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# Pop Culture, Politics, and America's Favorite Animated Family: Partisan Bias in The Simpsons?

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## **Pop Culture, Politics, and America's Favorite Animated Family: Partisan Bias in *The Simpsons*?**

In 2006, a survey found that while only one in five Americans could name more than one of the five fundamental freedoms protected by the First Amendment, more than half could name at least two members of *The Simpsons* family (McCormick 2006). Although twenty-two percent of those surveyed could identify all five members of the family, only one person in a thousand-person sample was able to name all five freedoms guaranteed under the First Amendment. While indicative of the generally low civic understanding of the American people that is already well documented (see Ferejohn and Kuklinski 1990), the survey also demonstrates the place in popular culture held by *The Simpsons* (1989- ).

When it first aired, conservative Republicans in the United States accused *The Simpsons* of being inappropriate for television, and the show responded immediately to the criticism with satire (see Keslowitz 2006; Pinsky 2001; Turner 2004). This conflict led to a debate over the show's partisan content: some observers said *The Simpsons* favored the left (Turner 2004), while others said the show was politically neutral (Cantor 1999). This debate has (until this article) lacked any empirical evidence. This omission is surprising considering the amount of scholarship on *The Simpsons* (see Alberti 2004; Keslowitz 2006; Pinsky 2001; Turner 2004, to name just a few). It is also surprising considering what we know about television's influence. Television news is an influential predictor of information and awareness (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). Television comedy programs can

affect political attitudes and issue salience (Moy et al. 2005; Compton 2008). A show influenced by *The Simpsons* (see Ortved 2009)—i.e., *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (1996- )—has been shown to increase internal efficacy (the belief that a person can make a difference in government) and cynicism (the belief that government is corrupt or incompetent) among young viewers (many of whom rely on Jon Stewart as a primary source of news) (Baumgartner and Morris 2006).

We know all of this—the popularity of *The Simpsons*, the initial Republican outcry over the show’s content and the subsequent debate over the show’s politics, the power of television on opinion, and the influence of *The Simpsons* on television itself—but, we do not know much in the way of the actual partisan content in *The Simpsons*. Until this study, we did not have data on the question of where *The Simpsons* fits politically, on the left or right? We assume that to understand the influence of *The Simpsons* on popular culture and its potential impact on viewers, it is necessary to go back to the show’s beginning (when the fight over its political content started), and study systematically the partisan content of the show.

### **Popular Culture, Humor, and Politics**

The relationship among humor, popular culture, and politics is not new (see Koller 1988). A joke on the political parties can be funny and useful, as Dave Barry (2007) has observed: “Every now and then, humor is invaluable for just puncturing pomposity... And if anybody needs to be reminded that they’re not as important as they think they are, it’s the people running the country—of both parties.” Political humor is also connected to the study of freedom, as jokes about the government are generally not allowed in oppressive regimes (see Koller 1988).

The importance of studying the partisan content of *The Simpsons* increases in a media environment in which competition over ratings and increased commercialization (combined with non-stop campaigns and increasing attempts by candidates to control their respective public image) has led to a seeming decline in the ability to engage in open dialogues about politics. It is during these times, when open challenges to politics are discouraged, that “writers will turn to irony, indirection, innuendo, allegory, fable—to the fictions of satire” to make their points (Griffin 1994, 139). Cartoons

are in a particularly advantageous position to mock politics through humor, as they are able to “press the boundaries of what is politically acceptable far wider than would otherwise be the case” (Singh 2002, 217).

Research on political humor and persuasion, information provision, and information discounting has demonstrated mixed results. Some research indicates that, when compared to news media, entertainment media are less effective for the acquisition of factual information (Kim and Vishak 2008; Prior 2003, 2005). Instead, entertainment media is effective in impression formation (Lee and Cappella 2001; Young 2004) and may serve as a gateway for further information-gathering (Xenos and Becker 2009), though it can lead to message discounting (Nabi et al. 2007). Scholars have also demonstrated that entertainment news programming or “soft news” is an important source of information for those who do not pay attention to traditional news sources (Baum 2002, 2003; Young 2006).

