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Dr. Stephen Depoe
Dr. William Jennings
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Julie Stewart

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Committee Chair: Dr. John Lynch
Abstract

This study examines the rhetoric of the cartoon South Park. South Park is a popular culture artifact that deals with numerous contemporary social and political issues. A narrative analysis of nine episodes of the show finds multiple themes. First, South Park is successful in creating a polysemous political message that allows audiences with varying political ideologies to relate to the program. Second, South Park’s universal appeal is in recurring populist themes that are anti-hypocrisy, anti-elitism, and anti-authority. Third, the narrative functions to develop these themes and characters, setting, and other elements of the plot are representative of different ideologies. Finally, this study concludes that parody is a unique form of commentary with a wide appeal and this is a contributing factor in South Park’s popularity among multiple audiences.
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In the year following Hurricane Katrina, *South Park* presented a critique of the blame game that followed, parodying liberals and conservatives alike as they showed the citizens of *South Park* ignoring the needs of the people in a neighboring town that flooded after its beaver dam broke. “It’s George Bush’s fault!” exclaims one citizen “George Bush doesn’t care about beavers!” Two other townspeople converse: “George Bush didn’t break that beaver dam! It was terrorists and Al Qaeda!” “Yeah, they’ve been secretly building beaver dam WMD’s for years now!” As conservatives and liberals around the town argue, the flood waters continue to rise in Beaverton, and it is only the children who feel compelled to go help save the people. Other episodes of *South Park* include a parody of global warming; presenting an insane and friendless Al Gore who is so desperate for popularity that he creates a creature called “ManBearPig” which is “half man, half bear, and half pig”—a symbol for global warming—that he is obsessed with throughout the episode. Another episode parodies the Iraq war and presents a fanatical George W. Bush as they show him invading heaven in an effort to track down and eliminate Sadaam Hussein.

When *South Park* first appeared on Comedy Central in 1997, older liberals and conservatives disapproved of its use of profanity, crude topics, and overall disrespect toward everyone. For example, when the show first aired, Peggy Charren, the founder of a group called Action for Children’s Television, called *South Park* a “danger to democracy” (Martin, 56). Additionally, many elementary and middle schools banned *South Park* related clothing or toys and sent letters home to parents, stating, “*South Park*
might look innocuous at a glance, but the content contains inappropriate language and racial slurs” (Huff, 1998, 102).

On the other hand, the show has become quite popular among younger audiences. During its first year on television, *South Park’s* audience grew, as it was viewed in nearly 3 million American homes each week (as well as by large numbers of college students who do not show up in Nielsen ratings) and was the second most watched cable program in 1997 (Huff, 1998). One critic states, “One of the two worst mistakes I've ever made as a television critic…was the day I decided that *South Park* was an unpleasant, shoddily made, one-trick-pony of a cartoon show that had run out of ideas” (Delingpole, 19). He goes on to explain that he now appreciates *South Park* for its use of parody, politically incorrect plots, and irreverent storylines. The popularity of the show among people of varying backgrounds is evidence of the fact that *South Park* operates by simultaneously using and parodying liberal and conservative variants of the dominant ideology. This chapter will provide a theoretical rationale for the research project, a description of the show and its popular reception, and then introduce the research questions guiding this study of politics and parody in the adult-themed cartoon *South Park."

**Background/Context**

*South Park* is a show that deals with multiple political issues, often times lampooning both sides of an issue in an effort to expose the ridiculous nature of many political or social debates. Issues that have been examined over the last 10 years include stem cell research, environmentalism, the evolution/creation debate, abortion, gay marriage, sex-education, sex-changes, elections/voting, smoking, tolerance/political
correctness, hate crime legislation, and freedom of speech. The show is an important artifact of the 1990’s and 2000’s that contains social commentary that is worthy of study.

This cartoon focuses on the lives of four boys in the third grade growing up in the fictitious town of South Park, Colorado. The characters often represent themes and potentially offer a perspective or ideology that will be the focus of parody or critique. Eric Cartman is a rude, selfish, overweight, loudmouth who bullies the other boys. Kenny McCormack is poor and, for the first few seasons of the show, dies in each episode. Kyle Broflovski is Cartman’s nemesis and is constantly teased by him for being Jewish. Stan Marsh is an average kid who holds the group together. The families of the children play a large role in the episodes, as do several people at the school the boys attend. At South Park Elementary, Principal Victoria’s staff includes Mr. Garrison and Miss Choksondick who are the boy’s teachers, and Mr. Mackey the guidance counselor. Each of these characters is a caricature. Principal Victoria is self-righteous and out of touch, Miss Choksondick is an old maid, and Mr. Mackey is an ineffective guidance counselor. Mr. Garrison goes beyond caricature and the show has implied that he was gay before they made him a transsexual in 2005. He has also been portrayed as mentally unbalanced. Chef, the cafeteria worker, is a large, African-American man who often gives the boys advice and who is widely known around town for his sexual prowess. Each episode of the show focuses on a different theme, frequently pitting the adults against the children, with one central character, usually one of the boys, “preaching” the show’s message at the end.

*South Park* frequently parodies political issues and ideas. Although liberals and conservatives are often polarized in America because of the differences in values and
ideology, it seems that certain programs intended for younger audiences are able to gather viewers from both sides of the fence (*The Daily Show*, *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, *Colbert Report*, and *South Park*). *South Park* is unique, though, because it is not constantly ridiculing Republican/Conservative ideals the way that *Family Guy*, *Daily Show*, and *Colbert Report* are. The parody in *South Park* is driven by a sense of populism: it lampoons conservatives and liberals for straying from the “common sense” of people and promoting values that fit with that common sense, regardless of conservative or liberal origin.

**Purpose/Justification**

Recently scholars have examined the rhetorical dimensions of popular culture as a way of understanding the values, views, and issues of a particular time period. Shea (1999) states, “popular culture implies the numerous forms, meanings, and practices that members of society find appealing—especially as they relate to leisure.” (1). He also sees television as the most pervasive part of popular culture as it both reflects and impacts contemporary cultural and societal norms. Culture may best be reflected through television shows of a particular time period, given the ubiquitous nature of this medium, with the average American spending 7.4 hours per day in each household watching it (Shea, 1999). Television can reflect as well as impact cultural attitudes and beliefs. Examining the messages of contemporary television programs can guide understanding of cultural changes and cultural ideals for a particular time and place.

Fiske (1986) elaborates on the goal of television criticism, “[these studies] treat the television text and the meanings that it proposes as an object that demands detailed, theoretical analysis which can provide important insights into the way our culture is
working” (201). Television should be analyzed because it is an integral part of people’s lives. It reflects and influences societal norms and ideals. Fiske (1986) proposes, “the need for a television criticism that advances towards the goal of understanding more about contemporary culture and its relationship to the social system” (213). He continues by explaining the means through which this can occur:

We should start with an investigation of the unique characteristics of television as a cultural agent. Television plays the roles that it does in our culture because it is not film, not a newspaper, not a book. We must study its specific characteristics as a medium that circulates cultural products and enables texts to be read from them. This will lead us to a study of the conditions of reading, the relationships between the television text and the sociocultural context of its reading (214).

Television has social and cultural meaning and as a unique medium it should be criticized as just that. Most criticism takes a progressive or radical political stance resulting in an ‘oppositional’ criticism that does not distinguish between the liberal and conservative variations of the dominant ideology. For example, in her study of the episodes of the show Ellen where the main character (and the actress playing her) come out of the closet, Dow (2001) uses a critical lens grounded in a progressive political perspective that critiques the dominant heteronormative ideology. Yet, within that dominant ideology are a number of variants, two that might be described as liberal and conservative. Those variations are not addressed. A similar situation arises in the study by Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002) of the popular television show Will and Grace. Again, they offer their
critique of the show’s heteronormativity from a progressive and anti-heteronormative perspective, and again, do not address variants within that dominant perspective.

This study will add to the body of popular culture/television criticism by exploring *South Park*’s role as a cultural artifact. Specifically, this project seeks to explore the qualities of *South Park* that make it appeal to both liberal and conservative audiences as well as examine the populist appeal of the show. Additionally it will examine how the narrative functions to reflect ideology on the show and the way that parody is used to critique the two main variants of the dominant ideology. In identifying what in the show appeals to liberals and conservatives, I will answer three multi-part research questions while examining nine episodes:

- **RQ 1:** What qualities of South Park make it appeal to both liberal and conservative audiences?
- **RQ 2:** How does narrative function to reflect ideology in South Park?
  - RQ2a: How do specific characters reflect ideology?
  - RQ2b: How do specific elements of the plot reflect ideology?
- **RQ3:** How are the specific conservative and liberal elements of the show organized in relation to one another?
  - RQ3a: How does narrative or other elements of the show organize the conservative and liberal elements?
  - RQ3b: What is the nature of that organization?

In identifying how the show appeals to liberals and conservatives, I will start from definitions of liberal and conservative developed from an examination of the political thought and ideology representative of liberals and conservatives. Additionally, I will
consider how the show’s carnivalesque nature (Larsen, 2001) leads to a parody of elite figures, such as George Clooney and Rob Reiner. This parody and anti-elitism is meant to provide a universal appeal to the show. Next, I will explore how characters and other elements of the show embody the elements of liberal and conservative identified in the literature review embody the negotiation of liberal and conservative ideology. Finally, I will evaluate the relationship of the liberal and conservative appeals to one another and identify how the narrative creates a specific relationship between the liberal and conservative elements as well as the overall populist appeal of the show. Answering these questions will be the organizing theme of the thesis.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This examination of *South Park* as an artifact of popular culture and an important social and political document is grounded in three broad areas: television criticism, parody and political ideology. This study is located within a tradition of television criticism that focuses on issues of ideology. This broad area will be narrowed by incorporating studies of cartoons as a unique genre. The study of television criticism and cartoons will be related to studies of parody. Finally, this study will identify key features of conservative, liberal and populist political ideology.

Ideology and Popular Culture

Rhetorical studies of television often examine how elements of ideologies manifest in popular culture artifacts. Television frequently transmits a dominant form of ideology. Fiske (1986) examines the role dominant ideology and polysemy play in television shows. He explains

> As these sense-making processes extended beyond the sense made of texts to include the senses made of self, of social relations and of the social structure at large, television was seen as a homogenizing force whose preferred (and singular) meaning was an example of the way that the dominant ideology worked hegemonomically to naturalize itself into the “common sense” of society in general” (392).

In other words, television shows tend to attract audiences through their reflection of dominant ideology. Fiske continues by stating that, “the failure of ideological criticism to account for the polysemy of the television text is paralleled by its failure to account for the diversity of Western capitalist societies” (392). While most Americans may ascribe
to a dominant ideology of freedom, equality, and capitalism, there are vast differences among people as to the role these ideals play in society. Moreover, the idea of polysemy is important when studying television, as multiple messages often arise out of programs. Messages are co-created between audiences and the show, and the viewer interpretation is dependent on a person’s world view.

Television studies often focus on contemporary ideas and the way they are portrayed through various programs. Because of the necessity to appeal to a wide audience, television shows tend to be framed within the dominant ideology. Dow’s studies of expressions of feminism through the popular media examine *Ally McBeal* (2002), *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1990), and *Ellen* (2001) and the role women have played on television. Dow (1990) points out that it is often difficult to critique popular culture from a feminist perspective. Where a literary critic can analyze specific works by women, she proposes that, “feminist critics of television always deal with the discourse of the dominant ideology” (262). Hegemonic forces frequently exist within popular culture artifacts and thus it is difficult to study messages outside of the dominant ideology. One example of this type of framing is *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (Dow, 1990). While the show is widely acknowledged as the first successful portrayal of a single career oriented woman on television, dominant ideology continued to frame issues and the show as whole. The seemingly progressive Mary Richards was an ambitious single-woman living alone, but the “traditional” family structure still existed. Lou Grant filled the father role and Mary filled the role of wife and mother for Lou and the other characters in the newsroom. Furthermore, Dow points out that Mary is the “token” female success story on the program, where other female characters such as Rhoda or Sue
Ann Niven are stereotypical women who are frequently portrayed as dependent on men or desperate to get married. The show then reflects multiple perspectives, but these perspectives are framed/restrained by the dominant ideology.

