrate an understanding with one of the goals for this part of the bill.

At the end of day two, the students completed a short writing assignment to explain the goals of the Freedom to Vote Act. The ability to communicate in this manner demonstrates the development of students’ political argumentation skills. For example, Noah said, “The bill would bolster our democracy by protecting voting rights...” Noah’s statement demonstrates a vital component of political thinking by realizing the importance of democratic citizens’ voices in order to carry out the diverse political processes. John’s text-based writing matched Noah’s arguments regarding the potential impact of the Freedom to Vote Act. “The goal of the Freedom to Vote Act is to make federal elections safer and let more people come to vote.” John’s statement demonstrates supporters of the Freedom to Vote Act added a component to the bill in order to address one of the criticisms by its detractors. Jaliyah specified that the bill was designed to help certain groups vote. “To let people who are minorities to be able to vote without discrimination.” Jaliyah’s writing demonstrates political thinking by showing how potential legislation can be targeted to certain groups. Beyond the broad goals of this bill, the students again reiterated key components of this bill as can be seen in Yazmine’s response.

The bill establishes certain federal criminal offenses related for voting; in particular, the bill establishes a new criminal offense for conduct or attempted conduct to corruptly hinder, interfere with, or prevent another person from registering to vote or helping someone register to vote.

Yazmine's statement, which was generated by unpacking the reading, reflected her emerging political thinking skills. Specifically, she articulated key details about this potential bill.

Days Three and Four: Conveying Competing Beliefs about the Freedom to Vote Act

A vital component of political thinking is grasping how and why certain politicians support a bill and others oppose it. In day three, the students consistently articulated why some politicians argued for the Freedom to Vote Act. For example, Mason said people supported this bill "because the right to vote is for everyone regardless of skin color and if we can't give everyone regardless of skin color and if we can't give everyone the right to vote, then we have failed as a nation." Mason's writing shows political thinking in a democracy by communicating the importance of all citizens taking part in the decision-making process by voting. Adam's argument paralleled Mason's about the purpose of this potential bill. "The Freedom to Vote Act gives all people the right to vote." Zariah stressed that the Freedom to Vote Act pushes back on many state voting laws passed after the ruling in the *Shelby v. Holder* case. "The author says many states are passing laws that restrict voting. The author says the Freedom to Vote Act can stop this from getting worse." Zariah assembled her conclusion by unpacking the readings and relying on her political thinking heuristics. Students' responses to the first analysis prompt on day three demonstrate that they could make arguments for why supporters of this bill thought it was needed.

The students consistently articulated in their responses to the second analysis prompt on day three why supporters of the Freedom to Vote Act argue it would be beneficial. Addisyn stated that, "The author said if nothing is done these laws (state voting laws) will make it harder for millions of Americans to vote..." Addisyn's statement shows political thinking skills by realizing how potential bills can alleviate current political realities. Frayhe mirrored Addisyn's argument. "They (supporters of this bill) believe the Freedom to Vote Act will protect Americans' right to vote by setting standards for people to vote safely and securely..." Jaliyah argued that supporters of this bill stress that, "It also lets people vote without discrimination." Frayhe and Jaliyah's writing capture political argumentation skills by conveying the importance of this potential bill to protect all citizens' right to vote. The students used evidence from the source examined to convey arguments utilized for why supporters believe the Freedom to Vote Act would be beneficial, which is a vital part of political argumentation and dependent upon complex constructions of understanding.

On day four, the students consistently articulated why some politicians argued against the Freedom to Vote Act. Doing so relies on refined political thinking and close readings of course content. For example, Amarie said, "According to the text, this bill (the Freedom to Vote Act) weakens a lot of state voter laws that are pretty popular with voters." Amarie's writing captures one key component of critics' resistance. Adam also pointed out parts of the bill that critics oppose. "The act (Freedom to Vote Act) doesn't allow voter identification for mail ballots that wouldn't be something you want to do." Adam's conclusions represent the opposition's perspective to the Freedom to Vote Act. Elaise stressed that critics of the bill do not want to

give the federal government more power with elections. “The author doesn’t want the act (Freedom to Vote Act) to be passed because it would mean they would take power from the states.” Elaise’s statement captures the opposition’s values against an active U.S. government. Students’ responses to the first analysis prompt on day four demonstrate that they could convey arguments for why opponents of this bill thought the Freedom to Vote Act was not necessary. In doing so, students constructed understandings through political thinking engagement.

