How Educators Can Choose Controversial Political Issues Ethically

1. Identify the Type of Issue

- Open Empirical: An issue that can be answered with facts, but a debate is still occurring because the evidence is conflicting or lacking. Example: Are self-driving cars safer than traditional cars?

- Settled Empirical: An issue that has been answered with facts. Example: Are opioids addictive?

- Open Political: A public-policy issue that has multiple, opposing viewpoints. Example: Should the United States implement single-payer health care?

- Settled Political: A public-policy issue that is no longer considered controversial or open for debate. Example: Should women have the right to vote?

2. Consider the Criteria for Controversy

- Behavioral: This criterion considers an issue controversial if sizeable numbers of people in society disagree on the issue regardless of empirical evidence. Upside: This standard reflects what society thinks. Downside: This standard may ignore empirical evidence. If sizable numbers of people believe in a conspiracy theory, despite the evidence, is it ethical to present this as a controversial issue?

- Epistemic: This criterion considers an issue controversial if sizeable numbers of people in society disagree on the issue, and there are multiple, logically grounded viewpoints on the issue. Upside: This standard reflects what society thinks while also considering reasonable, evidence-based viewpoints. Downside: People disagree on what is considered reasonable, which suggests that educators should ignore controversial political issues if viewpoints are considered unreasonable.

- Politically Authentic: This criterion considers an issue controversial if it is being debated in the political sphere (e.g., legislation, political campaign, and protest movements). Upside: This criterion addresses current issues being debated in the political sphere, which prepares students for life in a democracy. Downside: Viewpoints on politically authentic issues are not always grounded in logic.

3. Verdict

Politically authentic criteria have the edge.