
MAKING EVERY YEAR A PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION YEAR: USING *THE WEST WING'S* SANTOS/VINICK RACE TO SIMULATE ELECTION POLITICS

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Abstract

This article makes a case for using *The West Wing's* Santos/Vinick presidential election as a way to simulate election politics in civics and government courses. The series provides a behind-the-scenes view of the political decisions made by both fictional campaigns throughout the course of the primary and general elections. Teachers can use the content contained within the storyline to make connections to aspects of the formal curriculum found in typical survey courses and creating opportunities for authentic learning by allowing students to place abstract content into a practical context.

As the 2012 presidential election unfolded, first through the Republican primary and then the general election, social studies teachers across the United States tweaked their syllabi to include election-related projects and assignments. Presidential elections are one of the few high-profile political events in the United States that captures the attention of both political scientists and the general public, while creating an ideal opportunity for authentic learning that allows teachers to apply the formal curriculum to a real-life context for students (Haas & Laughlin, 2002). Since presidential elections only occur every four years, however, teachers are often unable to offer this type of engagement with electoral politics for the vast majority of their students. In this article, I make a case for using *The West Wing's* Santos/Vinick election as a way of recreating the context of a presidential campaign for high school civics and government courses.

Writing in *Political Science & Politics* over a decade ago, Beavers (2002) argued for the use of *The West Wing* as a pedagogical tool in undergraduate political science courses. The series, which aired on NBC from 1999 to 2006, has been the subject of much analysis by both film scholars and political scientists, most of whom agree that the series provides viewers with a nuanced view of the American presidency, albeit within the context of a television drama (e.g., Gladstone-Sovell, 2006; Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2006; Rollins & O'Connor, 2003). Creator Aaron Sorkin went to great lengths to develop storylines that were as realistic as they were entertaining, often employing former White House staffers from both sides of the aisle, such as Reagan speechwriter Peggy Noonan and Clinton Press Secretary Dee Dee Meyers, as consultants (Levine, 2003; Pompper, 2003). In a special episode that aired at the conclusion of the third season, former Presidents Ford, Carter, and Clinton, as well as prominent staffers dating back to the Nixon administration, all touted the realism of the series based on their personal experiences working in the White House.

Of course, the primary mission of *The West Wing* was to court viewers; therefore, Sorkin and subsequent writers often took dramatic license with certain material that may have created a

disconnect between the fictional presidency depicted onscreen and the “real” West Wing (Jones & Dionisopoulos, 2004; Levine, 2003; Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2006; Skewes, 2009). Conservative critics also chided what they viewed as a liberal bias in *The West Wing*’s depiction of government officials and policymaking. Jon Podhoretz (2003) once described the show as “the ultimate Hollywood fantasy: The Clinton White House without Clinton” (p. 222). Generally, the presidency created by Sorkin is one in which the office is treated with dignity and reverence. Some critics have argued that such a depiction of the presidency is unrealistic in that it portrays Americans’ ideal image of the individual they wish occupied the Oval Office rather than a more accurate portrayal of presidents who are multidimensional and inherently flawed (Giglio, 2000; Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2006; Quiring, 2003).

Despite these limitations, Beavers (2002) argues that *The West Wing* can serve as a pedagogical tool, provided that teachers treat the TV series as a type of text that needs to be critically analyzed and interpreted through such exercises as making comparisons between the series and real-life political events. In order for this type of critical approach to Hollywood fiction to occur, however, teachers must move film viewing from a passive task to an active process in which students are primed for the film through background information about the topic, monitored during viewing through guided questions and occasional checks for understanding, and debriefed after viewing to ensure a critical reading of the “text” (Marcus, Metzger, Paxton, & Stoddard, 2010; Russell, 2007).

Depending on the academic level of one’s students, teachers may be able to achieve these goals in a variety of ways, ranging from using advanced organizers that students complete as they watch a film or stopping at regular intervals to debrief important aspects related to content. In a recent study of one high school civics teacher’s use of *The West Wing*, for example, the teacher had success using guided questions in both honors and general-level classes (to see an example of the guided questions he used, refer to Journell & Buchanan, 2012a). In regular-level classes, however, the teacher found that students had trouble following the fast-paced dialogue used in *The West Wing*. Students were able to follow the plotlines more effectively when the teacher stopped each episode in 15-minute increments and asked students to summarize what had occurred up to that point (Journell & Buchanan, 2012b).

