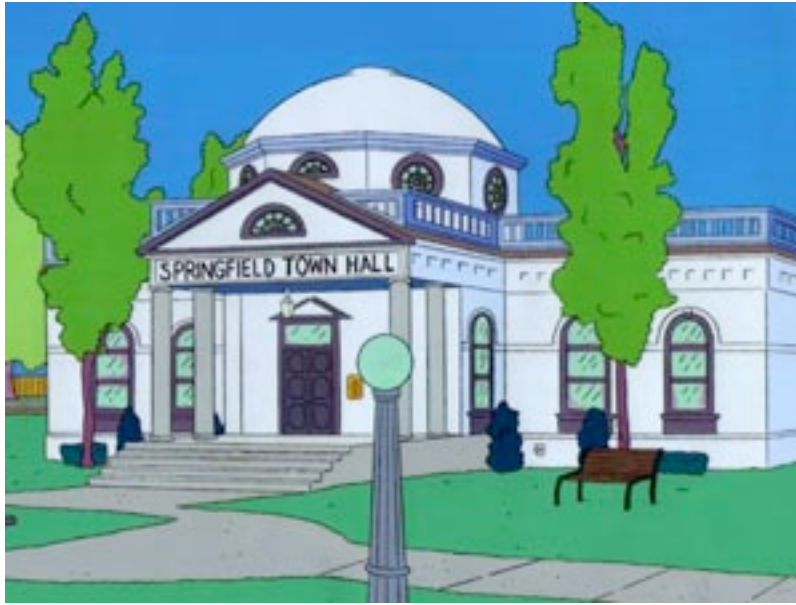


## **Popular Democracy and Citizen Engagement: Lessons from Springfield**



Fran Moran, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
Political Science Department  
New Jersey City University  
2039 Kennedy Boulevard  
Jersey City, NJ 07305

phone: 201-200-3259  
email: [fmoran@njcu.edu](mailto:fmoran@njcu.edu)

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A 2006 survey conducted by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (Circle) reported that “Most young Americans are misinformed about important aspects of politics and current events. For example, 53% are unaware that only citizens can vote in federal elections; only 30% can correctly name at least one member of the President’s Cabinet (and of those, 82% name Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice); and only 34% know that the United States has a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (compared to 27% who know that France holds a seat)” (Lopez, et. al., p. 4). Another 2006 survey, this from the McCormack Foundation, found that “only about one in four Americans (28 percent) is able to name more than one of the five fundamental freedoms guaranteed to them by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Yet when it comes to knowledge of popular culture, Americans are considerably more tuned in. For example, almost twice as many Americans (52 percent) can name at least two members of ‘The Simpsons’ cartoon family. And while more than one in five (22 percent) Americans can name all five of the fictional Simpsons family members – Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa and Maggie – just one in 1,000 people surveyed (.1 percent) was able to name all five freedoms guaranteed under the First Amendment.” Against this backdrop of fairly widespread political ignorance, we have also seen a steady increase in political apathy (e.g, voter turnout,<sup>1</sup> party registration, daily news consumption, and interest group involvement), particularly for younger adults. Indeed the overall decline in political participation may itself be symptomatic of a broader decline in civic engagement (see Putnam, 2000). The negative impact of such nonparticipation on the prospects of democracy, and the possibility that the low level of political knowledge and civic engagement may help explain the low levels of political participation, has led for sustained and organized calls to revise public education to include more direct requirements and opportunities for students to become more involved in their communities (see, for instance Colby, 2008; Dey, 2009; Hersch, 2005; Hollister, 2008; Swaner, 2005; Thomas 2008).

In the following discussion I argue that the city of Springfield, the fictional hometown of *The Simpsons*, is a viable and instructional model for understanding both the opportunities of, and the obstacles to, political participation and civic engagement. And as the survey data above indicates, using *The Simpsons* as a pedagogical tool seems to make some sense since the series may have more resonance with a disengaged public. I begin first with an overview of the show and develop the intellectual rationale for this enterprise. I then develop the political culture of Springfield, political socialization in

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<sup>1</sup> If calculated by the voting age population data favored by the US Bureau of the Census. If calculated using the voting eligible population (see McDonald; McDonald and Popkin) the rate may not have declined but the data still show a turnout rate well below those reported in other developed democratic systems (see Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance). We also need to add a qualifier for the historic 2008 presidential election, where youth voting hit 49%, the highest total since the 1972 election (the first time 18 year olds were eligible to vote). Voting in the two states with state-wide elections – Virginia and New Jersey – seems to have retreated to pre-2008 levels. In New Jersey, for instance, youth voting dropped 7% (falling from 26% to 19%) comparing the 1997 gubernatorial race to the 2009 election, see the data from Circle, 2009).

Springfield, and conclude with a study of the results of that socialization within that political culture.

