

**From the TV Screen to the World Stage: The Impact of
Popular Culture on Politics**

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Popular culture is imbued in almost everything we do— including politics. We see this fusion of politics and popular culture everywhere, from Saturday Night Live presidential parody skits, to Taylor Swift references in Senate hearings, to our social media feeds. This relationship between the popular and the political is neither new nor unimportant. I recently came across the following post on Tumblr:

The Lincoln Assassination is really just wild if you think about it for a moment. The younger brother of one of the most famous actors in the country- himself a famous actor and heartthrob in his own right- killed the President in a theatre and yelled “Sic semper tyrannis,” a line often associated with Brutus, a character that his brother had famously played. Like, imagine if Liam Hemsworth killed the Prime Minister of Australia at a red carpet movie premiere or something and yelled “I went for the head,” and Chris [Hemsworth, who played Thor] had to leave the Avengers press tour to tell everyone, “I swear I had nothing to do with this.” Imagine how weird that would be (Schmergo, 2019, np.).

One reply to the post remarked that, “[I was a] history major and yet this post is the first time I’ve fully appreciated the weirdness of the Lincoln assassination” (Phdna, 2019, np.). This comment truly resonated with me. I have of course learned about the Lincoln assassination, but when put in modern terms, with a reference to the Marvel franchise, it suddenly clicked for me. Popular culture has the ability to make history and politics relevant and interesting, and it is able to reach audiences that would otherwise be left unreached. Therefore, it is important to understand how this ability to impact us manifests in society, so that we can find ways to use this influence to better ourselves and the general public.

In this paper I answer the question— How does television impact the American public’s perception of American, English, and Northern Irish politics? To answer this question, I look at three popular television shows, each of which discusses the politics of a distinct country, and analyze the impact that these case studies have on Americans.¹ The first show I look at is *The*

¹ England and Northern Ireland are constituent countries within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. See Peterson 1997 and Spruyt 1996 for more on the distinction between “state” and “country.”

West Wing, which influenced how Americans felt about specific real life government policies, impacted how they perceived the role of the presidency, and increased political participation. I then look at *The Crown*, which served to humanize the royal family for Americans, increased their [perceived] knowledge about English politics and history, and made Americans more interested in English politics. In the third and final section I look at *Derry Girls*, which greatly increased Americans' knowledge of "The Troubles" and made them more interested in Northern Irish politics and culture in general. There are only three cases in this paper, but the findings have broad implications and it is highly likely that studies of other cases would yield similar results. I conclude that representations of politics in popular culture make us more engaged and interested in the politics of the time and place represented; and that the real-world impact of these shows can unintentionally (or intentionally) change our level of political awareness, engagement, or knowledge. This impact can be used for good– to combat harmful stereotypes and divisive politics– or can be used for bad– as part of a disinformation campaign.

In twelfth grade I took AP Government. I came into the class barely knowing the difference between a Republican and a Democrat– I even had to Google the definition of "POTUS." It was in this class that my teacher introduced us to the television show *The West Wing*. In order to keep a class of motivated, but soon to graduate, students engaged she would show us clips of the show when there were particularly relevant topics and episodes. After a few clips I was hooked and spent the rest of the year binge-watching the entire show, which I rationalized based on the premise that it would help me study for the AP exam. I finished the show feeling unexpectedly educated and found that I had actually learned a decent amount about the US government.

My experience watching *The Crown* was similar. After I watched the first five seasons, my friends and family deemed me the resident English expert and regularly asked me questions about English history and about the royal family. However, the oddest part of that experience was not that I was merely being asked just because I had watched a TV show, but that I suddenly felt connected to and passionate about a topic I knew little about before I watched the show.

Lastly, watching a show about Northern Ireland was a random decision made out of pure boredom and happenstance. After the first episode of *Derry Girls* I was hooked, and once I turned on the subtitles I felt I now had a basic knowledge of a conflict that I had learned next to nothing about throughout my entire education.² I once again finished the show with a new sense of knowledge and found myself constantly attempting to convince my friends and family to watch the show so that they too could learn about this part of history and politics.

In all three cases, I started out uneducated about, and even unaware of, the working politics of the US, England, and Northern Ireland. However, after watching the shows I not only felt knowledgeable about these subjects, I even found myself seeking out more information about questions and topics that came up in a particular episode or season. This experience could not be unique. Millions of Americans have sat down to watch these same fictional shows purely for entertainment, is it possible that at least some left with new knowledge and interest in a country's very real politics? With this possibility in mind, I analyze how *The West Wing*, *The Crown*, and *Derry Girls* change Americans' perceptions of these countries' actual politics.

To answer this question I first explain how popular culture in general influences people's views of politics. Throughout history, whether it was war propaganda, sports diplomacy, or government funded movies and television, countries have invested in popular culture to sway public opinion (Weldes & Rowley, 2015, p. 2). After exploring examples of the *general*

² The show itself is in English, but the Northern Irish accent makes subtitles a helpful necessity.

relationship between popular culture and politics I then apply these theories to these *specific* television programs. It is clear that there is a massive amount of room for public opinion to be shifted and molded by these shows, whether that is the intent of the producers or not, and therefore it can be helpful to understand this influence. I outline the importance of the breakdown of this influence in the following section.

