IN FACTIS PAX
IN KNOWLEDGE {THERE IS} PEACE
journal of peace education and social justice

Volume 20 Number 2 (2026): 204-226
https://openjournals.utoledo.edu/index.php/infactispax
ISSN 2578-6857

Trama-Informed Group Work in the Classroom

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Abstract

Recent U.S. presidential elections have intensified political polarization and social tensions, contributing to rising reports of election-related stress, anxiety, and symptoms consistent with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (American Psychological Association, 2024). Many Americans experienced challenges to both their lived realities and their deeply held core values, creating strife intrapersonally, interpersonally, and institutionally. However, to date, there has been no formal recognition of the growing number of clients seeking mental health services for election-related post-traumatic stress. Additionally, peace and dialogue initiatives are rarely mentioned in these discussions, nor is there a unified trauma-informed

framework for addressing it. This article presents a conceptual review of the effects of political polarization across individual, relational, and institutional levels, with particular attention to educational environments. Using a trauma-informed approach, the article introduces a structured, trauma-informed group therapy model that integrates psychoeducation, facilitated dialogue, and mutual support as a framework for social repair. Adaptation of the model is proposed here for use in peace education and classroom contexts, offering practical strategies for fostering safety, reflection, constructive engagement across difference as well as promoting civic empathy and sustainable peace.

Keywords

Trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), political polarization, peace education, dialogue

Political Polarization

Ordinary Americans are increasingly politically divided. Highly sensitive political issues and related ideologies have become associated with mainstream political parties and their candidates. The partisan differences that are deeply embedded within each of the major political parties have created a phenomenon in which ordinary citizens have increasingly identified with one or the other at the expense of peacefully coexisting. Political polarization refers to the growing gap in political beliefs and social identity between different political affiliations (Fraser, et al., 2023). It broadly signifies the ideological distance between candidates, parties, and/or voters (Lauka, et al., 2018). Examples of this may include ideological different positions by each party on controversial topics such as abortion, LGBTQ rights, gun control, and the economy. Differences between policy positions, or *ideological political polarization,* differs significantly from the emotional dislike and distrust of political out-groups that is evident in *affective political polarization*.

Affective Political Polarization

Affective political polarization occurs when people ascribe positive emotions to their own party and negative partisan views not just to parties, policies, or values, but also to members or supporters of opposing parties (Fraser, et al., 2023). It occurs when people view their partisan attachments as part of their social identities, and an election loss or criticism of their preferred candidate is perceived as a direct affront to them (Fraser et al., 2023). Affective political polarization posits that individuals begin to strongly identify with their political affiliations, viewing opposing groups with suspicion or hostility. It moves the electorate away from ideological viewpoints where compromises on shared values with opposing political parties might be possible. Religion, race, class, geography, and culture divide parties in ways that magnify party identity (Klein, 2020; Mason, 2018). Dr. Shanto Iyengar, Stanford University political scientist, has researched and provided critical commentary on the origins and consequences of affective polarization. Iyengar asserts that party affiliation is not simply an expression of disagreement, it has become the cause of them. Opposing party members now perceive one another as existential threats. He questions whether affective political polarization represents an end to democracy or a temporary radicalization of viewpoints that negatively impact accountability (Iyengar, 2024). Iyengar highlights this in his assertion that individuals may no longer sanction candidates for wrongdoing, even when it violates existing laws (Iyengar, 2024). In fact, he contends that affective political polarization has resulted in large segments of the populus being unwilling to accept election results not in their party's favor. In essence, affective political polarization allows one's own political side to evade accountability for undemocratic behaviors to prevent the other side from *winning*, enabling the election of leaders who potentially harm democracy (Kleinfeld, 2023). Affective political polarization can be destabilizing because it attaches to populism by appealing to ordinary people who feel their concerns have been disregarded by established elite groups (Kleinfeld, 2023). It is indicative not only of party affiliation but also enables a single vote to expose religious beliefs, race, ethnicity, gender, neighborhood, and other preferences. Partisanship can be thought of as a mega-identity, with all the psychological and behavioral characteristics it implies (Klein, 2020; Mason, 2018).

