

Political Culture and Public Opinion:

The American Dream on Springfield's Evergreen Terrace

“Please, please, kids, stop fighting. Maybe Lisa's right about America being the land of opportunity, and maybe Adil's got a point about the machinery of capitalism being oiled with the blood of the workers.”

Homer Simpson¹

When a little girl's father finishes a free sample of *Reading Digest*, she notices an essay contest: “*Children under 12. Three hundred words, fiercely pro-American. Sounds interesting.*” When she can't find her muse for the essay, the little girl rides to the local national forest for inspiration. Sitting amid the towering trees that allow rays of sunlight to beam down, the little girl solicits the landscape: “Okay, America, inspire me.” As she gazes out to the snow-capped purple mountain majesties, a bald eagle lands on a tree branch in front of her (notably between leaves that look akin to an olive branch in one talon and the spears of arrows in the other). Spreading its wings and cocking its head to one side, the vision awes the little girl, and she proceeds to write her essay.

Along with her father, the little girl presents her essay at the Veterans of Popular Wars hall, right after another child presents his defense of burning the American flag. In

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her essay, entitled “The Roots of Democracy,” the little girl recounts her vision of America: “When America was born on that hot July day in 1776, the trees in Springfield Forest were tiny saplings, trembling towards the sun. And as they were nourished by Mother Earth, so too did our fledgling nation find strength in the simple ideals of equality and justice. Who would have thought such mighty oaks or such a powerful nation could grow out of something so fragile, so pure?”²

Once the judges confirm that she, and not her father, wrote the essay, the little girl and her family win an all-expense paid trip to Washington, D.C., to compete in the finals. While visiting a memorial to a leading women’s rights pioneer, the little girl overhears her hometown congressman taking a bribe to permit logging in the same forest she found her inspiration. Disillusioned, she tears up her essay and envisions the capital morphed into a trough of pork barrel projects and legislative pigs stuffing their snots with bribes.

A different muse, one of a muckraker exposing graft, payola and corruption, strikes the little girl to write a new essay of what she has witnessed: “The city of Washington was built on a stagnant swamp some 200 years ago and very little has changed. It stank then and it stinks now. Only today, it is the fetid stench of corruption that hangs in the air.” Amid the audience’s gasps, the disillusioned little girl continues her torrid portrayal of the nation’s capital: “And who did I see taking a bribe but the ‘honorable’ Bob Arnold. But don’t worry, Congressman, I’m sure you can buy all the votes you need with your dirty money. And this will be one nation under the dollar with liberty and justice for none.”

Following a call by one of competition’s judges, the Federal Bureau of Investigations conducts a sting operation of the crooked congressman, who is expelled

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from the legislature and serves time in prison (where he miraculously becomes a born-again Christian). Upon hearing the news, the little girl gasps, “I can’t believe it. The system works.”

In this episode from the third season of *The Simpsons*, “Mr. Lisa Goes To Washington” advocates more than what Homer observes: “Oh, Marge, cartoons don’t have any deep meaning. They’re just stupid drawings that give you a cheap laugh,” upon which he stands up and exposes his “rear cleavage.” This episode, along with many others in the long-running animated series, espouses the virtues, vices, and varieties of American political culture, public opinion, and ultimately the American Dream. Through the skillful use of satire, *The Simpsons* demonstrates insights into the underlying political culture and public opinion of the United States governing system (and, more broadly, society-at-large). This chapter presents an overview, as well as the differing ideas, of the concepts of political culture, public opinion, and the “American Dream,” all through the medium of the Fox Network’s series *The Simpsons*.³

Culture and Politics

Both the umbrella concept of “culture” and the particular concept of “political culture” share common ideas and purposes; nevertheless, scholars have differing ideas and definitions of what constitutes culture and political culture. In general, a broad view of culture can be seen through what Walter Lippmann, a famous American journalist and political commentator, wrote in 1914: “Culture is the name for what people are interested in, their thoughts, their models, the books they read and the speeches they hear,

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their table-talk, gossip, controversies, historical sense and scientific training, the values they appreciate, the quality of life they admire. *All communities have culture. It is the climate of their civilization* (emphasis added).⁴

All societies have some kind of culture which represents a people's way of life. Culture is characterized best by a variety of components, such as values, beliefs, symbols, languages, norms, and even physical matter. Values serve as important components of culture by defining desirable and important principles or ideals within a society; values are the thoughts about what ought to be in a society, and as Seymour Martin Lipset describes, are "well-entrenched, culturally determined sentiments." Beliefs are seen as common concepts of a society and its people about what is true. Each society has core values that serve as its foundational basis; often these values center on the role and importance of the individual citizen, their responsibilities and protections within the society, and the role and importance of the collective grouping of citizens. An example is the freedom of speech, which is a value respected and cherished in the United States, as is the value of tolerating all viewpoints. However, these two values can conflict with each other, when the freedom to speak unpopular ideas challenges the value of tolerating different viewpoints.⁵

Along with these two important concepts, symbols and language are considered to be reflections of these values and beliefs, by embodying a society's values and beliefs within concrete terms and actions. For example, the preamble to the U.S. Constitution asserts that all political power rests with its citizens; "We the People, in order to form a more perfect union ... do hereby ordain and establish this constitution." This language gives concrete form to the value that political sovereignty, or the principle of legitimate

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power and authority, rests with “the people.” Along with symbols and language, norms are generally considered to be rules, or guidelines, by which a society enforces its values and beliefs upon its citizens.

