



Using television series to teach comparative and European politics

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Abstract

Despite increasing access to high quality television (TV) series in the golden age of television, political scientists (and especially scholars of comparative politics) have not systematically considered the possibilities that television series might offer for instruction. This article aims to fill this gap by illustrating the opportunities for teaching political science using TV series and outlining ways of integrating television series into the classroom using selected clips, screening full episodes, or using an entire series as a text. We then illustrate these methods by discussing ways that television series might be used in a typical introductory course on European politics.

Keywords Television series · Pedagogy · Popular culture · Teaching · European politics · Comparative politics

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, television has become the new medium of choice for story-driven creatives tackling interesting subjects, including politics. Serialised storytelling is less constrained than in films with shorter runtimes, leading writers to explore more complex topics in the sphere of politics. Although much of the discussion about contemporary television's new creative success has focused on American television series (for example, see Sepinwall 2013; Schlütz 2016), there has been a corresponding major increase in the distribution of international television series (Lobato 2018). This increases opportunities for instructors to utilise television in class to illustrate an extended set of topics and themes, especially as global pop

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culture is becoming more diverse: European public broadcasters took notice of the success of fictional political dramas in the U.S. and pushed for their own productions. Additionally, we have seen the rise of global streaming platforms (e.g., Netflix), which intentionally place original productions in international settings to gain new audiences and market authentic products to viewers worldwide (Jenner 2018).

Political scientists have, of course, frequently taught classes using movies as texts before (O'Meara 1976; Funderburk 1978; Engert and Spencer 2009; Valeriano 2013, among others). Pedagogical studies of film and television in political science have typically emphasised movies, which, considering their runtime, are easier to integrate into a course. However, there are fewer analyses of the use of television series, and many publications come from neighbouring disciplines. One prominent exception is *The Wire*, which was widely praised as a new form of social science fiction for its chronicling of different aspects of political life in the American city of Baltimore over five seasons (Ashworth 2010; Chaddha and Wilson 2010). In general, political science pedagogy has not adequately considered how to best integrate television series into the classroom. In part, this is because TV shows have to be screened more carefully: segments and episodes to be used in class must be introduced so that students can follow the plot, a consideration not necessary when watching a standalone film. But at the same time, popular TV shows have often been consumed by the students before, so revisiting them in the classroom and adding a layer of political science can increase student interest and make complex political structures and processes more accessible. Woodcock (2008) illustrates this argument in his pedagogical discussion of how to use *The Simpsons* to spark discussion about political issues. The focus of pedagogical publications often revolves around American society and politics; there are fewer examples where non-U.S. productions are discussed to integrate the medium of TV as text. This article illustrates the untapped potential for utilising TV series for a comparative politics and European studies curriculum.

In this paper, we systematically discuss how to integrate television series as text in comparative politics courses, providing illustrations using non-U.S. productions in the context of an introductory European politics course. TV shows can be especially helpful vehicles to learn about the political systems of other countries, as the depiction of politics in other settings can visually transport students and illuminate broader societal and cultural conditions more vividly than textbooks or articles alone (Van Belle 2017). First, we look at the television studies literature to delineate the role of fictional stories in pedagogy and the benefits to the classroom. We also review the literature on teaching using television series and political television series themselves. Second, we discuss and illustrate three methods of integrating television series into comparative politics courses: showing clips, screening full episodes, and using a single series as text. In some cases, we draw on our own experience in the classroom to provide suggested discussion points. For the discussion of a full series as text, we focus on *Borgen*, a successful series about Denmark's first (fictionalised) female Prime Minister. We have successfully used segments and episodes from *Borgen* in teaching, and we provide conceptual examples of how the series can be used in class to demonstrate course concepts and stimulate discussion.



We conclude by discussing how our suggestions can be applied to other courses as well.

Studying television and politics

There is extensive research in the field of television studies about the relevance of the screen for politics at large. For a long time, the empirical study of media and politics has been consumed with analyses of the impact of televised news. However, there is increasing attention on the impact of entertainment and fiction, as these also incorporate politics and make up a larger part of the average media diet (Aalberg et al. 2013). Fictionalised series use politics in service of a fundamentally different type of storytelling from what is generally provided by the news and documentaries (Holbert 2005). Gamson (1999) argues that fictionalised series, in comparison to nonfiction television, offer lifeworld content that engages the audience on an emotional level, bases truth claims on experiential knowledge, and treats the audience as being physically present within the program. Together, these provide the opportunity to immerse students more fully than showing a documentary might.

Series offer a different, more engrossing frame for political issues and can use some of the same storytelling techniques that politicians themselves use. Neumann and Nexon (2006) note that political actors are successful in generating followers or organising majorities through the use of convincing political narratives, just as fictional stories do. These fictional stories have pedagogical value because they can efficiently and persuasively communicate information to viewers. Some of the most popular series, such as *The Simpsons*, can rely on widespread recognition around the world, allowing instructors to make easily understood references and rely on students' existing experience with the show, which in turn makes it easier for instructors to tie in additional information that they would like students to understand (Cantor 1999).