The relevancy of popular culture and humor is of increasing importance as traditional barriers in the media environment are increasingly blurred (Baym 2005), with little distinction between public affairs and popular culture (Delli Carpini and Williams 2001). As audiences have begun to expect this blurring of entertainment, news, and politics from shows, it is increasingly important to understand the context in which political and partisan information is being relayed. If entertainment programming on television is the dominant source of information for people who do not watch traditional news programming (Prior 2005), then focusing on the content of entertainment programming is important. To understand the way people view government, it is necessary to study what they are watching on television.

### **The Politics of the Simpsons**

Much has already been written about *The Simpsons*, including anthologies of the counter-culture (Alberti 2004) and psychological aspects of the show (Brown and Logan 2005). Janssen (2003) examines *The Simpsons* through the lens of satire. Others have looked at *The Simpsons* through the lenses of postmodernism (Bybee and Overbeck 2001), traditional family morality (Cantor 1999; Rayner and Cantor 1987), racial stereotypes (Dobson 2006), sociology (Keslowitz 2006), and philosophy (Irwin et al. 2006). Still others have examined the transnational and economic (Cherniavsky

1999), religious (Pinsky 2001), and physics and engineering aspects of the show (Halpern 2007). Parisi (1993) investigated the “Black Bart” phenomenon and the appropriation of cultural images by subordinated outsider groups. Ahrenhoerster (2008) says that *The Simpsons* is a vehicle for creating discourse, especially among undergraduate students. Guehlstorff et al. (2008) found three levels of jokes presented on *The Simpsons*: elite humor, non-elite humor, and obscure references. The breadth of scholarship on *The Simpsons* is indicative of the show’s place in popular culture.

The diversity of the fans demonstrates that *The Simpsons* epitomizes the universal appeal of satire. Fans include political elites and ordinary people from vastly different backgrounds. Tony Blair (a big fan of the show) guest-starred as himself in an episode (while a sitting head-of-state). Ralph Nader and former Vice President of the United States Al Gore are avid fans (Turner 2004, 9, 356). Former United States Attorney General John Ashcroft’s favorite character is reportedly the liberal-leaning Lisa Simpson (Pinsky 2001). Conservative constitutional scholar Harvey Mansfield reportedly said, “*The Simpsons* is the best thing on television” (West 2002, 236).

This popularity among a diverse and global audience, along with the politically provocative nature of *The Simpsons*, suggests that, given the extremely wide-reaching impact of *The Simpsons*, studying the partisan content of the show is important. Given the show’s popularity, diverse audience, and longevity, it is important to understand where the show lands on the political and partisan spectrum to grasp the quality of the messages so many viewers consume. It is also important to analyze the partisan content of *The Simpsons*, because the question of that content has been long debated. Some claim *The Simpsons* is biased; conversely there are those who suggest the show is neutral. This debate over partisanship has lacked any empirical grounding. Until now, because in this study we present empirical evidence on the question of partisanship in *The Simpsons* to help resolve the debate, as well as to contribute to our broader understanding of how American party politics is presented in entertainment programming.

Al Jean, writer and executive producer of *The Simpsons*, claims that the show “promotes no point of view on any issue” (Dettmar 2004, 104). Jean repeats this claim during the DVD audio commentary on *The Simpsons Movie*, saying the show is “great” because it takes “both sides” of issues. Cantor (1999, 734-5) argues that *The Simpsons* does not take sides, and he

has avoided “the question of the show’s politics in the narrowly partisan sense” in his research on the show, because he assumes that the show “satirizes both Republicans and Democrats” equally. But, does it? That is an empirical question that begs to be tested.

