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Politics, Policy, and Pressure:

Studying San Diego Teachers' Affective Responses to Political Rhetoric in Polarized Times

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

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by

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The dissertation of Cassiopeia B. Guthrie is approved and is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

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Epigraph

"Don't let's forget that the little emotions are the great captains of our lives, and that we obey them without knowing it."

Vincent van Gogh (Letter to Theo, July 6, 1889)

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Abstract of the Dissertation

Politics, Policy, and Pressure:

Studying San Diego Teachers' Affective Responses to Political Rhetoric in Polarized Times

by

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Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

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California State University San Marcos, 2026

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In an era of increasing political polarization and intensified rhetoric, teachers must navigate directed attacks on educational initiatives. While prior research addresses conditions related to successful implementation of new policies in schools as well as the ways in which external threats can impact organizations and people working within them, less is known about how teachers react emotionally to polarized political rhetoric or how these reactions might relate to their perceptions of school climate and conditions. In an effort to address this gap, this mixed methods study investigated teachers' affective responses to political rhetoric, their perceptions of

conditions on their campuses, and the relationships therein. Using a dual theoretical framework of threat-rigidity theory and constructivism, the study explored three research questions via a concurrent embedded multi-phase mixed methods design using a quantitative survey with embedded qualitative components (n = 52) and opt-in interviews (n = 9). This study, conducted with public high school teachers in San Diego County, helps establish a greater understanding of how and in what ways an increasingly polarized political climate and its associated rhetoric influence teachers, schools, and systems. Findings indicate that, for the study participants: 1. the political climate is experienced through affective and identity-mediated meaning making; 2. heightened affective responses to the political climate correspond with perceived organizational constriction, which may exacerbate both affective strain and workplace challenges; and finally, 3. collaboration functions as both a protective condition and a point of tension in politically polarized schools. This study has implications for research, educational leadership, practice, policy, and social justice. While the current political climate continues to change, unearthing new feelings and emotional responses with it, it is imperative that the educational system responds nimbly to these potential effects in order to preserve their important work of ensuring students' learning, wellness, and safety.

Keywords: political climate, political polarization, affective response, positive affect, negative affect, political rhetoric, threat-rigidity, threat rigidity, teacher policy mediation, threat-rigidity theory, constructivism, teachers, high schools, public schools

Chapter One: Introduction

In 1787, the Preamble to the Constitution established imperatives for the citizens of a new United States: justice, domestic tranquility, and general welfare. These ideas were further articulated and reinforced through the adoption of amendments, including 1868's Fourteenth Amendment declaring: "No State shall make or enforce any law which shall… deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws," (U.S. Const. amend. XIV). In 1892, the Pledge of Allegiance was drafted by Francis Bellamy, reminding Americans that the flag represents indivisibility and "liberty and justice for all," (USAGov, n.d.). While the United States of 2026 bears little resemblance to that of the 1700s and 1800s, its guiding principles under these seminal documents remain the same: ours is a country of justice and domestic tranquility, established for the general welfare, providing liberty to all.

Yet somehow, the very concepts within these documents — equal protection, due process, liberty, and justice — have become politically polarized and controversial. On one hand, President Donald J. Trump has heralded the opening of a 1000-bed Everglades migrant detention center, Alligator Alcatraz, "surrounded by miles of treacherous swampland" where "the only way out is, really, deportation" (Aleaziz, 2025; Payne, 2025). Working to increase capacity for mass deportation, the administration also repurposed Guantanamo Bay for new private detention center contracts (Taheri, 2025) and increased United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement's budget by over $11 billion each year through the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (One Big Beautiful Bill Act, H.R. 1. 119th Cong., 2025). On the other hand, hundreds of lawsuits challenge the legality of the administration's executive actions including its deportations and visa revocations, among them Khalil v. Joyce, Chung v. Trump, Suri v. Trump, Abrego Garcia v.

Noem, and D.V.D. vs. U.S. Department of Homeland Security (AP News, 2025), while millions of protestors take to the streets for "No Kings" protests, their organizers calling for opposition to dangerous authoritarian forces (No Kings, 2025; Yang, 2025).

These exhibits demonstrate the disparity of beliefs about immigration as one major ideological junction in today's United States of America, but they are also reflective of a wider trend of political polarization which impacts not only the country at large (Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008; McCarty, 2019; Piazza, 2020) but also its education system as a microcosm of society (Houston, 2021; Houston, 2024; Wedlock, 2023). On the one hand, social reform initiatives like California's Assembly Bill 101 (Assembly Bill 101, 2021) are signed into law, creating a statewide ethnic studies graduation requirement in service of a wide array of student benefits (Bonilla et al., 2021; Dee & Penner, 2017; Sleeter, 2011). On the other hand, ethnic studies curricula experience political pressure (Fensterwald, 2025; Wu, n.d.a; Wu, n.d.b), similar resistance to which has been seen for Mexican American studies (Acosta, 2014), critical race theory (Hodge et al., 2022; Pollock et al., 2022), and other progressive pedagogies. This dichotomous sociopolitical atmosphere is the environment in which teachers are being asked to "ensure every student gets the education they need and deserve" (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.), despite multiple interpretations of just what that means.

When taken in context with rhetorical attacks on educational initiatives (Martin & Nai, 2024; Piazza, 2020; Reinemann & Maurer, 2006; Simonsen, 2021), eroding public trust in schools (Merod, 2021; Nuamah, 2021), and an increased perception of deprofessionalism and demoralization (Wronowski & Urick, 2021; Scott et al., 2001), it is no wonder that teacher attrition rates are increasing (Ingersoll et al., 2014; National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). After all, teachers are experiencing more systemic and social forces than ever before

(Dinham & Scott, 2000) in a climate where "while more is expected and demanded of schools, and schools and teachers are scrutinised as never before, educational resources have become scarcer, and the status and image of teaching as a profession has declined" (Scott et. al, 2001, p. 1).

These conditions of pressure in the greater political landscape as well as within school microcosms are important to examine, especially in light of policy roll-outs like Assembly Bill 101, as teachers serve as mediators between new policies and how they are implemented. Teachers are "active policy agents" who engage in daily decision-making within their unique contexts (Heineke et al., 2015, p. 383), so conditions within those contexts can directly impact how and if policies ever make it to practice. When presented with a new policy, teachers must construct meaning about what they are being asked to do, make decisions about what they will implement in their classrooms, and negotiate any technical and practical details of implementation (Coburn, 2021). It stands to reason, then, that the success of this teacher policy mediation is dependent upon working conditions, including collaboration opportunities (Birbili & Myrovali, 2020; Coburn, 2001; Suurtamm & Koch, 2014), resources (Cavendish et al., 2020, Van Galen, 2004), and space for autonomous decision-making (Lennert Da Silva & Mølstad, 2020, Mansouri et al., 2021).

When political leaders introduce new pressures into the education system — such as unveiling plans to close the Department of Education in order to allow families to "escape a system that is failing them" (The White House, 2025a), freezing $6.8 billion in federal education funding for the 2025-2026 school year (Lieberman, 2025; Mathewson & Jones, 2025), and criticisms of "discriminatory equity ideology" in schools (The White House, 2025b) — it can introduce unease and uncertainty into teachers' working conditions, potentially undermining

their policy mediation process and resulting in tense or subpar learning environments. Students deserve to have teachers who feel safe and invested and who can apply their energy in productive ways that lead to positive spaces for learning, and they simply cannot do this if they are warding off a multitude of challenges or threats. This makes understanding how and if politically polarized rhetoric is creating these challenges an imperative.

Statement of the Problem & Purpose of the Study

This era of conflict and challenge raises important questions about how the political climate and its associated rhetoric might influence the affect of teachers, their experiences within schools, and their success mediating policy to practice. For the purpose of this study, *affect* refers to self-reported emotions, measured dimensionally via positive affect (reflecting subjective emotional conditions such as enthusiasm, alertness, and activity) and negative affect (reflecting subjective emotional conditions such as distress, anger, contempt, and fear) (Watson et al., 1988). It is important because undoubtedly, affect can relate to school successes and struggles. For example, negative affect has been linked to higher rates of teacher burnout (Genoud & Waroux, 2021), decreased reading and math achievement for students (Prewett & Whitney, 2021), and inability for teachers to accept feedback (Anseel et al., 2011; Brett & Atwater, 2001; Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

This is concerning in light of the fact that negative affect in the form of anger, anxiety, and depression have been observed when teachers felt their practices or ideas were being questioned or challenged (Kelchtermans & Deketelaere, 2016) or when treatment was perceived to be unfair (Lazarus, 1991). This is increasingly likely to happen as educational initiatives are politicized, resulting in the potential for extreme emotional response (Dodd et al., 2012; Jerit,

2004; Prinz, 2021; Steiger et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2019) and heightened physiological arousal (Bakker et al., 2020).

It is also troubling because if teachers experience negative affect in response to the political climate and rhetoric, it could have repercussions for their ability to mediate policy into practice, support student learning and well-being, and contribute constructively within school ecosystems. Lazarus (1991), in his seminal psychology text about emotions, noted that the innate action tendency for anger is a biological urge to attack. How can this proclivity to action, or even the inhibition of that action (while still harboring the feeling itself), possibly be productive in a school or classroom setting? It is imperative to investigate teachers' experiences, perceptions, and affective responses in order to better understand the influence of the current political climate on them so that educational leaders can, by extension, better understand how they might cushion their contexts from potential triggers and threats, as well as facilitate spaces in which they can be pivotal policy mediators of educational initiatives.

Research Questions

To address these concerns, this study focused on the three research questions below, which are explained further in Chapter Three:

1. RQ1: Is there a relationship between teachers' affective responses to the political climate and their perceptions of institutional conditions that support policy mediation (collaboration, decision-making, resource access)?
2. RQ 2: Is there a relationship between teachers' affective responses to the political climate and their perception of threat-rigidity in their school environment?
3. RQ3: How do teachers describe the influence of the current political climate on collaboration, decision-making, and school resource support at their school sites?

Theoretical Framing

In order to examine these constructs meaningfully, it was important to consider not only how teachers make meaning of their experiences, but also to name the conditions that they were experiencing. Thus, a dual theoretical framework integrating threat-rigidity theory and constructivism was used. For this framework, threat-rigidity theory provided a lens through which external threats and responses to them might be experienced at an individual and organizational level. Constructivism helped to add clarity around how teachers make meaning of their experiences as well as how they navigate policy and climate.

Threat-Rigidity Theory

The first of two theories being used to anchor this work, threat-rigidity theory, offers an important lens through which organizational shifts and individual responses can be examined when threats are introduced. Threat-rigidity theory, which was introduced by Staw et al. (1981), posits that organizations and individuals react adaptively or maladaptively as a protective instinct when faced with an externally perceived threat (Olsen & Sexton, 2009). For example, focus group interviews in Daly's (2009) study revealed top-down directives and prescriptive programs, like Open-Court Literacy Program, that left teachers in program improvement schools feeling powerless. "There is no decision-making; we just respond," said one teacher, explaining that they felt like a Pez dispenser (Daly, 2009, p. 197). Common maladaptive organizational responses to perceived threats include the restriction of information processes (Staw et al., 1981; Olsen & Sexton, 2009; Mellahi et al., 2002), constriction of control, often into a rigid, hierarchical system (Olsen & Sexton, 2009; Mellahi et al., 2002; Staw et al., 1981), moves towards a "heavy reliance on standard operating procedure" (Staw et al., 1981, p. 513), and simplification of routines (Olsen & Sexton, 2009; Mellahi et al., 2002).

These organizational shifts have very real implications for teachers as they work to mediate the wide range of demands coming their way in increasingly stressful environments. Individual responses to threat-rigid conditions can include increases in psychological stress and anxiety (Olsen & Sexton, 2009; Staw et al., 1981; McCarthy et al., 2016), emotional exhaustion and cognitive interference (McCarthy et al., 2016) and reactions that range from defensiveness and resentment to decreased trust and willingness to engage with vulnerability (Daly, 2009; Staw et al., 1981; Olsen & Sexton, 2009). These types of emotional reactions can result in apprehension towards collaboration (Olsen & Sexton, 2009; Brezicha et al., 2024; Staw et al., 1981), isolation and interpersonal conflicts (Daly, 2009), and dissensus (Griffith, 2004).

Though earlier explorations of threat-rigidity examined instances in the business space, it has since been examined extensively in education across a variety of contexts (Brezicha et al., 2024; Griffith, 2004; Rosenblatt, 2004), including high-stakes accountability policy roll-outs in schools (Daly, 2009; Olsen & Sexton, 2009). Each of these contexts has revealed the same series of predictable patterns for both organizations and individuals when a threat is introduced as an "environmental effect that has impending negative or harmful consequences for the entity" (Staw et al., 1981, p. 502). For this study, threat-rigidity theory was used to examine whether predictable patterns were observed in schools in the current political climate, and whether and how conditions indicating external threat might be related to perceived political rhetoric.

Constructivism

Constructivism, the second theoretical anchor, is focused on the construction of knowledge. It posits that meaning is made through social and individual construction, and the interpretation thereof can be either objective or subjective. Maxwell (2013) explained that constructivism manifests in our daily lives as the knowledge that "what people perceive and

believe is shaped by their assumptions and prior experiences as well as by the reality that they interact with" (p. 43).

The roots of the constructivism paradigm hearken back to scholars such as Piaget, Kant, Dewey, Freire, and others (Allen, 2022). In their review of literature related to constructivism, Kanuka and Anderson (1999) developed a clear framework to represent four constructivist positions across two dimensions of constructivism. They include: co-constructivism (knowledge is negotiated through conversation and conversation, in turn is the external reality), cognitive constructivism (knowledge is an external reality that is constructed through internal conflicts within the individual), situated constructivism (knowledge is constructed socially, though everyone has different social experiences resulting in multiple realities), and radical constructivism (knowledge is constructed individually based on an individual's unique experiences; there is no one objective reality). For this study, constructivism was used to examine how participants made meaning of affective responses and personal experiences related to politics and school climate, and provided a lens through which to analyze how teachers' interactions with sociopolitical factors contributed to their developing belief systems and perceptions.

The dual integration of these two theoretical frameworks together helped frame not only how teachers interpreted and constructed meaning surrounding threat-rigid conditions, and political rhetoric, but also how conditions and political rhetoric were perceived as influencing their experiences at school.

Overview of Methods

In order to examine the relationships between multiple variables and also contextualize teachers' experiences, this study used a multiphase mixed methods approach to understand both

quantifiable relationships between the two elements (Creswell, 2014), as well as to gain qualitative contextualization and triangulation by carving out space for teacher voice in the data set (Lareau, 2021; Maxwell, 2013). This addition of contextualization by including participants' own words and direct experiences served to expand the aspects of the phenomena that I was able to explore (Greene, 2007, as cited in Maxwell, 2013) and allowed me to triangulate for veracity and validity (Fielding & Fielding, 1986, as cited in Maxwell, 2013), while maximizing the respondent rate (Creswell, 2014). A rationale, including other reasons why this methodology was selected, is explored further in Chapter Three.

The three-phase mixed methods study design included a Phase One concurrent embedded survey, Phase Two interviews, and Phase Three thematic synthesis and analysis. The Phase One mixed methods survey used a composite instrument leveraging items from validated scales paired with qualitative items. Quantitative data analysis for this phase included descriptive statistics, calculation of reliability, and investigation of correlation and regression. Qualitative data analysis included deductive coding using a priori codes associated with mediation conditions and affect, inductive coding with emergent themes, and pattern analysis. An opt-in question at the end of the survey created a pool of potential interviewees for the subsequent phase. Phase Two interviews, which were conducted via Zoom, used semi-structured questions from an interview guide/protocol with sample probes. Each interview session was recorded, transcribed, and hand and digitally coded deductively and inductively, then analyzed. Finally, in Phase Three, I examined the quantitative and qualitative findings for convergent and divergent themes, developed a statistical interpretation of the quantitative results, and leveraged key emergent qualitative statements to contextualize those themes. An in-depth discussion of this

purpose and research design, as well as data collection and analysis across the different phases of the project, is described further in Chapter Three.

Chapter Summary

As I have explored in this chapter, the current political climate is characterized by increased polarization and tension, including rhetorical attacks on education, eroding public trust, and perceptions of deprofessionalism and demoralization. These occur alongside controversial and politicized executive leadership actions and extensive nationwide protests. While there is no question that these sociopolitical factors exist, the possible influence of this climate and its associated rhetoric has yet to be meaningfully explored in the context of school climate, despite their potential to cause threat-rigid conditions. Therefore, this study sought to fill this gap by examining the relationships among these variables and how they are experienced by teachers.

Looking ahead, Chapter Two examines the literature surrounding this body of work, specifically extant literature on political rhetoric and teacher policy mediation, to provide context for the variables being examined and their intersections. It also introduces the conceptual framework guiding this study, explaining how it reflects both the study variables and dual theoretical anchoring. Chapter Three describes in detail the research design, data collection, and analysis methods used for this study. Chapter Four introduces quantitative and qualitative findings from the quantitative and qualitative survey and subsequent interviews. Finally, Chapter Five presents a synthesized discussion and offers implications for the field of education.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Policies abound in education. According to the California School Boards Association, districts are legally mandated to adopt over 90 policies, many of which require adjustment as new legislation occurs (California School Boards Association, 2024). Yet, though these policies are wide-ranging and enforceable, the ways that teachers respond to these mandates by policymakers and educational leaders often varies. Teacher policy mediation literature examines this idea, specifically looking at what happens when teachers are asked to change their practice in response to the introduction or implementation of a policy. This research has examined a wide range of policies in far-reaching contexts across the globe, including how teachers respond when presented with new policy (Brain et al., 2006; Martinie et al., 2016; Suurtamm & Koch, 2014), why teachers might respond in those specific ways (Klaeijssen et al., 2018; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009), and what experiences in pre-service training influence teachers' capacity to mediate policy (Akcaoglu et al., 2023; Alexiadou & Essex, 2016; Heineke et al., 2015).

In the context of politically tense times, and knowing that there is a spectrum of actions that teachers may undertake when being faced with policy decisions, it is important also understand what factors influence the frame in which teacher decision-making occurs (Olsen & Kirtman, 2002; Spillane, 1999; Van Galen, 2004), as well as whether the political climate relates to those factors.

Therefore, this literature review first examines the body of literature surrounding teachers and their mediation of policies, focusing on three themes prevalent across the literature: collaboration, school resources, and decision-making. Next, it delves into the current political climate and the influence of political polarization, and specifically political rhetoric, on schools. Finally, it will introduce a conceptual framework modeling potential relationships between these

variables, including how the dual theoretical anchoring will be used to examine them. Ultimately, this examination through these theoretical lenses will provide important context on which policy mediation challenges might be perceived when existing in and responding to politically polarized rhetoric, as well as which school climate conditions might serve as predictors of healthy or threat-rigid environments.

Teacher Policy Mediation

Collaboration: The Value of Dialogue and Collective Sensemaking

The first theme observed across the teacher policy mediation literature is the significant influence of teacher collaboration, collective sensemaking, and dialogic interaction on teachers' mediation of policies into practice (Birbili & Myrovali, 2020; Coburn, 2001; Suurtamm & Koch, 2014; Van Galen, 2004). It stands to reason that teachers who have engaged in dialogic practices within their institutions might have a more developed understanding of the institution's expectations. Therefore, it also follows that a teacher's understanding of a policy and ability to conceptualize how to apply it within their unique context can carry weight towards their ability and/or willingness to implement it. Conversely, many teachers express frustration with a lack of understanding, often due to their institution's failure to create facilitated opportunities for collaboration and dialogic sensemaking (Coburn, 2001; Mansouri et al., 2021; Van Galen, 2004). This lack of understanding is repeatedly associated with failure to meaningfully adopt the policy or practice (Alexiadou & Essex, 2016; Birbili & Myrovali, 2020; Coburn & Woulfin, 2012).

Aside from understanding a policy, research also indicates that it is important for teachers to contextualize it for their own personal classroom use. While visualizing policy in practice can be done in isolation, research suggests that, when it is collaborative, teachers exhibit ownership and buy-in (Butler et al., 2004; Leat et al., 2006). Moreover, teachers have repeatedly expressed

that their voices are needed in educational decision-making spaces, often disparaging what they perceived to be top-down policy mandates (Birbili & Myrovali, 2020; Cavendish et al., 2020; Grossman, 2010), wanting instead what Wallace and Priestley (2011) call a "bottom up" mode of implementation in which they are involved in creating their own reform methods. Coherence is key in implementation, and communities of practice and professional development with embedded agentic experiences can often support this need (Gallucci, 2003; Mansouri et al., 2021; Suurtamm & Koch, 2014), building connectedness and capacity, but also increasing compliance.

It is important to note that dialogue and collaboration around a policy do not always lead to tacit agreement or to its appropriate application. Evidence exists that, in the face of policies that seem out of place or inappropriate for the context (as with monolingual policies in multilingual spaces or curricular reform processes that fail to account for cultural or ideological expectations), teachers find ways to adjust their degree of participation (Khan Al-Daami & Wallace, 2007; Kiramba & Harris, 2019; Lytra & Gelir, 2023). Instructional coaches have also been shown to show bias towards specific initiatives more than others (Woulfin, 2018), which can impact implementation by their mentees. In a 2010 qualitative case study focused on the processes and outcomes of a New York State social movement led by educators in response to state assessment policy, Grossman noted not only the idea of practitioner power or the ability to close the classroom door when a teacher disagrees, but also the power of social protest to affect change. However, considering the strong body of research correlating collective sensemaking and collaborative opportunities with successful teacher policy mediation, it makes sense to consider policy assimilations and acceptances alongside the rejections.

While informal collaboration opportunities take place in organizations, formal constructs show particular promise for policy mediation, including coaching (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Woulfin, 2018), discourse communities (Alexiadou & Essex, 2016), collaboration structures with colleagues and community members (Coburn, 2001; Lennert Da Silva & Mølstad, 2020, Martinie et al., 2016), and professional learning communities (Xu & Lu, 2022), each with a distinct set of considerations. For example, Coburn and Woulfin's 2012 longitudinal case study at a Massachusetts elementary school found that reading teachers were far more likely to substantially adjust their practices when influenced, pressured, or counseled by an instructional coach. Woulfin's 2018 investigation of coupling theory to better understand how to leverage instructional coaches in support of district policy adds an important voice to the conversation about reducing potential coach bias. Sleeter (2011) also explained the importance of community engagement and dialogue in order to introduce publicly debated or politicized issues such as culturally responsive pedagogy, reinforcing the community as a key partner in implementation decision-making processes. Ultimately, despite the need to craft policy implementation in a way that meets contextual specifications, the literature is clear: it is important to ensure that collaboration, dialogue, and collective sensemaking are a part of those implementations.

This makes threat-rigidity theory's centralization and limiting access to information (Mellahi et al., 2002; Olsen & Sexton, 2009; Staw et al., 1981) even more important to consider. In threat-rigid environments, individuals can be apprehensive about collaboration (Brezicha et al., 2024; Olsen & Sexton, 2009; Staw et al., 1981) and, subsequently, experience interpersonal conflicts (Daly, 2009). Neither of these conditions is a likely precursor to open collaboration and collective sensemaking. It's also important to remember that teachers' experiences — their perception of opportunities for collective sensemaking and collaboration in their context — can

be influenced by past experiences, either collectively through conversation or through social interactions, as with co-constructivism or situated constructivism. Therefore, the onus falls upon the institution to facilitate these experiences by creating spaces where teachers have optimized opportunities for collective ownership and safe, well designed, and structured opportunities for engaging with peers as they set out to implement new policy.

School Resources: The Impact of Resource Sufficiency

Another theme that arises in the literature on policy mediation is the impact of resource sufficiency. In an ideal state, teachers would have available, abundant, and appropriate resources to support them in implementing new policies. However, operational procedures for policy implementation are often left to the organization, leaving each school or district to both determine how curricular and assessment materials, textbooks, technology, and human capital are allocated. Organizations also have to make hard decisions to work within the financial budgets and staffing availability. However, school resource availability is an influencing factor in how teachers put policy into practice in their classrooms: simply put, when teachers do not have or believe they do not have appropriate materials, resources, and institutional supports available, they experience less success with mediating policy to practice (Cavendish et al., 2020; Good & McCaslin, 2008; Van Galen, 2004). On the other hand, having structured support systems and resources in place influences teachers' capacity and willingness to implement policies with fidelity within their classroom contexts (Olsen & Kirtman, 2002; Werner et al., 2021; Woulfin, 2018).

Furthermore, adequate support has been widely associated with cohesive, high-fidelity rollouts (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Good & McCaslin, 2008; Mansouri et al., 2021). In one particularly lucid example on the Greek federal curriculum roll-out for early childhood education

teachers, Birbili and Myrovali (2020) noted that teachers, lacking adequate training, had no practical knowledge of how to use the new materials being deployed and ultimately turned to familiar practices, employing only superficial aspects of the intended policy. The authors noted that at the time of writing, fifteen years after the initial roll-out of the policy, teachers all but ignored the materials as non-compulsory guidance. In this instance, semi-structured interviews revealed that a disconnect in practical knowledge and a lack of resource support significantly impacted the implementation of the policy into kindergarten classrooms. This is similar to Cohen's (1990) exploration of Mrs. Oublier's attempts to revolutionize her math instruction, only to observe that she was leaning into the same practices as before. In schools facing disparate financial resources, results are even more telling, manifesting as poorer implementation of policies (Good & McCaslin, 2008) or adulterated versions of policies once they finally make it to practice (Van Galen, 2004).

Threat-rigid environments have the potential to see resource gaps as well. Teachers must grapple with a wide range of challenges as they work to reform their practice in alignment with new policies (Coburn, 2001), not to mention the multiple and complex demands already expected of them (Woulfin, 2018). However, organizationally, threat-rigid contexts respond through suppression of divergence (Mellahi et al., 2002), simplification of routines (Chattopadhyay et al., 2021; Olsen & Sexton, 2009), and pressure to conform (Staw et al., 1981). Suppression of divergence of practice, simplification of routines, and pressure to conform can result in limitations on institutional support and resources (Olsen & Sexton, 2009; Staw et al., 1981).

Such was the case in Olsen & Sexton's Hawthorne High School, where the institution of a "macro-climate of standardization, conformity, and high-stakes testing" was put into place by

administration following a negative accreditation report (2009, p. 23), along with a mandate that teachers use a new textbook series, rather than allowing them to leverage their knowledge of students in their classrooms and their unique needs. Teachers like Sophia experienced this sense of deprofessionalization with resentment, perceiving it as an affront to her skill as a teacher. When schools like Hawthorne insist upon the use of standardized resources rather than providing opportunities for choice to meet the needs of students, teachers can feel as though they do not have the resources needed to support instruction.

Moreover, from a constructivist perspective, prior experiences, assumptions, or realities with which teachers are interacting in real time can shape their perceptions and beliefs (Maxwell, 2013). Therefore, a number of other possibilities exist. For example, teachers who must first navigate a complex cognitive load of processing policy in a threat-rigid space with restricted communication or collaboration may not have the capacity to ask leadership for additional resources. Likewise, previous experiences with resource scarcity or insecurity can trigger a range of feelings and reactions as "coping" responses (Wutich & Brewis, 2014), which might also impact perceptions and beliefs about what the conditions mean for the organization and result in both community-level vulnerabilities and individual struggles. These considerations must be taken into account when assessing how teachers navigate the sufficiency of resources to meet their unique contextual needs, as a lack thereof could result in challenges or failure to implement new policy.

Decision-Making: The Imperative of Agency, Autonomy, and Professional Trust

Perhaps most salient is the connection between teacher agency and autonomy and mediation of policy into practice, as teachers ultimately, as mediators, are making decisions about if and how they will implement (Lytra & Gelir, 2023; Olsen & Kirtman, 2002; Xu & Lu,

2022). The literature is rife with examples of teachers who, experiencing a deficit of professional trust, agentic control, and autonomy, chose to leverage the one power they did have: the degree to which they rolled out the new policy (Birbili & Myrovali, 2020; Coburn, 2001; Lennert Da Silva & Mølstad, 2020; Mansouri et al., 2021). In several studies, teacher agency (Grossman, 2010; Henderson, 2017; Xu & Lu, 2022), agentic response (Lennert Da Silva & Mølstad, 2020), and autonomy (Martinie et al., 2016) are explicitly named. Likewise, there is a connection between trust in the teacher as a professional and successful teacher policy mediation. Teachers want to be respected for their experiential knowledge and contextual knowledge and want to be able to use that knowledge to determine how to roll out a policy in their own classroom setting. A sense of professional trust in their ability to do what is needed, therefore, becomes an important indicator of their adoption and implementation of the policy in question (Gardinier, 2012; Kay, 2024; Suurtamm & Koch, 2014).

The need to be respected and included as a decision-maker plays out in the form of voice and choice in how a policy translates to classroom practice. Practitioner response can range from total, enthusiastic compliance to complete rejection. Differing terms are used across the scholarly literature: for example, Coburn (2001) explains that teachers interpret, adapt, and transform reforms as they implement them; Lytra & Gelir (2023) explain these moves as adapting, recasting, and contesting policy elements; and Xu and Lu (2022) call this process contextualizing, negotiating, and navigating. Brain et al.'s work (2006) proposed one typology as an adaptation of Merton's 1957 responses within a social systems framework. Shown in Figure 1, this typology had teacher responses ranging from conformity (where both policy and practice are accepted), to ritualism (where the policy might be generally rejected but minimally put into practice), to rebellion (in which the policy and practice are both rejected and/or substituted), with

success referring to the degree of acceptance and adoption that occurs on the part of the teacher.

Figure 1

A Typology of Teachers' Adaptations to Education Policy and Practice

Adaptation	Policy	Practice	Descriptors
Conformity	Accepts	Accepts	Policy acceptor Minimalist mediator Technocrat teacher
Innovation	Accepts	Rejects	Policy acceptor Professional mediator Innovative teacher
Ritualism	Rejects	Accepts	Policy rejecter Minimalist mediator Technocrat teacher
Retreatism	Rejects	Rejects	Policy rejector Rejecting mediator Anomic teacher
Rebellion	Rejects/substitutes	Rejects/substitutes	Policy creator Creative mediator Creative teacher

Sources:
Brain et al., 2006, devised from Reid (1978) and text in Merton (1957) ch. 5

This range of patterns in how teachers respond when presented with a policy appears across several studies, including literature on dilemmas that are faced in instructional contexts and challenges arising between what teachers are told to teach and what they believe (Suurtamm & Koch, 2014; Windschitl, 2002). Dilemmas have been found to not only be obstacles, but also opportunities for growth and learning for teachers (Caspari-Gnann & Sevian, 2022), since collisions between policy and beliefs can impact teacher mediation of that policy. Kay (2024) noted, for example, how teachers felt forced to play "the policy game" (p. 649), yet did so in a way that contextualized the policy to their unique contexts, or, in Brain et al.'s (2006) terms, engaging in substitution of the details. The reality is simple: when a teacher's agency is strained by the way in which their ideological beliefs conflict with a new policy, they will reconcile those challenges as best they can (Henderson, 2017; Xu & Lu, 2022), an indicator of teachers flexing their capacity to choose how implementation happens within their own spaces.

