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Political Process as Envisioned by *The West Wing*

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The West Wing

Submitted by David Lombardo



For me *The West Wing* will be primarily remembered as compelling entertainment, but the experiences from this class have proven that a political education can be gleaned from the episodes. Although extracting that knowledge is not an easy task, and is one that requires further study as the DVDS of this show could be a useful supplement to any political science program.

In terms of educating a student *The West Wing* should either be used as a base from which to build or it should be a final capstone in a curriculum so that students can see theories and concepts applied in a meaningful and relatable way. My experience has essentially been a combination of the two approaches, as I began watching the show in high school and have rewatched every episode in the second half of my final year at SUNY Geneseo.

The first approach, using the show as a foundation for a political education is promising but would seem to have drawbacks. The main drawback is that it presents an idealistic and optimistic world that isn't always indicative of reality, and would instill a sort of naiveté in a young student who doesn't know anything beyond what he's learned from television. But while the show may present unrealistic outcomes, the scenarios and challenges they lay out to politicking and governing are very real, and are of a relevant interest to anyone with a desire

for a well rounded political education.

Many of the lessons that can be learned from *The West Wing* come in a very elementary fashion, so that if this was the primer for an education it would be adequate. Aaron Sorkin was writing for a general audience, and as such, many of the characters go to great lengths to explain what they're dealing with, the history of the issue, and present all sides of the issue. The history and various viewpoints that are presented are the most compelling reasons why this show could be extremely useful at a rudimentary level. At points you feel like you're in a classroom when you watch the show, as they delve into statistical sampling, explain Senate procedural rules, and debate the role of the media.

These conversations serve as an excellent starting point for any political education, and for me they made my textbooks much more comprehensible. I was able to imagine pocket vetoes in terms that didn't seem so abstract or have an added appreciation for how hard reforming social security actually is.

Beyond added comprehension from the show was an inspired love of politics that might have been equally as important as any quantifiable knowledge gained. The fact that the show was entertaining, and that it presented the political realm in a worthwhile light made the whole adventure

appealing to me, which is why I became more involved in politics and eventually sought a B.A. in political science. Thus, while the romanticism of the show may take away from its grounding in fact, it serves an ulterior purpose by driving people, like me, to explore the issue further and hopefully reaching their own understanding of issues and events. It's this drive that is instilled in people that makes *The West Wing* a very useful starting tool, as if it was an energy bar before a big race. It keeps you motivated, intrigued, and aware of the fact that there is a world outside of lectures and sometimes inaccessible books.

The second way to utilize *The West Wing*, as a culmination of theories and history, would most likely not have the same effects as if the show was used for a starting point. It's most useful capacity in terms of cementing an education would be as a frame of reference from which to debate things, probably in a manner similar to our Thursday discussions. The idea would be for a 300 level class of upper classmen to view how certain issues are covered and prepare to debate the validity of how things play out on *The West Wing*. Presumably they would be able to utilize their earlier knowledge from other classes to ensure an informed debate that would arise over how the show deals with issues like funding legislation, campaigning, and polling.

An upper level class most likely would be able to have a higher appreciation for the show than a general audience, and

would benefit from the political professionals that worked on the show. The list of contributors with respectable political credentials includes George Stephanopoulos, Dee Dee Meyers, and Lawrence O'Donnell. Their role on the show, of providing their own stories and creating new storylines, gives the show a high level of legitimacy. The new storylines they create could serve as test cases for students to debate, as they could muse about events that haven't come to fruition and could espouse their own predictions compared to the happenings on *The West Wing*.

It would also serve as a way to compare similar events from the show to history, and contemplate why they turned out differently. Two good examples would be the shutdown of the Federal Government in season five and the Presidential election in season four. The former would be applied to the standoff between Gingrich and Clinton, while the latter would be comparable to the Presidential election of 2000. With regards to both elections you can analyze the public strategies utilized by both campaigns, which in terms of the 2000 election would present itself as an interesting opportunity to assess Gore's terrible strategy and execution.

There is no downside to this approach of using *The West Wing* for upper level students, which is why I would recommend it. I think a class full of engaged students could really benefit from certain episodes and certain clips, cut in a fashion similar to the way I presented my GREAT Day video.

If I had to choose between the two approaches I would say that the latter is more effective and realistic. My own experience with *The West Wing*, in which it served as the base for my education, is probably impossible to reproduce in a classroom setting since I had the time to watch every single episode. With that understanding though, I would still recommend utilizing *The West Wing* for lower level classes as well as upper level classes.

I would recommend using the show in conjunction with both classes because it can work for a general audience or a more specific crowd. In terms of a general audience, which is what you have in an American Government class (110), there are specific episodes that could make certain themes more accessible and that's why I think those clips could be shown intermittently through lecture. The difficulty that arises is in understanding the fictitious world and its characters, but mandating they watch the first episode would provide enough understanding that no one would be lost after that.

That first episode could also be used in the higher level class to debate the role of the religious right in politics, as the White House contemplates appeasing the religious right over a perceived slight. Ideally a more specific audience, consisting of upper level students, would appreciate this dilemma for the White House, and it would serve as fresh way to approach politics.

Finally, the accessibility of *The West Wing* is derived from the fact that it is entertaining. I know academics don't like to think that a video can do their job or that entertainment has a role in a rigorous academic

life, but I think there's no reason artificial borders should be placed that would prohibit this show from educating students.

Frankly, I think it would be easier for students to learn if they were entertained with the source material. Since *The West Wing* is entertaining while remaining informative it should be used as a tool to supplement a political education, in terms of cultivating an interest and knowledge amongst beginners and honing the ideas of more seasoned students.