

# WATCHING OUT FOR DEMOCRACY

HOW ENTERTAINMENT TV PORTRAYS  
CIVIC LEADERSHIP AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT  
IN THE UNITED STATES

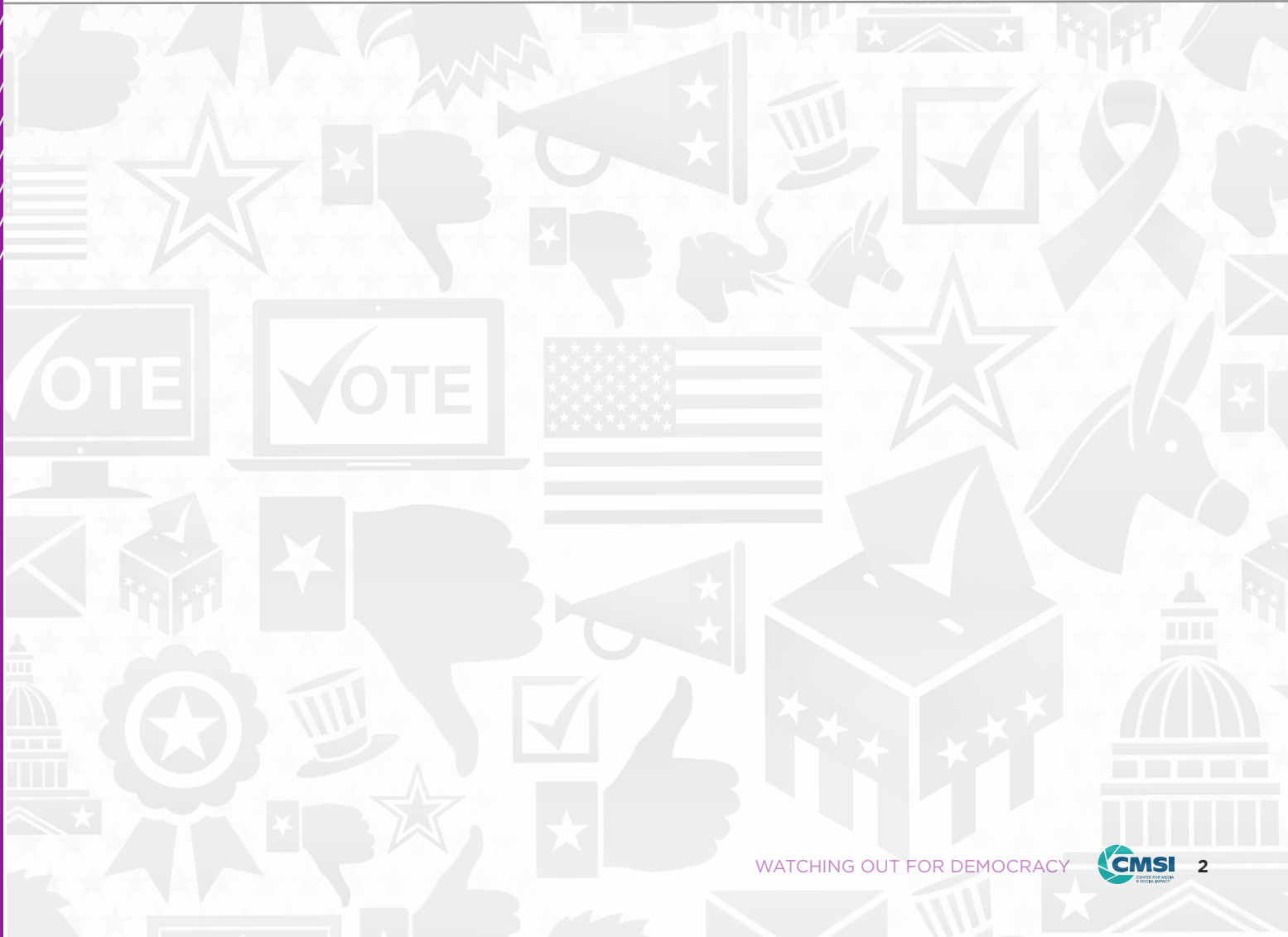
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# OVERVIEW

*Watching Out for Democracy* is an independent research project of the Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI), under the *Civic Leadership Stories Project*. Under the direction of Principal Investigator Caty Borum and Lead Researcher Paula Weissman, the CMSI research team for this study included David Conrad-Pérez, Aras Coskuntuncel, Kimberly Reason, L Cedeño Miller, and Allegra Udell. CMSI's Varsha Ramani served as operations director and publication manager. Olivia Klaus created the report design. The study was shaped and facilitated in collaboration with Will Jenkins, Charmion Kinder, and Jesse Moore of CMSI's *Civic Leadership Stories Project*; members of the MTV Entertainment Studios Social Impact team, including Brianna Cayo Cotter, Erika Soto Lamb, and Vaughan Bagley; and leaders from the nonprofit, nonpartisan organization When We All Vote, including Stephanie Young and Jessica Blair.





**The Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI)**, based at American University’s School of Communication in Washington, D.C., is a creative innovation lab and research center that creates, studies, and showcases media for equity, social change, and social justice. Focusing on independent, documentary, and entertainment media, the Center bridges boundaries between scholars, producers and communication practitioners across media industries, social justice, public policy, and public engagement. The Center produces resources for the field and academic research; creates original media; convenes conferences and events; and works collaboratively to understand and design media that matter. [www.cmsimpact.org](http://www.cmsimpact.org)



**The Civic Leadership Stories Project**, an initiative of the Center for Media & Social Impact, supports scriptwriters, showrunners, producers, talent, and other creatives telling storylines about people who are shaking up how things are done in places of power. These storylines (which are not just in “political” shows) can inspire audiences to get involved with voting, advocacy, and public service. The Project offers script consulting, story and character libraries, workshops, and more. [www.civicleadershipstories.com](http://www.civicleadershipstories.com)



**MTV Entertainment Group** is a preeminent global media company, connecting with its audiences through nine iconic brands including MTV, Comedy Central, VH1, CMT, Pop, Logo, Smithsonian, Paramount Network and TV Land. Additionally, MTV Entertainment Studios produces award-winning series, movies and documentary films. MTVE also uses its reach for social impact, spearheading broad change-driven coalitions through mental health and civic engagement campaigns.



**When We All Vote** is a leading national, nonpartisan initiative on a mission to change the culture around voting and to increase participation in each and every election by helping to close the race and age gap. Created by Michelle Obama, When We All Vote brings together individuals, institutions, brands, and organizations to register new voters across the country and advance civic education for the entire family and voters of every age to

build an informed and engaged electorate for today and generations to come. We empower our supporters and volunteers to take action through voting, advocating for their rights, and holding their elected officials accountable. In 2020, When We All Vote ran a robust, multifaceted campaign and reached more than 100 million people to educate them about the voting process and get them registered and ready to vote. The initiative also led in voter education, registration, and volunteer engagement and as a result, 512,000 people started or completed the voter registration process, and nearly 500 media, corporate, and nonprofit partners joined its efforts. Michelle Obama is joined by fellow Co-Chairs Stephen Curry, Becky G, Selena Gomez, Tom Hanks, H.E.R., Liza Koshy, Jennifer Lopez, Lin-Manuel Miranda, Janelle Monae, Chris Paul, Megan Rapinoe, Shonda Rhimes, Bretman Rock, Kerry Washington and Rita Wilson. [www.whenweallvote.org](http://www.whenweallvote.org)

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# INTRODUCTION

Just before the turn of the new millennium, broadcast network NBC unveiled the latest in a string of hit prime-time TV dramas. Week after week on *The West Wing*, heroic President Josiah Bartlet brought viewers into the intimate, frenetic business of the White House and Congress. With its soaring musical score, poetically decadent dialogue, patriotic monologues, and main characters' devotion to public service, it's safe to imagine that viewers learned (and felt) a little something about a civic mission in the highest level of the United States government. Cultural and awards acclaim followed. Audiences stayed loyal through seven seasons. Decades later, the show remains indelibly ingrained in public consciousness as perhaps a hopeful reflection of how the engine of American democracy is meant to work, or at least how we might imagine it to be.

In 2013, a different scripted entertainment show premiered during the fledgling days of the streaming TV revolution, ripe with cynicism and backroom machinations in the same hallowed halls. *House of Cards*, one of Netflix's earliest forays into original programming, portrays a corrupt, evil cast of characters occupying the most important political decision-making seats in Washington: the ruthless and double-dealing Senator-turned-President Frank Underwood and

his equally conniving wife, Claire, and a host of staffers and congressional members, each more rotten than the next.

Each of these shows portrays a vastly different image of civic leadership in the United States—who has power, what leaders do with it, and how these leaders affect our communities. And well beyond these political programs, we see civic themes in an array of other shows in current programming, from *Abbott Elementary* (ABC) to *Rutherford Falls* (Peacock).

Entertainment TV plays a profound role in how we see our democracy, government, and other civic systems. It can help us to imagine a better country, or it can convince us that our own actions don't matter. It can teach us that political and civic engagement is worthwhile, or it can give us the impression that the system is broken, regardless of whether and how we engage with it. And it can teach us about power: how leaders get it and how they use or misuse it. Entertainment media portrayals that predominantly spread cynicism and distrust toward public leaders and government can increase barriers to civic participation, including voting, protest, and public service. The effects can be even greater among communities of color, young people and others who already

**“Only about one-quarter of Americans say they trust the government in Washington, D.C., and only half believe that ‘ordinary people can do a lot to influence the government.’”**

face significant obstacles to civic participation. Entertainment media portrayals influence audience perceptions of government officials, as well as opinions about what can or can't be done about political and policy challenges, from racial justice to economic inequality to the climate crisis. What we see and learn on entertainment TV about civic leadership and participation matters. At the same time, when we fail to see authentic portrayals of civic leaders at all, a different kind of inertia can take root. Can we be and do what we do not see? Can audiences who want to make a difference even imagine themselves getting involved when civic leaders appear too perfect or too corrupt to be real?

Today, the United States faces a crisis when it comes to the health of our democracy. Only about one-quarter of Americans say they trust the government in Washington, D.C., and only half believe that “ordinary people can do a lot to influence the government.”<sup>[i]</sup> Compared to other developed nations, Americans’ trust in their government is particularly low; the U.S. ranks 23rd out of 41 countries on this metric.<sup>[ii]</sup> And we are confused about how it all works in the first place. According to one study, “dangerously low proportions of the public understand our democratic institutions.”<sup>[iii]</sup> Civic education in school, once a primary element, no longer shows up consistently, leaving young people to figure it out on their own later in life.<sup>[iv]</sup> At the same time, ideological polarization continues to increase, leaving ordinary Americans pitted deeply against one another based on how they vote or their beliefs about democracy and government.<sup>[v]</sup>

In the United States, the health of our democracy and our communities depends to a large degree on the health of our

civic institutions: federal, state, and local government agencies, and the many public goods they support, from libraries and schools to transportation and health. On a daily basis, our very quality of life is shaped by how well our civic institutions function and whom they are designed to benefit. Many Americans have strong views about this, but it's not enough to just talk about the situation. When we participate in civic activities—by voting, participating in local civic decisions, taking civic leadership roles, or volunteering—we play a role in shaping our communities and nation.