All of these intangible concepts (values, beliefs, and norms) may be identified, reinforced, and promoted through such tangible physical products as automobiles. When one sees an automobile as a product, or artifact, of a society’s culture, one associates certain values and attitudes within that society with the artifact, such as mobility, individualism, and exploration. Even television shows and movies can serve as artifacts that demonstrate the values, beliefs, even attitudes that constitute a society’s culture. As McBride and Toburen assert, the “images that are saved and broadcast on magnetic tape provide clues about ... our society in social, political, and economic terms.”⁶

Beyond these basic components, different types of culture may emerge within a society. This book’s key argument centers on the differences between popular culture, defined as commercial entertainment produced for mass consumption, and high culture, or entertainment produced for an elite class for very exclusive consumption. What appeals to elites, such as Robert Underdunk Terwilliger (a.k.a. Sideshow Bob), might be the staging of the operetta *H.M.S. Pinafore*, while the lowbrow comedy of Krusty the Klown and the violent escapades of *The Itchy & Scratchy Cartoon* may appeal to the masses (most notably Bart and, ironically, Lisa). Along with popular and high culture, other forms of culture may exist, such as economic culture, religious culture, sub-cultures, and, for the purposes of this chapter, political culture.

Within the political science discipline, the study of political culture mirrors the diversity of what constitutes the political way of life of a society. For example, in 1956,

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Gabriel Almond contended that “every political system is embedded in a particular pattern of orientations to political action,” what he called political culture. Later, in a now classic work, Almond and Sidney Verba defined political culture as “specifically political orientations—attitudes toward the political system and its various parts, and attitudes toward the role of the self in the system.” These attitudes have an impact on what citizens know about their political and governing system, what their feelings are towards that political system, and how they judge their political system.⁷

Almond and Verba contend that there are three types of political culture that ultimately make up a broader concept of “civic culture.” The first, participant political culture, is when citizens are highly in tune with the political activity and events of their society and they actively participate in political life: “members of the society tend to be explicitly oriented to the system as a whole and to both the political and administrative structures and processes.” This type of political culture is evident in *The Simpsons* episode “Much Apu About Nothing,” when local citizens, outraged by supposedly constant bear attacks in Springfield, march to City Hall and demand that the mayor do something. Once the citizens get their Bear Patrol, complete with a stealth-bomber, they are outraged by the taxes to pay for the patrols. Under siege at City Hall with citizens chanting “Down with Taxes!”, Mayor ‘Diamond Joe’ Quimby asks an aide, “Are these morons getting dumber, or just louder?” “Dumber, sir. They won’t give up the bear patrol, but they won’t pay taxes for it either,” remarks the aide. Unlike active citizen involvement found in participant culture, a second form of political culture is subject, when citizens believe that they have little impact on their society’s political life, so they choose not to participate in political activities. An example of this is alluded to in “Lisa’s

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Substitute,” in which Bart runs for class president against Martin Prince and is so far ahead in terms of popularity that no one in the class—including Bart—bothers to vote, except for Martin and his friend Wendell. The students all assumed a Bart victory was a foregone conclusion, and that their participation was not needed. Therefore, none of them bother to get involved. Finally, parochial political culture is when a society’s citizenry focus their attention on themselves and disregard any involvement in centralized political participation, since citizens have no expectation of the larger political system aiding them in any way. In the episode “The Bart Wants What It Wants,” Principal Skinner embodies the parochial culture as he begins to steal lab equipment from the Springfield Preparatory School and justifies it by saying to a shocked Lisa, “welcome to Dick Cheney’s America” before making his getaway.⁸

Analogous to Almond’s and Verba’s definition, Daniel Elazar, in his 1966 study of the United States, describes political culture as “the particular pattern of orientation to political action in which each political system is imbedded” which is “rooted in the cumulative historical experiences of particular groups of people.” Contending that a society can have numerous political cultures and that these cultures may overlap with one another, Elazar characterizes three distinct types of American political cultures: moralistic, individualistic, and traditionalistic. In his conceptualization of moralistic political culture, Elazar presents an approach to politics that exercises power and authority for the betterment of all citizens in order to achieve “some notion of the public good and ... the advancement of the public interest.” Citizens who adhere to this approach believe that it is their duty to actively participate in political life and that government should be more actively involved in both “the economic and social life of the