Any individual series will naturally be perceived differently by students. Holbert (2005) accordingly designed a typology, categorising titles along the two dimensions of audience expectations and the significance of a political message for the show. One resulting category is "fictional political dramas", which are explicitly grounded in political settings, leading the audience to expect messages that focus on inherently political issues. Nevertheless, these messages have different layers. Beneath overtly political plots there is also political messaging embedded in the program. Holbert finds satire is more implicit in its political messaging, a consequence of the goal to make the audience laugh and not engage them in a suspenseful story. Satire, however, provides a valuable entry point to viewers who might be less engaged and helps to illustrate alternative viewpoints on a particular issue (Yates 2018: 41). Eilders and Nitsch (2015) further refine Holbert's factor of significance of a political message into two dimensions: political intensity (inclusion of political and sociopolitical issues, political characters, and state officials) and degree of realism (concerning events, characters, time, and places). We rely on this logic to select titles that score high on all these



variables, as the pedagogical impact in the context of a comparative politics class is assumed to be the highest for these series. Baym (2017) focuses on the hybridity that drives an overlap of news and narratives and inspects three “public affairs dramas”. For him, the shape of a television series makes it special as “these programs develop rich and realistic characters engaged in slowly accruing plot lines, located within complicated and highly rendered social worlds” (Baym 2017: 17). Indeed, he finds that even if it is clear that *Borgen* was not meant to offer a literal or factual portrayal of Danish politics, in pursuit of fascinating the viewers and driving rational engagement of the audience with the political realities illustrated on the show, the storyline was never allowed to stray too far from reality.

In this sense, by simultaneously depicting political realities while seeking to provide entertainment, audiences are able to benefit from the affective and emotional investment of engagement in a television series (Holland 2019: 73–94). Nærland (2019) finds that viewers who generally are less interested in social issues state that some television series made them reflect on politics. Parsemain (2016) calls this engagement “critical involvement”, which allows an audience to both engage with real world knowledge and the fictionalised environment. For viewers whose overall orientation does not constitute a strong public connection, the engagement with political realism appears to provide them with a link to the world of politics in the absence of other connective practices. In the classroom, achieving critical involvement will allow students to similarly benefit and engage with course materials in ways beyond what they may be able to do with lectures and discussions alone.

Political scientists have built on this research in television studies and have increasingly engaged with television series as a medium, both as a reflection of politics and an influence on politics, in both American and international contexts.¹ Granville (2009) assesses the impact of *Yes, Minister* on British political opinion. Chow et al. (2020a) compiled a special issue on the geopolitics of Nordic drama. Saunders’ (2019) comprehensive typology of depictions of international relations in television series discusses how television series are simultaneously an analytical and predictive medium. Switek (2021) compares elements of anti-establishment rhetoric in populist party platforms with the content of political satires. Dyson (2019) examines the interplay between political television series and major theories of political science, studying how both are different ways of interpreting politics. These studies show that social scientists increasingly take television seriously as a medium worthy of study; however, there has been limited attention on how to integrate television into the political science classroom, especially in comparative politics.

Integrating television series into the political science classroom

At the same time as we have seen literature taking television’s discussion of politics seriously, political science has insufficiently considered how to incorporate television into the classroom. There are a few exceptions: Chaddha and Wilson (2011)

¹ This is separate from analysis of the impact of television news on politics, of which there are myriad.



employ *The Wire* as a depiction of the systematic inequalities in urban America in teaching about urban politics. Randell-Moon and Randell (2020) use *Parks and Recreation* as part of a public management curriculum to show how the bureaucratic is also the political, while Jester (2021) discusses the ways that popular culture can be used to make political theory more accessible for students, drawing on films and television series. Scholars in related disciplines have more concretely dealt with the pedagogy of integrating television into the classroom. Scholars in education (Tillman and Trier 2007), communications (Nicolas-Gavilan et al. 2017), management (Hunt 2001), business (Lopez et al. 2017), organisational behaviour (DelCampo et al. 2010), sociology (Scanlan and Feinberg 2000), and public administration (Considine 2006; Wegrich 2015; Borry 2018) have considered particular television series as pedagogical tools.

Comparative politics pedagogy, which might especially benefit from accurate depictions of politics in both drama and satire, has not substantially theorised how to incorporate television series into the classroom. However, we can draw on literature from international relations pedagogy for some guidance. Engert and Spencer (2009) outline four ways of teaching international relations using popular culture: historical depiction, issue depiction, cultural narratives, and allegories to explain theory. Within this fourth allegorical frame, several scholars have examined popular film series, and to a lesser extent, television series as a means of accessibly introducing students to international relations concepts. Dreyer (2016) discusses use of the *Hunger Games* films to illustrate how states might cooperate or engage in conflict in situations of anarchy. Young et al. (2018) use *Game of Thrones* as a basis for a classroom simulation to teach major subfield concepts. Dyson (2015) also reflects on his use of *Game of Thrones* as an entry point to teach international relations in cross-cultural settings. These examples, however, largely rely on popular culture as allegory, as opposed to a more realistic depiction of contemporary or historical political events. We seek to provide some broad guidelines for integration of these series with more realistic settings while also providing some reflections and guidelines that are more broadly applicable for the integration of television into a curriculum.