*What does this all look like in today's most-watched entertainment TV programming?*

*And why does it matter?*

***Watching Out for Democracy: How Entertainment TV Portrays Civic Leadership and Civic Engagement in the United States*** is an unprecedented examination of the top-rated leading entertainment TV shows (across scripted and unscripted) during a historic year, 2020, which saw soaring levels of voter participation in the national election. It asks and answers key questions: What do young American audiences (18-34-year-olds) see and learn about civic roles and participation when they tune into their favorite entertainment TV shows? How is civic leadership—from elected officials and other public service leaders—portrayed? How do characters talk about and take civic action, from voting to volunteering to making change in their communities? And ultimately, based on what we now know, what are the opportunities that can help future entertainment TV to be part of imagining and building a healthy democracy that can enable all communities to thrive now and for generations to come?

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[i] Pew: Many in the U.S., Western Europe Say Their Political System Needs Major Reform: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/03/31/many-in-us-western-europe-say-their-political-system-needs-major-reform/>

[ii] <https://ourpublicservice.org/blog/how-trust-in-the-u-s-government-compares-with-trust-in-government-around-the-world/>

[iii] Educating for American Democracy report. <https://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org/>

[iv] <http://www.pacefund.org/language-register/>

[v] <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/13/america-is-exceptional-in-the-nature-of-its-political-divide/>

# ABOUT THE STUDY

## METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW

*Watching Out for Democracy* examines how civic leadership and civic participation is portrayed in the highest-rated U.S.-based and -produced entertainment TV shows for 18-34-year-old viewers in 2020 across cable, broadcast, and streaming originals, according to Nielson and NPower data. The research includes both scripted (drama and comedy) and unscripted (reality and documentary) genres.

What do we mean by “civic engagement”? For the purposes of this study, civic engagement is defined as: **“Individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern. Civic engagement can take many forms, from individual voluntarism to organizational involvement to electoral participation. It can include efforts to directly address an issue, work with others in a community to solve a problem or interact with the institutions of representative democracy. Civic engagement encompasses a range of specific activities such as working in a soup kitchen, serving on a neighborhood association, writing a letter to an elected official or voting.”**<sup>1</sup>

To bring this definition to life, we used quantitative content analysis to view and code several tiers of civic conversation, action, and character portrayals in a representative sample of U.S.-produced entertainment TV program episodes, including:

- **PORTRAYALS OF PRIMARY “CIVIC PROFESSIONALS”** (elected officials/politicians, candidates for elected office, non-elected government officials/civil servants), compared to other crucial civic roles, including law enforcement, criminal justice, and teachers.<sup>2</sup>
- **PORTRAYALS OF EVERYDAY PEOPLE ENGAGING IN “CIVIC CONVERSATIONS”** about contemporary public affairs, social issues, and civics.
- **PORTRAYALS OF ORDINARY PEOPLE ENGAGING IN “CIVIC ACTIONS,”** such as volunteering in their communities, registering to vote, voting, and working at the polls.
- **PORTRAYALS OF VISUAL SIGNS OF CIVIC PARTICIPATION,** such as voter registration signs or protest signage, posters, and apparel.

Under the direction of the project’s principal investigator and lead researcher, five individual researchers watched and coded multiple variables, detailed below and reported in this report. Intercoder reliability for all reported variables reached above a threshold of  $\geq .66$ . In this report, all numbers are rounded up to the nearest whole number, so some rounding error (i.e., totals that are more or less than 100) does occur.

1 American Psychological Association. (2009). Civic Engagement. <https://www.apa.org/education-career/undergrad/civic-engagement>

2 For purposes of this study, we are most interested in elected officials, political candidates for elected office, and non-elected government officials/civil servants, given the dearth of research about these portrayals in entertainment TV. For more detail about exact character coding categories, see Appendix B of this report.

## TV NETWORKS, GENRES, PROGRAMS

The study universe consisted of 1,219 episodes from the 141 top-rated shows that were partially or entirely set in the United States or in a fictional world that reflected or parodied some aspects of “real life” in the U.S. (Fantasy programs, and those set in countries outside the United States, were not included.) A representative random sample of five episodes was selected from each show,<sup>3</sup> resulting in a final sample size of 658 episodes after removing those no longer available for viewing.<sup>4</sup> This final sample reflects more than half (54%) of the initial universe of episodes.

### TV PLATFORMS, NETWORKS & GENRES

Cable	Broadcast	Streaming	Scripted	Unscripted
Adult Swim	ABC	Amazon Prime +	Drama	Reality/
AMC	CBS	Hulu	Comedy/Sit-coms	Competitive
Black	CW	Netflix		Reality/Celebrity
Entertainment	Fox			Reality/Real
Television (BET)	NBC			People
Bravo				True Crime
Comedy Central				Reality/Improv
E! Entertainment				Comedic
Television				
MTV				
Nickelodeon				
Paramount				
POP				
TLC				
VH1				

### TV PROGRAMS

13 REASONS WHY	BACHELOR, THE	BULL
16 & PREGNANT	BACHELOR PRESENTS:	BUSCH FAMILY BREWED, THE
16 AND RECOVERING	LISTEN TO YOUR HEART,	CATFISH: THE TV SHOW
90 DAY FIANCE	THE	CHALLENGE, THE
90 DAY FIANCE: BEFORE THE	BACHELORETTE, THE	CHICAGO FIRE
90 DAYS	BAR RESCUE	CHICAGO MED
90 DAY FIANCE: HAPPILY	BIG BROTHER	CHICAGO PD
EVER AFTER?	BIG MOUTH	CIRCLE, THE
90 DAY FIANCE: THE OTHER	BIG SKY	CRIMINAL MINDS
WAY	BLACK INK CREW	DAILY SHOW WITH TREVOR
911	BLACK INK CREW CHICAGO	NOAH, THE
911: LONE STAR	BLUE BLOODS	DANCING WITH THE STARS
A MILLION LITTLE THINGS	BOB'S BURGERS	DEAD TO ME
ALTERED CARBON	BOJACK HORSEMAN	DEPUTY
AMAZING RACE, THE	BOSS BABY: BACK IN	DOUBLE SHOT AT LOVE WITH
AMERICA'S GOT TALENT	BUSINESS	DJ PAULY D & VINNY
AWKWAFINA IS NORA FROM	BOYS, THE	EMPIRE
QUEENS		

3 When a show had less than five episodes in total, all available episodes were taken (11 cases).

4 29 episodes



## TV PROGRAMS CONT'D

BROOKLYN NINE-NINE  
EX ON THE BEACH  
FAMILIES OF THE MAFIA  
FAMILY GUY  
FBI  
FBI: MOST WANTED  
FLASH, THE  
FLORIBAMA SHORE  
FOR LIFE  
FULLER HOUSE  
GOOD DOCTOR, THE  
GOOD GIRLS  
GOOD PLACE, THE  
GRACE AND FRANKIE  
GREY'S ANATOMY  
HAWAII FIVE-O  
HENRY DANGER  
HOW TO GET AWAY WITH  
MURDER  
HUNTERS  
I CAN SEE YOUR VOICE  
INK MASTER  
JEFFREY EPSTEIN: FILTHY  
RICH  
JERSEY SHORE: FAMILY  
VACATION  
KEEPING UP WITH THE  
KARDASHIANS  
KILLER INSIDE: THE MIND OF  
AARON HERNANDEZ  
LAST MAN STANDING  
LAW AND ORDER: SVU  
LEGO MASTERS  
LOCKE & KEY  
LOUD HOUSE, THE  
LOVE & HIP HOP  
LOVE & HIP HOP ATLANTA  
LOVE & HIP HOP MIAMI  
LOVE IS BLIND

LUCIFER  
MAGNUM P.I.  
MANIFEST  
MASKED SINGER, THE  
MASKED SINGER: AFTER THE  
MASK, THE  
MODERN FAMILY  
NARCOS: MEXICO  
NCIS  
NCIS: LOS ANGELES  
NEIGHBORHOOD, THE  
NEW AMSTERDAM  
ON MY BLOCK  
ORDER, THE  
OUTER BANKS  
OZARK  
PRODIGAL SON  
QUEEN'S GAMBIT, THE  
QUEER EYE  
RANCH, THE  
RATCHED  
REAL HOUSEWIVES OF  
ATLANTA, THE  
RESIDENT, THE  
REVENGE PRANK  
RICK AND MORTY  
RIDICULOUSNESS  
ROOKIE, THE  
RUPAUL'S DRAG RACE  
RUPAUL'S DRAG RACE ALL  
STARS  
RUPAUL'S DRAG RACE ALL  
STARS: UNTUCKED  
RUPAUL'S DRAG RACE:  
UNTUCKED  
RUPAUL'S SECRET CELEBRITY  
DRAG RACE  
S.W.A.T.  
SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE

SCHITT'S CREEK  
SEAL TEAM  
SHARK TANK  
SIESTA KEY  
SIMPSONS, THE  
SINGLE PARENTS  
SPACE FORCE  
STATION 19  
SUPERSTORE  
SWEET MAGNOLIAS  
T.I. & TINY: THE FAMILY  
HUSTLE  
TEEN MOM  
TEEN MOM II  
TEEN MOM: YOUNG AND  
PREGNANT  
THIS IS US  
TIGER KING: MURDER,  
MAYHEM, AND MADNESS  
TRIALS OF GABRIEL  
FERNANDEZ, THE  
TRUE LIFE CRIME  
TYLER PERRY'S ASSISTED  
LIVING  
TYLER PERRY'S HOUSE OF  
PAYNE  
TYLER PERRY'S SISTAS  
TYLER PERRY'S THE OVAL  
UMBRELLA ACADEMY, THE  
UNSOLVED MYSTERIES  
VANDERPUMP RULES  
VIRGIN RIVER  
WALKING DEAD, THE  
WILD 'N OUT  
WORLD OF DANCE  
YELLOWSTONE  
YOUNG SHELDON

## CHARACTER PORTRAYALS AND CIVIC ACTIVITIES<sup>5</sup>



### CIVIC PROFESSIONALS

How often are elected officials (politicians), political candidates for elected office, and non-elected government officials/civil servants portrayed in entertainment TV? For the purposes of this study, these are the “civic professionals” of primary interest, defined in the research as:

- **Elected Officials:** Individuals who hold an elected position at the local, state, or federal level, including elected officials running for reelection or another office.<sup>6</sup>
- **Political Candidates for Elected Office:** Individuals who seek an elected position at the local, state, or federal level.
- **Non-Elected Government Officials/Civil Servants:** Individuals who are employed by a local, state, or federal government entity or agency, but were not elected by the public into office.<sup>7</sup>

Comparatively speaking, how often do we see other civic professionals on screen?