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community.” This type of culture is exemplified in “Sweets and Sour Marge,” where Marge gets a judge to ban the import and distribution of all sugar into Springfield after it weighs in as America’s fattest city by the *Duff Book of World Records*, or in the “Weekend at Burnsie’s” episode when Ned Flanders leads a campaign for a government ban on medical marijuana. A second political culture, an individualistic one, values the principal importance of the individual within a society; therefore, government and politics should be “means by which individuals may improve themselves socially and economically.” Within this culture, political activity is seen as “a specialized one, essentially the province of professionals, of minimum and passing concern to laymen, and no place for amateurs to play an active role.” “Trash of the Titans” demonstrates this culture when amateur politician Homer Simpson defeats long-sitting sanitation commissioner Ray Patterson, and immediately botches the job by spending his yearly budget in less than one month. To resolve the deficit, Homer has other cities pay Springfield to take their trash; only when the trash begins to explode out of golf holes and manholes do the citizens fire Simpson and decide to relocate Springfield. Finally, Elazar contends that a third political culture, what he terms traditionalistic, exists primarily in the southern United States, where an ordered hierarchy within society determines the role and relationship of citizens. Those who at the top of the social system, sometimes referred to elites, are expected to play a significant role in government, while those in the lower end of the society are “not expected to be even minimally active as citizens ... [in fact], they are not even expected to vote.” Government, within this culture, is designed to promote and continue traditional values and beliefs within the society and the interpersonal relationships that have developed over time. This type of hierarchical

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culture is embodied in “They Saved Lisa’s Brain,” when Lisa and other local Mensa leaders assume the leadership of Springfield, only to be overthrown by the uneducated lower-class, Duff-drinking masses, and in the episode “Homer the Great,” when a society of influential men in Springfield, known as the Sacred Order of the Stonecutters, controls all aspects of politics and society, including hiding the truth about extraterrestrials, keeping the metric system down, and even making Steve Guttenberg a movie star.⁹

All of these approaches emphasize the fact that different concepts can explain political culture. A different approach taken by political scientists comes from studying political culture as an explanatory factor, rather than being defined by outside forces. Following his work in defining political culture by particular actions, Almond, in writing a study with Powell, wrote that political culture impacts “the conduct of individuals in their political roles, the content of their political demands, and their responses to laws.” This approach contends that political culture is not just “what a group has” in the forms of beliefs, attitudes, and values, but also “what a group is.” John Street notes that while some define political culture as being “the judgments citizens pass on political behaviour,” others characterize political culture as “the language through which politics is conducted.” Ultimately, Street argues that culture can be seen as “more than attitudes people hold to politicians and political institutions” (or the structures of government), but as “made up of a complex of feelings and images, deriving from the home and work, from manifestos and popular culture.” In an important study of American states and their political culture, Erikson, McIver and Wright determine that the political identity and ideological characteristics of a state, from Alabama and Wyoming, can be traced back to the state’s political culture, and government actions, or policy adoptions, can be linked to

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a state's political culture. Compare, for example, the differences in socio-political priorities due to differences in political culture between Springfield and Shelbyville in "The Seven-Beer Snitch," where Shelbyville enjoys a thriving cultural arts community and Springfield cannot even sustain their short-lived Frank Gehry-designed cultural center.¹⁰

The conflict over what defines and what constitutes political culture, as well as the impact it has on society, continues to demonstrate the variety and variations surrounding the core issues of what makes up a society's political and governing system. This expression of "a people's political way of life" has a significant relationship in the expression of those "people's" beliefs and attitudes about their political system. Conversely, changes in people's beliefs and attitudes can impact and evolve a society's political culture. As any society and its citizens mature, attitudes and beliefs can evolve and change as well. While the underlying beliefs and attitudes within a society about its politics and government serve as its political culture, the day-to-day (and often year-to-year) attitudes and beliefs about politics and government are a society's public opinion. Both political culture and public opinion interact with one another; the attitudes of political culture serve as the foundation to a society's political and governing system, while public opinion serves as important and necessary component to the daily political system, particularly within the United States.

The Power to Shape, and Be Shaped by, Public Opinion

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Just like political culture, public opinion is often viewed in varying and different ways. Public opinion can be viewed as the collection, distribution, and summation of the public's preferences on issues, events, and personalities, most notably within the political and governing system. Typically, public opinion is measured by polls, which tend to categorize public opinion in different ways: direction, or the issue's support or opposition among the public; whether the public's opinion on an issue or concern is stable or not; the intensity, or the gradation of support or opposition; and the issue's salience, or importance of the given issue among the public. In addition to these characteristics, once public opinion is measured, it can reflect varying attributes, such as consensus or agreement on an issue; a permissive attitude where the public is open to persuasion on the issue; or divisiveness, where the issue provokes strong opinions on both sides of the issue, such as abortion or gun control.