As we know from threat-rigidity literature, not only is decision-making restricted organizationally in threat-rigid environments, but also self-efficacy is reduced for individuals in the face of a threat (Helms-Lorenz & Maulana, 2016). Emotional exhaustion and cognitive interference become factors as well (McCarthy et al., 2016). This can have consequences for capacity for decision-making by creating a ripple effect, as can the feelings of decreased trust (Daly, 2009), vitriolic interactions (Brezicha et al., 2024), and dissensus (Griffith, 2004) and psychological stress and anxiety (McCarthy et al., 2016; Olsen & Sexton, 2009; Staw et al., 1981) that are found in threat-rigid environments. One particularly telling example of a threat-rigid school environment in the literature appears in a qualitative study of six teachers at a Southern California school that sought to understand how the school's reform climate impacted teachers and vice versa (Olsen & Sexton, 2009). The study found that threat-rigid conditions

were present in response to media pressure and parental and student perceptions of the school's success metrics. This resulted in reactions including defensiveness, resentment, and a desire to hide by closing the door, among other responses. Similar circumstances were also seen in Daly's (2009) mixed methods study in which focus group interviews revealed "reactive and unilateral decisionmaking" (p. 205), diminished agency, and fear conditions within the school environment.

While teacher stress is common to the career field (Lambert et al., 2018), responses to stressors are dynamic and determined by a range of factors (Harmsen et al., 2019; McCarthy et al., 2016), and the capacity that teachers have to tolerate stress varies throughout their careers (Huberman, 1993, as cited in Kyriacou, 2001). This is concerning from a policy mediation perspective, since continued teacher work stress can lead to counterproductive instructional strategies (Von Der Embse, 2017) as well as fatigue, negativity towards the profession, and job burnout (Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021; Yu et al., 2014). Studies have also shown that an infrastructure of preexisting conditions can occur in instances of ongoing stress (Sarkar & Osieyevvsky, 2018), essentially building a weak foundation which can impact an organization's susceptibility to crisis. The reality is that threats, in the form of stress, begin to undermine capacity to negotiate surrounding conditions both at the individual level (Griffith, 2004) and organizationally (Sarkar & Osieyevvsky, 2018). When considered through the lens of constructivism, considering that perceptions and beliefs are shaped by assumptions and former experiences (Maxwell, 2014), these psychological outcomes and negative perceptions can even be self-fulfilling.

Ultimately, it is clear that collaboration, resource sufficiency, and autonomous decision-making provide the optimal conditions for teachers to mediate policy consistently and with

fidelity. When those same conditions are not present, rejection or selective implementation may be more likely. This poses a concern as educational leaders work to roll out policies to serve deficits in the system (as with ethnic studies, restorative practice, and the creation of safeguards to protect marginalized children), but especially so when threats manifest in ways that diminish teacher self-esteem or wellbeing, resulting in teacher stress (Kyriacou, 2001) and in threat-rigid responses (Staw et al., 1981).

An Era of Increasingly Polarized Rhetoric

Teachers in the United States who are working to make sense of and navigate an ever-changing education system must also contend with a country that is experiencing upticks in political sorting and polarization (Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008; Houston, 2024; McCarty, 2019). Partisan divisions are intensified by political leaders working to mobilize public opinion (Galston, 2005; Jerit, 2004; Prinz, 2021) and a widening polarization gap is manifesting across the full range of topics (Houston, 2021), including those in education, with seemingly apolitical topics that are being politicized.

While United States political and social structures have long maintained white supremacist ideologies and structures of oppression (Anzaldúa, 1987), the Trump Effect, marked by "outspoken negative partisanship" (Journell, 2022, p.137), has shifted the tone of discourse, creating fodder for political leverage (Lavery & Dahill-Brown, 2024) and engendering racist nativist discourses tab.The strategy of politicizing rhetoric is intentional, of course, serving to "mobilize [a candidate's] party's base while simultaneously attracting the support of the uncommitted" (Jerit, 2004, p. 563). This has been seen with rhetoric about immigration (Pérez Huber & Muñoz, 2021; Piazza, 2020; Simonsen, 2019) and hostility directed towards women of color in elected positions (Muñoz, 2021), among other topics.

In a time when large number of adults use social media platforms — as many as half of the United States population, for example, with Instagram (Pew Research Center, 2024) — it is expected that social media will also continue to be a lively platform for political discourse and rhetoric, and it is, with over 17.5% of political ad spends being leveraged on digital platforms (Statista, n.d.). However, it is concurrently an era of rising mis/disinformation, a decline in media literacy (Gaultney et al., 2022; Pérez-Curiel et al., 2021), and studies showing that these very platforms amplify emotions caused by the political climate (Hodge et al., 2022; Pérez-Curiel et al., 2021; Pollock et al., 2023) and that those who are more extreme in attitude may experience the highest levels of arousal to political rhetoric (Bakker et al, 2020). Furthermore, since partisanship is often deeply personal and connected to identity (Prinz, 2021), in-group and out-group differentiation can result in reduced cooperation with perceived opponents (Dimant, 2023), leading to potential for personal conflict and negative affect.

Affective Responses to Political Rhetoric

The reality is that the political rhetoric is doing exactly what it is intended to do. While persuasion has long been studied (Aristotle, 2007), a focus on social mobilization to generate affective responses (Mateus, 2018) is worth noting. Since affect is something that is experienced nearly instantaneously when individuals are exposed to sociopolitical concepts (Abelson, 1963; Lodge & Taber, 2005), social anger can be engineered by political actors to rally supporters, reify existing worldviews, motivate attack, enforce shared norms, and initiate power-laden threats, among other moves (Condit, 2018). With a resurgence of far-right political movements, the outcomes are dire: dramatic increases in hate crimes (Miller & Werner-Winslow, 2016, as cited in Pérez Huber & Muñoz, 2021), domestic violence (Piazza, 2020) and entitlement racism and political trauma (Agosto et al., 2021) have been seen across the country, along with reported

negative affect and emotions like fear and anger. Though scholars have found that people with different political leanings respond in different ways — whereas individuals from the political right fixating on negative stimuli and experiencing a higher degree of fear and increased reactivity to threats (Dodd et al., 2012) while those from the political left are more sensitive and prone to anger and contempt (Steiger et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2019) — it is worth mentioning that all of the above responses are described within the domain of negative affect.

In the context of schools, most studies on affect and political rhetoric have focused on the impact on students (Chavez et al., 2019; Pérez Huber & Muñoz, 2021; Rogers & Ishimoto, 2021; Valdivia et al., 2021) rather than teachers. Nevertheless, considering how affective responses to political rhetoric manifest in the greater populace as a whole can offer a window into the types of reactions that teachers, as a subgroup of that whole, might be expected to have within that very specific context.

Schools as Targets for Political Rhetoric

Complicating the situation, in a polarized political environment, educational initiatives and policies are often targets for political actors. This is currently being seen in California and across the country with politicized calls-to-arms surfacing via upticks in school book challenges (Goncalves et al., 2024; Handelman, 2024), bans on Critical Race Theory, or CRT (Kelly, 2023; Pollock et al., 2022), forced parental notification policies targeting transgender and gender nonconforming students (Office of the Attorney General, 2024), and policies preventing trans athletes from competing in competitive sports (Thornton, 2025).

In these and other situations, despite evidence-based policies being developed and deployed to support students through a more equitable approach to content (as with ethnic studies), pedagogy (as with competency-based education), and discipline (as with restorative

justice), political interest groups and other stakeholders are both ready and willing to take them on, infusing a political angle (Press Team, n.d.; Wu, n.d.a; Wu, n.d.b).

One example of this is when, in the wake of anti-CRT campaigns impacting nearly 900 school districts in 2021, Pollock et al. (2023) engaged in an analysis of 16 educators' experiences with talking about race and LGBTQ topics, with many noting that they were actively silenced/censored or subdued. Participants described experiences that were dependent on locality, with pressure points including local board members, district leadership, school leaders, the greater local community, state laws, and national conservative organizations and media. One participant noted that the school board was trying to restrict talk about racism by looking at curriculum "with a fine tooth comb - because it talks about racism and microaggressions" (Pollock et al., 2023, p. 23).

Similarly, a April 10, 2024 special interest group report titled Analysis on Ethnic Studies Pilot in the Escondido Union High School District examined a local high school district's ethnic studies pilot proposal, calling out "biases overemphasizing power structures, race and racism, and victimhood" and "particularly concerning" terms including intersectionality, power, and privilege (Wu, n.d.a, p.1). A July 19, 2021 memo from the same author and organization also critiqued 11th and 12th grade curriculum from Oceanside Unified School District, writing that courses "unequivocally derive from the ideological framework of critical race theory and critical pedagogy" and conflate curricular objectives with "a more narrow and politicized goal of social justice and action civics," (Wu, n.d.a, p.1). Both of these are seemingly deliberate misrepresentations of the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum, whose general principles specifically call for civic engagement and civic responsibility (California, 2022), and which was presented by California Attorney General Bonta as "grounded in the foundational curricular

areas of the ethnic studies tradition" (2024, p. 3). Nevertheless, these examples are important as they show how these challenges plague local schools in the San Diego region just as they do the state and country.

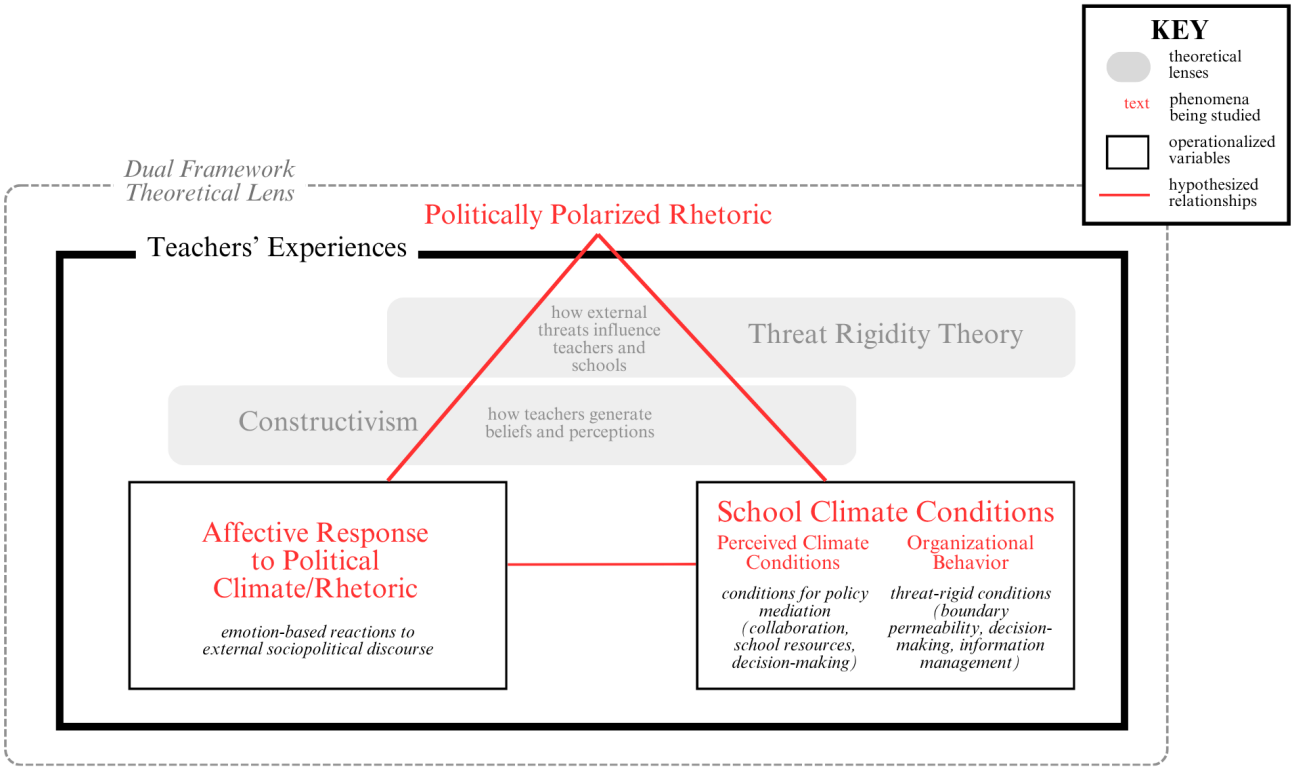
Acknowledging that, in this highly polarized climate, affective responses to the political climate undoubtedly shape teachers' perspectives and belief systems, it becomes imperative to also understand how these experiences relate to their perception of school climate and culture so that policymakers and educational leaders can operate with these findings in mind as they implement the processes and procedures that will influence the student and teacher experience.

Conceptual Framework

This study was predicated on a few specific bodies of literature which, at their intersection, raised more questions than they answered. Therefore, building a comprehensive conceptual framework to show hypothesized intersections between them from a systemic perspective served the purpose of adding clarity. The conceptual framework, or what and how I decided to study ideas and beliefs about this phenomena (Maxwell, 2013), is presented below in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Conceptual framework



This conceptual framework elevated the ideas explored earlier in this chapter. Namely, it focused on the idea that, in a shifting landscape of external sociopolitical discourse, politically polarized rhetoric results in affective responses (including fixation on negative stimuli, reactivity to threats, sensitivity, predisposition to anger, contempt, and fear). How these affective responses are constructed in teachers as a subgroup is unknown and worth exploring, as teachers' affect directly influences the way they engage at school and with students. Furthermore, while the literature indicated that political rhetoric influences conditions related to climate (including hate crimes, domestic violence, entitlement racism, and political trauma), previous studies have focused on the larger political landscape and may not be reflective of teachers' experiences at a

school systems level or in light of political climate and rhetoric in their specific contexts. Finally, while it is known that political affective responses to political stimuli are automatic in nature and connected to identity (resulting in in-group and out-group differentiation, reduced cooperation, and social anger), the consequences of these reactions had not been studied in tandem with school climate conditions for policy mediation, nor had they been examined through a threat-rigidity lens.

In the figure, the color red was used to identify the variables being studied and hypothesized interactions between them, while the dual theoretical lenses of threat-rigidity and constructivism were noted in gray to demonstrate how they will be leveraged to examine the component parts. The conceptual framework in its entirety captured the examination of teachers' experiences as a whole. It is important to note that relational pathways are non-directional. Although I generated directional hypotheses (Creswell, 2021) based on my examination of the literature, it was important to me as a researcher that I remained open to what the data was saying.

Therefore, in an attempt to understand if and how these three variables might be in relationship with one another, as well as what teachers' experiences were, this study examined them both independently and in relationship with one another, using both constructivism and threat-rigidity as a dual lens theoretical framing.

It is important to note that this conceptual framework assumes that if organizations and individuals respond in a certain way to threat-rigid environments, this applies also specifically to teachers. There is some data about how teachers respond to accountability testing environments, but these do not necessarily correlate to policy implementation. Likewise, while teacher policy mediation has been studied in terms of curriculum implementation, the outcomes do not

necessarily relate to a threat-rigid environment nor are they studied in conjunction with affective response to political rhetoric. For example, while Spillane's Zone of Enactment model (1999) does include external influences on policy mediation (as does Brofenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (2000) on systems in general), neither of them specifically focuses on the influence of the political climate.

That said, I chose to study these interconnected concepts in this specific context, as I felt that this work has implications for educational leaders since information about how teachers perceive affective response, threat-rigid environments, and school climate can offer more insight into how school learners might create spaces in which policy roll-out would be most successful, as well as where teachers may face additional challenges influencing their experiences.

Chapter Summary

As this chapter has explored, understanding how politically polarized rhetoric might impact teacher policy mediation ultimately necessitated an examination of the intersections between teacher policy mediation, motivation, threat-rigidity, and political polarization literature, as well as an expansion of research into new arenas.

Scholarship about teachers as policy mediators allows researchers and educational leaders to understand the factors and circumstances that influence teachers' decision-making processes, including the importance of collaboration, school resources, and decision-making. Additionally, researchers must examine the ways in which school conditions can be influenced by threat-rigid environments that come about in response to politically polarized rhetoric, as well as how individuals might experience the resultant affective responses those threats might cause.

Though it has been well established that stress is a factor in teachers' work environment and politicized topics and social justice have certainly been addressed in the context of policy

mediation with Sleeter (2011) noting how implementation can become a political endeavor with policies sparking political backlash, the specific response to how affective response to rhetoric impacts teacher motivation to mediate policy had yet to be explored in this context as I began this study. However, this information is important as it serves to support both researchers and educational leaders in better understanding the landscape impacting teachers' stress and motivation, conceptualizing whether either might influence capacity to engage in new policies under the threat of political rhetoric, and optimizing conditions for teachers so that they are more likely to successfully mediate new policies with fidelity rather than closing their classroom doors. With reform and pedagogical policies like Assembly Bill No. 101 rolling out in real time across California during an era of increased Trumpian rhetoric, it is important to understand responses and perceptions surrounding these conditions in order to be able to lead educational organizations in socially just reform implementation, despite current conditions of stress, threat, and polarization.

Therefore, considering the complexity of these topics, the study was developed and conducted to better understand the potential connections between these discrete ideas as well as to examine participant experiences and belief structures, thereby providing policymakers and educational leaders with a better understanding of how they might facilitate optimized spaces in which learning can take place.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter discusses my research design in detail, focusing on methodological moves for both data collection and analysis. In this chapter, I first state my rationale for the selection of mixed methods, followed by my research questions and hypotheses. I then explain how the study addressed them, including the methods used, instrument and variables, data collection, and quantitative and qualitative data analysis procedures. Finally, I discuss limitations, validity, and my positionality as a researcher.

Purpose of the Study and Methodological Rationale

The primary focus of this study was the potential relationship between two quantifiable variables: affective response to political rhetoric and perception of policy mediation conditions. A quantitative, correlational design allowed for the examination and measure of this relationship (Creswell, 2021), and using a survey to gather data can allow the outcomes from a standardized instrument to be potentially generalized from a sample to a population (Fowler, 2008, as cited in Creswell, 2021), depending upon the number of responses. On the other hand, there is value in also qualitatively understanding the experiences that teachers are having with both of these variables, leaning into participants' own words to provide contextualization through directly reported interpretations and perspectives (Maxwell, 2013).

As an integrated typology, mixed methods research is so named for its inclusion of both qualitative and quantitative methods in one study (Maxwell, 2013) to provide the "most informative, complete, balanced, and useful research results" (Nastasi et al., 2010, p. 20). For the purpose of this study, I chose to use the following definition of mixed methods research as "the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e. g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data

collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration" (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 123). This type of research allowed for using multiple approaches to investigate multiple aspects of the same phenomena and leveraging the different methods to create a broader understanding of the phenomena (Maxwell, 2013) through complementarity and expansion (Greene, 2007, as cited in Maxwell, 2013).

While the rationale for design decisions will be explored on a phase-by-phase basis later in this chapter, it is important to understand that not only do mixed methods of collection and analysis substantially dovetail multiple elements in a single study, but doing so also helped neutralize weaknesses existing in singular quantitative or qualitative methods plans, leveraging "both the structure of quantitative research and the flexibility of qualitative inquiry," (Creswell, 2021, p.21).

Research Questions & Hypotheses

This exploration was driven by three research questions. Following Plano Clark & Badiee's (2010) scholarship on the development of mixed methods research questions, the first two quantitative questions were paired with a third qualitative question. The following quantitative research questions were addressed in this study:

1. RQ1: Is there a relationship between teachers' affective responses to the political climate and their perceptions of institutional conditions that support policy mediation (collaboration, decision-making, resource access)?
2. RQ 2: Is there a relationship between teachers' affective responses to the political climate and their perception of threat-rigidity in their school environment?

The following qualitative research question was also addressed:

3. RQ3: How do teachers describe the influence of the current political climate on collaboration, decision-making, and school resource support at their school sites?

Mixed methods studies are also well served by an integrated question that combines the findings of both strands, or what is called a mixed-methods procedural/mixing question (Plano Clark & Badiee, 2010; Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007, as cited in Creswell, 2014). Though not a formal research question guiding specific findings, the following procedural question is also explored and presented in the discussion of this study:

How do qualitative experiences and perspectives described by teachers help to explain quantitative results from the survey?

Finally, I generated the following directional hypotheses (Creswell, 2021) based on my review of the existing scholarly literature:

Hypothesis 1: Teachers who report more negative affective responses to the political climate will also report lower perceived support for policy mediation conditions, such as collaboration, participatory decision-making, and access to instructional resources.

Hypothesis 2: Teachers who report more negative affective responses to the political climate will also report conditions of threat-rigidity in their school settings.

Overview of Research Design

In order to address the range of questions being explored, a multiphase mixed methods research approach was planned which included a cross-sectional survey (Fowler, 2014) with a quantitative focus and embedded qualitative elements (Creswell, 2021), followed by interviews to supplement the findings and add contextualization. While mixed method structure can be complex, I found this selected structure to be best captured via Creswell and Plano Clark's (2007) typology as a partially mixed concurrent dominant status design with a sequential

qualitative phase. Using Onwuegbuzie & Leech's (2006) rendition of the 1991 Morse notation system for mixed methods research, in which capital letters represent the priority method being used, the '+' sign represents a concurrent relationship and the '→' sign represents a sequential relationship, this was notated as follows: QUAN + qual → QUAL.

This design strategy was selected for a number of reasons. First, it was selected in order to best maximize the participant rate for this study while ensuring efficiency of data collection (Creswell, 2014) with initial quantitative and qualitative data being collected simultaneously. The predominant method, a quantitative survey, served as a means of addressing the primary and secondary research questions via quantitative statistical analysis (Creswell, 2014) while concurrent collection of nested open-ended qualitative questions addressed the third research question, exploring the experiences of participants in their own words, building an opportunity to gain a more comprehensive understanding of participant experiences and contextualization (Maxwell, 2013). In the secondary phase, a set of interviews purposely selected from an opt-in interview pool served to create additional context as well as provide rich, thick descriptions from the subjective perspective of the participant, both serving to triangulate the data (Creswell, 2014), as well as providing paradigmatic corroboration, an important reality check against researcher bias (Saldaña, 2021). Mixing for this study occurred both in the collection phase (QUAN + qual) as well as in the inference phase post-data analysis.

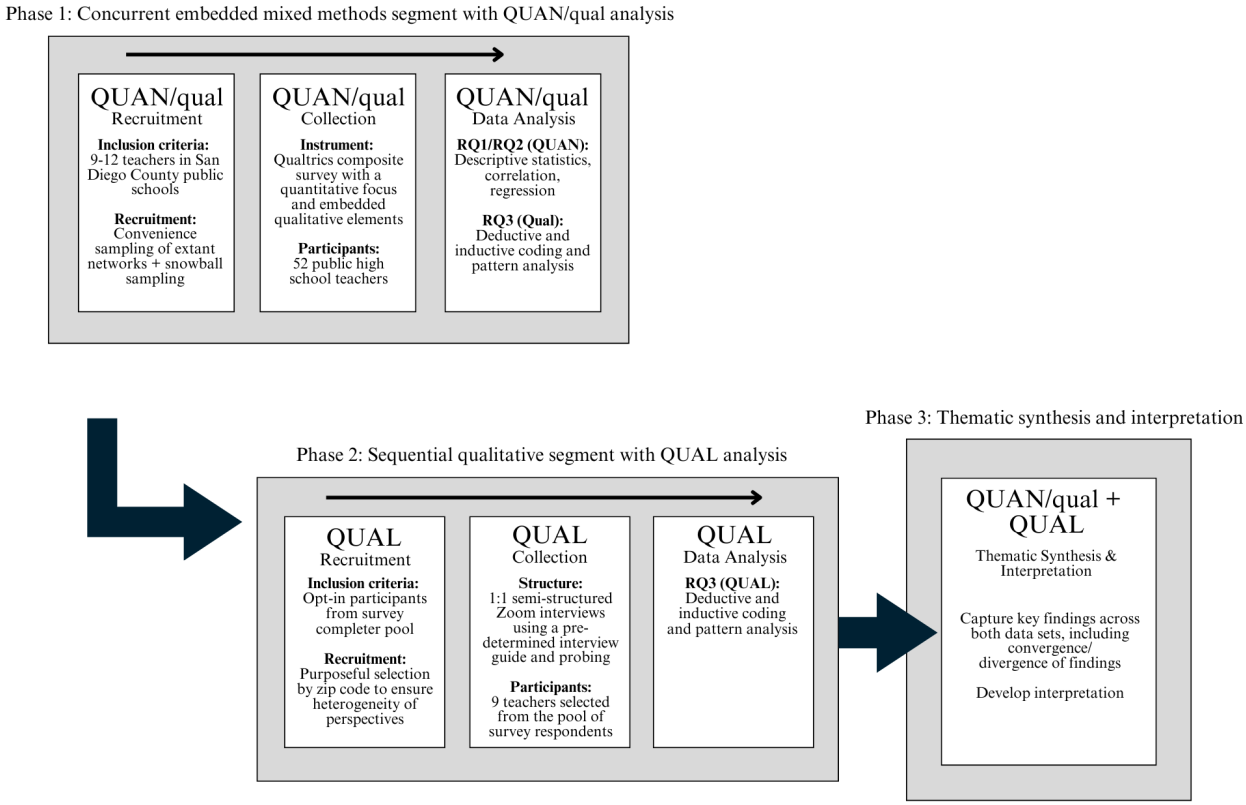
Beyond the reasons above, it is important to understand that these topics being studied have important implications for district and site administrators, who are charged with maintaining the appropriate school climate for teacher policy mediation, among other responsibilities, as well as at the educational policy level and in other fields. My hope was that learning more about potential statistical relationships between the variables could serve as a

jumping off point for opening a conversation about how affective responses to the political climate might impact other spaces and populations, making quantitative study both timely and much needed. However, research design can also be responsive to the desires of its audience (Creswell, 2014), and qualitative research has been shown to be more effective and to have more credibility with administrators (Patton, 1990), which serves as a powerful rationale for the collection and analysis of qualitative data. Therefore, using a mixed methods approach to explore both quantitative and qualitative elements provided a unique opportunity to understand variable relationships while additionally expounding and honoring the depth and breadth of teacher experiences and meeting the needs of the research's future audience.

To add clarity and simplify the analytic process, the three phases of this research design were prestructured (Miles & Huberman, 1994, as cited in Maxwell, 2013), as shown in Figure 3 and described at length in this chapter.

Figure 3

Multiphase Mixed Methods Research Design



As I prepared for recruitment and deployment of the survey, refinement of my survey instrument was a key step in ensuring that my instrument and procedures met the needs of the participants. Therefore, prior to submitting to the Institutional Research Board (IRB), I engaged in a pilot study, an important step for better understanding the concepts, understandings, and theories of individuals like the ones that I will survey (Maxwell, 2013; Saldaña, 2021). By testing my draft survey and interview protocol with audiences similar to my participant field via cognitive interviews and think-aloud protocols (Wolcott & Lobczowski, 2020), I was able to better understand how they understood my questions to be asking and take advantage of their feedback to iteratively revise. Furthermore, I captured analytic memos during this pilot study

process which can inform the development of in vivo codes (Strauss, 1987) to be used alongside conceptual ideas in deductive coding.

Site Selection & Participants

While there are many potential contexts within which I could focus for this research study, in early outreach conversations with public district educational leaders, it became evident that, in the political climate, some of the questions might not be well received if they were to be screenshotted and sent to certain stakeholders. There were also some concerns raised about the questions about threat-rigid conditions reflecting negatively on a district or site leadership, as well as feelings of unease about how demographic questions might be received (educational leaders, personal communication, July 10, 2025). This was problematic as, in this case, those I'd be looking to lean on to help facilitate distribution in a single district context (such as cabinet or principals) might in fact become gatekeepers (Creswell, 2014). I received coaching from trusted leaders in public high schools on how I might adjust my instruments in order to be more palatable at the district or site level, and it became clear that many of the valuable lines of questioning would need to be laundered and the purpose of the study redacted. Upon reflection, although it would be interesting to be able to engage in a more narrow case study approach by specifying a district as a singular context, it became evident that this would not be a strong feasibility due to the sensitive nature of the questions being asked without significantly compromising the direction that this important research will take. Therefore, while my study risked losing the additional contextual elements that it might have with a tighter bounding, it became clear that if I could make my survey available to teachers as intended without a district or site intermediary, it would capture a more nuanced representation of the variables that I was looking to examine.

As such, I opened up participation to San Diego County public high school teachers as a broad corpus with some inclusion criteria, a total possible population of 5,654 teachers as of the 2024 to 2025 school year (EdData, n.d.). This bounding, while unable to provide generalizability to the full population, is nevertheless an important metropolis to study, as these teachers serve over 320,000 students in the public system (California Department of Education, n.d.; EdData, n.d.), and San Diego as a whole serves over 8% of the state's children between the ages of 0 and 17 (KidsData, 2021). For this study, each participant was required to be a high school teacher at one or multiple San Diego County public school(s), teaching one or multiple subject areas, and it was acceptable if they bore other campus or district responsibilities as a part of their assignment, as long as they were considered certificated or instructional faculty. Narrowing to a public high school teacher population was intentional and key. While certainly all teachers, as representatives of a diverse society, may be influenced by political climate and rhetoric, Rogers and Kahne's 2021-2022 study, rooted in an investigation with 32 interviews and a nationally representative survey of 682 U.S. public high schools, found that the administrators noted trends that relate to my own study context. Namely, the authors found that political conflict is pervasive and growing, it is making it harder to address misinformation, it is leading to declining support for teaching about race and diversity, and it is manifesting in limitations on protections for LGBTQ+ youth. While Rogers and Kahne's (2022) work was specifically investigating the range of responses to political climate across blue, red, and purple communities, the manifestation of these findings across all public high school contexts, irrespective of political leaning, led me to believe that this was a particularly salient context to focus my research within.

Phase One

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I began with Phase

One, the concurrent embedded mixed method segment. This phase began with structured recruitment before moving to collecting data and analyzing it, and was specifically focused on answering quantitative research questions 1 and 2 and beginning to better understand qualitative research question 3.

Recruitment

Since relationships are key to gaining access to study participants (Lareau, 2021) and the nature of this study created potential difficulties in accessing them, convenience sampling of teachers via contacts in existing networks, which include other districts and at the San Diego County Office of Education, was a valid and productive option (Weiss, 1994, as cited in Maxwell, 2013) for Phase One.

It is important to note that, if a perception of social and/or employment consequences exists in relation to answering the questions, respondents have been known to decline to respond or to withhold their candid beliefs, thus becoming a "hidden" population (Heckathorn, 1997). Maxwell (2013) cites Bosk (1979) as stating that fieldwork is a "body-contact" sport (p. ix), which requires navigating a range of research relationships. Therefore, I also encouraged potential participants in the network to engage in snowball sampling (Goodman, 1961) as a chain referral technique, asking them to share my invitation and an information sheet/social media graphic with other teachers who might be interested and eligible. I also generated a contact list based on publicly available teacher email addresses from schools across San Diego County and shared the same invitation with the email addresses I was able to gather. Furthermore, I posted recruitment graphics publicly via social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn) to encourage sharing with wider networks, as Digital Peer Influence Theory suggests that behaviors and decisions can be shaped by online social circles (Rachmad, 2023).