The students consistently articulated in their responses to the second analysis prompt on day four why opponents of the Freedom to Vote Act argued it would not be beneficial. This demonstrates the emergence of their political argumentation skills. For example, Elaise made the following argument. “The author argues that the act (Freedom to Vote Act) wouldn’t help because it would erase what the states have done and cause many complications.” Elaise’s political argument demonstrates that opponents believe voting rights should reside under states’ control instead of the federal government. Both Elaise and Arriana gave a concrete part of the bill the author opposed, which revealed how they unpacked the course readings. “The author argues the Freedom to Vote Act will not help because the bill does not have voter identification for mail ballots would be one of the things that you wouldn’t want to do [sic].” Frayhe also captured how opponents of the bill prefer the federal government to not have power with voting rights issues. “They (opponents of the Freedom to Vote Act) also think states should make decisions (presumably on voting laws) for themselves.” These three students’ comments demonstrate evidence-based arguments for why opponents believe the Freedom Vote Act would not be beneficial.

Day Five: Zoom Dialogue with Experts about the Freedom to Vote Act

On day five, the students had a Zoom discussion about the Freedom to Vote Act with a representative from the Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the United States Senate. They constantly articulated background knowledge about the Freedom to Vote Act throughout the two-week case study, which demonstrates their skills at both political argumentation and constructing understandings. For example, Jay said, “We learned that the Freedom to Vote Act took two centuries of Americans fighting, marching, and dying for our right and promise the right to vote.” Jay’s comment was paraphrased from a source examined earlier in the project and demonstrates political thinking by connecting people’s civic actions about voting rights across time. Similarly, Erin said, “I think that (part of the Freedom to Vote Act) was a good idea to let people vote online...” Erin’s statement shows how online voting can alleviate a potential roadblock for voters to make their voices heard. Students’ statements like the ones provided above were consistent throughout all four Zoom sessions and illustrated their comprehension of content material about the Freedom to Vote Act.

The students also consistently articulated why certain parts of the Freedom to Vote Act were good or bad. The ability to make decisions and render judgment about a potential bill captures the essence of political thinking skills and knowledge construction that students must possess to be actively informed and engaged as democratic citizens (NCSS, 2013b). For example,

Jim said, “I like that the Freedom to Vote Act allows voters to register online because if there wasn’t an online registration we (voters) would have to wait in long lines all day...” Jim’s argument shows a potential ripple effect if the Freedom to Vote Act is not passed. Conversely, Pam pointed out one part of the Freedom to Vote Act she did not support. “I don’t like allowing people to vote by mail because their letter may get shipped late and may not have the opportunity to vote for the election.” Pam’s statement reveals a potential issue with the part of the Freedom to Vote Act focused on voting by mail. Over the course of the Zoom sessions, the students consistently made statements like the examples above and would explain why they did or did not support part of the Freedom to Vote Act. This fact was notable because it was the first time at this point in the research project where the students communicated the reasons why they agreed or disagreed with parts of this potential bill. To do so, students relied on their newly refined political thinking skills and novel understandings developed from close readings of course material.

In the Zoom sessions, the students explained reasons to support or oppose aspects of the Freedom to Vote Act. Their reasons are often connected to cultural values and realities in their local communities as well as what they considered basic logic. For example, Jill argued that the Freedom to Vote Act “could help someone that works overseas...” In a similar vein, Marco stated, “Mail-in ballots could help someone coming home or going to war.” Several students mentioned how mail-in ballots could help someone with health issues. For example, Arriana said mail in ballots could help “people who are sick or disabled.” Jaliyah also made the statement that mail in ballots could help “anyone who can’t move their legs.” These four students’ statements reveal logic in how the Freedom to Vote Act was adaptive to people’s different life circumstances. A few students pointed out parts of the Freedom to Vote Act that could create unintentional consequences. For example, Paris said, “I don’t like the fact that people will be able to vote the same day you get you registered to vote because you might be able to cheat.” These students’ political argumentation skills show that they could grasp how certain parts of the Freedom to Vote Act could help address or cause certain issues with Americans voting in an election.