Popular Culture and World Politics

The field of politics and popular culture is quickly growing in both size and respect. In this thesis, I use secondary sources and data from both published scholars and from the popular press in order to expand off of the primary research which is, of course, from the shows themselves. Television is a huge pastime for Americans and according to research done by the American Time Use Survey (ATUS), which measures how Americans spend their time, an average American teenager or adult watches around two hours and 46 minutes of television daily (Pinsker, 2018, np.). This amount of consumption is bound to affect how we feel about certain topics, especially when a show's main focus is about one specific topic. Understanding the extent to which television can actually mold a person's view of a topic would be important information for psychologists, government officials, entertainers, researchers, and other groups. By understanding how the media influences people's thoughts we can become more careful with what we consume and make sure it is sending safe, accurate, and healthy messages. This information can help the government with outreach programs, reputation management, and international relations. It can likewise help psychologists understand major shifts in public opinion and behavior, or even help producers more effectively promote their work by

understanding how their audiences may react. Overall, by looking at how television can impact the public perception of politics these ideas can be applied more generally.

The idea that popular culture is a useful and legitimate source to explain political and social phenomena is neither new nor controversial, but it is still often thought of as “low-politics.” As the University of New South Wales’ William Clapton (2018, p. 1) writes, “One person commented that the study of popular culture was ‘off-putting’ and akin to an ‘infantilization’ of the discipline. Another suggested that those conducting research on popular culture and global politics ought to ‘do hobbies in their own time’. One person even questioned why they should bother traveling around the world to undertake fieldwork if they could just sit at home and watch a movie.” What these people have in common is that they take the similar approach that popular culture does not belong in the same sphere as serious research. However, I will explain why this distinction is flawed; why, for example, using the Hemsworth brothers to explain the Lincoln assassination is not trivial but ingenious. As Daniel and Musgrave (2017 p. 512) write, “we should realize that more people have learned how the world works from Steven Spielberg than from Stephen Walt. Second, we should regard ‘inexpert’ images of world politics as worthy of investigation, not dismiss them as naive or ignorant.” Many scholars who have pioneered this effort fall under a category of study referred to as “Popular Culture & World Politics” (PCWP).³ The book “Popular Culture and World Politics: Theories, Methods, Pedagogies” (Caso and Hamilton, 2015) makes this point– that popular culture not only *can* be an integral part of political science research, but that it *should* be.

³ Some examples of recent scholarship in this field include: Van Veeren (2009) who explores how cultural icons from the Miss America Pageant to Elmo have affected politics; Philpott (2010) who explains the real effects that war movies in a post-Vietnam and post-9/11 era have on Americans’ perception of Arabs; Dunn (2006) who writes about how movies have the ability to shape society’s collective memory of history, thereby changing how we view a real life event; and Shepherd and Hamilton (2016) who explain how popular culture shapes how we view global politics.

The first important point to note is that the American government has been using popular culture to influence its people for decades. Grayson (et. al. 2009, p. 160) explains, “It is increasingly clear that it is popular culture that is held in common between the most humble acts of creativity at a mass protest and the inner sanctum of the Oval Office where presidents and their staffers watch and discuss *24* or *The Battle of Algiers*. The examples provided above not only suggest the efficacy of popular culture in fostering political change but are indicative of how popular culture may just become the central future location of politics.” Furthermore, the University of Bristol’s Jutta Weldes and Christina Rowley (2015, p. 2) explain that, “states actively use popular culture in many ways and for multiple purposes. In both wartime and peacetime, popular culture plays a surprisingly (or not?) large role in foreign (and domestic) policies.” If states and their governments can acknowledge how crucial and powerful popular culture is as an influence on their people, then we too should start to take advantage of and study its influence. Weldes and Rowley (2015, p. 4) go on to explain that another aspect of popular culture is that it represents how we view politics so much so that, “What most US Americans ‘know’ about the Arab-Israeli conflict, for example, comes from what they see, hear, and read in the news media – and, crucially, also what is presented in supposedly fictional popular cultural texts.” The importance of this point is that, “Popular culture not only reflects but also constitutes world politics” (Weldes & Rowley, 2015, p. 4). Not only can popular culture reflect how we see the world at large, but it actually plays an instrumental role in changing how we see the construction of that world. Furthermore, in the influential article “Pop Goes IR” this idea is expanded, “From this perspective, popular culture would be important in so far as it could be shown to have caused some kind of effect within these formal sites of activity. Effects are most often defined as a policy outcome” (Grayson et. al. 2009, p. 155). This crucial point highlights

the fact that popular culture has the power to affect real politics and policies. They go on to write that, “[the continuum of popular culture and politics] provides an impetus to view the signifying and lived practices of popular culture as ‘texts’ that can be understood as political and as sites where politics takes place.... Second, drawing upon work in cultural studies on popular culture will open up new avenues of investigation in IR” (Grayson et. al. 2009, p. 158). This point illustrates the importance of the fact that, “IR scholarship should be concerned about what happens to culture and to politics when one is rendered in terms of the other. Thus, there is a clear need to explore what is placed in the ‘frame’ of analysis when current reconfigurations of world politics are examined through the lenses of popular culture” (Grayson et. al. 2009, p. 160). In other words, as Cahir O’Doherty, a PhD student explains, “If we take it that culture functions not merely as a mirror in which political events are narrativised and enacted in popular imaginations, but as a medium that, in itself, influences the way world politics is constructed, presented, and conducted, then we begin to open up really interesting avenues of understanding and research.” (O’Doherty, 2013, p. 2). What all of these scholars argue is that utilizing popular culture in order to understand politics is both legitimate and crucial if we are to discern where certain political phenomena come from.

Additionally, in this paper I combine an analysis of popular culture with the well-established case study method.