Moving from Phase One to Phase Two, I used purposeful selection (Creswell, 2014; Light et al., 1990, as cited in Maxwell, 2013) to deliberately select teachers teaching across a range of San Diego zip codes in order to capture a heterogeneity of perspectives across a range of contexts to the degree possible. I made this decision as I thought it would increase the likelihood that my emergent themes and interpretations thereof would more adequately represent the full range being studied (Maxwell, 2013). I also used two additional purposeful selection rounds, explained later in this chapter in Phase Two data collection.

The information flyer, social media graphic, and social media post text appear in Appendix D, invitation and selection emails as well as the snowball sampling recruitment letter appear in Appendix E, and participant consent forms appear in Appendix F.

Data Collection

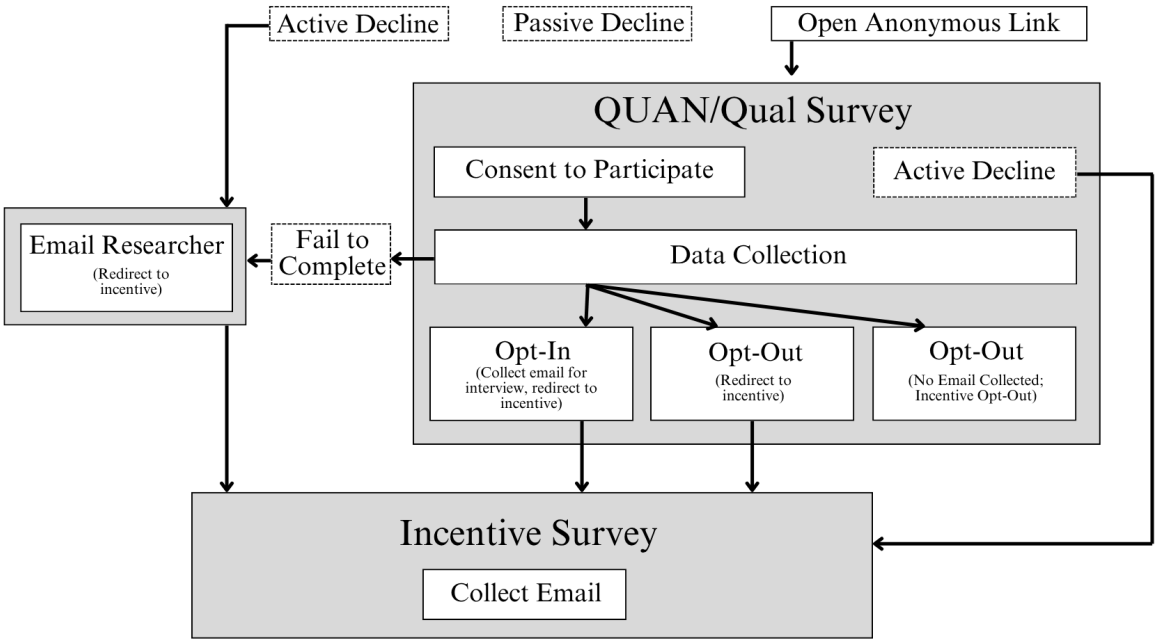
The survey for Phase One was administered via Qualtrics in order to allow me to collect QUAN + qual data while maintaining confidentiality of survey participants. I used skip logic and survey termination redirects to ensure a seamless experience. The first subsurvey, where the data collection occurred (hereafter termed QUAN/qual Survey), closed with a question to ascertain opt-in interest for interview participation, and a subsequent subsurvey collected contact information for those wishing to participate in the incentive opportunity (hereafter termed Incentive Survey). While the user experience only appear to include one survey, in fact, two separate surveys, administered back-to-back, allowed me to facilitate participation in the opportunity drawing regardless of survey completion (Sweetser, 2018).

These elements and transitions are illustrated in Figure 4 below, with one gray rectangle representing each of the different subsurveys, white rectangles indicating opt-in/opt-out decision tree points, and arrows indicating directionality of skip logics (within/out of surveys) and/or

redirections (between multiple surveys). “Active Decline,” “Passive Decline,” and “Fail to Complete” represent alternative paths leading to the incentive opportunity, which will be made available to participants and non-participants alike, per university IRB protocols (UCSD Human Research Protections Program, 2017). Each of these subsurveys is further described below, and a copy of the instruments together as they will appear to the participant in full are located in Appendix A.

Figure 4

Phase One Survey Design



The initial QUAN/qual survey began with an informed consent statement detailing the purpose, data usage, confidentiality measures, and an explanation of both the interview opt-in procedure and incentive structure. A multiple choice agreement was used to ensure consent and inclusion criteria were presented. Skip logic directed those declining consent or those who do not qualify for participation to the Incentive Survey. The QUAN/qual Survey was a composite instrument leveraging items from previously validated scales that have been used with similar populations: Positive and Negative Affect Scale (Watson et al., 1988), Revised SLEQ (Johnson et al., 2007), and Threat-Rigidity Scale (Daly et al., 2011).

Affective response to political climate was measured using the Positive and Negative Affect Scale, or PANAS (Watson et al., 1988). This validated instrument includes two 10-item scales which measure positive and negative affect, with participants self-reporting their perceived emotions on a 5-point Likert-like scale with response items ranging from "1-Not at all" to "5-Very much." Positive Affect is examined via items 1, 3, 5, 9, 10, 12, 14, 17, and 19, whereas Negative Affect is examined via items 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 13, 15, 18, and 20, with sample items that include "interested" and "irritable." Previous Cronbach's alpha scores were found to be .89 for Positive Affect and .85 for Negative Affect with narrow confidence limits, indicating adequate reliability with the general adult population (Crawford & Henry, 2004).

Perceptions of policy mediation conditions were measured via the Revised School-Level Environment Questionnaire, or Revised SLEQ (Johnson et al., 2007). The Revised SLEQ is intended to measure teachers' perceptions of their school environment through the examination of 21 items across five subscales. For the purposes of this study, I used three of the five subscales: collaboration, decision-making, and school resources, as those aligned with conditions in the literature about teacher policy mediation. The scale has been examined for internal

consistency with a similar sample, with Cronbach's alpha scores of .82, .78, and .77 for Collaboration, decision-making, and School Resources (Johnson et al., 2007). Additionally, I reversed the order of the answers for ease of response and clarity for the survey participants, though I kept the language of the responses the same. Whereas before the first response option presented was "5-Strongly Agree" and the last option presented as "1-Strongly Disagree," these have been reversed so that the first option is now "1-Strongly Disagree" and the last one is "5-Strongly Agree." This shift was important because it aligned the ordering scheme with the other scales in the survey and minimized the likelihood that participants would inadvertently answer opposite of what they intended.

Finally, *Threat-Rigidity* was measured via the validated *Threat-Rigidity Scale* (Daly et al., 2011). This instrument includes 12 items across four subscales: boundary permeability, decision-making, information management, and organizational characteristics, and asks participants to rate their perceptions of how often (site/district) administration act in a specific way, with sample items including "limit the flow of information" and "avoid opportunities for collaboration. This Threat-Rigidity scale, as part of a composite instrument, was tested with a similar population of teachers (Ramirez, 2015) and found to have an overall internal reliability score of .91.

These scales were paired with a range of normed Likert and open-ended items from Pew Research Center (Nadeem, 2023) and Ford et al. (2023) and additional open-ended questions investigating teachers' perception of how political pressures influence their experiences at school. It is important to note that, for this study, I treated political climate as an emic phenomenon in acknowledgment of my own bias as an instrument of research (Maxwell, 2013); the application of these open ended questions therefore allowed me to better understand

subjective experiences of teachers, including how they interpreted political pressures and the political climate manifesting in their unique contexts.

The survey concluded with a series of demographic questions intended to help better understand if any trends exist amongst subgroups of respondents. Since marginalized subgroups may be uniquely vulnerable to or targeted by the rhetoric being deployed (Chavez et al., 2019; Garcia-Rios et al., 2019; Pérez, 2015, Pérez Huber & Muñoz, 2021), certain groups of teachers may have less positional privilege in their contexts, and different schools have different governance structures, I felt it was important to investigate how demographic factors like these could have influenced subgroup experiences. Therefore, I collected the following demographic data: number of years teaching, grade levels and subject areas taught, tenure status, level of education, completion of teaching credential, ethno-racial identities, age, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

At the end of this survey, there was an opportunity for participants to opt in/out of the subsequent interview phase and, upon opt-in, to add their name, school zip code, email address, and phone number if they are willing to be considered for confidential interviews. The singular question had three options for participants. The first two options were: they could indicate an interest in interview participation and share their contact information, or they could decline interest in interview participation but indicate that they would like to be included in the opportunity raffle. For these two responses, a survey termination redirect moved participants to the Incentive Survey. The third option, which allowed them to decline interest in interview participation and decline to enter the incentive opportunity raffle, would simply end the survey process.

The Incentive Survey, the second survey, was used for the sole purpose of incentivizing

participation. On this page, survey participants and nonparticipant invitees entered for a chance to win one of three $100 Visa Gift Cards by simply including their contact email address. This opportunity was open to all who were invited to participate in the study, regardless of whether they chose to participate or not. The procedures for distribution were provided in the recruitment email in accordance with UCSD Human Research Protections Program IRB Standard Operating Policies and Procedures Section 3.17 (UCSD Human Research Protections Program, 2017): "Any individual who is asked to participate but declines, who consents to participate, or who fails to complete the study may choose to enter for a chance to win a $100 Visa Gift Card. A link to enter the contest is provided below, upon declining the survey consent form, or at the culmination of the survey, at which point participants will be asked to provide valid name, school site, and school email address for the sole purpose of being contacted if they win. The output from this questionnaire will be numbered in a chronologically increasing fashion, beginning numerically at 1, and a random number generator will be used to select the recipient, who will be contacted via school email within one month of the close of the survey in order to ascertain where to send their prize. Individuals are not guaranteed to win any prize. Chances of being selected in the opportunity drawing are approximately 1 in 100."

Data Analysis

Once data were collected, I began the data analysis process for both quantitative and qualitative items in Phase One. In order to test for response bias, I used wave analysis, testing returns on items multiple times in order to understand if average responses changed (Leslie, 1972, as cited in Creswell, 2012), which would indicate that response bias might exist. I also engaged in a respondent-nonrespondent check (Creswell, 2012) by contacting a few nonrespondents by phone from my extant network to understand how their responses aligned

with the averages.

Quantitative data analysis then began with a standard cleaning protocol. After importing my Excel file to the StataBE software, I redacted qualitative variables not being considered in the quantitative data analysis stage. My initial four questions were intended to build context and therefore I renamed these variables to clarify their intent (interest, discuss, follow, and talking about politics), re-coded the categorical responses to numeric scales, and applied labels.

Quantitative research questions 1 and 2 explored the relationships between my variables. For the first research question, "Is there a relationship between teachers' affective responses to the political climate and their perceptions of institutional conditions that support policy mediation (collaboration, decision-making, resource access)?," my independent variable was affective response to the political climate, measured via the continuous PANAS scale, and my dependent variable was perception of institutional conditions supporting policy mediation, measured via the continuous Revised SLEQ scale. For PANAS survey items, I renamed the variables using the affective term referenced in the question, cleaning and recoding Likert responses 1-5 and converting them to a numeric format. I computed row means for affect constructs PA (positive affect) and NA (negative affect). I likewise renamed Revised SLEQ variables, cleaning and re-coding Likert responses, converting them to numeric values, and applying labels. I reverse coded negatively worded items to ensure that my data reflected the intent of what participants were responding to, before computing row means for each of the Revised SLEQ subscales selected for this investigation: Collaboration, Resources, and decision-making (Johnson et al., 2007).

For the second question, "Is there a relationship between teachers' affective responses to the political climate and their perception of threat-rigidity in their school environment?," my

independent variable was affective response to the political climate, measured via the continuous PANAS scale, and my dependent variable was perception of threat-rigidity, measured via the continuous Threat-Rigidity scale. For the Threat-Rigidity items, I renamed site and district variables, re-coding Likert responses and converted them to numeric values before applying labels. I dropped item 9, "limit outside assistance" which I had inadvertently included as the sole item for the 'organizational characteristics' subscale in development of my survey, choosing instead to focus my analysis on valid and reliable constructs across "boundary permeability," "decision-making," and "information management," which were renamed to indicate subscale and organizational level (site or district). After grouping them into constructs, I computed the row means for each (Daly et al., 2011).

In cleaning the influence variables designed to capture perception about the influence that political rhetoric and language have on participants' jobs, I renamed the variables to reflect the elements of perceived influence (leaders, teachers, you, and freedom) before re-coding and cleaning Likert responses, again converting to numeric values, and applying labels.

Finally, for the last four quantitative items, focused on ascertaining whether pressure had been experienced across four specific domains (pressure to change, avoidance of materials, interactions with students, and freedom to make instructional, pedagogical and policy-related decisions), I renamed each variable and converted Yes/No responses to binary indicators, applying labels accordingly. All other variables were demographic in nature (years teaching, grade levels, subject area, tenure status, education level, credential status, ethnoracial identity, age, gender, and sexuality). Cleaning these included moves such as splitting multiple select responses and recoding categories, collapsing categories into fewer levels and creating a binary

variable based on ethnoracial identity splitting participants into People of Color (POC) and White.

I initially planned to add demographic covariates to account for potential differences in teachers' perceptions and experiences, specifically examining gender, ethnoracial status, and tenure status. However, given the small sample size and uneven subgroup distributions for the demographic segment of my survey, including multiple categorical controls with small subgroup sizes could have garnered unstable estimates and reduced statistical power (Tipton et al., 2017). Therefore, I opted to focus on the primary relationships of interest, examining demographic variables descriptively rather than as covariates.

Using StataBE as the analysis software, I then ran reliability checks and descriptive statistics for each question and for relevant subgroups, used Pearson's *r* correlation to test the strength and direction of the bivariate relationship, and completed OLS linear regressions to model and interpret the predictive relationship between the relevant variables.

I also had qualitative data in my survey. To analyze this data, I first used Qualtrics reports to export all qualitative findings. I reviewed the export holistically first, using iterative inductive coding via retroductive analysis (Emerson et al., 2011) with a goal of listening to what the data was saying. After hand coding, I moved into digital coding using Atlas.ti to track etic and emic codes (Saldana, 2021) across all qualitative responses. This data was later further analyzed in conjunction with Phase Two qualitative data.

Phase Two

Data Collection

In Phase Two, I moved into the sequential qualitative segment, using purposeful selection (Maxwell, 2013) by range of zip code to select 5-10 of the candidates who opt-in from Phase

One and collecting data via interviews, and then undergoing analysis. For initial interviews, zip code was selected as a proxy for socioeconomic status in order to ensure heterogeneity of the interview sample to the extent possible. This phase was focused on answering qualitative research question 3.

Qualitative interview data collection included a semi-structured interview (Maxwell, 2013) based on a pre-determined interview guide/protocol (Creswell, 2014; Lareau, 2021). This guide used open-ended questions addressing my study's key themes (Lareau, 2021). The qualitative questions in my interview were intentionally designed to tap into both the past via episodic memory (particular event or sequence) as well as single event memory (generalized account), which can allow for participants to protect themselves from challenging recountings (Maxwell, 2013). Multiple types of questions allowed for a greater depth of understanding in addition to the breadth provided by complementarity (Greene, 2007, as cited in Maxwell, 2013). Probing was used to encourage elaboration on initial responses and to delve more deeply into the discussed topics and some potential probes were included in the interview protocol. However, Lareau (2021) also notes the importance of using the participant's own words in probes and explains that the priority in fieldwork should be listening to interviewees rather than taking notes. Therefore, I worked to integrate the interviewees' thoughts into subsequent questions and used my interview guide frame instead as a space in which to capture initial impressions, which I later developed upon in field notes and analytic memos (Maxwell, 2013). The Interview Guide/Protocol appears in Appendix C.

All interviews were conducted via Zoom in order to maintain confidentiality, ease travel costs across the range of zip codes, and reach a range of participants. Each one was recorded with explicit permission of participants using the Zoom video recording and transcript recording

feature (Lareau, 2021). These recordings were used to create a direct transcription of responses (Creswell, 2014) and to capture the behaviors of participants for my own field notes and analytical memoing process (Lareau, 2021). Participants were given an opportunity to select their own pseudonym for themselves as well as to represent their context (Lareau, 2021), though all declined to select a pseudonym.

The opportunity to self-select pseudonyms is important as pseudonyms can operate as a reflection of self-identity and can be a practice of empowerment (Itzik & Walsh, 2023; Pretorious & Patel, 2024); however, in the absence of this decision on the part of my participants, rather than assuming ethnolinguistic background and thus treating ethnoracial identity as a monolith, I decided instead to select a specific letter from each person's given name, to review the Social Security Administration's list of most common names from the year in which each individual was born (Social Security Administration, n.d.), and to select the first name beginning with that letter to serve as their pseudonym. While this process is imperfect, I felt that it served to represent each of my participants as a representative of the United States general populace and to preserve the importance of each unique voice in the conversation without relying on ethnolinguistic or racial stereotypes, thereby avoiding further marginalization and stereotypes (Wang et al., 2026). I hope that being explicit about the intentionality of this decision allows other researchers to likewise wrestle with and determine their own paths forward for navigating the challenge of assigning pseudonyms for participants in a way that reduces marginalization and avoids reifying stereotypes.

As previously mentioned, I expanded my participant pool twice using additional approaches to purposeful sampling over the course of recruitment. First, I examined responses to the series of binary questions regarding experiences on campus from the survey. I selected

participants who displayed a range of perspectives, including those who did feel they experienced pressure as well as those who did not indicate this. I also expanded invitees to ensure that the range of gender identities was reflected. This decision was made in order to have the most data-rich responses and the most balanced data set.

Finally, I offered a $20 gift card as a token of appreciation to individuals selected for participation (Lareau, 2021). In the invitation email, I included a message which stated: "Participation is voluntary and confidential and all selected participants will be given a $20 VISA gift card as a thank you for their time." While I sent out 16 invitations to potential participants, 10 individuals agreed to participate in my interviews, of whom nine met study criteria.

Data Analysis

When I began analysis of my qualitative transcripts, I started by structuring my materials for coding, double spacing them and adding a wide right margin (Saldaña, 2021). I used a pre-code process of circling, highlighting, and memoing key elements and contrasting data (Layder, 1998, as cited in Saldaña, 2021), and engaged in both open coding and focused coding rounds (Lareau, 2021) via a retroductive analysis approach (Emerson et al., 2011) on an iPad using the GoodNotes app and an Apple Pencil. This allowed me to actively interact with the text while maintaining access to multiple iterations as needed.

While I entered this phase with etic a priori codes (Saldaña, 2021) related to concepts like teacher policy mediation conditions and affect, I found, as I engaged in iterative coding, that emergent findings were surfacing that I needed to capture via emic codes (Lareau, 2021; Saldaña, 2021). For example, in my analytic memos (Lareau, 2021; Maxwell, 2013; Saldaña, 2021), I noted that affective responses were both explicit and implicit. While some were clearly

named by the participant, others were inferred by me as a researcher based upon behaviors, reactions, and descriptions. I felt called to find a more structured way to track and ensure parity of coding across all participant interviews, reducing my confirmation bias.

This led to the development of a categorical coding matrix (Maxwell, 2013), in which I designed intentional code groups more aligned with Maxwell's organizational (e.g. activated/engaged vs. purposeful/agentic positive affect), substantive (e.g. external political pressure, self-censorship), and theoretical categories (e.g. collaboration avoidance/silencing, limited voice in decision-making). This codebook allowed me to track positive and negative (explicit and implicit) categories, mixed affect, emotional ambivalence, and affect management, as well as subcodes to categorize types of affect seen; an example of some of the codes used is shown below in Table 1.

Table 1

Sample of Qualitative Codes Used

Shorthand	Code	Definition
PA E	Positive Affect - Explicit	Clearly stated positive affective states expressed by participants
PA I	Positive Affect - Implied	Positive affective states inferred through tone, behavior, or description
NA E	Negative Affect - Explicit	Clearly stated negative affective states expressed by participants
NA I	Negative Affect - Implied	Negative affective states inferred through tone, behavior, or description
MIX	Mixed Affect	Positive and negative affect simultaneously presented by the interviewees
EA	Emotional Ambivalence	Interviewees display low affect responses
AM	Affect Management	Interviewees display or express strategies to regulate, suppress, or manage their emotional responses.

Leveraging overarching codes and analytic memos allowed me to monitor my own meaning-making about teachers' experiences, and peer checking segments of my coded transcripts helped me to operate with more confidence as I read through the extensive interview transcripts for my nine remaining participants. I engaged in 17 additional rounds of iterative data analysis using my analytic matrix to examine the findings through different lenses, including those from my dual theoretical framework, as well as to engage in capturing code count frequency where relevant to my research question, transforming qualitative responses into data points to share descriptively (Saldaña, 2021). I used the aforementioned code matrix and lumping technique to organize similar themes and subthemes, and engaged in post-coding to document iterations within code categories, such as words related to affective emotions. I additionally engaged in peer debriefing (Creswell, 2014) in order to both articulate which codes I was seeing across the data set and consider other ideas while "exploring aspects of the inquiry

that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). This process allowed me to both confirm my current direction and gain much-needed external insight to reduce bias.

Following the analytical debrief, I used interview transcripts to identify in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2021), leveraging participants' own words and phrases as codes, as well as to select vivid block quotes, a key step to both emphasize and add richness to the analytic data (Lareau, 2021). After selecting key quotes, I identified the most appropriate theming statements, or statements that I found to be explanatory or summative (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, as cited in Saldaña, 2021).

Phase Three

Thematic Synthesis & Interpretation

In Phase Three, I engaged in thematic synthesis and interpretation via concurrent mixed analysis. The literature notes how important theorizing can be, as it allows us to bring discrete concepts together and to find their interrelationships (Maxwell, 2013), and this therefore provided an important focus for me throughout this phase.

I began by examining the quantitative and qualitative findings and displaying statistical interpretations of the quantitative results alongside emergent qualitative statements. I winnowed the data set to remove irrelevant and unrelated information, focusing on key elements (Guest et al., 2012, as cited in Creswell, 2014) that corresponded to my research questions. Since, at this point, I was engaging in a procedural inquiry of how qualitative experiences and perspectives described by teachers helped to explain quantitative results from the survey, my examination of the data corpus in whole was key.

Therefore, after curating key findings across both data sets, I began to interrelate and

interpret areas of convergence and divergence and discrepant evidence (Creswell, 2014, Maxwell, 2013), both via an analog process using a cut-and-paste technique as well as digitally. This allowed me to engage with all of the key data at once as well as to select qualitative quotes yielding a rich contextualization of the themes that emerged. It also served to provide evidence for my interpretations while showcasing participant experiences in their own words. Upon winnowing these inclusions further, re-hand coding for conceptual connections and disparities, and selecting vivid quotes, I developed an interpretive synthesis to be reported in my findings.

Positionality

Considering the topic at hand, it is important to acknowledge my unique positionality as a former rhetoric and journalism teacher and working theatre critic. Working to impart the importance of ethics, truthtelling, and integrity in the production of news writing requires intentionality and vigilance. Community circles are one tool that can be used to ensure that students are both familiar with and comfortable with disseminating local, regional, national, and world news. In my high school journalism class, community news circles became our daily norm, and my editor-in-chief and managing editor led student discussions about newsworthy events, how students were perceiving them, and how they impacted our unique context in suburban Southern California. As we entered the early months of 2020, these circles began to include observations about a new threat: a virus that was sweeping not only the nation, but the world. Students reported as new hotspots popped up, infection rates soared, and violence towards members of the Asian American community materialized in major metropolitan areas, originating in fear and xenophobia. This was, they noted, exacerbated by commentary in the news about the “Kung fu” and “Chinese flu” due to its origination in Wuhan, China. As these stories continually unfolded in our news circles, students became increasingly agitated and

concerned, ultimately inviting our site administrators to a news conference to push for information about the schoolwide response. Standing in one such circle, I remember considering how the different facets of the conversation connected to other parts of my professional role and my identity.

I doubt that many of my students knew that, in addition to being their teacher and a professional writer, I am myself Asian American. After all, despite my phoenix-shaped eyes and high cheekbones, my coloring resembles that of my dad. I was born with blond hair and hazel eyes, and a smattering of freckles dances across not only my cheeks, but down my shoulders and arms. But as with many things, I am not all that I seem. A mixed woman of Taiwanese matrilineal heritage, my cultural identity is strong and nearly exclusively associated with my mother's side of the family. Some of my first memories include greetings at a red painted door in Ama's (grandmother's) native tongue. Family gatherings involved qipaos, a Buddhist altar laced with candles, tiny cups of whiskey, and mandarin oranges, and a room dressed floor to ceiling with treasures from our homeland. Once, growing up, I confusedly asked my Ama: "How did we eat before we could use chopsticks?" to which she answered, very matter-of-factly: "with a spoon." I was the eldest daughter of an eldest daughter many generations back, which came with it an intense set of expectations and responsibilities. Yet despite this strong ethnic affinity, there was always a shadow under the surface: my Ama's reminders to carry our Taiwanese identity close to the chest, as if it was something just for us at home.

Understanding this proclivity requires understanding Ama's own experiences. The eldest daughter in a Taiwanese household during the Imperial Japanese occupation, my Ama was raised to care for her siblings, feeding her newborn sister runny congee made with ground rice and water when milk or formula was unavailable. As a young woman, she worked in a family

member's tailor shop. It was there that my Ama would meet my Grandaddy when he came into the shop to have something repaired. They married just months later, and she would be the only one of her siblings to ever end up departing Taiwan. Upon arriving at her new family home in northeast Texas, Ama was told that her name (Hsu Kwei) sounded too foreign. Lacking relative social capital in her new space, she was renamed "Linda" by her new in-laws. For my Ama, assimilation was the only option; her daughters and their families would, in public, be as American as possible. We shared our heritage at home, but at home alone.

From a very young age — 3 or 4 years old — I knew that I looked different from my sister, my mother, and my Ama. Even my father, who had been blond in his youth, had darker features in adulthood. With racially ambiguous features, I felt like an outsider. I remember playing adoption games in my childhood bedroom, drafting birth certificates for imaginary babies. I imagine it was the easiest way for me to reconcile the differences between my looks and those of my family. Though I knew I belonged, I also knew that I looked different. I was Taiwanese, but I didn't feel Taiwanese "enough," but nor was I anything else. Of course, these perceptible differences in my looks often advantaged me in comparison to my family members. While my sister, with her classic South Asian coloring, and my brother, who would eventually grow a heavy beard and thick hair, were seen as "foreign," my positionality due to my light coloring spared me from most of the inappropriate or hurtful comments. Though I was still periodically exoticized due to my mixed heritage, my privilege as a person who was white passing and the comparative disadvantage of those I loved was formative in terms of my growing understanding of race and ethnicity.

As an adult, I am able to grapple with these experiences a bit more meaningfully. I understand that the way that we look and the places that we come from impact how we walk

through the world and the ways in which we are (or are not) accepted in given spaces. I consider the reasons and ways in which concealing our identities protected us, while also reflecting that I had the privilege to do so as a result of my coloring and my grandmother's insistence that we assimilate, where others do not. I consider the complexity of mixed race identity and the ways in which being "other" creates a feeling of not belonging anywhere. I consider how I've experienced the celebration of identity in one presidential cycle and then witnessed it weaponized in the next.. There are many, many layers here to be processed.

These thoughts, experiences, and memories have directly impacted my work in education as I've focused on creating spaces I wish my Ama, mother, and siblings could have had when growing up. From integrating restorative practices, to facilitating projects in which students have agency and autonomy, to creating safe spaces to address and interrogate a wide range of social justice topics, my classroom was a special place. When I moved to the district office as a curriculum and professional learning project manager, I began to see the ways in which external rhetoric influenced internal decision-making. My work with ethnic studies curriculum writing was acutely impacted by the political landscape and rhetorical statements by our school board and community members, as well as by the fears of leadership in response to both. For the past two years, I taught graduate classes for pre-service teachers and principals, affording me an incredible opportunity to engage in conversations about equity, access, and liberation. I've worked to actively combat injustice through my work in the greater community, using conference and instructional spaces to memorialize powerful practices that disrupt traditional power structures and open opportunities for underrepresented communities to be seen and heard. I've gotten to help others be bold in their identity where my grandmother felt she could not, and I am thankful for this opportunity to study and create transformative, liberatory spaces where all of

our young people feel celebrated and cherished. Now, as I step into a new role as an Assistant Principal, I feel a great deal of anticipation and excitement; soon, I will help learn and lead in transformative spaces alongside incredible faculty, staff, students, and community. There is nothing more exciting to me than that.

Yet as I apply both my experiences and my scholarship towards a focus on the ways that rhetoric — and specifically political rhetoric — elicits affective responses, I think back on my grandmother's experiences in response to racist rhetoric and racist-nativism both in Taiwan and in the United States. I think about my own feelings during the early days of COVID-19 and how it impacted my community and students. I think about how the current trend towards anti-immigrant rhetoric (among other topics) has been weaponized against my students and their families at my board meetings. And, to a certain extent, I remember to acknowledge that bit of fear and vulnerability that lurks in the back corner: the part that is ingrained as a result of generational trauma. I think about the risk associated with these lived experiences. I cannot blame those who have stories of their own for tucking them back inside, as they — as we — have been encouraged to. In the current climate, only those who "belong" are safe. What does this mean for the rest of us? And how do we reconcile this complicated past with the drive to put it behind us and try to move forward in home rather than dwelling in fear? I do not have any of the answers, but as a scholar practitioner, the exploration is important for constructing my own understanding and practice.

Ethical Considerations and the Role of the Researcher

In building this study, and given my past experiences, the idea of minimizing risk was at the forefront of my considerations and, as such, I included a number of safeguards in order to protect the identity of my participants. For Phase One, the only identifying information collected

in the QUAN/qual Survey was demographic in nature, with cross-tabulations being collected for demographic information (Penn State, n.d.). In vivo codes, themes, and quotes were de-identified post-collection and prior to publication (Penn State, n.d.), with pseudonyms used in place of identifiable names. Additionally, the initial data collection survey was deployed via Qualtrics using the "anonymous link" option, a feature which creates a single, reusable link that does not track individual participants (Qualtrics, n.d.). Furthermore, in order to ensure the security of participant responses, all research records were stored securely on my hard-drive on a password-protected device, using Qualtrics and Atlas.ti's secure and encrypted data storage systems with a secure private secondary password, and via Apple iCloud using biometric identification and a secure private tertiary password. All handwritten notes remained in my exclusive private possession. Per IRB requirements, project records include Kuali IRB submissions, consent forms, transcripts, data collection instruments, and any other materials associated with this project (University of California San Diego, n.d.); of these project records, all identifiable records will be destroyed after the study closes (University of California San Diego, n.d.). While it is impossible to completely eliminate risk, especially when associated with a politically charged topic, these protections, communicated via consent form and over Zoom, helped me to assure my participants that precautions were taken to minimize it.

In the meantime, the potential risk of extreme negative affective reactions for my participants was counteracted through the provision of supports to assist with respondents who might feel emotionally unsettled. Participants were informed that they were welcome to leave the study at any time and I offered resources for them to access if they required additional support, which appear in the consent form in Appendix F.