### **The Obligatory Introduction to *The Simpsons***

This fall marked the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> season of *The Simpsons*. It is now the longest running animated series, the longest running situation comedy, and the longest running prime time show in American television history. In addition to its weekly run on the Fox Network, the show is in 6 day syndication, sometimes several times a day, in media markets throughout the country. It has become a marketing juggernaut, producing a seemingly endless supply of clothing, bric-a-brac, toys, video games, music cds, books, and a movie. Most students attending college at the moment have literally grown up with the show, and it might be the case that the survey data I cited above speaks more to the pervasive spread of *The Simpsons* through American popular culture than to the relative political ignorance of individuals within that culture. The show's popularity has been matched with critical acclaim, as the actors, writers, and directors have been nominated for 58 Emmy awards, including 5 this year, (it has won 24 Emmys to date). The show has also become a remarkably rich source of material for a variety of academic disciplines. Scholars in Media Arts (Albini, 2004; Gray, 2005); Philosophy (Irwin, Conard and Skoble, 2001; Keslowitz 2006), Political Theory (Thoms, 2005; Woodcock, 2006, Cantor, 1999), Psychology (Brown and Logan, 2006), Religion (Hett, 2008; Pinsky 2001), "Science" (Halpern, 2007), and Sociology (Delaney, 2008; Fuchs 2008) have all found useful ideas lurking in the cartoon.



What I take this to mean is that the case for using *The Simpsons*, to help advance an understanding of civic engagement is not as farfetched as may initially appear. First, the show is clearly robust enough to sustain an academic examination. Second, politics has been central to the show from the beginning. Season One included three episodes which have a political component to them – “Homer’s Odyssey” (7G03), in which Homer, fired from the nuclear plant, becomes Springfield’s safety inspector and eventually organizes a protest rally against his former employer; “Bart the General” (7G05) in which Bart molds a military force of his picked-upon peers to strike

back at their bully tormentors; and “The Telltale Head” (7G07) in which Bart, attempting to impress aforementioned bullies, vandalizes the head of town founder, Jebediah Springfield and thereby reawakens a sense of civic pride among the Springfield citizenry. In its 20 year run, 34 of the 43 men who have served as president have made appearances (either as characters or in reference) on the show (see Halas);<sup>2</sup> and several heads of state, real and fictional, including an actual voiced appearance by then sitting prime minister Tony Blair (“The Regina Monologues,” [EABF22]) have also made appearances. The show has also featured plots with quintessentially political elements like elections for offices at the local (numerous Quimby elections), state (the classic “Two Cars in Every Garage and Three Eyes on Every Fish,” [7501]), and national level (notably in 1996’s “Treehouse of Horror VII” 4F02 segment where space aliens Kang and Kodos abduct and assume the form of Bob Dole and Bill Clinton, and again more recently in “Treehouse of Horror XIX [KABF16] when Homer is slain by a voting machine intent on preventing him from voting for Obama). And of course, the criminal justice system (police, courts, and jail) and the judicial system (civil and criminal) have been recurring features throughout the show’s run. The political dimension itself should have been expected since the show’s creator -- Matt Groening -- made his comedic mark through his “Life in Hell” comic strip, a weekly strip that ran in alternative and left-leaning newspapers and magazines (eg., *The Village Voice*, *In These Times*) at the time he was contacted by James L. Brooks to generate shorts for the Tracy Ullman Show. Finally, *The Simpsons* can work pedagogically because even those students who may not be fans of the show are at least familiar with its basics (characters, gags, vernacular, and probably a few plot lines) in a way in which they are not with classics of literary fiction or political theory.

Before we turn to our study of Springfield as a model for civic engagement, I should note some potential limitations of this approach and clarify what I am not going to do. *The Simpsons*, is, of course, a collaborative enterprise involving directors, producers, writers, animators, actors, and corporate sponsorship, so in my references to the show I mean that group composite, the episodes individually or the series collectively. I have not taken the time to trace out whether the themes I’ll be addressing can be attributed to particular writers/directors/producers (the actors have remained consistent through the 20 years; the writing, directing, and producing have changed hands several times). Having the 30 minute episode as the basic unit in this collaborative and evolving enterprise also creates difficulties in that the 20 year run, while comprising a significant body of work, was not necessarily intended to be viewed as a cohesive whole. This is especially true for an animated series, where the normal temporal constraints (i.e., the aging process) which can provide some directional momentum to a show are absent. Bart and Lisa are perpetually 10 and 8, respectively, and they’ve been in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grades for 20 years.

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<sup>2</sup> President G.H.W. Bush is the only president, indeed the only politician, to make a “non animated” appearance. In “Stark Raving Dad” (7F24) the family is shown huddled in front of the television watching actual footage of the President delivering a speech where he states that he hoped to make the country more like the Waltons and less like the Simpsons. After hearing that, Bart retorts with “Hey, we’re just like the Waltons. We’re praying for an end to the Depression, too.” References to the episodes are by title and series production sequencing code.

Obviously, continuity issues are likely to surface as new writers come in and revisit the same basic comic set up. Perhaps the clearest example of continuity breakdown occurred in “The Principal and the Pauper” [4F23] where we learn that the man we knew as Principal Skinner is an imposter. That being said, *The Simpsons* has been reasonably consistent in its use of Springfield, in terms of its history, urban design, and geography so that we can reconstruct the elements of its political culture and socialization process with some confidence. So while the logistical realities of the creative enterprise and continuity issues may be problematic, I do not see either as insurmountable objections. It is partly for this reason, though, that I am not going to discuss the politics of *The Simpsons* in ideological or partisan terms. Also, I am not going to do much to introduce the characters and basic comedic situation of the show and instead will assume that readers of this essay are already familiar with both, and that means we can move directly to a discussion of the political culture of Springfield, the base of the show.

