The West Wing as Endorsement of the U.S. Presidency: Expanding the Bounds of Priming in Political Communication

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This study uses priming as a theoretical basis from which to investigate potential effects of NBC’s The West Wing on individual-level perceptions of the U.S. presidency. As a result, this work extends political communication-based priming research to entertainment television content. Josiah Bartlet, the fictional president portrayed on the show, is generally perceived more positively by viewers than either the Republican President George W. Bush or Democrat William Jefferson Clinton. Perceptions of the importance of being engaging to presidential success rose as a result of watching the program, and The West Wing viewers retained more positive images of Bush and Clinton after the viewing experience. Viewing The West Wing seems to prime more positive images of the U.S. presidency that subsequently influence individual-level perceptions of those individuals most directly associated with this office. The authors make theoretical connections to previous work on role display and trust in democratic institutions.

Although the American public is bombarded with coverage of the daily activities of the U.S. president, the events primarily covered by various news anchors and reporters represent professional duties: bills being signed, press conferences, meetings with foreign heads of state. Rarely do citizens catch through the news a behind-the-scenes glimpse of the daily activities of the president (e.g., Fineman & Brandt, 2001). In contrast to most news coverage, NBC’s highly acclaimed The West Wing offers viewers a sustained depiction of the internal workings of the White House (Sorkin, Schlamme, & Wells, 2002). Although a fictional account, this show provides something to the American public that it cannot get from any other source, a vision of what it is like to be president on a daily basis. News is constrained from communicating a depiction of this kind because, in the real world,
there is a constant battle to keep the media at a certain distance from elected officials (Hess, 1991). In short, *The West Wing* represents the fly on the wall that the media wish they could be.

This study uses priming to look at the effects of viewing *The West Wing* on individual-level perceptions of the American presidency. The theory of priming in political communication has been relegated to the study of news (e.g., Iyenger & Kinder, 1987), but an argument is made for the relevance of this theory in this context to the study of entertainment television and politics. Thus, this study represents a theoretical and empirical extension of priming in political communication beyond a focus on the influence of public affairs content. This article addresses whether the fictional president presented on the show is perceived differently by audience members relative to real-world presidents (past and present), whether viewing *The West Wing* has an effect on perceptions of what is important to being a successful president, and whether watching this show has an effect on perceptions of the sitting president, Republican George W. Bush, or the former president, Democrat William Jefferson Clinton. Connections are also made to past work on television’s presentation of different role types (e.g., Goffman, 1959; Meyrowitz, 1985) and the influence of prime-time entertainment television use on trust in democratic institutions (e.g., Pfau, Moy, & Szabo, 2001). Finally, we outline how this article can serve as the basis for future lines of research studying the influence of *The West Wing* on the American presidency.

**Priming**

Roskos-Ewoldson, Roskos-Ewoldson, and Carpentier (2002) define mass communication-based priming research as “the effects of the content of the media on people’s later behavior or judgments related to that content” (p. 97). Priming has been used to study the influence of violent television content (e.g., Josephson, 1987), pornography (e.g., Malamuth & Check, 1985), and rock videos (e.g., Hansen & Hansen, 1988) and has enjoyed special prominence in the study of political communication (e.g., Scheufele, 2000). We first detail the use of priming by political communication scholars in assessing the effects of news content, then argue for the importance of studying entertainment content in politics and the applicability of priming to the empirical analysis of nonpublic affairs content in the area of political communication.

**Priming in Political Communication**

Iyengar and Kinder’s (1987) seminal work on priming in political communication revealed how news affects citizens’ judgment of elected officials and various public policy initiatives, and Price and Tewksbury (1997) offered an extensive theoretical discussion of the use of this theory as it relates to public affairs content. Several studies focused on the influence of news on individual-level support of the president (Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1982; Iyengar, Kinder, Peters, & Krosnick, 1984; Krosnick & Brannon, 1993; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990). The general set of findings from these studies concluded that “problems prominently positioned in
television [news] broadcasts loom large in evaluations of presidential performance” (Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1982, p. 855). Having said this, mass communication scholarship finds the picture of what type of individual is most likely to be primed rather muddy. Some studies conclude that the segment of the population with the lowest levels of political knowledge is most susceptible to priming (e.g., Krosnick & Kinder, 1990), whereas later works have stated that it is those who are “highly knowledgeable about politics but relatively inattentive to the flow of political news” who are most greatly affected (Krosnick & Brannon, 1993, p. 974).