Therefore, since television shows tend to be framed within the dominant ideology, the challenge for critics becomes one of identifying political strains that exist in shows and examining the interplay between variations on dominant ideology. One tool for examining television shows is the concept of polysemy which allows for multiple and complex readings of texts for various ideological messages. For this study, I will be examining multiple pieces of conservative and liberal literature in order to establish the definitions of widely held ideologies in America. Furthermore, this study seeks to understand the role that the narrative plays in establishing ideology in popular culture artifacts. This paper will examine the use of narrative and parody in the show *South Park* in order to identify the ideologies expressed in the program and the way these meanings are co-created by audiences in order to reflect multiple perspectives.

It is vital to study the role that the narrative plays in communicating the message of a program. The narrative functions as a vehicle for ideology. Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002) examine the way that *Will and Grace* became a successful television program because its progressive themes were shown through a traditional narrative. They look at issues of heteronormativity or popular representations of sexual orientation. In addition, they examine the function of the narrative as transmitting dominant ideology to the audience. Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002) explain, “we argue that *Will and Grace* makes the topic of homosexuality more palatable to a large mainstream television
audience by situating it within safe and familiar popular culture conventions, particularly those of the situation comedy genre”(89).

They go on to argue that through heteronormative framing, the show appeals to multiple audiences. Will (who is gay) lives with his best friend Grace (who is straight). But the show frequently poses these two as a couple and puts them in heteronormative situations. One of the major teasers of the show is the question, “Could Will and Grace ever get together?” Logically, the answer is “no,” but the show continues to frame the plot in this way. Traditional audiences are comfortable with the dominant ideology of heteronormative relationships, and *Will and Grace* acknowledges this through their portrayal of homosexuality. To the average television viewer it seems that a show about the lives of two gay men is progressive, but the heteronormative framing of the program is actually reflecting traditional ideals and a dominant ideology of heterosexuality (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002). Thus while the show is a social force on one level, bringing homosexuality into traditional homes, it is denigrating the movement by bending to meet dominant ideals.

Dow (2001) examines this same phenomenon in the sitcom *Ellen*, and again uses the idea of dominant ideology through narrative as her tool for analysis. The later seasons of the show focus on Ellen Degeneres’s character, Ellen Morgan, coming out of the closet to her friends. These episodes are framed as Ellen confessing her orientation to the straight characters that then “confront” this “problem” and have to “solve” it by accepting her difference. Dow points out that the format was still based on traditional values, “*Ellen* was a sitcom about a lesbian that was largely geared toward the comfort of heterosexuals. In this sense, it differs little from the history of representations of gays
and lesbians on television” (129). Being gay is seen as an issue, because dominant ideology projects that it is an issue. Rather than these episodes being a celebration of diversity, they focus on making homosexuality “comfortable” for heterosexuals.

Gray (1995) argues a similar point about race and television, specifically pointing to The Cosby Show. Gray explains, “The Cosby Show reconfigured the aesthetic and industrial spaces within which modern television representations of blacks are constructed” (79). Gray suggests that although it seemed that The Cosby Show was affecting race relationships in America in a positive way, the actual result was to suggest that African-American families should assimilate into a “white” narrative, and thus gain approval from white people only because of this adaptation. He also notes that the narrative is often used as means of assimilation; the Cosbys, in order to be accepted by the “traditional” American public, must adapt to the dominant “white” ideology, thus there is nothing particularly “black” about the Huxtables. They are as generic as any other television family, and as a result the show is not revolutionary, rather it is another traditional narrative framed through dominant ideology (1995).

In another article, Gray (2001) criticizes the inability of “liberals” to follow through on their own demands of diversity and inclusion in television, and a rejection of dominant ideology. He explains:

Despite pronouncements to the contrary the liberal discourse of diversity and inclusion endlessly desires a subject whose whiteness (and middle-classness) it believes insures cultural, political, and most of all economic legibility so essential for national identity. Disrupting and challenging the borders of this discursive commitment is risky business and threatens to
produce an illegibility that is variously labeled identity politics and political correctness (107).

In short, television tends to reflect traditional ideals because that is safe. Additionally, television producers want to avoid accusations of being politically correct or intentionally political, as this has a negative connotation and could result in negative ratings for television programs. An outward appearance of progressive ideology does not prove that a show is having any affect on a traditional audience, rather it may be asking diverse groups to assimilate into the dominant culture.

In her study of masculine assumption in television and movies, Scodari (1995) points out that in television, the narrative is frequently patriarchal. Where relationships are often framed in an egalitarian way, they actually focus on traditional male and female stereotypes such as the man as hero or the man as dominant. She suggests that television and movies would be more successful if they were to portray equality in relationships and that narrative could function to explore romantic relationships in a more realistic rather than stereotypical way. But she also points out that the way relationships are portrayed is “culturally delegated” (28) and thus a reflection of dominant ideologies. These shows act as social documents that contain truths and stories that shape the way we as people are supposed to act or judge.

**Television Criticism and Cartoons**

Another area where ideologies exist on television is in cartoons. Cartoons are social documents, frequently making us aware of dominant ideals about behavior and judgment. One cartoon that may be seen as a reflection of society is *The Road Runner*. This cartoon show is examined by Bruce (2001) through a mythico-rhetorical analysis of
the message system in the show. He explains that through this mythic analysis of the
Road Runner cartoons that he “will suggest that the children’s animation may actually
offer a more compelling and authentic critique of contemporary culture than is possible in
more scholarly approaches” (230). He claims that cartoons are “social documents” that
reflect and respond to the things that are occurring in the contemporary world of the
show. Moreover, where programs aimed at adults, such as motion pictures,
documentaries, or television sit-coms are often criticized when they make a social
commentary, cartoons often fly under the radar. He explains, “Cartoons can do forbidden
and disruptive things because unlike “adult” media they are not taken seriously” (231).
In examining the rhetoric of Road Runner cartoons, Bruce (2001) finds a rhetoric of
violence. Additionally, he points to a strong anti-technology message in the program.
Many of these messages are ignored or simply go unnoticed because of the playful,
childish nature of cartoons. Significantly, these types of deep analyses demonstrate that
there is more to cartoons than meets the eye.

Lehman (2001) points to two early cartoons that functioned as social commentary
in the 1940’s. John Henry and the Inki-poo and The Brotherhood of Man are two short
animated films that take on issues of racial stereotypes and prejudice. Both were released
in the 1940’s and were used to teach a moral lesson to children in schools and at movie
theaters. These were entertaining programs that were also a means of teaching a lesson
of social equality. Cartoons became a subtle means of educating an audience.

Television cartoons reflect the values of the society that produced them. They can
be examined for social messages regardless of whether the messages are intentional. The
relationships among characters on a show, for example, may give a clearer idea of
society’s views on topics at a particular time, simply because these images reflect a dominant ideology. For example, the function of implicit and explicit heteronormativity in cartoons is examined by Dennis (2003). According to Dennis, “signs are necessarily unfixed, especially in cartoons, which build on inference: A few loops and squiggles, a few lines of dialogue, must suffice to establish that Ruff and Reddy are male (not female), adult (not child), clothed (not naked), and sentient (not animal)” (132). In other words, sometimes the signs in cartoons are so vague that an audience must make their own assumptions about relationships. So while there have been many same-sex cartoon relationships, such as Ruff and Reddy, Yogi and Boo-boo, and Ren and Stimpy, the meaning of each relationship is different. Each cartoon deals with the relationship differently; early cartoons giving no explanation as to why two male characters, such as Yogi and Boo-Boo live together, travel together, and work together. At the time the goals of the creators may have been innocuous, but it still leads to questions of meaning. Later cartoons, as Dennis points out, give clearer messages, “Ren and Stimpy allowed for an awareness of same-sex desire and even homoerotic activity” (135) with plots surrounding reminiscing about the two main characters wedding and with them sharing a bed and making allusions to sex with Stimpy stating, “Is that all you ever think about?” after Ren tries to seduce him into the bedroom (135). Social messages, then, can be either inferred or intentional within cartoons, depending on the audience and the time frame.

Cartoons can also critique the social messages that are being transmitted. More recent cartoons, such as The Simpsons, Daria, and South Park, deal with contemporary issues, such as same-sex relationships, head on, while not always in a positive manner.
Dennis (2003) points out that, “gay-identified people may occur, but the desire that is antecedent to the identity is patently impossible” (139). Although episodes of all of these shows attempt to share positive ideas about same-sex relationships, as a whole they often resort to anti-gay humor or heteronormative plots (Dennis, 2003). Thus the social commentary that cartoons attempt to create can be undermined by various factors such as attempting to get laughs through immature homophobic humor.

Sometimes the social commentary and suggestions in cartoons are purposeful. For instance, stereotypical gender roles have, though history, been established on television programs. Ogeltree, Grahmann, Masson, and Reffeld (2001) analyze two recent cartoons, *Powerpuff Girls* and *Johnny Bravo*, and discover that these popular shows are attempting to change these stereotypes. In order to examine the cartoons the researchers first surveyed first grade students finding out what their favorite cartoons were and measuring the perceived aggression of each of the characters on the shows. Next they watched the two programs, *Powerpuff Girls* and *Johnny Bravo*, coding the episodes for self-compliments, aggression, appearance related actions, and examined these by gender. They found that *Powerpuff Girls*, the show featuring female characters, was perceived by children to be more aggressive, while *Johnny Bravo*, the show featuring a male character, was viewed as more appearance based. They conclude that, “for the two cartoons considered here, our data support a trend towards less stereotypical programming. As more television programming incorporates the changing gender roles in society, we may find television becoming less the purveyor of the traditional status quo and more an agent reflecting and contributing to changing gender roles in our society” (311). Overall the research pointed toward a change in programming, moving away from
a dominant ideology and defying traditional gender roles. In sum, the trend suggests that programs that defy tradition or stereotypes are growing in popularity.

Another cartoon that sends social messages is *The Simpsons*. Wood and Todd (2005) have studied *The Simpsons* and its social messages, examining the role that the cartoon plays in depicting a typical American city. They use the term “omnitopia” to describe the generic town of Springfield, which serves as a backdrop for the show. They explain, “We propose investigating *The Simpsons* as a text embedded in U.S. and global popular culture whose humorous episodes offer serious critiques of contemporary urban life” (208). In other words, cartoons, such as *The Simpsons* go beyond entertainment for children. They are, instead, social artifacts that critique society from a unique perspective. One technique that is often used in *The Simpsons*, according to Wood and Todd, is that of social fragmentation. This is defined as, “the division of communities through political, ethnic, cultural, and economic dimensions” (212). Thus, an episode of *The Simpsons* that examines Springfield from the perspective of the wealthy elite versus the perspective of the working class, is not just a humorous examination of the differences between the two groups, but is also a deep social commentary on class structure in America. The show grows out of the unique American way of life, and shows this life as it is in order to critique the things that are wrong as well as the things that are right in the country.

Television, particularly cartoons, has the power to influence the ideas held by society as a whole. Cartoons are an instrument that can be cleverly used to share social messages or to influence social change, because the messages are often hidden within lighthearted plots and one-dimensional characters. Furthermore, the fact that cartoons
seem to be aimed at children and are not viewed as “serious” may allow more room for social commentary.

