

EDUCATIONAL NOTE

Did You Say That Voting Is Ridiculous? Using *South Park* to Teach Public Choice

Adam J. Hoffer*

University of Wisconsin, La Crosse

George R. Crowley

Troy University

Abstract

We describe an approach to teaching public choice perspectives on voting using an episode from Comedy Central's animated television show, *South Park*. The episode depicts the events surrounding a vote for a new school mascot and demonstrates the near-zero value of an individual vote, the value individuals place on the act of voting itself, the problems that arise when voters must choose among undesirable candidates, and the role of political campaigning. The episode mirrors the public's perception of major-party candidates in most elections.

JEL Codes: A22, D72

Keywords: *South Park*, voting, elections, teaching public choice

I. Introduction

Recent economics education literature has advocated moving away from the pure lecture style of classroom instruction. Scholars have suggested the incorporation of movie clips (Mateer and Li 2008; Mateer and Stephenson 2011), video clips (Diamond 2009), comic strips (Lawson 2006), podcasts (Hall 2012), and academic entrepreneurship from student presentations (Hoffer 2013).

Hall (2005), Holian (2011), and Ghent, Grant, and Lesica (2011) recommend the use of television clips, describing economics in *The Simpsons*, *The Drew Carey Show*, and *Seinfeld*, respectively. We describe a similar methodology using the television show *South Park*, with a particular focus on the use of a 2004 episode to illustrate key concepts in public choice. Compared with programs discussed in the

* The authors thank the editor and anonymous reviewers for helpful comments.

existing literature, *South Park* provides a unique angle through which to demonstrate economics.

First, *South Park* has maintained its popularity and cultural relevance since its debut in 1997 and continues to air new episodes. Conversely, *The Drew Carey Show's* final season was in 2004, and *Seinfeld's* final season was in 1998; the typical freshman entering college in the fall of 2015 was born in 1997. While *The Simpsons* is still airing new episodes, they appear on a network channel, whereas *South Park* is aired on Comedy Central, a cable channel, giving the show far more leeway to address current issues in a manner that is less politically correct. While this often means the typical episode of *South Park* involves crass jokes and adult subject matter, it also gives the show more credibility with early undergraduate students, as the added “taboo” factor draws students’ attention. Each storyline unfolds through an honest, raw, unforgiving, nearly unfiltered lens—an appropriate perspective through which to educate students about free markets and public choice. Finally, episodes of *South Park* run just over twenty minutes and are freely available (both in their entirety and in premade clips) online at southparkstudios.com, making it an ideal show for classroom use.

While many episodes of *South Park* are rich with examples of economic concepts, we will focus on a single episode that has proven effective in teaching core ideas of public choice to introductory economics students at the undergraduate level.¹ *South Park* episodes, and this episode in particular, contain language and subject matter geared toward mature audiences (episodes are rated TV-MA when they air on television) and have been described by the Parents Television Council as “not recommended for viewers under 18,” so we are not endorsing its use in high school classes or with audiences who might be offended. We suggest instructors view the episode prior to showing it in a classroom and consider their audience. With an appropriate discussion, however, we feel the merits of the episode outweigh its possible offensiveness and make it an extremely useful tool for introducing core public choice concepts in an entertaining manner.

¹ It is perhaps unsurprising that *South Park* would contain good economics, as cocreator Matt Stone’s father was an economics professor at Metropolitan State College of Denver and a textbook author.

II. Episode Synopsis

South Park follows four third-grade students: Stan Marsh, Kyle Broflovski, Eric Cartman, and Kenny McCormick, who live in the fictional town of South Park, Colorado. In October 2004, *South Park* aired its 119th episode, which depicts events surrounding an election.² The episode begins with the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) invading the school and tossing blood on the school's mascot and cheerleaders. Due to pressure from PETA, the school changes its mascot from the South Park Cows to whatever mascot receives the most votes in a school-wide election.