Following Baym's analysis, we consider complex television series, which blend accurate depictions of real-world phenomena with fictional narratives, as "televisual public affairs narratives" (2017: 17). These series play an important role in orienting viewers to important social and political realities. Moreover, political series also invite viewers to consider the intersection of government and the lives of ordinary citizens (Tryon 2016: 137–164). As students often find video clips a valuable part of classroom instruction (Berk 2009, among others), these more complex television series, already designed to introduce viewers to multilayered political phenomena, provide ideal entry points to reinforce concepts and historical examples in the classroom. In their end of semester evaluations, students have stated that they find these series to be beneficial and that they help make material more accessible.

There are some crucial differences between feature length films and serialised storytelling spanning multiple episodes and multiple seasons. Chaddha and Wilson (2010), who used *The Wire* for a course on urban politics, noticed that the storylines drew students into academic research. With the freedom of artistic expression, TV series "... can weave together the range of forces that shape the lives of the urban



poor” (Chaddha and Wilson 2010). The series format allows the presentation of complex processes without sacrificing nuance or resorting to oversimplification. *The Wire* forces us to confront social realities more effectively than other media productions.

In a similar vein, television series set in the political system of a European country or with a politician as its main protagonist are able to play a role in educating students about political institutions and processes as well as societal conditions in these countries. However, the basic challenge of a comparative politics course is to combine knowledge about individual countries with more general concepts (Immerfall 1999). A comparative approach typically employs general concepts to probe similarities and differences and creates groups of states that exhibit similar characteristics (Magone 2015). Examining popular comparative politics or European politics textbooks suggests several common central topics (Caramani 2020; Magone 2015): parliamentarism, public administration, judicial power, local politics, political parties, elections, and interest groups. Additionally, specific to European politics is the question of how national states are integrated into the framework of the European Union and shaped by Europeanisation. We outline relevant TV series with this perspective in mind.

Techniques to incorporate TV series into the comparative politics classroom

We see three primary ways that television series can be integrated into the classroom. First, the instructor can show selected clips from several series throughout a semester. Second, the instructor could spend a class period screening a specific episode of an individual series. And third, the instructor might use one series over the course of the semester, either assigning the series as a text, or referring back to the same series for several in-class examples, allowing students to benefit from their understanding of the story and characters with less scaffolding from the instructor prior to each clip. To illustrate how television can be incorporated into political science classrooms, we discuss each method as a pedagogical tool and provide representative examples of series that can illustrate general concepts in the context of an introductory European politics course. We also describe the Danish series *Borgen* in more depth. Given its range of topics and parliamentary setting, it provides clear opportunities to incorporate one or several episodes into a syllabus (Baym 2017; Nitsch et al. 2019). Further suggestions for relevant series can be found in Table 1.

While we offer some guidance on pertinent episodes and series in the remainder of the article, in all cases it is important that instructors carefully view the specific clips, episodes, or series prior to class. This will ensure that the instructor both can plan the best way of relating the video to their course and style of teaching and can confirm that the excerpt or episode is considered appropriate for the rules and norms of their particular institution. For all methods of inclusion, the role of the instructor will be to facilitate what Parsemain (2016) terms as “critical involvement”, where students both engage with their outside knowledge about real



Table 1 TV series focusing on European politics

TV series*	Country setting	Genre	Original network	Years	Synopsis	Possible topics	Where available in U.S. (at time of publication)	Usefulness
<i>1992/1993/1994</i>	Italy	Drama	Sky Atlantic	2015–2019	The Mani Pulite corruption investigation upends the Italian political system and leads to the rise of Berlusconi and Lega	Corruption; Collapse of dominant parties; Populism; Party formation	Topic	★★★
<i>Au Service de la France (A Very Secret Service)</i>	France	Comedy	Arte	2015–2018	A satirical examination of the French secret service in the 1960s	Bureaucracy; Decolonisation	Netflix	★★★
<i>Babylon Berlin</i>	Germany	Drama	Sky 1	2017–Present	A sprawling examination of crime, party politics, and culture during the collapse of Weimar Germany	Emergence of Fascism/Collapse of Weimar Germany; Communist/Socialist tensions	Netflix	★★★
<i>Baron Noir</i>	France	Drama	Canal +	2016–2020	The mayor of a French town navigates politics between local and national level	Elections; Direct democracy; Political parties; Local politics; European integration	Topic	★★★
<i>Berlin Station</i>	Germany	Drama	Epix	2016–2019	An American production about the CIA station in Berlin	Season 3 examines gradual Russian encroachment in Estonia in a fairly realistic manner	Epix	★★
<i>Borgen</i>	Denmark	Drama	DR1/Netflix	2010–2013, 2022	A moderate politician unexpectedly becomes Denmark's first female Prime Minister and has to carefully manage coalition politics	Parliamentary systems; Coalitions; Political parties; Gender	Netflix	★★★★
<i>Byw Cefwydd (Living a Lie)</i>	United Kingdom (Wales)	Drama	S4C	2016–2018	The conduct of elections, journalism, and policymaking in the Welsh National Assembly	Devolution; Party politics; Media and politics	MHZ Choice	★★★



