

Teaching Political Science through TV Series

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September 2021

Abstract

Despite increasing access to high quality 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 offer for instruction in the same way as the discipline has discussed film in the classroom. 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. We then discuss the ways that television series might be used in a typical introductory course on European Politics.

Introduction

In the golden age of television, TV has become the new medium of choice for story-driven auteurs tackling interesting subjects: certainly including politics. Serialized 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 television's golden age has focused on American television series, there has been a corresponding major increase in the distribution of international television series to American audiences (Lobato 2018), increasing the opportunities for U.S.-based instructors to teach comparative politics using television.

European public broadcasters have noticed the success of 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.

Political scientists have of course frequently taught classes using movies as texts before.

Pedagogical studies of film and television in political science have typically emphasized movies, which considering their runtime are easier to integrate into a course. There are fewer investigations into the use of television series, and most publications come from other 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 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 screening a standalone film. But at the same time, popular TV shows have often been consumed by the students before, so re-addressing them in the classroom and adding a layer of political science might increase student interest and make complex political structures and processes more accessible. Finally, the focus of pedagogical publications often revolves around American society and politics; there is no template yet for comparative politics courses to integrate the medium of TV as text. This article illustrates the untapped potential for utilizing TV series for a comparative politics curriculum.

This article systematically discusses how to integrate television series as text in comparative politics courses, with specific illustrations 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 review the literature on teaching using television series and political television series themselves. Second, we discuss methods of integrating television series into a political science course. Then we offer illustrative examples of specific series and episodes that could be used to demonstrate concepts and stimulate discussion in an introductory course on European politics; however, our discussion can be applied to other courses as well.

Television and Political Science

Political scientists 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

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

Granville (2009) assesses the impact of *Yes, Minister* on British political opinion. Chow, Saunders, and Waade (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's (2018) edited volume on political TV shows uses the same framework to compare productions from different countries. And Dyson (2019) examines the interplay between political television series and major theories of political science, studying how both are different ways of interpreting politics.

At the same time as we have seen literature taking television's discussion of politics seriously, political science has inadequately considered how to incorporate television into the classroom. Contrasting or embedding 'dry' facts and knowledge as part of an entertaining story makes it more accessible for students. For instance, Chaddha and Wilson (2011) 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. 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), and public administration (Wegrich 2015; Borry 2018) have considered particular television series as pedagogical tools. While social scientists clearly increasingly take television seriously as a medium worthy of study, there has been limited attention on how to integrate television into the political science classroom.

Integrating Television Series into the Political Science Classroom

Baym considers 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. As students often find video clips a valuable part of classroom instruction (Berk 2009, among others), these more complex television series, which are already designed to introduce viewers to multilayered, real world, political phenomena, can provide ideal entry points to reinforcing concepts and historical examples in the classroom.

There are some crucial differences between feature length films and serialized storytelling spanning multiple episodes and multiple seasons. Chaddha and Wilson, 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 main protagonist might play a role in educating students of political science 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). We outline relevant TV series with this perspective in mind.

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 showing 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 will 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. Further suggestions of potentially relevant series can be found in the online appendix.

While we offer guidance on pertinent episodes and series in the remainder of the article and our appendix, 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 teaching style and confirm that the excerpt or episode is considered appropriate for the rules and norms of their particular institution.

Selected Clips

Instructors may show specific clips from any number of series over a semester. If a show is introduced for the first time, the instructor needs to briefly introduce the scene and the roles of relevant characters. Clips can be shown in both an in person or online environment; however, if teaching online there are two particular considerations to keep in mind. First, streaming videos in synchronous online environments is often somewhat choppy visually, 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 an online environment. For in person instruction, these concerns are minimized.

When showing a clip, the instructor should first introduce the concept under study. The clip itself should act as an illustration of the concept to reinforce the instruction. After showing the clip, the instructor can briefly summarize takeaways in the context of what they just watched. 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.

In a European politics course, there are myriad shows with clips that can improve students' understanding of political science concepts. We discuss three illustrations; please refer to the online Appendix A for a comprehensive set of suggestions.

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 city in northern France. 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 a reform of EU treaties to avoid fiscal sanctioning, 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, “Across the Barricade,” looks at attempts towards Catholic-Protestant unity among youths. 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 Stasi leadership in 1980s East Germany. “One Night in November,” the first episode 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. The multiple perspectives give students insight into both different views of the fall of communism, but also depict the sudden nature of the events of November 9, 1989. Students might require a brief introduction to the different groups (which apartment has dissidents watching the news vs. the Stasi-affiliated family), but the episode offers a great deal of clarity on characters' political perspectives even for those without background on previous storylines and relationships.