Are they:

- Military personnel?
- Law enforcement?
- Public school teachers?

What do primary civic professionals do on screen? Do they:

- Attend public events or meetings?
- Give public remarks or talks?
- Run for elected office?
- Engage in the legislative and public policy-making process?
- Engage in illegal activities?

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<sup>5</sup> Note: A more detailed glossary of character portrayals can be seen in Appendix B.

<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this study, while some attorneys general, judges, and district attorneys may be elected rather than appointed, we have not included them in this coding category of “elected officials.” This status differs from one municipality to the next, and TV programming does not offer sufficient contextual cues to appropriately code for “elected” members of the criminal justice system; thus, we coded these characters (attorneys general, judges, DAs) within the separate Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice System categories. (For more detail on each character coding category, see Appendix B: Glossary of Character Coding Categories.)

<sup>7</sup> Officials/civil servants in this category have some decision-making or regulatory ability, have impact on how a policy crafted by elected officials is implemented, and tend to comprise the higher-paying leadership roles within a government office or agency. For the purpose of this study, we also included officials appointed by elected officials, such as the president’s cabinet members.



## EVERYDAY PEOPLE PARTICIPATING IN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

How do everyday people engage in electoral politics in entertainment TV? Do they:

- Organize or attend electoral politics events?
- Give a talk or speech related to electoral politics?
- Donate to support electoral politics?
- Volunteer to canvas/conduct direct voter outreach for a political candidate or party?
- Participate in nonpartisan get-out the vote activities?
- Work/volunteer at the polls on election day?

Aside from electoral politics, what civic activities do everyday people do in entertainment TV, including engaging in contemporary social issues? Do they:

- Organize or attend events on issues of public concern or public policy?
- Giving talks or speeches on issues of public concern or public policy?
- Donate to address issues of public concern or community needs?
- Volunteer to address issues of public concern or community needs?
- Boycott a product or service?
- Engage in public protests or demonstrations?



## VOTING BEHAVIORS

- How do everyday citizen characters participate in voting behaviors?
- Do they register to vote and/or vote?



## VOTING MESSAGES

- What are the key messages about voting?
- What are the primary narratives about the efficacy of registration and voting?



## CIVIC ENGAGEMENT SYMBOLS AND VISUALS

- What symbols or visuals of civic engagement appear in entertainment TV?

**“The study universe consisted of 1,219 episodes from the 141 top-rated shows that were partially or entirely set in the United States or in a fictional world that reflected or parodied some aspects of ‘real life’ in the U.S.”**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Civic themes do appear in some of today's most-viewed entertainment TV programs in the United States—across networks, platforms, and genres. However, although characters are often shown talking about contemporary civic and social issues (such as racism and the environment), they are rarely shown taking leadership and acting to solve civic problems in their communities. Given this imbalance, models of authentic and effective civic leadership and civic participation are not readily visible. In addition, although they show up infrequently as characters in entertainment TV, civic leaders onscreen are twice as likely to be shown engaging in illegal activities than working in policymaking. By far, the civic professionals we see the most are members of law enforcement and the criminal justice system—much more than politicians and non-elected government officials/civil servants. When elected officials and civil servants do show up as characters in entertainment TV, they are dramatically more likely to be White and men. And in today's

most-watched, top-rated entertainment TV programming for young adults (ages 18-34), registering to vote and voting are actions that are nearly invisible, appearing in less than 1% of episodes. Voting messages are also nearly non-existent.

But these findings also present opportunities: When characters or subjects do engage in civic conversations or actions, they do so across all genres of entertainment—from scripted drama to comedy to unscripted—which presents actionable ideas for entertainment engagement across programming types for the future. In other words, no one entertainment genre is better able to incorporate civic life and participation than another, from reality to scripted drama to comedy. And on-screen characters' civic conversations mirror topics of concern in the United States, from racial justice to mental health and more; popular culture is a reflection, in many ways, of contemporary civic dialogue.

**“On-screen characters in top-rated entertainment TV programs are much more likely to be seen talking about civic and social issues than taking action.”**

# KEY FINDINGS



## **CIVIC THEMES IN ENTERTAINMENT TV: CIVIC THEMES APPEAR IN NEARLY ONE-THIRD OF EPISODES, BUT AUTHENTIC PORTRAYALS OF CIVIC LEADERSHIP ARE LACKING.**

Civic themes—that is, any appearance of civic conversations, ideas and actions—appear in about one-third (29%) of top-rated entertainment TV program episodes, across both scripted and unscripted genres. This reveals interest in these themes among show creators and audiences. However, authentic depictions of civic leadership and participation are largely missing from the most-watched entertainment TV portraits. Scripted drama and sit-coms portray civic themes more than all other entertainment TV genres (47% of civic themes occur in scripted drama, vs. 1-18% in all other genres, with scripted comedy in the number-two spot, portraying 18% of the civic themes in this listing of TV programs.)



## **CIVIC PARTICIPATION: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IS IN THE BACKGROUND, NOT THE FOREFRONT.**

When civic actions show up in entertainment TV, they are more likely to occur briefly or in the background of the episode's primary storyline. Civic participation generally does not drive storylines or narrative developments, appearing instead as a casual backdrop.



## **TALKING VS. DOING: CIVIC CONVERSATION IS PORTRAYED NEARLY THREE TIMES MORE THAN CIVIC ACTION.**

On-screen characters in top-rated entertainment TV programs are much more likely to be seen talking about civic and social issues than taking action—in fact, they are nearly three times more likely to be in conversation about contemporary social and civic issues than engaging in behaviors about them. Informal conversations about social issues of public concern, public policy, or community needs are seen in 16% of episodes, dramatically more often than civic actions. Similarly, politicians, candidates for elected office, and civil servants tend to give public talks or attend public events, and are the least likely to be depicted as engaging in the legislative and public-policy-making process itself.



## **CIVIC LEADERSHIP: LAW ENFORCEMENT DOMINATES PORTRAYALS OF CIVIC LEADERSHIP.**

Elected officials, political candidates for elected office, and non-elected government officials/civil servants are portrayed far less than other civic professionals. Elected officials show up in 11% of episodes, civil servants/non-elected government officials show up in 8%, and political candidates show up in 2% of episodes. By contrast, law enforcement and criminal justice system professionals appear in four in ten (41%) episodes, while teachers appear in 13% of episodes. Law enforcement portrayals appear nearly four times more than elected public leaders, and five times more than civil servants.



## **OFFICIAL CORRUPTION: OFFICIAL CORRUPTION IS TWICE AS COMMON AS POLICYMAKING.**

Elected officials, political candidates for elected office, and non-elected government officials/civil servants are twice as likely to be shown engaging in illegal activities than working in policymaking.



## **RACE AND GENDER IN CIVIC LEADERSHIP: WHITE MEN DOMINATE CIVIC LEADERSHIP PORTRAYALS.**

When elected officials, political candidates for elected office, and non-elected government officials/civil servants are portrayed in entertainment TV, they are much more likely to be White (78% White, 23% BIPOC) and identify as men (68% men, 32% women).



## **CIVIC ACTIONS: EVERYDAY PEOPLE ENGAGE ON SOCIAL ISSUES BUT INFREQUENTLY TAKE ACTION.**

Most-watched entertainment TV show characters generally do not engage with politics in storylines, but instead with contemporary social issues. Although infrequent, the top-five civic activities in which everyday people engage are:

- (1) organizing or attending events or giving talks/speeches on issues of public concern or public policy (6%),
- (2) donating or volunteering to address issues of public concern or community needs (nearly 6%),
- (3) boycotting a product or service or engaging in public protests or demonstrations (a little over 3%),
- (4) participating in nonpartisan get-out-the-vote activities or working the polls (nearly 3%), and
- (5) organizing/attending events or giving talks/speeches (2%).



## **MOST DISCUSSED ISSUES: TOPICAL CONVERSATIONS REFLECT CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC DEBATE.**

When they do discuss civic and social issues in entertainment TV episodes, characters are much more likely to discuss contemporary social issues than electoral politics or public institutions. Topical social issues in conversation reflect crucial and timely social justice topics in American life, with a focus on racial justice and racism, immigration, and gender violence.



## **PORTRAYALS OF VOTING: VOTING BEHAVIORS ARE RARELY PORTRAYED.**

Entertainment TV characters engage in voting behaviors (both registration and voting) in less than 1% of top-rated entertainment TV programming; only five total characters (across 658 TV episodes) are shown registering to vote or voting.

# SPOTLIGHT EPISODES:

## HOW TOP-RATED ENTERTAINMENT TV PROGRAMS PORTRAY CIVIC LEADERSHIP AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION



*The Neighborhood*

### POSITIVE CIVIC LEADERSHIP

In an episode of the **NBC scripted drama, *This Is Us* (episode: A Hell of a Week: Part 1)**, one of the central characters of the show, Randall, a successful Black finance professional and city councilman in Philadelphia, organizes a town hall with community members to talk about a controversial housing bill he agreed to. Randall is represented as a hardworking, dedicated city councilman who doesn't take time off work, even in the midst of personal distractions at home. He is also represented as being respected by a diverse cross-section of the community he represents. In the tense town hall discussion over the housing bill, Randall loses his composure and struggles to answer an onslaught of questions. The scene ends with him telling his community that "I can assure you that the housing bill will take all of your concerns in account... I wouldn't support this bill unless I believed in

it. I believed it was good for our district." He then says, "I need you to trust me. Trust me." The episode concludes with Randall being portrayed as a well-intentioned city councilman who means well, but as someone tasked with juggling the extraordinary duty of a city council representative on top of the numerous challenges faced by everyday citizens. The episode concludes with a humanizing moment, as Randall is overcome with the emotional demands of his life, crying as soon as he returns home from the office.

In an episode of the **CBS sit-com, *The Neighborhood* (episode: Welcome to the Election)**, the show follows Dave, a White neighbor in a predominantly Black neighborhood, as he mounts and runs his campaign for city council. The episode centers around his preparation for a debate against the incumbent candidate, Councilman Isaiah Evans.