Table 1 (continued)

TV series*	Country setting	Genre	Original network	Years	Synopsis	Possible topics	Where available in U.S. (at time of publication)	Usefulness
<i>Chernobyl</i>	USSR	Drama	HBO	2019	The story of the Chernobyl nuclear meltdown, with a special focus on the bureaucratic politics that led to the weak response	Nuclear power; bureaucracy; Communism	HBO Max	★★
<i>Derry Girls</i>	United Kingdom (Northern Ireland)	Comedy	Channel 4	2018–2022	A group of teenage girls grow up amidst the sectarian tensions of 1990s Derry, Northern Ireland	The Troubles; Religious tensions	Netflix	★★★★
<i>Deutschland 83/86/89</i>	Germany	Drama	RTL/Amazon Prime/Sundance TV	2015–2020	A newly recruited East German spy infiltrates the West	U.S.–German relations in the Cold War; Fall of Communism	Hulu	★★
<i>Eichwald, MdB</i>	Germany	Satire	ZDF	2015–2019	A German MP seeks to retain influence amidst new forms of politics and political communication	Legislatures; Political parties; Interest groups; Lobbying	Region 2 DVD	★★★★
<i>Gravy Train</i>	Belgium (EU)	Drama	Channel 4	1990–1991	A British bureaucrat becomes involved in EU policymaking; Season 2 contends with transition and future enlargement in post-Socialist countries	Euroskepticism; EU enlargement	Region 2 DVD	★★
<i>Hindafing (Welcome to Hindafing)</i>	Germany	Comedy	BR Fernsehen	2016–2019	A small town mayor unsuccessfully navigates complex political relationships	Multi-level politics; Migration crisis	MHZ Choice	★

Table 1 (continued)

TV series*	Country setting	Genre	Original network	Years	Synopsis	Possible topics	Where available in U.S. (at time of publication)	Usefulness
<i>Home</i>	United Kingdom	Comedy	Channel 4	2019–2020	A Syrian refugee acclimates to life in exurban London	Migration crisis; Refugee integration	HBO Max	★★★
<i>Les Hommes de l'ombre (Spin)</i>	France	Drama	France 2	2012–2016	The show revolves around a communication advisor and his work during a French presidential campaign	Political parties; Political communication; Elections and campaigns	MHZ Choice	★★
<i>La linea invisible (The Invisible Line)</i>	Spain	Drama	Movistar+	2020	The ETA emerges in the late 1960s to violently advocate for Basque independence from Spain	Separatist movements; Basque identity; 1968	Topic	★★
<i>La mafia uccide solo d'estate (The Mafia Only Kills in Summer)</i>	Italy	Drama	Rai1	2016–2018	A boy, whose father works for the city bureaucracy, grows up in late 1970s Palermo amidst increasing Government-Mafia tensions	Clientelism; Years of Lead	MHZ Choice	★★
<i>Mamon</i>	Czechia	Drama	HBO Europe	2015	The government is preparing to privatize a state-owned energy firm	Privatisation; Corruption	HBO Max	★
<i>Man Like Mobeen</i>	United Kingdom	Comedy	BBC 3	2017–Present	A Muslim man attempts to stay afloat in the housing estates of Birmingham	Treatment of racial and ethnic minorities	Netflix	★★



Table 1 (continued)

TV series*	Country setting	Genre	Original network	Years	Synopsis	Possible topics	Where available in U.S. (at time of publication)	Usefulness
<i>Marseille</i>	France	Drama	Nefflix	2016–2018	The race for mayor in Marseille gets entangled with personal and family relationships, when the longtime powerbroker is challenged by a young newcomer	Local politics in France; Corruption	Nefflix	★★
<i>Nobel</i>	Norway	Drama	NRK	2016	A Norwegian NATO commander in Afghanistan and his government official wife must contend with complex international political arrangements	NATO War in Afghanistan; Resource politics	Region 2 DVD	★
<i>Novine (The Paper)</i>	Croatia	Drama	HRT	2016–2020	A leading Croatian newspaper is caught up in the criminal and political machinations of the city's major players	Corruption; Media freedom	Nefflix	★★
<i>Okkupert (Occupied)</i>	Norway	Drama	TV2	2015–2020	The new Norwegian PM wants to shut down oil production; an international intervention aims to stop him	Russian encroachment (alternative universe depiction)	Nefflix	★★
<i>Parlement</i>	Belgium (EU)	Drama	france-tv	2020–Present	A new European Parliament staffer learns the intricacies of the multinational legislative institution	European Union; Multilevel governance; European Parliament; Political culture	Topic	★★★★



Table 1 (continued)

