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## **Understanding State Policy Issues in Context: Inquiry into State Political Information Ecosystems<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Polarization and Media in the US**

In the United States, political polarization has increased markedly since 2000, with consequences for local governments and state-level policymaking<sup>1</sup>. Redistricting, and the role of social media as the dominant source of information for many in the U.S.<sup>2</sup> has contributed to state and national legislatures that reflect more extreme political views.

A reliance on social media as both social network and newsfeed has led to echo chambers (a lack of sources with differing perspectives), the spread of misinformation, and algorithms that feed national political rhetoric and messaging. This focus on national news sources often overshadows coverage focused on how state or local policies may impact local areas. As a result, constituents likely experience fewer instances of exposure to political information from moderate political views or from local journalism.<sup>3</sup> Here we make the case that familiarity with local media and examining how proposed policies may impact local areas can be an essential tool to fight polarization and help students develop as informed citizens<sup>4</sup>. We present two tasks that can be used for students to conduct inquiry into state policies through developing an understanding of a states' political landscape and conducting a media audit to understand how the policy issue is being viewed and discussed across the state.

### **Understanding Local and State Political and Information Ecosystems (PIE)**

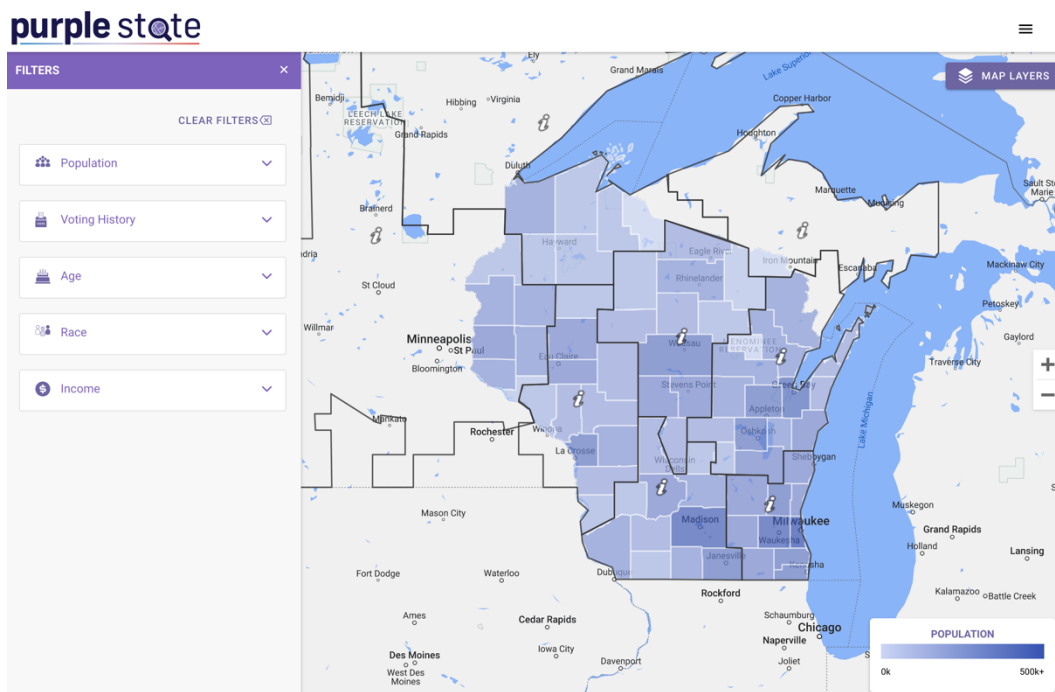
Educating students about political polarization and the role that political communication, local media, and partisan interest groups play in forming the current political environment is vitally important. Students need to be equipped to engage thoughtfully in this political reality to actively participate in the political process once they leave school.<sup>5</sup> This can be done effectively by engaging students with high quality policy research and data and examples of how policy issues are presented within local and state political landscapes.

Here, we model a classroom activity that can be used to support students' abilities to engage in policy issues in local areas by first developing an understanding of the state's *political landscape* and then conducting a *media audit* on a state policy issue. By doing this activity, we hope to model information seeking behaviors in students that will help understand how policy issues are viewed using local sources of information. The critical analysis skills focused on interpreting local journalism and other policy related information and data will also equip them to operate as citizens in the increasingly polarized political landscape.