**Parody**

Another important aspect of cartoons is their use of parody. Cartoons often deliver social commentary through parody, which is important and can appear in cartoons as often as it appears in other types of shows. A parody is a humorous imitation or portrayal of an event, person, or idea. Rather than an outright statement of disgust toward a social trend, cartoons lampoon current events, social trends, or people through humorous parodies. These parodies rely on humor so that even those who may disagree with the message can hardly disagree with the medium’s attempts to be funny.

Bush, Bush, and Boller (1994) argue that parody itself is an important form of criticism. They state, “Effective parody can serve to help us re-describe what we take for granted as conventional wisdom, rational thought and timeless truth to be absurd wisdom, incongruous thought and unreasonable truth” (68). Parody addresses social issues and consequences and should be analyzed and interpreted (Bush, Bush, & Boller, 1994).

Gottesman (1990) concurs, explaining, “Parody is a sign, in fact, that a culture is simultaneously maintaining continuity and making something new and valuable out of the eternal tension between imagination and reality. Parody offers evidence that a culture has not despaired of making some kind of sense out of its own hieroglyphics” (1). In other words, parody is a social tool used to interpret and comment on significant social ideas.

Gray (2005) examines the role that parody and genre play in *The Simpsons*. He examines the pedagogical role that television shows play for an audience, specifically
examining the rhetoric of *The Simpsons*. For example, Gray points out that advertisements in the Simpson’s hometown of Springfield are regularly mocked:

“Springfield’s promotional culture is drawn even more ludicrously than our own world’s, as *The Simpsons* mocks, derides, and teaches the ad” (2005, p. 229). In other words, the audience is learning as they watch the show, as there is a message in the parody. *The Simpsons* goes beyond entertaining and contains socially relevant messages. Gray (2005) points to an advantage that cartoons have in employing parody, “since jokes make us laugh, many viewers are likely to seek out parody, and few of us are likely to feel imposed upon in the way we might react to overtly didactic messages. Parody can take advantage of this, ensuring that its lessons rarely even feel like lessons” (234). Parodies can criticize social norms or ideals and point out flaws in dominant ways of thinking, without offending the audience.

Although previous literature often examines the way television programs are shown through a dominant lens, research does not often examine variants within dominant ideology. It is important to acknowledge that parody often plays within the dominant ideology. Gray (2005) explains, “with parody, then, the grammar that conceals and carries these ideologies is threatened, allowing the possibility that a single text can modify our understanding of a genre to include an awareness of both its ideological apparatus and the strategies it uses to offer this ideology” (227). Parody works within a culture’s dominant ideology and its main variants. It educates its audience about the strategies used by the dominant ideology, but it often does so in a way that modifies our understanding of the dominant ideology rather than attempting to subvert or overthrow that ideology.
Political ideologies

In addition to understanding the history of television studies, it is necessary to establish definitions of ideology. This study seeks to take a deeper look at the political implications of *South Park* and examine its use of parody and narrative to create a social message. The following paper is my contribution to the discussion. It will examine the ideologies portrayed on the show. Clark (1979) examines the political terms “liberal,” “conservative,” and “radical.” His review of the literature finds that “attitudes toward change and toward society are the key factors in distinguishing liberals, conservatives, and radicals.” In his examination of speeches from multiple perspectives, Clark (1979) shares definitions of speech (in his study of various contemporary political speeches) from each perspective:

Brock defines a politically “liberal” speech as one in which the content reflects an acceptance of the structure of society and favors a drift toward broader citizen participation in government decision-making, and toward increased secularism, materialism, and government planning. He defines a politically “conservative” speech as one in which the content reflects an acceptance of the structure of society and rejects a drift toward broader participation in government decision making and toward increased secularism, materialism, and government planning. He distinguishes speeches of the “radical” right and left from liberal and conservative speeches by arguing that the content of radical speeches rejects the structure of society itself and instead projects a vision of an ideal society.
substantially different than the one in which speakers and auditors are living (403).

Thus conservatives want less government interference and less secularism while liberals believe in more government programs and less religious/moral control. A conservative rejects the idea of big government and values personal success and responsibility over that of the collective, while a liberal believes it is the responsibility of the government to provide for the country through social programs and progressive laws. Clark (1979) found that radicals on both the right and left ends of the political spectrum gave speeches based on an idealist society that was far removed from reality.

Himmelstein (1990) examines the growth of the conservative movement during the end of the 20th century. He explains that economic, social, and national security themes are clear for conservatives, explaining:

In economics, conservatives have stressed freeing the market from the constraints of government. They have consistently equated less government with more freedom and greater prosperity: cutting taxes, domestic spending, and regulation would lead to greater freedom for Americans to produce, create, and achieve and hence to increased national wealth. On social issues, conservatives have condemned the secular, humanistic bent of American culture and its corrosive effects on the traditional family, gender roles, religion, and morality. In regard to national security, conservatives have urged greater spending on the American military to counter the growth of the Soviet military and restrict Soviet power. (14).
Thus there are three ideals that dominate conservative thought: economic libertarianism, social traditionalism, and militant anticommunism. There are conservatives who fall into one, two, or all three categories of thought. The basic tenet that connects all conservatives, though, is a desire to reduce government involvement in private/personal matters which results in increased personal responsibility (Himmelstein, 1990).

In his book *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948), Weaver lays out a plan for restoration from “modern man’s descent to chaos” (129). The first step is “driving afresh of the wedge between the material and the transcendental” (130). According to Weaver, The key to creating this dualism is acknowledging the basic right of private property. Allowing anonymous ownership of property and socialist ideals of collectivism will erode individualism and eventually lead to a downfall of society. He states, “the moral solution is the distributive ownership of small properties. These take the form of independent farms, of local businesses, of homes owned by the occupants, where individual responsibility gives significance to prerogative over property. Such ownership provides a range of volition through which one can be a complete person, and it is the abridgement of this volition for which monopoly capitalism must be condemned along with communism” (134). In other words, like many of today’s conservatives, Weaver values the rights of the individual, the rights of the small business, over the needs of the collective. The government should exist to allow individuals the right to free enterprise, and to regulate against monopolies (thus a Teddy Roosevelt perspective on conservatism). Those who are responsible and hard working will henceforth succeed, and this creates the backbone of a country.
As Nash (1998) studies the intellectual conservative movement he explains, “I doubt that there is any single, satisfactory, all-encompassing definition of the complex phenomenon called conservatism, the content of which varies enormously with time and place” (xiv). He continues to point out that conservatism is often more recognizable through a study of the contemporary ideas it rejects: “Conservatism [is] identifiable as resistance to certain forces perceived to be leftist, revolutionary, and profoundly subversive of what conservatives at the time deemed worth cherishing, defending, and perhaps dying for” (xiv). Basic tenets of conservatism, including less government intervention in people’s lives, capitalism, and a right to private property transcend time, but many other ideas are shaped by current events.

According to Nash (1998), William F. Buckley’s National Review has become the leading journal of conservative thought. In discussing the threat of communism (and its ties with liberalism in America in the 1950’s), Buckley explained that the conservative journal was necessary, “because in its maturity, literate America rejected conservatism in favor of radical social experimentation.” Nash continues explaining, “To be a conservative was to be part of a group of ‘non-licensed nonconformists’ in a world of enormous, liberal imposed conformity. No wonder, then, that a journal was needed for ‘radical conservatives’—those ignored by the ‘irresponsible, well-fed Right’ and abused by the liberals (Nash, 137). This then marked the beginning of a new breed of intellectual conservative. Nash describes the conservative that emerged in the early 1970’s after reviewing the writings of well-respected conservative intellectuals of the time explaining that right-wing intellectuals agree on certain “prejudices” that were fundamental:
Which they articulated and refined in many different ways: a presumption in favor of private property and a free enterprise economy; opposition to Communism, socialism, and utopian schemes of all kinds; support of strong national defense; belief in Christianity or Judaism (or at least the utility of such belief); acceptance of traditional morality and the need for an inelastic moral code; hostility to positivism and relativism; a “gut affirmation’ of the goodness of America and the West. These were but a few constituent elements of the working conservative consensus” (324).

While there is basic agreement of rights of people and private property over the collective among conservatives, there are distinctions that can be made within the group. There are traditionalists, libertarians, anti-Communists, and neo-conservatives (Nash, 1998). Nash explains, “To the libertarians, modern liberalism was the ideology of the ever-aggrandizing bureaucratic, welfare state. If unchecked, it would become a totalitarian state, destroying individual liberty and private property—the wellsprings of a prosperous society” (329). Classical liberalism had been rejected by modern liberals and this created a division where socially progressive libertarians who still valued a limited government began to identify with the conservative movement in America.

Next Nash (1998) explains, “to the traditionalists, liberalism was a disintegrative philosophy which, like an acid, was eating away at the ethical and institutional foundations of Western civilization, creating a vast spiritual void into which totalitarian false gods would enter” (330). In other words, the current state of liberalism was against everything a traditionalist stood for at the time. Finally, Nash (1998) states, “to the Cold War anti-Communists, modern liberalism—rationalistic, relativistic, secular, anti
traditional, quasi-socialist—was by its very nature incapable of vigorously resisting an
counterpart. Liberalism to them was part of the Left and could not effectively
repulse a foe with which it shared so many underlying assumptions. As James Burnham
had put it, liberalism was essentially a means of reconciling the West to its own
destruction. Liberalism was the ideology of Western suicide” (329-330). Those who
rejected communism, socialism, and collectivism saw the liberal move toward this type
of society as rejecting capitalism and thus creating the downfall of the West.

Neo-conservatives began to emerge in the 1970’s. These are moderate liberals,
anti-communist Truman/Humphrey supporters who felt abandoned by the Democratic
Party with the nomination of George McGovern in 1972 (Nash, 330). McGovern was too
liberal for these neoconservatives, and not a valid alternative to Nixon.

Berman (1994) supports this idea of a shift to the right following McGovern’s
nomination and states:

The rightward shift reflected a new reality. Liberalism had become a
pejorative word for millions of voters, who still supported many of the
social and economic programs of the Democratic Party. But they opposed
the cultural and social agenda of left liberalism as it was represented by
the McGovern movement and the supreme Court. Liberalism, in their
view, had become a vehicle for big government spending programs for
blacks. At the same time the Supreme Court’s ‘rights revolution’ seemed
more concerned with protecting, in the words of journalist Harold
Myerson, ‘the one against the many—not the many against the powerful.’
Such was the perception of many once-loyal working-class Democrats,
who now turned against the party and program of ‘limousine liberalism’” (1).

The Christian right, as it has been labeled by outsiders, is a newer part of the conservative movement. Nash points out that while the leaders share the same foreign policy and economic ideas as other conservatives, they tend to stress social/moral issues. Included in this are “abortion, school prayer, pornography, drug use, crime, sexual deviancy, the vulgarization of mass entertainment, and more” (Nash, 331). Liberalism, or secular humanism (the rejection of religious values and promotion of humanistic ideals) are to blame for this decline, according to religious conservatives.

Bobbio (1993) examines the political perspectives in America and finds, “the two axes in politics combine to produce four categories: the extreme right, the moderate right, the moderate left, and the extreme left. The extremists are authoritarian, and do not accept the rules of democracy, and although the moderate left and moderate right disagree over the question of equality, they accept the same rules for the political game” (xvii). In other words, extremists on either side of the political spectrum have a common disregard for rules, where moderates may disagree on issues, but are distinguishable from extremists because they are willing to follow rules. Additionally, Bobbio (1993) explains that the biggest difference between liberal and conservatives is their view of equality. Liberals value equality and thus embrace a goal of liberation, where conservatives value tradition, even if this includes inequality, and embrace a goal of protecting tradition. He explains, “the distinction between left and right corresponds to the difference between egalitarianism and inegalitarianism, and ultimately comes down to a different perception
of what makes human beings equal and what makes them unequal” (69). In other words, the growth of liberalism around the world is based on creating equality.