Additionally, it is also important to note that, throughout this process, I have remained cognizant of my responsibility towards countering the bias that a researcher inevitably brings into each space as an instrument of qualitative research (Maxwell, 2013), and that I bring in specifically due to my positionality as a local area teacher, university faculty member, doctoral scholar, emerging school administrator, and parent to two school aged children. While it is key that I bring my own lens as a practitioner to the work in order to employ critical subjectivity (Reason, 1988, as cited in Maxwell, 2013), given my current research focus, I knew it was important for me to be cognizant about how my lens might carry its own bias. For example, it could be deficit leaning to look at how negative conditions impact outcomes. I felt it was important for me to be aware of this predisposition both in the data collection process as well as when analyzing my findings on the back end. Throughout my study, I continually reflected on my own biases and observations via analytic memos and asides (Lareau, 2021; Maxwell, 2013; Peshkin, 1988), and considered the ways in which my own experiences and beliefs showed up in my assumptions and processing of themes and ideas, maintaining a vigilance toward retaining participants' own voices in the qualitative outcomes, while leveraging the safeguards embedded throughout my research design.

Threats to Validity and Limitations

While bias and reactivity as validity threats are always possible as a result of positionality (Maxwell, 2013), there were other considerations at play as well that I took into account. Qualitative research studies, including qualitative strands on mixed methods studies, are designed to study specific issues within focused localities and therefore have limited inferential power and external generalizability (Creswell, 2021), or the extension of conclusions to other individuals in the setting or in other settings. Likewise, since there was not a specific context that

I was using for this study and bounding in Phase One was loose and open to teachers across San Diego County, even though I was attempting for heterogeneity of response via purposeful selection by zip code, there was still less of an ability to "adequately understand the variation in the phenomena of interest in the setting or group of people studied," or to ensure internal validity (Maxwell, 2013, p. 137). Survey rates were also low, garnering only 52 valid responses, though a small sample size was anticipated due to the method of recruitment, topic of study, and access, interest, and awareness of the study, though survey respondents' demographic details approximated the demographic details of the overall population of White, 44 year old females (EdData, n.d.). Additionally, online surveys tend to have lower response rates than mail surveys by 11% (Wu & Fils-Aime, 2022). I also knew that survey respondents via snowball sampling could represent a bias towards a specific perspective or point of view, as opposed to being representative of the beliefs of the overall population. I worked to counter this, and an imbalance in gender participation in my interviews, by adding additional participants near the end of my data collection phase to help generate a more balanced sample and, in doing so, discovered that I was near saturation as I was hearing similar themes to what I had previously heard.

It is also important to note that my survey, as a composite instrument, was constructed using scales intended for other, related latent variables. As such, though their use in this context was valid in the context of the scholarly literature, I needed to consider carefully how representative each was of what I was asking it to measure. Reliability testing and careful consideration and pilot testing regarding these constructs helped to increase my sense of confidence in this arena.

Finally, applying the lens of constructivism means that I was looking at the ways that participants were constructing their own perceptions and beliefs in real time and in response to

previous events and constructs. Since it was not possible for me to take on their personas and to have experienced their lives in real time nor to to comprehensively capture all of the elements of their belief structure, descriptive validity and interpretive validity, or factual accuracy in my reporting and interpretation remained a threat to my findings (Maxwell, 2013).

However, these validity threats and lack of generalizability did not make this inquiry less important or timely. Moves were made across all three phases to create guardrails intended to strengthen the study against threats to validity, including the integration of methods such as rich data with verbatim transcripts, respondent validation in the form of in-process member checking, and triangulation of data through the use of interviews and survey responses (Maxwell, 2013). I specifically collected rich data with thick descriptions focused on social interactions and dialogue (Lareau, 2021) alongside transcripts and field notes to add contextualization and depth to the study (Lareau, 2021). Furthermore, my interview protocol and guide (Lareau, 2021) and semi-structured interview questions (Maxwell, 2013) served as an important validity check as they allowed me to remove suasive elements from my intended questions in advance of the interviews, optimizing their validity. I used in-process respondent validation (Maxwell, 2013) and post-interview member checking (Creswell, 2014) with my participants to ensure that my understanding of their perspectives was accurate, as well as peer-debriefing to explore other perspectives during the analysis process. Finally, I triangulated all data sources, allowing me to use my data in each strand to check its veracity against other methods of collecting the same information, facilitating a way for me to better understand the concepts (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2013).

Yet even if, regardless of these guardrails, the responses I received are in fact extreme cases and not representative of the entire population, even a non-representative study can provide

valuable insights and learning opportunities (Maxwell, 2013) as the outcomes reflect real teachers' feelings and therefore bring value to a field that is as yet understudied. Furthermore, I believe that the mixing of methodological approaches to meet a variety of audience desires and needs — that is, the combination of quantitative statistical elements and qualitative narratives — helped assist in creating a sense of face generalization, or the idea that it is plausible that the results can be applied to a more general setting (Maxwell, 2013).

Chapter Summary

Ultimately, this study explored potential relationships between affective responses to political rhetoric, institutional conditions associated with teacher policy mediation, and threat-rigidity while learning more about teachers' experiences in the current political climate in their own words. It explored the following research questions:

1. RQ1: Is there a relationship between teachers' affective responses to the political climate and their perceptions of institutional conditions that support policy mediation (collaboration, decision-making, resource access)?
2. RQ 2: Is there a relationship between teachers' affective responses to the political climate and their perception of threat-rigidity in their school environment?
3. RQ3: How do teachers describe the influence of the current political climate on collaboration, decision-making, and school resource support at their school sites?

In order to tackle these questions, as well as to make sense as to how qualitative experiences and perspectives described by teachers help to explain quantitative results, the study leveraged a dual theoretical framework of threat-rigidity theory and constructivism and employed concurrent embedded multi-phase mixed methods design. This study included a primarily quantitative survey with embedded qualitative elements followed by qualitative

interviews and thematic synthesis. Furthermore, a broad range of quantitative and qualitative analytic techniques were employed to examine and interpret the dataset in full.

This survey was open to all public high school teachers in San Diego County in order to ensure the veracity of the questions used, but in its open bounding, lost a bit of contextuality. That said, creating an opportunity to specifically investigate the experiences of teachers within this more narrow subgroup (public high schools) allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the outcomes. Furthermore, in a country and climate marked by unprecedented ideological and partisan polarization and catalyzed by intensifying political rhetoric, understanding how the variables intersected helped me to understand how changing political climates might influence teacher experiences.

Chapter Four: Findings

Constructivism tells us that our lived experiences and beliefs — both socially and individually constructed — directly influence the meaning and interpretation that we tie to our contexts. In the current political climate, this concept raises questions about whether and how political polarization might likewise shift the experiences that Americans have as a whole. From an educational leadership perspective, it also raises the question of how teachers' experiences and beliefs might be affected. As teachers' beliefs play a foundational role in the development and continuation of successful school landscapes (Leithwood, 2006), understanding how and if this phenomenon is shifting their experiences is imperative.

In an effort to better understand the perceived influences of the polarized political climate on teachers working in today's schools, this study aimed to explore any potential relationships between teachers' affective responses to the political climate and their perceptions of institutional climate conditions and conditions of threat-rigidity, as well as to inquire about how they believe the current political climate is impacting their school experiences. The following questions guided this research:

1. Is there a relationship between teachers' affective responses to the political climate and their perceptions of institutional conditions that support policy mediation (collaboration, decision-making, resource access)?
2. Is there a relationship between teachers' affective responses to the political climate and their perception of threat-rigidity in their school environment?
3. How do teachers describe the influence of the current political climate on collaboration, decision-making, and school resource support at their school sites?

The theoretical frameworks anchoring the design of this mixed methods study were threat-rigidity theory (Staw et al., 1981) and constructivism (Kanuka & Anderson, 1999). These dual frameworks offered a unique framing for not only how teachers interpret and construct meaning surrounding threat-rigid conditions and political rhetoric, but also how conditions and political rhetoric are perceived as influencing their experiences at school, thus serving as an interpretive lens through which we can determine how external factors influence school environments.

Using a multiphase concurrent embedded mixed methods design (Maxwell, 2013), this study aimed to collect quantitative and qualitative data from public high school teachers in San Diego county about their affective experiences and perception of the intersections between the political climate and rhetoric and their school environments. Using a QUAN/qual survey and qualitative interviews, it probed their thinking regarding a range of variables from both statistical and inductive perspectives. And, as expected with a constructivist lens, findings indicate that teachers' experiences in schools in today's political climate are situated in how they interpret events, interactions, and other perspectives, and construct knowledge and understanding around them.

Data from this study suggests a few key findings, among them: 1. affective responses to political climate, and especially negative affect responses, are associated with teachers' perceptions of reduced collaboration; 2. that negative affect to political rhetoric relates to perceptions of organizational constriction; and 3. individuals with different personal characteristics may experience these circumstances differently from one another.

Additionally, three overarching themes emerged from the analysis of participants' narratives. In keeping with the methodological commitment to privileging participant voice, each

theme was named using in vivo codes drawn directly from participants' own words, thereby preserving the authenticity and meaning participants attributed to their experiences.

- **"I cry on the way home sometimes": The effects of affect.** Teachers described how their positive and negative affective responses shifted both their experiences in their workplaces and their behaviors in response to those experiences. Furthermore, these experiences were often tied to either how personal identities felt targeted or to how they perceived that students were being targeted and internalized it.
- **"Trying to survive without scrutiny": Threat-rigidity in action.** Teachers identified that their school and district leadership engaged in compliance pressure, centralization of control, boundary tightening, and risk-averse behaviors in public school contexts.
- **"I felt like leadership had our backs": Leadership as an insulating factor.** While most teachers interviewed noted some degree of explicit or implicit negative affective responses, administrator and institutional sensemaking supports were identified as insulating factors that helped them navigate the current landscape with a sense of agency, purpose, and positivity.

These overarching themes, paired with the quantitative data, raise a timely warning that teachers and schools are being acutely impacted by the current political status quo. However, findings also suggest that there are key moves that educational leaders can employ in order to ensure that their teachers feel equipped to navigate the challenges and stay the course in supporting students and families through politically polarized times, such as facilitating

collaborative sensemaking opportunities both formally and informally, as well as directly intervening on their behalf when warranted.

This chapter first presents the quantitative survey elements and findings. I then explore the qualitative findings through the lens of the three overarching themes before presenting a brief summary of all findings. Chapter Five synthesizes insights across both data sets, presenting implications for the field of education and beyond.

Quantitative Findings

Descriptive Statistics

A total of 53 individuals participated in the QUAN/qual survey for this study and, as a condition for beginning the survey, participants self-certified that they were teachers in San Diego County working in a public high school context. One participant later disclosed during an interview that they worked for a religiously affiliated school, which does not meet the public school criteria. The participant was therefore redacted from the overall data set for both the survey and interview segments, leaving 52 survey respondents meeting the criteria as outlined in Chapter Three. Of the remaining 52 participants who submitted responses via the survey, only 37 participants completed the survey through the end of the demographic questions.

The literature on survey non-completion suggests that a variety of factors can influence these behaviors, including survey attributes and participant characteristics (Carnes et al., 2025). These characteristics are difficult to study, but limited findings suggest that younger age and lower socioeconomic status may be more likely to have missing data (Carnes et al., 2025), and statistical analysis has also shown that those who complete surveys in full (and their counterparts who do not) carry different political attitudes and behavior (Steinbrecher et al., 2015). Furthermore, nonresponse behavior has been studied across demographic subgroups (Johnson et

al., 2010), interestingly finding that survey nonresponse may be greater among persons living in areas with more in-groups and out-groups where there is a perception that some groups might be treated differently. A recent Pew report noted that the majority of responding United States adults believe that many ethnoracial groups continue to face discrimination at high levels, specifically identifying immigrants, transgender, Muslims, Jews, Black people, Hispanic people, Asian people, and individuals who are gay or lesbian as facing bias (Nadeem, 2025).

When paired with literature suggesting that the political climate and rhetoric may be experienced differently and result in differing behaviors by people within specific identity groups (Garcia-Rios et al., 2019; Pérez, 2015, Pérez Huber & Muñoz, 2021), I was not able to rule out the possibility that participants' demographic data might therefore either be experienced as a greater risk while responding or alternatively, modify their respondent behavior. As such, and given that I was conducting a non-probability survey (Lehdonvirta et al., 2021) which, while non-generalizable, is nevertheless an important exploratory study, I decided to keep all remaining responses in full as received for my quantitative and qualitative data analysis. Participants for this study who completed demographic data and descriptive statistics for survey variables are shown in Table 2. 62% of the sample identified as female, with 38% identifying as male and 3% identifying as Male/Gender Non-Conforming. 84% of survey respondents identified as Straight or heterosexual, 3% as Gay, 8% as Lesbian, 3% as Bisexual, and 3% as Other. When asked about their tenure status, 76% of respondents reported that they are tenured, 14% of respondents reported that they are temporary, 3% of respondents are probationary, and 8% of respondents were none of the above. Participants who identified as White made up 76% of the total sample. 8% of respondents identified as Hispanic/Latino/Latina. 3% of the total sample identified as each of the following ethnoracial groups: Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Afro-

Caribbean, and Middle Eastern/North African. Additionally, participants who identified with more than one ethnoracial group comprised 11% (n=4) of the sample. Finally, 70% of respondents have a graduate degree, while 30% do not. The mean age was 43.13 years (SD=10.42) and the mean years teaching was 15 years (SD=8.08).

Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

On average, participants reported higher levels of negative affect (M = 3.19, SD = 0.91) than positive affect (M = 2.77, SD = 0.74). Perceptions of school climate varied across subscales, with higher reported collaboration (M = 3.77, SD = 0.92) than decisions (M = 2.93, SD = 0.84) and resources (M = 3.07, SD = 0.99). Perceptions of threat-rigidity likewise varied, though site boundary permeability (M = 2.32, SD = 0.97), site decision-making (M = 2.61, SD = 0.79), and site information management (M = 2.45, SD = 0.88) were all reported at lower levels than their district counterparts, district boundary permeability (M = 3.13, SD = 0.85), district decision-making (M = 3.66, SD = 0.80), and district information management (M = 3.34, SD = 0.84), indicating that responding teachers perceive that districts behave in a more threat-rigid manner than schools.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Sample and Study Variables

Variable	*M / %*	*SD*	*Min*	*Max*
Gender (*n* = 37)				
Female	0.62			
Male	0.38			
Male/Gender Non-Conforming	0.03			
Sexuality (*n* = 37)				
Straight or Heterosexual	0.84			
Lesbian	0.08			
Gay	0.03			
Bisexual	0.03			
Other	0.03			
Tenure Status (*n* = 37)				
Tenured	0.76			
Temporary	0.14			
Probationary	0.03			
My job does not qualify for tenure	0.03			
Other	0.05			
Ethnoracial Identity (*n* = 37)				
White	0.76			
Hispanic/Latino/Latina	0.08			
Afro-Caribbean	0.03			
American Indian/Native Alaskan	0.03			
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.03			
Middle Eastern/Northern African	0.03			
College Education (*n* = 37)				
Graduate Degree	0.70		0	1
Bachelor's Degree	0.30		0	1
Age (*n* = 37)	43.13	10.42	29	62
Years Teaching (*n* = 37)	15.00	8.08	3	36
Negative Affect (*n* = 44)	3.19	0.91	1.00	4.90
Positive Affect (*n* = 44)	2.77	0.74	1.30	4.90
SC Collaboration (*n* = 42)	3.77	0.92	1.33	5.00
SC Decisions (*n* = 42)	2.93	0.84	1.33	4.67
SC Resources (*n* = 42)	3.07	0.99	1.00	4.75
TR Site Boundary Perm. (*n* = 44)	2.32	0.97	1.00	4.67
TR Site Decisions (*n* = 44)	2.61	0.79	1.00	4.50
TR Site Info. Mgmt. (*n* = 44)	2.45	0.88	1.00	4.25
TR Dist. Boundary Perm. (*n* = 43)	3.13	0.85	1.00	5.00
TR Dist. Decisions (*n* = 43)	3.66	0.80	1.75	5.00
TR Dist. Info. Mgmt. (*n* = 43)	3.34	0.84	1.00	5.00

Note: n is shown in parentheses next to each variable. Percentages are reported as proportions. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding and small subgroup sizes.

Descriptive Statistics by Subgroups

Additional descriptive statistics were also computed to examine variation in negative and positive affect across key demographic variables related to my constructivist framing, which indicates that experiences matter in how people make sense of their environments. From an equity and social justice standpoint, I wanted to understand whether certain groups might have differing experiences and how those personhood contexts might shape the patterns I was seeing. Based on literature indicating that People of Color (POC) and queer individuals often experience marginalization in society (Braveman et al., 2022; Hoy-Ellis, 2023), I selected these variables for examination. Furthermore, my anecdotal experiences as a teacher educator and district professional learning leader have indicated that early, mid and late career teachers experience their workplace in different ways (Day, 2012). Therefore, I wanted to also examine whether tenure status and years teaching might also reflect any trends. In order to explore these ideas, I calculated means and standard deviations in order to identify patterns across these four identity factors: ethnoracial identity, sexuality, tenure status, and years teaching. These were investigated for affective experiences (see Table 3), as well as for perceptions of site threat-rigidity conditions (see Table 4) and district threat-rigidity conditions (see Table 5). In order to explore variables representing very small subgroups, I used binned versions of each variable: for ethnoracial identity, responses were sorted into White and Person of Color; for sexuality, responses were sorted into straight/heterosexual and queer; for tenure status, responses were sorted into tenured and non-tenured; and for years teaching, responses were sorted into 0-3 years, 4-7 years, 8-15 years, 16-23 years, 24-30 years, and 31+ years to align with literature on teacher professional life phases (Day, 2012).

Participants of Color. Although there is limited inferential power with demographic subgroups of this size, descriptive patterns emerged for People of Color, who, on average, reported higher levels of negative affect ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 0.47$) and positive affect ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 0.61$) than their White counterparts. Additionally, they reported higher levels of site threat-rigid boundary permeability ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 0.89$), site decisions ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.01$), site information management ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.02$), district threat-rigid boundary permeability ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.72$), district decisions ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.95$), and district information management ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.78$) than White participants. Looking at this data in whole across the board, POC participants in this study ($n = 7$) reported both more emotional responses and more threat-rigid responses both at the site and district levels than White-identifying respondents ($n = 30$).

Queer Participants. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual participants were grouped into a combined subgroup, which was termed queer. In this study, queer participants ($n = 5$) reported higher levels of negative affect ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.42$) and lower levels of positive affect ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 0.51$) when compared with straight/heterosexual participants. They also reported higher levels of site threat-rigid boundary permeability ($M = 2.27$, $SD = 1.44$), site decisions ($M = 2.60$, $SD = 0.58$), and site information management ($M = 2.60$, $SD = 0.52$). However, from a district perspective, participants identifying as queer reported lower levels of district threat-rigid boundary permeability ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 0.64$), district decisions ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 0.45$), and district information management ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 0.65$).

Untenured Participants. Another category that I was interested in reviewing was teachers who were not tenured ($n = 8$). I found that they reported slightly higher levels of negative affect ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 0.76$) and lower levels of positive affect than tenured teachers. Untenured teachers reported lower levels of district threat-rigid boundary permeability ($M =$

2.79, *SD* = 0.62), district decisions (*M* = 2.94, *SD* = 0.48), district information management (*M* = 2.97, *SD* = 0.45), site decisions (*M* = 2.53, *SD* = 0.73), and site information management (*M* = 2.38, *SD* = 0.69) than their tenured counterparts, but reported higher levels of site threat-rigid boundary permeability (*M* = 2.42, *SD* = 1.15) than tenured teachers.

Participant Experience Bands. Finally, levels of negative and positive affect were examined across bands of 0-3 years (*n* = 2*)*, 4-7 years (*n* = 4), 8-15 years (*n* = 16), 16-23 years (*n* = 9), 24-30 years (*n* = 5), and 31+ years (*n* = 8). Of particular notice are the following observations:

- Teachers in the 0-3 year grade band reported the lowest levels in the following categories: negative affect (*M* = 2.55, *SD* =1.06); positive affect (*M* = 2.20, *SD* =0.71); site threat-rigid boundary permeability (*M* = 1.67, *SD* = 0.47), site threat-rigid decisions (*M* = 2.00, *SD* =0.71); site threat-rigid information management (*M* = 2.00, *SD* = 0.71); district threat-rigid boundary permeability (*M* = 2.33, *SD* = 0.47); district threat-rigid decisions (*M* = 2.75, *SD* =0.35); and district threat-rigid information management (*M* = 2.63, *SD* = 0.18).
- Teachers in the 4-7 year grade band reported the highest levels in the following variables: negative affect (*M* = 3.70, *SD* = 0.98); site threat-rigid boundary permeability (*M* = 2.83, *SD* = 0.58); site threat-rigid information management (M = 2.94, SD =0.97); and district threat-rigid boundary permeability (*M* = 3.50, *SD* = 1.14).
- Teachers in the 8-15 year grade band, also the largest subgroup at 16 members, reported the highest levels of positive affect (*M* = 3.02, *SD* = 0.53)

- Teachers in the 31+ year grade band reported the highest levels of threat-rigid site boundary permeability ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.03$); threat-rigid district boundary permeability ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.72$); and district threat-rigid information management ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 0.80$).

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Affect and Demographic Identity Variables

	Negative Affect		*Positive Affect*	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Ethnoracial Identity				
White (30)	3.06	0.92	2.79	0.62
Person of Color (7)	3.97	0.47	2.96	0.61
Sexuality				
Straight/Heterosexual (31)	3.16	0.98	2.85	0.63
Queer (5)	3.64	0.42	2.82	0.51
Tenure Status				
Tenured (28)	3.27	0.95	2.86	0.59
Non-Tenured (8)	3.29	0.76	2.65	0.74
Years Teaching				
0-3 years (2)	2.55	1.06	2.20	0.71
4-7 years (4)	3.70	0.98	2.70	0.74
8-15 years (16)	3.24	0.88	3.02	0.53
16-23 years (9)	3.38	1.04	2.99	0.59
24-30 years (5)	3.02	0.91	2.32	0.55
31+ years (8)	2.88	0.82	2.50	1.18
Total	3.23	0.92	2.82	0.61

Note: n is shown in parentheses next to each identity marker

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for Site Threat-Rigidity and Demographic Identity Variables

	TR Site Bound.		*TR Site Decisions*		*TR Site Info. Mgmt.*	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Ethnoracial Identity						
White (30)	2.02	0.81	2.40	0.62	2.18	0.69
Person of Color (7)	3.29	0.89	3.07	1.007	3.21	1.02
Total	2.26	0.89	3.07	1.01	3.21	1.02
Sexuality						
Straight/Heterosexual (31)	2.23	0.88	2.47	0.73	2.30	0.89
Queer (5)	2.27	1.44	2.60	0.58	2.60	0.52
Total	2.23	0.95	2.49	0.71	2.34	0.85
Tenure Status						
Tenured (28)	2.26	0.90	2.54	0.79	2.40	0.91
Non-Tenured (8)	2.42	1.15	2.53	0.73	2.38	0.69
Total	2.30	0.94	2.54	0.75	2.40	0.85
Years Teaching						
0-3 years (2)	1.67	0.47	2.00	0.71	2.00	0.71
4-7 years (4)	2.83	0.58	2.75	0.54	2.94	0.97
8-15 years (16)	2.31	1.00	2.64	0.79	2.34	0.88
16-23 years (9)	2.11	1.07	2.64	0.65	2.39	0.82
24-30 years (5)	2.27	1.09	2.20	0.87	2.30	0.97
31+ years (8)	2.50	1.05	2.88	1.03	2.69	1.02
Total	2.32	0.97	2.61	0.79	2.45	0.88

Note: n is shown in parentheses next to each identity marker

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics for District Threat-Rigidity and Demographic Identity Variables

	TR Dist. Bound.		*TR Dist. Decisions*		*TR Dist. Info. Mgmt.*	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Ethnoracial Identity						
White (30)	2.89	0.81	3.10	0.67	3.04	0.71
Person of Color (7)	3.81	0.72	4.11	0.95	4.11	0.78
Total	3.06	0.86	3.29	0.82	3.24	0.83
Sexuality						
Straight/Heterosexual (31)	3.04	0.89	3.25	0.82	3.19	0.84
Queer (5)	2.93	0.64	3.20	0.45	3.30	0.65
Total	3.03	0.85	3.24	0.78	3.21	0.81
Tenure Status						
Tenured (28)	3.12	0.83	3.45	0.83	3.40	0.79
Non-Tenured (8)	2.79	0.62	2.94	0.48	2.97	0.45
Total	3.12	0.80	3.33	0.79	3.31	0.75
Years Teaching						
0-3 years (2)	2.33	0.47	2.75	0.35	2.63	0.18
4-7 years (4)	3.50	1.14	3.38	1.16	3.44	1.05
8-15 years (16)	3.06	0.79	3.53	0.68	3.47	0.68
16-23 years (9)	2.93	0.89	2.89	0.70	2.86	0.95
24-30 years (5)	3.40	0.98	3.60	1.08	3.45	0.91
31+ years (8)	3.38	0.76	3.61	0.72	3.75	0.80
Total	3.13	0.85	3.37	0.80	3.34	0.84

Note: n is shown in parentheses next to each identity marker

As previously mentioned, these findings must be interpreted cautiously as the subgroups being examined are very small. That said, observing differences across these demographics nevertheless raises some interesting data, including opportunities for future research. For example, looking at demographic subgroups, POC participants reported higher perceived threat-rigid conditions across all three subscales. This could suggest that POC teachers may perceive more restrictive environments than White educators. At the district level, non-tenured teachers consistently reported lower rigidity across all subscales than their tenured counterparts, though trends were less clear for the site level, varying by construct. This may suggest a range of possibilities, such as that non-tenured teachers have less exposure to district level systems or that

tenured teachers feel more comfortable critiquing district systems. Additionally, when examining length of experience and perception of threat-rigidity, newer teachers in the 0-3 year experience bands consistently reported the lowest threat-rigidity scores, while teachers in the 4-7 year and 31+ year bands reported higher rigidity. This may reflect increasing organizational awareness or the way that their positionality shifts over time in the district. Across all teaching experience subgroups, average levels of negative affect exceeded average levels of positive affect.

Finally, it is notable that threat-rigid decision-making and information management scores averaged higher than boundary permeability scores at both the site and district levels across all subgroup total lines. This may suggest that participants experience threat-rigid communication processes and decision-making among their most pressing concerns in the current climate. However, again, since all subgroups listed and the overall sample are small, these interpretations only indicate possibilities for future study.

Variables

Dependent Variable: SLEQ Scale. To measure perception of institutional conditions that support policy mediation, I used the Revised School-Level Environment Questionnaire, or Revised SLEQ (Johnson et al., 2007). Participants were asked to rate their school environment across three subscales: Collaboration, decision-making, and School Resources. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with 13 items like "I have regular opportunities to work with other teachers" and "I seldom discuss the needs of individual students with other teachers." A high score on each of the three subscales indicates a stronger perception of the conditions existing at their specific context. I tested internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha for the Revised SLEQ scales to determine whether the multi-item scales demonstrated acceptable reliability. Results indicated strong reliability for Collaboration (α=0.89) and acceptable results

for decision-making (α=0.75). However, because Resources showed low internal consistency (α=0.41), this subscale was excluded from the regression analysis.

Dependent Variable: Threat-Rigidity Scale. To measure teachers' perception of threat-rigidity in their school environment, I used the Threat-Rigidity Scale (Daly et al., 2011). This instrument includes 12 items across four subscales: boundary permeability, decision-making, information management, and organizational characteristics, and asks participants to rate their perceptions of how often (site/district) administration acts in a specific way, with sample items including "limit the flow of information" and "avoid opportunities for collaboration. The scale ranges from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree) with a higher score indicating a stronger perception of threat-rigidity. I narrowed my use to three subscales: boundary permeability, or "the extent to which the school/district is open to and seeks out internal and external supports;" decision-making, or "the extent to which the school/district responds to situations in a considered and creative manner;" and information management, or "the extent to which the school/district facilitates the type, flow, and access to information" (Ramirez, 2015, p. 177) as these most closely aligned with my focus on collaboration, decision-making, and resource allocation.

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha separately across both site and district subscales. Site results indicated acceptable to strong reliability for decision-making (α=0.74), Information Management (α=0.89), and Boundary Permeability (α=0.86). District results likewise indicated acceptable to strong reliability for decision-making (α=0.87), Information Management (α=0.86), and Boundary Permeability (α=0.78). These results support the use of these three threat-rigidity subscales in subsequent analysis.

Independent Variable: PANAS Scale. Finally, to explore the relationships between both of these scales and teachers' positive and negative affect toward political rhetoric, I used the

Positive and Negative Affect Scale, or PANAS (Watson et al., 1988). This validated instrument includes two 10-item scales which measure positive and negative affect, with participants self-reporting their perceived mood on a 5-point Likert-like scale with response items ranging from "1-Not at all" to "5-Very much." Positive Affect is examined via items 1, 3, 5, 9, 10, 12, 14, 17, and 19, whereas Negative Affect is examined via items 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 13, 15, 18, and 20, with sample items that include "interested" and "irritable." A higher score indicates higher association with each positive or negative affect term in conjunction with political rhetoric (as a self-defined emic phenomenon). Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha separately for the negative and positive affect subscales, which indicated strong reliability for Negative Affect (α=0.90) and Positive Affect (α=0.85), thus supporting their inclusion in subsequent analyses.

Correlational Analyses

In answering my first research question, I focused on the relationship between teachers' affective responses to the political climate (independent variable, using PANAS valence affect variables PA and NA) and teachers' perceptions of institutional conditions supporting policy mediation (dependent variable, using Revised SLEQ subscales Collaborations, Decisions, and Resources).

These relationships were investigated using Pearson's r correlations (see Table 6). Results show a moderate negative correlation between negative affect and teachers' perception of collaboration (r = -0.459, $p < .05$). This result indicates that as negative affect reported increases, teachers' perception of a sense of collaboration on their campus decreases and vice versa. There were no significant relationships between negative affect and decision-making or resources, and little to no relationship was found with positive affect. As expected, correlations

were present between the revised SLEQ subscales, reflecting the interconnectedness of the overall construct.

Table 6

Pearson's r Correlation Between Affect and School Climate (SC) Variables of Interest

	Negative Affect	Positive Affect	SC Collaboration	SC Decision-making	SC Resources
Negative Affect	1.000				
Positive Affect	0.227	1.000			
SC Collaboration	-0.459*	-0.248	1.000		
SC Decision-making	0.008	0.002	0.463*	1.000	
SC Resources	-.0181	-0.145	0.680*	0.323*	1.000

$^{***}p<.001$, $^{**}p<.01$, $^{*}p<.05$

I then moved to the second research question, examining potential relationships between teachers' affective responses to the political climate (independent variable, measured via PANAS valence affect variables PA and NA) and their perceptions of threat-rigidity in their site environment (dependent variable, measured via Threat-Rigidity Scale subscales boundary permeability, decision-making, and information management) using Pearson's r correlations (see Table 7). Results indicate a low positive correlation between negative affect and site boundary permeability ($r = 0.397$, $p < .05$), site decision-making ($r = 0.325$, $p < .05$), and site information management ($r = 0.464$, $p < .05$). These results indicate that as negative affect reported increases, threat-rigid site boundary permeability, decision-making, and information management conditions increase and vice versa. Additionally, I found a low positive correlation between positive affect and site boundary permeability ($r = 0.361$, $p < .05$), site decision-making ($r = 0.459$, $p < .05$), and site information management ($r = 0.352$, $p < .05$), likewise indicating that as positive affect reported increases, threat-rigid site boundary, decision-making, and information management conditions increase and vice versa. Threat-rigidity subscales were found to be significantly correlated with one another, as expected.