Methodology

Case studies have an established history as an acceptable and logical research method in the social sciences. In *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* the authors explain how social scientists can scientifically approach their research and explain that

one way to do so is through the use of case studies. They state that case studies, “are essential for description, and are, therefore, fundamental to social science” (King, Keohane, and Verba (KKV), 1994, p. 44). Another influential source when it comes to explaining case studies is Alexander George and Andrew Bennett’s *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, in which they are avid defenders of the use of case studies to define and create theories. Most impactfully, Moses & Knutsen’s (2007) *Ways of Knowing: Competing Methodologies in Social and Political Research* is highly regarded in terms of legitimizing the use of case studies. They discuss at length the use of case studies and explain how they can be used for different purposes. They explain that a researcher’s, “aim is to unearth evidence of a hypothesized causal mechanism buried in the experience of a particular case” (Moses & Knutsen, 2007, p. 134).

Additionally, they explain a specific use of case studies, which is to generate hypotheses. This “hypothesis-generating” case study method is what I have used in my paper. In this method, the aim, “is to use a case to help formulate definite hypotheses or theories (for further testing subsequently)” (Moses & Knutsen, 2007, p. 137). In this paper, I take *The West Wing*, *The Crown*, and *Derry Girls* and use them to help define my theory– that these television shows impact different aspects of how Americans’ perceive politics in the countries they are based in. Moses and Knutsen go on to explain it best by using an analogy of building blocks, “we should think about these types of cases in terms of ‘building blocks’. The analyst studies a given case to generate a preliminary theoretical construct. Because this construct is based on a single case, it can do little more than hint at a more valid general model. This model, is then confronted by another case- which, in turn, might suggest ways of amending and improving the construct. These cases can then be assembled, like building blocks, into a stronger theoretical edifice” (Moses & Knutsen, 2007, p. 140). Furthermore, Daniel and Musgrave (2017) explore how

popular culture specifically can be applied and used as case studies. They define popular culture and media as “synthetic experiences” and write that, “These ‘synthetic experiences’ can change beliefs, reinforce pre existing views, or even displace knowledge gained from other sources for elites as well as mass audiences. Because ideas condition how agents act, we argue that international relations theorists should take seriously how popular culture propagates and shapes ideas about world politics” (p. 503). Most importantly they state that, “because novels, movies, and other sources influence audiences’ ideas about issues central to international relations, we must treat such sources seriously—both as researchers and as citizens” (Daniel & Musgrave, 2017, p. 512). Their work not only legitimizes popular culture as something that should be taken more seriously in the general public, but also emphasizes how we can use popular culture and television for serious case study research.

Now that I have established the use of popular culture and the case study method as a legitimate and viable method of research, I will explain my selection of these three specific cases. For this paper I wanted to explore how Americans’ view different countries’ politics and therefore would have to choose specific countries to focus on.

I chose *The West Wing* for a few reasons. Firstly, when looking at Americans’ views I wanted to start with how Americans view their own government. The show also garnered a large following and gained respect with both politicians and the public (Weiner, 2012, np.). Additionally, the show’s age has given enough time for a significant number of scholarly articles to be written about it, which I was able to use in my research. *The West Wing* aired from 1999 to 2006; it began just after the Kosovo War and the peak of American primacy and spanned 9/11 and The Iraq War. The show portrays the fictional presidency of Josiah Bartlet (Martin Sheen) and follows him and his staff throughout his two terms. Bartlet is written as a staunch Democrat

who spends most of the first season of the show having his staff fight their most vicious “enemy”— the Republican Party. The show illustrates the inner workings of the White House staff on a day-to-day basis and how they deal with different crises and problems. It follows Chief of Staff Leo Magaray (John Spencer), Deputy Chief of Staff Josh Lyman (Bradley Whitford), Communications Director Toby Ziegler (Richard Schiff), Deputy Communications Director Sam Seaborn (Rob Lowe), and Press Secretary C.J. Cregg (Allison Janney). Perhaps the best description of the show came from star Bradley Whitford, who called it, “liberal progressive porn” (Whitford, in Sagal 2017, np.). There have been many television shows set in the world of American politics, but unlike other examples, *The West Wing* is the most prominent show which centers directly around the workings of the President and his staff making it the ideal choice for this paper.

For the next two case studies I chose countries that Americans already have strong associations with and with which there is a long, shared history, so that I could look at perceptions of these countries before and after the show aired. *The Crown* not only has a massive American viewership, but has also gained the attention of scholars; and although the final season has not even aired yet, there are still multiple articles that analyze it.⁴ It also provides a different angle for a case study because it is based on real events. I felt that this point would make it especially interesting to see how a show would affect Americans’ perceptions of real life historical politics. This show began in 2016 and its final season is scheduled to air sometime in 2023 (McNeal, 2023, np.). While *The West Wing* is a completely fictional show, *The Crown*, is based on real life events; but the producers have made it clear that it is a fantasized, fictionalized version of history (Yossman, 2022, np.). While the writers worked extremely hard to make characters, settings, and stories realistic they have been open about the fact that not all

⁴ The show took the number one spot and was in the top 10 on Netflix multiple times since release (Bell, 2022, np.).

conversations and scenes are historically accurate, because it would make the show less dramatic and it would be impossible to have such inside information of the royal family, rather, “it's a work of fiction that's broadly based on historical events” (Gemmill, 2020, np.). Nonetheless, *The Crown* follows the drama of the royal family from the death of King George VI in 1952 to almost modern day with the breakup of Charles and Diana. The show also highlights the different prime ministers and their relationships with the Queen throughout her reign. It is through this storytelling of the Queen’s reign and the historical events that surround it that the show is able to influence Americans’ perception of English politics.