TV series*	Country setting	Genre	Original network	Years	Synopsis	Possible topics	Where available in U.S. (at time of publication)	Usefulness
<i>Sluha Naroda (Servant of the People)</i>	Ukraine	Comedy	1 + 1	2015–2019	A teacher is elected President of Ukraine after being filmed attacking political corruption (and in life-imitating-art, the actor playing the teacher has since been elected President of Ukraine)	Populism; Anti-System Politicians; Corruption; Zelenskyy's real-life rise	Netflix	★★★
<i>The Thick of It</i>	United Kingdom	Comedy	BBC 4/BBC 2	2005–2012	Satirical portrayal of the inner workings of a UK cabinet, emphasizing the role of political communication (inspired by the Blair New Labour government)	Cabinet politics; Political communication	Britbox	★★★★
<i>El tiempo entre costuras (The Time in Between)</i>	Spain	Drama	Antena 3	2013–2014	A woman copes with the Spanish Civil War in the Morocco Protectorate, and World War II in nationalist Spain	Major ideological -isms; Spanish Civil War	Pantaya/PBS Masterpiece	★★
<i>Weissenste</i>	Germany	Drama	Das Erste	2010–2018	A family drama largely focusing on the Kupfer family, involved in Stasi leadership, and its intersection with members of the opposition	Fall of Communism; Opposition within Eastern Bloc; Stasi	MHZ Choice	★★★★



Table 1 (continued)

TV series*	Country setting	Genre	Original network	Years	Synopsis	Possible topics	Where available in U.S. (at time of publication)	Usefulness
<i>Yes, Minister/Yes, Prime Minister</i>	United Kingdom	Comedy	BBC 2	1980–1988	A British politician becomes a first-time minister and has to learn to navigate the power of the permanent bureaucracy	Bureaucratic politics; Relationship between Ministers and Bureaucracy; British politics	Britbox	★★★★

Four Stars: The authors have used this series in a course already
Three Stars: The authors see clear uses for this series in many courses
Two Stars: The authors see possible uses for this series in some courses
One Star: The series is thematically relevant but may only be useful in specialised settings
*Series are listed by their original language titles. If the series is marketed under a different English-language title, that title is included parenthetically

world politics and analytical concepts while suspending disbelief and accepting the authenticity of the fictional depiction of politics on screen.

In the following section, we provide some practical advice for these three techniques of integrating television series into the political science classroom. Some considerations, however, are applicable across all three techniques. For example, if teaching online there are two particular considerations to keep in mind. First, streaming videos in synchronous online environments are often somewhat visually choppy, even if the audio keeps up. As such, showing subtitled clips is trickier online, as skips in the video may make it difficult for students to follow the scene. Second, some streaming services (such as Netflix) use technology that prevents their video from being shared via platforms like Zoom. Instructors should test sharing video clips from their desired platform beforehand to ensure that they are visible to students. Clips from TV series that can be found on YouTube or from DVDs should be workable in online environments. For in-person instruction, these concerns are minimised.

Selected clips

Instructors may show specific clips from any number of series over a semester. This technique is in some ways the lowest cost method of incorporating television series into the classroom, and it allows for instructors to draw on some of the most relevant scenes of a range of series over the course of a term. These short segments can easily be added to existing lesson plans for a session. Students often find video clips engaging, especially in an in-person environment when it represents a clearer shift in mode of instruction, and the use of relevant video clips can make a concept more memorable.

When showing a clip, the instructor should first introduce the concept under study. Typically, the clip (indirectly) references an element of a reading that was supposed to be prepared for the session. The clip itself acts as an illustration of the concept to reinforce the instruction. After showing the clip, the instructor can summarise takeaways in the context of what they just watched. This can either be scheduled at the beginning of the class to allow for a low-threshold entry into the topic or at the end of the class to recap the contents in a fictionalised narrative frame. If a show is introduced for the first time, then the instructor needs to briefly introduce the scene and the roles of relevant characters prior to airing the clip. Context should be streamlined, however, to only the most essential points to understand the scene. In many ways, this is similar to the way an instructor might show a clip of a news program or documentary, but it is important that the instructor provides more context for the characters and the plot than they might otherwise have to for a nonfiction clip. Given the increasing accessibility of international series, instructors can ask students if any of them have already seen the series. If any have, instructors can ask the students to share a (very) brief overall synopsis of the main characters and storyline as well as their impressions of the series. This can help make the exercise more interactive.



In a European politics course, there are myriad shows with clips that can improve students' understanding of comparative politics concepts. We discuss four illustrations here in more detail. Table 1, above, provides a systematic overview of television series about European politics with further suggestions.

Yes, Minister is a British political satire that aired on the BBC in the 1980s. The series follows the career of British cabinet minister Jim Hacker, head of the fictional Department of Administrative Affairs, and depicts his struggles to exert authority against a self-confident British Civil Service. The recurring conflicts between Hacker and his Permanent Secretary, Sir Humphrey Appleby, represent the inextricable tension between democratically accountable politicians and a bureaucracy focused on continuity and observation of existing rules. For sessions on cabinet governance in a parliamentary system (e.g., Müller and Strøm 2003) we employ a clip from Season 1, Episode 2 (0:44–2:44) in class, where the newly appointed Hacker struggles to define his ministerial role (“The Official Visit” 1980). This clip illustrates the complexity of bureaucratic language as well as the ways that certain tasks are functionally delegated to the bureaucracy, resembling the actual organisation of ministries. The humorous explanation of the two variations of a departmental reply (“‘under consideration’ means we’ve lost the file; ‘under active consideration’ means we’re trying to find it”) aptly fits with negative stereotypes of public administration and typically generates laughter from the class. Considine’s (2006) discussion of using *Yes, Minister* for teaching finds that humor is an important factor that greatly increases the engagement and interest of students, especially for teaching about public administration.