The causes of affective polarization are divided between external sources (media, ideological, social sorting) and internal sources (social identity, stereotypes, motivated reasoning, traits) (Druckman, et al., 2021). In 2019, 18-percent of Americans reported social media platforms as their preferred source for political issues (Getreu, 2022). By 2025, a Pew Research Center poll found that 54-percent of Americans got their news from social media platforms. It is important to understand the correlation it may have with the formation of political ideologies

and affective polarization. Selective news exposure and politically homogenous online social networks explain the potential role of social media and the internet on affective polarization. Increased exposure to favorable content can promote partisan identities and amplify negative evaluations of the opposing party (Iyengar, et al., 2019). Social media algorithms also exacerbate the proliferation of affective polarization by creating echo chambers where divisive content and misinformation spread, perpetuating groupthink with preconceived biases (Onyeogulu, 2024). Human identity relies on group membership, and in a polarized America, it refers to party membership but may have very little to do with positions on public policy. It represents identity politics, often weaponized by political elites or those in power to cultivate loyalty regardless of ideology. Instead, there is an increased emphasis on identity preservation that relies on an adherence to specific party affiliation at all costs.

Social Identity Theory

In *Uncivil Agreement*, political psychologist Lilliana Mason (2018) contends that identity-based ideology can drive affective ideological polarization even when individuals are naïve about policy. Mason (2018) purports that the passion and prejudice with which we approach politics is driven not only by what we think, but also powerfully by who we think we are. Social identity is the part of self that is derived from group membership. Human beings are hard-wired to attach to social groups. Once part of a group, there is identification, emotional connection, and well-being are derived from group membership (Mason, 2018). These are compelling psychological motivations for group formation. Human beings strive for a positive social identity because it serves the basic needs for certainty, self-esteem, and meaning in life (Scheepers, et al., 2016) Being part of a group distinctive from others can lead to positive social identity (Scheepers, et al., 2016). Dr. Marilynn Brewer, social psychologist, purports that human beings have two competing needs: one for group inclusion and one for differentiation (Mason, 2018). Bonds between group members and boundaries with outsiders foster membership and exclusivity.

In essence, all modern politics is influenced by identity. In recent decades, partisan identities have merged with racial, religious, geographic, ideological, and cultural identities (Klein, 2020). American politics have polarized around identity. Henri Tajfel, distinguished social psychologist, developed Social Identity Theory, explaining sorting, social categorization, and polarization as the process in which individuals derive self-concept from group membership, leading to in-group and

out-group bias (Islam, 2014). Tajfel hypothesized that the most important principle of subjective social order is constructing a classification of groups as "we" (in-groups) and "they" (outgroups) (Klein, 2020). To be considered a member of an in-group, one must follow a set of criteria including self-identifying with the said group and comparing oneself with members of not only that group using relevant attributes but also comparing oneself to the relevant outgroup (Getreu, 2022). Tajfel purported that in-groups dismiss, discriminate against, and compete against out-groups, even without reason or interests, to preserve their own identity (Klein, 2020). Group members simply want to win. Human inclination is to prefer and privilege members of the ingroups (Mason, 2018). Under situations of perceived threat or competition, the preference of the ingroup can lead to absolute hostility toward members of the outgroup (Mason, 2018). The Pew Research Center revealed that individuals are likely to impose negative traits (close-mindedness, immoral) onto members of the opposite political party (Brown, 2020). Tajfel maintained this preservation of identity influences how opposing political parties treat one another and shapes how we understand and ascribe meaning to the world.

Impact on Family and Relationships

Familial and interpersonal relationships play a significant role in well-being. Humans rely on relationships for emotional needs and companionship. Intact connections provide understanding, mutual care, safety, trust, and have a positive influence on thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. They often include shared values and offer belonging and personal growth. Close relationships are also gratifying, providing opportunities to explore shared interests, establish reciprocal support, and enhance self-esteem (Murray, 2021). Additionally, they reduce stress and build coping mechanisms that improve mental and physical health.

Families are a primary in-group and a major source of belonging and identity. Family membership provides a sense of home, support, and security (Warner, et al., 2021; Colaner, et al., 2020). Families often include contact with individuals who possess different social identities, including political affiliations (Warner, et al., 2021; Colaner, et al., 2020). Americans increasingly dislike and even despise their political opponents. Political differences create outgroups that pit family members against one another when voting and daily conversations (Warner, et al., 2021). In 2016, over 55% of Democrats and Republicans reported "very unfavorable" feelings towards their opposing party, up 17% a decade earlier (Chen, et al., 2018). In 2020, 43% of single Democrats would not date Republicans, and 24% of Republicans would not date Democrats (Brown, 2020). The Pew

Research Center (2025) found that in 2025, 80-percent of partisans reported feeling angry toward the other party. This polarization even impacts the likelihood that someone would engage in a romantic relationship with a person from the opposing party, with 68-percent of single Democrats and 24-percent of single Republicans saying they would not.