The last show I will be looking at is *Derry Girls*, which aired from 2018 to 2022, and portrays a group of friends and their respective families living through The Troubles in Northern Ireland. The main focus of the show is the typical teenage struggles of five Derry teenagers, main characters Erin (Saoirse-Monica Jackson), Michelle (Jamie-Lee O'Donnell), Claire (Nicola Coughlan), Orla (Louisa Harland), and James (Dylan Llewellyn); but these typical teenage struggles are set against the backdrop of the constant political struggle of The Troubles. We see the Catholic vs. Protestant fighting, IRA bombings, presidential visits, and, ultimately, the Good Friday Agreement through their eyes. These characters are consistently shown in contrast to their parents when political scenes are shown. Its status as a sitcom as opposed to a political drama like *The West Wing* or a historical drama like *The Crown* may seem like a barrier. However, it was this distinction that makes it the perfect choice, as it could be seen as less likely to influence public perception of politics than a political, historical drama. This quiet and unexpected influence is exactly what I wanted to look at in order to highlight the ubiquity of this phenomenon.

Case Study One: *The West Wing*

The West Wing has influenced Americans' perception of three different aspects of US politics. In this section, I explore how the show impacted overall support for American foreign policy by looking at the example of Bush's counterterrorism policy. I then explain how the show garnered support for the presidency through its portrayal of the fictional presidency of Josiah Bartlet, and how the show impacted Americans' overall perception of the role of the president. Lastly, I highlight the show's ability to increase Americans' political participation. Overall, through these examples I illustrate how the show has the ability to leave Americans with a more positive and connected feeling towards American politics.

One of the main focuses of *The West Wing* is the constant struggle of Bartlet's staff to implement their many policies. The Bartlet Administration deals with a variety of issues throughout the series' run including: hate crime legislation; the education budget; dealing with issues of race; among many others; but the policy I focus on for this example is the American approach towards counter-terrorism. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Aaron Sorkin, the show's creator, decided to use his show's platform to educate and influence Americans' perception of the "war on terror". On the show, a fictional terrorist, Abdul ibn Shareef, attempted to blow up the Golden Gate Bridge and therefore Bartlet ordered his assassination. An article in the *Journal of American Culture* argues that the show created a link between this incident and Iraq under Saddam Hussein, explaining that, "By conflating the two, [creator Aaron] Sorkin creates the proof of a connection between Iraq and terrorism, a feat that has proved a great deal more difficult for the Bush administration. If there was proof that Saddam Hussein had tried to blow up the Golden Gate Bridge as there was for Abdul Sharif, a war with Iraq might not be such a hard sell to the American public or the world community" (Gans-Boriskin & Tisinger, 2005, p.

111). They explain that this character on the show acts as a mirror to a real life situation— on the show the solution is clear cut and obvious, Sharif should be eliminated. Therefore, this fictional character was used to sway how Americans perceived the Bush administration’s push for war with Iraq. If someone was on the fence about their opinion on the war in Iraq and Saddam Hussein, but was then exposed to this character and plot line on *The West Wing* it would be easy to start conflating the two and supporting Bush’s policies.

Additionally, the University of Leeds’ Jack Holland (2011), discusses how a special episode (“Isaac and Ishmael”) which aired just three weeks after 9/11 compared the Taliban to the Nazis in order to provide Americans with a clear moral standpoint on the issue. This direct comparison between the two groups left little room for Americans to argue against the Bush administration's invasion of Afghanistan— who would want to be on the side of the Nazis’?

It is clear that the show has the ability to impact how Americans perceive and relate to the “war on terror.” Moreover, what is important about this one example is that it can be expanded to apply to other policies discussed in the show. If the show dealt with terrorism in order to gain American support for The Bush administration, who is to say they did not also sway how Americans felt about hate crime legislation, gun control, or any number of policies?

Additionally, likewise to support of a policy, presidents desire that their role as leader is viewed favorably by their constituents. *The West Wing* positively impacted how presidents were perceived and the role of the president in general. One study found that people viewed Bartlet as a more principled president than both Clinton and Bush. However, the researchers also found that “participants saw Bush and Clinton in a more positive light after viewing *The West Wing*. Perceptions of both presidents improved after coming into contact with the image of the presidency offered on *The West Wing*. This is strong evidence for *The West Wing* generating a

priming effect in viewers. The positive images of the American presidency found on the show translated to more positive images within viewers of the sitting President Bush and former President Clinton” (Holbert et. al. 2003, p. 437). The study found that people consistently perceived Clinton and Bush more positively after viewing the successful presidency of Bartlet.

The series ends with President Matthew Santos being sworn into office as the first Hispanic president of the United States. Likewise, in the first presidential election after *The West Wing*'s finale, Barack Obama was elected. While some may brush this off as a coincidence I think it illustrates something deeper about the connection between Americans' perception of politics and of popular culture. Weldes and Rowley explain this concept best when they write, “The politics of consumption extends beyond merely acknowledging that popular cultural artefacts are consumed in diverse ways. Consumption is inextricably linked to the production and reproduction of meanings – the maintenance of some, the transformation of others (whether through subversion, overt challenge or gradual change)” (Weldes & Rowley, 2015, p. 5). By providing Americans with a picture of what a president of America can look like, the show opened up the opportunity for people to make it a reality and to ignite change. In an interview with *The Guardian* the cast discussed the Obama election win. John Wells, the producer of the show, said that, “People started mentioning this extraordinary junior senator from Illinois. So Santos was modeled on Obama before Obama was Obama – and that made us look really good.” Schiff, who plays Toby Ziegler, continues, “In 2007, I was out campaigning. I’d be surrounded by 300 Obama foot soldiers at each stop in the caucus states. They would say: ‘You’re the reason we’re here.’ And when you look back at that election, the difference was in those states. Maybe these foot soldiers, who were there because of *The West Wing*, are the reason Obama pulled off that primary victory and became president. That’s pretty awesome” (Abbott, 2019, np.).