One important commonality for all political communication-based priming studies conducted to date is a focus on the influence of news. A focus on public affairs content by these researchers is appropriate, given their interest in providing empirical support for Walter Lippmann’s claim that the press “is like the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of the darkness into vision” (as quoted by Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1982, p. 848). We wish to extend Iyengar et al.’s (1982) basic argument that “media provide compelling descriptions of a public world that people cannot directly experience” to include entertainment content as well as news (p. 848).

**Importance of Entertainment Television in Political Communication**

There are several arguments for why political communication scholarship needs to study in a more systematic fashion the influence of entertainment television in politics. Mutz (2001) stated that individual audience members receive a great deal of political information from a variety of television sources and concluded that “the traditional distinctions between news and entertainment content are no longer very helpful” (p. 231). Shah (1998) made a similar argument concerning the importance of looking at the diversity of political messages being supplied by this complex form of mass communication. Recent attempts to better understand priming in political communication relative to other major areas of research in this same field (i.e., framing and agenda setting) have also focused solely on a discussion of news (e.g., Scheufele, 2000). This is perfectly sensible because these areas of empirical research have looked only at public affairs content to date, completely disregarding the potential role of diverse types of entertainment programming.

Several lines of political communication research are emerging in the study of various effects of entertainment television. Holbert, Shah, and Kwak (2003) have begun a systematic study of the influence of various forms of prime-time entertainment television viewing on individual-level, sociopolitical attitudes and behaviors (e.g., women’s rights, environment; see also Holbert, Kwak, & Shah, 2003). These works find that the use of different types of prime-time entertainment television programming have a distinct set of effects relative to the use of television news. This line of research could easily be expanded to include the study of entertainment television viewing and gay rights, race, and crime. In short, this area of inquiry is attempting to establish a link between the use of different genres of entertainment television and individual-level political consciousness (e.g., Lea, 1982).
There has also been some examination of the relationship between prime-time entertainment television use and trust in democratic institutions (Moy & Pfau, 2000; Pfau, Moy, & Szabo, 2001). Moy and Pfau (2000) make a convincing argument based on multiple empirical studies that various forms of prime-time entertainment television viewing can have an effect on how much faith individuals place in their representative governmental bodies. These lines of research are initial forays to a better understanding of the relationship between entertainment television and U.S. politics.

Gamson (1999) distinguished among categories of television content and contends that prime-time entertainment television may be particularly influential in constructing and maintaining political attitudes. The presentation of what he defined as “life-world” content engages the audience on an emotional level, bases truth claims on experiential knowledge, and treats the audience as being physically present within the program. Each of these unique characteristics of prime-time television dramas helps create a unique set of effects relative to those found in the traditional study of news (e.g., McCombs & Reynolds, 2002; Scheufele, 1999). Williams and Delli Carpini (2002) went so far as to argue that “the political relevance of a cartoon character like Lisa Simpson is as important as the professional norms of Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw, or Peter Jennings” (p. B15). They base their argument on the belief that an increasingly large percentage of the American public no longer clearly distinguishes between entertainment and public affairs programming. In fact, it is the younger generation of citizens who no longer sees a clear distinction between these two types of programming. If this is the case, then it is all the more important that political communication scholars focus their attention on a show like *The West Wing*, which clearly is pushing the envelope between fact and fiction.

*The West Wing*

*The West Wing* has completed four full seasons at this writing. The show depicts the life of a present-day president of the United States and his interactions with various staff members who have established personal and professional relationships with him during his initial presidential campaign and first few years in office. The program has not only achieved high critical acclaim, but has become extremely popular as well (de Moreas, 2000). For example, the April 3, 2002, airing was viewed by 12,027,000 television households (*Broadcasting & Cable*, 2002). In short, this popular program has the potential for influence, given the large number of people who watch this fictional account of the daily activities of a sitting president and his staff.

*Focus on Character*

Political communication scholars interested in the effects of media on the U.S. presidency have focused on the influence of both policy and character (e.g., Benoit, McKinney, & Holbert, 2001). Extant political communication-based prim-
ing research has focused largely on the influence of the presentation of public policy by news media (e.g., Krosnick & Brannon, 1993; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990), but we argue that the most likely potential influence of _The West Wing_ will center on the presentation of character rather than policy.

