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## Changing U.S. Political Climate Influence on the Professional Outlook of Prospective Teachers

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## Changing U.S. Political Climate Influence on the Professional Outlook of Prospective Teachers

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### Abstract

The election of Donald Trump as President of the United States has changed a great deal in the United States; teacher education is no different. The aim of this exploratory study was to gauge pre-service teachers' confidence in relation to factors associated with their chosen profession in the midst of the changing political climate. Teacher candidates ( $n=98$ ) at a mid-western land-grant institution completed a survey about their past, present, and future perceptions and confidence related to the role of government in education, physical and social-emotional safety in schools, and public perceptions of the role of educators. One major theme that emerged from the results was that pre-service teachers reported a decrease in confidence about the role of the government in education under the current presidential administration. Also, despite their chosen field of study, these pre-service teachers expressed concerns about a lack of respect and support for the teaching profession and the physical safety and emotional well-being of students in schools. These findings have implications for teacher preparation in the present and for the future.

### Introduction

This article attempts to capture a snapshot of an unprecedented time in the United States which, among many sweeping implications for the country, has had an impact on public education: In particular, the political change and apprehension of the “unknown” related to public education that could influence policy, practice,

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structure, function, and political authority of schools today. Our particular focus for this study has been on preservice teachers and how these changes, in the midst of their teacher preparation, may have impacted their confidence levels of the state of education and their career paths.

The election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States has begun with skepticism for some and optimism for others. Trump supporters believe his unconventional presidential style has helped to “drain the swamp” and shake up Washington for the better. At the end of December, the Gallup Poll (2017) reported 82% of Republicans approved of the job he has done as president. However, the same poll also indicated an approval rating of 9% when considering only Democrats and 39% when taking all Americans into account. The stark contrast in these figures illustrate the division in how his administration is being viewed. Some believe the Trump administration is upending government and bringing forth positive change to the traditional American political establishment, while others believe Trump disregards facts and verifiable information in his frequent tweets and public statements, which has led to a lack of confidence in the administration and their policy agenda. This study explores this phenomena with a sample of preservice teachers and investigates how the new administration and changing political landscape have influenced their outlook on preK-12 education.

With the wealth of information known about voters in the United States, politicians can easily communicate and relate their ideas and opinions to specific groups. However, the political positions of candidates may not be obvious to all voters. Often candidates’ thoughts and ideas are transparent while other times they are left intentionally vague. This fragmented communication style often leads to certainty in some areas and dismay in others. On most campaign trails, presidential candidates promise to uphold educational standards, increase performance levels in children, and increase awareness for teachers; however, those promises often lack clear outlines for how they can become realities. The same held true for the last presidential administration and now, more recently, the current presidential administration. However, one major difference between the Barack Obama and Donald Trump administrations is the manner they communicated and defended their positions during the election and during their presidencies. The media has showcased that although both administrations relished controversial topics, the manners in which they articulated their opinions were uniquely different, defending their political mindsets. In the past, media showed the past presidential leaders as being more empathetic and having more positive demeanors when opponents brought forward controversial topics. More recently, the media has shown that this is not true for the current presidential leader as he transgresses, mocks, and insults various individuals, groups, and communities to the point where society and media have labeled him a bully. He was and is continually categorized in this way because of what is interpreted by some as his lack of empathy, or his inability to understand and share the feelings of others, for anyone outside of his traditional frame of mind.

In addition, Presidents from the past opted to choose the highest-qualified men and women for various administrative positions. However, the Trump Administration recently appointed Betsy DeVos as Secretary of Education, who has no education-related degree or background, but rather a bachelor's degree from Calvin College with business experience. Her ideas of including vouchers for families to choose where their children go to school, along with her favoritism towards charter schools, have left many individuals apprehensive about the future of the educational system. This may be primarily because research has not shown that charter schools are successful compared to other school types (CREDO, 2013, 2015) and that funding will be needed to create and implement the voucher system. Further, with the manners that conventional and social media showcase and provide information to us every day, the information may get distorted, lending individuals to freely think about what has, is, and possibly what will come with the educational system as a whole.

One specific population that has been greatly impacted by these political changes is teachers. Teachers play an invaluable role in empathy development. Most teachers promote empathic growth by showing kindness, being responsive to their students, modeling empathy, and establishing a kind and respectful environment. The issues that have arisen for many teachers is trying to contradict Trump's negative dispositions about our younger generations along with the specific attacks targeted at teachers and the school systems as a whole. This concern, along with Trump's choice of DeVos, have many teacher education majors and educators within various schools and agencies concerned. This exploratory study is guided by the following question:

- How has U.S. political change influenced pre-service teachers' perspectives on preK-12 education at a rural Midwestern university?

## Literature

A brief review of the literature regarding the role of federal government in education and the impact of social views and attitudes on education was conducted to provide a context for the development of the survey that was utilized in this study.

### *The Political Climate of Education*

Historically the federal government, and specifically, the President have had minimal influence on the nation's education system. The Tenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution states, *the powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people*. Ratified in 1791, this statement was the beginning of the federal government's role, or lack thereof, in the education system of the country. For the most part, States were responsible for the development and regulation of their system of education. The federal government did not significantly deviate from this stance until the late 1950s. In 1957, the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, the world's first space satellite. To ensure the U.S. would remain competitive in the

scientific and technical fields, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act, which provided substantial funds to support education in science, mathematics, and foreign languages (“Sputnik Spurs Passage,” 2017). The next notable date in the history of federal government’s role in education came in 1983 with the publication of the report *A Nation at Risk*, which included the noted statement, “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people” (United States Department of Education, 1983, p. 5). The report began a national movement to increase rigor through increased educational standards and was often mentioned by Ronald Reagan during his presidency (Park, 2004). The federal government’s most substantial increase in involvement with public education came in 2001 with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). NCLB brought an unprecedented level of involvement from the federal government through stronger accountability of student learning and tracking of all students’ progress (Johnson, 2013). Although the Obama Presidential Administration ratified NCLB, now known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), to make it less strict and return some power to the states, the federal law still makes assessment and tracking of students’ progress mandatory (Davis, 2015).