Unhappy with this forced change, the boys scheme to convince the other students to vote for one of two new options, each an intentionally derogatory term frequently used in the American vernacular when mocking or demeaning an individual.³ The boys cannot reach a consensus as to which mascot to choose; Kyle and Kenny support one candidate (hereafter referred to as “derogatory noun 1”), Cartman supports the other (hereafter referred to as “derogatory noun 2”), and Stan fails to see the point in choosing either and tries to avoid participation in the election altogether. The episode focuses on Stan and his decision to *not* vote. Stan reveals the election information and his feelings to his parents, who are dismayed:

Sharon (Stan's mother): How was school today, Stanley?

Stan: It was ridiculous. We have to have a new school mascot and we're supposed to vote between a [derogatory noun 1] and a [derogatory noun 2].

Sharon: What did you say?

Randy (Stan's father): Did you just say . . . that voting is ridiculous?

Despite explaining his indifference, Stan's parents express their extreme disappointment in him. Further, his parents immediately take

² Episode 119 is episode 8 of season 8. The episode's title contains terms that may be objectionable to some readers, so we have not used it in this article. Readers interested in viewing and using the episode can find it by browsing for episode 8 of season 8 on the *South Park* website, www.southparkstudios.com.

³ We choose to err on the side of decency and not include the actual terms used in the episode here. While the candidate terms are certainly unpleasant names to be called, the actual words themselves are not typically subject to censor on even network television and refer to a feminine hygiene product and animal droppings.

opposing sides on the issue, with Stan's father supporting one candidate and his mother supporting the other. Sharon and Randy argue angrily despite having only been made aware of the election seconds earlier. The next day, after refusing to vote, Stan gets hit with the town's antivoting penalty: banishment from South Park until he decides that voting is important.

Stan roams the wilderness until coming upon the PETA compound. After some time, Stan reveals to the PETA members that he was banished from South Park for not voting, citing his indifference between the candidates. A prominent PETA member offers Stan the following advice: "But Stan, don't you know? It's always between a [derogatory noun 1] and a [derogatory noun 2]. Nearly every election since the beginning of time has been between some [derogatory noun 1] and some [derogatory noun 2]. They're the only people who suck up enough to make it that far in politics."

Convinced that he "had better get used to having to pick between a [derogatory noun 1] and a [derogatory noun 2] because it's usually the choice [he'll] have," Stan races home, receiving a warm reception paired with a music number and dancing. Stan votes for [derogatory noun 2], bringing its total votes to 36. The other candidate receives 1,410 votes and wins the election.

Angry that his vote "didn't matter," Stan is counseled that the merits of voting cannot be determined simply because his candidate did not win. Then, a teacher announces that all the PETA members were just found murdered at their compound. The room full of voters rejoices, declaring that they can now go back to having the cow as their mascot. The episode concludes with Stan's father telling Stan, "*Now* your vote didn't matter."

III. Application to the Teaching of Public Choice

This single episode deals with several public choice concepts covered in a typical introductory economics course. The core topic is clear and requires no interpretation: this is an episode about an election, detailing characters' various motivations for voting or not voting. While the tone is satirical and the events larger than life, the dilemma Stan faces and the reaction he receives from those around him are clearly applicable to the voting process in general. The other characters' views also tend to parallel those held by the average undergraduate student, who feels strongly that voting is important and yet likely does not remember for whom he or she voted for most offices in the last election.

Fundamentally, the episode details an election where voters must choose between two undesirable alternatives, mirroring the opinions held by many voters about major-party candidates in most elections. While Stan immediately recognizes the unfavorable situation and decides to abstain from voting, the rest of the town's residents become fervent in their support of the candidate they find least objectionable. This passion is most clear during the heated conversation between Stan's parents and the exchanges between Kyle and Cartman who, despite acknowledging that the choice of candidates was meant as a joke, quickly become consumed with wanting their choice to beat the other's. No supporter attempts to defend the merits of their candidate. Instead, they focus on the characteristics that make the alternative worse. This argument brings to the forefront issues of political parties and the nature of voting for imperfect candidates rather than for individual issues.