Affective polarization leads to social sorting where people live, marry, and work only with those sharing their views (Iyengar, et al., 2019). Affective political polarization threatens both democracy and citizens' mental health. Politics carries costs beyond economics. Hostility, conflict, and refusal to compromise are characteristics. At worst, relationships fracture, isolation increases, and aggression manifests, and safety and trust are lost. Animosity towards political rivals extends beyond voting. Implicit partisan biases influence discriminatory decisions more than racial or gender biases (Chen, et al., 2018). These dynamics predispose individuals to mental health problems. All levels of society are impacted. Political polarization erodes relationships, community bonds, support, and systems of care. Damaged friendships, disrupted workplaces, a reduction in family gatherings, feelings of guilt, regret, frustration, anguish, and remorse have all been attributed to political differences (Smith, et al., 2019).

Political orientation significantly relates to relationship satisfaction. Married couples with similar political attitudes report greater satisfaction (Leikas, et al., 2017). After the 2016 presidential election, many families reduced their time together or canceled holiday plans due to opposing political beliefs (Chen, et al., 2018). The Pew Research Center found that 40% of adults avoid political conversation with family, restricting those relationships (Warner, et al., 2021). APA reports 57% of Americans identify politics as a significant stressor, with polls citing government and politics as top fears (Smith, et al., 2019). The National Library of Medicine (2022), 11.5% reported politics harmed health, 40% reported higher stress, 20% lost sleep, and 20% lost friendships (Smith, et al., 2022).

Political Polarization and Education

Political polarization has also occurred within education and has affected instruction in both primary and secondary schools. One cause of this is that federal and state policies have increasingly politicized curriculum and limited the types of content that educators can address, in particular related to race, gender, and sexual orientation. Examples of this include Florida's "Don't Say Gay" law in K-12 schools and "Stop WOKE Act." A 2023 State of the American Teacher Survey found that 25 percent of teachers reported that their school or district told them to

limit discussions about political and social issues. Others chose to self-censor out of concern about repercussions, with 65 percent deciding to limit such discussions. Political polarization and the related perceptions of it also affect parents and their expectations of their children's schooling. A 2024 Brookings Institute poll showed that more than two-thirds of Republicans believe that public schools promote liberal viewpoints, while Democrats and Independents were more likely to see public schools as neutral or balanced.

The normalization of dangerous rhetoric, such as President Trump's comments that there were "good people on both sides" when neo-Nazis attacked ordinary citizens expressing their Constitutional right to protest in Charlottesville in August 2017, or purported that Haitians were "eating cats and dogs" in 2025, challenges everyday educators to avoid politicizing in the classroom. Kelly Keogh, a social studies teacher for 32 years, explained that although she initially struggled with how to respond to political tensions in the classroom, she ultimately felt compelled to speak up "I struggled with it at first, but I began to take more of a stand. As an educator and presumably a role model, I couldn't let this stuff go by without comment" (Walker, 2021). Similarly, Paula McAvoy, professor of social studies education at North Carolina State University, explained that while educators should avoid endorsing particular candidates and should remain mindful of expressing specific party positions, extreme polarization presents a broader concern for democracy. "Extreme polarization can lead to an attack on our values. We need to recognize that it's undermining our democracy, and that's not something that schools can or should ignore" (Walker, 2021). Additionally, curricula limitations and bans enacted by right-leaning legislators have made it challenging for educators to tackle important subjects and to address misinformation and hateful rhetoric.