With the election of President Trump and his appointment of Betsy DeVos as the Secretary of Education, there is some uncertainty as to how the federal government’s role in education may change. Betsy DeVos is supportive of returning educational control to states and local communities and is also a proponent of school choice through charters and voucher programs (“Betsy Devos,” 2017).

Although charter schools such as the Harlem Success Academy and KIPP have been extremely successful and the number of charters across the nation continues to rise, more than doubling from 2004 to 2014 and tripling in the number of students served (NCES, 2017), research on the effectiveness of charter schools is mixed. A comprehensive evaluation by the National Center for Educational Evaluation found that, on average, charter schools are not more or less effective than traditional public schools, except in the case of schools serving low income or low achieving students, in which case, charter schools have better results in some areas (Gleason et al., 2010). In the case of school vouchers, research has not identified many positive outcomes. Urban students in Milwaukee remain some the lowest scoring in reading and math after using a voucher system for over 20 years, and studies of programs in Louisiana and Indiana found voucher students performed significantly lower (Carnoy, 2017).

DeVos’s policy agenda is only part of the reason her appointment has been criticized. Some are more concerned with her lack of experience and qualifications to serve as secretary of education given that her only experience has come from serving on the board of interest groups including the Alliance for School Choice and All Children Matter. In addition, DeVos’s critics have been exceptionally vocal; one Senator reported receiving more than 50,000 emails and letters opposing her cabinet

appointment prior to the Senate's confirmation vote (Zernike, 2017). Mainstream media have also extensively covered her, and she has even been spoofed on popular late-night comedy shows such as *Saturday Night Live*. This level of coverage and criticism has led many educational professionals to be leery of her policy initiatives. The Washington Post (2017) reported that due to the protests at her many public appearances, the U.S. Marshals Service has provided special protection at an average cost of \$1 million a month. This state of uncertainty has many fearful of what changes may be in store for the nation's educational system.

Thus far, the Trump administration has not focused on education related issues very extensively. Trump did donate \$100,000 of his salary to the Department of Education in July to support STEM based camps. However, his proposed budget presented in May also called for a \$9.2 million cut to the Department of Education (Calfas, 2017). Also, the president rolled back protections for transgendered students, a move which was supported by DeVos' department (Rodan, 2017). DeVos herself continues to speak in support of expanded school choice through charter schools and voucher systems, but those efforts have not resulted in significant legislative changes (Green, 2017).

### ***The Social Climate of Education***

The American teaching force is increasingly less stable and the U.S. is suffering from teacher shortages, particularly in the areas of math and science (Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014). The problem lies not only in the recruitment of teachers, but also in retention (Wilson, 2011). According to Ingersoll (2002), the incentives that may initially attract some to become teachers may not be enough to keep them in the profession. Between 1989 and 2009, the annual attrition rate of teachers rose an astonishing 41% with those teaching five or fewer years at highest risk of leaving the profession (Ingersoll et al., 2014). Schools with poor working conditions and low salaries experience higher teacher turnover rates (Ingersoll, 2002). The highest rate of teacher turnover occurs in rural and urban school districts hosting a larger percentage of minority students and facing high-poverty rates (Ingersoll et al, 2014). Some school districts find it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain quality teachers, partly due to the fact that teaching is not often viewed as a well-respected profession in the United States (Ingersoll et al., 2014).

### ***Teaching as a Respected Profession***

Teachers have been fighting for years to gain the respect that professionals in other fields such as medicine, engineering, and law are afforded (Ingersoll et al., 2014). Concerns about the low status of the teaching profession were ranked as more pressing than concerns about administrators, students, and parents by alumni from a teacher education program in California (Tye & O'Brien, 2002). Unfortunately, the professional status of teachers in the United States is often akin to lower-skilled jobs (Ingersoll et al., 2014). As stated by Wilson (2011), "...in the

U.S. teaching is not generally seen as noble or culturally valuable. Americans don't expect their 'best and brightest' to pursue a teaching career" (p. 64). A recent survey of college freshman revealed the lowest interest for pursuing a career in education in 45 years. Only 4.6% of those surveyed in 2016 intended to major in education compared to 10.2% in 1996, 8.4% in 1986, and 10.7% in 1976 (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2017). In addition to feeling undervalued and underappreciated, former teachers have cited increased accountability for student learning (Tye & O'Brien, 2002; Ingersoll, et al. 2014), additional paperwork (Tye & O'Brien, 2002), student attitudes and misbehavior (Tye & O'Brien, 2002; Ingersoll, et al. 2014), poor working conditions, a lack of autonomy to make classroom decisions, low salaries, and a lack of classroom resources and professional development opportunities as reasons for discontinuing a career in education (Ingersoll et al. 2014). Unfortunately, some school climates do not adequately recognize and support the needs of teachers, which inadvertently contributes to teachers feeling disrespected and ultimately unsafe in their work environment. "Perhaps the most pervasive unmet need in our K-12 schools today, for both teachers and students, is to feel socially, emotionally, intellectually, and physically safe" (Cohen, Cardillo, & Pickerall, 2011, para. 17).

Safety in schools has been a concern for decades. The main focus has typically been on physical safety with news of gun violence in schools at an alarming rate. However, schools also need to be a space of social and emotional safety where students can feel supported (Cohen et al., 2011). With the barrage of negativity on daily media and political leaders openly insulting each other with callow adjectives, one must question if it will become more challenging for educators to build and maintain respectful school climates and help students develop positive social and emotional traits. Modeling respect, promoting empathy and combatting the bullying epidemic are central to school climate reform (Cohen et al., 2011). Educators across the country have implemented a variety of programs aimed at making schools safer and more civil. For example, The Citizen Curriculum designed for middle-school students promotes tolerance, empathy, and cooperation. Second Step, a violence prevention program, teaches three components of empathy- recognizing feelings in self and others, considering others' perspectives, and responding emotionally to other. (Feshbach & Feshbach, 2009). The Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence has developed the RULER Program, which helps students understand and communicate with others about their own emotions (Brackett et al., 2011).

