

Invoking History in Today's Politics

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Several political prints and posters from the period of Weimar Republic. Photo by: dpa/picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images

Teachers often seize on presidential campaigns as an opportunity for reliably lively classroom activities—watching debates, analyzing news coverage, holding mock elections—to deepen students' knowledge of the United States' political process and encourage their civic dispositions. But as the country's politics have grown more divisive, teaching during the presidential campaign has become more challenging. As the new school year begins, teachers face some difficult questions: Is it possible to teach about the election without revealing one's own political stance? Are the passions aroused by this campaign simply too contentious for the classroom? This year's campaign has an additional challenge—and opportunity—for history and social studies teachers, because so many political writers have invoked figures, movements, and moments from the past in their commentary on present-day America.

Comparing modern leaders to Hitler has long been a staple of the political fringes, but lately connections to the 1920s and 1930s have gone mainstream. Events and individuals at the heart of Facing History and Ourselves' case study, *Holocaust and Human Behavior*—including the Weimar Republic, the fascism of the 1930s, and Kristallnacht—have become fixtures in American political commentary. Pundits have often

pointed to Weimar at moments of political and economic disarray around the world, from Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein to Greece in its recent debt crisis. Now, the unstable, divided and violent years of the Weimar Republic are again invoked to warn Americans about the state of our republic today.

On May 31, 2016, German political commentator Jochen Bittner observed in *The New York Times*, "There are

almost too many differences to mention between what happened in the 1930s over here and what is going on today. Still, Germany's slide into a popular embrace of authoritarianism in the 1930s offers a frame for understanding how liberal democracies can suddenly turn toward anti-liberalism." He asked, "Are we at another Weimar moment now?"¹

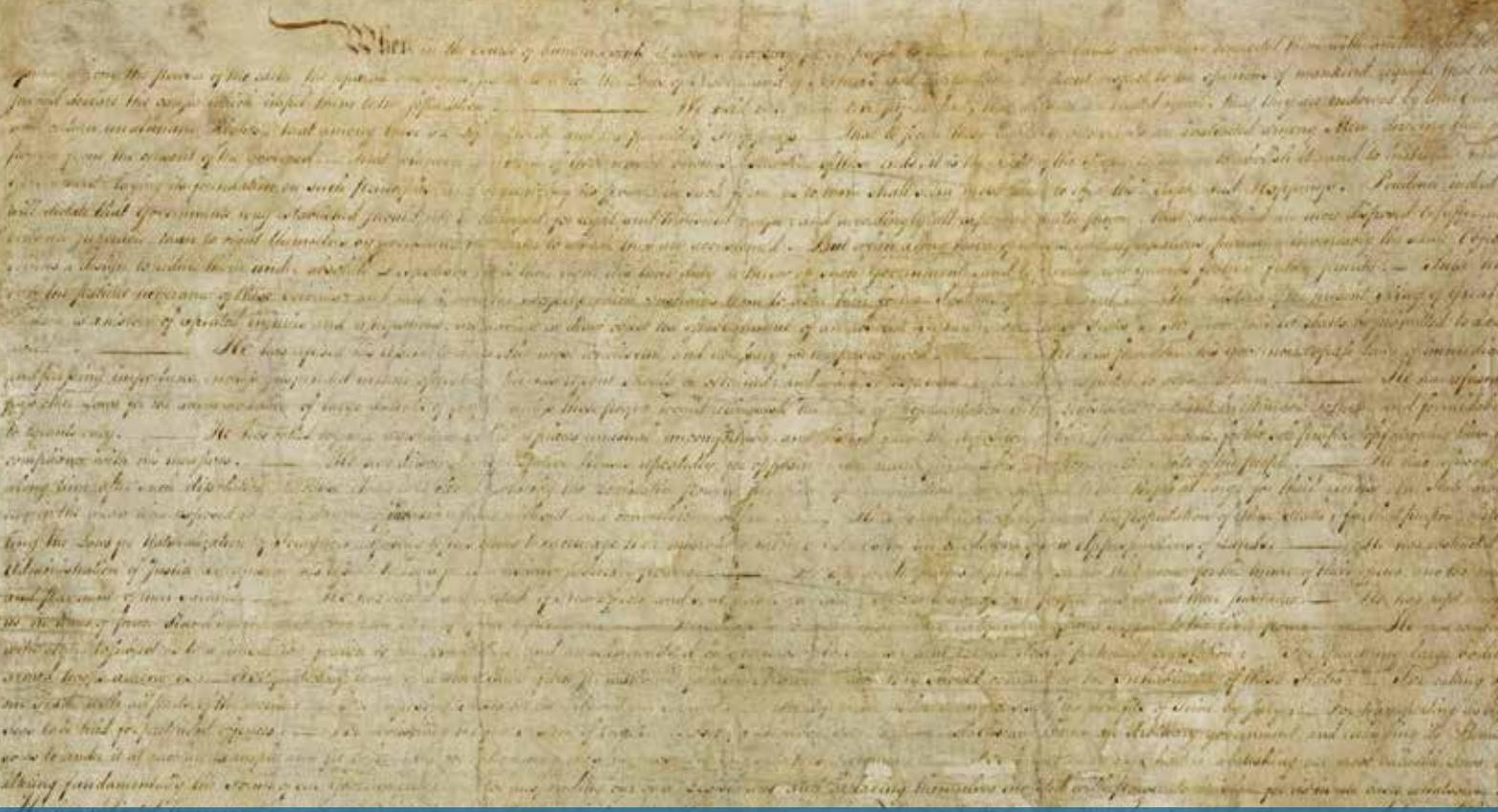
Weimar America?