At first Dave insists on taking a traditional ideas-rooted approach of trying to advance the core topics he would focus on if elected (e.g., budget reform, zoning regulations, recycling, and traffic abatement). Meanwhile, the incumbent politician, Isaiah, is framed as being in office for the prestige and celebrity aspects of the job, rather than to serve as a civil worker. At first, the charisma of Isaiah seems to win the debate crowd, until Dave's neighbor, Calvin, steps in and sticks up for Dave by pleading with the crowd to ask themselves: "Do we want a flash, song and dance man, or someone who has actual good ideas." In the end, the incumbent candidate, Isaiah, remains in power after defeating Dave in a close election. The episode closes with Calvin consoling Dave by saying that he still made a difference for the community, even though he lost the race.

In an episode of the **Fox sit-com, *Last Man Standing* (episode: *Break Out the Campaign*)**, a central character, Vanessa Baxter, a former teacher, decides to run for the Colorado State Assembly. She is depicted as a caring community member who believes that running for office can help her community and children's future. The episode follows her as she seeks advice from several other main characters about the best way to launch her first campaign speech—leading her to consider several cheesy electoral campaign clichés. At the end of the episode, Vanessa abandons her overly-rehearsed approach and note cards, and decides to speak from the heart. Speaking to a small group of supporters who gathered for her campaign opening, she says: "Look, do I have all the answers? I can't promise you that. But I will listen to you. I will work for you. And I will do everything I can to find those answers. That I can promise you.... Because our kids are worth it. And that's why I want to run for State Assembly."

## EVERYDAY PEOPLE ENGAGING IN CIVIC ACTION

In the **CBS sit-com, *The Neighborhood* (episode: *Welcome to the Speed Bump*)**, a predominantly Black neighborhood works with city officials in an attempt to slow speeding cars and make their street safer for children. As part of the effort, Dave—a well-intentioned,

yet painfully naive White neighbor and central character in the show—starts by going door-to-door to collect signatures for a petition. "I did some research, and the city will put in a speed bump if I get a signature from everyone on the street," David tells Calvin, his Black neighbor, on his first stop. Calvin and his wife, Tina, then warn Dave that people in the neighborhood could be a bit suspicious. With Calvin's help, Dave organizes a community event so that the neighborhood could learn more about his effort, ask questions, and sign the petition. After it works, and the city builds a speed bump on their street, Dave reflects on how he was able to work with the city to "do a good thing for the community." He tells Calvin, "You know, getting this done really woke up my sense of civic duty." He then declares a desire to run for city council, acknowledging that he doesn't mind the celebrity aspects of it. Calvin replies by asking if a new government position would mean that Dave would likely be coming by his house less in the future.

In the **NBC scripted medical drama series *New Amsterdam* (episode: *Liftoff*)**, a main character, Dr. Helen Sharpe, is tasked with coordinating a fundraiser to support cancer patients who cannot afford medical treatment. The event, with food and wine, is framed as an effort of well-intentioned medical professionals, and donations are framed as the way for citizens to do good.

In an episode of the **VH1 unscripted show, *RuPaul's Drag Race: Untucked* (episode: *Choices 2020*)**, one contestant, Jackie Cox, shares that she wore a burqa to one of the runway shows in order to give voice to a "small, queer Muslim community" that is rarely heard from on national platforms, and to destigmatize and raise awareness around being Muslim and American. The rest of the cast applauds her bravery.

In an episode of the **Netflix scripted drama series *The Umbrella Academy* (episode: *Right Back Where We Started*)**, the main characters find themselves in the midst of civil unrest in the 1960s. Two central characters, Allison and Ray, a married Black couple who are both activists, work for a nonviolent committee determined to challenge civic segregation. In one scene, Allison and Ray talk to a small group of Black community members about staging a sit-in protest in order to attract national media





*Black Ink Crew*

attention on the injustices in their community. The group talks about the importance of doing a sit-in that's respectful, not violent, and demonstrates "honor and dignity at all times," so that the media doesn't misrepresent their motives by painting them in a negative light.

In an episode of the **MTV reality series *16 and Recovering (episode 4)***, two central characters—the school principal and founder, and student, from Northshore Recovery High School—attend and speak at an annual statewide adolescent addiction event in Boston called "Recovery Day." The event brings together legislators, organizations and other allies who are battling addiction in order to "celebrate recovery and to create awareness." The episode centers around the main characters' efforts to prepare for the event and to provide encouraging support and helpful, positive messages for young people on the road to recovery and life after graduation (and the civic actors who have a desire—and platform—to support them).

In an episode of the **VH1 reality series, *Black Ink Crew (episode: Black Ink Matters)***, a central character of the show, Caesar, the owner of the show's main tattoo shop on Lenox Avenue in Harlem, is inspired to organize his community in support of the shop after facing an eviction notice from a landlord who wants to more than

double their monthly rent. After meeting with a local councilman in Brooklyn, Robert Cornegy Jr., Caesar and other main characters learn about a pattern of similar challenges facing other Black businesses as a result of predatory landlords and gentrification trends. With the support of the councilman, Caesar and his team are inspired to use community engagement and rallies to put 'moral' pressure on the landlord. Inspired by the councilman's encouragement, the crew organizes a rally with posters and megaphones outside of the tattoo shop calling the community to "Save Black Ink!" The protest includes getting community signatures to deem the location as a landmark.

## CONVERSATIONS ABOUT CIVIC AND SOCIAL ISSUES

In the **ABC scripted drama series *For Life (episode: Never Stop Fighting)***, the main character, Aaron Wallace, a Black man who has been wrongfully imprisoned—a character based on the real-life story of a wrongfully convicted Black man named Isaac Wright Jr.—urges a newly-appointed Bronx District Attorney to make better, principled decisions. While signing the papers that officially exonerate him, he looks at the district attorney who had the power—and

the responsibility—to help him earlier than he did, “Listen, now you have a chance to do better. You know that.”

Throughout a series of scenes in an episode of the **ABC scripted drama series *A Million Little Things* (episode: *Guilty*)**, a White mother, Shelly, and her Black daughter, Regina, talk about hurtful experiences with racism that her daughter has experienced in her life and that her mother has frequently ignored. Throughout the arc of the episode, Shelly comes to terms with her White privilege and how she had ignored microaggressions against her daughter for years because it was easier to pretend that racism didn't exist than to face the reality that her daughter had to experience it. In one scene, the daughter tells her White mother, who says that she wanted to raise her Black daughter to not see people based on their race, that, “You may not see color, but I don't have that privilege.” After some reflection, Shelly tells her daughter, “I realize I've done that my whole life. Skating past the bad to get to the good. Pretending the world is better than it is... I turned a cheek to so many things, because I thought it would be easier for you. But now I get how wrong I was.” The episode concludes with both main characters embracing each other in love and understanding.

In an episode of the **Fox scripted drama series *911: Lone Star* (episode *Friends Like These*)**, one of the main characters, firefighter Mateo, reveals his struggles with dyslexia and that he is a Dreamer, an undocumented individual with no

papers. He tells his team: “My parents brought me here when I was two. I didn't even know I didn't have an American birth certificate until I was 17. Look, my DACA status is up for renewal, and if I don't pass this test, I won't have a job or any employable skills. I don't know what I'll do if they kick me out.” Once learning of his status and situation, his fellow firefighters decide to help him pass the exam, while learning more about his Dreamer status and the stipulations of the DACA renewal process along the way.

In an episode of the long-running **ABC drama series *Grey's Anatomy* (episode: *You'll Never Walk Alone*)**, the main characters discuss equity in health care. In one scene, two Asian-American surgeons discuss a White chief surgeon who misdiagnoses right-sided diverticulitis in an Asian-descent patient as appendicitis. The surgeons discuss how right-side diverticulitis is a greater possibility for patients of Asian descent, and how the surgeon didn't scan for this. The two Asian American doctors—Dr. Nico Kim and resident Mabel Tseng—discuss the best way to approach the White chief surgeon, Dr. Owen Hunter, about his oversight without upsetting him. “I think he should know so he doesn't make this mistake again. But I don't know how to talk to him about it,” says Mabel. Dr. Kim then responds, “You don't know how to accuse your attending of being a racist?” In the episode's conclusion, Dr. Hunter reflects on the experience with another colleague, a Black doctor and a central character in the show named Dr. Miranda Bailey. Dr. Hunter tells his Black colleague that



*A Million Little Things*



*RuPaul's Drag Race & RuPaul's Drag Race: Untucked*

he just wants to treat all patients equally, rather than testing some patients for certain things and not others. To this, Dr. Bailey tells him: “Equal doesn’t work for everybody, Hunt. It’s about equity... Patients getting what they need, whether it fits into a protocol or not... So we all have biases, Hunt, including you. What matters now is what you do about it. You’re the chief of trauma. If the protocols don’t work, then read, learn... question... and change them.”

## VOTER REGISTRATION AND VOTING

Several reality TV episodes included brief PSA-style voting messages, which were integrated into the general narrative world of the show. In ***RuPaul’s Secret Celebrity Drag Race (Secret Celebrity Edition #102)***, on **VH1 and Paramount+**, the main contestants are tasked with creating an advertising spoof commercial for a product called “Schwing!”, described as “a little blue pill for men who suffer from ED (electoral dysfunction).” The contestants are tasked with appealing to “hard core voters whose drive to vote has gone limp.” Each contestant then gives various comedic testimonies to the effectiveness of the blue pill in getting them to vote “like a man” and “hitting the polls in all the right places.” The brief, comedic scene ends with one contestant advancing the key message: “Register to vote at [vote.gov](http://vote.gov). Stop playin’.”

In the **Netflix unscripted series *Queer Eye* (episode: *The Anxious Activist*)**, a passionate Gen Z climate justice activist, Abby, is depicted as sacrificing self-care for the betterment of her community and environment. Several climate justice themes and messages are woven into the narrative of the episode, and activism is featured as an effective and important component of civic life. Abby’s home, which also functions as a collective for other young activists, is featured and part of the “makeover” element of the show. Abby is shown giving speeches about the climate and organizing other efforts with her community. She is presented as a role model to her peers, family, and community. During the episode, Abby is introduced to Helen Gym, a Philadelphia councilwoman, outside of city hall. Helen is depicted as a positive role model who is using her civil platform to help fight for/and better her community in ways that Abby admires. The episode concludes with one of the main protagonists, Karamo, stating that the most powerful tool that viewers have to help Abby make positive change is voting: “The only way to save the world, to save your community, is getting out there and voting. You have the power. Vote!”