The show’s creator, Aaron Sorkin, has made it clear that he does not wish _The West Wing_ to reflect the most pressing issues facing the nation (Endrst, 2000). The fact that the creator of the show makes a conscious effort to not reflect a real-world issue agenda speaks to a potentially weak set of effects concerning issues. In fact, the writing and production schedule established for the show was created in part to try to insure that a given episode does not focus on an issue that is making headlines the same week of its airing (Jonge, 2001). The only running storyline that mirrored real-world events was the discussion of terrorism in the latter half of the 2001–2002 season. However, the fictional terrorism plots focus on Middle Eastern countries that are distinct from those dominating U.S. headlines. In short, most of the issues raised on _The West Wing_ are not those shown to be top-of-the-head concerns by public opinion polling.

Instead, almost all of the discussion of _The West Wing_ and its potential influence on the U.S. presidency focuses on character. The fictional chief executive has been described as the people’s president, someone who embodies the core values Americans hold most dear in their elected officials (Muir, 2000). Indeed, various commentators have associated Bartlet with terms like “smart, funny . . . decent” (Keveney, 2000, p. D7) and “charismatic and quietly omnicompetent” (Lehman, 2001, p. 95). He has also been described as “heroic” (Pergament, 2000a, p. 5C) and as someone who has “tapped into our nation’s fantasies about how we want our president to behave” (Pergament, 2000b, p. 1F). The show is optimistic in the image of the president being portrayed and the type of person who should hold the highest office in the land. Put simply, _The West Wing_ is most directly about character.

Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles (2002) recently completed a rhetorical analysis of _The West Wing_ and the image of the U.S. presidency offered on the program. Many of their insights focus on character. An argument is made that the U.S. presidency offered on the show is heroic, but that Bartlet is also shown to hold “the same insecurities and weaknesses that plague people every day” (p. 223). _The West Wing_ sentimentalizes a romantic ideal of the U.S. presidency, and Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles (2002) concluded that this show “may restore a sense of idealism to politics” (p. 223). It is not so much the issues being presented on the show that matter, but the characteristics displayed by Bartlet and his staff in dealing with whatever crises arise during a given episode.

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1 The one deviation from this policy was the first episode of the 2001–2002 season, which addressed the issue of terrorism. A disclaimer was provided at the beginning of that show stating that the episode in question was not part of the regular season and should be viewed as a special event in light of the tragedies of September 11, 2001. Indeed, commenting on the post-9/11 episode, Levin (2001) remarked, “_The West Wing’s_ speedy embrace of the subject is unusual” (p. D1).
Primming and *The West Wing*

Dubin (1978), in his discussion of theory building, described “an inverse relationship between the number of boundary-determining criteria employed in a model and the size of the domain covered by a model” (p. 134). The singular focus on news content by political communication scholars interested in priming effects reflects the establishment of an artificial boundary criterion for this theory. This artificial condition has led to the domain of priming in the context of politics being relegated to the study of public affairs content. There is little reason to think priming, or any of the other major theories that dominate the empirical study of political communication (i.e., agenda setting, framing), should be constrained to the study of a single type of media content. Nonpolitical areas of mass communication priming research have studied nonnews content with much success (e.g., Anderson, 1997), and it is important that political communication scholarship discard any unnecessary boundary criteria that may limit the use of this powerful theory. This study argues for a domain extension of political communication-based priming research to include entertainment television content.

Roskos-Ewoldson et al. (2002) argue for the use of a mental models approach to the study of media priming, instead of more traditional network models of memory (e.g., Price & Tewksbury, 1997). They state that the types of priming effects focused on by media scholars “cannot easily be explained by network-based theories” of memory (p. 112). A mental models approach is seen as “a larger theoretical framework” that is better situated to directly addressing the ability of individuals to access new versus existing memory structures or to retrieve specific pieces of information within those structures (p. 110).

A recent study by Segrin and Nabi (2002) is a solid example of a mental models approach to media priming-effects research (e.g., Roskos-Ewoldson et al., 2002). Segrin and Nabi's work focused on the relationships between television use, idealized perceptions of marriage, and behavioral intention to marry. These researchers found that those who watch romantic television programming have more idealized perceptions of the institution of marriage and conclude “media do play a role in developing and reinforcing beliefs about marriage” (p. 261). We argue that the relationship between viewing *The West Wing* and its potential effects on individual-level perceptions of the U.S. presidency mirrors the Segrin and Nabi study of romantic television use and individual-level perceptions of marriage. The viewing of positive images of the American presidency offered on *The West Wing* will prime within individuals more positive images of the office and those who have served in the capacity of president.

