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10 The Depiction of Politicians in *The Simpsons*¹

PETE WOODCOCK

Introduction

The Simpsons matter. People voting for the first time in the 2008 presidential elections, for example, will never have known a time without *The Simpsons* being on television. Also *The Simpsons* can never be accused of being mindless entertainment, as its ‘multi-referential nature’, whereby the show makes reference to a ‘variety of differing artistic genres’, ensures that *The Simpsons* is consistently intelligent viewing (Woodcock, 2006, 193). *The Simpsons* has proved so popular (both with the viewing public and academic commentators) that it is perhaps worth our while examining its depiction of politicians, as the show may provide people with one of their sources of political opinions. Indeed a survey conducted by the McCormick Tribune Freedom Museum illustrates that many people may have more knowledge of *The Simpsons* than their own rights and freedoms as ‘only one in a thousand were able to name all five freedoms contained in the First Amendment [to the Constitution of the United States of America], although one out of five Americans can name all five of the Simpsons characters’ (McCormick Tribune Freedom Museum, 2006, 2). Whereas it could be argued that this is an unfair comparison, one thing is for sure; people watch *The Simpsons* and, therefore, an examination of politics in *The Simpsons* is a worthwhile pursuit.

Paul A. Cantor, in his seminal work examining the politics of *The Simpsons*, suggests that the show is not political in the ‘narrowly partisan sense’ of favouring the Democrats over the Republicans (1999, 734). Instead the writers of the show have been unwilling ‘to forego any opportunity for humor’ and ‘have been generally evenhanded over the years in making fun of both parties, and of both the Right and the Left’ (Cantor, 1999, 735).² Jonah Goldberg, the editor of the American conservative publication *The National Review* concurs with Cantor regarding the lack of bias in *The Simpsons*, and adds that the show’s lack of direct political bias is very rare for the output of Hollywood, which is known for generally supporting left-leaning politicians and causes:

This even-handedness is noteworthy. Against the backdrop of conventional sitcoms, it makes *The Simpsons* damn near reactionary; if 50 percent of the jokes are aimed leftward, that's 49.5 percent more than we usually get.

(Goldberg, 2000)

There is a consensus, therefore, that politicians of all variety are satirised for comic effect on *The Simpsons* and, in the narrowly partisan sense (to use Cantor's phrase), *The Simpsons* does not betray a political preference. The purpose of this paper is simply to examine how the programme depicts politicians. It will attempt to show how politicians both fictional and real are mocked no matter what their political hue, but also suggests that the programme has provided, in Mary Bailey and Ray Patterson, examples of the manner in which politicians should behave. Consequently although *The Simpsons* satirises all manner of politicians without political bias; it does provide us with models of correct behaviour by elected officials, thus it is not accurate to suggest that *The Simpsons* satirise all public officials. To do this the paper will examine three models of negative depictions of politicians in *The Simpsons*; firstly fictional politicians (such as Joe Quimby and Sideshow Bob), secondly real politicians (such as Bill Clinton and George Bush Snr) and thirdly the case study of Bob Arnold, a corrupt politician who destroys Lisa Simpson's faith in democracy. After examining these negative models, this paper will turn its attention to two positive political role models in Mary Bailey and Ray Patterson, illustrating that the writers of *The Simpsons* do, in fact, provide us with models of how politicians should behave.

1. Fictional Politicians: 'Diamond' Joe Quimby and Sideshow Bob

Springfield's mayor, Joe Quimby, is the most prominent fictional politician featured on *The Simpsons* and he appears a politician 'committed to sexual promiscuity and material self-enrichment' (Singh, 2002, 215) and little else. Mayor 'Diamond' Joe Quimby is portrayed as a corrupt, womanising and only recently literate politician. When he is accused by right-wing talk radio host Birch Barlow of being an 'illiterate, tax-cheating, wife-swapping, pot-smoking spend-o-crat' during his election campaign against republican Sideshow Bob, he can only retort 'I am no longer illiterate' (*Sideshow Bob Roberts* 2F02).³ He is also a politician that frequently looks for easy answers to policy making and is unprepared to take political leadership of key issues. When Quimby, after much public pressure, introduces a bear patrol after a bear wanders into Springfield, he raises taxes in order to pay for it. He then faces criticism for this tax hike, so suggests that the tax hike was not, in fact, due to the bear patrol, but rather it was due to illegal immigration. So he is perfectly willing to lie to save his political skin and allow a group of people to be accused of

causing a tax raise when this was not, in fact, the case. His response to those criticising his tax hike was to ask if ‘these morons getting dumber or just louder’ (*Much Apu About Nothing* 3F20).