Like culture, different types of public opinion exist. In 1950, Gabriel Almond observed three distinct types of "publics": the general public, or those citizens who don't know or care about issues beyond immediate concerns that affect them (Homer, Lenny, Carl, Moe, Barney); the attentive public, or those citizens who are typically better-educated and who follow abstract political issues and concerns (Lisa, Flanders, Sideshow Bob, Mr. Burns, Principal Skinner); and the elite public, or the individuals, such as elected officials, journalists, and policy-makers, who can be highly influential on the other types of publics, and thus shape "public opinion" (Mayor Quimby, Governor Mary Bailey, Kent Brockman, Reverend Lovejoy, Birchabald "Birch" T. Barlow). With the increasing range of the media and, in the 21st century, other venues such as the internet, another form of public has emerged, that of issue publics, or those individuals who follow

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rather narrow and specific issues, as evidence in Springfield by the proliferation of interest-specific newspapers responding to Burns' monopoly of mainstream media in the award-winning fifteenth season finale "Fraudcast News."¹¹

Not only has the increased power of television, radio, and the internet spawned new types of publics, but these venues have also prompted an easier way to manipulate and energize public opinion. In the summer of 2007, the U.S. Senate was debating an extensive overhaul of U.S. immigration laws. While most public opinion polls reflected support for major provisions within the proposed legislation, critics of the measure utilized not only talk radio, but also the Internet, to energize and coalesce a grassroots backlash against the bill. When the "grass roots roared," the immigration plan stalled and eventually defeated.¹²

For their 18th season finale, *The Simpsons* went after this ability of private individuals to funnel their outrage against the media, and how the media and government together may join together to shape public opinion. In this 400th episode, entitled "You Kent Always Say What You Want," Ned Flanders responded to news anchor Kent Brockman's use of a profane word on air by using the Internet to mobilize "people I never met to pressure a government with better things to do to punish a man who meant no harm for something nobody even saw." Ultimately, Brockman is fired, and employs the same medium that brought him down to fire back at his former profession. In an appearance reminiscent of the 2005 movie *Good Night and Good Luck*, Brockman declares to a webcam broadcast:

Friends, the press and the government are in bed together in an embrace so intimate and wrong, they could spoon on a twin mattress and still have

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room for Ted Koppel. Journalists used to question the reasons for war and expose abuse of power. Now, like toothless babies, they suckle on the sugary teat of misinformation and poop it into the diaper we call the 6:00 news. Demand more of your government! Demand more of your press! Vote out your so-called representatives! Reject your corporate masters!¹³

The media shapes and influences public opinion in three distinct ways: agenda-setting, or determining which issues or concerns are “newsworthy” and influencing citizens to consider those issues or concerns above others, as evident in Kent Brockman’s entire broadcast dedicated to the “Lisa Lionheart” doll that created buzz for the Malibu Stacey rival; framing, or the ability to influence the way citizens interpret events and issues, as shown in “Mr. Spritz Goes to Washington,” when Fox News interviews a Democratic congressional candidate and places devil horns on him, puts a Soviet flag in the background, and tells him that he has made a “very adulterous point”; and priming, or affecting how citizens evaluate issues, events, and even candidates for public office. This is demonstrated in *The Simpson*’s 400th episode, when a Fox News commentator, in his “Liberal Outrage” segment, announces that it “seems that liberals want to give NASA the right to abort space missions whenever they feel like it,” Homer deplors “Liberals! I hate them so much!”¹⁴

The power to shape public opinion can come from not only the media and private individuals and groups, but also from the government itself. As Sven Steinmo has noted, “governments do not simply wait for citizens to demand public policies, they also set the agenda.” In “Much Apu About Nothing,” Mayor ‘Diamond Joe’ Quimby must

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deal with an angry mob over the “constant bear attacks” in Springfield and subsequent higher taxes to pay for the Bear Patrol. In dealing with the higher taxes issue, Mayor Quimby convinces the angry mob that it is illegal immigrants who are causing their higher taxes and pledges a ballot referendum on deporting illegal immigrants. Caught up in the fervor, the citizens of Springfield actively support the proposition’s passage. Moe observes, “You know what really aggravates me is them immigrants. They want all the benefits of living in Springfield, but they ain’t even bothered to learn themselves the language.” Homer responds, “Hey, those are exactly my sentiments.” What Homer doesn’t realize is that voting for Prop 24 would affect his favorite Kwik-E-Mart clerk, Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, who is an illegal immigrant. After discovering this fact, Homer reflects to himself, “I got so swept up in the scapegoating and fun of Proposition 24, I never stopped to think it might affect someone I care about.” Turning to his friend Apu, Homer takes him by the shoulder and says, “You know what Apu...I am really, really gonna miss you.”¹⁵