**Empathy.** Empathy is fundamental to a civilized society (Borba, 2016). Unfortunately, research suggests students in the United States are becoming less empathic (Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2011) and increasingly narcissistic (Twenge & Foster, 2008). Youth's capacity to care has plummeted while self-absorption has skyrocketed (Borba, 2016). Low total empathy scores have been associated with higher levels of violent bullying by males and indirect bullying by females (Joliffe & Farrington, 2006). This should be concerning to any professional charged with

the responsibility of preparing college students for people-oriented professions such as teaching. Future teachers are not only responsible for teaching content but for also keeping their students safe, both physically and socio-emotionally. In other words, teachers need to use both their heads and their hearts in order to make a true impact in a classroom.

Some may argue that the role of teacher educators across the nation has become even more challenging under the current political climate thwart with divisiveness in Congress, upheaval in the Department of Education, and negative commentary by politicians, the media, and social media. In October 2016, the National Education Association began a “campaign to raise awareness about the harmful effects of Donald Trump’s inflammatory rhetoric on America’s schoolchildren” (NEA, 2016, para. 1). For example, President Trump’s policy agenda regarding issues such as a border wall with Mexico and a travel ban from Muslim dominated countries has further stressed racial and ethnic tensions in the United States. Some of these widespread conflicts boiled over in Charlottesville, Virginia in mid-August. A group of white nationalists gathered for a rally and to protest the removal of the statue of a Confederate general. Counter-protesters organized to oppose the white nationalists message of racial superiority. Conflict between the groups culminated when a car drove into counter-protesters, killing one and injuring 19 others. Trump’s comments following the events condemned the white nationalist protesters, but also blamed counter protesters for their role in the tragedy. This is the reality in which teacher educators must develop teachers to work in schools with students. Concerns about the impact on bullying behaviors, particularly in relation to cyber-bullying, are being discussed across the nation (Costello, 2016).

**Bullying.** In 2016, the Teaching Tolerance Project coined the phrase ‘Trump Effect bullying’ after their survey of over 2,000 teachers indicated there had been a marked increase in bullying behaviors specifically related to immigrant and Muslim students (Costello, 2016).

As previously mentioned, the President’s policy agenda regarding issues such as a border wall with Mexico and a travel ban from Muslim dominated countries has exacerbated racial and ethnic tensions in America. Researches are continuing to study if these social environments are having an impact on preK-12 schools. After the election, the Teaching Tolerance project conducted another convenience sampled survey, this time including over 10,000 teachers. Of those respondents, “over 2,500 educators described specific incidents of bigotry and harassment that can be directly traced to election rhetoric” (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2017, p. 4). In addition, nine out of ten educators reported negative impacts on students’ mood and behavior.

This seemingly emerging social and political climate where narcissism and bullying are apparent within school climates should serve as red-flags to professionals who prepare future educators (National Center for Educational Statistics,



2016; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016). As a group of concerned teacher educators, we set out to explore whether pre-service teachers at a Midwestern land-grant university were concerned about the potential impact of a changing political and social climate on their roles as future educators. The exploratory study that is outlined below was conducted to answer that question.

## Methods

The research team consisted of four faculty members from the teacher preparation program at a Midwestern land-grant university. The team met Spring 2017 to create a survey tool that would identify preservice teachers' confidence levels and perspectives on education, the past Obama administration, the current Trump administration, and on the future presidential administrations. The significance of asking participants to rate their confidence on the past serves to indicate respondents' present conception of the past rather than capturing an accurate picture of the reality of the past. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained in accordance with the policy statements of the Human Subjects Committee at the respective university.

### *Data Collection*

**Survey development.** The survey tool developed used Likert-type questions. This questionnaire was developed based on the principal that Likert-type scales can be used to measure confidence (Carifio & Perla, 2007; Jamieson, 2004). No pilot of the survey was implemented. This is due to the timeliness of the political shifts occurring and the need the research team felt to try to understand these phenomena. This survey tool is being used in an exploratory manner (Jupp, 2006) to better understand current perspectives among students and begin the conversation about the ramifications of current politics on preservice teachers and what that means for teacher education. Future surveys will be informed by the results of this implementation.

The knowledge aim (Jansen, 2010) for this questionnaire was to understand the current perceptions of teacher candidates at this university on the political landscape and public education. Within the survey, respondents were first asked to think about their perspective when they began pursuing their current degree and asked to rate their confidence on a series of items, such as *public schools are well-funded and have access to a variety of necessary resources and policies are in place/being created to support and protect the mental and psychological well-being of teachers, students, and school communities*. For all of these students, this means they were thinking of two or three years before the time of the survey to the Obama administration; none of the respondents began the teacher education program during the Trump administration. The rationale for asking teacher candidates about the past is to gain a better understanding of the directionality of

those perceptions, meaning: do respondents see educational issues as tending in a positive or negative direction? Asking respondents about the past on survey items will often result in recall bias which threatens the construct validity (Bhattacharjee, 2012). To avoid this, we have not treated the results of this survey asking about the past as an accurate portrayal of respondent perspectives of the past. Rather, these data are viewed as a portrayal of the respondents' current views of the past. In this way, the recall bias is mitigated by focusing on the present. The next series of items asked the same set of confidence questions, but asked respondents to consider any changes to their present perspective. In this way, content validity is addressed by having the teacher candidates in this survey respond to the same questions multiple times (Drost, 2011); this method allows respondents to focus on the changes as they respond. The items were repeated a third time and respondents were asked to think about their future perspective. This structure was intended to provide some insight into how the change in presidential administration has influenced the present and future outlook of prospective teachers.

**Survey Administration.** The tool was offered via online using QuestionPro to gather as many responses as possible. The questionnaire consisted of six demographic questions including major, gender, racial/ethnicity, political affiliation, size of community growing up, and type of school attended. Ten questions broadly related to respondents' confidence perceptions of physical and emotional safety of school environments. Eight questions broadly related to respondents' confidence perceptions of teachers, and over 20 questions broadly related to confidence perceptions of the executive branch, political climate, and school climate, including the past Obama Administration, Trump Administration, and future administration. The demographic questions were multiple choice with the exception of age which was open-ended. Respondents' confidence levels were measured using a 5-point Likert scale with 1 being no confidence to 5 being completely confident. A few open-ended questions were also asked to gain some additional insight into education today (see Appendix A). Data was collected for 2 weeks so that students had time to complete the questionnaire with their class and work responsibilities.