## II. A Noble Spirit Embiggens the Smallest Man



The opening credit sequence for the show (both the classic and the new one introduced for the current season) is a brilliant piece of animation and storytelling. In a mere 68 seconds (full length intro) or 49 seconds (the typical syndication length to allow for additional commercial time), we are introduced to the main characters (the Simpsons family), most of the supporting cast, and the city of Springfield itself. As the “camera” follows Homer, Bart, Lisa, Marge and Maggie from their various destinations (the nuclear plant, school, the grocery) we career across the town and one of the really eye catching features of the sequence is how alive the city seems. The sidewalks are

full of pedestrians, the park is full of revelers, the stores are full of shoppers so that the image we get in just this short opening sequence is that of a vibrant city with what appears to be a healthy economy and civic life. In many ways the sequence indicates that the city itself is perhaps one of the more important characters in the show.

Springfield was founded by Jedediah Obadiah Zachariah Jedediah Springfield, a co-leader (with Shelbyville Manhattan) of a group of settlers who left Maryland in 1796 having misinterpreted a Bible passage (“Lisa the Iconoclast,” [3F13]) and who head west to search for New Sodom. When Jedediah proclaims that he has found the place to start the town, the group splinters in a dispute between the two leaders over the basic principles to govern the new town:

**Jebediah:** "People, our search is over. On this site we shall build a new town, where we can worship freely, govern justly, and grow vast fields of hemp for making rope and blankets."

**Shelbyville Manhattan:** "Yes, and marry our cousins."

**Jebediah:** "What are you talking about Shelbyville? Why would we want to marry our cousins?"

**Shelbyville Manhattan:** "Cause they're so attractive. I thought that was the whole point of this journey."

**Jebediah:** "Absolutely not."

**Shelbyville Manhattan:** "I tell you I won't live in a town that robs men of the right to marry their cousins."

**Jebediah:** "Well then, we'll form our own town. Who will come and live a life devoted to chastity, abstinence, and a flavorless mush I call rootmarm?" ("Lisa the Iconoclast," [3F13]).

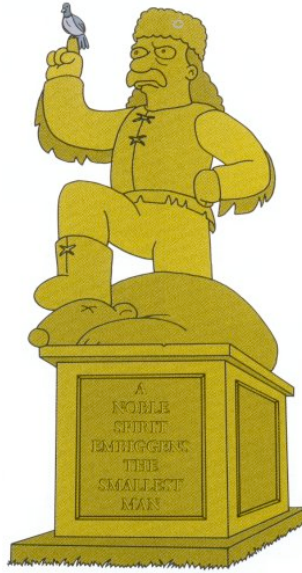
Following the dispute, the two men part company each leading a band of settlers to establish their own towns; Springfield and Shelbyville respectively. The Springfield town charter was adopted shortly thereafter (in 1797, see "The Homer They Fall," [4F03]) and key parts of it continued to be in effect until well into the twentieth century (for instance, the provision that "Should the mayor abdicate, a council of learned citizens shall rule in his stead" which led to a brief interlude of governance by the members of the local Mensa chapter ("They Saved Lisa's Brain," [AABF18]). They also planted a lemon tree to commemorate the event ("the lemon being the sweetest fruit available at the time," see "Lemon of Troy," [2F22]), so that we have a "town tree" and a "town fruit," both complete with a mythic connection to the town's origins. Indeed, the founding tale is replete with its own mythology and heroism (for instance, Jebediah was said to have killed a bear<sup>3</sup> with his bare hands and tamed a buffalo, ["Lisa the Iconoclast"]). Each of these events are then commemorated in the town: the town square has a statue depicting Jebediah astride a dead bear, and the town motto -- "A noble spirit embiggens the smallest man" -- is the reply that Jebediah gives to a young boy who asks him how he can ever hope to achieve Jebediah's greatness. The phrase in turn is the foundation for the town song, "Embiggen his Soul" ("Lisa the Iconoclast). Indeed, the mythology is such that Jebediah is credited with founding the city's signature holiday, Whacking Day, on 10 May 1775 ("Whacking Day," [9F18]), a day in which snakes are driven to the town

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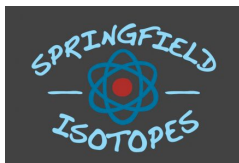
<sup>3</sup> The Jebediah mythology is extensive. In addition to playing a role in the American revolution -- he attempted to kill George Washington at Trenton -- Jebediah is also held to have protected the settlers during the Great Blizzard of 1848; and he was said to have killed the bear in 1838. See "The Telltale Head," [7G07].

center and struck with large sticks. This celebration, too, is full of ritual (special tools, song, and lore) that brings the whole town together.<sup>4</sup>

As noted above, and as befits a larger than life figure, Jebediah is commemorated in the town with a large bronze statue in the city center (depicting his triumph over the bear), his artifacts are kept on display in the town's historical museum ("Lisa the Iconoclast"), and his log cabin was preserved as a historic site (although the original was destroyed when the town's oldest tree fell on it, and has since been restored, see "Marge vs. the Monorail," [9F10]). To help solidify the significance of Jebediah, the town also honors him with an annual Founder's Day Festival (see "Lisa the Beauty Queen," [9F02]). Indeed the city maintains an Olde Springfield Towne section and Fort Sensible (see for instance, "I Married Marge," [8F10]; and "Whacking Day," [9F18]) to preserve what remains -- structurally and culturally -- of the early founding period.