Baron Noir is a production by the French premium network Canal+. It is the story of a French president-to-be and his friend, the mayor of a small French city. Politics is portrayed as a dirty game, where protagonists resort to illegal strategies (e.g., corruption, manipulating votes) to achieve their goals and advance their careers. The show illuminates the role of political parties in a multi-level setting where parties create networks between European, national, regional, and local levels. A clip from Episode 7 in the first season (6:38–9:40), in which the President proposes reforming EU treaties to avoid fiscal sanctions (“Pianoforte” 2016), can function as a prompt to discuss the role of the president in the French semi-presidential system, tensions between national sovereignty and supranational authority, democratic legitimacy in the European Union, and diverging conceptions of fiscal policy.

Derry Girls, a British sitcom that originally aired on Channel 4, examines the Troubles in early 1990s Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland. The first episode of Season 2 illustrates organised attempts towards Catholic-Protestant unity among youths (“Across the Barricade” 2019). Near the middle of the episode, the characters are prompted to come up with similarities between Catholics and Protestants; instead, they are only able to come up with progressively more absurd differences. The clip effectively and humorously illustrates the cultural chasms that made resolving the Troubles so difficult.

Weissensee is a German drama following an elite family with ties to the Stasi leadership in 1980s East Germany. Episode 1 of Season 3 shows the fall of the Berlin Wall from several perspectives in the final ten minutes: from inside the Stasi, from both regime loyalists and dissidents watching on television, and from East



Berliners at the Wall itself (“Eine Nacht im November” 2015). The multiple perspectives not only give students insight into different views of the fall of communism but also depict the sudden nature of the events of 9 November 1989. Students might require a brief introduction to the different groups (which apartment has dissidents watching the news versus the Stasi-affiliated family), but the episode offers a great deal of clarity on characters’ political perspectives even for those without background knowledge of previous storylines and relationships. Students can be asked about the reactions of the different groups to assess characters’ mindsets and perspectives on the East German regime. In our teaching, we have also asked students to reflect on the momentousness of such a change and to try to talk about what that would be like, as well as to try to compare it to similar major shifts they might have experienced in their own lives.

Single episodes

If instructors want to illustrate one specific concept in detail, they could devote a class session to watching an episode as a group. Even if serialised storylines span several episodes, there are often elements of the story that conclude in one episode. The students are therefore presented with a persuasive narrative that incorporates an element of comparative politics. The instructor can work with the class to relate the fictional representation to the relevant topics from their textbook. As a practical consideration, instructors must consider the length of their class period. Some modern episodic dramas have longer runtimes, which might extend beyond a 50-minute class period. As with clips, instructors should introduce relevant characters and settings to maximise student comprehension. Additionally, instructors should engage students in discussion afterward, to help students understand the relevant conclusions. Two suggested episodes are discussed below:

The Thick of It is a BBC production (4 seasons, 2005–2012), written by Armando Iannucci. The mockumentary format suggests that the audience is following an otherwise hidden part of the political process. The series satirises the Tony Blair-led New Labour government in the UK (1997–2007), especially Blair’s strategy emphasising political communication to “sell politics” (Heffernan 2006). The show offers insights into the internal workings of a cabinet in the Westminster system, highlighting the hierarchical relationship between the Prime Minister and other ministers. The first episode of the first season starts with a forced ministerial resignation (“I drafted you a letter of resignation”), followed by an exploration of complex internal cabinet dynamics from the perspective of his replacement (“Series 1—Episode 1” 2005). This episode is especially useful in explaining the weights of different portfolios within a cabinet and the special importance of cross-cutting policy domains.

Parlement (2 seasons, 2020–) is a multinational satire set in the European Parliament. The main protagonist, Samy, starts as a new employee of a French parliamentarian, who lacks understanding of how politics in the EP works. However, underneath this somewhat populist portrayal and the replication of certain national stereotypes (especially concerning UK representatives in favour of Brexit), the show contains accurate elements of a supranational, multilingual parliament (VoteWatch.



eu 2020). The underbelly of the Parliament is in general depicted as well-meaning and efficient in earnestly organising a democratic, transnational institution. Screening the first episode in class allows students to walk in Samy's shoes while he tries to understand the complex rules of the Parliament ("J'ai jamais eu de rapports" 2020), which is especially useful for students that have limited prior knowledge of the EU. This allows for discussion about the evolution of the European Parliament and the difficulties in creating an international organisation that is more than a federation of sovereign states.

Series as text

Integrating a complete series into a course as text requires significant planning on the part of the instructor. For short-run series or miniseries, this could be done as a homework assignment for class discussion or a written assignment. For longer-run shows, the course would fundamentally need to be designed around the series itself (see Chaddha and Wilson 2010). Instructors would need to deeply understand the series to find ways to relate it to the majority of the concepts that they want to teach in the course. They might need to make tradeoffs, either minimising or excluding topics they might otherwise want to cover that might not fit in a course based on a television series as a primary text. To ensure that students follow the material and connect to relevant concepts, instructors should prepare a character guide so students understand the relations and interactions.