**Sample.** An invitation to participate in this exploratory study was sent to 171 undergraduate teacher education majors enrolled in a variety of teacher education courses. A total of 98 respondents completed the survey. The response rate was 57% based on those that received the survey. Among secondary education students who received the survey, the response rate was 75% ( $n=64$ ). Among elementary and early childhood education students who received the survey, the response rate was 40% ( $n=34$ ). Student participation in the survey was voluntary. All participants ( $n=98$ ) were pre-service teachers between the ages of 19 and 25 years old in one teacher preparation program which offers both early childhood education and secondary education teacher certifications. The majority of participants identified themselves as Caucasian, a reflection of the lack of racial and ethnic diversity of the university

context. With regard to the open-ended response items on the survey, frequency counts of key terms were used to draw out commonalities among responses. Table 1 represents the demographic make-up of the pre-service teachers who participated in the survey. With regard to the open-ended response items on the survey, frequency counts of key terms were used to draw out commonalities among responses.

**Data Analysis.** Checks of internal consistency and reliability were conducted on the final survey data. Each time-specific subsection within the survey provided reliable data as the Cronbach's alpha for the past, present and future items were .847, .858, and .894 respectively. The questionnaire as a whole was internally consistent, as evidenced by a Cronbach's alpha of .853 from the final data set, which is well above the accepted level of .60 for exploratory purposes (Garson, 2016). The research team used descriptive statistics derived from QuestionPro reporting tools to analyze and better understand the results. The questionnaire in this study is Likert-type and, as such, represents ordinal data. As a result, the best means of analysis lies in descriptive statistics to measure central tendency and spread of data (Garson, 2016). Frequencies, means, medians, and standard deviations were calculated for each question. These scores were analyzed as a whole response group and as a comparison among demographic groups identified through survey responses. Inferential statistics from Likert-type surveys, particularly in small sample sizes, have limited usefulness. For the purposes of this study and data analysis, descriptive statistics tell the most complete story of students' confidence levels among this sample on these items. In this way, we have taken a qualitative approach to using these data to provide a description of the current state of our teacher candidates at this snapshot within the survey. In addition, the open-ended responses were coded for certain themes and frequency counts of terms used across participants provided an addition lens to view the results. As a final note related to the analysis of these survey data, this is an initial, exploratory questionnaire to gather data in various areas to inform future work. The research team intends to take up additional projects based upon these results. As of this writing, the team has completed a focus group with practicing teachers; the results have been analyzed and a manuscript is currently being drafted.

**Table 1.**  
*Participant demographics.*

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Political affiliation</i>	<i>Type of high school</i>
Female (84%)	Caucasian, not Hispanic (89%)	Republican (46%)	Public (95%)
Male (16%)	African American (4%)	Independent (27%)	Private (5%)
	Asian American (2%)	Democrat (18%)	
	Native American (2%)	Libertarian (6%)	
	Other (2%)	Prefer not to answer (3%)	
	Hispanic (1%)		

## Results

To understand the data from this investigation and help guide future work, results have been divided into three categories by the foci of the questions to which they pertain. First, findings emerged from the survey items which asked pre-service teachers about their perspectives of the relationships between government and education as well as the confidence they have had/have in the government in the past, present and future. Second, results pertaining to the pre-service teachers' perspectives of public school teachers center on the survey items which asked about the work and responsibilities of public school teachers. Next, some survey item results indicated findings with regard to these pre-service teachers' perspectives of the physical safety and mental and emotional well-being of students in public schools. Last, the open-ended response items from the questionnaire framed some of the survey results within the language of the participating pre-service teachers.

### *Perspectives of the Role of Government in Education*

In order to frame discussion of the results, given our research questions, it is necessary to first share the results of survey items related to the changing political climate. Four questions on the survey can be categorized as dealing with either pre-service teachers' perspectives on the government or the government's relationship with education. Table 2 highlights the results of these questions across all

**Table 2.**  
*Descriptive Statistics of Perceptions of Government and Relationship with Education Survey Items.*

<i>Questions</i>	<i>Present</i>	<i>Past</i>	<i>Future</i>
Public schools are well-funded and have access to a variety of necessary resources.	Mean: 2.39 Median: 2 S.D.: 0.87	Mean: 2.52 Median: 2 S.D.: 0.89	Mean: 2.41 Median: 3 S.D.: 1.04
Public schools receive adequate support from state, federal, and local governments.	Mean: 2.37 Median: 2 S.D.: 1.01	Mean: 2.41 Median: 2 S.D.: 0.97	Mean: 2.28 Median: 3 S.D.: 1.19
Statements made by the President of the United States are informed and accurate.	Mean: 2.05 Median: 2 S.D.: 0.81 *7% respond no opinion	Mean: 3.21 Median: 3 S.D.: 1.10 *14% respond no opinion	Mean: 2.08 Median: 2 S.D.: 1.22 *10% respond no opinion
Statements made by the United States Presidential Staff and administration are informed and accurate.	Mean: 2.08 Median: 2 S.D.: 0.95 *7% respond no opinion	Mean: 3.15 Median: 3 S.D.: 1.03 *16% respond no opinion	Mean: 2.05 Median: 2 S.D.: 1.18 *10% respond no opinion

participants. Table 3 breaks down these results according to the political affiliation of participants.

**Confidence in Government Officials.** The focus of this study was to capture the perspectives of pre-service teachers in the changing political climate as one presidential administration is replaced with another. The survey items that most closely reflect the changes in confidence between this change in administration are those that asked about statements made by the President of the United States and of the presidential administration including past, present, and future. The past section of the survey specifically asked respondents to think about their answer to this question when they entered their teacher education program, which for all respondents meant two or three years ago during the Obama administration. The survey items referring to the present and future would have been in reference to their perspectives on Donald Trump and his administration.