Starr (2007) points out that, “Liberalism is deeply rooted in American soil, so much so, in fact, that in the years after World War II many historians and social scientists regarded the liberal project and the American civic creed as more or less identical” (1). From the beginning, liberal thought in American has been based on American ideals of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”. Moreover, Starr explains that in American politics the term liberal refers to specific qualities including possessing a “tolerant and open frame of mind, generosity of spirit, breadth of education, lack of prejudice, willingness to acknowledge others’ rights, acceptance of disagreement and diversity, and receptiveness to innovation” (3).

The evolution toward modern day liberalism in American began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as there was a shift toward “progressivism” advocating that issues of the state, labor, and equality were public policy issues. Starr (2007) explains that J.A. Hobson, an economist from this group of “New Liberals” “argued that periodic economic depressions left millions of workers unemployed—their productive power wasted—because of inadequate demand. The poor were unable to sustain a decent life, while the rich could find no outlet for their savings” (102). His solution was an equal distribution of this wealth that he argued everyone would benefit from.

In addition, Starr (2007) makes a distinction between liberal and conservative ideas about the role of government explaining that while conservatives prefer less government intervention, “liberals generally believe that both corporations and the state are phenomena of power that may put freedom as well as other values in jeopardy and
that conservatives aggravate the potential for domination and injustice by turning the state over to business” (150). From the liberal perspective business and government both have powers that need to be kept in check, and thus a purely capitalistic society is not beneficial to the collective.

Based on the previous literature, we can identify several key features of “liberals” and “conservatives.” While both accept “the structure of society” (Clark, 1979), they each have unique features. For the purposes of this project, we can broadly define conservative as containing the following qualities:

- Rejecting broader participation in government decision making (Clark, 1979), which is reflected in opposition to social programs that do not show results.
- Equating less government with more freedom and greater prosperity, which is reflected in calls to cut taxes and domestic spending and to eliminate regulations on business (Nash, p. 14).
- Accepting “a traditional morality and the need for an inelastic moral code,” which would include opposition to “abortion, lack of school prayer, pornography, drug use, crime, sexual deviancy, the vulgarization of mass entertainment and more” (Nash, pp. 324, 331).

Similarly, we can identify the following qualities associated with the term “liberal”:

- “Favors a drift toward broader citizen participation in government decision-making” (Clark, 1979; see also Gray, 2001, p. 107). Part of this would include the creation of social programs by the government as well as the regulation of business (Berman, p. 1).
• Equating government planning, the welfare state and government spending as a means to addressing social imbalances, resulting in more freedom and greater prosperity (Clark; Bobbio, 1993)

• Support for a ‘secular worldview’ (Clark, 1979), implying a more elastic morality than developed in traditional inelastic moral codes. This would be reflected in support for abortion rights and support for projects removing religion from public schools and valuing tolerance and equality (Starr, 2007)

These three-part definitions will allow me to identify broad features of two varieties of ideology in South Park.

Finally, it is important to explore the idea of a populist audience. Kazin (1995) describes populism as “a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bound narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter” (1). In other words, a populist perspective values the common man and is anti-hypocrisy, anti-elitism, and anti authority. Lee (2006) explains that populism “positions a virtuous ‘people’ against a powerful enemy and expressed disdain toward traditional forms of democratic deliberation and republican representation” (356). From a populist perspective, there are multiple areas where a younger generation of conservatives and liberal can agree, and this is most likely where South Park succeeds. The show has a universal appeal when it comes to issues of elitism and world view. Celebrities who are vocal about political issues such as George Clooney (and his infamous Oscar speech), Rob Reiner (and his anti-smoking efforts), Rosie O’Donnell (and her involvement in the 2000 election), and Puff Daddy (and his Vote or Die) campaign are lampooned on the show, ridiculed for
their inflated sense of self-importance and unsolicited comments on social events. This is an area where young people of any political persuasion often can agree. According to Lee (2006), “Rather than understanding these contours historically or as the province of liberalism or conservatism, recasting its common features is critical to theorizing populism as a persistent force in shaping the assumptions, tenor, and boundaries that guide political argument” (357). Populism is the voice of the common man and is not constrained by any particular ideology, rather it is a representation of the people in general.

**South Park**

Specific studies of *South Park* have identified it as a popular show for younger audiences and a contemporary social document worthy of continued scholarly attention, but these studies of *South Park* are few in number. Gardiner has written two articles on *South Park*, both exploring issues of masculinity. The first (2000) compares the Blue Man Group and *South Park*, and claims that *South Park* focuses on masculinity, capitalism, and consumption. She explains:

I saw it as connected with, shaping, and shaped by contemporary masculinity and consumer capitalism. These two cultural events, the *South Park* cartoon show and the Blue Man Group entertainment, exhibited anality in their raucous delight in noise, mess, evacuation, and expulsion. However, this was not the anality of the familiar compulsive character, retentive and controlling. Instead, it was an expulsive anality that I argue is related to the ambiguity of men’s roles and identities in consumer society (252).
She examines the show from a Freudian perspective. From her perspective, *South Park* is analogous to someone who is anal-retentive and suddenly explodes, and this represents society’s imposition of the role of men as being different in modern times due to the mass consumer society of today.

Gardiner, (2005) also studies the movie: *South Park, Bigger, Longer, Uncut,* from the perspective of masculinity in film musicals. Gardiner’s (2005) concludes, “The very crudity of its underlying ideology, of a masculinism that wants to retain the world just as it is, unjust as it is, as the playground of powerful, male-bonded, American white boys who never need grow up and who can continue to enjoy the world’s pleasures and treasures without taking responsibility for them” (61). She sees the show as being anti-liberal/anti-progressive and from her perspective this is an extreme negative. Gardiner also points out that the movie was widely promoted by liberals for its promotion of free speech and received excellent reviews from progressive publications. She explains, “while obviously defending liberal beliefs in free speech and sexual freedom, the film also dramatizes a number of paradoxes about American masculinity. It stages liberal truisms only to transform them, modeling a ludic libertarianism” (51). Thus, she concludes that the show employs a liberal format for sharing less progressive ideals.

Larsen (2001) has written another article that examines *South Park*’s potty humor. In reference to the role the show plays in history he states, “the thematic concerns of Trey Parker and Matt Stone’s *South Park* enable the animated show to be situated as a crucial pop cultural artifact communicating and reflecting the concerns of contemporary subjectivities as produced under the sign of consumption” (80). The show, is in fact, an important artifact that examines society. Larsen claims, “*South Park* depicts the
postmodern sensibilities of the masses, immersed in the carnival, consumptive logics of genealogy, heterology and scatology, and becoming obese in its sacrificial residence in the black holes of carnival, televised history” (80).

*South Park* is an important cultural artifact with political and populist overtones. This project seeks to study the messages of the show and to examine the way parody and narrative are used in order to project polysemous messages that most any audience can relate to on some level.

**Methodology**

This study will answer the three research questions identified above through a textual analysis of *South Park*. According to Gronbeck and Sillars (2001), the specific building blocks of plot used to analyze the characteristics of narrative include theme, structure, characters, peripeteia, narrative voice, and style. Gronbeck and Sillars explain, “a culture is defined in significant ways by the themes that are developed in the stories told in society” (220). Themes are overriding ideas that exist in stories and they exist to reflect and influence the audience. The structure of a story is its construction, the order of events, the themes that are emphasized, and the location of crisis in the story. Characters, according to Gronbeck and Sillars, “are personae representing what is and what is not acceptable behavior” (224). Characters also function to develop the action of the story and they link the story to the audience’s experience. Peripeteia is the change of fortune that exists in stories in order to present “the symbolic pivots upon which individual and social life turns” (226). The narrative voice is the storyteller. It examines who is telling the story, their point of view, and the messages being shared through the story. Finally, style refers to the choice of words, figures of speech, and visual elements
of a story that reflect culture. This study will examine how multiple contemporary political issues are addressed in order to understand how one popular television cartoon negotiates the differences between the two main variants of America’s dominant ideology. Some key contemporary issues highlighting these differences include environmentalism, political correctness, and the role of public schools and the government in promoting morality. Nine episodes of *South Park* deal with these issues directly, and they will be the object of analysis for this study (see Table 1).

**Table 1: List of Episodes Examined**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Environmental extremism</th>
<th>“Rainforest Schmainforest”</th>
<th>“Two Days Before the Day After Tomorrow”</th>
<th>“Smug Alert”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tolerance/Political Correctness</td>
<td>“Mr. Hanky the Christmas Poo”</td>
<td>“Death Camp of Tolerance”</td>
<td>“Cartman’s Silly Hate Crime”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and the role of government, schools, and parents.</td>
<td>“Proper Condom Use”</td>
<td>“My Future Self and Me”</td>
<td>“Butt Out”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Chapter 3: Analysis

An analysis of multiple episodes of *South Park* makes it clear that the show presents parodies of liberals and conservatives, rather than representing a particular political ideology. Furthermore, *South Park*’s humor lies in what it parodies; it combines elements opposing each political ideology, and the polysemy of mass media allows individuals allied to either political perspective to read the show as supporting their point of view. For example, a viewer may treat an anti-liberal perspective as being pro-conservative or vice-versa. In many episodes the appeal exists in the parody and presentation of an “imagined other.” Three broad themes appear throughout these episodes: anti-hypocrisy, anti-elitism, and anti-authority. These themes represent populist perspectives.

The first theme that appears throughout these episodes is anti-hypocrisy. Forcing tolerance on others is repeatedly shown to be the goal of intolerant people; for example, a person preaching that it is important to be tolerant and respectful of diverse life choices is shown screaming at somebody for choosing to smoke. The next idea is that tolerance and respect are not things that can be taught. *South Park* also criticizes attempts at blindly globalizing ideas of tolerance or acceptance, because the individuals within the show advocating tolerance do so on the basis of uninformed assumptions about the world rather than observation and common sense. This anti-hypocrisy theme is also presented in multiple situations where a character’s behavior contradicts his/her words, such as Rob Reiner who is shown as being vehemently anti-smoking, yet is constantly eating unhealthy foods and getting fatter.
The second overriding theme found in South Park is anti-elitism. Elitists are presented as acting in an arrogant and imperialistic fashion because they feel they know what is best for people. Moreover, they are portrayed as being so self-assured that they will do anything and override the opinions and concerns of anyone in order to achieve their goals. Lying is acceptable because elitists are more informed than the common man and believe lying is the only means to their goal of ending what they see as bad behavior.

Part of the anti-elitism theme is an attack on pomposity. Celebrities, politicians, Hollywood, and the media are shown as self-serving and indifferent to and ignorant of the needs or concerns of working class people.

Finally, an anti-authority theme is found throughout these episodes. First, parents and teachers are presented as doing anything necessary to avoid confronting problems in a truthful manner. Second, kids see reality as it is, while adults have distorted perceptions of the way things are, often based on their worldview or self-perception. Adult characters are frequently parodies of authority figures that the audience can easily relate to including parents, teachers, politicians, celebrities, tour guides, or police officers. It becomes clear that the few adults that are presented favorably on the show are those with opinions that can be respected, but these characters are few and far between.