In an episode of the **VH1 reality series, *Black Ink Crew* (episode *You’re Not Being Nice, Apprent-nice*)**, about a tattoo empire in Harlem, a core narrative within the show centers around a get-out-the-vote event that one of the main characters, Caesar, tries to organize in order to get more people from the Black community

to go to the polls. During the episode, Caesar admits that he didn't see the power of voting in the past. As part of the organizing effort, Caesar meets with a Black city councilman based in Brooklyn, Robert Cornegy Jr. Together, Caesar and the councilman organize a get-out-the-vote effort, with Caesar declaring that "it's time to get off the sidelines, and to get involved." The episode tackles serious voting issues, ranging from community trust to voting rights for the formerly incarcerated and voter registration laws.

In the grand finale episode of ***RuPaul's Drag Race (season 12, episode 14)***, on **VH1 and Paramount+**, a montage in the middle of the show features the main contestants encouraging the audience to register and vote in the 2020 election. RuPaul starts the montage by saying that it was inspired by Madonna's 1995 Rock the Vote video. The montage features the contestants draped in or near the U.S. flag—as Madonna was in her video—while sending messages for everyone to "get that booty to the booth" and register to vote, including through "mail-in or absentee," and make history (and "herstory"). The contestants each include a brief statement about why they are voting, including messages such as: "I vote because it is my right as a U.S. citizen," "Together we have the power to change America," "Not only for the queers of today, but for the queers of tomorrow." Each contestant ends by saying, simply: "vote." Similarly, in several episodes of the VH1 series *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars*, contestants are featured lip syncing to the song "I Am American" while holding signs that encourage viewers to register to vote.

In an episode of **Comedy Central's late night television program *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah (episode: Social Distancing)***, the host, Trevor Noah, talks to U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren. In the interview, the two discuss registering to vote, various reasons to support the Democratic ticket, and what some consequences of the election will be (including impacts on climate change, the Black-White wealth gap, big technology regulations, and health care accessibility). Voting is advanced as a vitally important act for all citizens who care about their community and planet, and the episode encourages viewers to vote. The senator says, "We fundamentally believe that if every American citizen can vote, and get that vote counted, then that is how we build a stronger nation. That is how we build a future together."

Near the end of the reunion episode of the **VH1 reality series, *Love & Hip Hop Miami (episode: 314)***, a brief scene features the host of the show interviewing one of its central participants, Bobby Lytes, about the importance of voting. Bobby tells the audience: "Listen, we all know how important this upcoming election is. We want all of you guys to be our 'plus 1' at this upcoming 2020 election." After the host confirms that Bobby has already registered to vote, Bobby then directs anyone who hasn't registered to visit a VH1 website ([vh1.plus1thevote.com](http://vh1.plus1thevote.com)). The scene also features a get-out-the-vote table and effort to register more viewers to vote.



*The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*



Love & Hip Hop Miami

## CIVIC ENGAGEMENT SYMBOLS AND VISUALS

In an episode of the **NBC scripted series, *Chicago PD* (episode: *Silence of the Night*)**, an election poster stating “Vote Price for Chicago Mayor” is seen in the background at the scene of a shooting that resulted in a police officer being killed.

In an episode of the **NBC’s scripted drama series, *Law and Order: SVU* (episode: *The Things We Have to Lose*)**, protesters are depicted outside a courthouse holding signs with “#MeToo” and anti-sexual assault messages.

In an episode of the **Amazon scripted series *Hunters* (episode: *At Night All Birds Are Black*)**, a show set in 1977 New York City about hundreds of high-ranking Nazi officials conspiring to create a Fourth Reich in the United States, the opening scene features a group of Black protesters on a sidewalk in Harlem holding and posting signs stating various messages of Black Power and equality, including: “Jailing

Our Youth Will Not Stop the Problem”; “Black Power to Black People”; “Free Huey”; “Dope Plus Capitalism Equals Genocide, Damn the Pusherman”; “We Demand Equal Rights Now.”

In an episode of the **Amazon scripted superhero-based series, *The Boys* (episode: *What I Know*)**, the campaign headquarters for a congresswoman includes lots of campaign merchandise (including t-shirts, posters, and buttons), alongside red, white and blue election banners with her face and name on them. Creative posters also fill the walls with messages that include: “F\*ck Hate,” “Citizens for Corporate Oversight,” and “#Resist Vought [the name of the conglomerate].”

# COMPLETE FINDINGS

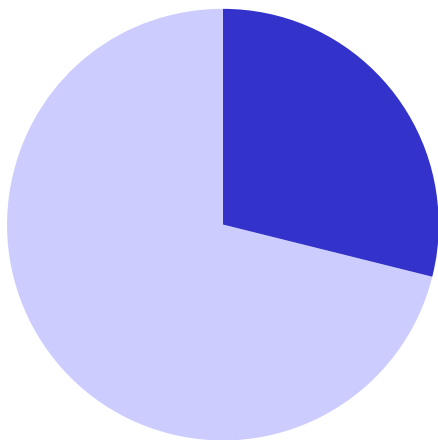
## CIVIC ENGAGEMENT PORTRAYALS BY TV PLATFORM AND GENRE

About three in ten entertainment TV episodes portray civic themes (civic leadership or civic participation).

In the most-watched entertainment TV shows across platforms and genres, portrayals of civic participation (including civic conversations and actions by both civic professionals and everyday people) show up in only about one-third of episodes (29%). The three major platforms (cable, broadcast, and streaming) are equally likely to showcase civic participation, although broadcast networks rise slightly to the top; 37% of civic participation storylines occur on broadcast networks (ex: ABC), 33% are portrayed on cable (ex: VH1), and 30% on streaming-native networks (ex: Netflix).

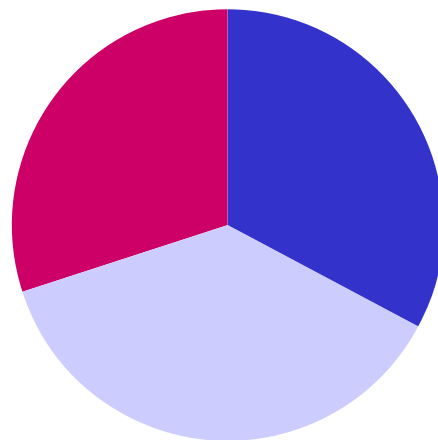
Scripted drama is leading the way; nearly half of episodes (47%) with civic engagement themes fall within this genre. There is more opportunity for growth across other genres.

### CIVIC ENGAGEMENT ON ENTERTAINMENT TV (TOP-RATED FOR 18-34 YEAR-OLD VIEWERS)



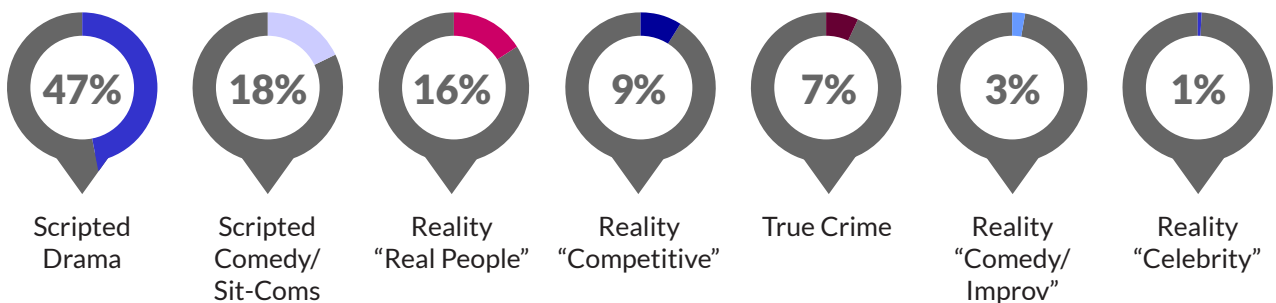
- 29% Civic Engagement Portrayals
- 71% No Civic Engagement Portrayals

### CIVIC ENGAGEMENT PORTRAYALS BY PLATFORM



- 33% Cable
- 37% Broadcast
- 30% Streaming

### CIVIC ENGAGEMENT PORTRAYALS BY GENRE



## CIVIC PROFESSIONALS

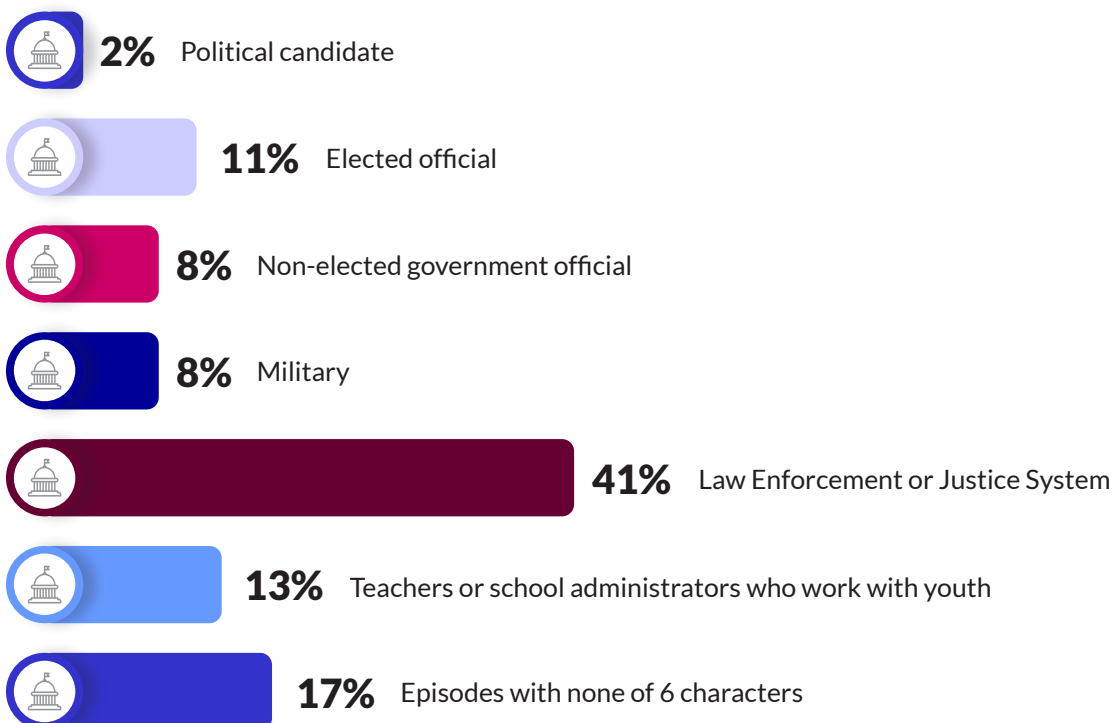
*Civic and elected leaders—those who are leaders in politics, public policy, government—are four times less likely to show up in entertainment TV than law enforcement and criminal justice professionals.*