The results of these survey items are intriguing and frame the perspectives of the participants in this survey. First, it should be noted that 14% and 16% of respondents did not share an opinion on President Obama and his administration, respectively. However, only 7% of these pre-service teachers chose not to respond when asked about the Trump administration. This might express more eagerness or attention to the current administration and its potential direction. With that in mind, the mean and median scores reveal a marked difference between these pre-service

**Table 3.**  
*Mean Scores for Perceptions of the Government and Education Items by Political Affiliation*

<i>Question</i>	<i>Republican (n=46)</i>	<i>Democrat (n=19)</i>	<i>Libertarian (n=6)</i>	<i>Independent (n=27)</i>
Public schools are well-funded and have access to a variety of necessary resources.	Past: 2.48 Present: 2.70 Future: 2.82	Past: 2.14 Present: 1.78 Future: 1.81	Past: 2.25 Present: 2.75 Future: 2.75	Past: 2.67 Present: 2.42 Future: 2.07
Public schools receive adequate support from state, federal, and local governments.	Past: 3.10 Present: 2.81 Future: 3.03	Past: 2.19 Present: 1.71 Future: 1.79	Past: 2.80 Present: 3.25 Future: 3.31	Past: 2.51 Present: 2.04 Future: 2.08
Statements made by the President of the United States are informed and accurate.	Past: 2.61 Present: 2.76 Future: 2.91	Past: 3.86 Present: 1.48 Future: 1.36	Past: 3.67 Present: 1.41 Future: 1.38	Past: 3.76 Present: 1.54 Future: 1.58
Statements made by the United States Presidential Staff and administration are informed and accurate.	Past: 2.63 Present: 2.77 Future: 3.01	Past: 3.64 Present: 1.48 Future: 1.36	Past: 3.51 Present: 1.79 Future: 1.59	Past: 3.59 Present: 1.54 Future: 1.54

teachers' perspectives of the Obama administration and the Trump administration. The scores show an overall "somewhat confident" rating for statements made by both Obama and his staff. This rating holds across political affiliations with the exception of republicans who rated both as "not very confident" on average. The standard deviations indicate this discrepancy in the overall means. With regard to Trump and his staff, there is less disagreement, also noted by a lower standard deviation between the means. Overall rating based on mean and median scores for both were on the lower end of "not very confident." In fact, when looking at the results across political affiliation, all but republicans rated Trump and his staff "not at all confident" on average. This confidence does not increase for the future with the exception of republicans with regard for the Trump administration staff.

These results suggest that there is more confidence in the remembrance of the Obama administration than in the current Trump administration among these teacher candidates. This holds true across political affiliation with the exception of republicans who rated both administrations nearly the same overall. There also does not seem to be much confidence in the current administration improving with the exception of pre-service teachers who identify as republicans toward the presidential staff; that sentiment is not reflected in the numbers for Donald Trump himself, however. This sets up the results of the remainder of this survey within the tumultuous political climate of a lack of confidence in the president and his administration. Overall, ratings of confidence in this survey do not improve from past to future with little exception. This illustrates an unsure outlook on the future, or in many cases, a dreary outlook. This seems to be very much a symptom for the changing political climate and a deficit of trust in the government.

***Public School Funding and Support.*** The results of the items asking about public school funding seemed to suggest some level of agreement. The mean and median scores overall indicate a lower confidence for the notion that schools are well-funded among this group of pre-service teachers. The standard deviation across scores indicates that there was generally low confidence among respondents. When controlling for the indicated political affiliation of the pre-service teachers taking this survey, scores still indicated low confidence, but those who identified as democrats had noticeably lower scores across time. This might suggest that this group is more sensitive to the funding of public schools. Republicans and libertarians seem more confident about the state of support for schools from government on average than democrat and independent counterparts.

#### ***Perspectives of the Physical Safety and Emotional Well-Being of Public School Students***

To gauge the confidence of pre-service teachers' regard to students' well-being in this changing political climate, four survey items questioned respondents on the physical safety or mental and emotional well-being of students. Results indicated

general distrust for the current administration. This context frames these questions about the confidence on the well-being of students. Table 4 displays the results of these four questions with descriptive statistics for overall scores. Table 5 represents the results of these four survey items by political affiliation.

There are two different responsible entities being compared in these four questions; the first two survey items dealt with the schools and school personnel most directly while the last two questions referred to the policies in place by administrative or governmental entities. These items followed trends that occurred throughout this survey. Namely, pre-service teachers' confidence tended to be higher for schools and teachers than for government. Additionally, democrats and independents trended toward a noticeably lower confidence in government than republican and libertarian counterparts. With regard to well-being, ratings for the safety and fair treatment of students in public schools garnered somewhat confident ratings. Overall, these two survey items resulted in median scores of "very confident" for the future. This might indicate a hope of these pre-service teachers that schools will become safer and more equitable. This makes the results of the items related to policy even more interesting. The mean scores with regard to policy on physical safety for students are on the lower end of "somewhat confident," yet the standard deviation is relatively high. When looking at political affiliation, democrats and independents reported markedly lower confidence in the physical safety of schools than other political affiliations. This reveals similar trends to general perspectives of the government from other survey items. When analyzing the results of the item about the mental

**Table 4.**  
*Descriptive Statistics of Perceptions of Physical Safety  
and Mental/Emotional Well-being in Public Schools Survey Items*