These three themes were found in episodes dealing with environmentalism, tolerance and political correctness, and education and the role of parents, schools, and the government. The following is an analysis of these episodes:

**Environmentalism**

The episodes of South Park that deal with the environment present parodies of activism and apathy. In “Smug Alert” the people in the town become so smug after
purchasing hybrid cars that they actually create a new environmental threat—a “smug” cloud that is growing so big that it will eventually destroy the world. “Rainforest Schmainforest” follows the boys of South Park as they travel with a choir called, “Getting Gay with Kids” to the rain forests of Costa Rica for a Save The Rain Forest rally. Finally, “The Day Before The Day After Tomorrow” parodies the movie *The Day After Tomorrow*, global warming, and the response to the Hurricane Katrina disaster.

Each episode can be viewed differently by viewers with differing political perspectives. While a conservative might see instances of parody that make fun of a liberal, conversely a liberal may see the opposite. In “Smug Alert,” Gerald becomes so smug that he feels he can control other people’s lives. He begins writing fake tickets and placing them on all non-hybrid cars, giving himself the authority that is usually reserved for a legitimate government agency. He exclaims, “Okay, there’s another one…Aw, man! Look at that! Can you believe this? An SUV with a V8 engine, makes me sick!” as he begins writing and placing fake tickets on these cars. In the “Rainforest Schmainforest” episode the liberal teacher is shown as having a secular world view as she repeatedly instructs the kids that the “Spirit of Maya” will save them and to worship Mother Earth and the rainforest, rather than God. When the choir is lost in the rainforest she advises the class that, “We just need to respect our mother rainforest so that she will respect us.” Still trying to get to safety the teacher again states, “Shh. Children, okay, let’s try to listen to what the rainforest tells us. And if we use our ears she can tell us so many things.” She is elevating the rainforest to a status above people. Additionally, there is a projection on the part of Miss Stephens that the rainforest cares about her and
the students and that it will communicate with “true believers” while the kids see the rainforest as a hostile environment.

The episode “The Day Before the Day After Tomorrow” presents a critique of both liberals and conservatives as they react to a flood that is clearly a parody of the Hurricane Katrina disaster. The critique shows that both sides failed to react properly and their desire to blame people rather than nature reflects a type of paranoia where reality is interpreted in terms of the characters pre-existing world-views. For example, in the episode conservatives are quick to blame “terrorists and Al Qaeda” for the flood, while liberals blame “George W. Bush”. The conservatives reply by stating “they’ve been secretly building beaver dam WMD’s for years now.” This blame game excludes those who are looking to solve the problem and makes the mistake of focusing completely on finding fault. The idea of an imagined other is prevalent here as a conservative watching the show will agree that liberals are quick to blame George W. Bush for disasters while a liberal watching the show will agree with the idea that conservatives are quick to tie everything back to terrorism. Both see the other side as being reactionary and predictable, and this is evident in the parody of both political views.

The media is also criticized for over-exaggeration of news stories as the Fox News Channel continues to escalate their stories about the flood making claims such as, “We’re not sure what exactly is going on inside the town of Beaverton, uh, but we’re reporting that there’s looting, raping, and yes, even acts of cannibalism.” The other reporter inquires, “My God! You’ve actually seen people looting, raping, and eating each other?” to which the reporter answers, “No, no, we haven’t actually seen it Tom, we’re
just reporting it.” They are more concerned with gaining attention for their programs than actually reporting the news. Where the media is supposed to be an unbiased source of information, clearly the show presents the media as a source of bias and exaggeration with the only goal being improving ratings, not reporting facts.

An anti-conservative message that might appeal to a liberal audience is seen in the reaction of the townspeople to the flood in Beaverton. Everyone is so concerned with blaming the flood on someone that they insist that the government not get involved in rescuing people. Limited government intervention is a conservative ideal that is ridiculed in this episode, as only the government would have the resources necessary to save the people stuck on their roofs during the flood. Where a conservative would equate less government with more freedom and greater prosperity, it is clear that in this situation government resources could have been used to save the people stranded in Beaverton.

The audience that the show most appeals to is the populist, who is most concerned with the common man, as the show presents messages that are anti-pomposity, hypocrisy, and elitism. For example, in the episode “Smug Alert,” those who drive hybrid cars are presented as smug, self-satisfied, and condescending. After Gerald places a ticket on Randy’s car for driving a non-hybrid car Randy gets mad at him. The following conversation occurs:

**Gerald:** Look, I’m just trying to make the people of South Park aware of a very serious problem.

**Randy:** The problem, Gerald, is that ever since you got a hybrid car, you’ve gotten so smug that you love the smell of your own farts!
**Gerald:** I didn’t think it was ‘high and mighty’ to [closes his eyes] care about the earth!

**Randy:** And that too! Stop talking with your eyes closed! That’s what smug people do!

**Darryl (another driver who was ticketed by Gerald):** Who the hell put this faggy fake ticket on my truck!?!?

**Gerald:** All right, that does it! Come on, Kyle, I don’t want you hanging around with these ignorant idiots!

The smug elitist Gerald also complains about the small-town residents of South Park explaining to Stan why his friend Kyle has to move, “I’m sorry, Stan, but unfortunately you live in a small-minded town filled with ignorant boobs.” Their smugness and continued “smelling of their own farts” creates a “smug” cloud so big that it is destined to destroy San Francisco upon its impending collision with the smug cloud from George Clooney’s acceptance speech at the Oscar’s, which the show ridicules as a self-congratulatory reinterpretation of actual history by George Clooney.

In “Rainforest Schmainforest” the teacher frequently elevates herself, repeatedly telling students, specifically Cartman, that she will change the way they think. This is similar to the government creating laws, such as smoking bans, that “change the way people think” through banning their “bad-behavior.” After being recruited to join the choir to save the rainforest, the students explain, “but we don’t care about the rainforest” to which the teacher replies, “and that’s exactly why you need to go.” On the bus she confronts Cartman for the first time stating, “And you must be Eric Cartman. I’ve heard about you. You don’t respect nature or other cultures.” Eric agrees that she has given an
accurate description of him, to which she replies, “Well, I’m going to change the way you think, kiddo!” Upon arrival in Costa Rica, Eric cries out, “It smells like ass!” to which Miss Stevens replies, “Eric, you respect other cultures this instant!” He replies, “I wasn’t saying anything about their culture, I’m just saying their city smells like ass.” Indeed, again, her reaction is to force Eric to change immediately.

Next, the narrative functions to reflect multiple ideologies in South Park. In “Smug Alert” Gerald decides to move his entire family to San Francisco in hopes of finding a more progressive community that cares about the environment as much as he does. The following exchange takes place among the new neighbors:

Peter: Oh of course [everyone here drives a hybrid]. We’re a little more progressive and ahead of the curve here in San Francisco. [he then farts, bends over to smell it, then stands up again] Ahhhmmmm…[he licks his lips to savor the fart]. Anyway, I’m sure you’ll find it much better here.

Paul: Yes, you’ll find that San Francisco is pretty much more open-minded and grown-up than the Midwest. [he farts, bends over to smell it] Ahhh, [sniff] ahhh, [sniff]. We’re just a little bit more protective of our environment here in San Francisco.

Peter and Paul are emphasizing a secular worldview and insinuating that this is better than a traditional world view. They take pride in being part of a progressive minded city that is “more open-minded and grown-up than the Midwest.” It is clear that their identity is wrapped up in their city, and their smug attitude impacts their perception of the country as a whole. They cannot imagine why people outside of San Francisco are more traditional than they are. They also brag that people are more protective of the
environment in San Francisco, although they are completely unaware of the giant smug cloud that they are creating, which is presented in the episode as a greater environmental threat than anything else in the world.

Cartman’s character frequently presents a negation of what is being presented as liberal. Although he represents a parody of conservatism, he is not portrayed as trustworthy or worthy of emulation. In “Smug Alert,” after realizing he is going to have to save Kyle from certain death in San Francisco, he describes the progressive town, “[San Francisco is] the breeding ground for the hippie movement in the 60’s; those hard-core liberals, lesbian activists, and diehard modern hippies young and old. I swore I would never set foot in San Francisco. God help me.” This statement is both a comical critique of elitism as well as an expression of a parody of the way conservatives might view a progressive city such as San Francisco as having an elastic moral code that does not match conservative perspectives.

Different perspectives are presented quite clearly in the relationship between Eric Cartman and Miss Stevens in the “Rainforest Schmainforest” episode as well. Again, Cartman represents the more conservative perspective, as he expects industry to save the students and ignores Miss Steven’s pleas that they be patient and allow the rainforest and Mother Earth to save them. Cartman eventually leaves the group because he is so fed up with Miss Stevens, stating: “I’m not following this hippie around anymore” and calling Miss Stevens “that god-damned stupid hippie activist!”

This conflict between Cartman and Miss Stevens reflects the show’s frequent anti-authority theme. In many instances, the kids see reality as it truly exists, while the adults have an idealized perception of reality. In the “Rainforest, Schmainforest”
episode, as the bus rolls into Costa Rica, Cartman keeps stating exactly what he sees. “Oh my God! Dude, look at how dirty and crappy everything is!” Miss Stevens replies, “Eric, Costa Rica is a Third-World Country. These people are much poorer than those in the U.S.” “Well, why the hell don’t they get jobs?” This is a parody of the conservative idea that poverty can be cured through individual effort.

The anti-authority theme is also evident in “Smug Alert.” Kyle complains, “Dad, all you ever do since you got this car is drive around and show it off!” He sees things as they are—his father is being an elitist just because he feels morally superior about driving a hybrid car. Kyle can see that his father’s behavior is offensive to other people and he is completely embarrassed by this, but his father is so enveloped by his smugness that he assumes that everyone admires, reveres, and agrees with him about the importance of hybrid cars. Furthermore, Stan, the voice of reason in this episode, also sees things as they are, pointing out that while hybrid cars are good, smugness is unappealing. The adults still cannot see this, vowing to eliminate hybrid cars rather than change their own behavior and eliminate their smug attitudes.

Finally, in “The Day Before The Day After Tomorrow” the kids are the only ones who remain calm and rational, as the adult perception of events becomes cluttered with arguments over who to blame and what caused the flood. While the adults are panicking about the imminent Global Warming Threat and debating over who is to blame for the flood, the children are worried about the people stranded in Beaverton, repeatedly asking the adults if anyone is “going to go help those people”. The children have a clear picture of the crisis and see no connection between rescuing people and placing blame, while the
adults seem paralyzed, unable to focus attention on rescue efforts because they are blinded by their arguments over the origin of the flood.

Extremism is again criticized in “The Day Before the Day After Tomorrow” as the Geologists discuss Global Warming as a possible cause for the flood:

**Randy:** My colleagues in the scientific community are still running tests, but…we believe [Global Warming may strike] the day after tomorrow.

**Geologist 2:** Excuse me, I’m sure we’re all very impressed with your wild theories, Doctor Marsh, but the fact is no statistical proof has ever been confirmed that global warming exists. Are you suggesting that we shut down the economy?

**Randy:** With all due respect, cliché dissenting Republican, the economy isn’t going to matter…the day after tomorrow.

This clearly parodies several things. First, it is parody of disaster movies, and specifically the way the Global Warming is turned into an entity in order to create a disaster plot for the movie *The Day After Tomorrow*. Second, this is a parody of the entire argument between Global Warming advocates and those who are not convinced that Global Warming is a large threat. Each character is a parody of the extreme imagined other by both sides. Geologist 2 (identified as cliché dissenting Republican), who represents the liberal imagined perspective of conservatives who do not believe in the Global Warming threat is presented as someone who does not really care about “wild theories” such as Global Warming, rather he is concerned about the economy. At the same time, Randy represents the conservative imagined perspective of liberals as he treats Global Warming as an imminent threat that exists as an actual entity that will
destroy the world in just one day. These are both extreme positions. Geologist 2 is ignoring the needs of the collective and thinking only about the economy rather than taking time to listen to Randy and other scientists describe global warming. Randy refuses to allow room for dissent and is reactionary rather than reasonable in his dissemination of information and his examination of facts.