The tasks we describe here are adapted from a political simulation we developed called PurpleState. PurpleState is an internship simulation that places students in the role of interns at a political communications firm where they design a political media campaign on state level policy

issues. Two of the primary goals of PurpleState are to engage students in inquiry into state level policy issues using real news and political data and to develop an understanding of how these issues are viewed within different political and information ecosystems.<sup>6</sup>

Focusing on developing an understanding of the demographic and political environment and conducting a media audit are activities developed from what actual political campaigns and communications firms do to understand the political landscape they are working in. In this activity, students research how a particular policy issue is discussed and *framed* in the media (e.g., news, social media, advertising). Framing refers to how an issue is defined and communicated from a particular political perspective. The goal of the media audit is to understand how issues are being talked about across the state, who the stakeholders on the issue are (e.g., politicians, interest groups), and how different views on the issues reflect the political and demographic environment in which they are produced. The media audit serves as a model for how to more consciously explore policy issues within a given context, and it helps students reflect on how different news and media sources reflect political views that are designed to influence audiences on these issues.



**Figure 1:** PurpleState Map Tool illustrating Population and Media Market Layers

A media audit is a task that helps students develop an understanding of how an issue is viewed in a particular region or state. It may be used for multiple purposes within a civics or government course as an inquiry activity focused on local and state politics or to understand the role of news media and political advertising at the state or local level. It can also inform how students may take action in their local communities on issues they care about. Finally, the media audit illustrates how geography and media literacy can be integrated into an inquiry of public policy issues.

By incorporating a wide variety of local news sources, students are exposed to a plurality of political opinions. They can also be engaged exploring how the sources are framed differently in relation to local regions and understand the role news organizations play in policymaking. For example they can begin to understand why a policy issue such as gun control may be viewed different in dense urban areas where gun violence is a primary concern versus a rural region of the state where hunting is a popular cultural activity. Not only do students see differing perspectives, but they can gain an understanding of how different news sources filter and interpret political stories and reflect the audiences they are created for.

Combining these news sources with visualizations of demographic and political geography, helps to understand how media shapes political narratives and vice versa (See, for example, Figure 3). Understanding this reciprocal relationship is an essential part of democratic citizenship<sup>7</sup>. The focus on state level policy issues and an understanding of the implications for local areas and how those issues may be viewed also allows for an easier transfer of what is learned in class to engaging as active civic agents outside of class.<sup>8</sup>

### **Understanding the Demographic and Political Landscape**

In PurpleState, students explore local and state political information ecosystems through our map tool (Figure 1). An analysis of the demographic and political landscape of the state is key to then understanding how policy issues are viewed differently in media markets or regions in the state. It is also useful for projecting the potential implications for politics and political advertising; for example, why a certain region of the state may get little attention because it is part of a media market for a neighboring state. Depending on the issues being investigated students may be asked to identify the most densely populated regions – or the wealthiest. See Figure 2 for some basic questions to have students engage in when exploring the demographic and political landscape.

#### **Demographic and Political Landscape Analysis**

An assessment of the political landscape is key to understanding the location and distribution of major groups of voters, population centers, state news organizations, and media markets. To conduct this analysis, have students utilize available data visualization tools (see Table 1) to develop an understanding of the state's demographics and political landscape:

1. **Population:** How are people distributed across the state? What does that population look like (for instance, age, income, ethnicity, etc.)?
2. **Voting History:** How do people in different parts of the state tend to vote? What does this tell us about the political beliefs/trends across the state?
3. **Media Markets:** How are different population centers grouped together, and what media is easily accessible to them? What are the affordances and limitations of producing media or advertisements in different parts of the state? What tradeoffs need to be made to effectively communicate to a target audience?
4. **Voting Districts:** What do state and federal boundaries tell us about the political balance in the state? How do these boundaries affect where and how media is broadcast?

**Figure 2:** Understanding the State Demographic and Political Landscape

### Conducting the Media Audit

The media audit task models how campaigns and communications professionals attempt to understand how issues are engaged with in local contexts. The goal of such a media audit is to examine and understand how the issue they are researching is framed and discussed by the different media sources in relation to their audience (e.g., political and demographic context) and media market.

Teachers can create such a learning activity for their own class with little effort. For example: creating a handout or guide for students that directs them to identify information using the four categories identified in Figure 4 about news coverage of a specific topic in their state or local area:

Our PurpleState map tool includes pinned local news stories about the selected issue representing media markets around the state (Figure 3). This allows students to examine a state policy issue (e.g., gun control measures) and how it is being communicated in different media markets across the state. Teachers could set up their own Google map with pinned stories for issues students who are interested in exploring in the media audit (See Table 1 for helpful resources). They could also provide a list of legitimate local news sources for the state and have students conduct searches on an issue they care about and create their own map.