Days Six through Nine: Students’ Political Argumentation about the Freedom to Vote Act

The students’ summative essays in days six, seven, eight, and nine revealed several themes connected to the emergence of their political thinking skills. For each theme, we will focus on one student’s essay that best embodies that theme. Excerpts for each student’s essay that reflects a particular aspect of political thinking will be provided.

First, several students’ essays connected the Freedom to Vote Act to previous struggles groups have faced. This type of connection across time with voting rights issues throughout U.S. history is a vital part of political thinking to make connections with related public policies across time. This can be seen in Arriana’s essay. Arriana made broad sweeping connections that “... the Freedom to Vote bill helps Americans by making it easier for people to vote because it took over

two centuries of marching, fighting, and dying to expand all of our rights to vote.” She followed up this broad statement by making a more recent connection:

Another reason I support it (the Freedom to Vote Act) is because, many states across the nation have passed major restrictions against voting that we have seen in decades, with this bill (the Freedom to Vote Act) those laws (voting laws passed by states after the ruling from the *Shelby v. Holder* case) cannot make it harder for Americans to vote.

Arriana’s two sample sentences were reflective of students’ essays connecting the Freedom to Vote Act to broader voting rights issues covered over the course of the Fall 2024 semester. Arriana’s writing shows the emergence of her political thinking skills by connecting different topics across time to voting rights issues.

Second, multiple students used parts of the Freedom to Vote Act to articulate why they supported this potential piece of legislation. This demonstrates elements of their political thinking skills by making evidence-based arguments to articulate reasons for supporting this potential bill. This theme can best be seen in Daniela’s essay. For example, Daniela said, “The bill includes election security to help the voters have more protection” (source c). She also stressed that, “The bill punishes people that attempt to interfere with a person’s voting rights and addresses those issues” (source c). Daniela demonstrated her political thinking skills by arguing that these components of the bill are needed so that voters do not face challenges voting due to state voting laws in the aftermath of the *Shelby v. Holder* Supreme Court case. “The bill (Freedom to Vote Act) makes sure that the laws (presumably state voting laws) don’t make it harder for people to vote due to past issues in elections” (source d). She went on to say that, “The Freedom to Vote Act gives Americans more freedom and protects rights for all Americans and allows reassurance that Americans will have protection” (source d and c). Daniela’s political argumentation skills in her essay capture how many students justified their support of the Freedom to Vote Act based on provisions in this potential piece of legislation.

Finally, a few students demonstrated their political argumentation skills by giving more depth in their explanations on why certain parts of the Freedom to Vote Act were needed. These students’ statements went past a simple listing with parts of this potential bill that they liked and instead went into more depth on reasons that these parts of the bill were beneficial. This theme can be seen in Noah’s essay. For example, Noah argued the following:

First, I support the Freedom to Vote Act because it makes voter security a priority at polling places after the 2020 presidential election because the Republicans believed that the Democrats cheated so this part of the act will put an end to cheating in elections. The Freedom to Vote Act is a bill that if passed will support the needs of many Americans.

Noah also argued former convicted felons should be allowed to vote:

Secondly, the Freedom to Vote Act will allow convicted felons the ability to vote but the only exception is that they cannot be convicted of their crime on Election Day to have the ability to vote. I support this bill because it will allow people to pick their leaders.

Noah argued with evidence to justify the passage of the Freedom to Vote Act. “In conclusion, I support the Freedom to Vote Act because it protects Americans’ rights to vote and will make voting safer and a higher priority. The Freedom to Vote Act should be passed because of the evidence stated above.” Excerpts from Noah’s arguments demonstrate his ability to justify why components of the Freedom to Vote Act are needed based on the current political climate. The ability to make political arguments like Noah did is a vital skill that future democratic citizens must possess in order to make informed decisions about issues and candidates to support. There were a few students like Noah that unpacked the benefits for components of the Freedom to Vote Act and used them to justify support for this piece of legislation.