Finally, the conservative and liberal elements of *South Park* are organized in multiple ways. The environmental episodes are not a critique of any specific political ideology, rather they are a critique of extremism. In the “Smug Alert” episode, Stan states the rational, anti-extremist view explaining, “Hybrid cars are a good thing” and encourages people to drive them, but for the right reasons and with the right attitude.

Multiple perspectives are expressed within the “Rainforest Schmainforest” episode. The show presents adults such as Miss Stevens as worshipping the rainforest with little knowledge of the area. It is an anti-hypocrisy message, best explained by the leader of the Costa Rican People’s Army: “You white Americans make me sick! You waste food, oil, and everything else because you’re so rich, and then you tell the rest of the world to save the rainforest because you like its pretty flowers.” In other words, Americans have no true concept of Costa Rica, third world countries, or the rainforest; rather elitists soothe their guilt by getting involved in saving the “pretty flowers.” An American reporter shown briefly describing the Save The Rainforest Summit supports this idea as well, saying “We’re here live in San Jose, Costa Rica, where hundreds of rich Americans have gathered for the Save The Rain Forest Summit. Everyone is here so they can feel good about themselves, and act like they aren’t the ones responsible for the rainforest’s peril.”
Additionally, the teacher who has such idealistic notions of the rainforest is proved wrong repeatedly. When the choir is lost in the woods, there are multiple encounters that end badly. First, they run into a giant snake. The group guide and choir teacher both assure the children that, “This snake is more afraid of us than we are of it” right before the snake devours the guide whole. Next the choir runs into a soldier. While the kids are terrified, Miss Stevens explains, “Now kids, let’s be a bit more ‘open-minded.’ I read all about this in Newsweek; this is a ‘people’s army.’ They are fighting the fascist policies of their fascist government.” After she makes the choir perform for the army, Miss Stevens asks to use a phone, to which the soldier replies, “Heehee yes, we have a phone. It’s right over there next to the 12-person Jacuzzi. Now, get out of here before we kill you!” The soldier is offended by her naiveté, which has been established in the episode through her constant faith in the rainforest, and through the revelation that her pre-existing ideas about the rainforest have all been completely inaccurate. The soldier sees her as being condescending and out of line with her view of the rainforest, and as a result is not nearly as helpful as Miss Steven’s predicts he will be.

When one of the students stops to touch a flower, Miss Stevens scolds him, “Oh no, no, no! That fragile flower is very delicate, okay?” As she finishes the flowers petals wrap around the student and he is lifted off the floor. They then encounter a tribe who Miss Stevens had described to the children earlier in the episode, explaining “the Yanogapa are gentle native people that live in the rainforest, but bulldozers are destroying their homes. Soon, they will have nowhere to go. So we must stop bulldozing the rainforest so that they can live.” To Miss Stevens’ horror, the Yanogapa turn out to be cannibals, and the choir group is forced to run for its life! As they run they get trapped
in quick sand, and once they have finally gotten out of it, Miss Stephens changes her tune stating, “All right, that does it! Blast these stupid-ass rainforests!! This place fucking sucks!! I was wrong!! Fuck the rainforest!! I fucking hate it, I fucking hate it!” When Miss Stevens finally realizes that she is in personal danger, her opinion of the rain forest changes.

Significantly, the people who have been vilified by the rainforest advocates, construction workers and big business, are actually the ones who save the choir. Cartman has discovered a group of American contractors clearing out trees. They find the choir and one by one each of the enemies: the Yanogapa, the giant flower, and the snake that ate the guide are all crushed by the bull dozer. Rather than harming nature, in this instance, man is dominating nature.

In most episodes of South Park, there is a monologue, frequently by one of the boys, that expresses the reasonable/rational view that the show is promoting. In “Rainforest Schmainforest” the show critiques the perceived hypocrisy of activists. The choir rewrites their song for the summit after their dreadful encounter in the rainforest, reflecting Miss Stevens changed ideas:

There’s a place called the rainforest; it truly sucks ass

Let’s knock it down and get rid of it fast

You say, “save the rainforest,” but what do you know?

You’ve never been to the rainforest before.

Getting gay with kids is here!

To tell you things you might not like to hear.

You only fight these causes ‘cause caring sells.
All you activists can go fuck yourselves

This song is the main message of the episode; the show presents the idea that many people who are wrapped up in activist causes are doing it for self-serving purposes, rather than because they want to make a change. Those who have been to the rainforest have a different experience than those who just like to look good to their rich friends. It is a direct critique of the hypocrisy that sometimes exists in activism.

In “The Day Before the Day After Tomorrow,” Stan who actually was instrumental to the Beaverton Dam breaking and causing the flood states to the crowd of people arguing over the cause of the flood, “Stop it! Stop it!! First it was terrorists, then George Bush and global warming and now you’re all blaming crab people for something that’s very simple! It’s MY fault! I broke the dam!” Thus the show presents the idea that in a situation such as Katrina blame is not important, rather fixing the problem and saving the people who are affected should be the first priority.

Finally, at the end of “Smug Alert,” Stan states: “Hybrid cars don't cause smugness, people do. [silent reactions all around] Look, hybrid cars are important. They may even save our planet one day. What you all need to do is just learn to drive hybrids and not be smug about it.” In other words, the final message is that it is important to take steps to protect and save the environment, but these steps should be taken with a positive attitude, not a smug or elitist attitude.

These episodes present a populist view of environmental issues. The voice of reason in each episode explains that it is negative to care about environmental causes for selfish reasons such as looking good to others or feeling good about oneself. Additionally, the point is made that people cannot ignore or deny environmental
concerns, as these issues are important. The final suggestion is that a populist approach to environmentalism that is based on reason and rationality is a positive thing and should be considered.

**Tolerance/Political Correctness**

Again, in the episodes dealing with tolerance and political correctness there is parody of both liberals and conservatives, but the overriding message is populist. In the episode “Mr. Hanky, The Christmas Poo” extremists on both sides of the issue of political correctness are parodied. As the kids put together their Christmas play, Mrs. Broflovski becomes irate stating, “How dare you include the Nativity in a school play? Don’t you realize my son is Jewish?!” This is reflective of a liberal secular view that would push for the separation of church and state. Another woman follows Mrs. Broflovski to where the children are practicing and states, “Mayor, we are deeply offended by the Nativity scene in front of the capital office. Church and State are separate.” Mr. Garrison reflects the conservative side that values tradition when he discounts the needs of the minority stating, “Oh God, you’re not gonna lay that Hanukah crap on me, are you?” rather than valuing her perspective as a minority. She again states, “That isn’t all, Mayor! The school play is doing a Nativity scene! It isn’t being sensitive to the Jewish community!” to which Mr. Garrison replies, “You are the Jewish Community!” Cartman promptly states, “Superbitch is at it again!”

Soon the entire town is confronting the mayor. Each person has a single agenda that he/she expects will be accepted and catered to. The priest states, “Mayor, the Nativity is what Christmas is all about. If you remove Christ, you must remove Santa and Frosty and all of that garbage too!” A hippie in the crowd exclaims, “And we must
put a stop to the cutting down of Christmas trees!” Another man shouts out, “And I’m sick and tired of those little flaps on coffee lids. If you don’t want to spill your coffee, you shouldn’t be driving with it!” Later in the episode they have to remove lights from the Christmas show because they “offend people with epilepsy” and they are not even permitted to have a star on the stage because it might offend non-Christians.

This episode presents a critique on extremism. The liberals are concerned with keeping church and state separate while the conservatives are concerned with keeping Christ in Christmas. This starts a snowball effect where everyone is complaining about his/her individual needs and soon everyone is expecting that everyone cater to his/her individual needs, beliefs, and morals. Finally, Kyle becomes so upset about this he is confronted by Mr. Hanky, The Christmas Poo, a non-denominational holiday mascot who is described in song, “It’s true. He doesn’t care what faith you are. Mr. Hankey, the Christmas Poo, he loves me and I love you” and Kyle explains, “Mr. Hankey comes out of the toilet every year and gives presents to everybody who has a lot of fiber in their diet.”

“Death Camp of Tolerance” presents the view that people should be tolerant of differences among people, but only to a certain extent. Mr. Garrison learns that a teacher in another community has been awarded 20 million dollars after being fired because of his sexual orientation. Mr. Garrison decides to exploit this idea and puts forth every effort to offend the students in his classroom with his antics with his new classroom assistant, Mr. Slave, a burly man dressed in leather chaps and a vest, who obeys Mr. Garrison’s every command. When Mr. Garrison actually instructs Mr. Slave to do something disgusting with the classroom gerbil, Lemmiwinks, even he is aware of the
inappropriateness of his behavior in front of a room full of fourth graders. The boys explain the situation to Chef:

**The Boys:** Hey Chef.

**Chef:** How’s it goin’?

**Kyle:** Bad.

**Chef:** Why bad?

**Stan:** Chef, we’re intolerant.

**Chef:** Intolerant of who?

**Kyle:** Gays, I guess.

**Chef:** Now why do you wanna go be intolerant of gay people, children? I thought you knew better.

**Stan:** Well, we didn’t think we were, but Mr. Garrison has this new assistant, and we’re really uncomfortable around him.

**Chef:** Children, a lot of times the reason you get uncomfortable around gay people is that they have some issues themselves. You have to ask yourself, “what is it about their behavior that, for some reason, makes me uncomfortable?”

**Kyle:** Well, I guess it’s mostly the way Mr. Garrison stuck a gerbil up Mr. Slave’s ass.

**Stan:** Are we homophobes now?

**Kyle:** We don’t wanna be gaybashers, chef.

**Chef:** Children, there’s a big difference between gay people and Mr. Garrison, do you understand that?
The show presents the idea that it is good to be open-minded and people should express tolerance toward most differences in people. But Chef, who is often a voice of reason on the show, points out the difference between being tolerant of sexual orientation and being tolerant of behavior that harms others. After complaining to the principal, Chef is sent to tolerance camp.

The pervasive anti-authority theme is present in the episodes about political correctness and tolerance as well. In the “Mr. Hanky” episode, it is the adults who grow concerned over the content of the Christmas play. The kids are apathetic, more concerned with their impending Winter Break and eating snowflakes.

This anti-adult theme is again evident in the “Death Camp of Tolerance” episode. The children’s parents are called in after they stop going to class because they are upset about their teacher’s behavior. The school counselor explains, “Parents, I had to call you in here because your boys have refused to attend class with their homosexual teacher, m’kay?” No one will listen to the children because they are so concerned with appearing to be open-minded and tolerant. As a result, the children are sent to an intensive tolerance camp which is presented in black and white and made to look like a concentration camp.

The Nazi-like Camp Warden instructs them (in a thick German accent), “Today we will be using the fingerpaint! You will make a painting that shows people of different races and sexual orientations getting along. Fingerpaint! Fingerpaint! You will not make any distinction between people of different colors! People with different sexual preferences! You will accept everyone!” Kyle is soon scolded for painting a bear, as this has nothing to do with tolerance. As the Camp Warden terrifies him and holds a pistol
against his head Kyle finally produces the product the warden is looking for, “A picture of people of all colors and creeds holding hands beneath a rainbow!”