In addition to celebrating its storied past, the city also includes a variety of institutions that have the potential to help bring the population together. It is home to two army bases (Fort Springfield, and Fort Fragg), a naval reserve base (Springfield US Naval Reserve), an air force base (Springfield US Air Force Base), and an armory (Springfield Armory), making it easily one of the most strategically important military sites in the US (and a testament to its congressional representative's ability to deliver the pork). There



are local adult professional and amateur sports teams -- the Springfield Isotopes (baseball), Springfield Zephyrs (amateur softball, see "Homer at the Bat," [8F13]), Springfield Atoms (professional football, "Homer Loves Flanders," [1F14]), league bowling,<sup>5</sup> as well as a full slate of youth sports (including football, hockey, and soccer).

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<sup>4</sup> Bart of all people was able to spot a discrepancy between two Jebediah tales -- Jebediah was said to be leading the charge of Fort Ticonderoga at the same time that he was said to be whacking the first snakes. Bart eventually uncovers evidence that the holiday was first celebrated in 1924 as an excuse to beat up the Irish ("Whacking Day"). Given that the holiday is of a relatively recent vintage, the ability to have the citizenry so easily buy into the Jebediah founding myth speaks volumes about either the veneration of the townspeople for its founding father or the gullibility of the population.

<sup>5</sup> As Woodcock (2006) notes, Springfield does not even suffer from the "bowling alone" problem. While there certainly is a healthy bowling community with individual keglers (Barney works at the "Bowl-a-Rama," as did Homer for a spell, and the alley is featured fairly regularly. But also see "Life on the Fast Lane" [7G11] and "Hello Gutter, Hello Fadder" [BABF02]), we also know that the town supports a strong, diverse, and apparently quite competitive bowling league, see "Team Homer," [3F10].

Beyond the sports teams, the city includes a variety of other cultural institutions, including the Springfield Film Festival, the Springfield Philharmonic, a book fair, and several museums: The Springfield Museum (“Mom and Pop Art, [AAFB15]), The Springfield Palace of Fine Arts (“Brush with Greatness,” [7F18]), The Springfield Wax Museum (“Lisa the Beauty Queen,” and “Bart of Darkness,” [1F22]), Springfield Museum of Natural History (“The Monkey Suit,” [HABF14]) to name a few.<sup>6</sup> Finally, we should note the strong religious presence in the city. Most of the main characters attend the same Christian church, The First Church of Springfield, which is affiliated with The Western Branch of American Reform Presbyteranism (for more, see Pinsky).<sup>7</sup> Attendance at the weekly services is impressive, with Reverend Lovejoy speaking to a full house every Sunday, despite his less than charismatic delivery and lapsed commitment to the calling.<sup>8</sup> So again we find the citizens of Springfield involved and engaged with their community.

No doubt readers at this point will have noticed that I have not addressed the actual government structure of Springfield, and that is because formal politics is the one area where the citizenry of Springfield seems deficient. As previously mentioned, the city continues to be governed by its 1797 town charter, as amended, and its municipal code of laws. The government today, then, has some elements of its 18th century pedigree, that is, we have a mayor-council form, with some bureaucratic agencies (e.g., sanitation, police), but with a significant amount of decision-making power left in the hands of the citizenry through the vehicle of the town meeting and proposition process. For the length of the show’s run, the municipal government has been under the control of Mayor Diamond Joe Quimby (with the lone exceptions being the rule by the Mensa clique when Quimby fled the



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<sup>6</sup> Lisa of course derides the town for its low brow ventures, and there are legion examples of that as well, including a Museum of Barnyard Oddities, the Stamp Museum, the Museum of Television and TV. In a letter to the editor she notes: “We are a town of low-brows, no-brows, and ignorami. We have eight malls, but no symphony. Thirty-two bars, but no alternative theater. Thirteen stores that begin with, ‘Le Sex.’ I write this letter not to nag or whine, but to prod. We \*can\* better ourselves!” (“They Saved Lisa’s Brain,” [AABF18]).

<sup>7</sup> To be sure, other religions are also represented in the show, most notably Krusty the Clown’s Judaism, Apu’s Hinduism, Lisa’s Buddhism, and occasional references to the Catholic church (although none of the characters appear to be Catholic), Unitarians, and Episcopalians. The show also included the brief appearance of the “Movementarian” cult which, for a short while, managed to claim most of the town as its adherents. Also, 2008’s “Mypods and Broomsticks” (KABF20) episode was the first to introduce a Muslim family into the town.

<sup>8</sup> Lovejoy relates that his enthusiasm for the profession waned in the face of Flanders’ incessant pestering for advice (“In Marge We Trust,” [4F18]. And even God reveals to Homer that He was disappointed in the Reverend (see “Homer the Heretic,” [9F01]).