A vast majority of popular press and scholarly accounts of *The West Wing* point to the presentation of a very positive image of the American presidency (e.g., Keveney, 2000; Lehman, 2001; Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2002). However, no empirical evidence has been gathered concerning perceptions of the presidency generated by viewing this program or whether individuals view the fictional president any differently from real-world presidents. Thus, we ask the following:
RQ1: Is Josiah Bartlet perceived more positively than real-world presidents by viewers of *The West Wing*?

RQ2: Does viewing *The West Wing* have an effect on perceptions of which character traits are important to being a successful president?

If viewing the program does prime a positive image of the U.S. presidency, these more positive thoughts should result in individuals thinking higher of those who hold or have held the office. Accordingly, we posit the following:

H1: Viewing *The West Wing* results in more positive individual-level perceptions of the character traits of the sitting U.S. President George W. Bush.

H2: Viewing *The West Wing* results in more positive individual-level perceptions of the character traits of former U.S. President William Jefferson Clinton.

**Method**

This study employed a pretest-posttest design. Participants (*N* = 195) completed a pretest questionnaire the morning of February 27, 2002, the day of the airing of an original episode of *The West Wing* entitled, “Hartsfield’s Landing” (Sorkin & Misiano, 2002). All participants who completed the pretest questionnaire were asked to attend an evening session (8:00 p.m. CT) during which they sat in a large lecture auditorium and viewed the original broadcast of the episode. Subjects were instructed to watch the telecast as if they were home and then completed a posttest questionnaire directly after watching the program.

**Participants**

This study used undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory mass communication class at the University of Missouri-Columbia. The average age of the participants was 20.33, with a slight majority being female (55%). Thirty-five percent of the participants defined themselves as members of one of the two major political parties, with an equal split between Democrats and Republicans. A large percentage labeled themselves as “moderate” in their political ideology (41%), and there was a roughly even split between those who think of themselves as falling to the more liberal or conservative ends of the ideological spectrum.

**Measures**

*Character traits.* This study used a typology of presidential character traits developed by Benoit and McHale (in press) in their analyses of which characteristics are commonly raised in presidential campaigns. The following is a list of the traits: trustworthy, determined, consistent, understands ordinary people, open, honest, warm, decent, responsible, fair, similar to ordinary people, keeps promises, com-

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2 The pretest questionnaire was completed 8 hours prior to viewing the episode.
passionate, likable, courageous, fights for ordinary people, hardworking, integrity, strong, loving, reasonable, and sense of humor.

Respondents were asked to place on a seven-point scale each of the character traits in response to the statement: “Please rate how important each of the following personality characteristics are to being a successful President of the United States,” with possible responses ranging from 1 (unimportant) and 7 (very important). All respondents were asked to address this same statement in the pre- and postviewing questionnaires.

Respondents were also asked to rate on a seven-point scale the sitting president, Republican George W. Bush, for each of 21 character traits, with possible responses ranging from 1 (very poorly) to 7 (very well). Everyone taking part in the study was asked to do the same for former President Clinton. The Bush and Clinton ratings were obtained both before and after viewing The West Wing episode. Finally, subjects were asked to rate Josiah Bartlet for the same typology of character trait items. The ratings for Bartlet were taken only during the postviewing stage, given that a number of subjects may not have had enough previous exposure to the program to render judgments on the fictional president.

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)
An EFA (principle axis, OBLIMIN) was conducted on the initial importance ratings of the character traits supplied by the subjects. The articulated factors obtained from this analysis were used as a baseline from which to compare the three presidents, real or fictional, as well as assess any changes in the importance of these traits from pre- to posttest. Three articulated factors emerged from the analysis: principled (integrity, keeps promises, honest, trustworthy, hardworking, and responsible); engaging (loving, warm, sense of humor, and compassionate); and common (similar to ordinary people, fights for ordinary people, understands ordinary people). The three factors are highly reliable for the initial importance ratings: principled ($\alpha = .87$), engaging ($\alpha = .83$), and common ($\alpha = .80$). The Cronbach’s alphas for the latter importance scale, both Bush scales, both Clinton scales, and the single Bartlet scale were calculated to insure adequate reliabilities. All indexes retained a Cronbach’s $\alpha$ above .70.