There is an anti-hypocrisy message in “Cartman’s Silly Hate Crime.” While the boys are playing outside in the snow one day, Cartman, who is white, gets mad at all of the kids for making fun of them and throws a rock that ends up hitting Token, who is African-American. When Eric is first punished by the school, Mr. Mackey gives him two weeks of detention. But soon FBI agents bust into the office and explain, “I’m afraid it’s a bit more complicated than that, Mr. School Counselor. You see, since the victim in this case is African-American, this is considered a hate crime.” Cartman asks what a hate crime is and they explain, “New laws have been passed that make any crime based on race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation a federal offense.” Cartman is soon sent to jail for his actions, and his friends are upset so they ask Token’s father how to get the charges dropped. He explains, “You see, the only person that can let Eric out of Juvenile Hall is the governor.” He then explains that he agrees that Hate Crime Laws are unfair and explains, “yeah, I have a real problem with hate-crime legislation. In fact, I’d love to see you kids go down and give the governor a piece of my mind.” When they ask why he does not do this, Token’s dad explains, “He won’t listen to me, because I’m black.” In other words, the governor is concerned with appearing to be tolerant and concerned about diversity, which is why he is enforcing the hate law, but his actions are far from being unprejudiced and inclusive.

In “Death Camp of Tolerance” the show presents multiple perspectives. First is the idea that in valuing equality, there is a liberal desire to be tolerant of anything. Mr. Garrison, in an effort to get fired and sue for discrimination based on his sexual
orientation, begins having graphic sex in front of his fourth grade students with Mr. Slave. He is dumbfounded when there are no repercussions, and continues to push the limit. Tolerance is so important to the adults of South Park and the people at the school, that they are willing to send the kids to a “tolerance” camp that is portrayed as being like a Nazi concentration camp. They even present the Courageous Teacher award to Mr. Garrison and even as he gets on stage to accept the award and presents a disgusting show (still in an effort to get fired), the audience just applauds him for his bravery. They keep stating, “That’s courageous. That’s brave.”

In “Cartman’s Silly Hate Crime” the idea of valuing equality becomes so important to the people of South Park, that Cartman is put in prison for throwing a rock at Token, who happens to be African-American. There is no investigation into Eric’s motivation for the crime, which was simply because Token kept calling Eric fat. In fact, Cartman even warns Token, “Token, I swear to God, if you call me fat one more time I'm gonna smack you on the head with this rock!” Indeed it is the kids’ merciless teasing of Eric that motivates him to hit Token; Cartman is not even aware of the racial implications of his action.

Cartman again negates the liberal view in the “Mr. Hanky” episode as he is pitted against Mrs. Broflovski. When she first complains about the play, he loudly exclaims, “Oh dude! Kyle’s mom is here to ruin Christmas”. His anger over the changing of the play prompts him to tell Kyle that “Jews can’t eat Christmas snow” and when Mr. Garrison asks, “Does anybody know any non-Santa or non-Jesus Christmas songs?” Eric promptly replies, “How about we sing ‘Kyle’s Mom is a Stupid Bitch’ in D minor?” He proceeds to sing the song for the whole class, “Ooooooh. Weeellll. Kyle’s mom’s a
bitch, she’s a big fat bitch, she’s the biggest bitch in the whole wide world…” The song continues with several verses about Kyle’s mom. Again, Cartman is presented as the negation of the liberal idea of tolerance. He is an extreme parody of conservatives who have no tolerance for diversity of religious thought or background.

“Cartman’s Silly Hate Crime” looks at the way people project ideas onto other people, based on what they want to believe. When Cartman is in the courtroom, a Nancy Grace- like character is shown describing the hate crime trial on Court TV. She states, “What turns a normal, fat little eight-year-old boy into a vicious, hate-crime-committing racist? We take you live to the courtroom.” In the courtroom the following exchange occurs:

**Prosecutor:** Mr. Cartman, do you know a boy by the name of “Token”?

**Cartman:** Uh, yes.

**Prosecutor:** Who is Token?

**Cartman:** He’s a black kid that goes to my school.

**Prosecutor:** Black! Did you say black?! You called him black!

**Cartman:** He is black.

**Prosecutor:** Oh! He said it again! He is African-American, and so you decided to pick him out!

**Cartman:** I did?

**Prosecutor:** The rage built and built inside your head until it became too much because you hate African-Americans!

**Cartman:** No, I hate hippies!

**Prosecutor:** What?
**Cartman:** I hate hippies! I mean, the way they always talk about ‘protecting the earth’ and then drive around in cars that get poor gas mileage and wear those stupid bracelets! I hate them! I want to kick them in the nuts!

**Prosecutor:** Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, this is why we have hate-crime laws! This ‘monster’ committed a crime—not against and individual, but against a race! Do the democratic thing and send his fat little butt to prison!

Under the guise of democracy the prosecutor is encouraging the jury to send Cartman to prison based on an assumption, all the while referring to Cartman as “the fat kid.” The judge then states, “I am making an example of you, to send a message out to people everywhere, that if you want to hurt another human being, you’d better make damn sure they’re the same color as you are!” Again, the show presents a logical perspective about hate crime legislation, that not every crime committed by a person of one race against a person of another race is motivated by hate.

“Death Camp of Tolerance” examines stereotypes and the idea of tolerance versus acceptance. When the students go to the tolerance museum, multiple things happen. They are shown many statues of stereotypes as the tour guide describes, “We are now entering the Hall of Stereotypes. These wax figures represent how some intolerant people have labeled minorities. Here we see a black person eating chicken and watermelon, a stereotype that hurts the African-American community. What other stereotypes to you see?” The group points out the stereotypes including an Arab as a terrorist, an Asian with a calculator, and as Cartman states, “a covetous Jew!” Randy
soon points to a sleeping Mexican man next to a bucket and states, “It’s the stereotypical ‘sleepy Mexican’” only to find out it is actually the janitor who has indeed fallen asleep in the middle of the museum.

Cartman is even praised for his “life choice” to be overweight. The only thing that is not tolerated is smoking, so when they go outside the following exchange occurs:

**Tour Guide:** We have to accept people for who they are and what they like to do. [notices man smoking outside] What the hell are you doing?

**Smoker:** Oh I was just uh…

**Tour Guide:** There’s no smoking in the museum!

**Smoker:** But I’m not in the museum.

**Tour Guide:** Get out of here you filthy smoker!

**Gerald:** yeah, dirty lungs!

**Sharon:** Go ahead and kill yourself, stupid tar-breath!

**Chris:** Dumbass!

**Richard:** Get out of here!

There tolerance does not extend to the smoker because that is behavior that is widely accepted as “bad,” as evidenced in smoking bans and anti-smoking campaigns. It is a clear anti-hypocrisy message as the people who are currently touring a tolerance museum are themselves extremely intolerant, specifically of smoking. Another example of a critique of hypocrisy in these episodes is that in all of them Eric Cartman is told to be respectful and tolerant of people’s differences, but he is constantly being ridiculed by the other characters for being overweight. The tour guide at the tolerance museum calls him
“Fat-tits,” Token calls him a “Fat-Ass” and there are repeated jokes about Cartman being fat. These types of comments are not criticized.

In the “Mr. Hanky” episodes, the liberal and conservative elements are shown in opposition to each other. The mayor finally proclaims, “I’ll put together a crack team of my best workers to make sure this’ll be the most non-offensive Christmases ever—to any religious or minority group of any kind.” The only solution that the adults can come to is one where nobody gets what they want. The result of the extremist perspectives of both sides of the argument is a ridiculously bizarre play that is introduced as, “And now, South Park Elementary presents the happy, non-offensive, non-denominational Christmas Play, with music and lyrics by New York minimalist composer, Philip Glass!” It is a bizarre play, and the first audience member to complain is Mrs. Broflovski exclaiming, “What the hell is this? This is horrible.” Next the priest explains, “This is the most God-awful piece of crap I’ve ever seen!” They begin to blame each other for this terrible show, and Mr. Garrison points out, “You’re the ones who made it this way.” Thus, the extremist views led to play with no meaning.

Mr. Hanky is the voice of reason in the “Mr. Hanky” episode, stating, “Come on gang, don’t fight. You people focus so hard on the things wrong with Christmas that you’ve forgotten what’s so right about it. Don’t you see? This is the one time of year we’re supposed to forget all the bad stuff, to stop worrying and being sad about the state of the world, and for just one day say, ‘Aw, the heck with it! Let’s sing and dance and bake cookies.’” When everyone agrees, this creates a positive and happy environment in South Park, which is further emphasized by the fact that this is the only episode in the first season of South Park where the character Kenny does not die.
Mr. Garrison is the voice of reason at the end of “Death Camp of Tolerance.”

After Mr. Garrison is applauded for his disgusting performance, he finally blows up at the audience stating, “Look, this kind of behavior should not be acceptable from a teacher!”

The audience, like robots erupts explaining, “the museum tells us to be tolerant.” Mr. Garrison replies, “Tolerant, but not stupid! Look, just because you have to tolerate something, doesn’t mean you have to approve of it! If you had to like it, it’d be called the Museum of Acceptance! Tolerate means you’re just putting up with it! You tolerate a crying child sitting next to you on the airplane or you tolerate a bad cold. It can still piss you off!” In other words, tolerance is a good thing, but it does not mean that all behavior is acceptable or appropriate in all situations.

Finally, the boys give a presentation to the governor (and succeed in freeing Cartman from the juvenile detention center) that is the rational voice in “Cartman’s Silly Hate Crime”

**Stan:** Thank you for taking the time to hear our presentation on hate-crime laws, entitled, “Hate Crime Laws: A Savage Hypocrisy”. [the presentation is accompanied by posters on an easel illustrating their points]. This is the Free Eric Cartman Now Committee.

**Token:** [flips to a page of someone stabbing another] If somebody kills somebody, it’s a crime. But if someone kills somebody of a different color, it’s a hate crime.

**Kyle:** And we think that is a savage hypocrisy, because all crimes are hate crimes. If a man beats another man because that man was sleeping with his wife, is that not a hate crime?
**Stan:** If a person vandalizes a government building, is it not because of his hate for the government?

**Token:** And motivation for a crime shouldn’t affect the sentencing.

**Stan:** [flips to a page revealing warring groups of people of different races] Mayor, it is time to stop splitting people into groups. All hate crimes do is support the idea that blacks are different from whites, that homosexuals need to be treated differently from non-homos, that we aren’t the same.

**Kyle:** [flips to picture of a rainbow of people holding hands] But instead, we should all be treated the same, with the same laws and the same punishments for the same crimes.

This supports the conservative idea of valuing freedom over equality and the overall message is that emphasizing differences and “splitting people into groups” has a negative impact on society.

**Education and the role of government, school, and parents**

Finally, there are multiple episodes of *South Park* that examine the role that government, schools, and parents play in educating children. Three episodes that deal with this topic are “Proper Condom Use” where the parents insist that the school teach their fourth graders sex education. “My Future Self and Me” where parents have hired actors to pretend to be their children from the future who have completely ruined their lives by using drugs and alcohol, and finally “Butt-Out” an episode focusing on anti-smoking campaigns and laws, focusing on Rob Reiner’s campaign to end smoking. These episodes appeal to liberal, conservative, and populist audiences. The anti-
hypocrisy, elitism, and authority themes are evident along with many sub themes that appear in all of these episodes.

One theme in these episodes is that parents do not want to have uncomfortable conversations with their children about issues. Consequently, they rely on unreliable sources to share the information with their children. In “Proper Condom Use,” Randy and Sharon cannot bear to speak with their son, Stan, about sex. They call a PTA meeting:

**Principal Victoria:** Okay, parents. I know a lot of you want a chance to speak, but we have to talk one at a time.

**Sharon:** Look, our kids are learning sexual things on the street and on television. There’s no way we can stop it. The schools have to teach them sexual education at a younger age.

**Principal Victoria:** School policy has been to teach sexual education later. In fifth grade.

**Mr. Tweek:** It isn’t soon enough!

**Stuart:** Yeah. Why, just this afternoon our son was caught beating off our dog.

**Chef:** Look, parents. Do you really want your children learning about sex? Part of the fun of being a kid is being naïve! Let them be kids for a while.