### How often do civic professionals show up in entertainment TV?

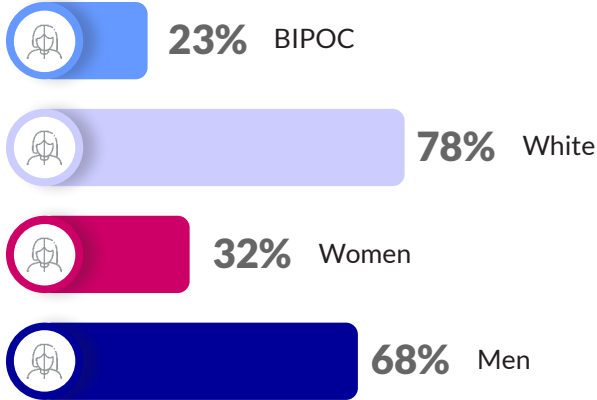
Elected officials, political candidates for elected office, and non-elected government officials/civil servants are depicted in about one-fifth (21%) of entertainment TV episodes. One in ten (11%) episodes portray elected officials, 8% portray civil servants/non-elected government officials, and 2% show political candidates for elected office. By contrast, the portrayal of law enforcement and criminal justice professionals is nearly double that of politicians and civil servants: four in ten (41%) entertainment TV episodes include people who work in law enforcement and criminal justice. When elected officials, political candidates for elected office, and non-elected government officials/civil servants do show up in entertainment TV episodes, they tend to be White (78%) and men (68%).

While they appear infrequently in entertainment TV episodes, the characters in these civic professional roles are featured in a variety of ways: *Political candidates* run for a variety of local, state, and federal offices (e.g., City Council, Governor of Oklahoma, President of the United States). *Elected officials* hold a range of local, state, and federal offices (e.g., mayors, governors, members of Congress, Vice President, President). And *non-elected government officials* tend to focus on well-known roles at the federal level, such as CIA Director, Chief Scientist at NASA, and head of The Department of Child and Family Services. They are most likely to be seen giving public talks or attending public events, rather than the other tasks and skills associated with civic leadership.

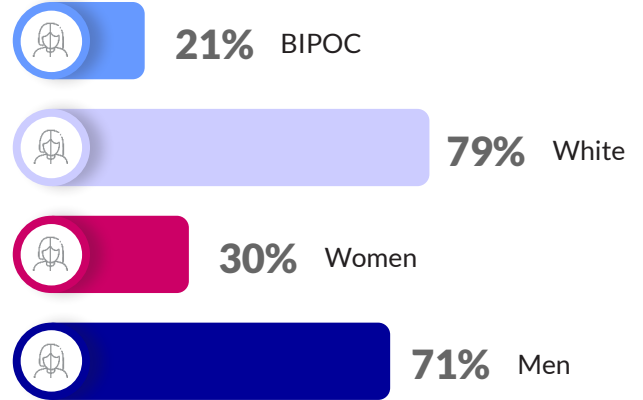
### ENTERTAINMENT TV EPISODES WITH CIVIC PROFESSIONAL CHARACTER TYPES



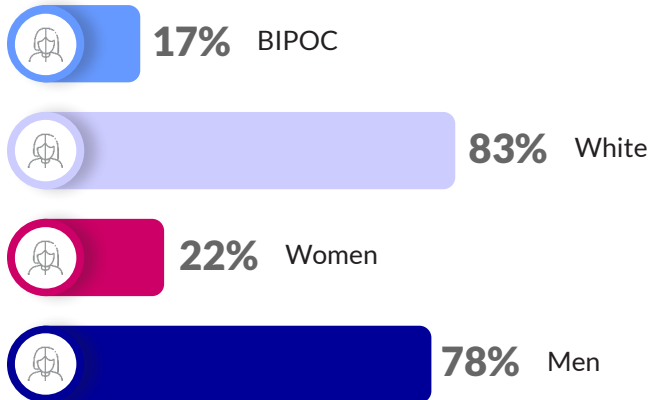
### PRIMARY CIVIC PROFESSIONALS (ELECTED OFFICIALS, POLITICAL CANDIDATES, NON-ELECTED GOVT OFFICIALS): RACE AND GENDER



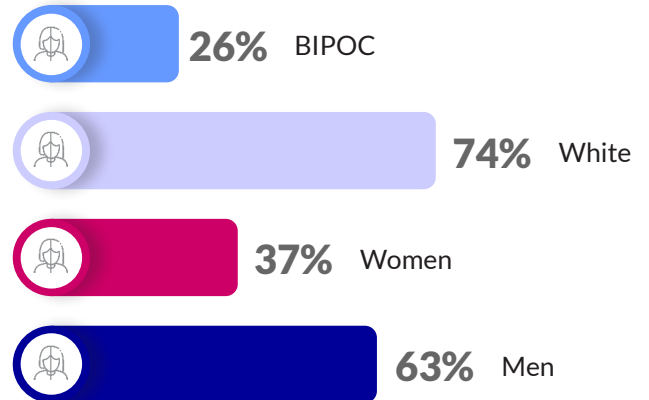
### ELECTED OFFICIALS: RACE AND GENDER



### POLITICAL CANDIDATES FOR ELECTED OFFICE: RACE AND GENDER



### NON-ELECTED GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS: RACE AND GENDER

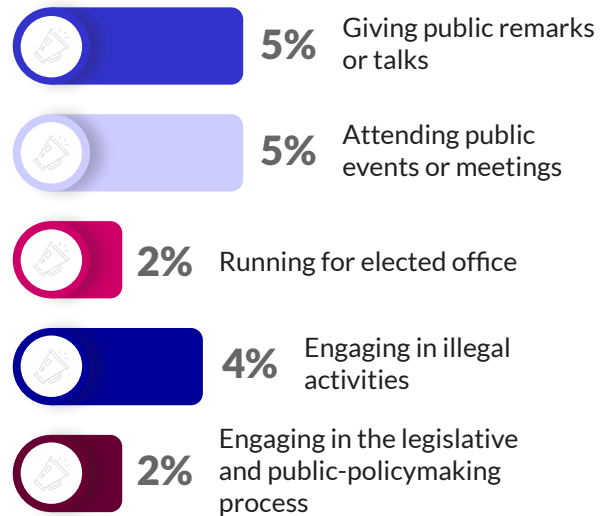




## What do primary civic professionals do on screen?

Although seen infrequently, when they do appear in entertainment TV episodes, elected officials, political candidates for elected office, and non-elected government officials/civil servants tend to give public talks or attend public events more than other activities involved in civic leadership jobs. They are the least likely to be depicted as engaging in the legislative and policy making process itself. Politicians and civil servants are twice as likely to be shown engaging in illegal activities than working in policymaking.

## CIVIC PROFESSIONALS' ACTIVITIES ON SCREEN



## Are civic professionals portrayed with positive or negative traits?

Elected officials, political candidates for elected office, and non-elected government officials/civil servants are equally likely to be portrayed in entertainment TV episodes with positive (competent, professional, honest) and negative (incompetent, corrupt, dishonest) traits. But elected officials are more likely to be portrayed with negative traits than political candidates or non-elected government officials/civil servants.

## TRAITS OF PRIMARY CIVIC PROFESSIONALS ON SCREEN: POLITICAL CANDIDATES

Out of 23 political candidates across all episodes:



48% Positive



13% Negative



39% Neutral

**honest**  
 genuine **charismatic**  
**COMPETENT**  
**KIND** **professional**  
**upstanding**  
**DEVOTED**

positive traits  
describing characters

**reactive**  
**IMMATURE** **UNFIT**  
**UNHINGED**  
**unqualified** **criminal**  
**malevolent**  
 genuine

negative traits  
describing characters

TRAITS OF PRIMARY CIVIC PROFESSIONALS ON SCREEN: ELECTED OFFICIALS

Out 95 elected officials across all episodes



54% Positive



36% Negative



11% Neutral

RESPECTFUL **honest**  
**friendly** **strong** genuine **charismatic**  
**COMPETENT**  
**KIND** **professional**  
**altruistic**  
**humorous** **upstanding**  
**DEVOTED** **knowledgeable**

positive traits describing characters

**a pawn** **FOOLISH**  
**UNLAWFUL** **uncaring**  
**dishonest** **criminal** **DISHONEST**  
 inappropriate  
**CRUEL** **oblivious** **petty**  
 offensive **ARROGANT**  
**murderous** **DRUG ABUSER** **misogynistic**  
**shady** **vulgar** **malevolent**  
**CORRUPT**

negative traits describing characters

TRAITS OF PRIMARY CIVIC PROFESSIONALS ON SCREEN: NON-ELECTED GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

Out of 86 non-elected government officials across all episodes:



45% Positive



45% Negative



9% Neutral

**honest** **professional**  
**DEVOTED** **loyal** perceptive **charismatic**  
**COMMITTED**  
**SHREWD** **professional** **STRONG**  
**ethical** **intelligent**  
**sound judgment**