In addition to these limitations imposed by lawmakers and policymakers on educators, students themselves bring politically polarized ideas to the classroom. (Anglum & Manion, 2025). Journell (2017) argued that teaching subjects like social studies in the Trump, or "post-truth," era poses a serious challenge to teachers' work of "ensuring students are trained to think critically and make reasoned decisions." Doing so is significantly harder because students come to class having participated in "ideological echo chambers that reinforce and legitimize alternative facts" (p. 10). Educators must carefully consider how to balance these perspectives in order to create a classroom climate that teaches young people civil tolerance. Building civil tolerance helps encourage civic participation in adulthood and has long been a key goal of public schooling. Having an open classroom climate that addresses social-emotional intelligence is a predictor of civil tolerance. Civil tolerance does not mean being indifferent or resigned but rather involves having strong views but being able to respect those of others. Sixth-grade social studies educator Christine

Nold argued that avoiding all political issues in her classroom abdicates educator's responsibility to address students lived experiences, asserting that teachers must create space for meaningful dialogue rather than retreat from politically charged topics (Walker, 2021). It is part of an educator's role to correct misinformation and to socialize people to create a better world. Affective political polarization clearly undermines that role (Walker, 2021).

In a higher education context, there are significant divides in regard to the belief that colleges and universities are having a positive effect on the country today. Recent national surveys indicate that public confidence in higher education has shifted significantly in the past few years. A 2019 Pew Research Survey found that almost 40 percent of respondents felt that colleges and universities are having a negative effect on the US today, an increase of 26 percent since 2012 that is almost exclusively held by Republicans. Another poll, this one in 2018, found that 79 percent of Republicans felt that their professors bringing their political and social views into the classroom was a major reason why higher education was going in the wrong direction. It unlikely that these percentages will decrease in the near future given the current administration's seeming disdain for higher education as being "too liberal" (Parker, 2019). A 2025 Pew Research Center survey found that about 70% of U.S. adults say the higher-education system is headed in the wrong direction, up significantly from 56% in 2020, with majorities of both Republicans and Democrats expressing this view. Perceptions of ideological bias persist. Among those with little or no confidence in higher education, 41% cite concerns that colleges are "too liberal" or politically biased as a key reason for their lack of trust. Republicans (85%) are far more likely to view campuses as leaning liberal than are Democrats (68%), and to view it as a major problem (67% compared to 26%) (Parker, 2019).

Federal and some state efforts to control what professors can teach has also dramatically affected campuses and likely exacerbates polarization. At best, it makes it more difficult to challenge polarization because professors must be more cautious about what they say. A Texas A & M professor was terminated after a student filed a complaint alleging that his classroom statement that there are more than two genders violated her religious beliefs and a contemporaneous executive order issued by President Trump. Scholars are concerned with this type of action, which they say is a threat to the critical need for academic freedom in higher education (Asch, 2025).

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

According to the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), six percent of the U.S. population will experience symptoms at some point in their lives (2024). In 2020, nearly thirteen million Americans were diagnosed with PTSD after experiencing a traumatic event perceived as unsafe, scary, shocking, terrifying, or dangerous (National Center for PTSD, 2024; SAMHSA, 2024). PTSD makes the individual feel stressed and afraid even after danger has subsided. Severity relates to the seriousness of the trauma, whether chronic or repetitive, proximity, and relationship with victim or perpetrator (SAMHSA, 2024). Symptoms can last months to years, including flashbacks, nightmares, detachment, loss of interest, angry outbursts, guilt, sadness, frightening thoughts, avoidance, negative beliefs, hyper-vigilance, memory problems, anxiety, mood changes, and physical pain (SAMHSA, 2024). The severity of PTSD is related to the seriousness of the trauma; if the trauma was chronic or repetitive, the individual's proximity to the trauma, and the relationship with the victim or perpetrator of the trauma (SAMHSA, 2024). Symptoms can last months to years, including flashbacks, nightmares, detachment, loss of interest, angry outbursts, guilt, sadness, frightening thoughts, avoidance, negative beliefs, hyper-vigilance, memory problems, anxiety, mood changes, and physical pain (SAMHSA, 2024). According to the DSM-V, diagnosis requires trauma exposure causing impairment for more than one month, avoidance, and chronic emotional arousal (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). (see Appendix A)

Election-Related Post-Traumatic Stress

While PTSD is a mental health condition that is triggered by experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event, often associated with events such as combat or personal assaults, recent studies have identified that highly stressful political events, such as contentious elections, can also act as significant stressors in people's lives. Political polarization and election-related post-traumatic stress is a relatively new concept that has been given increased attention only in the last decade. The increase in reported days of poor physical health, depleted mental health, depression, anxiety, stress, sleep issues, and substance use related to elections and politics has created an emergent need for mental health professionals to address this highly specialized, debilitating condition. While many forms of trauma are represented in the literature, very little research has been done explicitly addressing election-related trauma. Between 2016 -2020, mental health professionals have reported a significant increase in patients reporting that politics has negatively

affected their mental health (Smith, 2022). The American Psychological Association identified politics as a major source of stress for American adults due to sizeable rates of depression, anxiety, loss of sleep, and emotional reactivity among politically polarized groups (Smith, 2022). This has created an emergent need for mental health professionals to address this highly specialized, debilitating condition.

