

## Making politics palatable: Using television drama in high school civics and government classes.

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### **Abstract:**

The authors make a case for using *The West Wing*, a political drama that aired on NBC from 1999 to 2006, as an instructional tool in high school civics and government classes. The show offers a realistic portrayal of life in the White House through the eyes of Democratic President Josiah Bartlet and his senior staff that can further students' understanding of the traditional curriculum and aid teachers in broaching controversial political issues in their classes. Using two representative episodes from the first season, the authors describe how high school civics and government teachers can use *The West Wing* to achieve their instructional goals. The authors conclude by offering general suggestions to teachers wishing to use the series as part of their instruction.

**Keywords:** politics | film | secondary education | civics | government | *The West Wing* | social studies | education

### **Article:**

In 1913, Thomas Edison proclaimed that the recent invention of the motion picture camera would radically change American society to the point that "books will soon become obsolete in the schools... it is possible to teach every branch of human knowledge with the motion picture" (Reiser 2001, 55). Although history has proven Edison's prediction a tad ambitious, it is clear, however, that film has made a significant impact on both education and American society. The ubiquitous nature of popular film has the power to shape how individuals perceive themselves, their views of the past, and the institutions that form the basis of their daily lives (Ayers 1994; O'Connor 1988; O'Connor and Rollins 2003; Wineburg et al. 2007). Therefore, it is not surprising that film has become a pedagogical tool in all levels of education not only as a method to transmit content, but also as a way to challenge stereotypes, deepen understandings, and create emotional attachments to elements of the curriculum (e.g., Rorrer and Furr 2009; Stoddard 2007; Stoddard and Marcus 2006; Trier 2003, 2005).

In social studies education, Alan Marcus and Jeremy Stoddard (2007) report that most secondary teachers use portions of Hollywood films in their classes at least once a week, if not more. There

exists an extensive literature base advocating the use of film to teach history, arguing that motion pictures, when used correctly, can provide a more vivid and emotional depiction of historical events than what is typically found in textbooks (e.g., Marcus 2007; Marcus, Metzger, Paxton, and Stoddard 2010). Film has been argued as an effective method for gaining student interest in history (Marcus and Levine 2007; Weinstein 2001), fostering historical empathy (Stoddard 2007; Stoddard and Marcus 2006), and developing a critical understanding of history and historical interpretation (Marcus 2005; Metzger 2007, 2010; Rosenstone 1995; Seixas 1994; Toplin 2002). However, even the most ardent film advocates acknowledge that Hollywood productions should never constitute the entirety of instruction on a given topic. Rather, films are but one of many sources available to teachers, and they should be used strategically and always be contextualized for students through discussion and other means of content instruction (Marcus et al. 2010; Metzger and Suh 2008; Stoddard and Marcus 2010).

It is clear that history has cornered the market on descriptions of teaching with film within the social studies education literature, perhaps because of the large number of historical feature films produced every year. Yet, we believe many of the aforementioned advantages of using film in the history classroom can translate into other social studies disciplines. Admittedly, literature advocating the use of film in nonhistory disciplines is sparse (e.g. Beavers 2002; Kuzma and Haney 2001; Leet and Houser 2003; Lindley 2001; Mathews 2009; Serey 1992; Sunderland, Rothermel, and Lusk 2009); however, we believe this is related more to the general emphasis placed on history within most states' social studies curricula than problematic aspects of using film in other disciplines (Fallace 2008; Niemi and Smith 2001).

In this article, we make a case for using film as a way to supplement instruction in high school civics and government courses. There already exists a rich literature base within both political science and film studies dedicated to better understanding the relationship between depictions of government in film and Americans' opinions of politics and the political process (e.g., Gianos 1998; Giglio 2000; Gladstone-Sovell 2006; Graber 2009; Jackson 2002; Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 2006; Ranney 1983; Rollins and O'Connor 2003a, 2003b). Moreover, the literature on civic education contains several examples of students responding positively to visual representations of politics in educational environments (Forrest and Weseley 2007; Gaudelli 2009; Journell 2009, 2011c). Therefore, we believe that a film-based representation of politics, when used correctly, has the potential to provide a rich context from which students can make authentic connections with the formal curriculum as well as deepen their understanding of national politics.