Despite the argument that the show is neutral, there has been criticism from Republicans that the show leans left. In 1992, Republican President George H.W. Bush condemned the show at the Annual Convention of the National Religious Broadcasters: “we need a nation closer to *The Waltons* than *The Simpsons*, an America that rejects the incivility, the tide of incivility, and the tide of intolerance” (Turner 2004, 225-6). Three days after the President’s speech condemning the show, animators created a response. The family is shown watching the President’s speech on their animated television in the beginning of the episode. After the President’s line about the show being crass and the polar opposite of *The Waltons*, Bart replies: “Hey, we’re just like *The Waltons*. We’re praying for an end to the depression, too.” First Lady Barbara Bush later called the show “dumb,” while George H.W. Bush’s former Drug Czar William Bennett, upon seeing a poster of Bart at a drug treatment facility that said “Underachiever and Proud of It,” turned to the recovering addicts and said, “You guys aren’t watching *The Simpsons*, are you? That’s not going to help you any” (Turner 2004, 225-6). This semi-feud with the Bush Administration culminated with the episode “Two Bad Neighbors,” in which George H.W. Bush is portrayed as a crotchety neighbor who literally feuds with Homer and Bart. By the end of the episode, Bush moves out of Springfield, symbolically leaving his differences with *The Simpsons* franchise unresolved.

There are other reasons to think *The Simpsons* might be biased against Republicans. In spite of his claims about the neutrality of *The Simpsons*, Jean, one of the original writers for the show, ultimately admits: “We are of a liberal bent” (as quoted in Turner 2004, 223). Interviews given by *The Simpsons*’ creator, Matt Groening, also cast doubt about the show’s neutrality: “I’d vote for a statue of Bob’s Big Boy over [President] Bush” (as quoted in Turner 2004, 226). Groening says he tries “to use the guise of light entertainment to wake people up ‘to some of the ways we’re being manipulated and exploited’ by modern American culture . . . your moral authorities don’t always have your best interest in mind. . . . Teachers, principals, clergymen, politicians—for *The Simpsons*, they’re all goofballs, and I think

that's a great message for kids" (as quoted in Pinsky 2001, 159). Groening was reportedly "refreshed" in response to criticism of an episode ("Sideshow Bob Roberts") in which the Republican Party "is depicted as praying to Satan" and supporting a mayoral candidate of Springfield (Sideshow Bob) who threatens young children (Bart and Lisa) with violence after they disrupt Sideshow Bob's media event by supporting incumbent (Democratic) Mayor "Diamond" Joe Quimby: "No children ever meddled with the Republican Party and lived to tell about it" (as quoted in Alberti 2004, xxii). Turner (2004, 23) argues the show is ultimately liberal because of what he calls its "satirical values: a deep distrust of authority and a permanent commitment to subverting it." Groening seems to support this point when he says the purpose of *The Simpsons* is to "entertain and subvert" (as quoted in Turner 2004, 56). This is an interesting spin on the sixteenth-century poet Sir Philip Sidney's argument in "The Defense of Poesy" that the purpose of art is "to teach and delight."

Given what the writers and producers of *The Simpsons* have said, it is reasonable to assume *The Simpsons* is biased against Republicans, yet some scholars have assumed that *The Simpsons* is neutral regarding party politics (see Cantor 1999, 735, who claims the show has been "generally even handed over the years in making fun of both parties"). Cantor (1999) argues that *The Simpsons* honors conservative values, including the nuclear family and patriarchal authority (see also Woodcock 2008, for a discussion on the show's traditional gender norms). But without data on the partisan content of the show, we can only speculate which side of this debate, if either, is correct. Do *The Simpsons* expressly ridicule the Democratic or Republican parties? If so, which side is made fun of more often?

These questions are important, because *The Simpsons* is attributed to have the power to create popular culture itself. Turner (2004) argues *The Simpsons* has the power to *define* an entire generation. If true, then the partisan political content of such a powerful show is an important topic of study. For over twenty years, people of all ages and experience from all over the world have been exposed to *The Simpsons* on a regular (often daily) basis through network television broadcasts and syndication. Investigations of low-information rationality have demonstrated that individuals often retain free political information throughout their non-political lives (Downs 1957; Popkin 1994). Research on political comedy shows (such as

*The Daily Show*) has shown that information in the guise of comedy can contribute to the way young people view politics (Cao and Brewer 2008; Cao 2010; Hollander 2005).