In their study titled *Election-Related Post-Traumatic Stress: Evidence from the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election*, political researchers Timothy Fraser, Costas Panagopoulos, and Kevin Smith explored the psychological impact of the 2020 U.S. presidential election on voters. Citing the ways in which the election challenged some voters' sense of security through daily encounters with hostile opposing partisans, threats of violence, and interference with the peaceful transition of power, they hypothesized that the heightened political tensions and fears of election-related violence was traumatic for many Americans, potentially leading to measurable symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. (Fraser, et al., 2023). Their research involved a nationally representative sample of 573 U.S. adults using the PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5). (see Appendix B) Their findings indicated that a significant subset of Americans reported symptoms consistent with election-related PTSD, with prevalence rates higher (12.5%) than the annual PTSD prevalence of 3.5% (Fraser, et al., 2023). Additionally, the study found a positive association between affective polarization and reports of election-related PTSD symptoms. Respondents who scored highest on affective polarization, expressing anger, fear, disgust or fear towards the opposing party, also reported the greatest levels of intrusion, avoidance, and hyperarousal symptoms, with polarization emerging as the most significant predictor of election-related PTSD (Fraser, et al., 2023). These findings were compelling. Election stress can manifest like trauma. The strongest predictor of election-related PTSD was affective polarization. Election related PTSD symptoms appeared across party lines. And emotionally charged political environments have clinical relevance. The possibility that contentious election outcomes could produce long term mental and emotional consequences for citizens is a call to action (Fraser, et al., 2023).

A 2024 American Psychological Association Stress in America poll found that 77 of respondents cited the future of our nation as a source of stress, making it the most common source of significant stress indicated. More than 60 percent (62%) of respondents cited U.S. politics as a significant source of stress (American Psychological Association, 2024).

These studies underscore the potential for political events and high-stakes elections to function as significant stressors, contributing to PTSD symptoms in the

general population. Elections can not only be psychologically injurious, but traumatizing. These implications require interdisciplinary collaboration between clinicians and policy makers.

Treating PTSD

The primary goals of PTSD treatment are to reduce the frequency and severity of symptoms, managing symptoms as they occur, restoring a positive sense of self and self-esteem, and improving coping skills to better navigate daily life impacted by the trauma. Symptom management includes reducing the intensity and frequency of flashbacks, nightmares, hypervigilance, and intrusive thoughts (Schrader, et al., 2021). Emotional regulation techniques are often delivered individually to manage anxiety, panic attacks, and overwhelming emotions (Schrader, et al., 2021). In an effort to identify and expand effective treatment approaches, an increased awareness of the potential benefits of group treatment for PTSD has evolved. This involves a number of mechanisms that offer benefits beyond those provided in individual therapy. Shared group membership and the associated group-based social identity processes can offer an effective way to reduce PTSD symptoms and provide unique value in the treatment of PTSD (Griffin, et al., 2023).

Group Therapy

Group Therapy is a well-established treatment modality in the mental health profession and can be as effective as individual therapy for depression, bipolar disorders, schizophrenia, anxiety disorders, panic disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, eating disorders, borderline personality disorder, substance use disorders, and chronic pain (Pappas, 2023). Groups are beneficial for people experiencing shame, stigma, or isolation by providing support and solidarity through connection and cohesion (Pappas, 2023). They also offer efficiency by allowing a therapist to reach many people at once (Pappas, 2023). Shared group membership provides social identity, belonging, and support to buffer trauma and alleviate PTSD symptoms (Griffin et al., 2023).

Shared group membership offers a group-based social identity, supporting the premise in Social Identity Theory of the importance of group membership and that individuals derive a significant part of their self-concept from their membership within groups. Belonging to a support group, including those based on a shared type

of trauma, can positively affect psychological health. It can offer psychological benefits through processes such as social identification with others in the group, group cohesion, belonging, and social support to buffer the effects of trauma and alleviate PTSD symptoms (Griffin, et al., 2023). Further, groups provide acceptance, efficacy, support, and solidarity, known as the social cure (Griffin et al., 2023). It is the group-based nature of the treatment that is most beneficial, offering advantages over individual treatment options. The sense of belonging, support and social identity are associated with a reduction in depression and PTSD symptoms, and increased well-being (Griffin, et al., 2023).