DISCUSSION

This case study yielded meaningful insights. Students constructed and articulated understandings using close reading and text-based writing; students engaged in both critical and disciplinary thinking. Scaffolding, like the aforementioned graphic organizers (Appendices A-C), directed and enhanced students’ conclusions. Finally, Zoom technology boosted students’ engagement, particularly lower-achieving students, and complicated all students’ thinking. Through Zoom technology, students engaged with an expert who guided them to unpack their thinking and communicate informed conclusions based on components of the Freedom to Vote Act. These meaningful insights are unpacked below separately.

Students’ Constructed Understandings and Political Thinking

Students in small groups ably analyzed diverse sources about the Freedom to Vote Act and reached their own conclusions. Through discipline-specific scaffolding that directed their thinking, students examined short videos, actual legislation, and politicians’ positions about the proposed legislation in a similar vein as seen in Journell’s scholarship on political thinking (Clabough & Bickford, 2025; Journell, 2017; Journell et al., 2015). They unpacked key details from complicated texts to first summarize and then make meaning by articulating conclusions, questions, and concerns about the Freedom to Vote Act. The emergence of students’ political thinking manifested in their text-based writing and other expressions of understanding such as during class discussions and Zoom dialogue. This was particularly evident during the first five days of the unit as students reviewed both key parts of, and commentary on different views with the potential piece of legislation. Students synthesized understandings in order to articulate informed evidence-based conclusions. This was most apparent during the writing process in which they engaged in during the unit’s final four days.

Students also exhibited disciplinary thinking heuristics. They established political significance through contextualization and sourcing of primary and secondary documents (Clabough & Sheffield, 2023; Nokes, 2019; Polat, 2020; Tapung et al., 2018). This was apparent during students’ summative essays where many connected the Freedom to Vote Act with previous struggles minority groups have faced to vote throughout U.S. history. Students independently substantiated claims with evidence, which was evident during the summative

essays where, to offer one example of many, multiple students used parts of the Freedom to Vote Act to articulate why they supported this legislation. This reveals how students constructed and demonstrated their political understandings. Students' summative essays allowed them to strengthen and express their political thinking skills about the potential impact of the legislative branch on their daily lives (Clabough & Bickford, 2025).

Scaffolding to Cultivate Refined Understandings

The scaffolding positioned students to do various tasks. The graphic organizers within Appendix A were used the first two days and feature sections of the Freedom to Vote Act with analysis prompts to direct student interpretations. The graphic organizers within Appendix B were used during Days Three and Four and feature speeches from politicians supporting and opposing the Freedom to Vote Act. Analysis prompts directed students to examine the source of the document, consider the employed logic, and assess the stated goal. These processes helped students refine their political understandings about the Freedom to Vote Act. The final graphic organizer was employed on Day Six to initiate the writing process, assists students in creating text-based responses by locating the origins of their conclusions, and helps students organize their arguments. Students expressed and refined their arguments in detail during the summative writing assignment.

The positive impact of the scaffolding was apparent within students' summative assessments, which developed politicians' transcribed speeches supporting or opposing the Freedom to Vote Act (Sujito et al., 2019). A majority of students referenced sources within their writing, some through direct quotes and others through paraphrasing. Though half the class was at or above grade level in reading, nearly *all* students demonstrated competency of this text-based writing assignment. Their evidence-based writing revealed their informed position during this political inquiry throughout the course of the unit.

Zoom Technology as a Vehicle to Communicate Political Conclusions

Zoom software enabled these seventh-grade students in Birmingham, Alabama to connect with an expert from the Edward M. Kennedy Institute (EMKI) in Boston, Massachusetts. Each student had their own computer, earphones, and an eagerness to be involved. The students were genuinely excited at the novel activity with the EMKI representative, an informed scholar. Zoom technology provided students with access to an engaging expert and age-appropriate content developed specifically for this platform (Whitford, 2022).

Zoom technology appeared, the teacher noted, to have an outsized impact on struggling students. Many of Ms. Janeway's underachieving students were notably active during the classroom dialogue on Zoom. Ms. Janeway shared with the researchers how her struggling students appeared to want to show off their newly generated understandings to an adult outsider eager to listen. This speaks to students' enjoyment talking with an EMKI representative, the novelty of the tasks, and the effectiveness of Zoom technology.