Lastly, the show impacted how Americans perceived political participation and impacted voter turnout among both Democrats and Republicans. Voter turnout data from presidential elections before and after the airing of the show shows dramatic changes. In 1996 voter turnout in presidential elections was at 51.7%, but turnout steadily rose after the show premiered, first to 54.3% (2000), then 60.1% (2004) and then to 62.5% (2008) (File & Crissey, 2012, np.). It is true that correlation does not necessarily equal causation and there were no doubt other factors at play, but I believe that the evidence shows a connection between *The West Wing* and an increase in voter turnout. *The West Wing* reached huge audiences on a weekly basis and imbued them with a sense that the presidency is vital and impactful and therefore people better understood the importance of their vote. During the 2020 campaign, the cast reunited for a special called “A West Wing Special to Benefit When We All Vote.” The point of this reunion was to re-energize fans of the show to once again become active political participants and vote. Thus there can be no doubt that the show’s cast and crew believed that they did indeed impact real participation.

Additionally, while the show focuses on a liberal, Democratic president it increased the connection that both Democrats and Republicans felt to politics: “This relationship between West Wing popularity and political party affiliation also extends deeper into political ideology, namely how conservative or liberal people are. For both parties, but particularly for Republicans, people who identify on the farthest ends of the political spectrum (i.e. very liberal Democrats and very conservative Republicans) like the show more than their moderate counterparts” (DeVeaux, 2019, np.). Furthermore, as Gans-Boriskin and Tisinger write, “liberals could turn to the program for an idealized Clinton White House (without Clinton), and more conservative Americans could relate to the patriotism and honor of the characters even if they disagreed with the views espoused” (Gans-Boriskin & Tisinger, 2005, p. 103). What the show accomplished was that it

reached both ends of the political spectrum and increased political participation among people of all political persuasions.

Overall, there are multiple connections that can be drawn between *The West Wing* and how Americans perceive politics. Arguably, there is a clear connection between the show's portrayal of specific policy decisions and how Americans perceived the real world equivalents, as shown above in the example of the war on terror. Additionally, the show impacted how Americans perceived the president. It both increased the approval ratings of former presidents and paved the way for the election of Barack Obama. Lastly, the airdates of the show correlate to an increase in political participation. What these factors all lead to is that the show helped renew Americans' trust in government and provided a sense of comfort for them (Lyall, 2019, np.). As one student for *Harvard Political Review* writes, "The character of Jed Bartlet was so strong and well done that it's not hard to imagine the spillover it could have to real life. I've had plenty of friends mention that they switched their major from, say, English to political science, in large part due to watching Bartlet in *The West Wing*" (NA, 2012, np.). In short, when analyzing *The West Wing* I found significant data that points to different aspects of Americans' perceptions which were shifted in a positive light by viewing the show.

Case Study Two: *The Crown*

Americans have always had a peculiar fascination with the English people, English popular culture, and even the royal family (Malone, 2022, np.). After Netflix released *The Crown* in 2016 and the show climbed the ranks of the top ten spots, this fascination for the royal family was bound to grow and mature. *The Crown* changed how Americans view English politics and especially how they view the royal family. Firstly, *The Crown* has humanized the royals in a way

that was previously ignored. By portraying the intimate workings of the family *The Crown* caused Americans to view the royals in a new and more sympathetic light. Furthermore, the show is a historical drama, not a documentary; but it seems real enough that many famous Brits—including but not limited to former U.K. culture secretary Oliver Dowden, former U.K. Prime Minister John Major, and actor Judi Dench—called for Netflix to add a viewer discretion warning so that people would know it was fictionalized (Ray, 2022, np.). However, with or without a warning about historical accuracy the show has arguably given Americans a false sense of expertise about English history and politics. Lastly, the humanization of the royal family and the perception of accuracy has ultimately made Americans more invested in and interested in English politics and the royal family in general. Overall, by watching *The Crown*, Americans have become more drawn to English politics.

Before the release of *The Crown* the royal family was scrutinized, mocked, and judged for almost every misstep taken or mistake made (Seth, 2020, np.). People felt that they could judge members of the royal family based on what they read in the newspaper. However, after the first season of the show aired people started to feel differently. Where the royals were once seen as a distant monarchy up in a castle, people now saw fellow human beings who struggled with relatable problems like the loss of a family member, marriage difficulties, and even mental illness. Robert Lacy, a historical consultant for the show, said about the issue, “What the show does brilliantly is remind us that these are people” (Hughes, 2019, np.). There are three specific characters that I focus on to prove this point—Princess Anne, Princess Margaret, and King Charles.

Before the show debuted, Princess Anne (Lyla Barrett-Rye, Erin Doherty, and Claudia Harrison) was seen as an unimportant side character to her family (if she were seen at all), but

was most notoriously known as the “Frown Princess” due to her stern countenance when she was younger.⁵ After the release of the show this image quickly changed: “The Times named her ‘the most underrated royal’, The Telegraph labeled her a ‘style icon’ and The Guardian asked if she was ‘the most acceptable face of the monarchy’. In the months that followed, the 69-year-old was more closely reported on, and her popularity skyrocketed.” The princess was always the princess, but it was only after her portrayal in the show as a young, charismatic, and modern royal, that she was seen in a positive light (Seth, 2020, np.).