We hypothesize that *The Simpsons* contains partisan references, but that it does not take sides and ridicules both political parties equally. We think the fact that there has been a rich debate on this question in academic and pop culture literature is evidence that *The Simpsons* takes on both sides of the partisan spectrum. We note that the nature of humor itself is transpolitical. Humor can be an equal opportunity attacker, in which no point of view is safe from a joke. Given its use of satire and simply at the level of aesthetics, *The Simpsons* is unlikely to contain partisan messages (see Janssen 2003). The satiric animation of *The Simpsons* does not lend itself to attacking only one point of view. We think part of the appeal of *The Simpsons* is that it makes fun of everything and everyone, even itself (see Turner 2004). Given these reasons, we entered this study thinking that the show would contain partisan references, but we believed those references would come at the expense of both parties (not just Republicans).

## Theory

The theory underlying this research comes from ancient and modern explanations of public opinion. In Plato's (2005a) *Republic*, the allegory of the cave presents an argument for why the analysis of the content of mass media is important. The cave is a metaphor for (among other things) political life. The cave represents the political regime, what the Greeks called the *polis*. In the cave, the masses are chained together, so that they cannot turn their heads to see each other or anything except the wall of the cave. The wall contains shadows and reflections emanating from a fire behind them. These shadows are created by the "phantoms," the elite who dangle objects over the flames and manipulate popular opinion. A few people (the philosophers) are compelled for some reason to escape their chains and leave the cave. Outside of the cave, the philosophers are exposed to blinding natural light from the sun. Upon returning to the cave, the philosophers are ridiculed by the people still in the cave, because those people think the philosopher does not see correctly. The people in the cave understand the world based on the particular light of the fire in the cave, whereas the

philosopher understands the world based on the universal light of the sun. However that may be, Plato's allegory of the cave shows the way most people get information about the world—i.e., politically (from the media provided by the elites in a particular community).

Lippmann (2004, 1) builds on Plato's allegory of the cave in his classic work *Public Opinion* (published in 1922), which describes the way people understand politics as a matter of "the world outside and the pictures in our heads." These "pictures" depend on factors such as the "leaders" who manipulate the beliefs of the "rank and file" (Lippmann 2004, 129). Lippmann (2004, 173-174) argues that political science as a discipline needs to focus on "newsgathering" and the messages in the mass media to determine the way people get the information that forms their beliefs. Lippmann (2004) begins *Public Opinion* by describing Plato's allegory of the cave, placing his work on the shoulders of Plato and Socrates. Lippmann's (2004) basic point in *Public Opinion* is that because the elite-controlled media is responsible for how people "picture" government, it is essential for scholars to analyze that media to understand public opinion.

Zaller (1992) in *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* also embraces this ancient idea that the elites in society control the messages broadcast to the masses and influence the way people acquire information. Zaller (1992, xi) also emphasizes the tradition of "the Greeks" and the "philosophers of the late Middle Ages" who "had dealt with the same questions in early centuries." Zaller's (1992) purpose is to "explain how people acquire political information from elites and the mass media and convert it into political preferences" (quoted from back cover). Zaller (1992, 308) uses empirical evidence to confirm what Plato (2005a) described—i.e., that people still live in a cave—by noting, "[I]ndividuals do not possess 'true attitudes'... on most political issues." Instead, Zaller (1992) says that people are given the information that forms their beliefs by the elites in society. Zaller (1992, 6) argues that the elites—i.e., "politicians, higher-level government officials, journalists, some activists, and...experts and policy specialists"—are responsible for providing the frames and substance of people's political beliefs.

In the new media environment, the traditional focus of politically oriented scholars—i.e., hard news—is expanding to include entertainment sources (see Prior 2005); not only "soft news" programming like *20/20*

(1978- ), *Dateline* (1992- ), or *Entertainment Tonight* (1981- ), but also purely entertainment-driven programming with no obvious newsworthy component like *The Simpsons*. Such entertainment programs contribute to the “pictures in our heads” described by Lippmann (2004), and they constitute an elite source. Strictly speaking, *The Simpsons* qualifies as an “activist” elite source in Zaller’s (1992, 6) terms. Turner’s (2004, 23) argument that *The Simpsons*’ goal is to be subversive supports this contention. Based on our assumption that *The Simpsons* is an elite, activist source contributing to the way people understand the world, our purpose here is to study the content of the show to know more about the show itself, and to help settle the debate in the literature over its partisan content. We seek to understand what *The Simpsons* is broadcasting to the masses regarding party politics.