<i>Questions</i>	<i>Present</i>	<i>Past</i>	<i>Future</i>
Public school students are safe in classrooms.	Mean: 3.39 Median: 3 S.D.: 0.93	Mean: 3.66 Median: 4 S.D.: 0.97	Mean: 3.44 Median: 4 S.D.: 1.03
Public school students are treated fairly by teachers and administrators.	Mean: 3.68 Median: 4 S.D.: 1.03	Mean: 3.31 Median: 3 S.D.: 1.08	Mean: 3.61 Median: 4 S.D.: 0.95
Policies are in place/being created to support and protect the physical safety of teachers, students, and school communities.	Mean: 3.10 Median: 3 S.D.: 1.12	Mean: 3.41 Median: 3 S.D.: 0.90	Mean: 3.01 Median: 3 S.D.: 1.19
Policies are in place/being created to support and protect the mental and emotional well-being of teachers, students, and school communities.	Mean: 2.84 Median: 3 S.D.: 1.14	Mean: 3.02 Median: 3 S.D.: 1.07	Mean: 2.79 Median: 2 S.D.: 1.23

and emotional well-being of public school students, there are similar trends with lower mean scores all around. This indicates less certainty and confidence with regard to the emotional and mental well-being of public school students than the physical safety. Results also reveal that these pre-service teachers felt more confident about the physical and emotional well-being of students in the past as opposed to the present and future. As with many survey items, scores for the future were not higher, which points to less hope for improvement in these areas. Generally, these results point to a higher confidence among this sample in schools and teachers to make gains in student well-being as opposed to confidence in government policy to support well-being in schools.

#### *Perspectives of Public School Teachers*

The pre-service teachers who took part in this questionnaire generally indicated moderate to high confidence with regard to their personal perspectives of public school teachers. However, one noteworthy exception was in relation to teaching as a respected profession. Table 6 represents those results with accompanying descriptive statistics.

Unlike other survey items, there was not much variation between political

**Table 5.**  
*Mean Scores for Perceptions of Public School Physical Safety and Mental/Emotional Well-being Items by Political Affiliation.*

<i>Question</i>	<i>Republican (n=46)</i>	<i>Democrat (n=19)</i>	<i>Libertarian (n=6)</i>	<i>Independent (n=27)</i>
Public school students are safe in classrooms.	Past: 3.81 Present: 3.54 Future: 3.61	Past: 3.57 Present: 3.08 Future: 2.71	Past: 3.80 Present: 4.21 Future: 3.75	Past: 3.69 Present: 3.19 Future: 3.28
Public school students are treated fairly by teachers and administrators.	Past: 3.35 Present: 3.51 Future: 3.67	Past: 3.38 Present: 3.09 Future: 3.29	Past: 2.61 Present: 2.81 Future: 2.92	Past: 3.39 Present: 3.48 Future: 3.45
Policies are in place/being created to support and protect the physical safety of teachers, students, and school communities.	Past: 3.49 Present: 3.51 Future: 3.56	Past: 3.51 Present: 2.57 Future: 1.98	Past: 4.01 Present: 4.41 Future: 4.25	Past: 3.08 Present: 2.67 Future: 2.27
Policies are in place/being created to support and protect the mental and emotional well-being of teachers, students, and school communities.	Past: 3.34 Present: 3.21 Future: 3.47	Past: 2.54 Present: 2.38 Future: 2.09	Past: 3.65 Present: 3.81 Future: 3.03	Past: 2.69 Present: 2.41 Future: 2.12



affiliations for most items in this category. This is indicated by the relatively low standard deviations. There are clear trends in the results of these questions. These pre-service teachers noted an increased confidence in teachers as highly trained professionals from past to present; this is most likely a result of their own training in becoming teachers and a realization of the profession's complexity. Along these lines, there is a generally high confidence in the care and ability of teachers as seen in the results for teachers as good role models and advocates, and that teachers care about students and acknowledge cultural differences. This stands in contrast to the lower confidence with regard to the policies of well-being in schools; the results signal that these pre-service teachers sense that teachers care for students, but they are not supported by policy. Toward that idea of support, the remainder of survey items in this category reveal that these pre-service teachers do not have confidence in the support and respect for public school teachers. Despite high scores that teachers are respected professionals, there are low confidence ratings, a median of "not very confident," with regard to teaching as a respected profession.

**Table 6.**  
*Descriptive Statistics of Perceptions of Teachers Survey Items.*

<i>Question</i>	<i>Present</i>	<i>Past</i>	<i>Future</i>
Public school teachers are supported in schools and by communities.	Mean: 3.08 Median: 3 S.D.: 0.88	Mean: 3.18 Median: 3 S.D.: 0.89	Mean: 3.01 Median: 3 S.D.: 0.98
Public school teachers are highly trained professionals.	Mean: 4.10 Median: 4 S.D.: 0.91	Mean: 3.50 Median: 3 S.D.: 0.88	Mean: 3.75 Median: 4 S.D.: 1.03
Public school teachers advocate for their students and their needs.	Mean: 3.88 Median: 4 S.D.: 0.87	Mean: 3.81 Median: 4 S.D.: 0.85	Mean: 4.12 Median: 4 S.D.: 0.82
Public school teachers are good role models for students.	Mean: 3.92 Median: 4 S.D.: 0.93	Mean: 4.03 Median: 4 S.D.: 0.82	Mean: 4.12 Median: 4 S.D.: 0.93
Public school teachers acknowledge and value the variety of cultures in schools.	Mean: 3.49 Median: 4 S.D.: 1.01	Mean: 3.58 Median: 3 S.D.: 0.95	Mean: 3.76 Median: 4 S.D.: 1.02
Public school teachers care about their students.	Mean: 4.05 Median: 4 S.D.: 0.87	Mean: 4.10 Median: 4 S.D.: 0.85	Mean: 4.20 Median: 4 S.D.: 0.81
Teaching is a respected profession.	Mean: 2.60 Median: 2 S.D.: 1.15	Mean: 2.77 Median: 2 S.D.: 1.20	Mean: 2.49 Median: 2 S.D.: 1.18

Also, there is a borderline “somewhat confident” rating for public school teachers having community support. This points to interesting implications for this group of pre-service teachers. They seem to acknowledge the difficulty of the field in which they are entering and the complexity of the politics involved in education; despite this, they are still pursuing teaching careers.

### *Open-ended Response Items*

There were two open-ended response items on this questionnaire. The first asked students to name the most promising potential of public education. The results of this item follow trends from the rest of the survey. In short, many of the words with high frequency point to schools, teachers, and students as the impetus for the future of schools. Language related to students and learning are at the center of these pre-service teachers’ vision of promise in public education. Also of note are recurring terms like “create,” “support,” and “opportunity.” The hope among these pre-service teachers lies in the potential of teachers to create opportunities to support students.