Specifically, we provide a rationale for the use of film as a way to generate political interest and understanding within high school civics and government classrooms through a critique of *The West Wing*, a television drama that provides a behind-the-scenes look at life in the White House and the federal government's role in shaping public policy. Prior to entering academia, the first author used *The West Wing* in his own high school government classroom based largely on his personal affinity for the show. Looking back, he certainly did not use the show to its fullest

potential based on what he has since learned about using film in educational contexts, but the show was one of his students' favorite aspects of the class and he was able to regularly accentuate his classroom instruction with aspects from the show. Now, both authors are currently engaged in several projects in which we are studying the viability of using *The West Wing* in high school civics classrooms.

The rest of this article provides readers who are unfamiliar with the show a glimpse into the pedagogical potential of *The West Wing* through a brief history of the series and a detailed description of two episodes from the first season. For each episode, we will outline accompanying instructional activities that teachers could use in their classrooms. Whenever possible, we illustrate the activities with authentic examples from our research and personal experiences with the show. The article will end with general considerations for teachers interested in using *The West Wing* as part of their classroom instruction.

### Using *The West Wing* to Teach Politics

*The West Wing*, which aired on NBC from 1999–2006, follows the fictitious administration of Democratic President Josiah Bartlet through the eyes of his senior staff and members of the first family. In addition to highlighting these individuals' responsibilities within the administration, the show deftly chronicles their efforts to shape the public policy debate in Washington while attempting (often unsuccessfully) to control the media and manage their personal lives.

Throughout the seven seasons it was broadcast, the series focused on multiple aspects of the presidency that often mimicked the real-life events that occurred during the administrations of Presidents Clinton and George W. Bush, respectively.

*The West Wing* won a total of twenty-seven Emmy Awards during its run, including the award for Best Drama a record-tying four times from 2000–2003. Given the show's scope and critical acclaim, *The West Wing* has been the subject of much debate among both film scholars and political scientists (e.g., Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 2006; Rollins and O'Connor 2003b). Aaron Sorkin, the show's creator, envisioned the show as a weekly civics lesson and went to great lengths to develop authentic storylines and political depictions that would make the show as educational as it was entertaining, even hiring former high-profile White House staffers from both sides of the aisle to serve as consultants, such as former Clinton press secretary Dee Dee Myers and former Reagan speechwriter Peggy Noonan (Levine 2003; Pompper 2003). In a documentary special at the end of the third season, the show's producers interviewed Presidents Ford, Carter, and Clinton and senior staffers from the last seven administrations, including Myers, Noonan, David Gergen, Henry Kissinger, Leon Panetta, and Karl Rove, all of whom touted the realism of the show based on their personal experiences in the White House. Due in large part to this realistic portrayal of politics, *The West Wing* was often considered one of the more highbrow shows on television, with educated individuals from high-income households constituting a considerable portion of its viewership (Hayton 2003).

While the series received praise from many political scientists and government officials, it had its share of critics as well. In general, the show was subject to charges of paternalism (Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 2002, 2006) and claims of a disconnect between the fictionalized Bartlet White House and the “real” West Wing (Jones and Dionisopoulous 2004; Levine 2003; Skewes 2009). Conservatives often attacked the show as promoting a liberal agenda and depicting Republicans or members of socially conservative groups as ignorant or racist (Graber 2009; Podhoretz 2003). Many of these same critics also argued that the show was too idealistic and, therefore, unrealistic. Jon Podhoretz (2003) described the show as “the ultimate Hollywood fantasy: the Clinton White House without Clinton” and chastised its portrayal of a lack of animosity among the senior staff and the depiction of Bartlet as a heroic figure (Podhoretz 2003, 222). Although Sorkin's vision of the presidency is consistent with most other depictions found in film in that Bartlet is depicted as both tough and compassionate and his office is treated with dignity and reverence (Giglio 2000), critics have likened *The West Wing* to a political romance in which Bartlet is not a realistic depiction of an American president but rather a portrait of the ideal person Americans wish they had in the Oval Office (Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 2006; Quiring 2003).