Not only do elected officials and policymakers have an impact on public opinion, but so do those running for public office. As Leonard Steinhorn describes it, modern-day candidates are akin to big business when they engage in the “political sell”: “political advertising—at least the positive kind—is all about ... defining and branding candidates, turning their lives and beliefs and backgrounds into a story so engaging and appealing that voters want to associate with it through their vote.” Steinhorn goes on to argue that the “most common and emotionally satisfying narrative links the candidate to the American Dream—as an individual who either triumphed over adversity or rose above modest means to become a national leader.” When Montgomery C. Burns, Sideshow

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Bob, and even Homer Simpson seek public office, they all attempted to shape public opinion through their campaigns. In “Two Cars in Every Garage and Three Eyes on Every Fish,” Burns seeks to use his vast fortune to win the governor’s mansion and override the penalties imposed on his nuclear plant by state inspectors (after it was discovered that Bart caught a three-eyed fish in the local stream adjacent to the power plant). Through a campaign of smear tactics and deriding “those bureaucrats down there in the state capital,” Burns is able to go from a 98 percent “despicable or worse” rating to tied with the incumbent governor. His campaign fails only when, on the eve of the election, Burns joins the Simpson family for dinner and Marge serves one of the three-eyed fish that started the investigation of the Springfield Nuclear Plant. Burns, with campaign consultants urging him to eat the fish, spits it out before live cameras, dooming his run for office. As he leaves the Simpsons’ house, Burns observes the irony of his doomed campaign: “This anonymous clan of slack-jawed troglodytes has cost me the election. And yet, if I were to have them killed, I would be the one to go to jail. That’s democracy for you.”¹⁶

Unlike his fellow Republican, Sideshow Bob defeats Springfield’s six-term mayor, “Diamond Joe” Quimby, through a combination of first appealing to Springfield’s citizens from jail, and upon release, running as the Republican mayoral candidate. On the campaign trail, Bob attacks Quimby as a “flip-flopper,” and actually does back-flips to impress his audience of school children. To counter Bob’s campaign antics, both Bart and Lisa jump into Quimby’s lap before the cameras and reporters designed to show the public Quimby’s softer side. Campaign ads dot the airways, with Quimby’s campaign spots ending with “If you were running for Mayor, he’d vote for you,” while Bob’s

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negative ads attack Quimby for being soft on crime; the ads even point to the fact the Quimby pardoning Bob, to which the ad rhetorically asks “Can you trust a man like Quimby?” Only after it is shown that Bob stuffed the ballot box with votes from dead people (and pets) does Quimby return to office.¹⁷

Most interestingly, a successful campaign ensues after Homer insults the garbage collectors and picks a fight with the sanitation commissioner. After his campaign stumbles at a U2 concert, Homer goes to Moe’s Tavern and seeks the bartender’s advice for his stumbling campaign. Moe says that Homer needs to “think hard and come up with a slogan that appeals to all the lazy slobs out there.” Homer then hits upon his campaign slogan of “Can’t Somebody Else Do It?” and promises of round-the-clock trash pick-up and doing all the “messy jobs” that leads him to an astonishing victory over the efficient and able incumbent. The citizens of Springfield expect the sanitation department to do all sorts of things that they don’t want to do; yet when Homer goes on a \$4.6 million spending spree to fulfill his campaign pledge, Mayor Quimby denounces Homer for blowing his annual budget within a month.¹⁸

Whether it is through campaigns, or through government policies, or the power of the media, public opinion ultimately is key linkage between the governed and the government. In his classic work, *Public Opinion and American Democracy*, V.O. Key portrayed public opinion as being “the product of an interaction between political influentials and the mass of the people” in which the elites of society must work to develop within the public guarantees not to follow the base instincts and easy pathways that will lead towards the destruction of a democratic system of governance. In *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World*, Daniel Yankelovich

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relates the importance of public judgment to the soul of the American Dream: throughout the nation's history, "one of the most persistent themes in American political thought has been how to create a community in which all Americans participate fully as citizens. This is the Dream of Self-governance—of free people shaping their destiny as equals." Ultimately, Yankelovich follows Key's argument by advocating not public opinion, but "public judgment" that marries the general public with the nation's elites, so that in order for "democracy to flourish, it is not enough to get out the vote. We need better public judgment, and we need to know how to cultivate it." Once the gap between the experts and the masses can be achieved, then, Yankelovich contends, the American Dream of a successful democratic practice will be solidified. But just ensuring the practice of the American governing system is not the only way to envision the American Dream; in fact, like public opinion and political culture, the American Dream has its own variations.¹⁹