Table 7

Pearson's r Correlation Between Affect and Threat-Rigidity at the Site Level

	Negative Affect	Positive Affect	Boundary Perm.	Decision-making	Information Manag.
Negative Affect	1.000				
Positive Affect	0.227	1.000			
Boundary Permeability	0.397*	0.361*	1.000		
Decision-making	0.325*	0.459*	0.751*	1.000	
Information Management	0.464*	0.352*	0.748*	0.855*	1.000

$^{***}p<.001$, $^{**}p<.01$, $^{*}p<.05$

These relationships were also explored for district level data. Findings, shown in Table 8, indicate a low positive correlation between negative affect and district boundary permeability ($r = 0.458$, $p < .05$), district decision-making ($r = 0.345$, $p < .05$), and district information management ($r = 0.476$, $p < .05$). These results indicate that as negative affect reported increases, threat-rigid district boundary, decision-making, and information management conditions increase and vice versa. These results notably indicate higher correlations than the site threat-rigidity results. There were no significant relationships between positive affect and any of the district threat-rigidity subscales, and once again, threat-rigidity subscales were significantly correlated with one another.

Table 8

Pearson's r Correlation Between Affect and Threat-Rigidity at the District Level

	Negative Affect	Positive Affect	Boundary Perm.	Decision-making	Information Manag.
Negative Affect	1.000				
Positive Affect	0.227	1.000			
Boundary Permeability	0.458*	0.019	1.000		
Decision-making	0.345*	0.049	0.828*	1.000	
Information Management	0.476*	0.103	0.854*	0.906*	1.000

$^{***}p<.001$, $^{**}p<.01$, $^{*}p<.05$

Regression Assumption Testing

Following correlations, regression models were conducted to assess the extent to which negative affect might predict collaboration and threat-rigidity. Prior to interpreting regression results, I checked assumptions of multicollinearity, normality, and homoscedasticity via a residual versus fitted plot. Since the low number of data points alone made it difficult to visually determine homoscedasticity via the residuals versus fitted plot, I added the Breusch-Pagan/Cook-Weisberg test to check to see if the error variance was constant. The results indicated no evidence of heteroskedasticity; however, I still decided to use robust standard errors as a precaution throughout given my small sample size (Struck, n.d.). No violations of the assumptions of linearity, multicollinearity, normality, and homoscedasticity were found.

Regression Analyses

When examining regressions for negative affect and school climate in the domain of collaboration, which previously were found to be correlated, findings indicate that the overall model was statistically significant, explaining approximately 21% of the variance in collaboration ($R^2 = 0.211$). Negative affect was found to be a significant negative predictor of school climate collaboration ($\beta = -0.463$, $p < .01$). This result means that for every one-unit increase in perceived negative affect, teachers' perception of collaboration decreases by 0.463 units. Although the correlation between positive affect and school climate collaboration was not statistically significant, regression analyses using robust standard errors indicated that positive affect was a significant negative predictor of collaboration ($\beta = -0.319$, $p<.05$), However, the model explained only a small proportion of the variance in collaboration ($R^2 = 0.062$), suggesting a relatively weak relationship that may warrant further analysis in larger samples. Finally, regression analyses considering both negative affect and positive affect simultaneously

indicated that negative affect remains a significant negative predictor of collaboration ($\beta = -0.432$, p<.05), while positive affect was not a statistically significant predictor. The overall model, which was statistically significant, explained approximately 24% of the variance in collaboration ($R^2 = 0.240$). These results indicate that, while teachers reporting higher levels of negative affect also perceive lower levels of collaboration, positive affect does not appear to predict collaboration once negative affect is accounted for. This suggests that a collaborative climate may be more sensitive to negative affect than to positive affect. These results are shown in Table 9.

Table 9

OLS Regression Exploring the Relationship Between Negative (NA) and Positive (PA) Affect and SC Collaboration (*n*=42)

	Model 1 Collab.	Model 2 Collab.	Model 3 Collab.
Negative Affect (NA)	-0.463**		-0.432*
	(0.144)		(0.149)
Positive Affect (PA)		-0.319*	-0.223
		(0.145)	(0.152)
Intercept	5.256	4.664	5.779
	(0.429)	(0.450)	0.577
R^2	0.211	0.062	0.240

Robust standard errors reported in parentheses.
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

I continued by using linear regressions to explore the extent to which negative affect, positive affect, and negative and positive affect together predict teachers' experiences with site and district threat-rigidity conditions, as well as to determine how much variation in boundary permeability, decision-making, and information management are predicted by affect. It is important to note that, for the threat-rigidity subscales, negative coefficients indicate lower levels of perceived rigidity, whereas positive coefficients indicate higher levels of perceived rigidity (Daly, 2009).

The findings indicated that negative affect to the political climate is, across the board, a statistically significant predictor of threat-rigid environments in terms of site boundary permeability, decision-making, and information management, as the OLS regression models showed negative affect to be a significant positive predictor of boundary permeability ($\beta = 0.423$, SE = 0.147, $p < .01$), decision-making ($\beta = 0.281$, SE = 0.117, $p < .05$), and information management ($\beta = 0.449$, SE = 0.139, $p < .01$) using robust standard errors. These results mean that for every one-unit increase in perceived negative affect, teachers' perception of site threat-rigid boundary permeability increases by 0.423 units, site threat-rigid decision-making increases by 0.281 units, and site threat-rigid information management increases by 0.449 units. The adjusted R^2 values were 0.156 for boundary permeability, 0.106 for decision-making, and 0.280 for information management models. This indicates that negative affect explains approximately 16% of the variance boundary permeability, 11% of the variance in decision-making, and 28% of the variance in information management at the site level. These results indicate that higher levels of negative affect are associated with stronger perceptions of threat-rigidity at the site level.

Positive affect was likewise found to be a statistically significant predictor of threat-rigid environments in terms of site boundary permeability, decision-making, and information management, as the OLS regression models showed positive affect to be a significant positive predictor of boundary permeability ($\beta = 0.470$, SE = 0.179, $p < .05$), decision-making ($\beta = 0.486$, SE = 0.157, $p < .001$), and information management ($\beta = 0.417$, SE = 0.167, $p < .05$) when using robust standard errors. These results mean that for every one-unit increase in perceived positive affect, teachers' perception of site threat-rigid boundary permeability increases by 0.470 units, site threat-rigid decision-making increases by 0.486 units, and site threat-rigid information management increases by 0.417 units. The adjusted R^2 values were 0.130 for boundary permeability, 0.211 for decision-making, and 0.124 for information management models. which indicates that negative affect explains approximately 13% of the variance boundary permeability, 21% of the variance in decision-making, and 12% of the variance in information management at the site level. These results indicate that higher levels of positive affect are associated with stronger perceptions of threat-rigidity at the site level.

Regression analyses considering both negative affect and positive affect simultaneously indicated that negative affect remains a statistically significant positive predictor of site boundary permeability ($\beta = 0.354$, $p<.05$) and information management ($\beta = 0.392$, $p<.01$), but not for site decision-making. Positive affect was only a statistically significant positive predictor of site boundary permeability ($\beta = 0.372$, $p<.05$). This overall model for affect and site boundary permeability was statistically significant, with negative and positive affect explaining approximately 24% of the variance in site boundary permeability rigidity ($R^2 = 0.240$). The overall model for affect and site decisions was likewise statistically significant, explaining approximately 26% of the variance in site decision rigidity ($R^2 = 0.262$). The overall model for

affect and site information management was statistically significant as well, explaining approximately 28% of the variance in site information management rigidity ($R^2 = 0.280$). These results indicate that not only is negative affect a significant predictor of both boundary rigidity and information management rigidity, but information management may be particularly sensitive to negative affect. Interestingly, negative affect did not significantly predict site decision-making rigidity when controlling for positive affect. This may suggest that teachers perceive threat-rigidity less through decision-making procedures and more through organizational communication and discourse practices at their site level such as messaging and access to information. All affect and site threat-rigidity regression values are shown in Table 10.

Likewise, I conducted regressions for affect and district threat-rigidity (see Table 11). Findings once again indicated that negative affect to the political climate is, across the board, a statistically significant predictor of threat-rigid environments in terms of district boundary permeability, decision-making, and information management, as the OLS regression models showed negative affect to be a significant positive predictor of boundary permeability ($\beta = 0.429$, SE = 0.142, $p < .01$), decision-making ($\beta = 0.304$, SE = 0.122, $p < .05$), and information management ($\beta = 0.439$, SE = 0.128, $p < .001$) when using robust standard errors. These results mean that for every one-unit increase in perceived negative affect, teachers' perception of district threat-rigid boundary permeability increases by 0.429 units, site threat-rigid decision-making increases by 0.304 units, and site threat-rigid information management increases by 0.439 units. The adjusted R^2 values were 0.209 for boundary permeability, 0.119 for decision-making, and 0.226 for information management models. This indicates that negative affect explains approximately 21% of the variance boundary permeability, 12% of the variance in decision-making, and 23% of the variance in information management at the district level. As with

previous correlations, positive affect was not found to be a statistically significant predictor of district threat-rigid environments.

Regression analyses considering both negative affect and positive affect simultaneously indicated that negative affect remains a statistically significant positive predictor of district boundary permeability (β =0.440, SE = 0.146, p<.01), and information management (β =0.436, SE = 0.133, p<.01) when using robust standard errors. The overall model was statistically significant, and with negative and positive affect together explained approximately 21% of the variance in district boundary permeability rigidity ($R^2 = 0.214$) and 23% of the variance in district information management rigidity ($R^2 = 0.227$).

When negative and positive affect were examined simultaneously, negative affect remained a significant positive predictor of district decision-making (β =0.306, SE=0.124, p<.05). However, while the overall model approached statistical significance, it did not meet the traditional threshold (p = 0.0571). Nevertheless, the model still offers insight into the unique relationship between negative affect and district threat-rigid decision making after accounting for shared variance with positive affect.

Table 10

OLS Regression Exploring the Relationship Between Negative (NA) and Positive (PA) Affect and Site Threat-Rigidity (*n*=44)

	Model 1 Bound.	Model 2 Bound.	Model 3 Bound.	Model 1 Decisions	Model 2 Decision	Model 3 Decisions	Model 1 Info. Mgmt.	Model 2 Info. Mgmt.	Model 3 Info. Mgmt.
NA	0.423**		0.354*	0.281*		0.201	0.449**		0.392**
	(0.147)		(0.142)	(0.117)		(0.102)	(0.139)		(0.134)
PA		0.470*	0.372*		0.486***	0.430		0.417*	0.308
		(0.179)	(0.166)		(0.157)	(0.156)		(0.167)	(0.164)
Intercept	0.970	1.014	0.158	1.718	1.266	0.780	1.020	1.029	0.347
	(0.423)	(0.472)	(0.632)	(0.346)	(0.467)	(0.532)	(0.398)	(0.467)	(0.572)
R^2	0.158	0.130	0.235	0.106	0.211	0.262	0.280	0.124	0.280

Robust standard errors reported in parentheses.
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 11

OLS Regression Exploring the Relationship Between Negative (NA) and Positive (PA) Affect and District Threat-Rigidity (*n*=44)

	Model 1 Bound.	Model 2 Bound.	Model 3 Bound.	Model 1 Decisions	Model 2 Decision	Model 3 Decisions	Model 1 Info. Mgmt.	Model 2 Info. Mgmt.	Model 3 Info. Mgmt.
NA	0.429**		0.440**	0.304*		0.306*	0.439***		0.436**
	(0.142)		(0.146)	(0.122)		(0.124)	(0.128)		(0.133)
PA		0.023	-0.078		0.540	-0.165		0.120	0.120
		(0.169)	(0.173)		(0.166)	(0.170)		(0.171)	(0.166)
Intercept	0.175	3.068	1.939	2.390	3.215	2.429	1.932	3.005	1.890
	(0.464)	(0.462)	(0.587)	(0.384)	(0.485)	(0.592)	(0.403)	(0.483)	(0.551)
R^2	0.209	0.000	0.214	0.119	0.002	0.120	0.226	0.010	0.227

Robust standard errors reported in parentheses.
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Summary of Quantitative Findings

Examined together, the quantitative findings suggest patterns across the dataset. Not only were affective responses (and in particular negative affective responses) to the political climate associated with reduced perceptions of collaboration, but they were also widely associated with perceptions of both site and district threat-rigidity. Districts generally were perceived by respondents to be more threat-rigid than sites. And, perhaps most importantly, negative affect in response to the political climate explained 11-28% of the variance in perceived site threat-rigidity outcomes and 12-23% of the variance in perceived district threat-rigidity outcomes. In contrast, positive affect in response to the political climate showed weaker and less consistent relationships with threat-rigidity outcomes, particularly after controlling for negative affect. Examined together, these findings suggest that negative affective experiences may play a stronger role in influencing participants' perceptions of threat-rigidity in their environments than positive affect. These quantitative patterns offer a foundation upon which to build the qualitative analysis.

Qualitative Findings

In an attempt to better understand the third research question guiding this study – How do teachers describe the influence of the current political climate on collaboration, decision-making, and school resource support at their school sites? – this study explored qualitative survey data as well as interviews. These qualitative findings are described as an overarching corpus of data since interview participants were drawn from survey respondents.

To set the context for the study, I posed a survey question asking respondents to name any U.S. political event or situation they'd been thinking about in the past week, even if only a

brief thought, no matter how small. I then asked them to share a word or phrase to "describe how the above event makes you feel."

The way my heart caught in my chest as I reviewed the events and the affect list would ultimately set the stage for me as a qualitative listener: how could I ensure that I was really showing up to this data analysis as a listener and a learner, while not allowing my own feelings and perspectives over the polarized events to color my interpretation? It was with this listening posture that I began to explore my qualitative data.

Interview Participants

In addition to survey responses from my 52 respondents, I received contact information from 20 participants indicating willingness to be interviewed. I contacted 16 possible interviewees, and 10 agreed to participate in the interview process; however, one of them was later removed from the data set due to ineligibility. Table 11 shows the remaining participant pseudonyms, their age, gender, sexual orientation, self-identified ethnoracial identities, tenure status, and the mean household income of the zip code in which their school is located, which I used as a proxy for socioeconomic status in the selection process. The final nine participants in my dataset include three participants identified as People of Color and six as White. Two participants noted that they are Lesbian, one noted that they were Bisexual, and six stated that they are Straight or heterosexual. Three participants were male, and the 6 other respondents interviewed were female. All participants will be referred to thereafter by their pseudonym.

Table 12

Demographic Characteristics of Interview Participants (n=9)

Name	Age	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Ethnoracial	Tenure status	Mean Household Income
Christina	39	Female	Heterosexual	Pacific Islander	Tenured	$164,000
Brenda	56	Female	Heterosexual	White	Tenured	$105,000
Elizabeth	55	Female	Heterosexual	White	Tenured	$149,000
Patricia	57	Female	Lesbian	White	Tenured	$71,000
Frank	43	Male	Heterosexual	White	Tenured	$105,000
Crystal	38	Female	Lesbian	Hispanic/Latino	Probationary	$105,000
Brittany	35	Female	Heterosexual	White	Tenured	$71,000
Steven	37	Male	Bisexual	Afro-Caribbean	Temporary	$149,000
Gabriel	33	Male	Heterosexual	White	Tenured	$71,000

Note: All names are pseudonyms.

In the subsequent section, the experiences of these individuals are explored thematically, alongside qualitative findings from the larger group of 52 survey participants, through three in vivo thematic codes, "I cry on the way home sometimes;" "Trying to survive without scrutiny; and "I felt like leadership had our backs."

"I Cry on the Way Home Sometimes": The Effects of Affect

In line with findings from previous work (Fitzgerald, 2014), participants in this study varied widely in what they considered to be political. When surveyed, 18 respondents referred directly to Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) action, five to recent acts of violence (Charlie Kirk's death and mass shootings), seven to military initiatives and foreign policy (the war in Ukraine, trade wars, and Operation Southern Spear), five to financial concerns and changes/defunding of social programs (health care, VA cuts, education, and national parks), eight referencing President Trump's behavior specifically (speech towards reporters and regarding Rob Reiner and court cases), and two tied to the release of the Epstein files. However, when responding to the question regarding how the political event made them feel, out of the 52

survey respondents, the trends were more clear: only three selected a positive affect word (interesting, surprise, comfortable) and one stated “I don’t know,” while 48 other responses were associated with negative affect (among them: scared, unsafe, concerned, enraged, distraught, helpless, frustrated, angry, furious, heartbroken, dismayed, and discouraged). This emergent theme, that teachers’ experiences with political climate are tied to negative affect, continued to surface across the data set in both explicit and implied ways. As my analysis expanded through the interviews, it became clear that teachers often tied these feelings to identity, both in how they perceived that their own personal identity markers might result in them being targeted, as well as through how they internalized the challenges that their students faced.

One salient example of this emerged in the interview with Patricia, a health science teacher in the final years of her career, who has been in the profession for 23 years. Over the course of her career, Patricia has served as a teacher, a teacher on special assignment (TOSA), and an assistant principal across multiple sites yet when asked about how she feels at her job, Patricia responded simply, “it’s hard.” While presumably she has enjoyed a fulfilling career as an educator given her length of service, this current climate colors her experience, especially given the way that she feels that her identity is currently under attack as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community.

> Students come to school sharing the views of their parents and saying things that could be deemed as hate speech or racially motivated, leaving me in a precarious place of wanting to correct behavior and also feeling resistant to correcting that behavior voraciously without outing myself, and then leaving myself open to more ridicule, and also not being protected by my superiors. I feel like the days of Don't Ask, Don't Tell are back. I have taught during a time where I did not display any photos of my spouse, at that time my

> significant other, in my classroom as it would raise a lot of questions among my students that I would be afraid to answer for fear of the repercussions of the phone calls of parents that would happen after. I find myself back in the same place. I do have my photos displayed on my bookshelf, but I don't point them out. I don't talk about them. And when it has come up, I have sidestepped the topic.

For Patricia, the current atmosphere has created a space where she no longer feels that she can be open with who she is. When she notes "without outing myself" but later references a time both before and after "the days of Don't Ask, Don't Tell," it becomes apparent that there has been a time in her career in which she was open about her relationship with her spouse. Nevertheless, in today's climate, LGBTQIA+ topics have been not only subdued, but also actively censored and silenced (Pollock et al., 2023) and Patricia experiences the reticence and trepidation associated with this censorship, fearing that if she is discovered to be queer, she might be subject to ridicule and pariahship. Furthermore, Patricia explicitly notes being "afraid to answer for fear of repercussions." Though she does not explain directly what these repercussions might be, it is clear that they are serious enough that she avoids the topic entirely.

Crystal, also a queer teacher currently in her first year at her school site, teaches ELD, Ethnic Studies, and English. Though she is new at her school site, Crystal is not new to education; she is in her ninth year of teaching overall. Crystal shares that she has actively faced challenges due to her lesbian identity at a previous school before landing in her current, more supportive site.

> Parents were calling and complaining about me day one because the kids asked if I was gay and I said yes. They said to leave my adult problems at home... I got asked not to come back because I was on a temporary contract… Now I'm always scared of getting in

> trouble, or that I'm doing the wrong thing, because it's, like, I'd be being told that I was an amazing teacher and all these things, and then just all of a sudden, the rug would get pulled out from underneath me.

Crystal's experiences are the manifestation of what Patricia fears: that her demographic identities might pose a risk factor to her in the school context. Crystal names specific repercussions at her school, from parent complaints, to being hassled by administration about her classroom decor, to being dismissed outright, and identifies these previous experiences as creating the foundation for her feelings of fear and risk aversion. Crystal notes that it took her a year off to recalibrate prior to applying for her new position to decide if she was "willing to go through this all over again."

Brenda, a 56-year-old woman who teaches biochemistry and medical interventions for a STEM-focused public magnet, explained that she is not only impacted by her own experiences, but also those of her students, specifically students who are a part of the LGBTQIA+ and immigrant communities. Brenda's narrative of these students' challenges becomes crucial as she later highlights her emotional response to the current crises, despite having a wide array of supports and resources at her disposal. This interview, from which the in vivo code for this theme was taken, captures the idea that negative affect isn't just a moment or a feeling, but rather something that empathetic educators carry with them beyond the classroom.

> I feel like there's just a lot of fear, and it extends to everyone… I'm just trying to be aware that they might be scared to death when their parents go outside the house, or they might be scared to death that some rights they now have as a transgender youth or a gay person could be taken away from them at any moment, and this is incredibly scary. So, I feel very sensitive and compassionate towards our kids right now, more so than ever before because I know they're not always gonna tell me, but they're facing a lot of stuff…

> Everything is kind of going my way in terms of me being able to stay healthy and balanced, but do I cry on the way home sometimes? Yeah. When we had a meeting after school last week about what to do if ICE shows up on your campus, I'm like… oh my god, I just… I literally wept the whole way home. I'm like, please do not let this happen to us. Are you serious? How far would I be willing to go?

Gabriel, a White male heterosexual interviewee who comes from a much more secure socioeconomic background than that of his students, has been teaching and working in youth-adjacent spaces for nearly 15 years now, but acknowledges that his upbringing didn't prepare him for how to handle situations like the ones he faces in a more socioeconomically poor and demographically diverse community:

> I have had a lot of students who were really, really afraid of the first time that the ICE raids were coming around, right? That was something that was new to me, because that was something that was kind of out of sight, out of mind for me.. But it was very clear to me that students had questions, and they were fearful for their family members or for themselves… this is something that I have not really had to deal with in my personal life, but it was affecting the kids that I work with every day and their families, and their problems became my problems.

Gabriel's direct acknowledgment shows this extrapolation from student and family to educator when he says "it was affecting the kids that I work with every day… and their problems became my problems." As Brenda and Gabriel note, caregiving is deeply embedded in teachers' work and professional identity, and oftentimes teachers lack indications as to where the boundaries for obligation of care end (Anderson, 2026). While each teacher must independently navigate how they allow these care obligations to affect them, there is always a risk that even the

most proactive and caring teachers can begin to feel ineffectual or strained. One survey respondent, a 16-year special education teacher, spoke about how teachers at his site patrol the neighborhood to alert families to immigration enforcement, and offer supports for students and families in the event of detainment. Yet, even in light of these efforts, he explains that "no amount of communication can combat the fear in the community at this moment" in a "soul crushing" political climate.

Ultimately, this idea that the current political climate weaponizes personhood against individuals — either the interviewees themselves, or their students and families — was raised by eight of my nine interviewees, both in the context of teachers' own experiences and those of their students.

Beyond the appearance of negative affect in response to political climate across these interviews, affect management and emotional shutdown were also observed in seven out of nine interviews. "I'm tired. And in public education, we don't rest and reflect. We just go on, no matter what happens," noted one interviewee. An arts teacher who declined to be interviewed seemed even more reserved: "I feel like I can not change the system even when I do try to, so it's best if I just take the limitations and work with them. This is the system I work for."

While certainly the extent of negative affect across nearly all surveys and interviews is notable, a lack of affect is equally concerning. Schools, and especially the schools described by my respondents, are high-stress environments. If teachers struggle to draw boundaries and take on the pressures of their students and their families, despite being predisposed to burnout (Yu et al., 2014), what could the impacts be to those teachers and the students they serve? And how might additional challenges further compromise the spaces in which young people learn?

"Trying to Survive without Scrutiny": Threat-Rigidity in Action

These teacher responses, and the lack thereof, make sense in the context of threat-rigidity theory, whose literature notes that threats cause stress, anxiety, and other individual physiological outcomes (Staw et al., 1981), as well as feelings of fear and inhibition of action (Daly, 2009).

In this study, 29 of 42 survey respondents indicated that political language or rhetoric influences policy or leadership decisions in their school or district to a moderate or greater extent. Upon further exploration, five out of nine interview respondents (Elizabeth, Brittany, Crystal, Patricia, and Gabriel) also directly described conditions of threat-rigidity in their schools tied to the political context, noting in particular the influence of the political climate on workplace decision-making and information management. Since threat-rigid environments are widely considered to result in adverse consequences for individuals as well as poor outcomes for groups (Mazzei et al., 2024), especially when present during times of significant change (Staw et al., 1981), it becomes critical to understand threat-rigidity's link to the political climate in order to better identify and prevent these conditions in school contexts, home to both vulnerable students and their affectively responsive teachers.

While the range of threat-rigidity behaviors was explored quantitatively via the survey, the dataset also unearthed something surprising: where these pressures were originating. In the survey, respondents were asked to explain where political pressure primarily comes from. While responses were split, with five responses each indicating that pressure comes from formal site and district leaders, four from teacher leaders such as PLC leads and department chairs, and four from students and families, as well as three from political interest groups. However, most saliently, seven respondents indicated school board members as the source of this pressure,

always in conjunction with their school or district leaders or political interest groups. This is important because, while California's constitution holds that all elected school offices are nonpartisan, political affiliation cannot be included on the ballot, and candidates cannot be supported, endorsed, or opposed by a political party (Constitution of California, art. 2, sec. 6), this regulation does not prevent candidates from holding political beliefs and identities, nor from carrying them into political office.

Patricia, a health teacher, explained that, in her district, board members are "really politically motivated to… the far right," and impose their religious and political beliefs on constituents. This is not an isolated perspective; six other respondents also noted that school board members use their positional power to advance political objectives, and three of those respondents specifically described those trustees as "very conservative."

Politicization of school boards has resulted in consequences within the school districts that they serve, at least partially due to the power dynamics at play as district staff acquiesces in response to board pressure. "As we know, the board is who re-ups and approves and rehires cabinet members," Patricia explains, explaining that this leads to leadership's avoidance of conflict by choosing to avoid topics, initiatives, or instructional moves that they believe will be controversial.

The in vivo code for this theme, which comes from a survey response by an 18-year veteran English and Social Science teacher, notes the controlled and fearful administration at their site who are "afraid to bring up difficult topics and often a refusal to put things in front of the board. This leads to a dysfunctional district, but also schools that are trying to survive without scrutiny." This is a direct acknowledgment of maladaptive threat-rigid behaviors, or at

least of the perception of them, and risk-averse behavior regarding curricular decisions and bringing instructional materials to the board.

Other respondents share similar stories: one participant explained that curriculum writers have had to revise the language in Ethnic Studies curriculum to get it through the board approval process, while others noted micromanagement of class novels, removal of texts from a library, restricting materials to a "very short approved list," and "confront(ing) staff about books they disagree with." Still another participant was "warned that members of the board would be unhappy with specific content rolled out in lessons in the classroom," and noted that she had personally experienced "members of the board expressing disapproval or outrage at such content."

While the survey responses lack further description of what content or texts resulted in these reactions, the described behaviors of school board trustees are eyebrow-raising at best and alarming at worst. The California School Boards Association, a non-profit organization representing school board officials at over 1000 local educational agencies in the state, write in their 2024 periodical 'What it takes to lead' that an effective board member "acts with dignity, and understands the implications of demeanor and behavior" (p. 6) and governs "in a dignified and professional manner, treating everyone with civility and respect" (p.7), which hardly seems to encapsulate the same behavior as "outrage" or "confronting."

Interviewee Crystal believes that these school board behaviors are encouraged by parents' rights groups who move from board meeting to board meeting to advocate politically for changes in public schools:

> There was a board member who planted a book, an LGBTQ book, in the elementary school library, and then came back the next day and "found" it, and then tried to create

> this whole reason to pull all the books from all the classrooms and all that. They ended up getting caught that they had done that so then that kind of died, but there's groups of people — their kids don't even go to the districts — and they start in [redacted/district name], then go to [redacted], and then [redacted]. They're just, like, these parents' rights situations… they're just hiding homophobia and racism behind parents' rights.

These observations are aligned with maladaptive behaviors seen in threat-rigid environments, specifically constriction of control, in which power is tightened, authority is centralized, and work becomes more micromanaged (Olsen & Sexton, 2009; Mellahi et al., 2002; Staw et al., 1981). In these examples, authority figures such as the board and cabinet are seen as responding to "conspiracy theories," "religion," and "parents' rights situations," by reducing access to textbooks, curriculum, novels, and other resources, as well as addressing staff in ways that are perceived to be confrontational.

Beyond these markers of threat-rigidity, there is also evidence that administrative pressures lead to risk-averse behaviors including self-censorship and reduced open communication at the site level.

Elizabeth, one of my interviewees and a veteran English and Social Studies teacher working at a socioeconomically privileged school in coastal San Diego, spoke to this challenge: "It's this cultural hegemony where, basically, things become taboo, and you just don't talk about them or include them because you know something's gonna happen." She explains: "I am always concerned about how my content will be perceived, so I plan to be attacked and try to think about how I can protect myself through the content standards." Despite a 30-year career in education, Elizabeth fears blowback and being taken out of context, leading her to self-censorship and careful navigation within her context, risk-averse behaviors.

Elizabeth explains how fallout from a recent lawsuit, Mahmoud v. Taylor, has permeated schools that vertically articulate to her campus. This impact on the educational ecosystem results in echoes to her own school as well as her ability to offer diverse books even within the walls of her classroom. Now, she feels insecure about even the finite options she has on her shelf as independent reading options:

> The only way I can teach a book is if it's approved by the district for whole class reading, but to get around that, I had them choose an independent reading book… Well, one of the books that I had in my selection was LGBTQ. No one picked it up, no one read it. No one has read it at all. I've had this book on my shelf for two years; no one's read it. And I was even, like, afraid to say what it's about, and even promote it in my class… I only have one, and it's well recommended, but no one's read it.

Elizabeth shares that administrators in her district have a propensity to penalize teachers rather than creating space for learning. She notes that this creates conditions of fear for students in the school community as well:

> We don't allow for mistakes. Mistakes are not respected, they're not expected, and they're not corrected in a way that invites criticality about what we're doing. And then I don't think it models to kids that we can make mistakes. When the adults are in fear of doing something wrong, then kids are in fear of doing something wrong... it just feeds on itself.

As she goes on to describe depression and what she'd look for in a different job, Elizabeth reifies concerns about how long teachers might be willing to try to "survive without scrutiny" before ultimately seeking their happiness in other careers and spaces, especially given continued attrition rates in the profession from 6.4 percent to 9 percent between 1988-89 and 2008-09 (Ingersoll et al., 2014) and evidence that attacks on teacher professionalism were found

to be a key consideration in the erosion of job satisfaction for teachers across four countries (Scott et al., 2001).

Elizabeth's stories and the responses of the other interviewees and survey respondents are key in highlighting the threat-rigid environments materializing in San Diego schools, evidenced by the centralization of control, restriction of information processes, and the emphasis on routine instruction and materials. While causality cannot be assumed by the concurrent presence of politically polarized rhetoric and climate, nevertheless the descriptions of these contexts and experiences, well aligned with threat-rigidity literature (Olsen & Sexton, 2009; Mellahi et al., 2002; Staw et al., 1981), indicate a need for more exploration.