The Zoom platform situated all students to further unpack arguments on Day Five that they developed over Days One through Four. As demonstrated above, nearly every student

engaged in dialogue and active negotiation with the meaning and impact of the Freedom to Vote Act; few students failed to contribute to the technology-enabled discussion. If anything, the Zoom activity deserved more time and space than a single day within the two-week unit.

Limitations

This research study contains multiple limitations. First, because it was conducted with only one teacher's classroom, generalizations cannot be made. Second, the students in this study were largely homogenous from a demographic standpoint. Third, this study—completed over two weeks— was a limited intervention when considered in the context of the students' year-long seventh grade experience. These factors do not permit generalizations.

CONCLUSION

This case study contributes to the research literature on Journell's political thinking (Journell, 2017; Journell et al., 2015). The findings inform scholarship about teaching public issues, particularly how to sensitively approach politically divisive topics using the best available evidence. Discoveries from this case study shape our understandings of supporting disciplinary literacy within the social studies, specifically how to seamlessly intertwine close reading and text-based writing within the writing process. This curricular unit aligned in practice to the C3 Framework's focus on literacy, criticality, and inquiry within the social studies; it was designed to direct quality social studies pedagogy that prepares students with necessary knowledge and skills for their future responsibilities as citizens in a democracy (NCSS, 2013b). These students developed and answered meaningful questions, and scrutinized legislation for its goals and impact. They also analyzed politicians' speeches for their logic and perspective and articulated their newly constructed understandings using evidence-based claims.

This case study reveals some potential areas of future research. We intend to be illustrative but not exhaustive. One area of future research might include political thinking and historical empathy. This might include understanding on a human level the impact of political legislation. Another area of future research could examine how Zoom may be utilized as a vehicle to connect students with informed scholars, activists, and/or representatives around the world to unpack and discuss potential pieces of legislation. Finally, a potential third area of future research could examine the writing process of political argumentation. Just as analysis preceded synthesis, students' close reading of diverse sources proceeded and amplified their text-based writing. A researcher with background in the writing process may better unpack the influence of these elements of the scaffolding in our project. Our inquiry can serve as a model to build from with these future areas of study with political thinking.

Students need more opportunities to experience meaningful pedagogy where they engage deeply with the material, form and refine understandings, and communicate conclusions through civic engagement (NCSS, 2013a). Students value the opportunity to be taken seriously by outside experts interested in what they think. Zoom, as a platform, provided this opportunity in an effective, cost-efficient manner. Furthermore, students can explore the

layers and nuances of issues in more depth through discussions with local, state, national, and world experts (Blevins et al., 2018). These kinds of learning experiences with civic education topics are pivotal in preparing students to meaningfully engage with public issues as future democratic citizens.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, K. (2024, December 31). Something important is unfolding in America that hasn't happened in a while. *The New York Times* A21, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/31/opinion/american-politics-trust-institutions.html>
- Barr, R.D., Barth, J.L., & Shermis, S.S. (1977). *Defining the social studies* [Bulletin 51]. NCSS.
- Berson, I.R., Berson, M.J., & O'Brien, J. (2021). At a crossroad: NCSS and technology. *Social Education*, 85(6), 342-344.
- Blevins, B., LeCompte, K., & Ellis, T. (2018). Students at the heart of civic learning: Best practices in implementing action civics. In J. Clabough & T. Lintner (Eds.), *No reluctant citizens: Teaching civics in K-12 classrooms* (pp. 83-96). Information Age Publishing. doi [10.1108/978-1-64113-267-120251008](https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-64113-267-120251008)
- Bullock, C. S., Gaddie, R. K., & Wert, J. J. (2016). *The rise and fall of the Voting Rights Act*. University of Oklahoma Press.
- Caro, R. (2002). *Master of the Senate*. Vintage Books.
- Clabough, J. (2017). Helping develop students' civic identities through exploring public issues. *The Councilor: A Journal of the Social Studies*, 78(2), Article 2.
- Clabough, J., & Bickford, J. (2025). Strengthening students' political thinking skills to unmask the power exercised by the U.S. Congress. *The Journal of Social Studies Research*, 49(4), 262-275. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23522798251349206>
- Clabough, J., & Clyde, R. (2021). Civic education: The mission of NCSS. *Social Education*, 85(5), 306-309.
- Clabough, J., & Russell, W. (2025). Ploughing new fields of scholarship in social studies: Planting the seeds of civic, economic, and geographic thinking. *The Journal of Social Studies Research*, 49(2), 75-84. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23522798241246196>
- Clabough, J., & Sheffield, C. (2023). Historical context to civic action: Trade books and disciplinary literacy instruction. *The Social Studies*, 114(4), 183-204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00377996.2022.2163221>
- Corsaniti, N., & Epstein, R. (2021, August 18). What Georgia's voting law really does. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/02/us/politics/georgia-voting-law-annotated.html>
- Corasanti, N., & Wines, M. (2025, February 23). The death of competition in American elections. *The New York Times* A11, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/23/us/politics/us-elections-gerrymandering.html>
- Cowgill, D. A., II, & Waring, S. M. (2017). Historical thinking: An evaluation of student and