When used correctly, empirical research has shown *The West Wing* to be an effective instructional tool at both the undergraduate (Holbert et. al., 2003) and secondary (Gaudelli, 2009; Journell & Buchanan, 2012a; Journell & Buchanan, in press) levels. In the aforementioned study of *The West Wing* in a high school civics classroom, the teacher found that by regularly showing episodes from the first season, he was able to make his political instruction more applicable to students. After each episode, he was able to link what occurred in the show to the real-life political world, which led to a greater understanding of both current events and the political process (Journell & Buchanan, 2012a; Journell & Buchanan, in press).

In that study, what amazed the teacher the most about his students’ reactions to *The West Wing* was their enthusiasm for the show. The engaging characters, consistent humor, and gifted storytelling provided by the screenwriters allow students to get hooked on the show quickly. Once students become enamored with the plotlines, content that students would normally find “boring” becomes more palatable (Journell & Buchanan, 2012a). Moreover, the plotlines remain relevant even though *The West Wing* went off the air in 2006. Although the details might be slightly different, the show covers topics (e.g., terrorism, immigration, gun control) that are still discussed in

Washington today and draws the same distinctions between Democrats and Republicans (e.g., big government versus small government) that were central issues in the 2012 election. Almost all of the content covered in *The West Wing* could easily be related to contemporary political issues.

The majority of *The West Wing*'s seven seasons were spent chronicling the fictional presidency of Democrat Josiah Bartlet through the eyes of the President and his senior staff. In this article, however, I focus specifically on the campaign for Bartlet's successor between Democratic Congressman Matthew Santos and Republican Senator Arnold Vinick that takes place over the latter half of season six (Schlamme & Misiano, 2005) and the better part of season seven (Schlamme & Misiano, 2006) of the series. The focus of season six is the primary election process while season seven is devoted almost entirely to the general election. Although coverage of both the primary and general elections tends to focus more on the Democratic side, most likely because those characters were more recognizable to loyal viewers of the series, the writers make a conscious effort to give an insiders' perspective to both campaigns. Some episodes will only follow the Santos campaign while others will only follow the Vinick campaign, often as both sides grapple with similar issues.

Unfortunately, the writers also intermingle episodes focusing solely on the final year of the Bartlet administration with their coverage of the Santos/Vinick contest, which have no real pedagogical value for the purposes of teaching electoral politics. Those episodes can easily be omitted without losing anything from the election storyline. I have included a chart (Appendix A) of each of the election-themed episodes in seasons six and seven, along with a brief plot synopsis and a listing of relevant content that can be found in each episode. There are a total of 23 episodes over the two seasons that are related to either the primary or general elections. Of course, instructors pressed for time could show only the episodes from season six related to the primary election or the episodes from season seven related to the general election as they are not necessarily dependent on each other. In the remainder of this article, I will briefly summarize both the primary and general election storylines for those who may be unfamiliar with the series before ending with suggestions for classroom use.

The Primary Election Campaign

Season six takes place in the middle of the seventh year of Bartlet's presidency, and candidates from both parties are throwing their hats into the ring for their party's presidential nomination. On the Democratic side, the presumptive nominee is Vice President Robert Russell, although few within the Bartlet administration view him as a serious candidate who could win a general election. With less than two weeks until the filing deadline for the New Hampshire primary, Bartlet's Deputy Chief of Staff, Josh Lyman, flies to Texas and makes a personal plea for Santos to run for the Democratic nomination. After discussing the offer with his family, Santos agrees with one condition—that Lyman leaves the White House and runs his campaign.

At the onset, Santos is one of several lower-tier candidates for the Democratic nomination behind the two frontrunners, Russell and former Vice President John Hoynes. The first primary-themed episodes focus on the crucial primary states of Iowa and New Hampshire. In Iowa, all of the Democratic candidates take the "ethanol pledge" (although none truly believe in ethanol as a viable fuel alternative) while in New Hampshire, they engage in a variety of "grip and grin" campaign tactics while simultaneously trying to raise money for television advertisements and

collecting as many local endorsements as possible. Without a war chest comparable to the Russell and Hoynes's campaigns, Santos needs a strong showing in New Hampshire to extend his campaign. Following an effective primetime television advertisement and a strong debate performance, Santos wins 19% of the New Hampshire vote, which still places him a distant third to Russell and Hoynes, but increases his fundraising efforts and allows him to remain in the race.