Advocates for the series counter these charges by arguing that depicting Bartlet as a liberal Democratic president allowed Sorkin to create a more realistic portrayal of the presidency than that demonstrated in other films and television shows that have “neutral” political leaders who often come across as ambivalent (Alkana 2003; Gianos 1998; Gladstone-Sovell 2006). Others argue that the positions advocated in *The West Wing* are secondary in importance to the authentic depictions of the political process and the complexity by which public policy is created and implemented (Levine 2003). Moreover, viewers are privy to the ways in which these decisions are made, a process that the public rarely sees. As Donnalyn Pompper (2003, 26) notes, “[V]iewers come away from watching the program feeling as if they have witnessed politics in action, unmediated by journalists.”

Regardless of how one feels about the show, it is important to note that the primary function of *The West Wing* was to court viewers and make a profit, not unlike historical feature films that seek lofty box office returns. When placed into that context, political scientist Staci Beavers (2002) argues that the show offers considerable pedagogical possibilities for students to develop a more nuanced understanding of the White House's role in shaping public policy. Beavers makes a case for using *The West Wing* in undergraduate political science courses, and others have described successful use of the show at the college level (e.g., Holbert et al. 2003). However, there have been few documented cases of using *The West Wing* to improve secondary students' political knowledge. William Gaudelli (2009) conducted a study in which he used an episode from *The West Wing* in conjunction with two other examples of political film to analyze how students respond to democratic visual texts. Collectively, the students appeared uninterested in the episode and responded that they had a hard time following the plot. Yet, each of the

student groups Gaudelli studied was able to apply elements of the show to their prior knowledge of government and current events when asked.

Although all seven seasons of *The West Wing* have significant educational potential, we are choosing to analyze two episodes from the first season because the initial season contains a wealth of information teachers could incorporate into a typical civics or government classroom and is ideal for plot and character development. <sup>1</sup> The two episodes also illustrate what we feel are the most salient pedagogical benefits afforded to teachers who choose to use the series as part of their instruction. The episode “Five Votes Down” offers an excellent example of how teachers can use the show to supplement the formal curriculum while “Take this Sabbath Day” provides a glimpse into the show's ability to serve as a catalyst for discussions of controversial political issues.

### “Five Votes Down”

#### Plot synopsis

A famous quotation about the legislative process often attributed to Otto von Bismarck is that “laws are like sausages. It's better not to see them being made.” After completing a course in civics, most high school students can accurately describe the legislative process from a technical standpoint—prospective laws must receive majority votes in both the House of Representatives and the Senate before being sent to the president for his signature or veto. However, this textbook description fails to incorporate the political element that too often affects the outcome of legislation. This episode of *The West Wing* focuses on the dirty side of the legislative process that few Americans ever witness.

The episode begins seventy-two hours before a crucial floor vote in the House on a weapons bill that the White House believes will pass without problems. However, Leo McGarry, the White House chief of staff, receives a call from the House minority whip letting him know that they have lost five Democratic votes needed to secure passage of the bill. Given that the president has publicly announced his support of the bill, losing the vote would be a major public relations disaster for the administration. The whip's phone call sets into motion a whirlwind of activity among the senior staff in which they have to identify the five congressmen who have switched sides and then find ways to convince them to change their minds.

One aspect of this episode that is particularly instructive for students is that none of the five congressmen switched their vote for ideological reasons. Rather, one is concerned that his support of the bill will hamper his chances for reelection because he represents a moderately conservative district; three others are using their opposition as leverage to secure pork barrel projects for their constituents; and the fifth is using his vote to draw the attention of the administration who he feels has not properly courted him in the past. Equally educative are the methods by which the senior staff, unbeknownst to the president, attempts to bring the congressmen back to their side. In one instance, Josh Lyman, the deputy chief of staff, uses a

strategy of intimidation, which he likens to Lyndon Johnson's approach to dealing with Congress in the 1960s, threatening that the White House would find and publicly support a Democrat who would challenge the sitting congressman in his upcoming primary election. In other cases, deals are struck, either in the form of earmark legislation or—in the case of the congressman who felt slighted by the White House—a photo opportunity with the president. Finally, the last vote is secured by having Vice President John Hoynes, a former Senator and fellow Texan, use his personal influence to persuade the congressman to vote for the bill.