## Methodology

The data presented here are the result of a content analysis of the first five seasons (N=103) of *The Simpsons*. These episodes were selected for four reasons. First, they represent the period of the series when the original conservative, Republican reaction occurred. Second, these early episodes created the long-term frames of the program (Ortved 2009, 78-79). Third, the first five seasons originally aired in a time-span (1989-1994) that covers presidents from the Republican and Democratic parties, major economic and foreign policy events, and equal opportunities to mock Democrats or Republicans. Fourth, the beginning of the show is the most natural place to study, because, as Plato’s (2005a, 377b) Socrates in the *Republic* observes: “the beginning in every task is the chief thing.” For these reasons, we focus on the first five seasons of *The Simpsons* to analyze the show’s partisan humor.

The design of the content analysis closely followed Heeron (2000), who examined the religious content of the show. Heeron’s (2000) content analysis consisted of explicating episodes of *The Simpsons* by searching for a particular message. Unlike Heeron (2000), however, this study looked at all of the episodes from the first five seasons of the show to increase confidence in the reliability of the findings. Heeron (2000) looked at a random sample generated by syndicated broadcasts of the show, which could result in missing content (bias) because of the constraints of syndication

(see Turner 2004). We think it is better to focus on all of the episodes from the first five seasons of *The Simpsons* to understand the way partisan political content was presented in the early years of the show. Most of the controversy over the show occurred during those early years. The early years of the show also established the frames of *The Simpsons*' universe in terms of the characters' personalities and tendency to exhibit types of behavior (see Ortved 2009). If there was any partisan bias in *The Simpsons*, it is reasonable to expect such bias to be found within the first five seasons of the show.

To capture any partisan content in *The Simpsons*, we addressed four questions. First, does the episode contain any reference to politics at all? The focus here was on any reference to a political event, party, politician, or issue of public policy broadly understood. Second, how much of the episode is dedicated to politics? If the main storyline of an episode involved an expressly political or governmental theme—e.g., running for office or protesting the policies of a corporation—then it was counted as being “all” political. If the episode contained one or more political jokes, but not an entirely political storyline, then it was counted as having “some” political content. If the episode was completely devoid of any satire about government or political affairs of any kind, then it was counted as having no (“none”) political content. Third, are there any patently partisan references in the episode? Any time a patent partisan reference was made about either the Democratic Party or the Republican Party, it was recorded. To be counted, the reference to party politics had to be express. For the sake of clarity, ideological references did not count as partisan content. We are only interested in the specific question of partisanship raised by Cantor (1999). Finally, of the patent partisan references, what is the form of the partisan content? Specifically, after the partisan satire was noted, the context in which the partisan references were made was also recorded.

## Findings

The frequencies of the politically themed episodes of *The Simpsons* over the course of the first five seasons are interesting. First, every single one of the 103 episodes contained at least some political element. Thus, the answer to the first question was always “yes.” Looking at the amount of

political content in the show, 70.9% (73 shows) have “some” political content (at least one political joke) in the episode, while 29.1% (30 shows) have a completely political storyline in the episode. This evidence of at least “some” political content in every episode of *The Simpsons* in the first five seasons of the show affirms the importance of studying the show’s content. *The Simpsons* is not a comedy show about nothing; no wonder it can be so controversial—it takes on the subject of controversy, i.e., politics, on a regular basis. Nearly 30% of the shows are devoted to an entirely political storyline.

Table 1 **Partisan Political Content in *The Simpsons***

Joke#	Season#	Episode#	Political Content	Dem.	Rep.
1-2	3	21; 56	All	1	1
3	4	4; 63	All	0	1
4	4	19; 78	Some	1	0
5	5	12; 93	Some	1	0
6	5	14; 95	Some	1	0
7-8	5	17; 98	Some	1	1

Note: N=103. There were a total of eight jokes aimed at the political parties over the course of six episodes. The first “Episode#” refers to the episode number of the particular season, and the second number refers to the overall episode number of the entire series. “Dem.” and “Rep.” refer to number of jokes aimed at Democrats and Republicans in the particular episode.