The only electoral challenge that Quimby has faced to his power in Springfield came from Sideshow Bob, who runs for mayor shortly after being released from prison for the attempted murder of Bart Simpson (*Sideshow Bob Roberts* 2F02). Bob’s vengeful nature, fraud and contempt for the people of Springfield show him to be no more honest than Quimby as a politician. When elected, Sideshow Bob sought revenge on Bart and Lisa (who had spearheaded Quimby’s campaign against Bob) by directing the erection of a new expressway through the Simpson’s home. Bob is foiled by Lisa and Bart, however, when they discover Bob’s election fraud that included registering the dead (both dead people and dead pets) as republican voters. Sideshow Bob’s rant upon conviction exposes his contempt for the people of Springfield suggesting that their ‘guilty conscience’ may force them ‘to vote Democratic, but deep down inside [they] secretly long for a cold-hearted Republican to lower taxes, brutalize criminals, and rule you like a king’ (*Sideshow Bob Roberts* 2F02). Consequently it is fair to say that fictional politicians are not portrayed in a positive manner in *The Simpsons*, but that this portrayal is politically neutral in that it includes criticism of a Democrat (Quimby) and a Republican (Sideshow Bob).

Therefore the writers of *The Simpsons* portray Springfield’s most prominent politician (Quimby) in a negative light, however his only serious challenger (Bob) is depicted, if anything, in a worse manner. Indeed, this is perhaps best summed up by Lisa Simpson who, whilst campaigning for Quimby (against Sideshow Bob), suggests that ‘this time he is the lesser of two evils’ (*Sideshow Bob Roberts* 2F02).

2. Real Politicians: George Bush Snr and Bill Clinton

The living politician that receives the most thorough criticism from *The Simpsons* is George Bush Snr, who forms the basis of the plot of an episode when he moves in next door to Homer and Marge (*Two Bad Neighbours*, 3F09). The interest in George Bush Snr from the writers of *The Simpsons* was probably sparked by his comment that ‘we need a nation closer to the Waltons than the Simpsons’ (Quoted in Pinsky, 2001, 5). Bush is portrayed as being completely out of touch with the modern world, for example he goes to the drive-thru window at Krustyburger, and suggests that a Krustry burger ‘doesn’t sound too appetizing’ before asking what ‘kind of stew’ they have available today (*Two Bad Neighbours* 3F09).

George Bush senior is not the only living politician that is mocked by the show however. Bill Clinton was also mocked, for example, when Lisa Simpson

writes to President Clinton to complain when her school band are denied first place at a state fair contest when the Ogdenville's school band use coloured glow sticks to enhance their performance, contrary to the competitions rules (*Saddlesore Galactica* BABF09). President Clinton appears at the end of the episode, having overturned the band competition results, claiming that Lisa has taught kids a valuable lesson; 'if things don't go your way, just keep complaining until your dreams come true'. Marge retorts that this is a 'pretty lousy lesson', to which Clinton responds 'I'm a pretty lousy president' (*Saddlesore Galactica* BABF09). Elsewhere Clinton forces Marge to dance with him suggesting there is a federal law compelling her to do so. When Marge questions this he responds simply by saying that:

I know you don't think you're good enough for me. But believe me you are. Hell, I done it with pigs. Real, no-foolin' pigs! (*Homer to the Max* AABF09)

Consequently real politicians are not portrayed in a more complimentary fashion than their fictional counterparts.

3. Case Study: Congressman Bob Arnold

Perhaps the episode with the most uncomplimentary depiction of a politician is that of Congressman Bob Arnold in *Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington* (8F01), in which the Simpson family win a trip to Washington courtesy of Lisa's successful entry in the 'Patriots of Tomorrow' essay writing competition. The essay that Lisa prepares that wins her trip to Washington shows a very American ideal of hope in her nation and how certain political ideals (equality and justice) had helped the USA grow into the powerful nation it was:

When America was born on the 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 fledging 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?