city to avoid what he erroneously believed to be a looming criminal indictment, and a short period when Sideshow Bob held office before being removed for rigging the election (with the help of the Springfield Republican Party, see “Sideshow Bob Roberts,” 2F02). Despite the generally high attendance at community events -- the chili cook off, the food festival, neighborhood yard sales, regular town hall fora, parent-teacher association meetings, etc. -- the citizenry of Springfield is otherwise detached from formal politics. Indeed, when president G.H.W. Bush decides to settle in Springfield after leaving office, he remarks that one of the reasons for doing so was that it boasts the lowest voter turnout in America (“Two Bad Neighbors,” 3F09); and the debates preceding Sideshow Bob’s mayoral victory were sponsored by Springfield’s League of Uninformed Voters (“Sideshow Bob Roberts”).<sup>9</sup> Part of the reason for this may lie with the quality of the political institutions at the local level. After all, the mayor’s seal is emblazoned with *Corruptus in Extremis* (“Marge in Chains,” 9F20); and its courthouse motto is “Liberty and Justice for Most” (see “Barting Over,” EABF05). To cite just one example of the depth of the mayor’s corruption, Quimby cuts a deal with Fat Tony and the mob to provide milk for school lunches, and we eventually learn that the milk was of murine rather than bovine origin (“Mayored to the Mob,” AABF05). It is not difficult to surmise that for the citizens of Springfield, the two main features of their political life -- pervasive and largely open political corruption at the local government level combined with significant elements of direct democracy, simultaneously sour many of them on politicians and governing institutions (so voter turnout is low) and provide hope that the direct democracy channels can overcome the venality of the political establishment (so town hall meetings are packed).

### III. This town is a part of us all

Clearly, civic engagement of the sort we see in Springfield does not happen by accident, and, as we would expect, the city seems to invest in or have otherwise developed, a fairly extensive system for political socialization. As Marge reminds her son, “Bart, you have roots in this town and you ought to show respect for it. This town is a part of us all” (“Lemon of Troy,” 2F22). From the preceding discussion, we can see that one of the more distinctive features of Springfield is that nearly every public building bears the town’s name. In this way, the townspeople are at least subconsciously reminding themselves of their identity as a people whenever they talk about or move about the city. It becomes difficult to escape the steady reminders of locale and identity. This identity is also reinforced through the use of in-group/out-group oppositional definition.

Throughout the series, we have seen Springfield foster and maintain rivalries (sometimes friendly, sometimes less so) with its neighboring towns,

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<sup>9</sup> That episode is also the only reference to a town council in the show’s history; so if we have a mayor-council, it is a very weak council indeed.

Shelbyville and Ogdenville. The key rivalry is the one with Shelbyville and, as we saw in the founding story discussed above, the rivalry is part of the town founding mythology.<sup>10</sup> To the outside observer, the two cities seem remarkably similar (as in Springfield, downtown Shelbyville boasts a statue dedicated to its founding father (and his cousins), the school has similar cliques whose members parallel those of Bart and his circle (see “Lemon of Troy”), its own nuclear plant, sports teams, schools, etc. But to the townspeople involved,



the differences outweigh the similarities. From the Springfield perspective, Shelbyvillians are slow, dim, and menacing.<sup>11</sup> The tone for this rivalry can be seen in the founding myth of the two cities. Recall that Springfield was established on the principles of *both* chastity and abstinence, whereas Shelbyville was based on decidedly less virtuous sexual *mores*. From that beginning it is understandable that Springfielders will look down on their neighbors in Shelbyville. The rivalry between the two towns is reinforced through athletic competition (Shelbyville boasts the Shelbyville Shelbyvillians [baseball] Shelbyville Visitors [hockey] and the Shelbyville Sharks [football]), economic competition (e.g., shopping, the nuclear plants) and artistic/cultural rivalry (Springfield builds an ultramodern Frank Gehry designed concert hall in response to a successful theater in Shelbyville<sup>12</sup> Indeed the rivalry became so intense that Springfielders razed Shelbyville City Hall to retaliate for Shelbyville’s successful baking of the world’s largest pizza (see “Homer Loves Flanders,” 1F14), and the rivalry was sufficiently well known that Lyle Langley, the con man in the ill fated Springfield monorail project, is able to sway the vote at the town hall meeting by remarking to the assembly that such an ambitious and far-sighted project was probably better suited for Shelbyville (see “Marge vs. the Monorail,” 9F10). The rivalry with Ogdenville, while much less intense, was still fairly hostile. In a recent episode, an economic downturn in Ogdenville leads to a massive migration from Ogdenville into Springfield. Eventually the Springfielders grow weary of the Ogdenvillians and they enact anti-immigrant legislation that orders the eviction of Ogdenvillians and uses Ogdenville laborers to construct a barricade around Springfield (see “Coming to Homerica,” LABF12).

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<sup>10</sup> It might speak to the centrality of Springfield as a “character” in the show in that like the other characters, the city has a relationship with its neighbors -- Shelbyville and Ogdenville in particular -- and like other minor characters in the show, we learn a surprisingly large amount of background detail of each. Shelbyville has its own founding father, myths, food -- the turnip -- that parallel those in Springfield.

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, the Shelbyvillians have the same perspective of Springfielders. In “The Seven Beer Snitch” (GABF08), the Simpsons family sees a show in Shelbyville -- “Song of Shelbyville” -- in which the crowd laughs riotously at a character depicting Springfielders as dim witted hicks.

<sup>12</sup> The town did not support classical music, however, and after a less than successful run, the building was sold to C. Montgomery Burns who transformed the hall into a prison, see “Seven Beer Snitch” (GABF08).