In contrast, the other open-ended item asked respondents to identify the biggest issue facing public education. The words coded here are quite different than for the previous survey item. Aligned with the perceived hyper-awareness of politics in the context of this survey, the pre-service teachers specifically named both Donald Trump and his appointed Secretary of the Department of Education, Betsy DeVos. This further supports the lack of confidence these pre-service teachers have in the Trump administration to address the needs of public education. Other words of note include “poverty,” “funding,” “support,” and “standardized.” These terms indicate that these pre-service teachers view the biggest issues facing education as external forces to the schools and teachers; teachers have no control over poverty, levels of funding, the amount of support they receive, and the standardized testing requirements. These results are synced with the confidence ratings from other survey items which placed higher confidence on teachers than on the support and respect they receive from communities and the government.

## Discussion

The results from this study brought forward various threads related to undergraduate students’ beliefs, confidence levels, and thoughts about the past, present, and future political climates in the United States. The results also produced respondents’ current perspectives and beliefs about public school funding and public school teachers, physical safety and well-being of public school students. The results suggest there is generally more remembrance of confidence in the Obama Administration than present confidence in the current Trump Administration and that the majority of respondents have an unsure outlook on the future of public education today due to varying reasons. Some similar and differing trends

occurred related to the physical safety and emotional well-being of public school students. However, the overall results do not include high confidence levels in this area, even with the security and safety measures that are currently in place at public schools across the nation. This is in keeping with the rash of school violence in recent years and corresponding hyper-politicization of the issue. Related to perspectives of public school teachers, there was little variation between political affiliations for most items in this category, rating teachers as good role models, advocates, and caregivers for students. This is indicative of the notion that this sample of pre-service teachers think highly of teachers and the profession in contrast to government and its ability to support education. For the open-ended responses, respondents felt there were several promising aspects of education today with the primary foci on students, teaching, schools, and opportunity. For the biggest issues facing public education today, funding, time, poverty, and Betsy DeVos were restated many times. These specific terms and ideas were not included or mentioned within the questionnaire, other than the questions that were asked of funding and teachers. All of these results are telling of the concerns about the current and future directions of government and education.

One of the most striking findings of this study was the difference in confidence between governmental issues and those specifically pertaining to schools and teachers. Respondents were generally not confident in the future outlooks of governmental support and funding. In addition, they lacked confidence and trust in the President and his staff. In line with the broad political landscape, republican respondents were more confident of the government's future impact on education. The political divisions also translated to some other areas. Democrat respondents were very concerned about issues like school safety and the emotional and mental well-being of students in the future while their republican counterparts did seem to share the same level of those concerns. This may be because pre-service teachers that identify as democrat or independent are more concerned with issues like "Trump Effect" bullying and republicans do not see those as issues.

The results of this study bring to light a possible bigger concern with how political beliefs influence teachers. Do teacher political beliefs have an effect on classroom environments and teacher responses to students? More research is needed to determine if some of the views from this survey of pre-service teachers matriculate into perceptions of issues and non-issues as in-service teachers. Given the current political climate, these issues are worthy of new inquiry.

Schools, and to a more specific extent teachers, are a lens to current events for students. To better prepare future teachers, teacher educators must recognize and adapt to world events and pre-service teachers' perspectives of them. This includes the current political turmoil in the United States. For the teacher education program in which the pre-service teachers from these findings are enrolled, there is work to be done to respond to the lack of confidence in some areas and how to address those as professionals. These findings suggest that teacher education programs need to encourage advocacy with their pre-service teachers so they feel more inclined to

promote educational policies, showing others the respect teachers deserve in the United States. Preservice teachers should also be taught how to adapt to change to meet the evolving needs of their students and consider the context of the communities in which they serve. In addition, there appears to be some questions about physical safety and emotional well-being of students, thus showcasing the need to increase teacher education on responding to bullying, safety measures, and student and teacher emotional well-being. This, though not a new symptom of the times, seems to have been exacerbated, at least with this sample of pre-service teachers, as the Trump administration continues not to inspire confidence in its empathy and support for public schools and students.

### Limitations and Future Directions

The study included 98 participating pre-service teachers. The response rate was 57% across all teacher education programs at the university. The results elicited a good representation of the various educational majors located at the Midwestern land-grant university, but the results are limited to that particular context and generalizability within this context based on this sample is limited. The respondents were selected through a convenience sample at only one Midwestern university, therefore the generalizability of these result to pre-service teachers beyond the sample is limited. A response rate of 57% additionally limits the generalizability of the results to the population sampled (Couper, 2000). However, since this was an initial, exploratory study into pre-service teachers' outlook of education after a change in presidential administration, the results are still valuable in guiding future study. In addition, because this study was conducted at this particular setting, where racial diversity is low, and a different undergraduate educational population and/or geographical area across the United States may elicit different or similar results based on those particular respondents' thoughts, beliefs, and ideas.

The researchers in this study plan to further examine the empathy and bullying piece along with the physical and emotional safety questions due to the varying responses. Currently, a focus group with practicing teachers has been conducted and analyzed, and the manuscript is being developed. The researchers may also further this study by having respondents take the same survey for several years in a row, thus creating a longitudinal outlook to the changing political climate and public education over time, and hopefully identifying critical educational components to education being viewed as a respected professional career. However, more research needs to be garnered and analyzed related to these topics, where educational policy, reform, and decisions are made at the governmental level.

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## Appendix A

Dear student:

We are conducting a research project entitled “Pre-service teachers views on education in a changing political climate” as part of a research project at \_\_\_\_ University.

The purpose of this study is to gauge the perspectives on education of pre-service teachers at \_\_\_\_ University during the current changing political landscape.

You as a student are invited to participate in the study by completing the following survey. We realize that your time is valuable and have attempted to keep the requested information as brief and concise as possible. Participation in this survey will take approximately 15 minutes of your time. Your participation in this project is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

There are no known risks to you for participating in this study. There are also no direct benefits or compensation to you for taking part in this study. The only benefit to you will be the educational experience.