Princess Anne’s aunt, Princess Margaret has a similar character arc. She was often seen by the public as the queen’s wild, rebellious, and even inappropriate younger sister. The show changed that perception through its portrayal of her constant struggle with mental health issues, lack of purpose, and failed, loveless marriage that was forced upon her. For example, Robert Lacey states, “The second episode of the new series, *Margaretology*, concentrates on Princess Margaret and it really depicts her dilemma, that of always being sidelined and having no real role, in a way people will find sympathetic” (Hughes, 2019, np.). She is portrayed as a relatable, complex, emotional human being.

Lastly, and surprising to many, *The Crown* takes a somewhat sympathetic view of King Charles. It paints him in an almost tragic way, growing up waiting for the death of his mother so he can take on the title of king. In one memorable scene, we see his own mother tell him that he has a voice no one wants to hear and we see that he constantly feels neglected by his family.⁶ In season five it even portrays his relationship to Camilla Parker Bowles as a heartbreaking love story. In “The Way Ahead” (S05E05), the episode breaks down what was dubbed “Camillagate,” when a private, intimate, phone call between the two was leaked to the press. Instead of focusing

⁵ I listed three actors who play Princess Anne because the show replaces each character with older actors every two seasons or so in order to portray the passage of time and therefore she has been portrayed by three separate actors.

⁶ *The Crown*: Season 3, Episode 6- “Tywysog Cymru”.

on only the scandal, “The episode ends, after a montage showing the fictional Charles helping countless happy children, with closing titles informing us that ‘The Prince’s Trust has assisted one million young people to fulfill their potential and returned nearly £1.4 billion in value to society’” (Romano, 2022, np.). This portrayal turned a person who was viewed in a negative light for most of his adult life into a sympathetic, neglected, lovesick, boy. Ultimately, by taking a closer look at how the show portrays Anne, Margret, and Charles we are able to understand how Americans who viewed the show changed their perception of the royals from a standoffish family to a family whom one can find sympathetic and relatable.

The show also shifted how Americans perceived the history of English politics. Arguably, before the release of the show many Americans were either uneducated or uninformed about English politics, yet after watching the show they now had expertise in the subject, or at least they thought they did. Many influential British figures like the former U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair and actor Helena Bonham Carter have spoken out about the fact that the show is in fact fiction and should not be treated as fact or seen as fact by its viewers.⁷ After much backlash from politicians and actors alike Netflix added this disclaimer to a season five trailer: “Inspired by real events, this fictional dramatization tells the story of Queen Elizabeth II and the political and personal events that shaped her reign,” but they have yet to add it to the show itself (Ray, 2022, np.).

Peter Morgan, the creator of both *The Crown* and the film *The Queen*, stated that “in the years since *The Queen* was released, Tony Blair has recounted his phone argument with the monarch, he has repeated, unattributed, the artificial lines that his fictional counterpart and Her Majesty's spoke in the film” (Sayeed, 2018, p. 20). This line is in reference to a movie he created about the queen but the sentiment is the same. A fictional portrayal of events has the ability to

⁷ See Adekaiyero 2022 and Lewis 2022.

alter how *even those who were there* view the event. If it can influence the recollection of events in the minds of the people who lived through them, it is reasonable to conclude that the millions of Americans who watch the show will be influenced to an even greater extent.

Multiple story lines like Princess Margaret's marriage, Phillip's possible adultery, and Charles and Camilla's relationship have been heavily dramatized and have even had details made up for the sake of the show's plot. Helen Lewis, writing in *The Atlantic*, describes this issue of confusing fact and fiction when she writes, "The real source of unease with *The Crown* comes from the dissonance between the high naturalism of the program's costumes, staging, and set design and the liberties taken with its plotlines. The current discussion would not be happening if the show were not so rigorously faithful to the historical record in every department except for its script" (Lewis, 2020, np.). The show is able to "trick" audiences into believing every conversation is real because of the crew's background research and attention to even the smallest of details: "The research team is also responsible for things like finding the right dog to resemble Queen Elizabeth's II dogs, as well as the toys that were created in 1982 for Prince William" (Peña, 2021, np.). Every detail is just right so that, "*The Crown* brings history to life in a way that gives viewers the feeling of authenticity" (Peña, 2021, np.).

This blurring of fact and fiction has had real life implications for viewers as explained by Courtney Peña, research scholar at St. Mary's University, who writes, "For example, Camilla Parker Bowles, the Duchess of Cornwall, has been a victim of cyberbullying due to the false suggestion that she and Charles, the Prince of Wales, had an affair while he was married to Diana, the Princess of Wales. Many fans of *The Crown* have been misled over the way Prince Charles and Camilla's friendship is shown, which has led to people believing that what they are seeing on the Netflix series is true" (Peña, 2021, np.). Annabel Curran, writing for *The Michigan*

Daily, explains the relationship between Americans and the royal family as, “a relationship that a person imagines having with another who they do not actually know, such as a celebrity or fictional character” (Curran, 2022, np.). The release of *The Crown* has made Americans believe that they now know the royals on a deeply personal and intimate level. Aja Romano, writer for *Vox*, explains, “As the Washington Post put it when fact-checking the Duke of Windsor’s relationship with Hitler, the history is ‘not totally as depicted, but darn near close.’ Because it’s so often right, the show’s fictional liberties merge seamlessly with the truth and make it easy to take the whole series as gospel” (Romano, 2022, np.). *The Crown*’s ability to make Americans feel as though they are now expert historians has real life implications for Americans’ relationship with English politics. *BBC* writer, James Jeffrey, explains that this ability is, “spurred in recent years by the impact of media productions and real-life events” and that “The status Britain’s monarchy has in US popular culture is extreme and a 20th Century phenomenon” (Jeffrey, 2018, np.).