The effect of these rivalries is to forge a greater unity among the Springfielders. Class, ethnic, and religious divisions within the city blur and recede whenever the focus shifts to the rivalry between Springfield and its neighbors.<sup>13</sup> Pride in Springfield is further stoked through public education, popular culture, and the media in the city. In terms of education, the city has a somewhat surprisingly robust system of public and private education;<sup>14</sup> and, as we have seen, particularly in the elementary school level, the education system includes a fair amount of political socialization. Much of what we learn about Springfield -- its founding, its history, its traditions -- we learn from following Bart and Lisa's work on school projects. The importance of these early socialization efforts on the subsequent political development of children has long been recognized; it is one of the reasons school attendance is mandatory. But one of the unique features of the Springfield elementary curriculum is the extent to which it incorporates local lore into its socialization process. As with most schools in the US, ample attention is given to the basics of national political life (based on some of the tests Bart has failed over the years, we know at least that the curriculum focuses on US history).<sup>15</sup> Capital City and Washington (and all they represent) remain distant players in the life of Springfield and in the concerns of its citizens.<sup>16</sup>



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<sup>13</sup> The ingroup/outgroup distinctions work just as effectively when Springfield is given a new area code and the town subdivides between those with the old area code and those with the new one. Eventually the city is riven in two, with armed barricades, separate political institutions, and armed guards patrolling the borders; see "A Tale of Two Springfields," BABF20).

<sup>14</sup> The public schools include Springfield Elementary, West Springfield Elementary, PS 182, The Enriched Learning School for Gifted Children, the Springfield Magnet School for the Gifted and Troublesome, Springfield Junior High School, and Springfield High School. Private schools include Rommelwood Military Academy, Saint Sebastian's School for Wicked Girls, Springfield Christian School, Springfield Creative Arts Academy.

<sup>15</sup> The patriotic essay contest Lisa enters was not sponsored by the schools. Her original and prize-winning essay -- "The Roots of Democracy" -- was appropriately patriotic; she revised it at the national finals though with "Cesspool on the Potomac" -- a markedly less jingoistic exercise, but patriotic in its own way. The change was prompted by her witnessing Congressman Bob Arnold taking a bribe to permit logging on Springfield National Forest, and the new speech described the scene; setting in motion the quick action of the Congressional Ethics Committee and the public humiliation and expulsion of the congressman.

<sup>16</sup> One classroom exercise has the students design a new state flag, but otherwise details of the state go unmentioned in the show, save that it's been governed by the beloved Mary Bailey. When Capital City is mentioned or shown though, it is many orders of magnitude more urban, hipper, and sophisticated than Springfield; see for instance, "Dancin' Homer," 7F05).

The insularity of Springfield is further maintained by its relative isolation from most mainstream media. The news outlets are entirely local -- the *Springfield Shopper* is the daily press, and the various television stations are unique to Springfield. Kent Brockman's newscasts feature local themed stories, and his nightly news talkshow -- "Smartline" -- is also focused on local topics and features local guests. Occasionally we see evidence of the national networks -- typically Fox<sup>17</sup> -- but for the most part Springfield is not really part of the regional, much



less national, popular culture. One of the clearest examples, of course, is that Krusty Burger has so dominated the town that neither McDonald's, Burger King, Taco Bell, nor any of the other "upscale" family restaurant chains have been unable to penetrate Springfield consciousness, much less the Springfield market (McDonald's has a franchise in Shelbyville though). I say "consciousness" because the citizens of

Springfield seem completely unaware of their existence. In "22 Short Films About Springfield" (3F18) we have this exchange between Police Chief Wiggum and Officers Lou and Eddie while sitting at a Krusty Burger:

**Lou:** You know, I went to the McDonald's in Shelbyville on Friday night --

**Wiggum:** [interrupting] The McWhat?

**Lou:** Uh, the McDonald's. I, I never heard of it either, but they have over 2,000 locations in this state alone.

**Eddie:** Must've sprung up overnight.

**Lou:** You know, the funniest thing though; it's the little differences.

**Wiggum:** Example.

**Lou:** Well, at McDonald's you can buy a Krusty Burger with cheese, right? But they don't call it a Krusty Burger with cheese.

**Wiggum:** Get out! Well, what do they call it?

**Lou:** A Quarter Pounder with cheese.

**Wiggum:** Quarter Pounder with cheese? Well, I can picture the cheese, but, uh, do they have Krusty partially gelatinated non-dairy gum-based beverages?

**Lou:** Mm-hm. They call 'em, "shakes."

**Eddie:** Huh, shakes. You don't know what you're gettin'.



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<sup>17</sup> Most of these references are pretty critical of Fox; see, "Swipes at Fox," <http://www.snpp.com/guides/foxswipe.html>

-- Don't think you want to know.<sup>18</sup>

Considering the ubiquity of American fast food cuisine in the global market, its absence in Springfield is a shocking indicator of Springfield's isolation, especially when we keep in mind that Springfield's radio dial is relatively full -- KBBL am, KBBL fm, KUDD, WKOMA, KJAZZ, KFSL, WOMB -- and presumably in need of advertising dollars. This is all the more surprising considering that Krusty Burger is itself a national chain. Speaking of Krusty, we should also note that the pantheon of media and celebrity heroes in the town is also entirely local, although, the rest of the country seems familiar with at least some of the brighter lights in the Springfield star circuit, with Krusty in particular enjoying a modest reputation beyond the confines of the town as a comedy legend). Other elements of national pop culture are also largely absent: Springfield's beer market, for instance, is entirely dominated by Duff brands (neighboring Shelbyville has Fudd); but considering how frequently alcohol is referenced in the show -- Moe's Tavern being the most obvious source -- it is startling to see no sign of the national brands.<sup>19</sup>



In short, the high rates of civic engagement and participation in Springfield may not be fully reproducible in other contexts inasmuch as the participation may turn on the insularity of the town. With that type of isolation it becomes more plausible for the citizenry to believe that their participation matters because in a sense, they only have each other. The culture and the supporting socialization process help inculcate the idea that the city is in fact, "part of us all." In some respects, then, life in the town seems more akin to the polis of ancient Greece (see Woodcock, Cantor) in that Springfield emerges as a nearly self-sufficient enclave with an active and engaged citizenry. We can see the existence of and the importance of that civic pride in two episodes revolving around Jedediah Springfield. In "The Tell-Tale Head," Bart's vandalism of the Jedediah statue (he severs its head) reawakens the sense of community in the townspeople, including the bullies whose derogatory remarks about the town founder prompted

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<sup>18</sup> The scenes in this episode involving the police are thinly veiled references to Quentin Tarantino's classic "Pulp Fiction."