In the midst of this legislative battle, a subplot occurs that is part of a larger theme throughout *The West Wing* that highlights the toll of working at the White House on individuals' families and personal lives. On the night in which he finds out about the five missing votes, Leo, the only member of the senior staff who is married, arrives home at 2:00 a.m. to realize that he has forgotten his anniversary. In a subsequent scene, Leo returns home to find his wife in the midst of leaving, and she asks him for a divorce. In an emotional exchange, Leo admits where his priorities lie:

Leo: This is the most important thing I will ever do, Jenny. I have to do it well.

Mrs. McGarry: It's not more important than your marriage.

Leo: It is more important than my marriage right now. These few years while I am doing this, yes, it is more important than my marriage.

As Mrs. McGarry walks out the door, it is the first of many reminders throughout the series that working at the White House involves incredibly long hours and personal sacrifices that few on the outside truly recognize.

#### Instructional activities

The ideal placement of this episode would be at the end of a unit on the legislative branch to show students how the lines between the executive and legislative branches often blur as the White House uses its leverage to push certain legislation through Congress. The episode contains a wealth of information about the legislative process that teachers would need to flesh out as students watch the episode. As with any film, teachers need to provide their students with guiding questions or another activity to complete as they watch the episode (Marcus et al. 2010; Russell 2008). An example of guiding questions for this episode that we have used in our research can be found in appendix A.

Then, as students watch the episode, teachers should stop it periodically and debrief with them. The conversations should address key points and answer any contextual questions the students may have. The following is an excerpt of a classroom conversation that occurred when the teacher stopped the episode directly after Josh threatens the Democratic congressman who is worried about his reelection bid:

Teacher: We just saw Josh lay the smack down on in this last scene. I don't know if that is the best term, but that is the one that came into my head (laughter in the class). Why did the congressman change his mind about the [weapons] bill?

Student: He was saying that he won his district by only 52 percent in the last election, and the thing that this bill is on is weapons, and he is saying that his community likes guns.

Student: So, what is he worried about?

Student: That the NRA is going to step up and run ads against him.

Teacher: What is the NRA?

Several students: The National Rifle Association.

Teacher: Right. They are very active politically. Whenever there is a bill or candidate that wants to restrict gun rights, they make signs and ads against the candidate. So, he is voting based on what?

Several students: Reelection.

Teacher: So, what does Josh do?

Student: Threatens him.

Teacher: Yeah, he says that the White House is going to do what?

Student: Run someone else against him.

Teacher: Good. Any other questions?

Student: What is a whip?

Teacher: Good question. In the episode they talk about the whip telling them that they are five votes down. Based on that, what do you think the whip does?

Several students: Counts votes.

Teacher: Right. He is a congressman in charge of counting votes. Each party has one, and it is either the majority or minority whip. In this case it is the minority whip because the Democrats are in the minority in Congress.

Then, after the episode is over, teachers need to have a concluding discussion in which the broader themes of the episode are tied into students' prior knowledge of the legislative process. The following excerpt is from the same class and occurred after the conclusion of the episode:

Teacher: Early in the episode, Leo says that there are two things you never want to see made—laws and sausage. Why does he say that? What did you see about the legislative process?

Student: It is dirty.

Student: It is underhanded.

Teacher: Yeah, it is dirty. Underhanded—great word. Of all the people whom we see, now there are probably a lot of other congressmen who are voting the way they believe, but of the ones we see, how many are voting based on their conscience?

Several students: One.

Teacher: Which one?

Several students: Richardson.

Teacher: Unfortunately, that is the way it often works in Congress. You heard Josh talk about how he was so sick of Congress that he could vomit. I have said that very same thing when talking with my friends. Unfortunately, a lot of congressmen are only concerned with getting reelected, and they vote on politics, not how they feel.

Teachers could extend this conversation to discuss how events similar to those depicted in the episode contribute to the growing distrust Americans have of Congress and the resulting political ambivalence that occurs among the electorate (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Teachers could also have students analyze the phenomenon of individual members of Congress polling high among their constituents while overall approval ratings of Congress typically hover below 30 percent. This episode offers an excellent starting point for discussing the relationship between pork barrel legislation and national politics, a conversation that could easily segue into the debate over earmarks that appears to surface in every federal election.