- teacher ability to analyze sources. *Journal of Social Studies Education Research*, 8(1), 115–145.
- Crayton, K., & Verhovek, K. (2023). Shelby County v. Holder turns 10, and voting rights continue to suffer from it. *Brennan Center for Justice*.
<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/shelby-county-v-holder-turns-10-and-voting-rights-continue-suffer-it>
- Creswell, J. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage.
- Creswell, J.W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Dinkelman, T., & Cuenca, A. (2017). Qualitative inquiry in social studies research. In M. McGlinn Manfra & C. Mason Bolick (Eds.), *The Wiley handbook of social studies research* (pp. 95-131). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118768747.ch5>Digital Object Identifier (DOI)
- Doolittle, P. E., & Hicks, D. (2003). Constructivism as a theoretical foundation for the use of technology in social studies. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 31(1), 72–104.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2003.10473216>
- Edward M. Kennedy Institute (EMKI). (2025). *About the Kennedy Institute*.
<https://emkinstitute.org/about-the-institute/>
- Engle, S. H. (1960). Decision making: The heart of social studies instruction. *Social Education*, 24(7), 301–306.
- Engle, S. H., & Ochoa, A. S. (1988). *Education for democratic citizenship: Decision making in the social studies*. Teachers College Press.
- Evans, R. W. (2004). *The social studies wars: What should we teach the children?* Teachers College Press.
- Evans, R., Newmann, F., & Saxe, D. W. (1996). Defining issues centered education. In R. Evans & D. W. Saxe (Eds.), *Handbook on teaching social issues* (1st ed., pp. 2–5). NCSS.
- Grant, S.G. (2013). From Inquiry Arc to instructional practice: The potential of the C3 Framework. *Social Education*, 77(6), 322-326, 351.
- Halperin, M., & Heilemann, J. (2013). *Double down: Game change 2012*. Penguin Press.
- Journell, W. (2017). *Teaching politics in secondary education: Engaging with contentious issues*. State University of New York Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9781438467719>
- Journell, W., Beeson M., & Ayers, C. (2015). Learning to think politically: Toward more complete disciplinary knowledge in civics and government courses. *Theory & Research in Social Studies Education*, 43(1), 28-67.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2014.1001106>
- Kaysen, R., & Singer, E. (2024, October 30). Millions of movers reveal American polarization in action. *The New York Times*.