"I Felt Like Leadership Had Our Backs": Leadership as an Insulating Factor

Despite indicators of threat-rigidity and pressure across the full range of contexts explored, a third theme that emerged from the data is that administrator and institutional sensemaking supports can serve as insulating factors, helping teachers navigate the current landscape. Teachers also reported a sense of agency and purpose, as well as other forms of positive affect, when reporting protective conditions, suggesting that administrative behaviors were related to teachers' positive feelings despite the polarized political climate. The protective conditions most frequently mentioned included collaborative structures, opportunities to engage in dialogue, both formally and informally, and direct buffering support in the face of controversy. This underscores the importance of educational leaders who are cognizant of the needs of their teachers, understand research-supported best practices, and take action to ensure that teachers can focus on the needs of their students.

Since threat-rigid conditions are resulting in regular responsive shifts, such as how schools respond to a community ICE presence, or what core novels teachers are permitted to use

for instruction, it stands to reason that having structures in place to support understanding of those revised and novel policies and practices would likewise ensure better outcomes.

In this study, these were seen in three ways suggested by the literature: as structured formal collaboration opportunities (Lennert Da Silva & Mølstad, 2020, Martinie et al., 2016), as professional learning communities (Xu & Lu, 2022), and as discourse communities (Alexiadou & Essex, 2016).

Structured formal collaboration opportunities were among the supports described by six of my interview participants. Elizabeth, an English teacher working at a higher income school in coastal San Diego, explained that, while generally she experiences isolation at her school, even at one time noting "alienation" from colleagues in the threat-rigid environment, she also enjoyed a recent positive experience engaging meaningfully in collaboration with her peers on a new novel pilot team. Frank, a White male performing arts teacher, is involved in several formal collaboration structures, including multiple district advisory committees, which give him an opportunity to create change in district policies.

Crystal, an interviewee in her second year at a public high school located in a large military housing complex, has frequent opportunities to collaborate within a formal structure at her school. She shared with me that she has been able to participate in district professional learning opportunities during the school year, including one at a local museum, and enjoys a full paid pull-out day once a trimester, in addition to dedicated weekly time with her team.

> We get a whole day where we sit together. Obviously, when subs cancel and stuff, then we can't participate, but then we get make-up days… and then most of our Thursdays, which is our early release days, are given to kind of do as we need or please. So, like, we

> check in with our uh, you know, like, English, and then we, like, branch off, and us 9th grade people will go off and plan, and things like that.

For five of my interviewees, professional learning communities also played a role in ensuring that teachers had opportunities in place to engage in collective sense making. Gabriel, the social science teacher and baseball coach, noted a very structured PLC system that he feels works well for addressing challenges that arise, but also offers a degree of flexibility:

> We do have a very structured way of addressing it through the PLC system, and if it ever needed to be pivoted, like, something happened tomorrow, and we needed to address something, we have a system that's in place that allows us to do that. It's flexible enough that we could, you know, wherever we're at in our learning cycle, if we needed to collaborate with our colleagues about something that was pressing and immediate, we could easily pivot and do that. Some of my colleagues have thoughts and opinions on how maybe overly structured it can be at times, but I do have faith and know from experience that, if needed and when needed, we're able to pivot and use that time in a way that is helpful for all of us as the adults here, but then also so that it can trickle down to being effective for the kids as well.

Patricia teaches at the same school and spoke about the structure that Gabriel describes. While she wishes there was more space in the PLC process for open dialogue and improvement science cycles related to staff-selected topics, she does acknowledge that PLCs provide space to address and support district- and site-led objectives.

This type of more staff-led collaboration — open dialogue on topics of choice — while not present at Patricia's school, did come up in interviews when Christina, Brenda, and Crystal when each described a version of dialogic discourse sessions on their campuses. These meetings,

operated as facilitated discussion forums, served to build community and to develop teachers' knowledge and capacity for navigating the current political climate.

Interviewee Christina said that these sessions follow a very particular structure under her current leadership that are intended to avoid stigmatization.

> We do bi-weekly webinar and seminars on developing issues and matters arising, for sure. In this meeting, they give room for everybody to talk, and they do it anonymously, in the sense that you must not stand up and give your own two cents. you write on a piece of paper if there are any doubts as you seek your opinion (from) the larger crowd. If you are not comfortable in saying it out (loud), you also write down your answer. We used a web app… you drop your questions and your answers. So I think that went a long way.

Brenda, the biochemistry teacher, explained that her site does regular morning meetings to help staff identify what is happening, process it together, and to support their understanding of how to move forward.

> We have morning meetings here at [redacted] and this is honestly when we kind of bring up any political issues. Let's say it's an election day, let's say something huge has just happened… there's been a shooting… There's usually some kind of discussion around, hey, here's how you can message this to students. Here's how you could message this to parents if the need arises. So it's almost like in a way, less restrictions… more guidance. I feel like that's how I would phrase it.

She adds that this space feels deeply accepting and there is a high degree of trust between administration and teachers, even when the topics are heated, as with a recent meeting in which ICE was discussed.

> I've never felt like even those people in morning meeting are like, tone it down now, you know? Or be careful what you say in front of kids. I've never felt that coming off them. I feel like instead it's like… a respect. I'm just trusting that you know that you can say that here, and you may not be able to say that in your classroom… they trust that we're gonna do what is right, and speak in appropriate terms. And any time that… the line has been stepped on or across, I think it's been addressed in an appropriate manner… not in one that's, like, threatening to shut down anyone, but one that is more meant to educate teachers, students, parents, in a way that will help us all function in a tricky climate in the best way that we possibly can.

These morning meetings are a clear emergence of tenets of dialogic discourse as outlined by Robin Alexander (2006). While Alexander's focus was on how teachers interact with students, the descriptors nevertheless are well suited to be considered in a meeting setting at a school. In the article, Alexander noted that dialogic engagements should be collective (done together, rather than in isolation), reciprocal (in which individuals listen and consider different perspectives), supportive (welcomed without a context of fear of embarrassment, and with an opportunity for common understanding), cumulative (built upon one another's thoughts in coherent ways), and purposeful (with educational goals in mind) (Alexander, 2006, as cited in Boyd & Markarian, 2011).

The morning meetings described by Brenda meet several of these descriptors to a tee. They are collective (done with the entire staff together in person), reciprocal (open to a variety of unrestricted topics by all participants), supportive (welcomed by facilitators with trust and openness). Though it is unclear how cumulative these meetings are, the intentionality with which they are being employed implies that they are purposeful. Most of all, they are a positive space

for teachers like Brenda, who feel and express the weight of contending with a range of heavy political topics.

Crystal also believes that a focus on creating safe spaces for dialogue has helped people process feelings at her site, explaining this as "we're all always gonna talk about it." She connects these practices to restorative justice-informed and feels like they help support an open campus where there's a feeling of being open to everybody: "Everyone gets to have feelings, we're all always gonna talk about it, very restorative-y."

Crystal's confidence may be related to dialogic discourse, but she also explains a phenomenon that appeared across the data: a feeling and sense of calm thanks to the principal's direct actions. In several instances, teachers note that their site administrator listens deeply to them, is sure to speak with intention, and even intervenes on their behalf when things get challenging.

I connect this concept with the self-determination theory condition of relatedness. Relatedness, paired with autonomy and competence in motivation theory, refers to the degree of security and connection an individual experiences in a given context, which in turn drives their intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). I noted all three conditions at times throughout the data set — autonomy, relatedness, and competence — and, while it was not my primary focus, I believe the frequency and intensity noted with regard to principal's secure support is an important data point for this particular topic, especially considering that it offers a key contrast to threat-rigid behavior by principals in an earlier theme.

While administrators at both the site and district level might be expected to behave in more top-down and directive ways in threat-rigid environments and to restrict open communication (Daly, 2009), the principal at social studies teacher Gabriel's school does the

opposite. Gabriel said that he feels connected to this principal and trusts his leadership. He specifically appreciates his willingness to be a listener and tackle communications rather than delegating to his team, noting that he is "not afraid to address difficult topics and have to have conversations."

Crystal shared that, at her current site, her principal is responsive to the needs of teachers in their care, genuinely solicits feedback, and immediately takes action. She notes a specific recent example of feeling supported that has validated her decision to return to the classroom after traumatic previous experiences.

> I actually had my first formal district complaint right before the winter break… the principal was really supportive… they talked to the parent for, like, 45 minutes, created a relationship with them… they did a really good job of calming it down, not letting it affect me and my teaching and anything like that. And I think my site specifically has really good admin that will go to bat for their teachers, and 99% of the time, the teacher's not even aware of the fact that there is a battle happening on their behalf.

Ultimately, it was clear from the data that principal action and the utilization of formal and informal structures of collaboration were crucial to helping to support participants through the multitude of challenges they face in the current political climate. As Brenda noted in her interview, from which this in vivo code was taken, her administrators' willingness to stand alongside them codified in them the strength to continue through the most challenging of times.

> We stood out in front of the school and handed out little flyers about your rights if you are an immigrant, and I think we had very positive parent support, but then there was also some some kickback after that with, you know, various pictures placed around with, look what these teachers are doing at the school. I felt like leadership had our back. I mean,

they were standing out with us even if they weren't actively handing out cards, there was a presence there of, like, if anything should go south, we've got you.

Summary of the Findings

This chapter presented findings on teachers' affective responses to the current political climate and their perceptions of organizational conditions in their educational contexts. The quantitative findings, associated with research questions 1 and 2, examined relationships among affect, school climate, and perceived threat-rigid conditions at both the site and district levels. Qualitative findings, aligned with research question 3, explored how teachers describe and epistemologically make sense of political rhetoric and climate on collaboration, decision-making, and resource allocation. Examined together, these findings provide insight into how teachers experience and interpret organizational conditions within the broader political landscape.

While a number of findings emerged from the overall landscape of this data, a few key findings rose to the forefront. First, quantitative data found that, for this sample of teachers, negative affective experiences have a significant negative relationship with teachers' perceptions of collaboration; threat-rigidity is associated with negative affect toward the political climate; and collaboration and rigidity are inversely related to one another. Furthermore, participants generally perceived districts as being more threat-rigid than schools, with individuals bearing different identity markers potentially experiencing things differently from one another.

Qualitative findings indicated that teachers experience negative affect widely in response to political climate, which affects their workplace, and described manifestations of threat-rigid conditions across nearly all contexts. Findings also emerged regarding how collaborative structures and direct administrator intervention might shift teachers' experiences during this time of polarization.

Taken together, these quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that teachers' affective experiences, organizational conditions, and perceptions of political polarization are interconnected. Across both methodological domains, participants noted that they navigate conditions shaped by political rhetoric and climate, resulting in negative affect. They also noted the ways in which they perceived that collaboration, decision-making, and resource allocation might be related to external pressures. While these findings are limited to this sample of participants, they nevertheless provide insight into how political climate might be experienced through affect, institutional and leadership behaviors, and school climate conditions. As such, this chapter serves to open discussion about how these variables might impact educational contexts and raises important questions about the role of researchers, leaders, and policymakers in responding to them.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusions

This study allowed me to not only investigate a wide array of variables as well as the experiences of teachers, but also to explore how qualitative experiences and perspectives described by teachers help to explain quantitative results from the survey by examining the dataset as a whole.

This study explored the following three research questions:

1. Is there a relationship between teachers' affective responses to the political climate and their perceptions of institutional conditions that support policy mediation (collaboration, decision-making, resource access)?
2. Is there a relationship between teachers' affective responses to the political climate and their perception of threat-rigidity in their school environment?
3. How do teachers describe the influence of the current political climate on collaboration, decision-making, and school resource support at their school sites?

Synthesizing my findings for both data sets, I found that, though the quantitative and qualitative data collected for this study each independently tell important stories about the experiences of 52 high school teachers in San Diego, the salient elements are striking when taken in tandem with one another. During this cross-findings synthesis phase, three key elements rose to the forefront: 1. political climate is experienced through affective and identity-mediated meaning making; 2. heightened affective responses to the political climate correspond with perceived organizational constriction, which may exacerbate both affect and work conditions; and 3. collaboration functions as both a protective condition and a point of tension in politically polarized schools.

In this chapter, I will present discussion around these synthesized themes from the quantitative and qualitative data sets, while situating these findings in the extant literature for these bodies of knowledge. Finally, I will discuss implications for research, educational leadership, practice, policy, and social justice.

Discussion of the Findings

Leveraging a dual theoretical lens of constructivism and threat-rigidity theory is key to interpreting the emerging themes from this study. After all, this study tackles affective response as an emic phenomenon, which, by nature, requires us to understand how participants make sense of their experiences and environment. Furthermore, the study examines how teachers perceive conditions in their schools, and specifically those that may be perceived as threat-rigid, shifting within a polarized political climate. This requires understanding how teachers' lived experiences, sociopolitical contexts, and interactions shape their realities.

The Political Climate and Making Meaning of It

While there were many moving pieces in this study, it is nevertheless important to begin discussion with one of the key observations that, for teachers of this study, the political climate is experienced through affective and identity-mediated meaning-making. This observation began to emerge early on during data analysis, when it became clear that many participants (48 out of 52 survey respondents) associated political events and climate with negative valence emotions ranging from "scared" to "gutted." This array of responses, variable in nature, mirrored the wide range of political elements that respondents were thinking about as they responded to questions within this survey, adding color to the validated scale results, and setting the stage for interpretation.

In addition to this open-ended qualitative question, participants' affective responses to political climate were captured via descriptive statistics of negative affect and positive affect using the PANAS scale. Calculated independently, mean negative affect responses emerged just above the scale midpoint (M = 3.19, SD = 0.91) and mean positive affect responses emerged just below that same midpoint (M = 2.77, SD = 0.74). However, a more nuanced review of demographic subgroups surfaces more concerning data. For example, despite the overall mean for negative affect hovering at 3.19, the mean reported negative affect for People of Color was 3.97 (SD = 0.47), and the mean positive affect was 2.96 (SD = 0.61), also higher than the overall mean of 2.77 overall. Furthermore, queer participants reported a negative affect mean of 3.64 (SD = 0.42) and a positive affect mean of 2.82 (SD = 0.51). Since both of these subgroups are among those perceived as targets in today's political climate, while the sample is too small to draw direct comparisons, the potential trend is nevertheless concerning. After all, if identity markers were found to influence affective responses among participants in this context, and if this trend were extrapolated to marginalized teachers as a whole, there could be serious and devastating implications for subgroups under fire, including psychological consequences, further destabilization of workplace contexts, and potential career or personal burnout.

Descriptive data in the "I cry on the way home sometimes" theme also elevate educator stories about how study participants have experienced attacks on their personhood or that of their students, resulting in feelings of anxiety, fear, and sadness. Appearing throughout the qualitative transcripts are examples of participants noting that their identity markers are a factor in their feelings, as with Patricia and Crystal's lesbian identities influencing their feelings of safety in their school contexts and their classroom actions. In another story, an early career non-gender-conforming survey respondent described how specific incidents such as ICE officers coming

onto campus to deport students and students' family members being taken into custody at green card application appointments have created a sense of fear and trauma on their campus for immigrant families.

However, teachers do not just passively observe classroom and campus spaces. Rather, as empathetic caregivers, they find themselves relating to their students' challenges and taking on the emotional burdens that their students carry. This was especially evident in the way that Gabriel assumed his students' problems as his own, as well as in Brenda's tears as she considered the impact of ICE action on her students' families and considered how she might help keep her gay students (and her own gay child) safe in a climate where their rights might be stripped from them. One mid-career math teacher I interviewed spoke to how the strain of trying to balance personal belief structures in the current politicized climate within her school is causing her to fray emotionally, leading to a recent incident in which a friend had to talk her out of quitting, despite having invested 11 years at her institution. These exhibits help contextualize the ways in which teacher and student identities, and specifically People of Color and queer identities, might serve to amplify and exacerbate the ways that these individuals experience and process the current polarized political climate and make sense of their contexts.

Given that even microaggressions are shown to have impacts to psychological safety for marginalized communities (Sue & Spanierman, 2020), in a world in which race and LGBTQIA+ topics have been increasingly targeted (Pollock et al., 2023), it seems no wonder that teachers might feel that those markers in particular are under scrutiny, either individually for themselves as well as for their students. Furthermore, teachers are operating in spaces which, as parts of the whole, may assume microcostic polarized behaviors. One survey respondent described her campus as "volatile" and as bearing a "clear and sometimes ugly divide," and Brenda explained

that her students come to school "armed and loaded with their parents' philosophies and political beliefs." Yet another survey respondent, an English teacher, noted that some students carry "fringe beliefs, especially regarding race and gender." If all social interactions can result in additional affective arousal, a type of "behavioral synchrony" called emotional contagion (Herrando & Constantinides, 2021, p. 4), these experiences could result in additional adverse affective responses for students and, by extension, for their teachers. When exacerbated by ongoing rhetoric, threat-rigid environments, and emotional contagion, these challenges for individuals in marginalized demographics compound concerns about psychological safety in the present time, as well as burnout (Genoud & Waroux, 2021), attrition (Ingersoll et al., 2014; National Center for Education Statistics, 2024), and other consequences in the long run.

The Complexity of Affect & Threat's Effects

Another key observation that came to light from the outcomes of this study is that, for the participants studied, heightened affective responses to the political climate corresponded with perceptions of organizational constriction, conditions that participants also described as intensifying both affective strain and workplace challenges.

From a quantitative perspective, statistical analysis showed that participants associated their political feelings with perceptions of greater threat-rigidity across all three subscales. Negative affective response to the political climate explained nearly 16% of the variance in site and 21% of the variance in district threat-rigid boundary permeability, as well as 28% of the variance in site and nearly 23% of the variance in district threat-rigid information management. Furthermore, looking at the district threat-rigidity subscales, all yielded mean scores above the midpoint (Boundary Permeability: $M = 3.13$, $SD = 0.85$; Decisions: $M = 3.66$, $SD = 0.80$; Information Management: $M = 3.34$, $SD = 0.84$).

At the site level, there was also a low positive correlation between positive affect and all three threat-rigid domains examined, regression findings from the combined model identified both negative and positive affect as statistically significantly positive predictors of

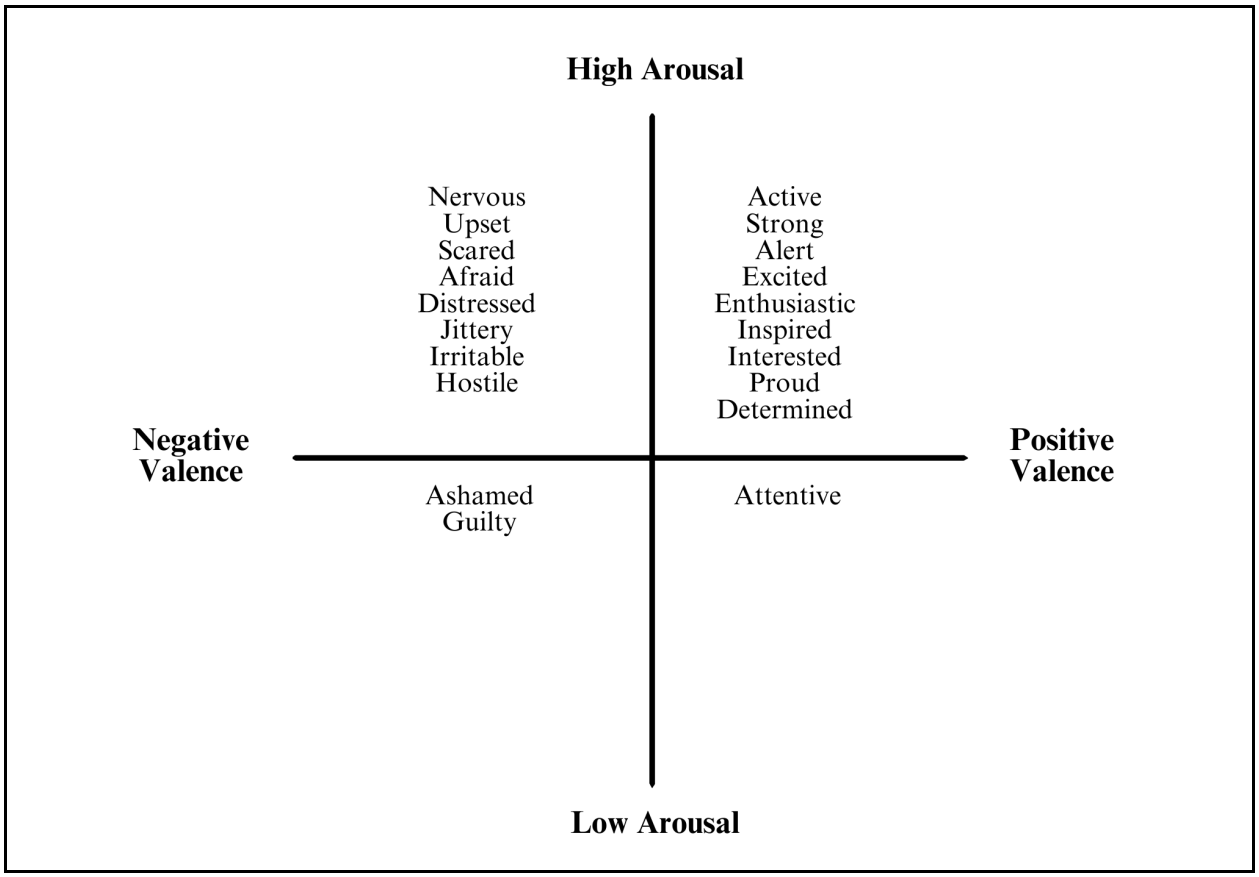
site boundary permeability rigidity, with the combined predictors accounting for nearly 24% of the variance in the outcome variable. However, interpreting these findings requires greater conceptual nuance regarding what “positive” and "negative” affect actually represent within the PANAS framework.

It is important to pause here to circle back to the literature, and specifically to the work of James Russell and his Circumplex Model of Affect (1980), a spatially circular model featuring affective dimensions situated in a circle, on which 28 affect words were placed using an x-axis representing the variation between displeasure and pleasure and a y-axis representing degree of arousal from low to high. This model is particularly important when considering the words that are included in the PANAS scale. This is because, while labeled “positive” and “negative” affect, the words do not necessarily constitute what the layperson might consider a ‘positive’ or favorable feeling. Watson and Tellegen’s model (1985), the PA-NA Model, was created when they found that self-reports of emotions tended to cluster around High PA and High NA and focused their model around these concepts. As a result, the PANAS scale focuses primarily on high arousal affective states. This means that, in the PANAS framework, “Positive Affect” does not necessarily indicate emotional comfort, optimism, or well-being. Rather, many PANAS Positive Affect words reflect heightened states such as “interested,” “alert,” and “attentive.” On the other hand, Russell’s model focuses more on the multidimensionality of affect. To demonstrate this, I leaned into Russell’s Circumplex Model of Affect and the placement of extant terms to generate a simple model which includes quadrant placement of the PANAS

affective terms to help conceptualize the ways in which PANAS items might be situated across the Circumplex Model of Affect (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Valence Arousal Model with PANAS

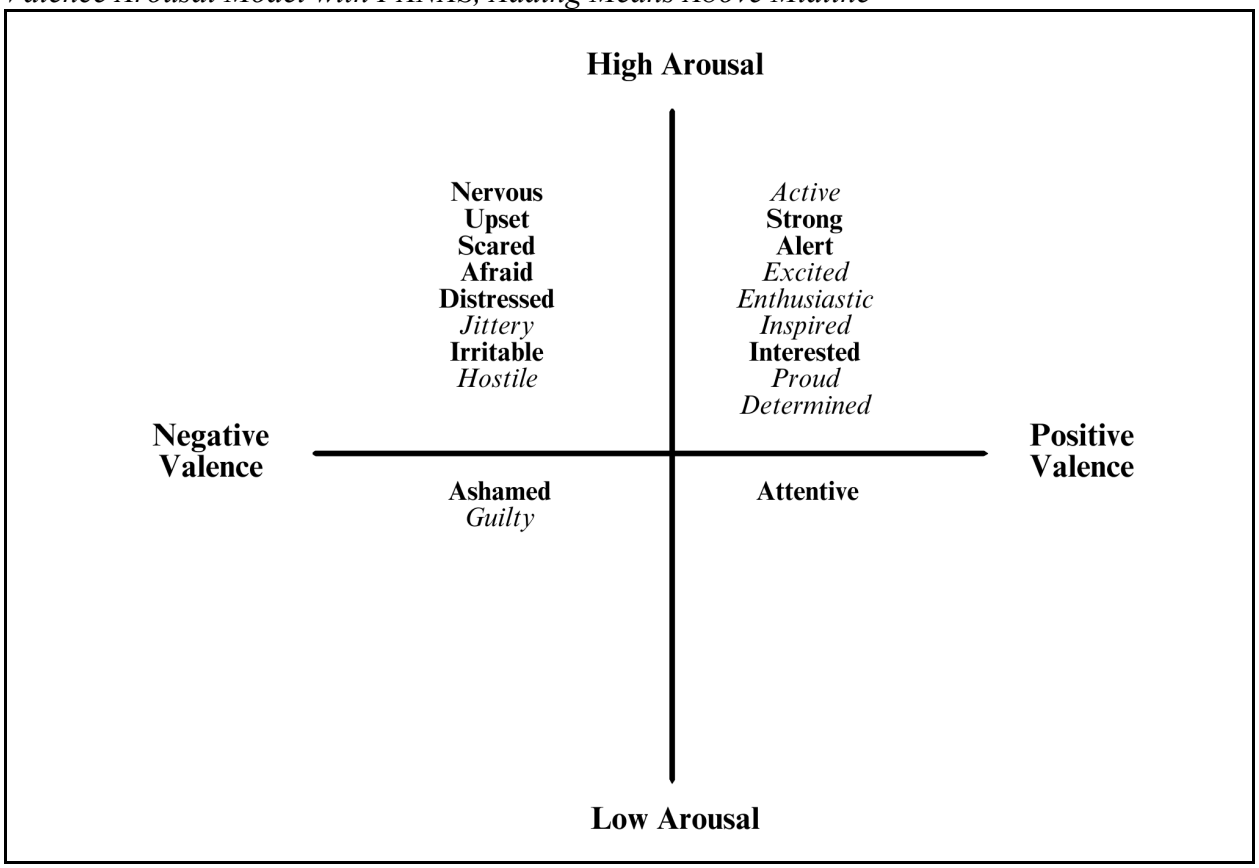


Based on Circumplex Model of Affect (Russell, 1980), PANAS-Momentary (Watson et al., 1985)

While all high arousal PANAS items are part of the PANAS Positive Affect scale score and are therefore reflected in the statistical analysis in that way, as I moved into synthesis of my qualitative and quantitative data, I felt it was important to generate a more nuanced view of these concepts by re-coding interview data as Positive High (Positive Valence High Arousal), Positive Low (Positive Valence Low Arousal), Negative High (Negative Valence High Arousal), and Negative Low (Negative Valence Low Arousal). With this in mind, I found myself very interested in item-level means for both Negative Affect and Positive Affect. Upon running these, PA items strong, alert, interested, and attentive were found to have means above the scale midline (M = 3.50-3.86), while NA items nervous, upset, scared, afraid, distressed, irritable, and ashamed had means above the scale midline (M = 3.11-3.95), shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6

Valence Arousal Model with PANAS, Adding Means Above Midline



Based on Circumplex Model of Affect (Russell, 1980), PANAS-Momentary (Watson et al., 1985)

These high-mean PA items are typically more associated with high arousal than they are with positive valence on the Russell (1980) Circumplex Model of Affect. Similarly, Watson & Tellegen's (1985) PA-NA Model conceptualizes these terms as indicators of strong engagement or activation. Interpreting these findings therefore requires caution, as elevated PA scores may reflect heightened states of arousal rather than positive-valence emotions. This is especially important when considering teachers' experiences within their threat-rigid schools and districts, as it helps us to better understand that teacher participants' "positive affective responses" more accurately reflect "high arousal states of reaction" to the political climate, and therefore are what is reflected in findings from the regression models as positive predictors of threat-rigidity

domains. This interpretation also helps explain why high arousal states may predict threat-rigid boundary permeability and information management, as well as, to a lesser extent, decision-making processes.

The theme "Trying to survive without scrutiny" explored these conditions that teachers were reporting in their schools through a threat-rigidity literature-focused lens and, when examined through these three lenses, adds additional contextualization as to how threat-rigidity is showing up.

Boundary permeability in threat-rigid environments refers to controls on what enters or leaves the organization, and showed up across the study in respondents' and interviewees' descriptions of the ways that site and district leaders navigated situations like new curricula, micromanaging of textbooks, and instructional content restrictions. When asked about the types of pressures, if any, that they experienced on their campuses, seven survey respondents directly mentioned restrictions on classroom or library books or within their curriculum. "There are curriculum documents not being brought before the board for fear of potential denial," one survey respondent noted, while another explained, "The district has micromanaged the texts humanities teachers can read, and board members have snuck into and confronted our school media tech about books they disagree with." Another respondent said that she felt hopeless in light of the restrictions being imposed upon her, explaining, "we can not teach books that are not approved by the district," a challenge, considering only three books on the short approved list of nine were even available to teachers for classroom check-out.

Information management rigidity, or restriction on how information is shared, framed, or accessed, was also seen, as when a survey participant, who declined to be interviewed, explained: "The district only wants input that agrees with their decisions. Anything else provokes

negative scrutiny," or when Elizabeth described "structural barriers to even having a conversation about (Ethnic Studies), even though they have all the data that shows that it's good for kids," explaining that this was due to the fact that "it hadn't been voted on" yet by the board.

Controlled messaging about information perceived to be controversial was seen across the data set, with 15 survey respondents reporting that they had been pressured to change or stop instructional activities due to political concerns, citing that this pressure comes from school board members (seven respondents), site leadership (five respondents), district leadership (five respondents), teacher leaders (five respondents), students and families (four respondents), political interest groups (three respondents), and other colleagues (one respondent). Furthermore, participants noted disproportionate reactions from board trustees including outrage and confrontation.

Participants also described limitations on decision-making, or controlling who participates or how they are invited to participate. Top down decisions, centralized within district authority figures, reflect this domain, as when Patricia explained that she believes these instructional decisions are made to protect leadership from retaliation by "politically motivated" board trustees who hire and fire, or when participants like Gabriel described "top-down" processes that "we've gotta hammer" that were perceived as "overstructured" by his colleagues.

This contextualization of threat-rigid processes helps to shape a more comprehensive understanding of how teachers responded to quantitative threat-rigidity questions in the survey. These exhibits of threat-rigidity, however, were not merely experienced as contextual framing for the teachers I engaged with. Rather, participants reported that threat-rigid conditions resulted in changes to how they make decisions and navigate interactions in their classrooms and on their school sites, including risk averse behaviors. These behaviors have run the gamut in terms of

how teachers respond, from one late career health teacher who explained that she just makes sure "that topics in the family life units are strictly rolled out from the state approved curriculum and no straying... even if students ask questions" to Elizabeth, who pre-plans how to navigate the future attacks she sees as inevitable using content standards.