As the race approaches Super Tuesday, the Santos campaign is running on fumes, and without at least a second-place finish in the California primary, Santos's hopes of securing the nomination are all but finished. However, only days before the crucial vote, the Hoynes campaign is rocked by scandal as allegations that the former Vice President sexually harassed a former staffer become public. This revelation causes a considerable number of Hoynes's supporters to back Santos, and overnight, the Santos campaign has become the alternative to Russell. Santos ultimately wins the California primary, and he and Russell then split the remaining primary states without either candidate having earned enough delegates to secure the nomination.

By the time the race reaches the Democratic National Convention, Russell and Santos are almost even in terms of delegates, setting the stage for a brokered convention. As primetime audiences watch, the delegates engage in multiple rounds of voting while a bevy of backroom deals are being made to try and persuade enough delegates to switch their allegiances so that one of the candidates can reach the magic number needed to secure the nomination. After two days and several rounds of deadlocked votes, the White House puts pressure on Santos to agree to a deal in which he would serve as Russell's running mate, but Santos refuses. After hearing Santos give an impassioned speech to the Democratic delegation, President Bartlet ultimately intercedes and throws his support behind Santos, which allows him to secure the nomination. On the last day of the convention, Santos emerges as the Democratic nominee, and he quickly chooses Leo McGarry, former Chief of Staff to President Bartlet, as his running mate.

Less attention is given to the Republican primary contest; however, viewers are told that unlike in the Democratic race, Vinick has garnered enough delegates to secure his party's nomination well before the Republican National Convention. After winning the primary, Vinick seeks to unite the party behind his selection of a running mate. As a moderate Republican who is pro-choice, Vinick realizes that he needs to balance the ticket with a socially conservative vice presidential candidate. He is initially turned down by his chief rival in the Republican primary, but ultimately decides on West Virginia Governor Ray Sullivan, a socially conservative former prosecutor who Vinick feels can help him connect with the Religious Right. As they await the result of the Democratic primary, the Vinick campaign staff begins a 50-state strategy that is designed to use the senator's moderate stances to win over independents and conservative Democrats regardless of whom Vinick runs against.

The General Election Campaign

Season seven chronicles the Santos/Vinick race, which is eerily similar to the real-life contest that would take place two years later between Barack Obama and John McCain (Funt, 2008). In Santos, the Democrats have nominated a young, relatively unknown three-term Congressman from Texas who would become the first Latino to be elected president should he win the general election, and the Republicans have countered with Vinick, a four-term senator from California who is in his late sixties and is a moderate on most social issues. From the very first episode,

viewers are led to believe that the race will be a close contest, as the Santos campaign is elated to find that the first Gallup poll after the Democratic National Convention only has them nine points down to the more established and well-known senator.

Throughout the season, the focus shifts back and forth between the Santos and Vinick campaigns as both sides attempt to develop a coherent message for the American public. The Santos campaign struggles at the outset as the media questions his selection of McGarry as a running mate. McGarry brings a wealth of experience to the ticket, including foreign policy expertise that Santos lacks, but McGarry also carries considerable baggage, particularly in terms of his health and prior bouts with alcoholism and addiction to painkillers. Santos also faces questions regarding his lack of experience, and his campaign struggles with avoiding turning the race into a referendum on whether a Latino is qualified to serve as president of the United States.

Vinick, on the other hand, regularly has to answer questions from the conservative wing of his party about his moderate stances on social issues, especially abortion. In particular, members of the Religious Right put pressure on Vinick to promise to appoint pro-life judges should he be elected, a promise that Vinick makes in private but denies once it is leaked to the press. Throughout the campaign, Vinick has to continually address issues surrounding his age and the fact that he never served in the military, issues that become more visible when Santos is called upon to complete his military reserve duty during the middle of the campaign.