Group Therapy for PTSD

Individuals with PTSD are often socially isolated and may have difficulty trusting others. This can intensify the acuteness of PTSD symptoms. The loss of formerly held group memberships resulting from isolation can exacerbate identity loss. Identification with others in the group is believed to help mitigate the effects of trauma and reduce PTSD symptoms (Muldoon, et al., 2019). Group treatment provides a safe environment to become more socially connected with others and an opportunity to rebuild trust. Yalom regards this social component (cohesion, interpersonal learning) of group treatment as a central mechanism through which change occurs (2005). Additionally, individuals with PTSD frequently feel that their PTSD symptoms and trauma experiences are unique to them, further intensifying their isolation from others who could not understand the symptoms they are experiencing (Sloan, et al., 2012). Group treatment offers the opportunity to normalize PTSD symptoms by engaging with other individuals who are experiencing similar trauma symptoms. Group members may also be able to challenge each other in ways a group leader cannot because of perceived shared status as trauma survivors (Sloan, et al., 2012). Yalom refers to this process as universality.

Support Groups for Election-Related PTSD

Support groups differ from therapy groups. The goal of a support group is to help members cope. The goal of a therapy group is to help individual members change. Therapy groups, led by licensed mental health professionals, change behaviors and underlying issues through therapeutic techniques. Support groups provide peer support and shared experiences with others facing similar challenges. They represent a unique treatment approach for election-related post-traumatic stress.

Election-related stressors pose threats to the human experience as they threaten the integrity of close relationships, self-image, identity, and values. The trauma impact of unpredictability and instability in the political world, assumptions about the world being threatened, disruptions to everyday life, and ruptured connections can be devastating and bewildering, leading to feelings of isolation. Support reduces isolation through cohesion in homogenous groups and creates opportunities in heterogenous groups to unite members from different party affiliations. Group members discuss their experiences in a safe space, validate feelings, and develop coping mechanisms together. This collective approach addresses individual distress and promotes a broader understanding of shared societal impacts, fostering communal support and resilience. Participation in structured support groups restores faith in humanity, reconstructs relationships, and rebuilds belonging to a community (Weinberg, et al., 2005). The group becomes a corrective experience, rebuilding trust and safety, reducing isolation, and restoring a sense of belonging.

Trauma-Informed Mutual Aid Model of Group Work

Traditional group therapy for PTSD focuses on symptom management and cognitive processing, while trauma-informed mutual aid groups emphasize safety, trust, and empowerment to minimize re-traumatization and foster resilience. Rosenwald and Baird's article *An Integrated Trauma-Informed Mutual Aid Model of Group Work* blends trauma-informed principles with mutual aid to create a supportive and healing group environment, addressing emotional dysregulation, distrust, and powerlessness (Rosenwald & Baird, 2020). Traditional group work models often do not fully address the complex needs of individuals who have experienced trauma. By incorporating trauma-informed care, group space becomes safe, respectful, and empowering, promoting resilience, connection, and collective healing.

Integrating trauma-informed care with mutual aid principles allows group members to actively engage in each other's healing. Mutual aid encourages reciprocity, peer support, shared experiences, and problem solving, reducing isolation, and fostering connection (Rosenwald & Baird, 2020). Mutual aid principles encourage peer support, shared experiences, and collective problem solving, helping group members move from isolation typically found in PTSD to connection. Rosenwald & Baird contend that combining trauma-informed principles with the mutual aid support group process minimizes the risk of retraumatization while fostering reciprocal relationships and shared healing. Strategies include establishing clear group norms, promoting shared leadership, and

facilitating open dialogue (Rosenwald & Baird, 2020). Trauma-informed group work prioritizes safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment through structure and predictability, allowing members to share experiences and benefit from mutual support.