What are today's commentators trying to say when they compare the United States in 2016 with Germany in the 1920s and 1930s? Why are others referencing fascist movements and dictatorships as they look at recent elections in Europe? Because the Weimar Republic was an emerging liberal democracy that gave way to the fascist Third Reich, war and genocide, recalling the Weimar era and the fascist movements of the 1930s and 1940s today may primarily be an expression of anxiety. The cry of "Weimar America" is a warning flare sent into public discourse, suggesting that democratic ideals and human rights are in danger.

How are we to know if this comparison is apt? The Weimar Republic was a complex period marked by fear and uncertainty. In the aftermath of Germany's loss in the Great War and the abdication of the Kaiser, there was a mood of humiliation and anger. Street violence perpetrated by both paramilitary groups and civilians created chaos. With high inflation and unemployment, many people lived precarious economic lives or lost everything. The Weimar years were also socially liberal and culturally innovative, and many previously marginalized groups felt a new freedom to express themselves in their art, music and sexuality. While this cultural ferment

IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776.

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America.



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United States Constitution. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States: n.p, 1787. Smithsonian Primary Sources in U.S. History. Web. 1 Sept. 2016

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created a sense of promise for some, others felt threatened by the new liberties and worried about the destruction of social norms and traditional gender roles. German democracy had shallow roots, and in Weimar's unstable atmosphere political parties emerged that aroused and exploited an "us and them" worldview, offering simple solutions that promised to restore Germany to greatness.

Some will read this too-brief sketch of the Weimar years and find a reflection of the United States today. Others will point out the many differences between then and now. History teachers have long been aware of the dangers of presentism: students often misunderstand the past when they evaluate it through the lens of their present context. Is it possible for the reverse to happen as well? Do

we sometimes use history to oversimplify the present or to misunderstand its complexity?

As students of history, we want to resist turning the past into just another tool of partisan rhetoric, selectively shaping a narrative that makes the sharpest political weapon. Such historical comparisons have a way of hardening antagonisms and shutting down conversation, not opening up communication. Yet we also reject the idea that the past is just an irrelevant series of long-ago events. Is there a middle way?

Understanding the relationship between past and present is key to a healthy democracy, and also crucial to the education of young people. While we don't want to make facile comparisons between the present and the past, at Facing History, we do believe it is impor-

tant to allow, if not provoke, students to discover their connections to events and choices in history. John Dewey argued that educators must figure out how a given subject "lives" in the experience of a student, and build on that understanding to nurture further growth. There is a developmental imperative in adolescence to find connections back into history that allow young people to integrate their autobiographical past and their understanding of the societal past. Those connections may then be used, for example, to explain differences between a parent's opinion and one's own, to support students' budding political or social thinking, and to help students see the nuance and complexity in our current moments. As educators who work to nurture engaged citizens, we want to start a conversation about how making connections with history, including the history of the Weimar era, can inform our choices today.

Facing History and Ourselves

This year, Facing History and Ourselves celebrates its 40th anniversary. In 1976, Facing History began helping educators teach adolescents about the history of the Holocaust through an interdisciplinary approach that focused on universal themes of human behavior. Since then, Facing History has developed resources and methodology that help classrooms use the lens of human behavior to examine a broader scope of topics, including racism, bigotry, and other forces that have threatened democracy in the United States and worldwide, and have sometimes led to collective violence.

In a time of transition between childhood and adulthood, adolescents are ready for the challenge of confronting complicated and troubling histories, reflecting on their own capacities for good and evil, and thinking about their own moral development. As students dig deep into historical case studies using Facing History resources, they address the developmental questions of adolescence: Who am I? What groups do I consider myself a part of and why? Where do my prejudices come from? How do I get labeled? When should I speak out and when not? What difference can I make? As a result, students' understanding, both of history and of themselves, deepens. One Facing History student wrote, "One thing this [Facing History and Ourselves] course has done, it has made me more aware—not only of what happened in the past but also of what is happening today, now, in the world and in me."

When students examine the steps that led to the Holocaust, the often-violent struggle for freedom and equality in the years of Reconstruction following the American Civil War, or the "moral universe" of the Jim Crow society that serves as the backdrop for the novel *To Kill A Mockingbird*, they discover that history is not inevitable and the choices of individuals matter. They also come to realize that there are no easy answers to the complex problems of racism, antisemitism, hate, and violence; no quick fixes for social injustices; and no simple solutions to moral dilemmas. Meaningful change takes patience and commitment. Still, as another Facing History student said, "The more we learn about why and how people behave the way they do, the more likely we are to become involved and find our own solutions."