Given these requirements, instructors must carefully consider if a particular series is worth this degree of emphasis, in the particular context of their learning objectives for the course. We believe there are series that one can indeed devise a political science course around, but this number is likely to be fairly limited, and the decision should not be taken lightly. Wilson and Chaddha's (2010) discussion of *The Wire* as a primary text is one informative way to consider this question. Their course focused on urban inequality, an issue that *The Wire* approaches extensively through a variety of themes, characters, and plotlines. However, even a critically acclaimed show about a relevant topic may not offer sufficient range to design a course around. An in-between measure, which we advocate for in our example, uses several episodes of the same series according to topical fit but does not assign the entire series as a text.² This allows students to gain some advantages of watching a whole series (building understanding of characters and their relationships over time) without requiring that every episode fit neatly within the pedagogical goals of a broader course.

In the context of an introductory European politics course, *Borgen*, a Danish parliamentary drama that originally aired on the national public channel DR1 from 2010 to 2013, is the series that best lends itself to use throughout the semester. A revived fourth season, co-produced by Netflix and DR, aired in Spring 2022. The authors use *Borgen* in teaching, and our subsequent discussion depicts our thinking about how we would extend this use over the course of a term. *Borgen* follows Birgitte Nyborg, the leader of a centrist party heading

² For discussion of similar strategies in high school curricula, see Journell and Buchanan (2012).



Table 2 Relevant pedagogical themes in *Borgen*

Theme	Episode
Agriculture	S3x04
Campaigns and elections	S1x01, S3x10
Changes in the political left	S2x03
Coalitions	S1x02, S3x10
Corruption	S1x09
Ethnic minority regions	S1x04
European Union	S2x02
Far right	S2x06
Gender equality	S1x05 (Quotas), S2x10 (Conceptual)
Immigrant integration	S3x03
Military interventions/peacekeeping	S2x01
New party formation	S3x02
Party leadership and membership	S3x01
Privacy and surveillance	S1x07
Relations with authoritarian states	S1x06
Relations with developing countries	S2x07–08
Relations with the United States	S1x04
Sex work	S3x05
Small political parties	S3x08
Welfare state reform	S2x09

into a national election who emerges from coalition negotiations as Denmark's first female prime minister. While *Borgen* is fictional, "it represent[s] very real institutions, processes, and histories" (Baym 2017: 19). *Borgen's* compelling-yet-accurate representation of Danish politics and society is an intentional part of DR1's public service mandate as a public broadcaster (Chow et al. 2020b). Over the course of the series, *Borgen* deals with the intricacies of parliamentary democracy, explores the role of the media in politics, and examines double standards for women. While some stories stretch across multiple episodes, many topics are covered in an episode-of-the-week format convenient for highlighting concepts in the classroom. The fourth season deals with many important themes in political science (great power relations, coalition dynamics, decolonisation, climate change), but it is more serialised in nature. This makes it somewhat less well-suited for classroom usage, though certain clips could still be useful.

While *Borgen* covers a wide range of topics (see Table 2 below), as Dyson notes, at its core it is about the politics of compromise inherent in any functioning parliamentary democracy (2019: 59–71). Political issues are contextualised inside of parliamentary debates, where coalitional dynamics, media coverage, and civil society dictate what outcomes are truly possible. This is especially valuable for teaching European (or comparative) politics to U.S.-based students, as



the inherent logics behind politics and policymaking in parliamentary systems fundamentally differ from presidential systems. By viewing many substantive issues through this lens, this systemic difference is continually reinforced over the semester.

Example 1: logics of multi-party systems and coalition formation

Courses on European politics typically include a section about elections. The dominant electoral system in Europe is proportional representation, which in turn tends to lead to multi-party systems. The presence of multiple groups in a parliament implies the emergence of coalition politics, where political parties negotiate to build a majority (Müller and Strøm 2003). The first two episodes of *Borgen*, focusing on a national election and subsequent negotiations, provide rich examples of parliamentary institutions in action. Moreover, they serve as a clear introduction to the characters and storylines in the show, making it easier to refer to episodes later on in the semester. Season 1, Episode 2 in particular extensively examines coalition formation (“Tæl til 90” 2010). First, the story introduces students to the characteristics of multi-party systems, as the fictional party system in *Borgen* encompasses the party families usually present in European party systems. For instance, instructors can use the *Borgen* party system to illustrate Lipset and Rokkan’s (1967) cleavage model that explains the current structure of party competition based on historical societal conflicts. Parties’ policy positions are the foundation for talks about forming a government where parties gauge their differences and similarities (Martin and Stevenson 2001). Students could be asked to note examples of policy differences that appear in the episode and tie them back to the placement of the parties in a two-dimensional policy space discussed beforehand. Students learn how policy distances connote possibilities for parties to cooperate.