Analyses
Two repeated-measure Multiple Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) tests were run for the research questions and hypotheses. The initial MANOVA addressed the first research question of whether Bartlet is perceived any differently by citizens
relative to two real-world presidents, with candidate (Bartlet, Bush, and Clinton) acting as the independent variable and character traits (principled, engaging, and common) as the dependent variables. The candidate measures employed for this test are those that reflect the first ratings of each president, Bush and Clinton, in the pretest questionnaire and Bartlet from the posttest questionnaire.

The second MANOVA has time (pretest, posttest) as the independent variable and the following nine dependent variables: importance-principled, importance-engaging, importance-common, Bush-principled, Bush-engaging, Bush-common, Clinton-principled, Clinton-engaging, and Clinton-common. This MANOVA allowed us to address the latter research question and both hypotheses, each of which deals with movement in perceptions across time.

**Results**

**Individual-Level Perceptions of Bartlet**

We employed Wilks’s lambda for an assessment of an omnibus effect, and president (Bartlet, Bush, and Clinton) was found to have a significant main effect, $F(6, 736) = 109.67, p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .472$. The univariate results point to significant differences for all three character trait types: principled, $F(2, 370) = 252.34, p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .577$; engaging, $F(2, 370) = 22.88, p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .110$; and common, $F(2, 370) = 7.91, p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .041$. Thus, the three presidents differ in terms of citizens’ ratings of their character traits.

A comparison of means reveals a general pattern of Bartlet rating higher than both Bush and Clinton on all three character trait indexes (see Table 1), with four of these differences being statistically significant. Bartlet was seen as more principled and common than Bush and more principled and engaging than Clinton. Thus, the findings generally point to Bartlet being perceived in a more positive
light than either of the real-world presidents, with the most meaningful differences found for individual-level perceptions of his being more principled.

Effects on Ratings of Importance, Bush, and Clinton
Time was found to have a significant omnibus main effect, $F(9, 177) = 11.43$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .368$, indicating that there was movement in the relative importance of the character traits or ratings of real-world presidents from pre- to postviewing.

Importance. The univariate results indicate that there was movement in only one of the three character trait indexes from Time 1 to Time 2: engaging, $F(1, 185) = 20.57$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .100$. Neither principled, $F(1, 185) = .78$, $p > .40$, observed power = .14, nor common, $F(1, 185) = .35$, $p > .45$, observed power = .09, moved in a significant manner from pre- to postviewing. A comparison of the means for engaging from Time 1 to Time 2 reveals that The West Wing viewers, after viewing the show, tended to think being compassionate, warm, funny, and loving is more important to being a successful president (see Table 2).

Bush. Bush was seen as more principled after viewing The West Wing, $F(1, 185) = 13.45$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .068$, and more common $F(1, 185) = 7.45$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .039$ (see Table 2). There was no significant movement for Bush on engaging, $F(1, 185) = .30$, $p > .55$, observed power = .09. This set of findings provides partial support for H1, with Bush seen more positively on two of three character trait indexes after participants’ viewing of The West Wing.

Clinton. Former president Clinton was seen as more principled, $F(1, 185) = 57.55$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .237$ and engaging, $F(1, 185) = 8.04$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .042$, after participants watched The West Wing (see Table 2). There was no movement for Clinton on the common scale from pre- to postviewing, $F(1, 185) = .00$, $p = 1.00$, observed power = .05. Mirroring the findings for Bush, Clinton was viewed more positively for two of the three character dimensions. This provides partial support for H2.

| Table 2. Comparison of Means from Pre- to Postviewing |
|-------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
|                        | Importance | Bush | Clinton |
|                        | Pre | Post | Pre | Post | Pre | Post |
| Principled M           | 6.24 | 6.28 | 5.49 | 5.63 | 3.59 | 3.93* |
| SD                     | 0.88 | 0.68 | 1.23 | 1.46 | 1.25 | 1.32 |
| Engaging M             | 4.62 | 4.95* | 5.24 | 5.17 | 4.43 | 4.59* |
| SD                     | 1.29 | 1.28 | 1.77 | 1.34 | 1.29 | 1.27 |
| Common M               | 5.41 | 5.46 | 4.87 | 5.03* | 5.06 | 5.06 |
| SD                     | 1.17 | 1.16 | 1.61 | 1.59 | 1.38 | 1.37 |