(*Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington* 8F01)

However Lisa's faith in America is shaken when, on a stroll around Washington, she witnesses Congressman Bob Arnold taking a bribe from a lobbyist for a logging permit for Springfield Forest. What makes it worse for Lisa is that he receives his bribe at the Winifred Beecher Howe Memorial, commemorating a womens' rights campaigner whom Arnold refers to as a 'pooch'. Lisa, a feminist, greatly admired Winifred Beecher Howe who had said that she would 'iron your sheets when you iron out the inequities in your labour laws', so Bob Arnold had successfully trampled on all of Lisa's political

beliefs. Lisa, a 'dynamic and intelligent character' is perhaps the only strong female character on *The Simpsons*, and espouses numerous ethical and political causes such as vegetarianism, Buddhism and sexist attitudes, and is therefore not one to take things lying down (Snow *et al.*, 2001, 136). Lisa decides that she did not want to read her old essay again as Arnold's acts have caused her to lose confidence in the ideals it espoused. Lisa decides instead to write a new essay outing the corruption of Bob Arnold, and her new found lack of faith in the Washington political elite:

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. (Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington 8F01)

Lisa is booed off stage. However, her revelations result in Arnold being expelled from Congress and the eventual winner of the competition thanks Lisa, reminding people that the price of freedom is 'eternal vigilance'.

So whereas this episode gives us an example of a politician acting shamefully, and destroying a little girl's faith in democracy, the system corrects itself; Lisa's essay starts a chain reaction which leads to the corrupt element being removed. Consequently the message from *Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington* is not an entirely gloomy one as it appears to be saying that whereas there are corrupt elements in the body politic, the system is robust and can remove them.

4. Mary Bailey

One might think from the above that all politicians are portrayed in a negative manner and that therefore programmes like *The Simpsons* might result in a deep cynicism about all politicians. This is not necessarily the case, however, as *The Simpsons* do give us two positive role-models for politicians; both of whom are dramatically used as the opponents attempts by key characters to seek public office. In *Two Car in Every Garage and Three Eyes on Every Fish* (7F01) the multi-millionaire Springfield Nuclear Power Plant owner Mr Burns decides to run for election to the position of state governor.⁴ Mr Burns, who is perpetually portrayed as being evil and scheming, is contrasted by the incumbent governor, Mary Bailey, whom Marge Simpson describes as 'the most beloved governor our great state has ever known'.

The episode begins with Bart Simpson catching a three-eyed fish in the old watering hole; a catch that, unfortunately for Mr Burns, takes place in front of an investigative reporter. Suspicion immediately falls on the nearby nuclear powers plant as having caused this mutation. In the ensuing media clamour, Mary Bailey promises that an investigation of the plant should take place,

leaving Marge confident that justice will be done. Indeed an investigation does take place and safety inspectors note 342 violations at the plant, including bubble gum being used to patch a hole in the cooling tower, a plutonium rod employed as a paperweight and the plant's safety inspector (Homer Simpson) being asleep at the job. Mr Burns attempts, with no success, to bribe the inspectors and is left with a \$56 million bill to get the station up to scratch or face closing down the plant. Burns decides that rather than make these improvements he should run for governor so that he can make his own rules on safety.

The electoral battle lines are drawn, with Mr Burns employing 'a speech writer, a joke writer, a spin doctor, a make-up man, a personal trainer, a muckraker, a character assassin, a mudslinger and a garbologist'. This is because they realise that Bailey is 'beloved by all' and therefore they need to smear her (despite going through her bins they find nothing). Mary Bailey, on the other hand, has people such as Marge Simpson handing out leaflets and knocking on doors and says that she does not want to treat the voters as 'gullible fools' but, rather, rely on their 'intelligence and good judgement'. Indeed it is the division in the Simpson household, with Marge supporting Bailey and Homer supporting Burns, that will eventually lead to Mr Burns's downfall. Burns's advisors suggest that he should have dinner at the home of one of his workers on the evening before the election to try to show he is down to earth so that he may get the common person's vote, and the Simpson residence is chosen. Marge is, understandably, unhappy at having the rival candidate in her home, indeed she refuses to 'snuggle' with Homer because she does not want to snuggle with anyone who is 'not letting me express myself'. To this, Homer replies with an astonishing piece of chauvinism when he suggests that Marge can express herself 'in the lovely home you keep and the food you serve'. However, this gives her an idea. When Mr Burns is at the dinner table he is presented with the main course; a mutated three-eyed fish like the one Bart had caught earlier. He chokes on the fish and is unable to eat it, spitting it across the room leaving an aide to remark that his campaign was 'ruined before it [the piece of fish] hit the ground'.

The contrast in this episode is pretty clear between Mr Burns, who runs for public office to benefit himself and hires a team of individuals who practice the dark arts of politics in order to do so, and 'good old Mary Bailey' on the other, who relies on the support of upstanding citizens such as Marge Simpson. Whereas it would be easy to take this episode to be a critique of a certain method of electioneering (and indeed it is this) we should not overlook the positive depiction of the honest hard working politician Mary Bailey.