There were six shows with specific partisan references (5% of the first five seasons). Out of 103 episodes, five episodes contained jokes aimed at the Democrats (Mean=.05); three episodes contained jokes aimed at the Republicans (Mean=.03). No episode contained more than one partisan reference to each party. Performing a simple one-sample T test shows no

significant differences between the means, confirming the neutral hypothesis posited by Cantor (1999) and others. Based on this evidence, there is no difference in the number of partisan jokes aimed at Democrats and Republicans on *The Simpsons*. The show does not favor one political party over the other; both are ridiculed rarely and equally.

**Table 2 One Sample T-test Democratic vs. Republican Mockery in *The Simpsons***

	Mean	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
Republican Party	.03	.914	.363
Democratic Party	.05	.	

Note: N=103. Democratic Party: SD = .22, Mode = 0, Max. = 1.  
Republican Party: SD = .17, Mode = 0, Min. = 0, Max. = 1.

Overall, there are very few partisan references in the sample. The first partisan references did not occur until season three of the show (21<sup>st</sup> episode of the third season and 56<sup>th</sup> episode overall in the sample). Perhaps as part of the show's effort to be an equal opportunity offender, the very first references to partisan politics on *The Simpsons* come at the expense of both parties (one joke each) in an episode containing an entirely ("all") political storyline. The episode is about Sideshow Bob being released from jail prematurely and committing attempted murder; he is the source of both partisan references. Sideshow Bob is himself a Republican, as he reveals while reminiscing about life in prison:

Do you know what prison is like for a life-long, conservative Republican? In our overcrowded cell, we became little more than beasts—[flashback to a scene in prison] Who used my Chap Stick?! . . . I don't want it!

The Democrats are not immune to Sideshow Bob's comments. Upon being convicted, he exclaims:

I'll be back; you can't keep the Democrats out of the White House forever! And when they get in—I'm back on the streets, with all my criminal buddies!

The next expressly partisan reference occurs during episode four of season four, and it comes at the expense of Republicans. There are no Democratic references during this episode, which is entirely (“all”) political in its storyline. Lisa is crowned a beauty queen, but she rebels when pressured to endorse cigarette smoking. The partisan reference is an off-the-cuff remark by Krusty the Clown, a judge in the child beauty pageant, who shows up late to the event and says, rather indifferently upon arriving: “Yeah, yeah. What’s this—the, uh, Republican fundraiser?” A child beauty contestant in this episode references the Bill of Rights as a “good thing,” and Ronald Reagan is presented as a wax head on a pike in this episode (next to Dr. Ruth’s and Mr. T’s heads, respectively).

Another partisan reference from episode 19 of season four (78<sup>th</sup> episode overall) occurs during an episode with “some” political content. Grampa Simpson is the source of the reference in an episode dominated by a storyline about Homer and Marge’s high school reunion. When asked by Bart whether he wondered “why [he was] getting checks for absolutely nothing,” Grampa replies, “I figured ‘cause the Democrats were in power again.” Interestingly, Cantor (1999, 735) considers this particular zing at the Democrats’ expense to be “perhaps the funniest political line in the history of *The Simpsons*.” This episode also references the war on drugs, President Nixon, and another former President: Grampa claims to be “a man who once took a shot at Teddy Roosevelt.” Grampa Simpson is presented as an active citizen who writes letters to magazines (*Modern Bride*) and the President of the United States: “Dear Mr. President, there are too many states nowadays. Please eliminate three. I am ‘not’ a crackpot.”

The remainder of the partisan references occurs during season five. They all contain “some” political content. In the 12<sup>th</sup> episode of the season (93<sup>rd</sup> episode overall), *The Simpsons* takes on fad self-help trends, and Grampa makes more obscure partisan references. Upset about having to pay money to see his now famous grandson perform his popular catchphrase (“I didn’t do it”), Grampa remarks: “I have to pay five dollars to see my own grandson—that’s the Democrats for ya!” The Oliver North Trial is referenced in this episode. Mayor Quimby is caught having an affair by his wife (who looks like Jackie Kennedy): “I, uh, didn’t do it,” he says in his Kennedy-esque accent. The next partisan reference occurs during episode 14 of season five (95<sup>th</sup> episode overall). This episode concerns Lisa Simpson

inventing an intelligent girl doll to compete with the stereotypical Barbie doll or “Malibu Stacy Doll” as it is known in Springfield. Again, the source of the partisan reference is a non sequitur from Grampa (who mockingly says): “The President is a ‘Demi-crat.’”