Note. *$p < .01$, postviewing mean is different from corresponding previewing mean.
An interesting pattern of results emerges from the two MANOVAs. It is only for those indexes where Bush or Clinton were initially seen as inferior to Bartlet (i.e., Bush-principled, Bush-common, Clinton-principled, Clinton-engaging) that we see significant shifts in perceptions of these two presidents from Time 1 to Time 2. In each of these cases, participants saw Bush and Clinton in a more positive light after viewing *The West Wing*. Perceptions of both presidents improved after coming into contact with the image of the presidency offered on *The West Wing*. This is strong evidence for *The West Wing* generating a priming effect in viewers. The positive images of the American presidency found on the show translated to more positive images within viewers of the sitting President Bush and former President Clinton.

**Discussion**

This study argues for extending the domain of political communication-based priming research to include entertainment television. The general tenor of this argument builds off calls made by several scholars who have asked for a more systematic analysis of non-public affairs content in political communication. It is important that empirical political communication scholarship include the study of a wide range of media content areas, and this study is a reflection of the fact that political-based media effects do exist in entertainment television. We find empirical evidence for *The West Wing* producing positive images of the U.S. presidency and that these positive images translate into more positive perceptions of those individuals most directly associated with that office, George W. Bush and Bill Clinton. This combination of results embodies a priming effect.

This study reveals that it is not just news content that influences citizens' perceptions of the American presidency, but that prime-time entertainment television content like *The West Wing* can also produce a similar set of priming effects. This study should be seen as complementary to extant political communication-based priming studies that have focused on how public affairs content influences individual-level perceptions of the U.S. presidency (e.g., Iyengar, Kinder, Peters, & Krosnick, 1984; Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1982; Krosnick & Brannon, 1993; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990). However, there must also be recognition of the fact that the image of the U.S. presidency offered on a show like *The West Wing* is distinct from that provided by the major news outlets. The former is dominated by a behind-the-scenes glimpse of what it is like to be president, whereas the latter focuses on public professional duties inherent to the office. These messages provide very different perspectives that can have unique influences on how citizens relate to the highest elected office in the country.

Future research should attempt to reveal how the priming effects generated by entertainment television may vary from those produced by news. One distinction we make in this work is between policy and character. Past political communication priming studies are dominated by the study of news' presentation of policy, whereas we argue that a show like *The West Wing* more likely has influence through its presentation of character. Other unique factors relative to these two
types of content may exist, and future research should make every attempt to identify and empirically test these potential nuances.

Several findings from this study are pertinent to other research areas of political communication scholarship. First, the finding of a significant shift in the perceived importance of being engaging to a successful presidency points to a potential, unique influence of a show like *The West Wing* relative to traditional news content. This unique effect may stem from the distinct roles of the U.S. presidency displayed by the two types of content. Second, the broader implication of *The West Wing* priming more positive images of the presidency speaks directly to past research on the influence of various forms of entertainment television viewing on trust in the executive branch of government.

**Role Display**

Goffman (1959) argued that “performances” or norms that are engaged in as part of everyday living, employment, and entertainment are governed by and understood through the behaviors that are or are not present. Thus, we might understand what is appropriate and expected behavior in a restaurant (or its kitchen), a church, a bar, a living room, or a bedroom based on these cultural norms. What we learn to expect or actually perform is governed by what Goffman refers to as front region and back region performances or behavior. For Goffman, a region was comparable to a setting. Of the front region, he argued that certain norms or expectations must be maintained. This could entail certain behaviors that are directed toward or appropriate to others in that region, such as an audience to a play or patrons of a restaurant, or it could entail behaviors that are appropriate to the region that is within the view of others. By contrast, the back region is where formal decorum and politeness requirements are not applied and where moral or instrumental rules may not be in effect. Comparable to a backstage of a theater, this setting is where members of the space can let down their guard, be themselves, and not have to worry about an audience that is interacted with or within view of any action. Thus, keeping the back region closed to most, if not all, members of the audience is a practice in image control.

Meyrowitz (1985) applied Goffman’s discussion of the presentation of front-versus backstage roles in interpersonal behavior to the study of television. By linking Goffman’s work to this form of mass communication, Meyrowitz argued that we need to discard old notions of focusing on “only encounters that occur face-to-face in set times” and instead look at “the larger, more inclusive notion of patterns of access to information” (p. 37). He went on to state that what television provides is not a more detailed account of events, but access to information that we would not otherwise be privy to via face-to-face encounters. He argued that television creates a merging of information worlds, and one way it achieves this end is by providing audience members with a view of the backstage existence of social situations. Building off Goffman’s front- versus backstage dichotomy, television ultimately creates a large middle region of existence between audience members and the roles being portrayed on various programs.