positive traits describing characters

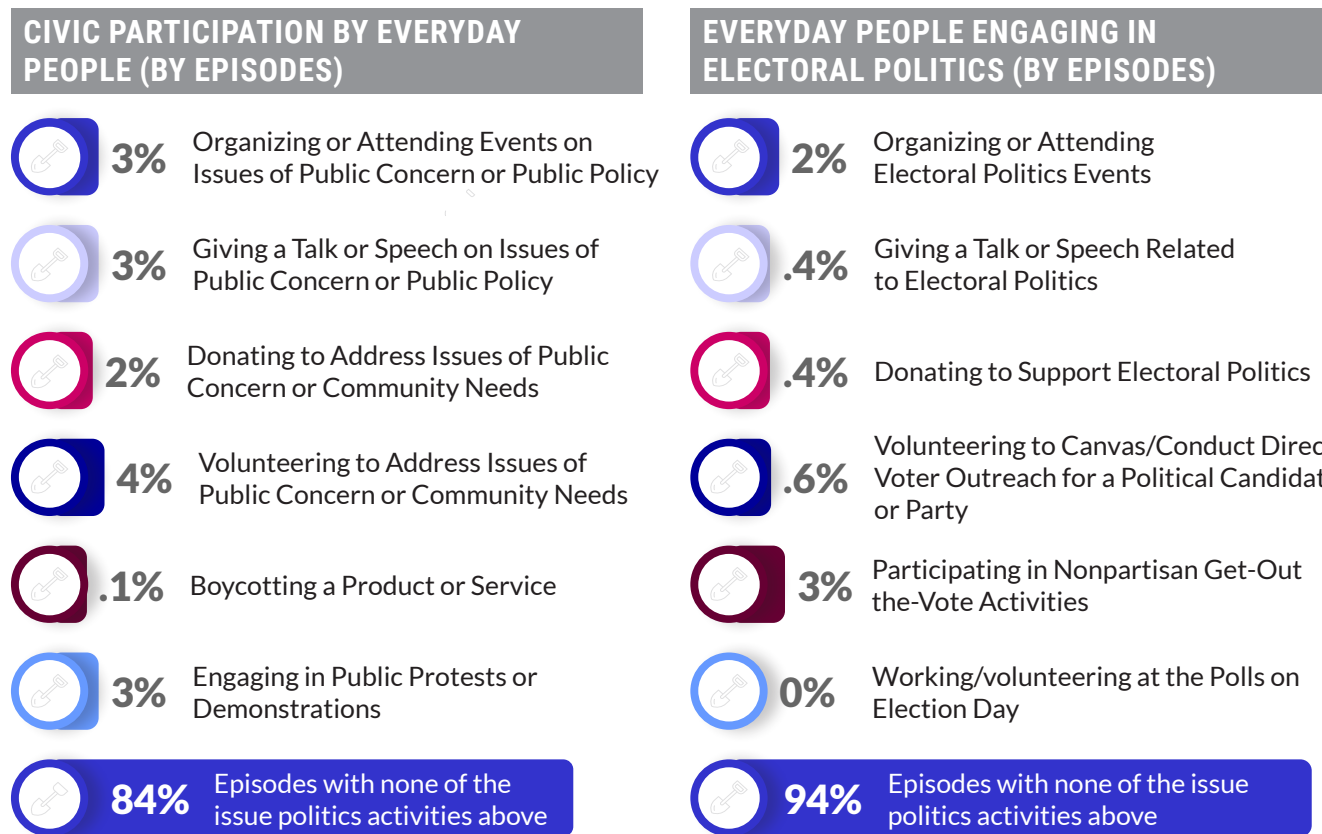
**a pawn** **CORRUPT**  
**COMPROMISED** **duplicitous**  
**collusive** **UNETHICAL**  
**ruthless**

negative traits describing characters

## EVERYDAY PEOPLE PARTICIPATING IN CIVIC LIFE

About one-fifth (21%) of entertainment TV episodes portray ordinary people participating in civic life.

In most-watched entertainment TV, everyday people are more likely to engage in civic actions related to topical social issues than electoral politics, although civic behavior of any kind is infrequent. Top civic activities are: volunteering to address issues of public concern or community needs (4% of episodes depicted this behavior), organizing or attending events on issues of public concern or public policy (in 3% of episodes), and giving a talk or speech on issues of public concern or public policy (a little less than 3% of episodes).



## CONVERSATIONS ABOUT CIVIC AND SOCIAL ISSUES

*Ordinary people are more likely to be depicted in conversations about civic and social justice issues than electoral politics. Conversations mirror contemporary concerns: mental health and substance abuse, gender violence, racism, and immigration.*

Informal conversations about civic and social issues between characters are eight times more likely to focus on issues of social justice concerns than electoral politics (16% vs. 2% of total episodes). Characters' conversations about issues address a broader range of topics that align with contemporary challenges in American society. The most frequently occurring issue themes aligned with topical areas of public debate and concern: racism, racial and social disparities, and genocide; mental health and substance abuse; gender and sexuality-based discrimination and violence; immigration policies and experiences; children's rights and protection; and healthcare systems and health equity. However, these conversations rarely turned into any steps to model skills, approaches, or actions to respond to the challenges—nor did they connect with public policy or structural acts.

### CONVERSATIONS ABOUT SOCIAL & CIVIC ISSUES VS. ELECTORAL POLITICS (BY EPISODES)



**2%** Conversations about Electoral Politics



**16%** Conversations about Issues of Public Concern, Public Policy, or Community Needs

## SOCIAL & CIVIC CONVERSATION TOPICS (BY EPISODES)

17%

### Mental Health & Substance Abuse



**Example subtopics:**

- Teen anxiety, self-harm, and depression
- Suicide

- Alcoholism
- Drug addiction and overdosing
- Mental health treatment

17%

### Gender & Sexuality-Based Violence and Discrimination



**Example subtopics:**

- Sexual assault/date rape
- Domestic violence
- LGBTQ and/or transgender rights, discrimination or hate crimes

- Gender equality, stereotypes, and pay equity
- Reproductive rights

16%

### Racism, Disparities, & Genocide



**Example subtopics:**

- Mass incarceration/wrongful imprisonment of Black citizens
- COVID-19 (Anti-Asian hate/racism, disproportionate health outcomes for Black Americans)

- Underrepresentation of Latino leaders in corporate America
- Muslim travel ban
- Anti-semitism/finding and holding former Nazi leaders accountable

15%

### Immigration Policies & Experiences



**Example subtopics:**

- Immigration requirements, relationships, and green cards
- Dreamer status/DACA renewal

7%

### Children's Rights & Protection



**Example subtopics:**

- Bullying
- Child abuse/neglect/sexual assault

- Trafficking of minors
- Foster care/adoption issues and related trauma

6%

### Healthcare Systems & Health Equity



**Example subtopics:**

- Health insurance access
- Exorbitant medical bills
- Health equity issues related to income and race

- Healthcare philanthropy and fundraising

21%

### Other Topic Areas



**Example subtopics:**

- Environmental protection, general criminal justice/prison reform, low-income families/poverty, housing policies, Puerto Rican statehood, school security policies

## VOTING BEHAVIORS AND MESSAGES

*Less than 1% of entertainment TV episodes feature citizens registering to vote or voting in elections.*

Across genres and platforms, voter registration and voting are activities that barely register in entertainment TV episodes. Across the full sample, only five characters were shown registering to vote or voting; in other words, 0.8% of episodes depict voting activities. Of these five, three were women, three were BIPOC, and one was identified as LGBTQ. In parallel, voting messages related to the ease and efficacy of voting appear rarely in entertainment TV episodes.

Voting messages related to why voting is important appeared a total of 47 times across the 658 episodes. Thematically, almost half of these messages (n=22, 47%) described voting as a civic duty or necessary to preserve and strengthen democracy. Other miscellaneous messages included themes related to removing unsatisfactory leaders from office, making one's voice heard, empowering communities, or making history with a vote. The most prominent message, at 0.6%, is "Registering to Vote is Easy." Other voting efficacy messages appear in 0.3% episodes or less: "Voting is easy," "Voting doesn't really change or accomplish anything," and "Voting is more difficult for some Americans than others."

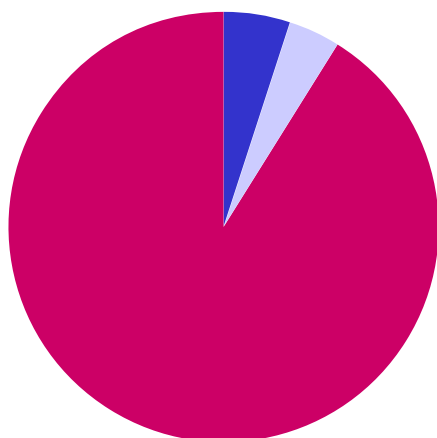
Voting messages that do not appear at all in most-watched entertainment TV: "Registering to vote is a hassle," "Registering to vote is more difficult for some Americans than others," and "Voting is a hassle." This is a net positive, given that these negative messages may not inspire voter empowerment.

## CIVIC ENGAGEMENT SYMBOLS AND VISUALS

*Entertainment TV generally does not display visuals or symbols of civic engagement and participation.*

About 91% of entertainment TV episodes contain no visuals or signage dealing with civic participation, from voter registration to voting to volunteering to civic and community service. Electoral politics visuals (like political election signs) and voting messages are roughly equal, but both are depicted infrequently.

### SYMBOLS, SIGNS, AND VISUALS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN ENTERTAINMENT TV



- 5% Electoral Politics Visuals
- 4% Issue Politics Visuals
- 91% Episodes that contained no civic engagement symbols, signs, or visuals

# CONCLUSION AND OPPORTUNITIES

Entertainment TV continues to play a powerful role in reflecting and shaping the country in which we want to live. History provides many positive examples of entertainment as a fuel for social change that expands equity and justice, or a cultural force that inspires us to be better neighbors and members of our communities. In this portrait of the top-rated entertainment TV programs watched by an influential and important constituency that will shape the trajectory of the United States—18-34-year-old viewers—authentic civic leadership and effective civic engagement are not nearly as visible as they could be. Civics education is vitally important in ensuring a thriving democracy in the United States, and the entertainment industry can be part of imagining and building this future. The findings here point to opportunities for deeper connections between popular culture storytellers and robust civic life and participation.

- **Room to Increase Civic Engagement Portrayals Across Genres:** While scripted drama and comedy are the primary entertainment TV genres that reflect civic engagement most readily, examples exist across unscripted TV and genres. In other words, all genres of entertainment television are ripe for exploration of storylines about civic leadership and engagement.
- **Opportunity to Move Beyond Civic Conversation to Civic Action:** Civic conversations in entertainment TV present an opportunity area for civic storytelling. TV shows and storylines that are already addressing topical social and civic issues might take the narratives into deeper places, connecting conversations with civic actions and behaviors that actually address social problems. Civic conversations—already happening in popular entertainment TV episodes—provide a ready-made foundation to showrunners and writers who may wish to extend stories to explore civic leadership and action, and what is possible when people gain power to make real progress. These developments will open a new realm of conflicts and surprises for characters and storylines.
- **Space for More Authentic Portrayals of Civic Leaders:** Civic leaders and officials show up infrequently in entertainment TV, and when they do, they often appear in a negative light—as corrupt or incompetent. While this surely reflects some realities, a new generation of civic leaders is running for office and making a difference around the country. Their unexpected and entertaining stories are waiting to be told.
- **Opportunity to Portray More Women and BIPOC Civic Leaders, Less Law Enforcement and Military:** Women and BIPOC civic leaders can be found in every corner of American life, from federal to state and local levels. And yet, they are not nearly as visible in popular culture. This presents opportunities for more storytelling about exciting characters working to make a difference in their communities through consensus and the people’s will. With more collaboration and engagement, we may be able to see a different model of the country than one dominated by policing and the military.
- **Characters Taking Action Can Empower Citizens:** The American people are interested in change on serious issues we face together, including racism and economic inequities. Storylines that show characters taking effective action—and connecting to public policy—can be empowering and inspiring to audiences.
- **Voting and Voter Registration Can Be Demystified:** By far, the kind of civic participation (and even conversation) that shows up the least in top entertainment TV is voter registration and voting, the very bedrock of democracy in the United States. Messages and character portrayals that position voting—not only in national elections, but on the state and local level, in midterms as well as primary presidential election years—as a way to implement real social change on social issues can be valuable in strengthening our civic fabric. Together, we can build a stronger and healthier democracy.

