

As the protagonist of *Parks and Recreation* and city councilwoman of Pawnee, Indiana, Leslie Knope has to navigate the messy world of politics. Whether she's trying to extend public pool hours or keep the local video store open, she always runs into conflicts with her fellow government employees. While these are minor issues in a small town, they mirror the larger issues that the federal government faces. There are many instances in which the show makes a statement about the inefficiency and corruption of government. However, despite all the obstacles that Leslie faces, her determination ensures that she triumphs in the end. While the satire of *Parks and Recreation* may decrease external political efficacy, Leslie's enthusiasm for government could increase civic engagement.

A number of studies have been done to examine how *The Daily Show* impacts the viewer's trust in government and political participation. Baumgartner and Morris (2006) concluded that watching *The Daily Show* results in more negative candidate evaluations and increased cynicism towards the government and the news media. Jon Stewart regularly makes fun of government officials, which causes viewers to doubt whether the government is doing its job properly. This leads to decreased external political efficacy, or faith in the government.

On *Parks and Rec*, the character that holds the most cynical attitude towards government is Ron Swanson. He believes that all government is a waste of taxpayer money. In fact, he refers to the government as "a greedy piglet that suckles on the taxpayer's teat until they have sore, chapped nipples." He's very apathetic when it comes to his job and rarely puts in any effort, except for when he's cutting spending. Hearing his extremely anti-government thoughts may

affect the viewer's opinions, leading them to think that the government is incapable of getting anything done. However, despite their opposing ideologies, Leslie and Ron still remain friends and respect each other. This offers some hope for bipartisanship within the government, something that Congress is struggling with right now.

Although this Baumgartner and Morris seem to state that political comedy can have a negative influence, other studies have challenged this finding. For example, Cao and Brewer (2008) found that exposure to political comedy shows was positively related to political participation. There are also studies that found positive political effects of late-night comedy in general, including late-night talk shows. Hoffman and Thomson (2009) determined that political efficacy positively mediates the relationship between late-night TV viewing and civic participation. Becker (2011) found that watching late-night comedy has a positive effect both on trust in government and internal political efficacy, which is the belief in one's own ability to understand and participate in politics. This means that late-night comedy can increase internal political efficacy, which can increase civic participation.

When Leslie runs for City Council, she's considered the underdog. Her main opponent is Bobby Newport, who is completely incompetent but also belongs to the richest family in town. Although it's clear he would do a horrible job, his skilled campaign manager and nice guy persona make him the favorite to win. After a hard-fought campaign with help from her friends at the Parks department, Leslie manages to win the election against all odds. If she had lost, not only would it have been depressing, but it would have shown that a candidate could basically buy himself the win. Leslie's victory is inspiring, it shows that anyone can run for office and even win if they are passionate and hard-working. During her debate against Bobby, Leslie says,

“As your city councilor, I will make sure that no one takes advantage of Pawnee. This is my home, you are my family, and I promise you I’m not going anywhere.” That’s the kind of candidate the viewer wants to see succeed, and Leslie gets the happy ending she deserves.

Once Leslie is on City Council, she finds a new nemesis in Councilman Jamm. He constantly challenges Leslie, and is always trying to think of a way to benefit himself. For example, he tells Leslie that he will only vote yes on her bill if she switches offices with him, because she has a nicer office. Leslie gives in, because she wants her bill to pass to help improve the city. When Jamm is the swing vote for deciding whether a mini-golf course will close or not, Leslie has to treat him to a game of mini-golf and snow cones to convince him to vote to keep it open. Also, Leslie wants to build a park on an empty lot, while Jamm wants to open a restaurant chain. When Leslie plans a gala to raise money for the park, Jamm schedules an emergency response drill on the same day. Jamm is conniving and selfish, perfectly fitting the stereotype of a sleazy politician. But Leslie always comes out on top, figuring out a way to beat Jamm while still keeping her strong moral code. This makes Jamm look foolish and shows that scheming doesn’t pay off.

There are always going to be people like Ron Swanson, Bobby Newport, and Councilman Jamm playing a role in government. But the good news is there are always going to be Leslie Knope too. While *Parks and Recreation* may comment on the government’s flaws, it ultimately sends a hopeful message because Leslie always prevails. This assures the audience that there are some good-hearted people working for the government that truly have its citizens in mind. Leslie is the beacon of optimism that gives the show a positive tone, despite its satiric

nature. Most importantly, she makes the viewers think that if Leslie can make a difference, then maybe they can as well.

Works Cited

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