The American Dream at 742 Evergreen Terrace

Just as there are variations to the understanding of political culture (whether it can truly explain or be explained) and public opinion (does it drive the actions of government, or does government drive the opinions of the public), so too are there variations on the conception of "The American Dream." Scholars have debated and discussed the core ideas of, and even if there is such a thing as, an "American Dream." The conflict over an American dream often focuses on the ideal versus the reality of such a notion. An early proponent of such a concept was James Truslow Adams, who wrote in 1932 that "there has ... been the *American dream*, that dream of a land in which life

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should become fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement.” He ended his work focusing on the conflicting reality of class-ism within America, by pointing that “those on top, financially, intellectually, or otherwise, have got to devote themselves to the ‘Great Society’”, and those who are below in the scale have got to strive to rise, not merely economically, but culturally. We cannot become a great democracy by giving ourselves up as individuals to selfishness, physical comfort, and cheap amusements.”²⁰

Along with this belief in a fuller life, scholars have debated the core characteristics of the American Dream. In what he calls the “American Creed,” noted political culture scholar Seymour Martin Lipset describes the characteristics as being “liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire.” As a society that abhors the use of government to instill and mandate, it is primarily left up to the individual to achieve success in the end; the United States is seen as “a country that stresses success above all, [and] where people are led to feel that the most important thing is to win the game, regardless of the methods employed in doing so. American culture applies the norms of a completely competitive society to everyone.”²¹

In their study of American political culture, Herbert McClosky and John Zaller argue that all societies suffer from conflicting values, and that within the United States, those values are of democracy and capitalism. While the economic system of capitalism “is primarily concerned with maximizing private profit,” the political system of democracy “aims at maximizing freedom, equality, and the public good.” Daniel Elazar contends that while the United States broadly shares a general political culture, that culture is “rooted in two contrasting conceptions”: the “marketplace in which the primary

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public relationships are products of bargaining among individual and groups acting out of self-interest,” while the second conception is that of a “commonwealth,” where “citizens cooperate in an effort to create and maintain the best government in order to implement certain shared moral principles.” This battle over individualism versus the collective is often seen as the center of political battles in American politics, and can certainly be seen within the lives of the family on Springfield’s Evergreen Terrace.²²

In the episode “Scenes from the Class Struggle in Springfield,” the tension of trying to demonstrate a family’s achievement of the American Dream is satirically and expertly played out through Marge Simpson. Upon discovering a \$2800 Chanel suit marked down to \$90 at an outlet mall, Marge buys the dress and wears it to the Kwik-E-Mart, where a snobbish high school acquaintance sees her and invites her to the Springfield Country Club. Mingling with the upper-crust of society and ignoring her family, Marge must constantly redesign her Chanel suit until the evening when she and her family are invited to a gala ball, where they will be invited to become members of the club. Having gone through several renditions, the dress is destroyed, and Marge goes out to purchase an expensive replacement, to ensure that she will fit in with the elites. Warning her family that there will be “no vulgarity, no mischief, no politics” on the eve of their being accepted by high society, Marge reflects on the fact that she’s more comfortable in a place like Krusty Burger than a country club: besides, she notes that “I won’t want to join any club that would have *this* me as a member.”²³

Other approaches to understanding the American Dream have sought to explain not just the ideals, but the realities of what former President Bill Clinton observed: “if you work hard and play by the rules you should be given a chance to go as far as your

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God-given ability will take you.” In her work, Jennifer Hochschild contends that the American Dream rests on four tenants: that everyone, no matter their background, can achieve the dream; that everyone can have a reasonable anticipation of achieving the dream; that everyone can achieve the dream “through actions and traits under one’s own control”; and finally, that “true success is associated with virtue.” But in looking at these tenants through the realities, the dream is more of a fantasy and “less than perfect.” Hochschild argues that the notion of an American Dream is too focused on “radical individualism,” while defining success in achieving the dream often boils down to money and power. Through looking at the pursuit of the American Dream through the perspective of minorities, for example, Hochschild argues that whites trust the American Dream, even though that same dream “encourages people not even to see those aspects of society that make the dream impossible to fulfill for all Americans.”²⁴

Another scholar contends that there is not a single, but multiple, forms of the American Dream that have been evident through history. According to Jim Cullen, the American Dream is “a complex idea with manifold implications that can cut different ways,” and that the different visions of the American Dream gives it strength to carry on through time: “Ambiguity is the very sources of its mythic power, nowhere more so than among those striving for, but unsure whether they will reach, their goals.” Cullen points to certain key periods within U.S. history—the Puritans, the Declaration of Independence, the dreams of upward mobility, equality, and homeownership—as constantly redefining and elaborating upon the basic characterization of the American Dream. Richard Ellis also notes that the American history exemplifies different political cultures, and that among these cultures are egalitarianism, or social equality,