Your responses are collected anonymously. This survey will not ask for identifying information. Your responses are strictly confidential. When the data and analysis are presented, you will not be linked to the data by your name, title or any other identifying item.

Your consent is implied by the completion of the completed questionnaire. You may keep this letter for your information. If you have any questions, now or later, you may contact us at the number below. Thank you very much for your time and assistance.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the \_\_\_\_ University Research Compliance Coordinator.

**Directions:** The first set of questions ask about your perspective in the past. Think about your perspective on the following questions in the past. Rate your confidence in the following when you began pursuing your current degree on a scale of 1-5. (1=not confident at all, 2=slightly confident, 3=somewhat confident, 4=very confident, 5=completely confident or no opinion)

- Public schools are well-funded and have access to a variety of necessary resources.
- Public school teachers are supported in schools and by communities.
- Public school teachers are highly-trained professionals.
- Public school teachers advocate for their students and their needs.
- Public school teachers are good role models for students.
- Public school teachers acknowledge and value the variety of cultures in schools.
- Public school teachers care about their students.
- Teaching is a respected profession.
- Public school students are safe in classrooms.
- Public school students receive a high-quality education.
- Public school students are treated fairly by teachers and administrators.
- Public schools receive adequate support from state, federal, and local governments.
- Policies are in place/being created to support and protect the physical safety of teachers, students, and school communities.
- Policies are in place/being created to support and protect the mental and psychological well-being of teachers, students, and schools communities.

**Directions:** When you began pursuing your degree, the Obama administration would

have been leading the executive branch. Rate your confidence in the following statements from that time. (1=not confident at all, 2= slightly confident, 3=somewhat confident, 4=very confident, 5=completely confident or no opinion).

- Statements made by the President of the United States are informed and accurate.
- Statements made by United States presidential staff and administration are informed and accurate.

**Directions:** These questions ask about your perspective right now. Keeping in mind the changes that have occurred since you began your degree, rate your confidence in the following right now. (1=not confident at all, 2= slightly confident, 3=somewhat confident, 4=very confident, 5=completely confident or no opinion).

- Public schools are well-funded and have access to a variety of necessary resources.
- Public school teachers are supported in schools and by communities.
- Public school teachers are highly-trained professionals.
- Public school teachers advocate for their students and their needs.
- Public school teachers are good role models for students.
- Public school teachers acknowledge and value the variety of cultures in schools.
- Public school teachers care about their students.
- Teaching is a respected profession.
- Public school students are safe in classrooms.
- Public school students receive a high-quality education.
- Public school students are treated fairly by teachers and administrators.
- Public schools receive adequate support from state, federal, and local governments.
- Policies are in place/being created to support and protect the physical safety of teachers, students, and school communities.
- Policies are in place/being created to support and protect the mental and psychological well-being of teachers, students, and schools communities.

**Directions:** Rate your confidence in the following statements with regard to the Trump administration currently. (1=not confident at all, 2= slightly confident, 3=somewhat confident, 4=very confident, 5=completely confident or no opinion).

- Statements made by the President of the United States are informed and accurate.
- Statements made by United States presidential staff and administration are informed and accurate.

**Directions:** These questions ask about your perspective on the future. Rate your confidence in the following for the future when you begin teaching. (1=not confident at all, 2= slightly confident, 3=somewhat confident, 4=very confident, 5=completely confident or no opinion).

- Public schools are well-funded and have access to a variety of necessary resources.
- Public school teachers are supported in schools and by communities.
- Public school teachers are highly-trained professionals.
- Public school teachers advocate for their students and their needs.
- Public school teachers are good role models for students.
- Public school teachers acknowledge and value the variety of cultures in schools.



- Public school teachers care about their students.
- Teaching is a respected profession.
- Public school students are safe in classrooms.
- Public school students receive a high-quality education.
- Public school students are treated fairly by teachers and administrators.
- Public schools receive adequate support from state, federal, and local governments.
- Policies are in place/being created to support and protect the physical safety of teachers, students, and school communities.
- Policies are in place/being created to support and protect the mental and psychological well-being of teachers, students, and schools communities.

**Directions:** Rate your confidence in the following statements with regard to the Trump administration as you foresee the future. (1=not confident at all, 2= slightly confident, 3=somewhat confident, 4=very confident, 5=completely confident or no opinion).

- Statements made by the President of the United States are informed and accurate.
- Statements made by United States presidential staff and administration are informed and accurate.

**Directions:** Answer the following questions to the best of your knowledge currently.

What is the most promising potential of public education in the U.S.?

What is the biggest issue facing public education in the U.S.?

**Directions:** Demographic Information—Remember that you will not be asked to share any personally identifying information. You are anonymous.

What is your age?

With which gender do you most closely identify?

1. Female
2. Male
3. Prefer not to answer

Which of the following most closely describes your racial/ethnic background?

1. Black or African American
2. White or Caucasian
3. Hispanic or Latino
4. Asian
5. Native American or American Indian
6. Pacific Islander
7. Other
8. Prefer not to answer

Which of the following most closely describes your political affiliation?

1. Democrat
2. Republican
3. Libertarian
4. Green Party
5. Independent
6. Prefer not to answer

What is your major?

1. Agricultural Education
2. Early Childhood Education - Birth through Age 8
3. Early Childhood Education - Elem Co-op
4. Early Education and Care
5. Art
6. Biology
7. Chemistry
8. English
9. Family and Consumer Sciences Education
10. French
11. German
12. History
13. Health
14. Math
15. Music Education
16. Physical Education
17. Physics
18. Psychology
19. Sociology
20. Spanish
21. Speech

Which of the following most closely represents the size of the community where you grew up?

1. 0-5,000 people
2. 5,000-15,000 people
3. 15,000-50,000 people
4. 50,000-100,000 people
5. More than 100,000 people

Which of the following most closely describes the high school you attended?

1. Public
2. Private
3. Homeschooling
4. Virtual Public
5. Virtual Private
6. Virtual Homeschooling