Of course, the ultimate application of this episode would be to tie the realistic portrayal of politics in the show to a real-life legislative fight. Teachers could use whatever major piece of legislation is being debated in Congress and have students research the potential swing votes and hypothesize what types of backroom deals could be made to secure passage or rejection of the bill. At this point, students will have made the transition from learning about politics to beginning to think like a political scientist (Niemi and Smith 2001).

“Take this Sabbath Day”

Plot synopsis

This episode is unusual in that it is one of the few *West Wing* episodes to focus on a single topic—the death penalty. In doing so, the episode covers a breadth of religious views on capital punishment and reinforces the famous notion that the buck ultimately stops with the president.



The episode opens with a scene of the Supreme Court refusing to render a stay of execution for Simon Cruz, a drug kingpin who has been sentenced to death for his role in the murder of two rival drug lords and whose sentence falls under federal jurisdiction because of a recently passed federal statute on drug-related crimes. One of the defense attorneys knew Deputy Communications Director Sam Seaborn in high school and uses this connection to make a plea for a presidential pardon.

President Bartlet arrives back in Washington from an overseas trip with forty-eight hours to make a decision whether or not to pardon Cruz because of an archaic law stating the United States does not execute individuals on the Jewish or Christian Sabbath days. Bartlet, a devout Catholic, spends the next two days agonizing over the decision. Although he personally opposes the death penalty, he realizes that whatever decision he makes will set a precedent for his successors regarding the separation of powers and the Eighth Amendment guarantee against cruel and unusual punishment. In addition to seeking spiritual guidance from the Pope and his boyhood priest, Father Cavanaugh, Bartlet receives additional advice to stay the execution from members of Protestant (pollster Joey Lucas) and Jewish (Communications Director Toby Ziegler) faiths. However, Charlie Young, personal aide to the president, advises Bartlet differently, telling the president that he would want to personally carry out the execution of the unknown assailant who killed his mother, a Washington, D.C., police officer, a few months prior. Press Secretary C. J. Cregg takes more of an ambivalent stance toward the execution, at least until she has to report to the press that Cruz's mother is still alive, a task that forces her to acknowledge the human side of the death penalty. Moreover, Bartlet is constantly reminded throughout the episode that polling data show the vast majority of Americans claim to support capital punishment.

Ultimately, Bartlet chooses not to commute the sentence despite his personal objections and the advice given to him throughout the episode. In the moments before the execution is to take place, Father Cavanaugh arrives at the White House to offer counsel. As the clock ticks past midnight, one can see the anguish that the decision has caused the president, and the episode ends with him offering a confession to the priest.

#### Instructional activities

Research suggests social studies teachers often struggle with broaching controversial issues in their classrooms (e.g., Hess 2004, 2009). Often, this trepidation occurs because controversy occasionally breeds passion, which can be dangerous when accompanied by ignorance or a lack of context. This episode provides a unique way for teachers to put a human face on an issue students typically view in the abstract.

Although “Take this Sabbath Day” is a stand-alone episode, meaning that it is not reliant on previous plotlines, students can neither fully understand nor appreciate the magnitude of the death penalty simply by watching the episode. Therefore, it is important that teachers

contextualize the episode by having their students understand both sides of the issue prior to viewing. In one of our studies, the teacher had his students find ten arguments for and against the death penalty for homework two days before viewing the episode. The next day, the teacher had students share what they found, and he compiled a master list on the board.

On the day of the episode, the teacher had students write down how they felt about the death penalty using a scale from one to ten, with one signifying strong opposition and ten signifying strong support. Then, after watching the episode, the teacher had his students re-rate their opinions. While many opinions did not change, it was clear the episode had an effect on the way several of the students viewed the death penalty. Following are a few of the comments from students whose opinions did change (pre-episode is in normal font, post-episode is in italics):

2: I oppose the death penalty for several reasons. Money can be put to better use, killing is not right, and killing someone doesn't solve problems or help to reduce the crime rate. 4: My opinion slightly changed as I watched the episode. Religion is a major factor that many people consider, but I don't think it should when it comes to the death penalty. Religions are different and not everyone believes the same thing.