The last partisan references came at the expense of both parties during episode 17 of season five (98<sup>th</sup> episode overall). The episode is about Bart winning a pet elephant from a radio show. The elephant is shown stampeding through town, crashing into the political parties’ respective conventions, which just happen to be taking place down the street. At the Republican convention people cheer: “We want what’s worst for everyone” and “We’re just plain evil.” At the Democratic convention people boo: “We hate life, and ourselves” and “We can’t govern.” President Clinton is depicted in this episode playing the saxophone. Moe (the depraved bartender in Springfield) sees President Clinton and yells: “Hey, Clinton, get back to work!” The President responds: “Make me.” Vice President Gore is also referenced. Marge thinks Bart’s elephant might gore someone, and Homer replies: “Heh-heh, it does look like Al Gore.” Homer also mocks communism: “Marge, I agree with you in theory. In theory, communism works. In theory.” The enduring nature of government humor is ridiculed via a joke-telling robot DJ (the DJ-3000): “Looks like those clowns in Congress did it again. What a bunch of clowns!” The human DJ, baffled and impressed by the wit of the robot, asks: “How does he keep up with the news like that?”

## Discussion

According to *The Simpsons Guide to Springfield*, “Springfield community life often centers around meetings—meetings to decide how to spend the rare budget surplus, to hear the candidates debate, [and] to warn the public about a strange new viral hybrid that’s been introduced into the town’s water supply” (Groening 1998, 10). Perhaps because the focus is mostly on these small-town meetings—i.e., on local politics in Springfield, in which offices are non-partisan—the findings reveal *The Simpsons* during the early years to be basically non-partisan. The show is an equal opportunity source of satire.

In the future, when the entire series ends and all of the seasons are made commercially available, the partisan references may turn out to be

biased; however, that seems unlikely given what has been found here. To begin with, the characters' personalities and traits, as well as the style of the show itself were all established early in the series (Ortved 2009). For this reason, it is rational to expect future episodes to be similar in partisan content to what was found here. Alternatively, it has been said that *The Simpsons* has become less political or edgy over the years (Ortved 2009; Turner 2004). If true, then the early episodes from this sample would be the place to find partisan bias, if it existed. No bias was found.

It seems likely that the non-partisan joking is deliberate. Both Democrats and Republicans watch television. Consistently mocking one side more than the other is bad business. If *The Simpsons* is ultimately liberal in the sense that it favors individual activism over elite rule, as Turner (2004) argues, then it is able to accomplish this feat as a kind of Trojan horse. As Pinsky's (2001) work on religious themes in *The Simpsons* has shown, there is plenty of material in the show for conservatives to enjoy. The diverse fan base of the show (from Al Gore to John Ashcroft) suggests the show has something for all political tastes. As soon as the show picks a partisan side, it risks alienation among viewers and a concomitant loss of influence and profit.

The conservative Republican reaction to *The Simpsons* in the beginning of the series can be explained perhaps by the ideology of the show, and by the creator of the show, Matt Groening. The out-spoken, counter-culture cartoonist, Groening, seems to self-identify as a liberal: "I like [Lisa Simpson's] idealism, her stubbornness...[her] politics...If I had to be transmorphed into *The Simpsons* cartoon universe (a horrifying thought), I'd like to be Lisa Simpson" (Pinsky 2001, 39). According to Pinsky (2001, 46), Lisa Simpson is identifiable with "contemporary liberal activism." To the extent Groening's politics play a role in the creative process of *The Simpsons*, there may be reasons for the partisan defenders of conservative and Republican politics to react to *The Simpsons*. But Groening's take on politics seems to be about political issues like environmentalism and smoking, not partisanship. Groening wants to be subversive, so it would be expected that *The Simpsons* opposes the status quo (all of it) including "both" political parties.