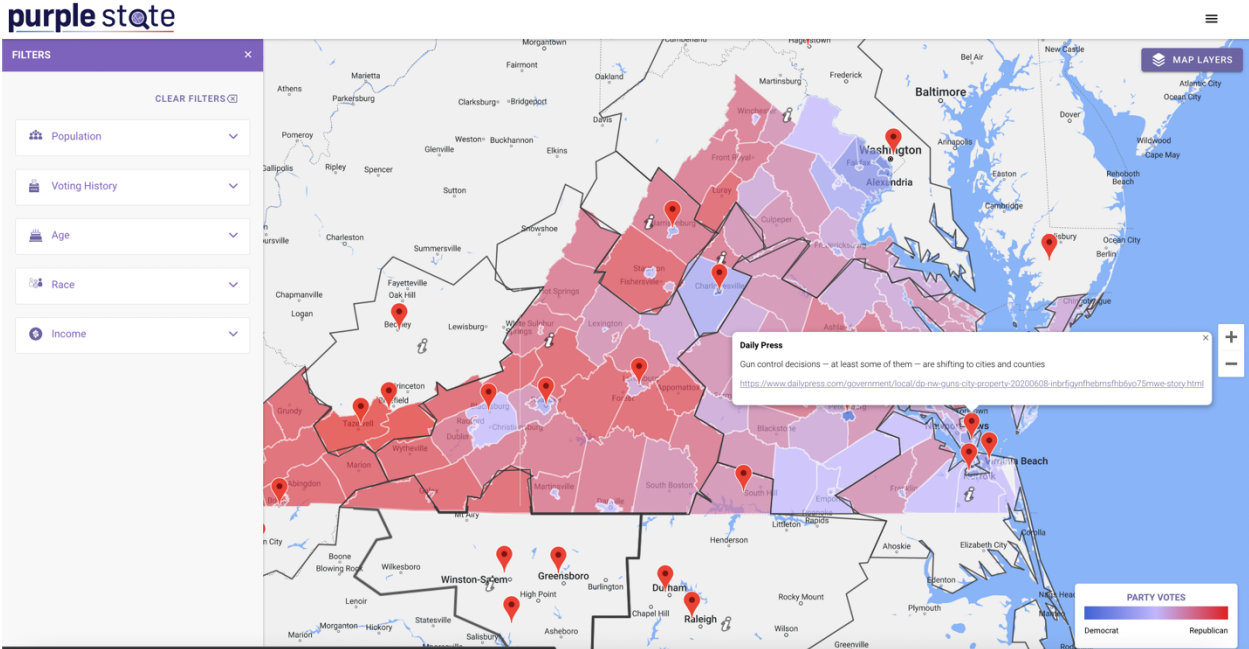


Figure 3: Map Tool Illustrating Voting History, Media Market and News Layers

In addition, other data sources such as proposed state legislation, political advertising, polling data, or Google Trends data (which shows common related web search terms) can be used in conjunction with the local news stories to help students draw connections between a broad range of media coverage and how policy making takes place in their community or state.

<p><b>Media Audit</b></p> <p>The <b>media audit</b> helps to understand how the policy issue is viewed across different media markets. By conducting a media audit, students:</p>
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- 1) identify important **stakeholders** on the issue,
- 2) assess any **regional differences** in how the issue is being framed or discussed,
- 3) identify **messages** and **themes** that reflect any kind of persuasive strategy, and
- 4) identify the political perspectives of news organizations and their **audiences**

**Stakeholders:** Identify the individuals (e.g., politicians) and major local and regional organizations who may support or oppose the issue you are studying. These could include think tanks, special interest groups, and political action committees.

**Regional Differences:** Use the media sources to identify how the issue is being discussed across the state. Ask yourself: Where are most of the news sources located? How is the issue being defined or framed? What are the key arguments being used for or against the issue? Is a majority view presented, or is it hotly contested?

**Strategies and Messages:** The news sources in the media audit show how the issue may be viewed in different regions of the state and the groups who are the audience for these news sources.

**Intended Audience:** Scan news sources for clues about who they're trying to reach. Articles may refer to specific groups by name (e.g., parents, hunters, or conservatives). In other cases, the tone of a particular message might indicate a particular audience.

**Figure 4:** The Media Audit

After conducting their media audit on a state policy issue, this information can inform a number of discussion models or informed civic actions. For example, their media audit could be used as evidence for a structured academic controversy on the policy or a similar deliberative activity. Students could also be asked to reflect on how the views in news media and other sources reflect how the issue is viewed across regions in the state and how they can use the data they have to explain any differences. If this is an issue they have selected to examine and form an action plan for, this reflection could then be used to develop a plan for advocating on their issue using their understanding of how the issues is viewed by different groups. They could identify ways that they thought could be compelling for different groups to perhaps find common ground on the issue. For our example of gun control, what are policy positions that it seemed fit the way the issue was framed across regions and differences, such as universal background checks for gun sales.