We feel Meyrowitz’s argument is pertinent to our finding concerning a rise in the perceived importance of being engaging to a successful presidency. Once
again, the engaging index consists of the following characteristics: loving, warm, sense of humor, and compassionate. These are characteristics not usually displayed by presidents who are performing front-stage roles, the exact roles most often being covered by news organizations. Instead, it is in the backstage where fictional President Bartlet on *The West Wing* can display these elements of his persona to the American audience.

One important extension of this line of argument would be a content-based study analyzing which personality characteristics are displayed by Bartlet when taking on front- versus backstage roles (e.g., Holbert, Tschida, Dixon, & Airne, 2002). The fictional Bartlet functions in multiple roles on the show, and it would be important to find out if different elements of this well-rounded character are commonly associated with different role types. This content-based work could then be linked to effects-based studies like this one on priming to gain a better understanding of the processes of effects taking place as a result of viewing *The West Wing* (e.g., Shoemaker & Reese, 1991; Simon & Iyengar, 1996).

**Confidence in the U.S. Presidency**

Moy and Pfau (2000) have completed a detailed analysis of the influence of different forms of television use on trust in various democratic institutions, including the executive branch of the federal government. They found the use of hour-long prime-time television dramas has a positive effect on individual-level ratings of the competence and character of the U.S. president. This effect is robust even after taking into account a host of exogenous control variables. This type of television use also has a positive influence on individuals' global attitudes toward this branch of government. Future research needs to try to distinguish the effects of political-based prime-time dramas from the influence of the other shows that make up a majority of the networks' dramatic listings (i.e., crime dramas, legal dramas, etc.). Past research has revealed that both have positive influences, but political dramas may have some unique effects given the nature of the material being discussed each week.

Our finding of a priming effect for *The West Wing* supports an argument raised by Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles (2002) that this show may lead to increased confidence in the U.S. presidency. We encourage future research to better link critical-cultural and empirically grounded approaches to allow each area of research to build off each other's epistemological strengths and weaknesses (e.g., Holbert, Shah, & Kwak, 2003).

Finally, it would also be important to link various content- and effects-based research on *The West Wing* to detailed audience analyses that would allow for a better understanding of who watches this program and what leads certain types of individuals to watch (e.g., Blumler & Katz, 1974). This would allow for a more complete understanding of the relationships that exist between citizens who watch the show and the U.S. presidency.

**Limitations**

We recognize that this study retains inherent limitations that can be improved upon by future work in this area. One limitation is the use of student participants.
Although these individuals are members of the general viewing population, it is important that future work obtain a broader sample of viewers. Our student sample reflects a group of individuals pointed to by Williams and Delli Carpini (2002) as not seeing a clear distinction between entertainment and news content, but it is important that a broader sample of the U.S. television-viewing population be tested to properly assess the generalizability of our results.

A second limitation is the short-term nature of the effects measured for this study. Although it was important to establish first whether any priming effect was evident, future work should incorporate some delayed measures to track whether the influences of *The West Wing* persist.

A third limitation is our use of a single episode. Once again, this study sought to isolate whether a particular priming effect was evident. Future research should use multiple episodes to better insure that the effects found in this work are generalizable for the program as a whole (e.g., Jackson & Jacobs, 1983; Jackson, O'Keefe, & Jacobs, 1988). Also, it will be important to attempt to replicate these findings (Boster, 2002; Holbert, Benoit, Hansen, & Wen, 2002), not only for *The West Wing* but for other entertainment-based television programs or theatrical releases, and to see if audiences are primed in a similar fashion across time and entertainment content.

**Conclusion**

This study extends the study of priming in political communication into the realm of entertainment television and provides empirical support that the positive images of the U.S. presidency offered on *The West Wing* result in more positive viewer perceptions of those who hold or have held the office. Future research should make every attempt to extend the theoretical bounds of other areas of political communication research (e.g., framing, agenda setting) to include more than just the study of news. This study heeds the call of other political communication scholars who have asked that the discipline cast a wider net in its study of media. We encourage others to study not just *The West Wing*, but other types of non-public affairs content as well.

**References**