Psychoeducational Groups

Psychoeducational groups are a form of group therapy designed to provide participants with valuable information and coping skills about their mental health conditions or other life challenges (Sarkhel, et al., 2020). These groups are typically led by a mental health professional who takes on the role of both instructor and facilitator. They are used widely due to their ability to combine therapy, education, and social support. The primary goal is to educate clients about a specific issue, rather than facilitating the deep emotional exploration that can be found in traditional therapy groups (Sarkhel, et al., 2020). Psychoeducational group sessions are structured and follow a planned curriculum. Because group members share similar concerns, connections, cohesion, and empathy are attainable. The benefits of these groups include not only increasing knowledge and self-awareness about a topic but also acquiring new practical skills for managing the accompanying symptoms or stress, reduced feelings of isolation through shared experiences, and improved confidence and support (Sarkhel, et al., 2020).

Intergroup Dialogue

Intergroup Dialogue (IGD), like therapy groups, creates safe spaces to share experiences, build empathy from diverse perspectives, and understand social identities. Deeply rooted in the work of Paulo Freire, IGD raises consciousness for oppressed groups to understand the history and circumstances of their oppression. It is a form of social justice education to engage difference, social identity, and social justice through an intentional process to enhance equity across two or more social identity groups with distinct subject and power positions (Hicks, 2021). IGD is a structured process exploring specific social identity categories, such as race or gender, through active listening, reflective processing, and relationship building. Groups are comprised of two or more differing social groups to explore social identity, conflict, community, equity, and inclusiveness (Gurin, 2013). The focus is promoting an awareness from different social groups about the dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression, closely aligning with the core value of social justice in social work (Gurin, 2013). It is rooted in multi-cultural conflict solving that

analyzes privilege and oppression, aligning with social work and a trauma-informed approach. Using a trained co-facilitator model, two facilitators lead the IGD groups: one from each identity. This models a dialogic relationship for participants, while increasing awareness of biases and identities (Gurin, 2013). The three core goals of IGD are consciousness raising, building relationships across differences and conflicts, and strengthening individual and collective capacities to promote social justice (Gurin, 2013).

Components of IGD are uniquely suited to address political polarization because the process does not seek to push people to find common ground or even compromise their beliefs and values. Instead, when conflicts are complex tied to identity, the goal is to support people to interact and relate in spite of their differences (Cleven, et al., 2018). This makes IGD less threatening, as participants see dialogue as constructive interaction without altering their identities. IGD facilitators do not define participants or their identities. They facilitate a process in which participants explore their own identities, individually or as members of the group. In this manner, talking across differences can reduce affective polarization. Participants move at their own pace and are encouraged to communicate honestly, making the changes that occur more likely to continue when they encounter difference in any capacity in the future (Cleven, et al., 2018).

The DPT Model

(Dialogue, Psychoeducation, and Trauma-Informed Support for Election-Related PTSD and Political Polarization)

Combining key components from Intergroup Dialogue, Trauma-Informed Mutual Aid Support Groups, and Psychoeducational groups into a blended approach can meaningfully change the treatment of symptoms of affective political polarization and election-related PTSD. Intergroup Dialogue contributes an emphasis on change though facilitated dialogue across differences. Mutual aid groups emphasize the trauma-informed principles of safety, trust, shared voice, peer support, and empowerment. A psychoeducational approach creates a non-threatening, neutral learning space that is less likely to emotionally dysregulate group members, while adding skill building and structure to the group. Each approach has standalone benefits, but melding them offers potential to provide enhanced practice outcomes.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Several key treatment advantages exist with this integration. Drawing on the benefits of each individual approach, the DPT Model promotes holistic healing by addressing both the individual and collective experiences of trauma and understanding the broader social and systemic contributing factors. Being trauma-informed ensures that dialogue and therapy settings prioritize emotional safety, thereby reducing the risk of re-traumatization, while fostering participant trust. Structured conversations across cultural and societal identities promote empathy, reduce biases, and incorporate therapeutic techniques supporting emotional processing. Trauma-informed approaches focus on restoring a sense of control, and combined with IGD, empower individuals to engage in meaningful social change and personal healing. IGD and Trauma-Informed Mutual Aid Support Groups both emphasize connection, reducing isolation, and fostering belonging, essential for trauma healing. Trauma-Informed Mutual Aid Support Groups explore emotions and behaviors. IGD expands social consciousness and identities. And trauma-informed care ensures this process is handled sensitively. DPT would enhance conflict resolution with emotional intelligence and social awareness, addressing individual trauma and collective wrongs. Drawing from each approach, it is a responsive hybrid model addressing trauma related to affective polarization and election related PTSD. DPT could be broadly applied in mental health practices, schools, workplaces, and communities, making it a versatile, DPT group participants learn that political distress is a stress-response phenomenon grounded in neurobiology, trauma theory, and relational dynamics and that it can be moderated through structured dialogue, psychoeducation, and trauma-informed support. Broader applications of the DPT framework could be applied in other high-conflict or identity-based environments where fear, identity threat, and emotional reactivity hinder communication and connection; family systems work (intergenerational conflict), school and university-based groups, community healing circles, workplace groups, and faith-based groups. Strengthening the model moving forward includes developing a facilitator manual, establishing training protocols for clinicians, piloting in diverse settings, and creating digital adaptations.