The Lessons of Weimar

When we teach Weimar, we emphasize that the failure of democracy in Germany was not inevitable. Though democracy was new in Germany, it was not doomed to fail, and many Germans living in the Weimar era felt a tremendous sense of possibility and progress. We offer students stories of individual Germans and invite them to explore how identity and personal circumstances played a role in voting decisions, along with social context and political persuasion. We examine how structural weaknesses, like an unreformed judiciary and a chaotic parliamentary system, made German democracy fragile, not resilient, in the face of economic depression and political demagoguery.

The Weimar era is also an opportunity to consider how social tensions and divisions can be exploited for political gain. Ultra-conservative forces, including the growing National Socialist party, articulated a fervent nationalism that sought to restore pride to the country, partly by blaming minority groups for Germany's ills. Some leaders gave new voice to

long-held prejudices against minorities, including Jews. In the 1920s, Germany's 500,000 Jews accounted for less than one percent of the total population of about sixty-one million. Yet by focusing on Jews as "the enemy," anti-Semites made it seem as if Jews were everywhere and were responsible for everything that went wrong in the nation. Erich Ludendorff, one of Germany's top military leaders, and others spread the lie that Jews were responsible for "the stab in the back" at the end of the war, the Treaty of Versailles, the Communist Party, and the founding of the Weimar Republic itself. By stirring up resentment against Jews, these leaders deflected responsibility for their own role in Germany's defeat. The climate in the country became increasingly violent, as a number of extremist groups hired thugs and organized private armies to intimidate and even kill supporters of the republic, including the Jewish Foreign Minister Walter Rathenau. The seeds of collective violence were sown long before the Nazis gained control of Germany.

When students explore the Weimar era with intellectual rigor and historical empathy, they can become attuned to the subtext of political rhetoric and learn not to accept easy answers to complex questions. These skills of the historian are also crucial to citizenship. As scholar Sam Wineburg has written, history has a role to play as "a tool for changing how we think, for promoting a literacy not of names and dates but of discernment, judgment and caution."²

Using Historical Perspective to Probe the Present

This study of history invites us to make connections to the present moment—not by offering simple answers to the dilemmas we face, but by provoking us to ask more probing questions about our country and our choices. Some of the questions students and teachers may ask include:

- How and why does economic

struggle sharpen social tensions? Is there a relationship between economic and social stratification and the health or weakness of a democracy?

- What role does fear play in our country's decision making? How can we tell when fears are legitimate and when they are aroused for political gain?
- What language is being used in national conversations to talk about "us and them"? How can words be used to dehumanize groups and exclude them from a national community?
- Why do some believe stereotypes about minority religious and ethnic groups? Why might some groups, often those in the majority, be more inclined to believe or support biased ideas about certain minority groups?
- What are the attitudes towards laws, government and institutions in our society today? Is the law respected by all, including political leaders?
- What does it mean to suggest that democracy is at risk? How do we monitor the health of democracy and pay attention to small steps that may be changing its character? What avenues do citizens have to protect and sustain democracy? What are the consequences when citizens become bystanders?
- What is the role of the information and media in maintaining a healthy democracy? How can a democratic society encourage free speech while maintaining the standard of truth in journalism? At a time when we have exponentially more media and access to information than people did in the 1930s, how do we interrogate the information we receive? How do we sift through

the rhetoric to get an accurate reading on the state of our democracy? How do we decide when to listen to the "warning flares"?

One thing is certain: whether or not we are living in a time similar to Weimar, we need students and adults alike to think critically about the choices they face, not only as individuals, but as members of an interactive community. If nothing else, the history of Weimar reveals the fragility of democracy. What resources do we in the United States have to help us shape and sustain our democracy—resources that may not have been available in Weimar Germany? We need to use our voices thoughtfully and carefully, not to call names or invoke memories of dangerous times gone by, but to talk together about the world we want to live in. The "Weimar America" comparison is meant to suggest that the stakes today are high—and they are—but what the history really teaches is the significance of active citizenship. History may not tell us who to vote for, but it reveals how much every person's choices matter. 🌐

For More Information

Facing History has created a collection of readings, lessons, primary sources, and other resources for studying Weimar Germany in the classroom called "The Weimar Republic: The Fragility of Democracy," available at hstry.is/weimar. In addition, subscribe to Facing History's blog, Facing Today, to read posts that explore the connections between history and the present, at hstry.is/facingtoday.

Notes

1. Jochen Bittner, "Is This the West's Weimar Moment?" *The New York Times* (May 31, 2016), www.nytimes.com/2016/05/31/opinion/is-this-the-vests-weimar-moment.html?_r=1.
2. Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Temple University Press, Mar 1, 2001), x.

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