Borgen can also help to illustrate the arithmetic of coalition formation, including differences between minimal-winning and oversize coalitions. *Borgen*’s Wikipedia entry contains a figure with the fictional seat distribution that functions as the base for coalition talks. One student exercise would be to discuss the different numerical models from coalition theory and predict the most likely outcome (with and without taking policy issues into account). After watching the episode, instructors can further teach students about situational issues that affect government formation in a less obvious way (e.g., incumbency, leadership change).

The authors have also used the initial episodes of *Borgen* in the classroom to help educate students about the strategic elements of coalition formation before students participated in an active learning exercise. In this exercise, groups of students were assigned roles as members of a political party in a given European country. They researched that party’s goals and positions before being given a simulated election result. Students then used the seat distribution from this election result to negotiate to form a government, including ministerial portfolios and basic compromises for a joint manifesto. *Borgen* provides a useful shorthand and helps students quickly understand the different strategies that might be available to them as they try to accomplish their parties’ goals.



Example 2: role of gender in politics

Borgen also offers a detailed study of the role of gender in politics and political communication, and it is well suited for examining the biases that women in politics face. Boaz (2020), in her discussion of the pedagogical value of fiction in teaching gender and international politics, notes the ways that fictional series can powerfully illustrate biases as well as enable classroom discussion of issues pertaining to gender. Discussion of the implicit and explicit biases that Nyborg faces is crucial throughout the series and is present from the first episode, in which there is considerable discussion about what she can wear to a pre-election debate (see Bell and Sinclair 2016 for more thorough discussion). Within the *Borgen* universe, the media also frequently comments on Nyborg's struggles to balance family and the Prime Ministership and does so through an inherently gendered lens (Hallsworth 2021: 131–162). To that end, nearly any episode of the series could be used to inform a discussion about gender and politics. However, two in particular could be selected. In Episode 5 of the first season (“Mænd der elsker kvinder” 2010), there is an explicit discussion around gender quotas, one of the most common institutions designed to increase the involvement of women in politics. Another option could be the finale of *Borgen*'s second season (“En bemærkning af særlig karakter” 2011), which strays from the series' typical issue-of-the-week format and has a clearer reflection on, and discussion of, being a woman in politics. This could be paired with a discussion of an academic text, like Aaldering and van der Pas' (2020) analysis of the gender-differentiated media depictions of leadership styles of Dutch politicians. *Borgen* is especially well suited to discussion of gender and politics, because it has a combination of both explicit and implicit discussions of gender—both within the fictional context of the series itself and as a representation to the audience in our own reality—which allows instructors considerable flexibility in picking the optimal entry point for their classroom.

A full range of substantive topics that might be appropriate for an introductory European politics course is shown in Table 2 below, with reference to specific episodes.³ We do not suggest that instructors cover all of these; instead, we offer this table as shorthand for instructors seeking to cover specific topics in the course of their semester using a single series to keep students engaged in both material and a single dramatic narrative.

If time in class is not available for screening an entire episode, another option could be to assign students to watch particular episodes out of class and to write short reflections. If episodes are assigned to be watched outside of class, it is important for instructors to remember that not all students have access to Netflix, the current streaming location for *Borgen* in most countries. Instructors should ensure that students have access to the materials by either working with their university library to make the DVDs available for short-term loan and/or by hosting an on-campus classroom screening of the episode(s) outside of normal class hours.

³ Table 2 differs slightly from Boukes et al.'s (2022) characterisation of main episodic themes, likely due to differing analytical versus pedagogical purposes.



Conclusion

There are more high-quality television series than ever, and there is far greater distribution of international TV series. Students are easier to reach with audio-visual materials coming from popular culture; picking up on shows they might be familiar with disburdens the process of introducing knowledge about foreign states and their political systems. Together, this creates a rich opportunity for instructors to use television series to aid in the comparative politics classroom. Because the application is less intuitive than with films, we outline three techniques that instructors can use: showing clips, screening full episodes, and incorporating a series as text. We further offer suggestions of how each technique can be implemented and illustrate this implementation in the context of an introductory European politics course.

In our own teaching, we find that students are responsive to the use of fictional series and are noticeably engaged. TV series are effective at absorbing students in narratives that engage them on an emotional level, and students actively participate in discussion about them. In online settings, students often respond to the clips in the chat proportionally more than they do to other types of lecturing or class activities. We find that satire may be an especially effective technique, using humour to create an accessible entry point to contemporary and historical political concepts. We also find that the use of TV series can draw in students that are otherwise more difficult to reach, and the effective use of fictionalised media as pedagogy could be a useful tool for reducing the teaching burden of simultaneously trying to reach high-achieving students and students who are struggling. In evaluations, students have directly pointed to our use of television series as a major factor that has contributed to their learning.

While our examples presented in this paper draw on European politics, the methods outlined could easily extend to other regions as well, such as (but not limited to) Latin America (Chile's *El Reemplazante*) (Cabello 2021), South Asia (India's *Powder*) (Mehta 2020), East Asia (South Korea's *City Hall*) (Jo and Park 2012), and Oceania (Australia's *The Hollowmen*) (Weinert and Tranter 2020). Further research can develop a similar, comprehensive resource for other regions, similar to Table 1.

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