Groening's influence in *The Simpsons* may be about creating a spirit of opposition among the writers and animators against an established order

that encourages citizens to be woefully uninformed and elites to be horribly corrupt and incompetent (see Alberti 2004). For Chuck Jones (1990, 93), famous animator for Warner Bros, art needs to oppose something as a matter of course, because in his words: “creativity without opposition is like playing polo without a horse.” In this tradition of cartooning as oppositional, of which *The Simpsons* is very aware (see Turner 2004), *The Simpsons* opposes everything, citizens and elites (see Guehlstorf et al. 2008).

*The Simpsons* not only ridicules both sides of the aisle, the show even ridicules itself (Keslowitz 2006). Attacking one’s friends and one’s enemies equally references ancient Athens and Socrates. Plato’s (2005b, 173d-e) Socrates’ most passionate follower (Apollodorus in the *Symposium*) is said to “run down” himself and “everybody else” as if he had “some extravagant idea that the whole world, with the sole exception of Socrates, is in a state of utter misery.” Apollodorus may have misunderstood the nature of Socrates’ questioning, but the idea that philosophy stands outside of convention—actually, in direct opposition to it—is germane to any study of *The Simpsons*.

Socrates and *The Simpsons* have much in common. “True, *The Simpsons* is funny, but its use of satire goes much deeper than humor. . . . [It] searches for truth in a town full of corruption and lies . . . it teaches us to do the same” (Keslowitz 2006, 16). The lesson of the show seems to be “to get people to re-examine their world” (Turner 2004, 410). In this sense, *The Simpsons* is philosophic because it uses humor to encourage questioning authority and ourselves. “*The Simpsons* has carried on the tradition of Socrates in that it holds to his ultimate ideal: ‘The unexamined life is not worth living’” (Keslowitz 2006, 16). Perhaps it is this interpretation that generated the conservative Republican reaction to *The Simpsons* in the beginning of the series. Perhaps the show was seen by them the way Socrates was seen by his accusers, as being anti-traditional and cosmopolitan (things that conservatives typically oppose on principle).

The irony of the initial criticism of the show, however, is that *The Simpsons* may have become defenders of the status quo over time (Ortved 2009). The show may not actually generate self-reflection and civic action among viewers as Keslowitz (2006) alleges. *The Simpsons* may actually create apathy and cynicism. Future research will need to address the empirical effects of *The Simpsons*, if any, on viewers’ opinions about govern-

ment. Based on what we know now, political humor programming heavily influenced by *The Simpsons*, such as *The Daily Show*, presents a mixed picture regarding the effect of humor on viewers' political opinions. *The Daily Show* has been shown to increase both efficacy and cynicism among young viewers (Baumgartner and Morris 2006). It seems that constant laughing at government creates a cynical sense that government is laughable. However, perhaps because government is seen as so laughable, people think that they could make a difference in government if they tried (people think they understand what they find laughable). Future research should look at the effects of *The Simpsons* on viewers' opinions and should address whether the show increases levels of cynicism and internal efficacy in viewers in a manner similar to *The Daily Show*.

The first five seasons of *The Simpsons* contain a substantial amount of political content. Every episode contains at least one joke about government or political affairs, broadly understood. This study shows that *The Simpsons* makes fun of Democrats and Republicans rarely and equally. We think the evidence presented here shows that *The Simpsons* is non-partisan. We expect future research on the partisan political content of the show to confirm our findings when more seasons of *The Simpsons* are made commercially available (currently seasons 14-19 are not available for sale to the public). In addition to the study of the content of the show, future research should look at the effects, if any, of *The Simpsons* on viewers' political beliefs, particularly regarding efficacy and cynicism. Given the billions of dollars of revenue *The Simpsons* generates each year and the show's dedicated global audience, there is ample reason to suspect the political satire of the show has significant effects on its audience.

Such effects, if they are found to exist, will no doubt be unimportant to Homer Simpson, because as he ironically says to his wife (in the entirely political episode "Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington"), "Oh Marge, cartoons don't have any deep meaning. They're just stupid drawings that give you a cheap laugh." That may be true for many cartoons before *The Simpsons* first aired on television, but it does not ring true for *The Simpsons* itself.

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