Considerations for the DPT Model in Classroom Settings

We believe that the DPT model can be useful in a classroom setting to help address affective polarization. Educators can use the model to create dialogue that focuses on understanding complexity and nuance and healing trauma, rather than a more traditional debate model that emphasizes "winning" (Walker, 2021). Many educators already use inter-group dialogue to help students understand power, oppression, discrimination, social inequity, and how they connect to intersectional

identities. As Brar et al. (2025, p. 6) explained, "Higher education contexts offer an important setting for IGD implementation due to the juxtaposition of increased diversity exposure and college students' hesitation about voluntary interactions with outgroup members." Research has shown that IGD improves awareness of equity issues, improves perspective-taking, decreases prejudice, increases empathy, improves communication skills, reduces divisiveness, enhances intergroup relations, and increases action behaviors, all components of peace education (Frantell et al., 2019; Gurin et al., 2002; Kelly et al., 2024; Zúñiga et al., 2014). Further, and critical to why we believe IGD is a key part of the DPT model to address affective polarization in a classroom setting, it has been found to transform how people think about others, especially outgroups (Brar et al., 2025). As Koopman and Seliga explained, learning to talk about emotions in ways that do not judge makes it more possible to have difficult conversations about issues that we disagree on in ways that meet needs for respect and create connection across difference (2021). Several studies have also found that online classes can successfully utilize IGD and that an online environment might reduce the anxiety some students feel with face-to-face contact (Amzalag & Shapira, 2021; Brar et al., 2025).

Because students may have that anxiety about interacting face-to-face in a classroom with diverse populations and political outgroups, the DPT model adds the important element of being trauma informed. Koopman and Seliga (2021) explain that while a classroom does not always have to be comfortable, it does need to be a place where everyone's needs for empathy and respect are met. As peace educators are schooled in understanding and using nonviolent communication (Rosenberg, 2003), they are ideally suited to bring this trauma informed emphasis to using the model in the classroom. According to Koopman and Seliga, having empathy and respect for oneself and others when engaging in difficult dialogue is an essential part of peace education (2021). Further, Gandhi emphasized that involving emotions was more transformative than purely intellectual approaches to education.

Conclusion

Political polarization in the United States has evolved beyond ideological disagreement into an affective, identity-based division that disrupts psychological safety, fractures relationships, and stresses civic institutions, particularly educational settings where young people are immersed in norms of democratic engagement. Emerging evidence that contentious elections can produce symptoms

consistent with post-traumatic stress is evident in the clinical presentation of political distress, further justifying the need for trauma-informed responses that extend beyond individual treatment. This article contends that election-related post-traumatic stress and affective polarization are mutually reinforcing, creating cycles of threat perception, hyperarousal, avoidance, and social withdrawal that reduce both relational functioning and civic tolerance. In response, the Dialogue–Psychoeducation–Trauma-Informed Support (DPT) Model (Milano, 2025) offers a structured group-based framework that integrates psychoeducation, facilitated dialogue across difference, and trauma-informed mutual aid to reduce isolation, build emotional regulation skills, and support constructive engagement without requiring ideological compromise. Adaptation of these DPT principles for peace education, including classroom constructs, would benefit educators' efforts in creating psychologically safe spaces for respectful dialogue, correcting misinformation, and strengthening civic empathy. The work of peace educators in championing trauma-informed dialogue that helps heal divides has never been more important.

Future work should prioritize piloting and evaluating DPT across clinical, educational, and community settings; developing facilitator training and fidelity guidelines; and examining outcomes related to PTSD symptom reduction, affective polarization, intergroup attitudes, and relational repair. Ultimately, addressing political polarization as both a psychosocial stressor and a social identity process invites interdisciplinary collaboration aimed at restoring connection, strengthening democratic norms, and supporting sustainable peace.

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