The election and the voters' behavior also speak to the criticisms of the rational voter model (specifically, that voters in fact hold irrational or biased views) levied against traditional public choice argument (see, for example, Caplan and Stringham [2005]). The episode also clearly represents Hayek's (1944) contention of "the worst getting on top" when the PETA leader convinces Stan that elections are always between "some [derogatory noun 1] and some [derogatory noun 2]," since they are the only types of people who succeed in politics.

The costs and benefits associated with the act of voting itself are also spotlighted throughout the episode. Stan is immediately admonished (and ultimately exiled) when he announces his intention to not vote, even though he makes it clear his choice is due to his indifference toward both candidates and not an indictment of the process itself. The rest of the town's residents speak of the importance of the voting act itself (culminating in a reference to the oddly titled "Vote or Die" campaign popular at the time of the episode's airing), though not one offers a real justification for this belief. Early on, Kyle is eager to persuade Stan of the importance of voting, but only because Kyle expects Stan to vote for the same candidate; once Stan expresses interest in the alternative, Kyle chastises him, demonstrating to Stan that the merit of voting seems to hinge on voting for the "right" candidate. The residents are also seen conflating the concept of a "right" to vote with a "requirement" or "duty" to vote, as evidenced by Stan's banishment. Ultimately,

once Stan returns to vote, he finds that his vote literally does not matter.

While the majority of the episode centers on voting, special interest groups and attempts to “inform” (persuade) undecided voters play major roles throughout. Cartman resorts to outright bribery of potential voters with candy in an attempt to gather support for his candidate. More obviously, PETA is featured as an interest group operating outside of the electoral process. The episode even includes a formal debate, where the potential mascots dodge questions, play to the audience, and engage in personal attacks in an effort to persuade rationally ignorant voters.

IV. Conclusion

The election portrayed in *South Park* illuminates many core concepts in public choice. Moreover, it humorously sheds light on why college classrooms are filled with students who profess the importance of voting and yet cannot name most of the elected officials for whom they voted. As most Americans are more likely to die on the way to the voting booth than to cast the decisive vote in an election, the irrational act of voting may be more easily explained to a room full of undergraduates by a handful of animated third-graders than by a preaching economist.

References

- Caplan, Bryan, and Edward Stringham. 2005. “Mises, Bastiat, Public Opinion, and Public Choice.” *Review of Political Economy*, 17(1): 79–105.
- Diamond, Arthur M. 2009. “Using Video Clips to Teach Creative Destruction.” *Journal of Private Enterprise*, 25(1): 151–61.
- Ghent, Linda S., Alan Grant, and George Lesica. 2011. “The Economics of Seinfeld.” *Journal of Economic Education*, 42(3): 317–18.
- Hall, Joshua. 2005. “Homer Economicus: Using the Simpsons to Teach Economics.” *Journal of Private Enterprise*, 20(2): 165–76.
- Hall, Joshua. 2012. “Incorporating *EconTalk* Podcasts into the Principles Classroom.” *Journal of Private Enterprise*, 28(1): 113–18.
- Hayek, F. A. 1944. *The Road to Serfdom*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hoffer, Adam. 2014. “Fixing Fallacies.” *Journal of Private Enterprise*, 29(2):141–47.
- Holian, Mathew J. 2011. “Using Drew Carey in the Classroom.” *Journal of Private Enterprise*, 26(2): 161–67.
- Lawson, Robert A. 2006. “Teaching Economics Principles with Comic Strips.” *Journal of Private Enterprise*, 22(1): 168–76.
- Mateer, G. Dirk, and Herman Li. 2008. “Movie Scenes for Economics.” *Journal of Economic Education*, 39(3): 303.

- Mateer, G. Dirk, and Frank E. Stephenson. 2011. "Using Film Clips to Teach Public Choice Economics." *Journal of Economics and Finance Education*, 10(1): 28–36.
- Parker, Trey, and Matt Stone. 2004. "Douche and Turd." *South Park*, season 8, episode 8.