# METHODOLOGY APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A: TV PROGRAMS AND DATA SOURCES FOR TOP-RATED ENTERTAINMENT TV

(18-34-year-old viewers in the United States)

TV program data sources:

(1) Nielsen, L+7, 12/30/19-12/27/20, P18-34. Prime Plus (7p-12a). Excludes repeats, news and sports programming. 3 telecasts minimum.

(2) Npower, 12/30/19-12/27/20, P18-34.

SHOW NAME	FQ	SHOW NAME	FQ
13 REASONS WHY	5	CATFISH: THE TV SHOW	5
16 & PREGNANT	5	CHALLENGE, THE	5
16 AND RECOVERING	4	CHICAGO FIRE	5
90 DAY FIANCE	5	CHICAGO MED	5
90 DAY FIANCE: BEFORE THE 90 DAYS	5	CHICAGO PD	5
90 DAY FIANCE: HAPPILY EVER AFTER?	5	CIRCLE, THE	5
90 DAY FIANCE: THE OTHER WAY	5	CRIMINAL MINDS	5
911	5	DAILY SHOW WITH TREVOR NOAH, THE	5
911: LONE STAR	5	DANCING WITH THE STARS	1
A MILLION LITTLE THINGS	5	DEAD TO ME	5
ALTERED CARBON	5	DEPUTY	5
AMAZING RACE, THE	4	DOUBLE SHOT AT LOVE WITH DJ PAULY D & VINNY	5
AMERICA'S GOT TALENT	1	EMPIRE	5
AWKWAFINA IS NORA FROM QUEENS	5	EX ON THE BEACH	4
BACHELOR, THE	5	FAMILIES OF THE MAFIA	5
BACHELORETTE, THE	5	FAMILY GUY	5
BAR RESCUE	5	FBI	5
BIG BROTHER	5	FBI: MOST WANTED	5
BIG MOUTH	5	FLASH, THE	5
BIG SKY	5	FLORIBAMA SHORE	5
BLACK INK CREW	5	FOR LIFE	5
BLACK INK CREW CHICAGO	5	FULLER HOUSE	5
BLUE BLOODS	5	GOOD DOCTOR, THE	5
BOB'S BURGERS	5	GOOD GIRLS	5
BOJACK HORSEMAN	5	GOOD PLACE, THE	4
BOSS BABY: BACK IN BUSINESS	5	GRACE AND FRANKIE	5
BOYS, THE	5	GREY'S ANATOMY	5
BROOKLYN NINE-NINE	5	HAWAII FIVE-O	5
BULL	5	HENRY DANGER	5
BUSCH FAMILY BREWED, THE	5	HOW TO GET AWAY WITH MURDER	5



SHOW NAME	FQ
HUNTERS	5
I CAN SEE YOUR VOICE	5
INK MASTER	5
JEFFREY EPSTEIN: FILTHY RICH	4
JERSEY SHORE: FAMILY VACATION	5
KEEPING UP WITH THE KARDASHIANS	5
KILLER INSIDE: THE MIND OF AARON HERNANDEZ	3
LAST MAN STANDING	5
LAW AND ORDER: SVU	5
LEGO MASTERS	5
LOCKE & KEY	5
LOUD HOUSE, THE	5
LOVE & HIP HOP	5
LOVE & HIP HOP ATLANTA	5
LOVE & HIP HOP MIAMI	5
LOVE IS BLIND	5
LUCIFER	5
MAGNUM P.I.	5
MANIFEST	5
MASKED SINGER, THE	5
MODERN FAMILY	5
NARCOS: MEXICO	5
NCIS	5
NCIS: LOS ANGELES	5
NEIGHBORHOOD, THE	5
NEW AMSTERDAM	5
ON MY BLOCK	5
ORDER, THE	5
OUTER BANKS	5
OZARK	5
PRODIGAL SON	5
QUEEN'S GAMBIT, THE	5
QUEER EYE	5
RANCH, THE	5
RATCHED	5
REAL HOUSEWIVES OF ATLANTA, THE	5
RESIDENT, THE	5
REVENGE PRANK	5
RICK AND MORTY	5
RIDICULOUSNESS	5
ROOKIE, THE	5

SHOW NAME	FQ
RUPAUL'S DRAG RACE	5
RUPAUL'S DRAG RACE ALL STARS	5
RUPAUL'S DRAG RACE ALL STARS: UNTUCKED	5
RUPAUL'S DRAG RACE: UNTUCKED	5
RUPAUL'S SECRET CELEBRITY DRAG RACE	4
S.W.A.T.	5
SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE	5
SCHITT'S CREEK	5
SEAL TEAM	5
SHARK TANK	5
SIESTA KEY	5
SIMPSONS, THE	5
SINGLE PARENTS	5
SPACE FORCE	5
STATION 19	5
SUPERSTORE	5
SWEET MAGNOLIAS	4
T.I. & TINY: THE FAMILY HUSTLE	5
TEEN MOM	5
TEEN MOM II	5
TEEN MOM: YOUNG AND PREGNANT	5
THE BACHELOR PRESENTS: LISTEN TO YOUR HEART	5
THE MASKED SINGER: AFTER THE MASK	4
THIS IS US	5
TIGER KING: MURDER, MAYHEM, AND MADNESS	5
TRIALS OF GABRIEL FERNANDEZ, THE	5
TRUE LIFE CRIME	5
TYLER PERRY'S ASSISTED LIVING	5
TYLER PERRY'S HOUSE OF PAYNE	5
TYLER PERRY'S SISTAS	5
TYLER PERRY'S THE OVAL	5
UMBRELLA ACADEMY, THE	5
UNSOLVED MYSTERIES	5
VANDERPUMP RULES	5
VIRGIN RIVER	5
WALKING DEAD, THE	5
WILD 'N OUT	5
WORLD OF DANCE	5
YELLOWSTONE	5
YOUNG SHELDON	5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>687</b>

## APPENDIX B: GLOSSARY OF CHARACTER CODING CATEGORIES

- **Character:** A “character” in this study can refer to both fictional characters and real people showcased in reality television or other genres.
- **Political Candidates for Elected Office:** Individuals who seek an elected position at the local, state, or federal level.
  - Examples: presidents, vice-presidents, federal congresspersons (senators and representatives), state legislators, governors, lieutenant governors, mayors, etc.
  - Exclude: attorneys general, judges, district attorneys or others in the Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice System categories (below). Some in this category can be elected to public office, but given that this differs from one municipality to the next, and TV programming does not offer sufficient contextual cues to appropriately code for “elected” members of the criminal justice system, these characters are all coded within the separate Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice System categories.
- **Elected Officials:** Individuals who hold an elected position at the local, state, or federal level, including elected officials running for reelection or another office.
  - Examples: presidents, vice-presidents, federal congresspersons (senators and representatives), state legislators, governors, lieutenant governors, mayors, etc.
  - Exclude: attorneys general, judges, district attorneys or others in the Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice System Characters categories (see below).
- **Non-Elected Government Officials/Civil Servants:** Individuals who are employed by a local, state, or federal government entity or agency, but were not elected by the public into office. Officials/civil servants in this category have some decision-making or regulatory ability, have impact on how a policy crafted by elected officials is implemented, and tend to comprise the higher-paying leadership roles within a government office or agency. For the purpose of this study, we also include officials appointed by elected officials, such as the president’s cabinet members.
  - Examples: Director of a federal government agency (e.g. director of NIAID, the U.S. Postmaster General, director of a public transport or public works department, city managers or clerks, directors of local public health departments, director of a state’s prison system, a manager at a state department of Motor Vehicles).
  - Exclude: government workers who have less responsibilities or decision-making ability within a government agency who tend to comprise lower-paying, subordinate roles (e.g., administrative assistant at the DMV, or town hall, public education staff, or mail carrier.) For purposes of this study, exclude all first responder leaders and managers such as fire station captains, paramedic captains and 911 dispatch supervisors/managers.
  - Exclude: attorneys general, judges, district attorneys or anyone else who belongs in the Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice System categories.
- **Law Enforcement Characters:** Individuals employed by a local, state, or federal government to enforce the laws of a jurisdiction (excluding any military personnel). These are people who work on the ground and do the work of enforcing the law. For example, a high-level FBI director is coded in Non-Elected Government Officials & Civil Servants. An FBI agent that regularly goes into the field would be coded in the Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice System categories. A sheriff in the U.S. (even if elected) typically performs law enforcement duties and is therefore considered similar to police officers for the purpose of this study.

- Examples: Sheriff, police officer, Chief of Police, police detectives, FBI agents, CIA agents, immigration enforcement officers.
  - Exclude: High-level FBI or CIA directors that primarily serve as civil servants and don't regularly go into the field to enforce the law. Any individual identified verbally or visually as a member of the military.
- **Criminal Justice System Characters**: Individuals who are judges or lawyers and are employed by a local, state, or federal government in the civil, criminal, immigration, traffic, etc. court system.
    - Examples: federal judges, state judges, county judges, federal or state attorneys general, district attorneys, prosecutors working for any district attorney or attorneys general, public defenders.
    - Exclude: Any individual identified verbally or visually as a member of the military.
- **Military Characters**: Individuals that are actively part of the armed services including soldiers, members of the reserve, and any ranked officers.
    - This definition includes anyone who is identified verbally or visually as a member of the military. This can include a variety of non-civilian occupational roles (e.g., soldiers on the front line, military doctors/nurses, military scientists/engineers). A visual cue to make a decision might be whether the individual is in uniform or not or driving/using a military asset. Individuals in military attire and/or operating military assets would clearly be coded as military.
- **School Teachers/Educators**: Individuals who directly contribute to student learning and development in a school for youth. Includes teaching staff (teachers, special educators, librarians, physical education teachers/coaches), high-level administrators who oversee a school's curriculum and its teachers (principals, vice-principals, etc.), and guidance counselors that help students maneuver emotional/educational difficulties or plan their curriculum and career choices. These individuals can work in a public or private school setting for purposes of this study (given the lack of dialogue or visual cues that can reliably signify either "public" or "private").
    - Exclude: for purposes of this study, non-teaching related staff (e.g., maintenance staff, attendance secretary etc.).

# **WATCHING OUT FOR DEMOCRACY**

**HOW ENTERTAINMENT TV PORTRAYS  
CIVIC LEADERSHIP AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT  
IN THE UNITED STATES**



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