- <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/10/30/upshot/voters-moving-polarization.html>
- Kendall, K. (2023). Teaching democratic humility to improve classroom discussion. *Research in Social Sciences and Technology*, 8(2), 1–20.
- Kohlmeier, J., & Saye, J. (2019). Examining the relationship between teachers' discussion facilitation and their students' reasoning. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 47(2), 176–204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2018.1486765>
- Krippendorff, K. (2013). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Krippendorff, K. (2018). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Lo, J. (2017). Adolescents developing civic identities: Sociocultural perspectives on simulations and role-play in a civic classroom. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 45(2), 189–217. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2016.1220877>
- Maxwell, J. (2010). Using numbers in qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(6), 475–482. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410364740>
- NCSS. (2013a). *Revitalizing civic learning in our schools*. <https://www.socialstudies.org/position-statements/revitalizingcivic-learning-our-schools>
- NCSS. (2013b). *The college, career, and civic life framework for social studies state standards: Guidance for enhancing the rigor of K-12 civics, economics, geography, and history*. Author.
- Nelson, M.R. (1995). The early years, 1921-1937. *Social Education*, 59(7), 14-21.
- Nokes, J. (2019). *Teaching history, learning citizenship: Tools for civic engagement*. Teachers College Press.
- Oliver, D.W., & Newmann, F.M. (1992). Teaching public issues in the secondary school classroom. *The Social Studies*, 83(3), 100-104.
- Oliver, D.W., & Shaver, J.P. (1966). *Teaching public issues in the high school*. Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Parker, W.C. (2023). *Education for liberal democracy: Using classroom discussion to build knowledge and voice*. Teachers College Press.
- Parker, W.C., & Lo, J.C. (2019). From design to deed: A guide to simulating government and politics on the AP platform. In C. Wright-Maley (Ed.), *More like life itself: Simulations as powerful and purposeful social studies* (pp. 167-186). Information Age Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-64113-322-720251014>
- Polat, S. (2020). Multidimensional analysis of the teaching process of the critical thinking skills. *Research in Social Sciences and Technology*, 5(2), 134–157.
- Rhodes, J. H. (2017). *Ballot blocked: The political erosion of the Voting Rights Act*. Stanford University Press.
- Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage.

- Schul, J. E. (2023). *Historical and contemporary foundations of social studies education: Unpacking implications for civic education and contemporary life*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003372318>
- Stoddard, J.D., Swiecki, Z., & Shaffer, W. (2019). Behind the curtain: An epistemic design process for democratic media education simulations. In C. Wright-Maley (Ed.), *More like life itself: Simulations as powerful and purposeful social studies* (pp. 21-39). Information Age Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-64113-322-720251004>
- Sujito, B. T., Solikhah, I., & Muttaqin, W. M. (2019). The effect of analogy variations on academic writing: How Indonesian EFL students perform with different cognitive styles. *Journal of Social Studies Education Research*, 10(1), 116–132.
- Swan, K., & Griffin, S. (2013). Beating the odds: The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies Standards. *Social Education*, 77(6), 317-321.
- Tapung, M., Maryani, E., & Supriatna, N. (2018). Improving students' critical thinking skills in controlling social problems through the development of the emancipatory learning model for junior high school social studies in Manggarai. *Journal of Social Studies Education Research*, 9(3), 162–176.
- Van Hover, S., & Hicks, D. (2017). Social constructivism and student learning in social studies. In M. M. Manfra & C. M. Bolick (Eds.), *The Wiley handbook of social studies research* (pp. 270–318). John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118768747.ch12>
- Verhovek, K. (2025). John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act reintroduced in House. *Brennan Center for Justice*. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/john-r-lewis-voting-rights-advancement-act-reintroduced-house-brennan-2>
- Whitford, A. (2022). Understanding and addressing gender stereotypes with elementary children: The promise of an integrated approach. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 51(2), 264-295. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2022.2140091>
- Wineburg, S. (2018). *Why learn history (When it's already on your phone)*. The University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226357355.001.0001>
- Zhang, Y., & Wildemuth, B. (2009). Qualitative analysis of content. In B. Wildemuth (Ed.), *Applications of social research methods to questions in Information and Library Science* (pp. 308-319). Libraries Unlimited.