9/10: Because even though it cost more to kill a person, I feel that there is too much risk in keeping a person alive who is a threat to society. 5/6: Because now that I hear other opinions and look at how it effects [sic] people I have a new opinion about the death penalty.

3: I do not believe that the death penalty is a constitutional and just punishment because it is murder. It does not change the fact that criminals are everywhere and they are not afraid to die. But I agree that if someone cannot function in society and does not feel guilty for what they have done, there is nothing to do but kill them and let God decide what they do for eternity. I have two different opinions. From a religious standpoint I am a 3, from a political standpoint I am a 7.

8: I do not like the idea of killing someone or dying, but whenever someone does something horrible enough, this is all they deserve. 6: The government shouldn't have the power to kill someone, but these people do deserve it. Do they lose their rights after a bad crime? Who gets to decide?

As with "Five Votes Down," the teacher had his students complete guided questions for this episode (appendix B) and led students in a general discussion about the death penalty after the episode had concluded. By using the arguments made by the characters in the show, students were able to discuss the issue in a way that was not confrontational, as this exchange shows:

Student: When the Catholic guy talked, it made me change my mind [to support the death penalty less].

Student: See, it made me change my mind and support it more. This episode was about religion, but this [issue] isn't about religion. This is about society.

Teacher: Did Bartlet use religion to shape society?

Several students: No.

Teacher: Did he use religion to shape his own views?

Several students: Yes.

Teacher: We haven't talked about this that much yet, but we have something called separation of church and state in this country. Sometimes politicians try to use religion to shape public policy, which I think creates some problems. I have no problem if [politicians] are religious, but if they use religion to create policy it poses problems because we have large numbers of Christians, Jews, and Muslims in this country.

As the teacher's last comment suggests, being able to discuss the death penalty within the context of *The West Wing* may allow teachers to more easily resolve what Diana Hess (2005, 47) calls the “disclosure dilemma”. Although research on the merits of teacher disclosure are mixed (e.g., Journell 2011b; Hess and McAvoy 2009; Kelly 1986), many teachers avoid disclosing their opinions because they believe their position in the classroom wields too much influence should they decide to disclose their political views (Hess 2004; Miller-Lane, Denton, and May 2006). However, if teachers can preface their disclosure with episodes from *The West Wing* that present the merits of both sides of an issue, perhaps they will feel more comfortable expressing their opinions within the context of the arguments made by the characters in the show.

### General Considerations for Using *The West Wing*

The two episodes offer a glimpse into the pedagogical potential of using *The West Wing* in high school civics and government classes. Besides providing an enjoyable medium from which to engage students in political discussions, the show often delves deeper into the political process than most textbooks and many newspapers. From a content perspective, *The West Wing* provides a rich context from which to supplement the traditional curriculum. The first season of *The West Wing* addresses a multitude of issues—capital punishment, mandatory minimum sentencing, hate crime legislation, gun control, Supreme Court nominations—in a way that allows teachers to engage in discussions of these issues by using the arguments developed by the characters in the show instead of the popular narratives that students often bring to class from their homes and peer groups. Even though the liberal argument tends to win out in the end, the show generally represents both sides of an issue, as evidenced in the “Take this Sabbath Day” episode.

Of course, *The West Wing*, just like any television show, has limitations when a teacher considers its use as an educational tool. Teachers must always remember that films and television shows are made to attract viewers and deliver a profit, and *The West Wing* is no exception. In addition to the show's political focus, there are various subplots, such as the sexual

tension between Josh and his administrative assistant and the romantic relationship between President Bartlet's daughter and Charlie, which have little political relevance. The show also regularly uses language that might be tame in comparison to that which is used in the real West Wing, but it may be more vulgar than what most teachers typically allow in their classrooms.

Perhaps the greatest limitation of *The West Wing* is the fast-paced nature of the show, which was noted by students in Gaudelli's (2009) study. Characters engage in rapid dialogue, and it is typical for episodes to have three or four intersecting plotlines. This breakneck pace can be very confusing and frustrating for some students to process, particularly English language learners and students in lower-level classes. Therefore, if teachers wish to use *The West Wing* in their classes, they must realize that they cannot simply press play and assume students will automatically understand what is going on in each episode.