Additionally, when studying Americans’ interest in the royal family before and after the show aired the results are staggering. One Pew Research study done before the show aired found that “by and large, most Americans say they do not follow news of the British royal family.... at least 60% have said that they are ‘not too closely’ or ‘not at all following’ royal news on seven different occasions” (Reilly, 2013, np.). A second study found that when asked if they were following news about Prince William’s engagement, “The results were 37% said not closely at all with only 11% saying very closely” (Pew Research Center Staff, 2010, np.). 27% said “not too closely” leading to a majority of people not closely following the story. These studies illustrate the lack of American interest in the royal family before the release of *The Crown*. However, when looking at how this interest changed after the show aired this can be seen in a

comparison of recent royal weddings. 23 million Americans watched Prince Harry and Kate get married in 2011. Two years after *The Crown* premiered, 29.2 million Americans watched Harry and Megan's 2018 wedding (Grady, 2018, np.). This uptake in viewers illustrates how American interest in the royal family has clearly grown since the show aired.

In 1953 when the Queen herself was crowned, Gallup asked Americans what they thought of her and concluded that, "While Americans thought of Elizabeth II in a generally positive manner, her actual coronation did not elicit much of their attention. When asked if they were interested in the coronation ceremonies for Queen Elizabeth, just 38% of Americans in 1953 said they were, while 61% said they were not" (Moore, 2002, np.). However, this lack of enthusiasm has shifted in recent years, "While approval ratings for the real Queen have been steady since 2016, the show has strengthened her position as a figurehead" (Seth, 2020, np.). Overall, the show has bolstered Americans' interest in English politics and the royal family.

In summary, *The Crown* plays a unique role in influencing how Americans perceive English politics. While the show does include prime ministers and parliament the main focus and therefore the main thing affected by it is the royal family. Firstly, the show highlighted the humanity of the royals making Americans more likely to sympathize with them than in the past. It has also turned Americans into self proclaimed experts on English history and politics even if their expertise is sometimes misled. Lastly, the show has garnered enough attention around the royals that there was a sizable increase in American interest in English politics. Ultimately, *The Crown* has acted as a bridge between the United States and England as a way for Americans to understand and care about English politics more.

Case Study Three: *Derry Girls*

This show differs from the first two examples in that Northern Irish politics are arguably taught and known less by Americans. As Bill Bigelow, a teacher and author, writes, “‘Wear green on St. Patrick’s Day or get pinched.’ That pretty much sums up the Irish-American ‘curriculum’ that I learned when I was in school. Yes, I recall a nod to the so-called Potato Famine, but it was mentioned only in passing” (Bigelow, 2019, np.). It is thus possible that a show focused on a specific period of Northern Irish history has the opportunity to make real change. *Derry Girls* is able to teach American viewers about what The Troubles were and why they are still important today. Most importantly, it serves to revitalize Americans’ knowledge of Northern Irish culture and politics.

The 1998 signing of the The Good Friday Agreement may not have entirely ended the conflict, but it did end The Troubles.⁸ Despite the fact that this agreement was the product of American diplomacy, begun by the National Committee on American Foreign Policy, and concluded by Senator Bill Mitchell, Americans were not invested in the outcome. In a poll done by Gallup Research, when asked, “What would you, personally, prefer to see happen in Northern Ireland: for it to remain part of the United Kingdom or for it to become united with the Republic of Ireland?” 33% of Americans said they either had “no opinion” or “did not care” about the outcome (Saad, 1998, np.). It is surprising that 33% of Americans were so uninterested in a conflict that was resolved due to the heavy influence and support of American politicians— how is it that over a third of the population was so apathetic towards this issue? Even before the agreement was reached Americans were uninterested in the conflict. In February 1996, two years before the agreement came into place, Pew Research asked how closely Americans followed “the

⁸ The Troubles was a period of conflict and fighting that lasted from the late 1960’s until the 1998 signing of the Good Friday Agreement. The conflict was between Catholic supporters of Irish unification and Protestant supporters of British rule (Wallenfeldt, 2023, np.).

recent I.R.A. (Irish Republican Army) bombings in London ending the cease fire between Britain and the I.R.A.” the majority of Americans said “not closely” or “not at all” (Pew Research Center Staff, 1996, np.). Two years later and a mere 14 days after the referendum on the Good Friday Agreement, a survey asked how closely they followed “An agreement between Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland on a new form of government for Northern Ireland” 73% of Americans said “not closely” or “not at all” (Pew Research Center Staff, 1998a, np.). Lastly, when Americans were asked a few months later how closely they followed “The explosion of a car bomb in Northern Ireland” the results were similar in that the majority was still not following news surrounding The Troubles (Pew Research Center Staff, 1998b, np.). These surveys clearly demonstrate that when it came to Northern Ireland the majority of Americans were completely indifferent to what was happening.⁹ The Troubles and its resolution appeared to be of little interest to the average American; *Derry Girls* changed that.