### **Making it Work in Your Class**

Creating a media audit activity can add depth, rigor and nuance to any government or civics classroom. There are numerous ways that students can be engaged with state and local political and information ecosystems. In Table 1, we provide a limited number of examples of data sources and interfaces for exploring issues policy issues in local contexts and the role that media play in shaping how those policies are viewed.

In our own research, we have found that students who participate have a greater depth of knowledge of how issues are viewed in different regions of the state and by different segments of the population. Students also report having higher levels of empathy for those they may disagree with and higher levels of confidence in engaging those they disagree with in discussion of these issues.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, understanding local and state political and information ecosystems can also help students become more savvy consumers of news, media, and political communications, and asks them to reflect on how what they are learning in these tasks relate to their own news and information seeking behaviors. Conducting a media audit activity provides an opportunity for students to find news databases, learn how to use them and begin to curate their own newsfeeds in more conscious ways. Utilizing these tools and skills helps to make students more capable and informed citizens with a greater sense of agency for their own participation in civic life.

**Table 1.** Resources for Creating a Political and Information Ecosystem Lesson\*

Map Interfaces	Google Map ( <a href="https://maps.google.com">maps.google.com</a> ): Create your own map with pinned news stories or other layers of data.
	2020 Census Demographic Data Map Viewer ( <a href="https://census.gov">census.gov</a> ): Allows students to explore state and county level data across a range of demographic categories.
Voting / Political Data	Five Thirty Eight ( <a href="https://fivethirtyeight.com/">https://fivethirtyeight.com/</a> ). Site provides numerous data visualizations at the state and local level and access to data bases.
	Politico ( <a href="https://www.politico.com/">https://www.politico.com/</a> ). News coverage site for US politics along with data and visualizations on issues impacting states.
	Ballotpedia ( <a href="https://ballotpedia.org">https://ballotpedia.org</a> ). Site provides data on elections and issues appearing on ballots.
	National Conference of State Legislation ( <a href="https://www.ncsl.org/">https://www.ncsl.org/</a> ). This database provides access to state legislative tracking systems to identify and understand what legislation has been proposed and its status.
Databases for Searching Local News	Google News ( <a href="https://news.google.com">https://news.google.com</a> ). Google news provides the ability to search for news from state and local news sources. You may encounter paywalls when trying to access the stories, however.
	Newsbank ( <a href="https://www.newsbank.com">https://www.newsbank.com</a> ). Provides a powerful search tool for searching news stories from state and local level journalism sources and includes a wide array of sources in its database.
	Internet Archive ( <a href="https://archive.org/">https://archive.org/</a> ). The internet archive includes a vast array of local television news stories as well as radio broadcasts from regional or local radio stations.

\*use your school accessible databases that include local news sources where possible to avoid advertisements and paywalls.

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<sup>1</sup> Grumbach, Jacob M. "From backwaters to major policymakers: Policy polarization in the states, 1970–2014." *Perspectives on Politics* 16, no. 2 (2018): 416-435.

<sup>2</sup> Kubin, Emily, and Christian von Sikorski. "The role of (social) media in political polarization: a systematic review." *Annals of the International Communication Association* 45, no. 3 (2021): 188-206.

<sup>3</sup> Mutz, Diana C. "Facilitating communication across lines of political difference: The role of mass media." *American political science review* 95, no. 1 (2001): 97-114.

<sup>4</sup> Gaultney, Ira Bruce, Todd Sherron, and Carrie Boden. "Political polarization, misinformation, and media literacy." *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 14, no. 1 (2022): 59-81.

<https://doi.org/10.23860/JMLE-2022-14-1-5>

<sup>5</sup> Hess, Diana E. *Controversy in the classroom: The democratic power of discussion*. Routledge, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> PurpleState is funded by the Institute of Educational Sciences and housed at the University of Wisconsin – Madison in partnership with William & Mary and the University of Rhode Island. The project website, which includes a full description and access to project resources is <https://www.purple-state.org/>.

<sup>7</sup> Percy, Mark. "'It's Not Accidental at All'--Media Literacy, 'Whataboutism,' and Occam's Razor." *Research Issues in Contemporary Education* 6, no. 2 (2021): 10-35.

<sup>8</sup> Stoddard, Jeremy, Zachari Swiecki, and David Williamson Shaffer. "Behind the curtain: An epistemic design process for democratic media education simulations." *More like life itself: Simulations as powerful and purposeful social studies* (2018): 21-39.

<sup>9</sup> Chen, Jason., Tutwiler, Shane, Brohinsky, Jais, Behnke, Derek & Stoddard, Jeremy. (2022). Analyzing the impact of a localized political simulation on participants' self-efficacy and interest. Presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. San Diego, CA.