Appendix A – Graphic Organizers for Days One and Two

First Day Excerpt from Freedom to Vote Act This bill addresses voter registration and voting access, election integrity and security, and campaign finance. Specifically, the bill expands voter registration (e.g., automatic and same-day registration) and voting access (e.g., vote-by-mail and early voting). It also limits removing voters from voter rolls. Next, the bill establishes election day as a federal holiday. The bill declares that the right of a U.S. citizen to vote in any election for federal office shall not be denied because that individual has been convicted of a criminal offense unless, at the time of the election, such individual is serving a felony sentence.	Questions about Excerpts 1. How does the Freedom to Vote Act attempt to expand voter registration? Use evidence from the source to support your arguments. 2. Why would the Freedom to Vote Act want to establish election day as a federal holiday? Use evidence from the source to support your arguments. 3. How does the law impact those found guilty of a crime? Use evidence to support your arguments.
Second Day Excerpt from Freedom to Vote Act The bill establishes certain federal criminal offenses related to voting. In particular, the bill establishes a new criminal offense for conduct (or attempted conduct) to corruptly hinder, interfere with, or prevent another person from registering to vote or helping someone register to vote. Additionally, the bill sets forth provisions related to election security, including by requiring states to conduct post-election audits for federal elections. The bill addresses campaign finance, including by expanding the prohibition on campaign spending by people outside of the United States, requiring additional disclosure of campaign-related fundraising and spending, requiring additional disclaimers regarding certain political advertising, and establishing	Questions about Excerpts 1. How does the bill try to punish people that attempt to interfere with a person voting? Use evidence to support your arguments. 2. Why would the Freedom to Vote Act include election security added to the bill after the 2020 U.S. presidential election? Use evidence to support your arguments. 3. How does the Freedom to Vote Act try to address campaign finances? Use evidence to support your arguments.

an alternative campaign funding system for certain federal offices.	
---	--

Appendix B – Graphic Organizers for Days Three and Four

Day Three’s Pro-Statement about FREEDOM TO VOTE ACT Mr. Schumer, Mr. President, for over 240 years, the story of American democracy has been a march toward allowing everyone the right to vote. It took over two centuries of Americans marching, fighting, and dying for the promise to expand to all of our citizens the right to vote. But for every two steps forward, there are those who try to pull us one step back. This is where we find ourselves. Many states across the nation have passed major restrictions against voting that we have seen in decades. If nothing is done, these laws will make it harder for millions of Americans to vote. The Senate needs to take action to protect our democracy from the forces that are trying to unravel it from the inside out. This is why the U.S. Senate will begin to debate the Freedom to Vote Act. The Freedom to Vote Act will protect Americans’ rights to vote. It sets basic standards for all Americans to vote safely and securely. It fights back against power of billionaires and corporations to buy elections and also respects the rightful authority of States to carry out their elections. The goal of the Freedom to Vote Act rests on a simple principle: Americans must be able to freely choose their leaders, and those leaders must be accountable to the people. That is what this is about, simply a debate and important one to be sure.	Questions about Excerpts 1. Why does the author argue the Freedom to Vote Act is needed? Use evidence from the source to support your arguments. 2. How does the author argue the Freedom to Vote Act will help? Use evidence to support your arguments. 3. What does the author argue is the goal of the Freedom to Vote Act? Use evidence to support your arguments.
Day Four’s Con-Statement about FREEDOM TO VOTE ACT On this bill, I think we all know where we’re headed. Both the Rules Committee where I serve, and the	Questions about Excerpts

Senate, have already rejected this federal takeover of elections several times this year. This bill weakens a lot of state voter laws that are pretty popular with voters. Not allowing voter identification for mail ballots would be one of the things that you wouldn't want to do. If you wanted to have mail-in ballots, you would want to be sure where those came from and, honestly you would want to have objective standard like your voter ID number or some other number that was uniquely yours. This bills retains Senate Bill 1's guarantee on ballot drop boxes, federalizes rules for setting up different voting districts, I think it chills free speech. Requires felon voting. Now, why would anybody want to be against any of those things? There are reasons to be against all of those things, but state make that decision for themselves. Accurate voter rolls were seen as one of the great progressive moves forward so you'd have some sense that the people who voted on Election Day were actually people who were supposed to vote. I certainly hope my colleagues today will not pass this federal takeover of election laws.	1. Why does the author argue the Freedom to Vote Act is not needed? Use evidence from the source to support your arguments. 2. How does the author argue the Freedom to Vote Act will not help? Use evidence to support your arguments. 3. What does the author argue is the goal of the Freedom to Vote Act? Use evidence to support your arguments.
--	--

Appendix C – Day 6 Scaffolding

Historians gather materials from many different sources to support their positions. From which source did you gather your information? Indicate in the table where you found the information you will include in your letter to the editor.

Information to support your answer	Where did you find that information?