How, then, should teachers use *The West Wing*? Certainly, one way is to show clips or isolated episodes from the show to highlight aspects of the formal curriculum. The problem with using clips and nonsequential episodes, however, is that students do not necessarily know the characters, and they may spend more time trying to figure out the characters' relationship with each other rather than paying attention to the content being discussed, an issue Gaudelli (2009) encountered in his study. In our research studies, we have shown weekly episodes throughout the course of a semester, choosing episodes from the first season that both advance plotlines and contain significant political information. By using the show as Sorkin intended it to be viewed, students are better able to develop their understanding of the characters and plotlines as well as the complexity of national politics, even compared to the level of depth found in a typical Hollywood film (Vest 2003).

Even when showing a weekly episode, it is critical that teachers provide their students with adequate scaffolding to ensure understanding. Students should be given a character guide that includes pictures of each of the main characters and a short description of their role in the administration. We have also found it helpful to place an abridged character guide on the advanced organizer given to students for each episode (see appendices). For students who struggle with the pace and complexity of the show, we have found that stopping each episode in fifteen-minute increments and debriefing to ensure students are following along is an effective strategy. <sup>2</sup> Another strategy that might be especially useful for English language learners would be to provide them with episode transcripts, which can be accessed online. <sup>3</sup>

During post-episode discussions, teachers must move beyond simply recapping plotlines. Implicit and explicit biases must be detected and unpackaged, including those from a theatrical standpoint, such as music and lighting. As Jeremy Stoddard (2009, 425) observes, "Films inherently include perspectives that are often based in values of the filmmaker, even when it attempts to include balance." For example, to increase drama in the show, the White House often appears dark, and conversations take place within shadows (as one of the first author's former students once remarked, "You think the government would have enough money to buy a light

bulb!”). All of these technical tools play a part in how certain characters or issues are depicted that can affect the messages students take from the show.

Ultimately, the pedagogical potential of *The West Wing* rests on the ability of teachers to connect the episodes to issues and events that are occurring within the real-life political world. After contextualizing a particular episode, teachers should then relate what happened in the fictional world of the Bartlet administration to the policies of the current administration and have students engage in political conversations based on their personal opinions and the knowledge ascertained as a result of watching the show. Within civics and government courses, political discussion is not just a method of reinforcing content; it is a civil skill in which students should be provided opportunities for continual practice (Journell 2011a). However, to engage in political discussions, students need to understand both sides of issues, and *The West Wing* provides an enjoyable and authentic way for students to “see” arguments for and against many controversial political issues being played out in real life.

Although we have only described how to use two episodes, the scope of *The West Wing* allows teachers to supplement much of their required curriculum if they choose to view episodes on a regular basis. One of the teachers we studied kept a running list of Bartlet's positions on major issues as his students watched episodes throughout the semester, and during his political party unit, the teacher used those positions to explain the relationship between party platforms and individual campaign issues. Since they were given the information using a context in which they were familiar, his students appeared to grasp the concept quickly and were able to apply it to actual presidential elections. The same teacher also incorporated *The West Wing* into his political propaganda unit by having students watch real campaign commercials and then create their own either supporting or opposing Bartlet's reelection. Although watching actual presidential advertisements provided an authentic context from which his students could better understand various propaganda techniques (Journell 2009), the use of *The West Wing* continued that process by creating an advertisement for a “real” politician rather than a hypothetical candidate.

Other *West Wing* activities could include creating a flowchart of the current executive branch and hypothesizing what each member's role in the administration might be based on their counterparts in the Bartlet administration or having students evaluate the briefings of the White House press secretary and drawing comparisons to what they have seen on the show. Teachers can have advanced learners develop individual or group projects in which they critically evaluate both President Bartlet and the current president using specific criteria, such as Richard Neustadt's (1990) framework for assessing presidential power. This activity would be instructive for students because, not only would it force them to look objectively at the successes and limitations of the current occupant of the Oval Office, but it would also make them critically assess the realism of Sorkin's depiction of the office.