Viewers are treated to a behind-the-scenes look into both campaigns as they grapple with many of the same issues, such as when to go negative, how to use the media to their advantage, and how to manage the impact of 527 groups and other outside forces on the campaign. Of utmost importance to both camps, and a reoccurring theme throughout season seven, is the concept of electoral math and how to make the best use of fundraising contributions. Viewers are privy to the difficult decisions that are made in the midst of a hard-fought campaign, such as when to pull money from one state and shift focus to another. Moreover, viewers can see how these decisions are informed by polling data and other factors, such as the expensiveness of certain media markets over others and the ability of the presidential contest to affect down-ticket races in certain states. Other behind-the-scenes issues that are addressed include the negotiations surrounding the number and format of debates, as well as the raising and lowering of expectations for debates depending on the perceived oratorical skills of a candidate, and the preparation for a legal battle should the election be contested or too close to call.

As the campaign progresses, Vinick begins to establish a sizeable lead, but that lead quickly evaporates in the wake of two unexpected events that alter the trajectory of the race. First, in a storyline that is reminiscent of the Trayvon Martin shooting in 2012, a young African American who had stolen a car and was carrying a toy gun is killed by a Latino police officer who claims to have shot the adolescent in self-defense. Santos subsequently makes a speech on race that begins to unite the Latino and African-American communities and helps ensure the Black vote on election day. Of more consequence, however, is the meltdown of a nuclear reactor in San Andreo, California, only weeks prior to the election. Once it becomes known that Vinick, a proponent of nuclear power and the senior senator from California, had lobbied for the construction of that plant, the race becomes too close to call. Both campaigns spend the remaining weeks prior to the election shoring up their respective bases and attempting to sway any remaining undecided voters.

On election night, the storyline takes an unexpected twist due to the untimely death of actor John Spencer, who portrayed Democratic Vice Presidential Candidate Leo McGarry, in the middle of season seven. The writers decide to have McGarry fall victim to a heart attack after the first wave of election results are reported, and his death is announced by the Santos campaign soon thereafter. With the voting booths still open on the West Coast, focus turns to California, which had been predicted to go to Santos. Perhaps buoyed by the announcement of McGarry's death, Vinick narrowly carries California, which means that the election ultimately rests on the results from Nevada and Oregon, both of which are too close to call. Santos eventually wins both states by the slimmest of margins, and Vinick chooses to concede rather than force a recount.

Instructional Implications

Creative teachers can develop a wide range of activities using this *West Wing* storyline if they are willing to think outside of the box and take time to unpack all of the political detail that is contained in each episode. First, however, instructors need to consider the practical aspects of using this type of film in their classes. Each episode runs approximately 40 to 45 minutes, which may make showing episodes in class challenging in light of the curricular demands found in a typical civics or government course. In a year-long course, showing an episode once a week or once every other week may be an option, but teachers working under the constraint of a semester-long, block schedule may not be able to allot that much time. If showing full episodes is not possible, then a possible suggestion would be to show selective clips from each episode pertaining to the Santos/Vinick election.

Once teachers develop a viewing schedule, the content afforded by *The West Wing* allows for critical discussions on a variety of topics pertaining to national politics. More importantly, these discussions could easily supplement topics found in the typical civics or government curriculum. For example, when discussing the nuances of the electoral college, students could apply what they learned in class to a practical context of how political operatives use that same information to make decisions about where to campaign or spend advertising money. Similarly, when instructors cover polling data in class, they can refer to *The West Wing* in order to show students how politicians use that information to make political decisions. Other topics that are present throughout both seasons and would be ripe for critical analysis are the relationship between politicians and the media, the divide between the moderate and extreme wings of both political parties, and the importance of certain issues, such as race and religious faith, as litmus tests for those running for office.

In addition, research on using *The West Wing* with secondary students has shown that students have an easier time understanding current political events after they have first been able to contextualize the political decisions made by members of the Bartlet administration (Journell & Buchanan, in press). Therefore, even the more subtle aspects of the Vinick/Santos campaign, such as Vinick being pressured to appeal to the religious base of his party, may better help students understand elements of real-life politics, such as the emergence of the Tea Party as a fiscally conservative wing of the Republican Party. For teachers who regularly engage students in discussions of current events as part of their courses, being able to connect events with the *West Wing* storyline that all students have seen may be helpful for establishing a common starting point for discussion.

Regardless of how teachers choose to use *The West Wing* in their classes, they must make students aware of the limitations of the series and take steps that allow students to critically analyze the series as a source of political information. For example, there are several storylines running throughout seasons six and seven of *The West Wing* that have little to do with politics, such as the inevitable romance between Lyman and a member of his campaign staff or the leaking of a classified military secret by a senior member of the Bartlet administration. For many students, these lighter storylines may be the spoonful of sugar that helps the medicine go down, so to speak. However, when creating assignments, teachers would need to be clear that students limit their responses to the political information contained in each episode.