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individualism, hierarchy, fatalism, and hermitude, or the attempt to withdraw from society to “live a life of austere self-sufficiency.” Some, such as James A. Morone, contend that, beyond identifying specific characteristics, American political culture is, like public opinion and culture itself, “almost constantly contested and continuously evolving.”²⁵

Within the town of Springfield, one family seems to be at a constant battle to achieve some semblance of the American Dream’s attributes. Yet ironically, in the episode “Homer’s Enemy,” the writers of the show demonstrate that Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa, and Maggie have achieved some levels of success that many average Americans have not. In an episode that many observers have noted as one of the darkest and funniest social commentaries, viewers are introduced to Frank Grimes, a Springfieldite who survived a silo explosion at the age of 18, who learned how to hear again during the painful recuperation, and who studied science by mail, eventually earning his correspondence school diploma in nuclear physics. After Mr. Burns witnessed Grimes’ moving story, Frank begins a career at the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant. In trying to make friends with his new co-worker, Homer invites Grimes (who Homer has nicknamed “Grimey”) to the Simpsons for dinner. Upon seeing the Simpson’s house, Grimes exclaims that “it’s a palace,” and is astonished that Homer has photographs of him with former President Gerald Ford, on tour with the Smashing Pumpkins, and even when Homer went into outer space. Comparing the Simpson’s residence to his apartment (which has a bowling alley above and below it), Grimes goes ballistic, declaring that “I’ve had to work hard every day of my life, and what do I have to show for it? This briefcase and this haircut. And what do you have to show for your lifetime of sloth and

ignorance? ... A dream house, two cars, a beautiful wife, a son who owns a factory (that Bart bought with one dollar), fancy clothes and lobsters for dinner!” Grimes goes on to contend that Homer epitomizes what is wrong with America: “You coast through life, you do as little as possible, and you leach off decent, hard-working people—like me. If you lived in any other country, you’d have starved to death long ago.” “He’s got you there, Dad,” remarks Bart.²⁶

The Simpsons: Pop Culture Evidence of Variations on the American Dream

In our modern society, many different artifacts can be utilized to demonstrate the idea of America political culture, public opinion, and the ultimate goals that most American strive for. Yet going back to the perceptions of a French philosopher on the young American republic, Alexis de Tocqueville sought to understand why citizens of the United States were so restive in the midst of apparent success:

One can conceive of men having arrived at a certain degree of freedom that satisfies them entirely. They then enjoy their independence without restiveness and without ardor. But men will never find an equality that is enough for them. Whatever a people’s efforts, it will not succeed in making conditions perfectly equal within itself... However democratic the social state and political constitution of a people may be, one can ... count on the fact that each of its citizens will always perceive near to him several positions in which he is dominated, and one can foresee that he

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will obstinately keep looking at this side alone. When inequality is the common law of a society, the strongest inequalities do not strike the eye; when everything is nearly on a level, the least of them would it. That is why the desire for equality always become more insatiable as equality is greater. ... In democratic peoples, men easily obtain a certain equality; they cannot attain the equality they desire. It retreats before them daily but without ever evading their regard, and when it withdraws, it attracts them in pursuit. They constantly believe they are going to seize it, and it constantly escapes their grasp. They see it from near enough to know its charms, they do not approach it close enough to enjoy it, and they die before having fully savored its sweetness.²⁷

Through the use of popular culture artifacts such as *The Simpsons*, one can envision the differing perceptions of political culture, public opinion, and notions of what constitutes the American Dream. The rebellious individualism of Bart, the intellectualism and social consciousness of Lisa, Homer's constant craving for success (albeit usually for a donut or Duff beer), the caring concern of Marge, even the quite certitude of Maggie—all contribute in some fashion to serving as a reflection of the ways Americans live their lives. But even though, as de Tocqueville observed, Americans are achieving success, they ultimately yearn for something beyond that achievement—and perhaps that is the best conceptualization of political culture and public opinion that leads to the American dream, as reflected in the not-so-quiet little town of Springfield, U.S.A.

¹ “The Crepes of Wrath,” Production Code: 7G13, Original Airdate: April 15, 1990.

² The “defense of flag burning” essay is offered by resident bully Nelson Muntz, who ends his essay with the definitive argument of “but if you do [burn the flag], you better burn a few other things. You better burn your shirt and your pants. Be sure to burn your TV and car. Oh yes, and don’t forget to burn your house, because none of those things could exist without six white stripes, seven red stripes, and a *hell of a lot of stars*.”

³ “Mr. Lisa Goes To Washington,” Production Code: 8F01, Original Airdate: September 26, 1991.

⁴ Lippman, Walter. 1914. *A Preface to Politics*. New York: M. Kennerley, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20125/20125-h/20125-h.htm> (accessed July 1, 2007).