Derry Girls premiered on Netflix in the United States in 2019 and was immediately popular. This popularity is highlighted by Parrot Analytics, which measures audience interest for various forms of entertainment, and found that, “the audience demand for *Derry Girls* is 10.5 times the demand of the average TV series in the United States.” It also found that “*Derry Girls* has higher demand than 97.6% of all Comedy titles in the United States” and that, after the United Kingdom where the show is produced, the United States has the highest watch ratings at “73% of the demand in... [the] United Kingdom” (NA, nd., np.). A country whose politics were largely ignored by Americans at the time of conflict suddenly became the focal point of a popular television show. Not only does the show increase awareness about Northern Ireland, it also educates the people who watch it.

⁹ Pew conducts thousands of surveys and yet including the ones I mention only four questions/surveys appeared following a keyword search for “Irish” and “Ireland”. This should emphasize the lack of interest in this subject at the time.

American viewers are getting a brief history lesson in the form of a TV show. Popular magazine articles about *Derry Girls* are forced to begin their articles with a brief overview of its historical context because they understand that their readers would otherwise not have any background of what is going on in the show. One article in *Teen Vogue* titled “*Derry Girls* Season 3 History Lesson: The Troubles Conflict” explained the historical context for the show: “*Derry Girls*’ stateside popularity is a necessary intervention in this ahistorical tendency, decentering Irish Americans from their overwriting of Irish identity while informing a new generation about the Troubles” (McMenamin, 2022, np.). An article in *Cosmopolitan* titled “Here’s What You Should Know About the Real Events From ‘*Derry Girls*’ Season 2-You might need a lil context to understand the LOLs” also mentions the importance of the show’s historical context. The author writes, “there’s also some pretty serious stuff going on in the background, and you should probs know context before you tear through this entire season. (But TBH, Orla McCool will make you scream-laugh even if you have no idea what’s going on.)” (Chambers, 2019, np.) and then provides a one paragraph summary of the historical conflict in modern slang for their younger subscribers. These articles illustrate the use of *Derry Girls* as a teaching tool: “For English, Scottish, Welsh, and other international viewers, who didn’t learn about The Troubles at school, the show has been hugely educational. *Derry Girls* provided an important backdrop of context” (Thompson, 2022, np.). These articles highlight how a sitcom about fictional teenagers can teach real teenagers about the politics and history of a country.

The final season of *Derry Girls* has already aired, but it will continue to play an important role in how Americans perceive Northern Ireland. The show has, in the words of *Mashable* writer Rachel Thompson, “educated people about what it was really like growing up during the Troubles” (Thompson, 2022, np.). By looking at these articles it is reasonable to

assume that some percentage of viewers will be inspired to learn more about the country and its politics. Uninformed Americans who might not have had any particular interest in learning about The Troubles, finished the show with new knowledge and awareness.

The show also put Northern Ireland on the map culturally for Americans. The show's creator, Lisa McGee, explained, "I hope that will be the legacy of *Derry Girls*, that other people will write about [Northern Ireland]" (Carroll, 2022, np.). Right before the final episodes of *Derry Girls* aired, the Northern Ireland-set short film "An Irish Goodbye" premiered and then went on to win the 2023 Oscar for "Best Short Film (Live Action)". This came in a year that saw a, "record haul of 14 nominations for Irish personnel and Irish films" (Clarke, 2023, np.). Likewise, "Belfast," an Oscar-nominated and winning film set during The Troubles, was released in 2021. It is therefore arguable that just as McGee hoped, *Derry Girls* sparked a flurry of new fiction focused on Northern Ireland; but what is clear is that the market for these stories has grown.

All in all, *Derry Girls* plays an important role in influencing Americans' views of Northern Irish politics. The show educated uninformed Americans about the important time period of The Troubles and the politics surrounding the issue. It has also been a catalyst for increasing Americans' appreciation for and interest in Northern Irish culture and media. Overall, the show has illustrated its clear power and influence in affecting how Americans perceive Northern Ireland.

Conclusion

These three case studies highlight the important effects that television and popular culture can have on Americans' perception of American, English, and Northern Irish politics. *The West Wing's* influence impacted three specific parts of politics: how Americans felt about real life

policies, especially the war on terror; how Americans perceived the role of the presidency; and how it increased the political participation of its American viewers.

The Crown influenced Americans in a different way. It humanized the royal family and allowed Americans to sympathize with them. It left Americans with greater knowledge about English history and politics, though that knowledge was occasionally more perceived than real. Lastly, it made Americans more invested in English politics and the royal family.

Unlike *The Crown*, which sometimes blurred fact and fiction, *Derry Girls*, has educated Americans about The Troubles and about Northern Ireland. The show's influence has also reached beyond the three seasons and began a trend of increasing American interest in Northern Ireland.

Each of these shows is unique and the influence of each show is unique; however, they all have considerable impact on Americans' political interest and engagement with those countries. This matters because politics is important and impactful and the unexpected influence of television on people's perception and understanding of politics can have real effects and can, for better or worse, lead to real actions.

If people are aware of these possible effects and influences then perhaps television can be used to break harmful stereotypes and divisive politics. And if that is true, then perhaps governments can use these existing shows as a way to broaden political engagement or strengthen international ties. Similarly, it is worth exploring how popular culture can be used in classrooms to teach about politics— especially if it could be used to counter pervasive misinformation. But while there may be a way for government to harness popular culture for the benefit of the population, it is also important to examine how we can ensure that the use of popular culture is not harmful.

President Bartlet often asked his staff “What’s next?” And now I will ask the same question “What’s next?” What’s next for the field of politics and popular culture and how will the nexus between them continue to develop? Will we learn to harness the influence of popular culture, or will we let it continue to grow and consume us.

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