Teachers should also make students aware of the liberties that the writers may have taken with certain information in order to make the show more attractive to viewers. In many cases, these liberties may embellish aspects of real-life politics, such as the relationship between the media and political campaigns, or seek to simplify complex concepts so that they can more easily be understood by a general audience (Skewes, 2009). Another obvious limitation of *The West Wing* is that it is written from a liberal, Democratic perspective, although the show typically does a good job of showing both sides of major issues (see Journell & Buchanan, 2012a) and the writers spend almost as much time on the Vinick campaign as they do the Santos campaign. Teachers, however, may have to consciously balance the liberal slant portrayed in the show with supplemental materials that are more conservative in nature.

As Beavers (2002) noted in her original argument for using *The West Wing* as a pedagogical tool, instructors must take steps to have their students critically analyze the series as a type of text. In terms of using the Santos/Vinick campaign, one way that instructors could achieve that goal is by having students compare what they are watching with accounts of actual presidential campaigns, such as news articles or analysis/commentary from the 2012 election (e.g., Sabato, 2013). Students could then place *The West Wing* in an appropriate context while still enjoying the pedagogical benefits of being privy to an insider's view of a national election.

Conclusion

Although it is unlikely that most teachers will reap the same benefits from the Santos/Vinick campaign as they might from integrating their curriculum with an actual presidential election, *The West Wing* does provide a viable alternative for the semesters in between real-life elections. The goal for all teachers should be authentic learning, which involves being able to take theoretical information and place it into an appropriate context (Newman & Wehledge, 1993). For students, being able to apply what they learn in their civics and government courses to a presidential election, real or manufactured by Hollywood, creates a much richer learning experience.

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EPISODE	BRIEF PLOT SYNOPSIS	INSTRUCTIONAL CONTENT
Things Fall Apart	A brokered Democratic convention between Santos, Russell, and Hoynes	Binding versus non-binding delegates; super-delegates; internal politics to flip delegates on subsequent rounds of voting
2162 Votes	Santos wins the Democratic nomination; selects McGarry as running mate	Rules/politics of conventions; possible floor nomination
SEASON SEVEN		
The Ticket	Santos receives first polling data of campaign; worries over McGarry being a drag on the ticket	Importance of polling data; analyzing polling data; bureaucracy of presidential campaigns
The Mommy Problem	Shaping the Santos message for the electorate	Life on the campaign trail; shaping candidate image and campaign message; deciding when to go negative
The Message of the Week	Shaping the Vinick message for the electorate	Life on the campaign trail; shaping candidate image and campaign message; attempting to unite the party
The Al Smith Dinner	Both sides respond to a Republican attack advertisement on Santos's record on abortion	Influence of 527 advertisements; deciding when to go negative; importance of abortion issue in presidential politics
The Debate	A live debate between Santos and Vinick	Outlining traditional Democratic and Republican positions
Undecideds	A racially motivated shooting in Los Angeles inserts race into the election	Debate bumps; targeting undecided votes; courting Black and Latino votes
The Wedding	Top Democrats question the campaign leadership	Electoral math; deciding where to allocate money and manage resources; down-ticket races

EPISODE	BRIEF PLOT SYNOPSIS	INSTRUCTIONAL CONTENT
Running Mates	The Vice Presidential debate	Lowering/raising expectations; impact of campaigns on candidates' families
Duck and Cover	A nuclear facility in San Andreo, California, experiences a meltdown and influences the campaign	Impact of national tragedy; using media to spin events
The Cold	Three weeks until election day; dealing with the San Andreo disaster	Deciding when to "shake up" a campaign staff; perceptions of a candidate's health/age; spinning/controlling media
Two Weeks Out	Both campaigns refocus their strategy for the final two weeks of the campaign	Electoral math; the importance of the personal lives of candidates
Welcome to Wherever You Are	Five days until the election	Securing turnout; celebrity endorsements; preparing for legal battle over election
Election Day, Part I	Election day	Exit polling data; impact of weather on turnout; electoral math; considering the variety of scenarios on election night
Election Day, Part II	McGarry dies from a heart attack; Santos wins a narrow election	The importance of swing states; electoral math