⁵ Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 25.

⁶ Allan McBridge and Robert K. Toburen, “Deep Structures: Polpop Culture on Primetime Television,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 29, no. 4 (1996), 181-200.

⁷ Gabriel A. Almond, “Comparative Political Systems,” *The Journal of Politics* 18, no. 3 (1956), 391-409. Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 11.

⁸ Almond and Verba, *The Civic Culture*, 15-18. “Much Apu About Nothing,” Production Code: 3F20, Original Airdate: May 5, 1996. “Lisa’s Substitute,” Production Code: 7F19, Original Airdate: April 25, 1991. “The Bart Wants What It Wants,” Production Code: DABF06, Original Airdate: February 17, 2002.

⁹ Daniel Elazar, *American Federalism: A View from the States* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1966), 84-93. “Sweets and Sour Marge,” Production Code: DABF03, Original Airdate: January 20, 2002. “Weekend at Burnsie’s,” Production Code: DABF11, Original Airdate: April 7, 2002. “Trash of the Titans,” Production Code: 5F09, Original Airdate: April 26, 1998. “They Saved Lisa’s Brain,” Production Code: AABF18, Original Airdate: May 9, 1999. “Homer the Great,” Production Code: SF09, Original Airdate: January 8, 1995.

¹⁰ Gabriel A. Almond and G. Bingham Powell, *Comparative Politics: Systems, Process, and Policy* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978), 25. Lisa Wedeen, “Conceptualizing Culture: Possibilities for Political Science,” *The American Political Science Review*, 96, no. 4 (2002), 713-728. John Street, “Political Culture—From Civic Culture to Mass Culture,” *British Journal of Political Science*, 24, no. 1 (1994), 95-113. Robert S. Erikson, John P. McIver, and Gerald C. Wright, Jr., “State Political Culture and Public Opinion,” *The American Political Science Review*, 81, no. 3 (1987), 797-814; see also their book, *Statehouse Democracy: Public Opinion and Policy in the American States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993). “The Seven-Beer Snitch,” Production Code: GABF08, Original Airdate: April 3, 2005.

¹¹ Gabriel A. Almond, *The American People and Foreign Policy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1950). “Fraudcast News,” Production Code FABF18, Original Airdate: May 23, 2004. The Writer’s Guide of America recognized this episode with the Paul Selvin Award, which honors works with a focus on First Amendment issues.

¹² Julia Preston. “Grass Roots Roared and Immigration Plan Collapsed.” *New York Times*. June 10, 2007.

¹³ “You Kent Always Say What You Want,” Production Code: JABF15, Original Airdate: May 20, 2007.

¹⁴ “Lisa vs. Malibu Stacey,” Production Code 1F12, Original Airdate: February 17, 1994; “Mr. Spritz Goes to Washington,” Production Code: EABF09, Original Airdate: March 9, 2003. “You Kent Always Say What You Want,” *ibid*.

¹⁵ Sven H. Steinmo, “American Exceptionalism Reconsidered: Culture or Institutions?” in *The Dynamics of American Politics: Approaches & Interpretations*, ed. Lawrence C. Dodd and Calvin Jillson (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1994), 128. “Much Apu About Nothing,” Production Code: 3F20, Original Airdate: May 5, 1996.

¹⁶ Leonard Steinhorn, “Ads Are Us: Political Advertising in a Mass Media Culture,” in *Campaigns and Elections: American Style*, ed. James A. Thurber and Candice J. Nelson, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2004), 117. “Two Cars in Every Garage and Three Eyes on Every Fish,” Production Code: 7F01, Original Airdate: November 1, 1990.

¹⁷ “Sideshow Bob Roberts,” Production Code: 2F02, Original Airdate: October 9, 1994.

¹⁸ “Trash of the Titans,” Production Code: 5F09, Original Airdate: April 26, 1998.

¹⁹ V.O. Key, *Public Opinion and American Democracy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), 557. Daniel Yankelovich, *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 1.

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²⁰ James Truslow Adam, *The Epic of America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1932), 404; emphasis in original.

²¹ Lipset, *American Exceptionalism*, 19, 47.

²² Herbert McClosky and John R. Zaller, *American Ethos: Public Attitudes Toward Capitalism and Democracy* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1984), 7. Elazar, *American Federalism*, 85-86.

²³ "Scenes from the Class Struggle in Springfield," Production Code: 3F11, Original Airdate: February 4, 1996.

²⁴ Jennifer L. Hochschild, *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 18, 251.

²⁵ Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 6-7. Richard Ellis, *American Political Cultures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 142. James A. Morone, "The Struggle for American Culture," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 29, no. 3 (1996), 424-430.

²⁶ "Homer's Enemy," Production Code: 4F19, Original Airdate: May 4, 1997.

²⁷ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. By Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 513-514.