Teachers also reported that these conditions further impacted their affective responses. Crystal described her experiences working in a context where she was expected to be lockstep with her department colleagues, noting that she now has to work through "a lot of PTSD moments." Others reported feeling "afraid," "alienated," and "alarmed" by the decisions being made by leaders in their contexts. This was especially the case with participants who felt that they, or their students, were marginalized, including members of the LGBTQIA+ community like Patricia and Crystal, and teachers serving students of color, like Brenda and Gabriel. This was also echoed through descriptive statistics suggesting elevated perceptions of district threat-rigidity in Person of Color subgroups and higher levels of site threat-rigidity in Person of Color and queer subgroups, although further research with larger samples is needed in order to confirm these observations.

Offering a stark and startling look at the consequences of threat-rigidity in action, one survey respondent — describing the current political climate as "dystopian" and her context as being threat-rigid at both the site ($M = 3.45$) and district ($M = 5$) levels on a scale score of 1-5 — described a system that has shifted in alarming ways. Whereas previously she noted hanging "everyone is welcome here" signs in her classroom, she later describes how her students now use "derogatory phrases like 'dirty illegal aliens' and calling women in the class 'piggy'," and suggest that she has no recourse against this behavior, since they are following the lead of the president. She explains receiving directives from her administration to remove books from her

classroom library and hearing rhetoric from the community at board meetings, and goes on to note her feeling that, in her current context, she "can not change the system… so it's best if I just take the limitations and work with them."

While only one example of a teacher's experience, this nevertheless offers a peek into how threat-rigid systems and political rhetoric, taken in tandem, might not only create hostile circumstances for teachers, but also potentially incapacitate them from leveraging culturally relevant practices (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and supporting students in their care. This, in turn, raises concerns about how schools might continue to maintain conditions for learning for all their students. Viewed through the lens of threat-rigidity theory, participants' accounts collectively suggest that affective response to political pressure may not only correspond with perceptions of organizational constriction, but also reshape how teachers perceive their own agency, risk, and capacity to engage in culturally relevant educational practices.

Collaboration: A Complex Condition

Finally, while this study's small data set provides limited analytic power regarding the relationship between three complex variables and their subscales, it nonetheless raises questions about how these variables might intersect in a possible moderation model. After all, data from this study suggests that collaboration may function as both a protective condition and a point of tension in schools responding to politically polarized climates, particularly when political polarization disrupts relational trust or psychological safety between and among educators.

Quantitative findings showed that teachers experiencing negative affect to political climate also perceived a reduction in perceived collaboration on their campus, with negative affect explaining approximately 21% of the variance in collaboration. The influence of negative affect on perceptions of collaboration in schools shown in this study suggests that political

climate and polarization may not exclusively be experienced individually and emotionally, but also extend into how teachers see, perceive, and experience the functionality of collaborative structures within their schools. From a constructivist perspective, this is significant because collaborative spaces allow teachers to collectively interpret policies, negotiate meaning, and make sense of their professional and personal experiences.

This finding is even more interesting given the lens of threat-rigidity as threat-rigid organizations, and specifically the ones described by this study's participants, are often characterized by centralization of authority, constraint of external resources, and limitations on the flow of information, which can also manifest as a lack of opportunity for dialogue, collaboration, and collective sensemaking. Taken in conjunction with findings indicating elevated perceptions of threat-rigidity, this might suggest that the political climate may not only shape teachers' affective responses, but also correspond with threat-rigid organizational conditions related to collaboration.

Collaboration is generally seen as a productive organizational condition in schools (Griffiths et al., 2021). When present, it provides an opportunity for increased trust, mutual respect, collegiality, and shared responsibility. In the theme "I felt like leadership had our back," teachers like Frank and Elizabeth described successful collaboration opportunities that they had at the district level. Frank shared that his experiences on district advisory committees allow him not only to connect with and encourage colleagues, but also to advise his district on financial, policy, and curricular decisions, while Elizabeth noted two meetings where she was able to be in community with her peers as she piloted a new novel with colleagues from other campuses as being "wonderful." Another interviewee, Crystal, spoke extensively about opportunities that she has both with her department and with her grade level teams to co-develop and share resources

and instructional plans, including pull-out days and weekly collaboration time. Structured formal collaborative opportunities, as described by these participants, provided key spaces for collective sensemaking about policies such as curriculum implementation and pedagogical practices. Additionally, professional learning communities, like the ones experienced by Gabriel and Steven, offered a space for discussion and the application of new ideas while, from a more dialogic perspective, Christina's bi-weekly seminars and Brenda's morning meetings served to create space for processing of current events and to prepare for possible outcomes and responses through collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative, and purposeful discourse (Alexander, 2006, as cited in Boyd & Markarian, 2011).

Of course, it is important to note that not all collaborative experiences were inherently positive. This seemed to be especially the case when my participants felt that they carried differing views or beliefs. Brenda said that she avoids potentially controversial conversations due to a feeling of unsafety and having "no desire to alienate my colleagues." One survey participant who declined to be interviewed said, "I purposefully don't interact with colleagues who do not align with my personal and political views." These examples show that political polarization may also produce avoidance and intentional disengagement from collaborative opportunities when they perceive ideological differences with their peers. Brittany noted, "I know that my political view is not widely accepted in education and so I have to tread lightly in conversations that I strongly disagree with." In these instances, collaboration is still tense and imperfect.

Nevertheless, even teachers like Brittany, who feel that their beliefs are less common and accepted, note that having colleagues to process information with helps them to move past the more challenging moments and continue the work of supporting students in their contexts. This reinforces the ideas that relationship building and shared values are, in fact, key to supporting

collaboration in a school context (Griffiths et al, 2021) and that listening and relational trust, like those built through restorative practices, can support all members of the school community during challenging times (Brown, 2017).

The fact that diminished collaboration was related to negative affective response to the political climate while concurrently being seen in threat-rigid spaces (appearing across boundary permeability, decision-making, and information management) is important to attend to. After all, extant literature shows that teacher collaboration, collective sensemaking, and dialogic interaction are important elements supporting teachers' mediation of policies to practice, indicating that having these conditions in place is important if teachers are to productively navigate curriculum, procedural, and other policies (curricular, procedural, and otherwise) (Birbili & Myrovali, 2020; Coburn, 2001; Lytra & Gelir, 2023; Mansouri et al., 2021; Palkki, 2023; Suurtamm & Koch, 2014; Van Galen, 2004; Xu & Lu, 2022). Other studies indicate that teachers' collaborative practices can influence collective responsibility and efficiency in teaching (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020), supporting the best student-facing outcomes in schools.

Ultimately, these findings suggest that the organizational conditions that are cultivated by schools within times of polarization may shape not only teachers' affective wellbeing, but also the collaborative meaning-making processes through which they negotiate policy, practice, and professional identity.

Implications

Research Implications

The findings of this study have powerful implications with regard to research. As the study exists at the intersection of three main bodies of scholarship: political science, psychology, and educational leadership, its findings can inform scholarly investigations across all three

bodies as well as in complex intersections between them. For example, looking at politics alone, the study provides important context about the influence of the current political climate on individuals, specifically teachers, which can be further explored by researchers. When political climate and the sociology of education are combined, the implications are even more salient. Findings indicate that public high school teachers who report more negative affective responses to the political climate also report lower perceived opportunities for collaboration. Additionally, they reported conditions of threat-rigidity in their school settings. As these findings echo other studies regarding negative affective responses being linked to political rhetoric (Dodd et al., 2012; Steiger et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2019), these public high schools can be examined as a microcosm of the larger landscape, suggesting that there are key research implications for the sociology of education, focusing not only on how schools operate as social institutions, but also on how they reflect society as a whole.

Additionally, since threat-rigid conditions are being reported in contexts that are perceived as having reduced collaborative structures, we might infer that schools can function as politically reactive institutions. In these contexts, organizational structures, communication patterns, and collaborative conditions may shift in response to external sociopolitical pressure, potentially resulting in reduced collaboration opportunities, increased intrapersonal tension, and constrained instructional decision-making (Olsen & Sexton, 2009; Staw et al., 1981; McCarthy et al., 2016), and becoming more aligned with an organizational status quo. Likewise, the sociological concept of coercive institutional isomorphism in the context of schools (Cardona & Dasi, 2020; Powell, 1983; Puttick, 2015) indicates that differing institutions — such as educational organizations — will become more similar to one another in structure and practices in response to external pressure, among other variables. Therefore, findings of sociopolitical

conditions as external pressures impacting schools might suggest that other types of schools, such as private, charter, and expanded grade or age settings might also be examined for similar variables as this study to see if similar outcomes might be manifesting across other adjacent educational systems.

It is also important to note that, while this research is grounded in an educational context, there are significant implications for how we understand systems, power, and rhetoric both in the field of education and in other ecosystems at large. One of the central implications of this study is that political rhetoric and polarization may function not only as external sociopolitical phenomena, but also as internalized organizational conditions that shape affective experience, collaboration, and institutional behavior within schools. While this study only investigated the relationship between affective responses and perception of school climate and threat-rigidity, future studies might also be designed: to explore how political narratives shape administrative behavior, to examine specific types of rhetoric for differing outcomes, to identify micro responses to macro political discourse, and even to expand study research questions to non-educational systems. Research projects like these might allow researchers to better understand how contentious political cycles, polarized narratives, and even public discourse ultimately infiltrate organizational and governance structures and shape working and living conditions for those within the institution. It is through the meaningful expansion of research in these interrelated domains that we might be able to better understand the repercussions of political rhetoric and climate on schools and systems at large.

Empirically, this research also contributes to and has implications for research on teachers, providing evidence that political polarization may permeate the school ecosystem in ways that reshape teachers' experiences, while demonstrating that teachers' negative affective

responses to political rhetoric are associated with reduced perceptions of collaboration. As previously mentioned, the findings also demonstrate that teachers' affective responses to polarized rhetoric are linked to specific organizational behaviors, thus reinforcing the importance of studying teachers as institutional and political actors embedded within complex sociopolitical systems.

While certainly the importance of the role of teacher as the mediator of policy has been explored across the scholarly literature (Brain et al., 2006; Martinie et al., 2016; Suurtamm & Koch, 2014) and has even been tied to politics (Grossman, 2010), this research takes it one step further into the sociological domain. In examining the experiences of teachers in the current climate as it manifests both within and outside of schools, the study affirms that teachers' experiences, including how they interpret political rhetoric, may have direct implications both on their actions in the classroom as well as how they perceive and respond to the world around them. Further, it raises the question of whether political narratives might become organizational processes influencing the school environment at large.

Furthermore, this study also stands to contribute to the ways in which mixed method research is deployed to understand research that extends into multiple domains. While a concurrent embedded mixed methods approach with a quantitative focus allows us to examine the statistical relationships between perceived conditions, threat-rigidity, and affective response to political rhetoric, the added qualitative elements, both in the survey structure as well as in the follow up interviews, allow us to better understand, with nuance, what teachers' lived experiences are in their own words. This method, therefore, offers a more expansive understanding of the current political climate and the way it is being experienced by public

teachers in high schools, and may be replicable for future research in this arena, and can serve as a model for future research projects.

Finally, while political rhetoric has been commonly thought of in a more abstract way, this study adds a concrete perspective of its power. Political rhetoric does not simply get released into the wild, but rather its presence sets off ripple effects that manifest across school and organizational contexts and influence the participants therein, further illustrating that political polarization can have deep implications on daily institutional and personal realities.

Educational Leadership Implications

As with the domain of research, the field of educational leadership may benefit from this work. From a threat-rigidity perspective, educational leaders play a critical role in shaping how schools respond to external pressures such as political rhetoric and polarization. Leaders may respond adaptively through dialogue, collaboration, and shared sensemaking, or maladaptively, through constriction, centralization, and reduced communication. While California administrative credential programs address areas such as instructional leadership, personnel supervision, student discipline, and resource management (Administrative Services Credential, n.d.), the findings of this study suggest that additional preparation may be necessary to help leaders navigate politically polarized educational contexts.

One of these areas is communication. When it comes to communication, site administrators often lean on communications and public relations personnel employed by the local educational agency or contracted by their cabinet. Public information officers and communications officers are often responsible for setting policy, creating templates, engaging in proactive community engagement, and handling crises. However, a significant portion of daily and site-specific communications still falls to local leadership such as assistant principals and

principals. This study raises a concern about how these communications (both school-directed and in community platforms, social media spaces**,** etc.) or lack thereof might influence the teacher experience at those sites or provide tacit signals regarding what is supported, discouraged, or left unspoken in the school context. Local school leaders and their district counterparts must have an understanding of how political rhetoric and climate can influence affective responses in teachers, as well as their behavior and experiences in their schools, and to consider ways in which they can buffer school contexts to protect employees and, by extension, students.

This study also found that administrators' direct behaviors in creating collaborative structures and supporting staff helped insulate teachers' experiences, especially in the cases of Frank, Crystal, and Gabriel. These findings suggest that collaboration may function not merely as an instructional support structure at the school level, but also as an organizational resilience mechanism during periods of political stress. Considering this, training for educational leaders might include the introduction and design of structures such as empathy interviews and dialogic discourse communities, as well as the implementation of collaborative techniques like interdisciplinary teams and PLCs. While many sites use formal structures to guide their professional learning, building collaboration and authentic discourse into these spaces could create space for collective sensemaking for teachers, thus increasing their capacity to navigate policy implementation.

Furthermore, with a developing understanding that schools and districts may respond organizationally in threat-rigid ways such as centralization of authority, shifts to formalized processes, and restricted information sharing, leaders should be prepared to recognize these conditions as they arise and consider ways to develop structures countering them, among them,

resisting over-centralization and facilitating participatory leadership opportunities for teachers and staff. Leaders also must understand the role that they play in shaping and navigating affective conditions within these environments. Where uncertainty and ambiguity exist, stress can be exacerbated and threat-rigid conditions may increase.

However, even in less threat-rigid spaces, administrators' actions help shape the psychological safety of schools. This was particularly clear in Crystal's description of how her principal supported her in a recent parent complaint, helping both sides to feel heard. Educational leaders can influence how communication is handled on their campus as well as how and if collaboration takes place, and whether it is sustained or diminished. Since a lack of community can exacerbate stress, educational leaders' moves to develop community might do the opposite, affording teachers with the time, space, and resources to better manage external stress. After all, while threat-rigid circumstances may not be within the locus of control of these leaders, they can nevertheless implement actions to interrupt threat-rigid patterns.

Finally, educational leaders should consider how they can support the emotional conditions within their schools and districts. Educational leadership is not solely structural in nature, but also affective, as leaders help shape the relational conditions through which teachers experience political and institutional pressures. While collaboration, dialogue, and structures of support may help mitigate their impact on school systems, emotions themselves can be destabilizing for teachers trying to navigate the current political climate, and especially for those teachers holding marginalized identities. Educational leaders, therefore, should learn about emotional management strategies and resources, such as empathetic listening and normalizing discourse (Berkovich & Eyal, 2018), that they can implement on their campuses, as teacher emotional support is related to positive academic and social outcomes for children (Curby et al.,

2013). This is especially important for teachers from marginalized groups as, from an equity leadership perspective, ignoring how teachers from certain subgroups may be disproportionately affected could result in perpetuating inequitable organizational conditions.

It stands to reason that as principals and district staff work to optimize conditions within their schools and districts, an understanding of how external factors influence both policy implementation and organizational communication can better prepare them to navigate new initiatives as well as the day-to-day challenges of educational leadership. While these elements are not yet part of educational leadership training programs, structured professional development, resource banks, and conference presentations for administrators could improve conditions in public high schools by providing educational leaders with the tools and knowledge necessary to navigate challenges as they arise and to create adaptive leadership frameworks. By cultivating and employing protective organizational conditions, leaders may better position their schools to respond to political and rhetorical threats while mitigating threat-rigid organizational conditions.

Practice Implications

The implications of practice tie into these ideas about preparing individuals working in schools and thus cross the lines between the domains of educational leadership and practice. Research has long established the value of professional learning, collective sensemaking, and dialogic opportunities for teacher policy mediation. While teachers certainly can implement policy in any conditions, research shows consistently that those who have access to specific circumstances of support (financial, collaborative, and autonomous), are more likely to do so with fidelity, whereas those without often report struggles in implementation (Olsen & Kirtman, 2002; Werner et al., 2021; Woulfin, 2018). Therefore, it stands to reason that intentionally

developed professional learning opportunities, if offered by educational leaders across contexts, could create constructivist spaces that support collective sensemaking and reflective processing.

Professional learning informed by the findings from this study might therefore be developed in order to address several needs: how to engage in collective sensemaking about policies being implemented; how to build capacity around navigating affect and care in listening to one another, even in times of heightened emotionality; how to navigate complex communicative challenges such as public discourse; and how to engage in restorative and dialogic practices with colleagues.

While teachers often have access to a range of collaborative structures in their institutions, they may not be familiar with how to navigate these structures or maximize this time. Therefore, leaders might benefit from developing resources and structures to help teachers engage in collective sensemaking productively. These professional learnings could include elements like facilitated dialogue protocols, consensus-building practices, collaborative inquiry structures, and reflection routines designed to support shared meaning-making. Structures like these could help teachers engage more productively in ongoing meaning-making processes with others, which would in turn contribute to the realities and experiences that they socially construct.

Another professional learning opportunity might be to support an affective capacity training for teachers focused on emotional sensemaking and navigation. This training might support them in both identifying and naming their emotional responses, as well as with communicating clearly about them with colleagues in healthy and productive ways. While teachers in this study felt strongly about their beliefs, they sometimes noted uncertainty about how to navigate conversations with one another, choosing to avoid potential discord rather than

to engage in listening spaces as empathetic colleagues and fellow humans serving students. This type of training would build collective capacity to engage in conversations with multiple perspectives and to help develop rapport and empathy toward opposing perspectives. In a polarized world, teachers may have to contend with increasing affective responses and emotional moments. Creating space for them to learn how to navigate these feelings together by building empathy and taking a listening stance, via communication and relationship-building strategies, might therefore allowing teachers to find commonality (or sit in their differences, but with a mutual respect) and move forward in service to students. This would result in positive outcomes for the school ecosystem as both a workspace and an educational space for teachers, as they would feel more comfortable engaging with their peers collegially. Part of this training could include a break-out session for formal and informal school leaders focused on threat-rigidity's hallmark characteristics and how intentional moves and communication strategies might not only help coworkers engage relationally with one another, but also support a healthy school climate and relational dynamics within which collaboration can happen (Griffiths et al, 2021).

Restorative practice, as a discipline, focuses on building community, strengthening community, and resolving conflicts. Across the data set, participants in this study noted treading lightly and avoiding conversations with one another. As one survey respondent explained, "I purposefully don't interact with colleagues who do not align with my personal and political views;" these actions could result in even fewer opportunities for collaboration and collective sensemaking. Given that restorative practices practices are designed to help frame human dignity and voice across cultures and disciplines (Baile, 2019), training and support around the implementation of restorative practices may be a useful pathway forward as a support as teachers engage relationally with colleagues with whom they may not agree. This type of training could

integrate training in a specific restorative justice frame to develop a common language, before integrating role play opportunities and space for processing to help teachers build capacity in day-to-day engagements. This type of training, focused on taking a listening stance and building common understanding and relational trust (Brown, 2017) could support teachers in moving forward together rather than moving apart, as well as be transferable to working with students, families, and the greater community.

Finally, extending upon the restorative practice training above, professional learning focused on civic responsibilities, communication, and public discourse during times of political tension could be valuable for all members of the school community, including students, teachers, families, and administrators. Information management rigidity often shuts down lines of communication, as was seen in some of the contexts in this study, as when one survey respondent noted, "Admin told me that I could not talk about… how to keep students safe during ICE raids." But these moments — and especially moments related to student safety — are times in which communication *must* flow. If student safety, wellness, and learning are at the center of what schools do and teachers are at the front line, interacting with students and families, they must be equipped to answer difficult questions and to navigate school and district policy. This is true even if those responses are carefully constructed, crafted, and approved by school leadership. Therefore, role-specific sessions in areas like communication role-play and scenarios for practice across ideological divides, as well as media and press navigation support for administrators, could be valuable.

Professional learnings, like those noted above, could not only offer training and support, but also function as relationally-focused opportunities to build trust, dialogue and rapport, thus setting the stage for more collective capacity on other, more challenging topics when they arise.

Ultimately, while professional learning is just one possible avenue, trainings like these could be very valuable in helping teachers feel more comfortable operating in their work environments and alongside differently-minded peers and community members, thus increasing their sense of occupational safety. Teachers who feel safe experience a greater degree of job satisfaction in their workspaces (Avram et al., 2015), whereas teachers who feel under threat, as in threat-rigid environments, experience strong negative feelings including anger and hostility (Kelchtermans & Deketelaere, 2016). Therefore, administrative efforts to create and support spaces of psychological safety and insulation from political rhetoric — paired with thoughtful policy implementation — could potentially contribute to more job satisfaction and less attrition for the profession as a whole.

Policy Implications

These findings also have important implications for policy-makers at the regional and state levels, whose decisions often function as key levers for change, specifically highlighting the importance of developing more rhetorically resilient policies that can withstand challenges posed by politically-motivated actors, strengthening institutional support structures and resource pipelines, addressing organizational threat responses, and implementing processes that safeguard teacher well-being.

It is clear from multiple examples across the literature that policy roll-outs face significant friction in the form of rhetoric and misinformation campaigns (Rogers & Kahne, 2022) as well as direct resistance from political and community actors seeking to advance specific viewpoints (Jerit, 2004). For example, in California, the Ethnic Studies mandate, Assembly Bill 101, has been stymied due to widespread rhetorical pressure (Fensterwald, 2025; Wu, n.d.a; Wu, n.d.b) paired with a lack of integrated funding levers (Sleeter, 2025). However,

as with previous domains, knowledge is power. If regional and state policymakers understand how various policy implementations may be influenced by political actors, they can also be more thoughtful in both their development and roll-out of future policies. This means that, with the correct tools and knowledge in hand, the potential exists for policymakers to develop policies that are less susceptible to misinformation campaigns, develop roll-out plans which include comprehensive messaging resources, and use public relations best practices to couch messaging accordingly, thus ensuring that their policies are appropriately resilient to potential threats at the local level, including mandates like Assembly Bill 101, allowing implementation even when funding might not be present.

The findings could also point to the need for more expansive institutional support structures directed by policy-makers at the regional or state level. For example, California elementary schools are required to select curriculum from a list provided by the state, whereas high schools can develop their own processes, so long as those processes meet specific criteria (CDE, n.d.). Adding a criterion of robust feedback and community input around curriculum as well as other initiatives at the state level could result in decision-making that is more representative of diverse views. If collaborative decision-making is to happen in a meaningful way, the conditions have to be facilitated… and if conditions are to exist, they must be a prerequisite for participation.

State and local policy-makers might also consider setting clear guidelines to protect teacher instructional autonomy. In the current system, the weaponization of non-political terms has led to an increasing degree of ambiguity surrounding the idea of "appropriate language," as was shown by the qualitative responses from this study's participants. When teachers are unsure of whether using a specific term is controversial or safe, it can lead to a more threat-rigid

environment. While unions work to protect teacher autonomy, they themselves are under political pressure (Rev, n.d.), having been villainized in the current climate. Furthermore, unions do not protect all members of the school community, including newer teachers, and union participation is a privilege restricted to certain school contexts. Therefore, having guidelines set at a more structural level would be beneficial for increasing perception of safety for teachers across the system.

Policymakers might also consider developing or supporting practical systems to discourage threat-rigid leadership behaviors and structures to protect teacher well-being and retention. The threat-rigid experiences taking place on school campuses might be tempered were state and regional leaders to offer access to leadership coaching, legal resources and briefs, and online trainings to help educational leaders navigate the challenging polarized rhetoric in their own spaces, thus allowing them to focus their efforts on implementation of resources at their own sites and with their own staffs. Furthermore, policies could be developed to address protecting teachers experiencing political stress in their workplaces, including whistleblower protections and mandates and/or opportunities for teacher and community voice to be fully and intentionally represented in all decision-making spaces including school boards and state councils. While certainly pressures and threats will always exist in the political sphere, preparation and resources on the front end could potentially result in more effective policy implementations while reducing the noise and clutter created by bad actors.

Social Justice Implications

Finally, but perhaps most importantly, this study has important implications on social justice. As has been addressed above, the study examines reported affect and perceptions of individuals who exist in systems, examining how they react and respond to specific emic triggers

that they are experiencing. Taken together, this study suggests that politically polarized climates may shape schools not only through threat responses, but also through the affective and collaboration processes through which teachers construct their professional identities. Affect is not experienced in a vacuum and can be influenced by compounding factors, including demographics, social factors, and marginalization. This study finds that members of certain communities experience differing degrees of response and some communities are more at risk than others. This validates previous research about complex racial trauma (Cenát, 2023) and other realities experienced by the subdemographics reflected in my participant population, and it is especially important in an era marked by rhetoric that targets specific groups. This indicates a need for a reexamination of our systems with an important question in mind: how can we ensure that our systems are strong and resilient, both in general, but also specifically in service to populations more at risk of experiencing the deleterious effects of political rhetoric simply as a result of their personhood or social standing?

For example, it has already been previously demonstrated that rhetorical attacks referencing immigration directly impact Latino/a students (Chavez et al., 2019), likely because they are experienced as attacks on their personhood. In my study, similar politicized concepts were likewise noted, amongst them a concern about "deporting people 'non compatible with Western civilization,'" which left the respondent feeling "scared."

However, it is important that while this finding portrays a different political event (and likely party affiliation) than a different respondent's thoughts about how "Charlie Kirk's assassination" left them feeling "sad and helpless," both convey experiences related to both politicized rhetoric and negative affect and, presumably, both might be experienced concurrently in conditions nonconducive to learning and job satisfaction.

Therefore, research indicates a need for school systems to create insulation and protection for teachers and students who fall in politically targeted demographics, including People/Teachers of Color and LGBTQIA+ teachers and staff. Ensuring that the system is built and led with an understanding of the unique needs of these demographics and the people within them will lead to more secure and happy employees — employees who are less likely to go elsewhere to teach or to be victims of attrition from the profession due to burn-out or frustration (Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021; Yu et al., 2014). Secure teachers create secure classrooms, which provide safety to students, thus establishing a strong foundation for Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943). Therefore, psychologically safe educators may contribute to more stable and supportive classrooms for students.

Conclusion

Ultimately, it was clear that teachers in this study felt the influence of the current political climate, both personally and professionally. Participants described experiencing these influences affectively, often in ways mediated by their own identity markers or those of their students, and in tandem with threat-rigid conditions in their schools. These dynamics may compound existing trends related to psychological unsafety for marginalized individuals, educator burnout, and attrition, among other potential outcomes.

At the same time, the study also points towards possibilities for moving forward, shifting beyond avoiding difficult discussions, as Brittany and Steven described, or engaging in what Gabriel referred to as "a game of telephone." Schools can adapt, if not despite these challenges, than in response to them, as with the tensions that Brenda and Gabriel observed among students and their families. They can also create structures and conditions that help mitigate affective responses such as Elizabeth's fear, Patricia's hopelessness, and Crystal's experiences of trauma.

Political polarization appears likely to remain a persistent feature of the educational landscape for the foreseeable future. Yet students deserve hope… the hope that emerges through fortitude in the face of challenge, resiliency and courage during moments of vulnerability, and thoughtful, data-informed changes within schools that better position them to weather these conditions. As Gabriel reflected about his students: "Our job is to help them learn and grow and a lot of that (learning) happens in that uncomfortable zone." Perhaps educators and leaders, too, can take a lesson from this idea as well: through the facilitation of community building, dialogue, and collective meaning-making opportunities — even when they feel uncomfortable — schools may be better positioned to sustain relationally and affectively safe, supportive conditions during periods of political polarization.

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Appendix A: Survey Instrument

UC San Diego

The purpose of this study is to examine how political rhetoric affects teachers' emotions, experiences, and perceptions of their school environment. Participants for this phase of the study will take an online survey (approx. 10 minutes). Your insights may help school leaders and policymakers support teachers in polarized political climates. Intentional measures have been taken to minimize any risk to participants, and participation is voluntary. Your responses will remain confidential. You are also eligible to enter for one of three $100 VISA Gift Cards. More information about this study is available here.

By clicking "I consent to continue," you are giving your consent to participate in this study. You must be a 9-12th grade teacher at a San Diego County public high school to participate.

- ◯ I consent to continue.
- ◯ I decline to participate.

UC San Diego

The following questions are intended to ascertain your eligibility to participate. All participants must teach at a 9-12 public high school in San Diego County.

Do you teach at a public high school in San Diego County?

Go back

Continue

UC San Diego

Experiences with Politics and Political Rhetoric

The following questions are intended to explore your basic beliefs about politics and political rhetoric (persuasive language used in the political landscape).

How interested would you say you are in politics?

Extremely interested	Very interested	Somewhat interested	Not too interested	Not at all interested
○	○	○	○	○

How often do you discuss government and politics with others?

Nearly every day	A few times a week	A few times a month	Less often
○	○	○	○

Would you say you follow what's going on in government and public affairs...

Most of the time	Some of the time	Only now and then	Hardly at all
○	○	○	○

Would you say talking about politics with people you disagree with is generally...

Interesting and informative	Stressful and frustrating
○	○

What one word or phrase would you use to describe politics in the U.S. these days?

Go back

Continue

UC San Diego

Very briefly, what U.S. political event or situation have you been thinking about this past week? (e.g., a politician's recent public statement, a new policy being debated in Congress, the U.S.'s role in international events). This does NOT need to be an event or situation that happened in this past week, it only needs to be something that you thought about, even if it was a very brief thought. If you have been thinking about multiple events, please identify the one you have been thinking about the most, no matter how small the event may be.

What one word or phrase would you use to describe how the above event makes you feel?

Go back

Continue

UC San Diego

Consider your **feelings** about ***political rhetoric***. This scale consists of a number of words that describe different feelings and emotions. Read each item and then mark the appropriate answer in the space next to that word. Indicate to what extent you GENERALLY feel this way or how you feel ON AVERAGE.

	Very Slightly at All	A Little	Moderately	Quite a Bit	Extremely
Interested	○	○	○	○	○
Distressed	○	○	○	○	○
Excited	○	○	○	○	○
Upset	○	○	○	○	○
Strong	○	○	○	○	○
Guilty	○	○	○	○	○
Scared	○	○	○	○	○

	Very Slightly at All	A Little	Moderately	Quite a Bit	Extremely
Hostile	○	○	○	○	○
Enthusiastic	○	○	○	○	○
Proud	○	○	○	○	○
Irritable	○	○	○	○	○
Alert	○	○	○	○	○
Ashamed	○	○	○	○	○
Inspired	○	○	○	○	○

	Very Slightly at All	A Little	Moderately	Quite a Bit	Extremely
Nervous	○	○	○	○	○
Determined	○	○	○	○	○
Attentive	○	○	○	○	○
Jittery	○	○	○	○	○
Active	○	○	○	○	○
Afraid	○	○	○	○	○

Go back Continue

UC San Diego

Administration at School and the District

The following survey items are meant to explore how your experiences in your school environment may be impacted by administrator actions.

Using the scale to the right, indicate your level of agreement with each statement below: How often does your ***site*** administration...

	Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
Curtail quests for new information	○	○	○	○	○
Close off dialogue	○	○	○	○	○
Make decisions based on preconceived judgments	○	○	○	○	○
Believe teachers are unable to solve instructional problems	○	○	○	○	○

	Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
Withdraw from professional interaction	○	○	○	○	○
Use short-term fixes for complex problems	○	○	○	○	○
Respond to demands impulsively	○	○	○	○	○
Limit the flow of information	○	○	○	○	○

	Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
Limit outside assistance	○	○	○	○	○
Grasp for solutions in a frantic manner	○	○	○	○	○
Avoid opportunities for collaboration	○	○	○	○	○
Micro-manage school operations	○	○	○	○	○

Go back

Continue

UC San Diego

Using the scale to the right, indicate your level of agreement with each statement below: How often does your ***district*** administration...

	Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
Curtail quests for new information	○	○	○	○	○
Close off dialogue	○	○	○	○	○
Make decisions based on preconceived judgments	○	○	○	○	○
Believe principals are unable to solve instructional problems	○	○	○	○	○

	Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
Withdraw from professional interaction	○	○	○	○	○
Use short-term fixes for complex problems	○	○	○	○	○
Respond to demands impulsively	○	○	○	○	○
Limit the flow of information	○	○	○	○	○

	Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
Limit outside assistance	○	○	○	○	○
Grasp for solutions in a frantic manner	○	○	○	○	○
Avoid opportunities for collaboration	○	○	○	○	○
Micro-manage school operations	○	○	○	○	○

Go back

Continue

Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements about your school from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

	1 - Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	5 - Strongly Agree
Teachers design instructional programs together.	○	○	○	○	○
Instructional equipment is not consistently accessible.	○	○	○	○	○
Teachers are frequently asked to participate in decisions.	○	○	○	○	○
There is good communication among teachers.	○	○	○	○	○
The school library has sufficient resources and materials.	○	○	○	○	○

	1 - Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	5 - Strongly Agree
Decisions about the school are made by the principal.	○	○	○	○	○
I have regular opportunities to work with other teachers.	○	○	○	○	○
Educational technology equipment is readily available.	○	○	○	○	○
I have very little to say in the running of the school.	○	○	○	○	○
I seldom discuss the needs of individual students with other teachers.	○	○	○	○	○

	1 - Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	5 - Strongly Agree
The supply of equipment and resources is not adequate.	○	○	○	○	○
Classroom instruction is rarely coordinated across teachers	○	○	○	○	○
Good teamwork is not emphasized enough at my school.	○	○	○	○	○

Go back

Continue

UC San Diego

Political Rhetoric and School

The following questions will capture your perception about the influence that political language and rhetoric have on your job.

To what extent do you perceive that political language or rhetoric influences policy or leadership decisions in your school or district?

Very slightly or not at all	A little	Moderately	Quite a bit	Extremely
○	○	○	○	○

To what extent do you think that politically polarized rhetoric influences how teachers make instructional or pedagogical decisions in your school or district?

Very slightly or not at all	A little	Moderately	Quite a bit	Extremely
○	○	○	○	○

To what extent do political pressures or politically polarized rhetoric influence your instructional, pedagogical, or policy-related decisions?

Very slightly or not at all	A little	Moderately	Quite a bit	Extremely
○	○	○	○	○

To what extent do you feel free to make instructional, pedagogical, or policy decisions that reflect your professional judgment and expertise?

Very slightly or not at all	A little	Moderately	Quite a bit	Extremely
○	○	○	○	○

Go back Continue

UC San Diego

You're almost finished; there are only two sections left.

Please indicate below whether you have experienced any of the following at your school.

	Yes	No
Have you experienced any pressure to change or stop certain instructional activities or topics due to political concerns?	○	○
Have political concerns caused you or your colleagues to avoid or remove certain instructional materials or topics?	○	○
Has political discourse influenced how you interact with students, colleagues, families, or school leadership around instructional topics?	○	○
Have you noticed any changes in how decisions are made at your school in response to politically sensitive issues—for example, increased administrative control, stricter guidelines, or fewer opportunities for teacher input?	○	○

Go back

Continue

UC San Diego

On the previous page, you responded YES to the following statements. In 1-2 sentences, please briefly explain each experience in the space provided.

You noted you have pressure to change or stop certain instructional activities or topics due to political concerns. ***In 1-2 sentences, please share:*** *Where did the pressure come from?*

- [ ] Teacher leaders (PLC leaders, department chairs, etc.)
- [ ] Site leadership (Assistant principals, deans, principals, etc.)
- [ ] District leadership (Coordinators, directors, cabinet, etc.)
- [ ] Student and families
- [ ] School board members
- [ ] Political interest groups
- [ ] Other

Did this pressure result in any new restrictions or increased oversight?

You noted that political concerns have caused you or your colleagues to avoid or remove certain instructional materials or topics. ***In 1-2 sentences, please share:*** *What changes were made, and how did this affect your instructional planning or classroom practices?*

You noted that political discourse has influenced how you interact with students, colleagues, families, or school leadership around instructional topics. ***In 1-2 sentences, please share:*** *How has this affected communication, collaboration, or trust at your school?*

You noted that you have noticed changes in how decisions are made at your school in response to politically sensitive issues—for example, increased administrative control, stricter guidelines, or fewer opportunities for teacher input. ***In 1-2 sentences, please share:*** *Please describe what you have noticed.*

Go back

Continue

UC San Diego

On the previous page, you responded NO to all 4 statements. Why do you suppose this is the case? Are there specific individuals, processes, or structures in place that have prevented political pressures, rhetoric, and climate from impacting you?

Go back

Continue

UC San Diego

The following demographic questions will help to better understand if any trends exist amongst subgroups of respondents. ***These data are completely anonymous; please feel free to answer honestly.***

Counting this year, how many years have you been teaching? *If this is your first year teaching, please select 1.*

What grade level(s) do you teach? *Select one or more.*

- [ ] 9th Grade
- [ ] 10th Grade
- [ ] 11th Grade
- [ ] 12th Grade

Which of the following best describes your tenure status?

- [ ] Temporary
- [ ] Probationary
- [ ] Tenured
- [ ] My job does not qualify for tenure
- [ ] My school does not offer tenure
- [ ] Other

What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- ◯ High school diploma or equivalent
- ◯ Some college
- ◯ Associate degree
- ◯ Bachelor's Degree
- ◯ Graduate Degree

Have you completed a teaching credential program in the state of California or another state?

- ◯ Yes, I have completed a teaching credential program in California
- ◯ Yes, I have completed a teaching credential program in another state outside of California
- ◯ No, I have not completed a teaching credential program
- ◯ Other

With which ethno-racial identity do you identify? *Select one or more.*

- [ ] Afro-Caribbean
- [ ] American Indian/Native Alaskan
- [ ] East Asian/Asian American
- [ ] Black/African American
- [ ] Hispanic/Latino/Latina
- [ ] Middle Eastern/North African
- [ ] Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- [ ] White
- [ ] Other (please describe)

Go back Continue

UC San Diego

With which ethno-racial identity do you most strongly identify?

- ◯ Afro-Caribbean
- ◯ American Indian/Native Alaskan
- ◯ East Asian/Asian American
- ◯ Black/African American
- ◯ Hispanic/Latino/Latina
- ◯ Middle Eastern/North African
- ◯ Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- ◯ White
- ◯ Other (please describe)

Please select your age from the dropdown below.

Please indicate how you identify yourself. *Select one or more.*

- [ ] Female
- [ ] Male
- [ ] Gender non-conforming
- [ ] Decline to State
- [ ] Other

Please indicate how you identify yourself. *Select one or more.*

- [ ] Straight or heterosexual
- [ ] Lesbian
- [ ] Gay
- [ ] Bisexual
- [ ] Transgender
- [ ] Decline to State
- [ ] Other

Go back Continue

UC San Diego

The researcher will be conducting 30-minute Zoom interviews to better understand what teachers are experiencing across San Diego County. If you are open to participating in a 30-minute follow-up interview, please click "Yes, please consider me for an interview" below. If you do not want to participate in the interview, please click "I am not interested in an interview." Regardless of your selection, your survey responses will remain confidential and any information will be de-identified.

- ◯ Yes, please consider me for an interview.
- ◯ I am not interested in an interview.

→

UC San Diego

First and Last Name

What zip code is your school located in?

If selected, what are your preferred methods for me to contact you?

- [ ] Email
- [ ] Phone (call)
- [ ] Phone (text)

→

UC San Diego

Email Address

Phone Number (for phone calls)

Phone Number (for text messages)

→

Please wait while you are redirected.

Click here if you are not automatically redirected.

UC San Diego

Your completion of the below question indicates your interest in being entered for a chance to win one of three $100 VISA gift cards. *To enter, you will need to submit your email address in the field below. This submission is separate from all other components of this survey and will solely be used for contacting winners and for any other purpose.*

- ○ I would like to enter for the incentive drawing and will provide my email address for this purpose.
- ○ I am not interested in entering the incentive drawing.

→

UC San Diego

Email Address

→

UC San Diego

If you have questions about this study, please contact the researcher by phone at 760-215-2684 or via email at c1guthrie@ucsd.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the UC San Diego Office of IRB Administration at irb@ucsd.edu or 858-246-4777.

If you experience a strong emotional response to any questions in this survey, you are encouraged to contact the San Diego Access and Crisis Line (1-888-724-7240) which offers free, confidential counseling and community resources to support your mental health. This resource is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and in multiple languages. A live chat service is also available Monday – Friday, 4pm-10pm.

Appendix B: Interview Guide/Protocol

Researcher:	
Date/Time:	
Focus:	
Context:	
Location:	

- To facilitate my note-taking, I would like to record our conversation today. Only researchers on the project will have access to the recording transcription. ***Do I have your permission to do so?***

TURN ON RECORDING

- You received a copy of our informed consent for human subject requirements for IRB. Essentially, this document states that: (1) Our Zoom interview will take no more than 30 minutes and, while it will be recorded and transcribed, I will remove any identifying information from the transcript, (2) All information shared will be held confidential, and I will use only a pseudonym to represent what you say (3) Any portions and/or the entire recording may be erased at your request, (4) Your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and finally (5) I do not intend to inflict any harm. ***Please confirm that you understand this.***
- I also wanted to note that all research records including recordings will be stored securely on the hard-drive of a password-protected device using secure and encrypted data storage systems with a secure private secondary password and biometric identification and any handwritten notes will remain in my researcher's private possession. Identifiable records will be destroyed after the study closes. ***Do you have any questions?***

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. I'm conducting a study to better understand how the current political climate is shaping teachers' experiences and workplace conditions. Your responses will remain confidential and pseudonyms will be used in any reporting. This interview should take about 30 minutes. I have a script to follow for the main questions, but I may ask follow-up questions to have you expand or clarify some of the things that you say. Again, you can skip any question or stop the interview at any time. I'm interested in your personal experiences and reflections and there are no right or wrong answers. ***Do you have***

any questions before we begin? If you have any questions at any time, please do not hesitate to let me know.

1. Can you tell me a bit about your background and role at your site?
    Probes:
    How long have you been teaching for?
    How long have you been at your site?
    What subject(s) and grade level do you teach?
    How do you feel about your job?

2. How does your school or district typically respond to politically sensitive issues through policy decisions?
    Probes:
    How does this affect you as a teacher?
    How have local, state, or national topics shown up in your school's policies or decisions?
    Do certain issues seem more closely monitored or restricted than before?

3. Can you think about a time when politically polarized rhetoric affected your school working environment and your experience within it?
    Probes:
    How have conversations about equity, race, gender, and/or history been handled?
    How did tensions or support around these topics affect your school environment?
    What role did parents or community groups play in this dynamic?

4.Think about a time when there was pressure around a politically sensitive topic. What happened? How did leadership respond?
    Probes:
    Did you feel pressure to respond in a certain way?
    What impact did it have on your autonomy or ability to interpret and implement policy in your classroom?

5. What has your experience been like with collaboration and decision-making when there is a new policy to implement?
    Probes:
    What opportunities do you have to shape how policy is enacted?
    How does your school involve teachers in interpreting or adapting new policies?

6. What kinds of resources, such as time, training, materials, or administrative support, are available to you when implementing new policies?

Probes:
How have these supports changed over time?
What do you need that you haven't been able to get?
How do these affect your ability to implement or adapt policies in your classroom?

7. Is there anything else you would like to share about how the political climate or school conditions affect your ability to make instructional or policy-related decisions?

Probes:
What do you think people misunderstand about teaching in this environment?
What would you want policymakers or the public to know?

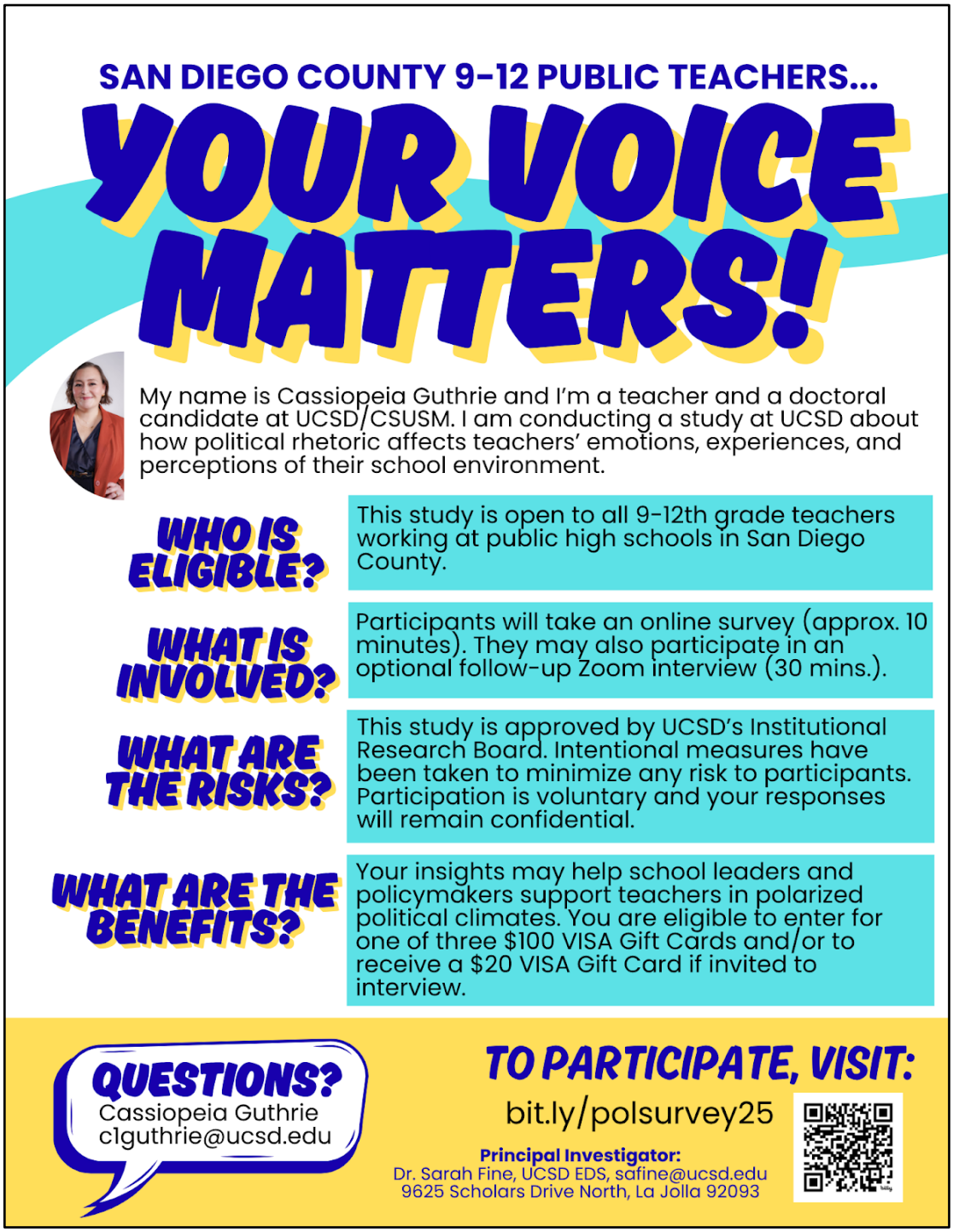
8. If you had more support or freedom in your role, what would you change about the way policy or curriculum decisions are made or rolled-out in your district?

Thank you for sharing your time and experiences with me. Your insights are very valuable and will help contribute to a better understanding of teachers' experiences in the current political climate. If you think of anything you would like to add later or have follow-up questions, please feel free to contact me.

END RECORDING

Appendix C: Informational Flyer, Social Media Graphics, and Social Media Recruitment

Informational Flyer



Instagram Stories Graphic:

SAN DIEGO COUNTY 9-12 PUBLIC TEACHERS...

YOUR VOICE MATTERS!

My name is Cassiopeia Guthrie and I'm a teacher and a doctoral candidate at UCSD/CSUSM. I am conducting a study at UCSD about how political rhetoric affects teachers' emotions, experiences, and perceptions of their school environment.

WHO IS ELIGIBLE?

This study is open to all 9-12th grade teachers working at public high schools in San Diego County.

WHAT IS INVOLVED?

Participants will take an online survey (approx. 10 minutes). They may also participate in an optional follow-up Zoom interview (30 mins.).

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

This study is approved by UCSD's Institutional Research Board. Intentional measures have been taken to minimize any risk to participants. Participation is voluntary and your responses will remain confidential.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

Your insights may help school leaders and policymakers support teachers in polarized political climates. You are eligible to enter for one of three $100 VISA Gift Cards and/or to receive a $20 VISA Gift Card if invited to interview.

TO PARTICIPATE, VISIT:

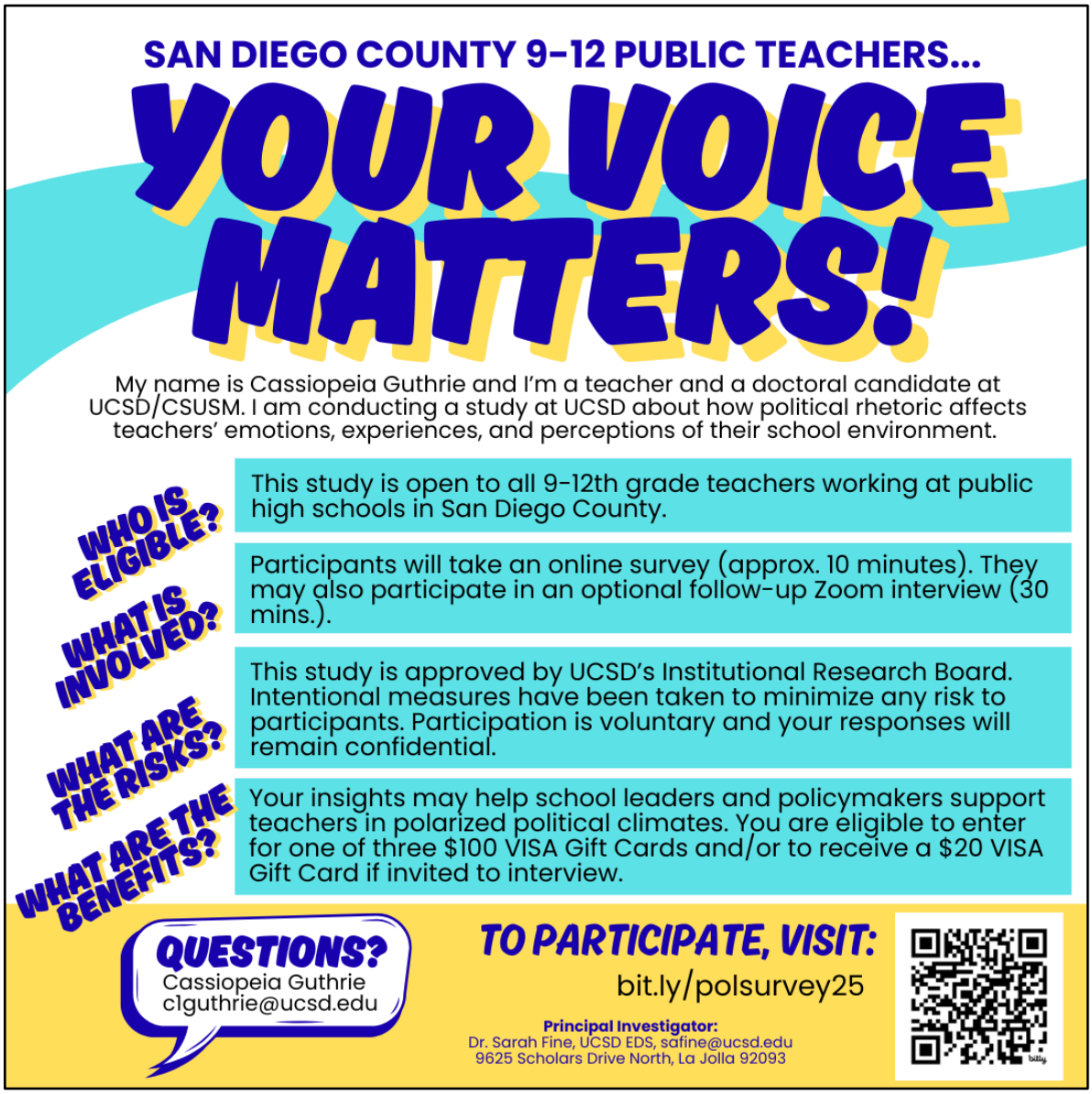
bit.ly/polsurvey25

QUESTIONS?

Cassiopeia Guthrie
c1guthrie@ucsd.edu

Principal Investigator:
Dr. Sarah Fine, UCSD EDS, safine@ucsd.edu
9625 Scholars Drive North, La Jolla 92093

Facebook/LinkedIn/X/Instagram Graphic:



Social Media Copy (variations similar to the below):

High school teachers, your experiences matter! Have you felt the effects of political rhetoric in your classroom or school? I am conducting a UC San Diego research study about how the current political climate influences teacher experiences. Take a short survey (10 minutes) and/or participate in an optional Zoom interview (30 minutes) to

help us understand what it is really like teaching in 2025! Click the link to participate: bit.ly/polsurvey25.

Eligibility: This study is open to all 9-12th grade teachers working at public high schools in San Diego County.

What is involved? Participants will take an online survey (approx. 10 minutes) and may also participate in an optional follow-up Zoom interview (approx. 30 minutes).

What are the benefits? Your responses will help develop a more comprehensive understanding of the ways that political rhetoric and educational environments might intersect and may aid in the development of resources for educational leaders leading their contexts.

Questions? Contact the Lead Researcher: Cassiopeia Guthrie (c1guthrie@ucsd.edu) or Principal Investigator: Dr. Sarah Fine (safine@ucsd.edu, UCSD EDS, 9625 Scholars Drive North, La Jolla, CA 92093).

Informed consent document: [link]

Raffle entry: [link]

Appendix D: Participant Invitation

Initial Email

Hello teachers,

My name is Cassiopeia Guthrie and I am a doctoral candidate conducting a UCSD study to learn more about public high school teachers' experiences with the current political climate and political rhetoric and with climate and social conditions in San Diego high schools. Your answers can help us develop a more comprehensive understanding of the ways that political rhetoric and educational environments might intersect.

This survey is open now and available through (end date). It should only take about 10 minutes, but will be very helpful for us in developing an understanding of if and how political climates and rhetoric influence school environments. All 9-12th grade public high school teachers in San Diego County are eligible to participate. Participation is voluntary and your individual responses will remain strictly confidential.

To participate, follow this link to the survey: (anonymous link)
Alternately, you may copy and paste the following URL into your internet browser: (url)

The results of this survey may be used to inform policy and procedures in schools across San Diego County and beyond, and your experience is deeply valued in this process. I am attaching an informed consent document for your review with further information. Participation in the study is not required in order to participate in the raffle; any individual may choose to enter for a chance to win a $100 Visa Gift Card. A link to enter the contest is provided here (link), upon declining the survey consent form, or at the culmination of the survey, at which point you will be asked to provide an email address. This email address submission is separate from all other components of this survey and will solely be used for contacting winners and not for any other purpose. A random number generator will be used to select the recipient, who will be contacted within one month of the close of the survey in order to ascertain where to send their prize. Individuals are not guaranteed to win any prize. Chances of being selected in the opportunity drawing are approximately 1 in 100. Furthermore, I will also conduct follow-up 30 minute Zoom interviews with select respondents. Participation is voluntary and confidential and all selected participants will be given a $20 VISA gift card as a thank you for their time.

If you have any questions about this survey, please don't hesitate to email me at c1guthrie@ucsd.edu or the Principal Investigator, Dr. Sarah Fine, at safine@ucsd.edu. Thank you in advance for taking the time to complete this important survey.

Warmly,

Cassiopeia B. Guthrie
Researcher
UCSD/CSUSM Joint Doctoral Program, Educational Leadership

Selection Email

Hello NAME,

Thank you so much for your participation in my study examining if and how political climates and rhetoric influence school environments. I am deeply appreciative for the time spent completing the survey as well as for your willingness to participate in a follow-up interview. You have been randomly selected to participate, should you wish to do so.

Interviews are being planned between (start date) and (end date) and will take place over Zoom. Interviews will last no longer than 30 minutes and will be conducted personally by me in order to maintain confidentiality. Participation is voluntary and confidential, and all selected participants will be given a $20 VISA gift card as a thank you for their time. Please note that these interviews will be recorded, though you may decline to be recorded and/or any portions and/or the entire recording may be erased at your request. All data will be de-identified and I will only use a pseudonym to represent what you say.

More information about the study is available in the attached Informed Consent document, which you should review prior to signing up. You will be given a copy of this form for your records. If you have any questions about this study, please call me at 760-215-2684 or email me at cbguthrie@csusm.edu. You may also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Sarah Fine, at safine@ucsd.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the UC San Diego Office of IRB Administration at irb@ucsd.edu or 858-246-4777.

If you wish to be interviewed, please click the following link to select a time and date: (link)

Thank you for your consideration.

Warmly,

Cassiopeia B. Guthrie

Researcher
UCSD/CSUSM Joint Doctoral Program, Educational Leadership

Snowball Recruitment Letter

Dear (name),

Thank you for your interest in my UC San Diego research study. I am writing to ask if you would be willing to share the enclosed information with public high school teacher colleagues in your network in San Diego County who might be interested in participating. There is no obligation to share and, regardless of your decision, it will not affect our relationship, but please know that your assistance would be greatly appreciated.

Thank you so much for the consideration.

Warmly,

Cassiopeia Guthrie
Researcher, UC San Diego

Enclosure:
Informational Flyer, Graphics

Appendix E: Participant Informed Consent/Exempt Information Sheet

You are being invited to participate in a UC San Diego research study titled Studying San Diego Teachers' Affective Responses to Political Rhetoric in Polarized Times. This study is being done by Cassiopeia Guthrie (Co-Investigator) and Dr. Sarah Fine (PI) from UC San Diego. You were selected to participate in this study because you are a public high school teacher in the greater San Diego County region. The purpose of this research study is to learn more about San Diego school teachers' experiences with the current political climate and political rhetoric and how those experiences relate to climate and social conditions in San Diego high schools.

OVERVIEW:
Your participation in this research should last approximately 10-40 minutes. If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete a survey which includes multiple choice and free response questions and should take about 10 minutes to complete. You are welcome to skip any question that you do not feel comfortable answering. This survey can be completed on any web browser, including on a mobile device.

The final question of the study will ask if you would like to be considered for participation in a secondary interview or not, as well as whether you would like to submit your email address for contact purposes for an optional incentive opportunity drawing or not. If you indicate an interest in participating in the subsequent interview, it will be conducted via Zoom, will be confidential, and will take no more than 30 minutes to complete. Interviews will be recorded via Zoom and transcribed using Otter.ai. Recordings are optional; the recording may be stopped at any time and portions and/or the entire recording may be erased at your request. All research records including recordings will be stored securely on the hard-drive of a password-protected device using secure and encrypted data storage systems with a secure private secondary password and biometric identification and any handwritten notes will remain in my researcher's private possession. Identifiable records will be destroyed after the study closes. Pseudonyms will also be used in place of identifiable names.

RISKS & INCONVENIENCES:
There are minimal risks and inconveniences to participating in this study. These include:

- The time required to complete the survey or interview may be inconvenient.
- Your contact information will be stored in the Qualtrics software if you submit it. There is some risk that your email address could be seen by others, but this risk is low.
- The use of electronic means of communication (e.g. the internet, e-mail, text messages, faxes, and social networking) may not be secure, private, or confidential in your community. Please consider this when determining which contact information you might choose to provide.

- Your free response answers in the survey or interview answers in the opt-in interview round may include identifying information which will be securely managed by the researcher; however, it will be de-identified in the analysis process and destroyed following the culmination of this project.

To minimize these risks and inconveniences, the following measures will be taken:

- The survey items have been limited to 12 pages.
- Your responses will be confidential. We will not use your name or any other identifying information in the reporting of results; only pseudonyms will be used. Your personal information will only be accessed by the lead researcher and will be removed from the data set prior to publication.
- The results of the survey will only be presented in aggregate and the researcher will not share individual results aside from brief de-identified quotes that represent themes seen across a range of respondents.
- Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relationship with the researcher or the university in any way.

BENEFITS & COMPENSATION:

While there are no direct benefits to you for your participation in the survey, your responses will help develop a more comprehensive understanding of the ways that political rhetoric and educational environments might intersect and may aid in the development of resources designed to support educational leaders in leading their contexts.

Survey participants and nonparticipants may enter for a chance to win one of three $100 Visa Gift Cards by including their contact email address. This opportunity is open to all, regardless of whether they have chosen to participate or not. Participation in the study is not required in order to participate in the raffle; any individual may choose to enter for a chance to win a $100 Visa Gift Card. A link to enter the contest is provided below, upon declining the survey consent form, or at the culmination of the survey, at which point participants will be asked to provide an email address. This email address submission is separate from all other components of this survey and will solely be used for contacting winners and not for any other purpose. The output from this questionnaire will be numbered in a chronologically increasing fashion, beginning numerically at 1, and a random number generator will be used to select the recipient, who will be contacted within one month of the close of the survey in order to ascertain where to send their prize. Individuals are not guaranteed to win any prize. Chances of being selected in the opportunity drawing are approximately 1 in 100.

Survey participants may choose to opt in to consideration to participate in a follow-up interview. 5-10 participants will be selected for participation in the voluntary, confidential interview phase, each of whom will be given a $20 VISA gift card as a thank you for their time.

RIGHTS:
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time. Choosing not to participate or withdrawing will result in no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. You are free to skip any question that you choose. Furthermore, recordings are optional; the recording may be stopped at any time and portions and/or the entire recording may be erased at your request.

CONTACT:
If you have questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact the researcher(s), Cassiopeia Guthrie, at 760-215-2584. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the UC San Diego Office of IRB Administration at irb@ucsd.edu or 858-246-4777.

By participating in this research, you are indicating that you are at least 18 years old, have read this consent form, and agree to participate in this research study. Please keep this consent form for your records.

If you experience a strong emotional response to any questions in this survey, you are encouraged to contact the San Diego Access and Crisis Line (1-888-724-7240) which offers free, confidential counseling and community resources to support your mental health. This resource is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and in multiple languages. A live chat service is also available Monday – Friday, 4pm-10pm.

Principal Investigator:
Dr. Sarah Fine, UCSD EDS
9625 Scholars Drive North, La Jolla 92093