<sup>19</sup> The exceptions of national penetration into Springfield are in music (where we find frequent appearances by leading rock and rap acts) and movies (the town seems to be aware of current Hollywood actors; Mel Gibson, Ron Howard, Kim Bassinger to name a few have all had guest appearances as themselves on the show. Occasionally nationally recognized artists and authors have also appeared in the town; but they usually pale in comparison to the local celebrities.

Bart to embark on his destructive ways in the first place. And in “Lisa the Iconoclast” we see a deep appreciation for the benefits of that sort of civic pride.

While researching an essay for the school’s Founder’s Day celebration, Lisa visits the local historical society where she accidentally unearths the truth about Jebediah Springfield. While handling Jebediah’s fife, she discovers a diary extract in which Jebediah reveals that he was never a revolutionary patriot, but a pirate named Hans Sprungfeld:

*Know ye who read this there is more to my life than history records. Firstly, I did not tame the legendary buffalo, it was already tame, I merely shot it. Secondly, I have not always been known as Jebediah Springfield. Until 1796, I was Hans Sprungfeld, murderous pirate. And the half wits of this town will never learn the truth. ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha. I write this confession so that my infamy will live on long after my body has succumbed to my infectious diphtheria.*

Through deeper research she learns the full scope of Sprungfeld’s villainy: an attempted assassination of George Washington. When she tries to go public with all this information, she receives a failing grade for her report (as her teacher, Miss Hoover, put it “This is nothing but dead white male bashing from a PC thug. It's women like you that keep the rest of us from landing a husband”); and Lisa, her children, and her children’s children are banned from the Springfield Historical Society ... for three months. Later at the parade honoring Jebediah Lisa is able to work her way to the podium and get control of the microphone. As she stands facing the people she pauses to consider what she should say, when an elderly woman in the crowd mistakes her deliberation for trepidation and shouts “Don't be shy....just think of Jebediah, and the words will come.” That voice and that advice tips the scale, as it were, and now, standing above the smiling rapt faces fully attuned to what she might say, with this opportunity to inform the people that they’re celebrating a lie, Lisa chooses to let the myth continue rather than let “the truth” emerge. That George Washington makes an appearance in this story provides a nice connection to our contemporary political scene; for it is a subtle reminder that we too have our myths and they may have their merit.

#### **IV. Civic Engagement: Promises and Perils**

Through socialization the people of Springfield have apparently developed a sense of ownership over the town. Springfield is a key part of the way in which the people in the town define themselves; it is, as Marge tells Bart, “a part of us all.” This, I think, helps explain the heightened levels of civic engagement in the town. The people turn out for the yard sales, festivals, sports and cultural events because they have, to a significant extent, incorporated the city into their sense of who they are as a people. This attachment to the city also manifests itself in their political relations. As noted, both the state and federal governments are remote

and largely uninvolved in helping the town. This can be seen most clearly, perhaps, in the “Bart’s Comet” episode (2F11) where the city, facing impending annihilation from a comet hurtling towards the earth, awaits help from the federal government. The news cuts to a shot of the Congressional debate on the bill to authorize funding for the evacuation of Springfield. We learn that the bill is about to pass unanimously until a rider is attached to appropriate “\$30 million for the perverted arts.” The amended bill fails, prompting the news anchor to opine “I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: democracy simply doesn’t work.” But as Woodcock (2006) points out, the problem here is not democracy, but representative democracy as practiced in the United States. And in those instances where the federal government has intervened, the effect was largely negative. Perhaps the clearest example of this is in *The Simpsons Movie*, where the federal government orders the total isolation of the town beneath an impregnable dome. Federal officials are routinely portrayed as corrupt (the Congressman Bob Arnold bribery scene in “Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington,” incompetent (the legislative scene mentioned above), wasteful (as when we learn that the US State Department has refitted the toilets in southern hemisphere outposts so that toilets flush in “the correct American way” (“Bart vs. Australia,” 2F13), or intrusive (the various Nuclear Regulatory Agency or Internal Revenue officials who visit). Given that experience, the low voter turnout mentioned already may make a bit more sense. The good citizens of Springfield could reasonably conclude that voting in federal elections would not help them in any meaningful ways. The same cannot be said for participation at the local level.