5. Ray Patterson

Just as Mary Bailey is the incumbent who is electorally challenged by Mr Burns, and whose decency, honest campaigning and supporters provides a

contrast with her challenger, so Ray Patterson provides a foil for Homer when he stands as Springfield's sanitation commissioner (*Trash of the Titans*, 5F09). The election is cast when Homer picks a dispute with the Springfield garbage collectors and has his refuse collection cut off, despite the fact that a simple apology for his abusive behaviour (calling them 'trash eating stink-bags') would prevent the build up of rubbish occurring in the Simpson's back garden.

When Homer wakes up one morning to find his garbage collected he assumes that he has 'beaten City Hall', when in fact Marge has simply apologised. Consequently Homer decides to run against Ray Patterson, the man who Bono refers to as a 'fine public servant' and who has been elected sanitation commissioner 16 years in a row. Homers election strategy is twofold: firstly, he promises popular (but completely impossible) policies, and secondly he slurs Ray Patterson.

Homer comes up with the election slogan 'can't someone else do it', promising to get the garbage men to increase their service to do all the people's dirty jobs and around-the-clock garbage collection. Indeed, Homer promises to hire more garbage men who would 'wash your car, scrub your shower, [and] air out your stinkables'. Homer also accuses 'old man' Patterson (he is two years older than Homer) of being a drunk, and cuts his break lines so that he is late for a public meeting. Patterson warns voters of Homers crazy promises, until frustrated, he eventually cries:

All right, fine. If you want an experienced public servant, vote for me but if you want to believe a bunch of crazy promises about garbage men cleaning your gutters and waxing your car then by all means vote for this sleazy lunatic.

(Trash of the Titans, 5F09)

The people fall for Homer's policies. However, when elected Homer manages to exhaust his entire budget in just one month, spending money on new uniforms with suede boots and amphibious garbage trucks. When later asked how he spent so much money he blames it on the fact that they let him sign checks with a stamp. He manages to prevent a strike of garbage collectors by allowing other cities to dump their waste in abandoned mines beneath Springfield leading to environmental disaster. A public vote removes Homer from office and reinstates Patterson; however Patterson refuses, saying how gratifying it is to leave you 'wallowing in the mess you've made'.

The comparison between Homer and Ray Patterson appears to be one of responsibility. Homer makes promises that cannot be achieved and, when elected, takes large risks in order to attempt to fulfil his promises. Ray Patterson, on the other hand, is simply a competent administrator who gets things done in a no-fuss manner.

Conclusion

This paper has been an attempt to see the variety of ways in which politicians are presented on *The Simpsons*. We have seen that the writers of *The Simpsons* do satirise politicians both real and fictional; however that satire is not party political in that the writers are (as Cantor suggested) perfectly happy to satirise both Democrats (Quimby and Clinton), and Republicans (Sideshow Bob and George Bush Snr). We also saw that Bob Arnold represents the typical corrupt politician who is discovered by a combination of the bravery of an individual (Lisa Simpson), and a robust political system.

Homer and Mr Burns also provide us with negative depictions of politicians: one who seeks election to further his own ends and is prepared to rubbish his opponent so to do; and another who makes irresponsible promises that lead to Springfield being bankrupted when they are attempted to be implemented. Homer and Mr Burns are, however, contrasted with a positive depiction of a politician in Mary Bailey and Ray Patterson; quiet and efficient public servants who get on with their jobs in a competent and fuss-free manner. This is, of course, an entirely neutral (in the party political sense) depiction of the admirable politician, however it is, nonetheless a positive depiction of a politician. Consequently whereas it is certainly true that *The Simpsons* does satirise politicians of both parties and is therefore even handed in the way it treats politics in the party political sense, it does, in Mary Bailey and Ray Patterson, give us a glimpse into what the writers of the show find admirable in a politician.

Notes

1. This paper would not have been possible without the help, support and patience of Susan Smith and Dave Robinson.
2. Politics is found in *The Simpsons* for Cantor not by the direct support of one political party over another, but rather in its celebration of 'the nuclear family as an institution' (1999, 736), and its depiction of the 'old ideal of small-town America' coupled with a 'distrust of power' (1999, 745).
3. All episode details from either Richmond and Coffman (1997), Gimple (1999), McCann (2002) or McCann (2005).
4. It is, of course, never revealed which state Springfield is in; indeed, the lack of a state has become something of an in-joke.

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