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 serialized storylines span several episodes, there are often elements of the story that conclude in one episode. The students therefore are presented with a persuasive narrative that incorporates an element of comparative politics. The instructor can work with the class to relate the fictional representation with 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 run times, which might extend beyond a 50 minute class period. As with clips, instructors should introduce relevant characters and settings to maximize 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 popular 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 satirizes the Tony Blair-led New Labour government in the UK (1997-2007), especially Blair's strategy emphasizing political communication, to 'sell politics' (Heffernan 2006). The show offers insights into the internal workings of a cabinet in the Westminster system, emphasizing the hierarchical relationship between the Prime Minister and other ministers. The series premiere opens with a forced ministerial resignation ("I drafted you a letter of resignation"), followed by an exploration of complex internal cabinet dynamics through his replacement. This episode is especially useful in explaining the weights of different portfolios within the cabinet and the special importance of cross-cutting policy domains.

Parlement (1 season, 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 work. However, underneath this somewhat populist portrayal and the replication of certain national stereotypes (especially concerning UK representatives in favor of Brexit), the show contains accurate elements of a supranational, multilingual parliament (VoteWatch.eu 2020). The underbelly of the parliament is in general shown as well-meaning and efficient in earnestly organizing 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, which is especially useful for American students that have very limited understanding of the EU. This allows for discussion about the European Parliament's evolution and the difficulties in creating an international organization that is more than simply a federation (Lelieveldt and Princen 2015).

Series as Text

Integrating a complete series into a course as text requires significant planning on the part of the instructor. Instructors should also prepare a character guide so students will understand the relations and interactions. For short-run series or miniseries, watching a series could be 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 (Chaddha and Wilson 2010). Instructors would need to deeply understand the series to find ways to relate it to the majority of the concepts in the course. They might need to make tradeoffs, either minimizing or excluding topics they might otherwise want to cover that may not fit in a course based on a television series as a primary text.

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 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 approach this question. Their course focused on urban inequality, an issue that *The Wire* approaches 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 (see also Journell and Buchanan 2012). 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 2010–2013, is the series that best lends itself to use throughout the semester. Over three seasons (Netflix is producing a fourth at the time of writing), *Borgen* follows Birgitte Nyborg, the leader of a centrist party heading 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.

While *Borgen* covers a wide range of topics, 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 contextualized 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. A full range of substantive topics that might be appropriate for an introductory European politics course can be found in Appendix B.

If an instructor were to cover parliamentary systems, elections, and coalition formation early in the course, the first two episodes of *Borgen* provide rich examples of parliamentary institutions in action. Moreover, they would also clearly introduce the characters and storylines in the show, making it easier to refer to episodes later in the semester. These episodes could be shown in class, especially episode 2, which extensively examines coalition formation. Coalition formation can be tricky for American students, as it relies on an entirely different political logic than the American electoral system. Another option could be to assign students to watch these episodes out of class and to write a short reflection. If episodes are assigned to be watched outside of class, instructors must remember that not all students have access to Netflix, the current streaming location for *Borgen* in the U.S. 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 episodes outside of normal class hours.

Conclusion

There are more high quality television series than ever, and there is far greater distribution of international television series within the U.S. Students are easier to reach with audio-visual materials coming from popular culture; using 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 as resources in the comparative

politics classroom. Because the application is less intuitive than with feature films, we outline three techniques that instructors can use: showing clips, showing a full episode, 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.

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Appendix A. TV Series Focusing on European Politics								
TV Series	Country setting	Genre	Original network	Years	Synopsis	Possible topics	Where available	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, Decolonization	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	2010-Present	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 Celwydd (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	★★★
<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-Present	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	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	★
<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	Region 2 DVD	★★
<i>La línea 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; Basques; 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; War of Lead	MHZ Choice	★★
<i>Mamon</i>	Czechia	Drama	HBO Europe	2015	The government is preparing to privatize a state-owned Energy firm	Privatization; 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	★★
<i>Marseille</i>	France	Drama	Netflix	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	Netflix	★★
<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	Netflix	★★
<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)	Netflix	★★
<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	★★★★

<i>Sluha Narodu (Servant of the People)</i>	Ukraine	Comedy	1+1	2015-2019	A schoolteacher 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; Zelensky's real-life rise	Region 5 DVD	★★
<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	★★
<i>Weissensee</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	★★★★
<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	★★★★
Key								
Four Stars: One or both authors has 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 specialized settings								

Appendix B. Pedagogical topics in *Borgen*

A full range of substantive topics that might be appropriate for an introductory European politics course is shown in Table 2 below, with references to specific episodes.¹ 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.

¹ Table 2 differs slightly from Boukes et al.'s (2020) characterization of main episodic themes, likely due to differing analytical vs. pedagogical purposes.

Theme	Borgen 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