When we turn our attention to local politics, however, we have a very different situation and a very different picture emerges of the citizenry. The people do more than simply attend town hall meetings, but they actively participate in those meetings. Likewise, the town has eagerly embraced the proposition provisions of the town charter to enact significant legislation (for example, Proposition 305: Discount Bus Fares for War Widows [“Lisa the Simpson,” 4F24], Proposition 217: Yes on Casinos [“The Old Man and the ‘C,’ Student” AABF16], and Proposition 24: Illegal Immigration [“Much Apu About Nothing,” 3F20]). The extension of direct democracy reached its apex with Proposition 304, which mandated that public polls become legally binding (“Homer Badman,” 2F06). While the wisdom of some of the decisions reached at the town hall meetings or via propositions can be debated (the casino gambling experiment was a disaster for the town; and the illegal immigration was both mean spirited and misguided) the point I want to make is not to the perspicacity of the people but to the broader fact that the people were engaged in their public affairs. We should also note that during the brief rule of the Mensa group, the policies developed were no more edifying (e.g., the abolition of athletic events and the introduction of seven year mating cycles for instance; see “The Saved Lisa’s Brain”).

The citizens also come together for more informal political activities, in particular the use of protest, letter writing campaigns, and boycotts. We have seen the townspeople stage anti-nuclear power rallies (“Homer’s Odyssey,” 7G03), anti-violence rallies (“Itchy and Scratchy and Marge,” 7F09), anti nudity (7F09 again), anti-germ war (“Mother Simpson,” 3F06) and bears (“Much Apu About Nothing,” 3F20). But while each of these show the promise and potential power of collective action, they also point to some of the difficulties of challenging the prevailing institutions of power or of relying on the wisdom of the crowd. So, for instance, the anti-nuclear rally collapses when Homer, the leader of the rally, succumbs to Burns’ offer of a new job in the nuclear power plant as the plant’s safety inspector (earlier in the episode Homer had been fired from the plant for gross incompetence). The anti-violence rally, organized and led by Marge to protest the level of cartoon violence, is successful in having the cartoon removed from the air. Her efforts led to the creation of an organized interest group -- Springfieldians for Nonviolence, Understanding, and Helping -- but one which eventually shifts focus from violence in cartoons to nudity in the arts (specifically, an exhibit of Michelangelo’s “David”). Marge objects to that change, which prompts her to conclude that based on her experience, “I guess one person *can* make a difference, but most of the time, they probably shouldn’t.” Finally, the anti-bear rallies exposed a deeper problem with a ready reliance on public opinion.

The anti-bear rallies were initially designed to prompt Quimby to take some action and protect the city against bears (after a bear wandered into the city and was spotted). Homer leads the crowd to City Hall chanting “We’re here. We’re queer. We don’t want anymore bears!” Quimby responds to the crowd’s demands by creating a “Bear Patrol,” a special task force complete with its own helicopter unit, to deal with the bear problem. Of course when Quimby imposes a tax to pay for the patrol, the people once again rise to protest, this time chanting “Down with Taxes.” Upon hearing the throng, Quimby turns to his aid and asks “Are those morons getting dumber or just louder?” Which elicits the reply “Dumber, sir.” It is in trying to deflect attention and criticism that Quimby shifts the debate to illegal immigration which in turn leads to the passage of Proposition 24. The episode introduces two significant difficulties with popular democracy. The first, of course, is the fickleness of public opinion. As James Madison and the Federalists argued, one of the advantages of representative of democracy is that it introduces a filter to slow and refine public opinion. Without that filter the public can become a threat to itself. The second relates to an early critique of direct democracy, for as Plato and Aristotle noted, the people are always vulnerable to the rhetorical powers of the demagogue. In the bear example, Homer was able to lead the crowd in contradictory directions that exasperate the Mayor.

The problem of group activity degenerating into mob violence is a recurring theme in the life of Springfield. Mobs arise and violence erupts with stunning regularity in the town. Regular viewers have seen mobs pursue Bart, Homer, Grampa Simpson, elementary school students, a burlesque house, the installation of a statue of Jimmy Carter, and so on. Indeed, Principal Skinner was almost burned at the stake for teaching the Galilean theory of earth’s rotation



("I'm telling you people, the earth revolves around the sun," see "A Star is Burns," "2F31). Riots break out for the most trivial of reasons sports events, rock concerts, and as we have seen with the case of the Shelbyville town hall, when a bigger pizza is baked. As the immigrant episode, and the violence demonstrate, there is a strong downside to too much popular participation in the absence of effective political institutions or socio-cultural practices to channel the energy. In the case of Springfield, it would not be going too far out on a limb to suggest that mob violence and rioting are as much a part of the political culture as PTA meetings and the town hall.



## V. Conclusion

*The Simpsons* provides a useful model for discussing both the benefits and the problems of civic engagement and political participation. As we have seen in Springfield, civic engagement depends upon cultivating a feeling of attachment for the political unit (be it ward, city, county, state, country) among the citizenry. But channeling that engagement in productive directions also requires effective political institutions and an educated citizenry. As John Adams observed, "Liberty cannot be preserved without a general knowledge among the people... and the preservation of the means of knowledge among the lowest ranks, is of more importance to the public than all the property of all the rich men in the country. It is even of more consequence to the rich themselves, and to their posterity." The case of Springfield is an excellent pedagogical tool to remind us of the delicacy of democracy; too little and too much engagement are both threats to the body politic. A lesson that would have been helpful to have absorbed before a government commits itself to nation building.

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- No Homers: <http://www.nohomers.net/index.shtml>
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- Simpson Crazy. <http://www.simpsoncrazy.com/>

Map of Springfield: [http://www.craphound.com/images/map\\_of\\_springfield.gif](http://www.craphound.com/images/map_of_springfield.gif)