We do not have space to list every pedagogical possibility afforded by *The West Wing*, and surely, there are plenty we have yet to consider. We believe creative civics and government teachers can find a multitude of uses for *The West Wing* if they are willing take a risk and use film or television shows in a proactive way in their classrooms. At the very least, *The West Wing* presents students with a portrayal of politics that is more compelling and, in many ways, more authentic than what they see on television or uncover through traditional political instruction.

Appendix A. Guiding questions for “Five Votes Down”

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**“Five Votes Down”**

Answer the following questions as you watch this episode of *The West Wing*. A list of main characters in this episode is located at the bottom of this sheet.

1. What bad news does Leo receive during the president's speech?

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Based on the context cues, what do you think the whips in Congress do?

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Who does Sam and Josh think is needed to sway Congressmen Tillinghouse and LeBrandt into voting for the bill?

\_\_\_\_\_

4. In the midst of securing the five missing votes, what has Leo forgotten?

\_\_\_\_\_

5. How does Josh get Congressman Katzenmeyer (the one he meets outside) to change his vote?

\_\_\_\_\_

6. Why did Congressman Wick (the one Josh meets in the White House) decide not to vote for the weapons bill?

\_\_\_\_\_

7. How does Josh get Congressman Wick to agree to vote for the bill?  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. Why does Congressman Richardson (the African-American congressman whom Leo meets with) not want to vote for the bill?  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. What do we find out about Leo and Vice President Hoynes during their conversation?  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. How does Vice President Hoynes get Congressman Tillinghouse to vote for the bill?  
\_\_\_\_\_
11. Who ends up receiving the credit for the legislative win?  
\_\_\_\_\_
12. In the space below, write at least 2 to 3 sentences explaining what you learned about the influence of the White House on Congress from watching this episode.

**List of Main Characters in “Five Votes Down”**

Leo McGarry—White House chief of staff

Josh Lyman—deputy chief of staff

Toby Ziegler—White House communications director

Sam Seaborn—deputy communications director

CJ Cregg—White House press secretary

John Hoynes—vice president of the United States

Congressmen Tillinghouse, O’Bannon, LeBrandt, Katzenmeyer, and Wick—the missing

five votes

Congressman Mark Richardson—chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus

### **Appendix B. Guiding questions for “Take this Sabbath Day”**

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

#### **“Take this Sabbath Day”**

Answer the following questions as you watch this episode of *The West Wing*. A list of main characters in this episode is located at the bottom of this sheet.

1. What has the Supreme Court ruled?  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. What does Cruz's defense attorney want Sam to tell the president to do?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. According to Sam, why doesn't the United States execute people on Saturday or Sunday?  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. According to Leo, why does the president have the power to pardon Cruz instead of the governor of Michigan?  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. Based on his answer to President Bartlet, what is Charlie's position on the death penalty?  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. What is Joey Lucas's (Protestant) position on the death penalty?  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. According to the poll mentioned by President Bartlet, what is the position of most Americans on the death penalty?



---

8. What is CJ's job after the execution takes place?

---

9. What is Toby's (Jewish) position on the death penalty?

---

10. What is President Bartlet's (Catholic) personal position on the death penalty?

---

11. However, why does President Bartlet not want to pardon Cruz?

---

12. In the space below, write at least 2 to 3 sentences arguing whether or not you think President Bartlet should have stopped the execution. Justify your opinion with evidence from this episode.

**List of Main Characters in “Take this Sabbath Day”**

Jed Bartlet—president of the United States

Leo McGarry—White House chief of staff

Josh Lyman—deputy chief of staff

Toby Ziegler—White House communications director

Sam Seaborn—deputy communications director

CJ Cregg—White House press secretary

Joey Lucas—campaign manager for Democratic congressional candidate

## Notes

1. Short plot synopses of the rest of the episodes from the first season as well as subsequent seasons can be found at <http://www.westwingepguide.com>.
2. The authors would like to thank Alan Marcus and Jeremy Stoddard for their thoughtful suggestions on this aspect of our research.
3. Transcripts of all episodes from seasons 1 through 4 can be found at <http://www.westwingtranscripts.com/>. The authors would like to thank Jean Rosales for alerting us to that Web site.

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