**Ms. Choksondik:** Naïve at what cost, Chef? Parents, we have to face facts: Children in America are having sex at younger and younger ages.
STD’s are affecting younger and younger kids all the time. The only way we can combat that is by educating children before they have sex.

**Chef:** The first thing that kids learn about sex shouldn’t be some bitch-scare tactic about STD’s.

**Sheila:** No, she’s right! With all the teen pregnancies that are out today, I think my boy does need to know about sexual education. From the school.

Multiple things occur in this discussion. First, Chef, a character who is often shown having sex with many women, is against teaching the children sex education in school. On the other hand, Miss Choksondik, the boys’ teacher, who later in the episode reveals that she has very little sexual experience of her own, is advocating teaching the children. This juxtaposition is an interesting reflection of the message of the show as the person with the most experience encourages children to stay naïve longer. Additionally, it is clear that the parents are concerned about their children, but rather than teaching them about sex themselves, they want to avoid discomfort and make the school do it.

“My Future Self and Me” is about a company that sets up everything necessary for parents to convince their children that the child from the future is visiting. The process is explained to a set of parents looking to educate their son:

**Director:** It should take about a month to achieve the results you want.

**Mr. Brooks:** We sure hope so. We just don’t know how to talk to our son about drugs.

**Director:** Well, now you won’t have to! [He introduces them to the actor, Josh, who will be playing their son] He knows all your family
history and every detail of your house. And he’s worked up quite a future for your son.

**Josh:** I’m going to tell him that I dropped out of school and went to prison for eight years, where I was sodomized. In the ass.

**Mr. Brooks:** Woohoo! That should get Kevin to stay clear of drugs!

Soon, Stan’s parents invest in this process, and “Future Stan” runs naked into their home drinking a beer and smoking a cigarette. When asked how he traveled back in time, “Future Stan” explains, “I have no idea, man. I was just about to go to sleep in an alley behind the crackhouse and I shot up a little heroin, and then this electrical storm started…” He is there to scare Stan away from ever touching drugs or alcohol, because his parents do not want to discuss these issues with them themselves.

Another common theme in these episodes is that rather than confront issues, often adults use scare tactics and lies to prevent their children from engaging in what they perceive as unsafe behavior. Miss Choksondik teaches the children about “Proper Condom Use” by making the girls so terrified of sexually transmitted diseases that they think they can’t even stand next to a boy who isn’t wearing a condom. On the second day of sex education, Miss Choksondik focuses the lesson on pregnancy, stating:

**Alright girls. Yesterday we went over the myriad of diseases you can get from boys, but today we’re going to talk about the most horrible thing they can give you of all. Pregnancy! That’s right, since you girls have decided to be sexually active; teen-pregnancy is at an all-time high! You seem to think it’s gonna be fun and neat to have a baby, well let’s watch a little video shall we?**
Instead of teaching them about sex, she shows them a traumatizing video. In the video the narrator states, “...later the contractions are happening closer together. Mom sure is in a lot of pain. Now we can see the crown of the baby’s head, stretching the vaginal walls in ways never before thought possible by Mom. Finally, the miracle happens, and the baby is born. But mom’s not done yet! She still has some afterbirth to push out of her.” This terrifies the girls in the class.

“My Future Self and Me” shows parents using similar tactics in order to stop their children from getting involved with drugs or alcohol. After “Future Stan” comes to visit the family, Stan’s parents meet with the director to report on their results:

**Director:** So everything is working out with your future actor? Your son seems to be responding.

**Randy:** I think he’s pretty scared alright.

**Sharon:** It’s just a little weird having people lie to our boy like this.

**Director:** Well, you know what us ultra-liberals say, when it comes to children and drugs, lies are okay! The ends justify the means. We’ll take smoking for instance. The truth is, there is no hard evidence that second-hand smoke can kill, but we believe it’s okay to lie about that as long as it gets people to stop smoking.

**Sharon:** Well that make sense.

**Director:** So it is with everything here at Motivation Corporation. It’s okay for us to lie and tell kids that all marijuana supports terrorism or that one pill of ecstasy is going to kill them. It’s not necessarily true, but the ends justify the means.
The show presents the opinion that from an ultra-liberal perspective, scare tactics and fear appeals are a legitimate means of controlling socially unacceptable behavior. It is unlikely that smoking pot contributes to terrorism or will ruin a teenager’s life. But rather than have an uncomfortable conversation with their children, or discuss the true risks and effects of drug or alcohol use, Motivation Corp. convinces parents that lying is a justifiable means to the end goal of creating a child who does not experiment.

Next, in the anti-smoking episode, “Butt Out” the boys are subjected to a stereotypical school assembly with a group of not-so-cool young adults giving a performance about not smoking called, “Butt Out.” First, the kids abhor the group which is made clear by the reactions each of the boys has—Kyle rolls his eyes and states, “Oh no!” Cartman exclaims, “I am going to kill myself,” Kenny, as Eric explains, “is eating his own hands” and Stan states, “Jesus Christ!” Second, the group makes ridiculous associations between smoking and other issues:

**Guy 1:** Hey! What’s the big deal? I like smoking, and it makes me cool!

**Girl 1:** Oh really? Do you think lung cancer is cool, too?

**Guy 2:** What about emphysema? Is that cool?

**Guy 3:** And what about abortion and AIDS?

**Guy 2:** That’s none’s to the cool!

**Guy 3:** Remember kids, if you smoke, you could grow up to be a failure.

Or grow up to be dead!

**Guy 1:** So don’t believe what those evil tobacco companies tell you!

Because if you don’t smoke, you can grow up to be…

**Everyone:** Just like us!
This group is so concerned with stopping kids from smoking that they associate smoking with abortion, AIDS, and failure in order to scare the school children. This is a false analogy and another scare tactic. Ironically, the boys are so worried that they will turn out like the people in the assembly that they immediately start smoking, Stan stating, “Give me a hit. Give me another one, give me another one!” Once the boys are caught smoking, Sheila Broflovski calls Rob Reiner into town so that he can help them get a smoking ban passed. Throughout the episode he uses lies and scare tactics in an effort to gain support for a smoking ban. Reiner eventually ends up saying flat out to the kids, “You kids need to understand something, okay? Sometimes lying is okay. Like when you know what’s good for people more than they do.” To which Cartman replies, “Oh my God, that is what I’ve always said! I love this guy.” Cartman, who is the embodiment of bad behavior, is the only one who respects Reiner’s nefarious attempts to take down Big Tobacco.

An anti-elitism message is presented through the portrayal of Rob Reiner in the “Butt Out” episode. First, Rob Reiner quickly becomes Cartman’s hero after they meet him:

**Cartman:** [impressed] Isn't he awesome, you guys?

**Kyle:** What??

**Cartman:** Dude, he just goes around imposing his will on people. He's my idol.

The idea that adults project their ideas onto their kids is also apparent. In all three of these episodes the children are completely naïve about sex, drugs, and cigarettes. The adults have bought into the hype that everyone is doing socially unacceptable things at
younger and younger ages, and thus they are panicking about their children. But in each instance it becomes clear that the children are too young to understand the ideas that parents are projecting onto them. Again, kids see things from an unbiased perspective, having limited previous knowledge of the subject, while adults have a distorted perception of reality. For example, when the girls learn about STD’s and AIDS in “Proper Condom Use” they do not fully understand the message.

**Wendy:** Stay away from me Stan!

**Stan:** Why?

**Wendy:** Are you wearing a condom?

**Stan:** A what?!?

**Girls:** [all screaming loudly] AAAAAAAGGHHHHHHH!

**Bebe:** Do any of you have your condoms on?

**Kyle:** No.

**Girls:** AAAAAAAGGHHHHHHHH!

**Wendy:** don’t you know that without wearing a condom you could get a disease?

**Kyle:** Nuh. Uh.

**Bebe:** yeah huh. If you don’t wear a condom, you’re gonna get AIDS!

**Wendy:** You guys have to wear condoms. Now, please, just, just go away. We don’t want your AIDS.

The girls are terrified, not just of having sex, but of boys in general—without understanding anything about actual sex. The boys are so upset about the conversation with the girls that they quickly run to the drug store to buy condoms, a task that they
clearly do not understand. The pharmacist is reluctant to sell such young children condoms, but the assistant explains, “kids are going to do what they do, and it’s up to us to make sure they’re protected.” The kids soon discover that there are condoms especially for boys their age, “We just got in the new Gladiators for kids. ‘Lil Mini’s. They’re specially designed for kids under 10, and they’re only $5.95 for a box of fifty.” The next scene shows the boys trying to use the condoms. They are completely confused which is evidenced by Butters passing out rubber bands to all of the boys to make the condom “stay on.” Butters exclaims, “there ain’t nothin’ that’s getting’ in my wiener through this thing! And it’s even got a little reservoir at the end so you can pee in it!”

At this point, the teachers hear about the condom purchase and almost gleefully decide that they must start teaching sex ed. to students in Kindergarten, oblivious to the fact that the kids only purchased condoms in the first place because of their scary lessons at school. All the adults have bought into media hype that says that kids are having sex at younger ages, when in reality the kids have no desire for sex or any real understanding of what sex is. This parody of the push to have sex education taught in schools at younger ages shows that adults often project their ideas onto children, resulting in a complete misunderstanding on the part of naïve students. Again in “My Future Self and Me” parents have bought into ridiculous media claims about marijuana leading to terrorism, shootings, or addiction to harder drugs. In the beginning of the episode, the kids find a bag of marijuana. They have no idea what to do but are concerned because they have seen so many fear appeals about the drug.

**Kyle:** Throw it away, Clyde!

**Clyde:** I’m not gonna touch it. You throw it away!
Stan: What’s going on?

Kyle: Some high schoolers left their marijuana cigarette behind. Uh we have to throw it away before some kids find it or something.

Stan: So throw it away.

Clyde: Nobody wants to touch it.

Kyle: What if the residue gets on our hands and it leads to harder drugs like those commercials say.

Craig: Yeah, didn’t you see that commercial where it says that if you have pot you could become a terrorist?

Clyde: And the commercial where the two kids have pot and the one kid shoots the other. Harmless?

Eventually Stan picks it up to throw it away, stating, “There, see? I touched marijuana. I’m not a terrorist, I didn’t shoot anybody, and I don’t feel like doing more drugs now. No big deal.” At the same time, Stan’s parents have seen the same commercials that the boys are referencing and decide that the must act now in order to prevent Stan from using drugs. They contact a company called Motivation Corporation that will send an actor to pretend to be Stan from the future, a total loser who has ruined his life because he touched marijuana. Stan is instantly suspicious of his “future self” and he and Butters begin spying on their parents, soon to find out the truth. Cartman soon starts a business punishing parents for their bad behavior, and Stan and Butters who have both been duped, meet with Cartman:

Cartman: Look around you. I know how it feels to be really, really pissed off at your parents. And I will work hard for you.
Stan: Our moms and dads lied to us about our future selves! It was just a trick to get us to not wanna try drugs or alcohol.

Cartman: [let’s out a heavy sigh] God-dammit! See? This is exactly why I started this business. If a parent can’t respect their child, then who can they respect huh? Listen! Parents understand one thing, and that’s consequences. They need to see consequences for the actions, or else they’ll never learn. What my company does is inflict those consequences upon the parents in a very real and very direct way!

Through Cartman, the show presents the idea that parents should respect their children rather than lie to them. The idea of the kids inflicting consequences on their parents shows a juxtaposition of roles—the parents are acting like children by lying in order to prevent bad behavior, and thus the children are going to punish the parents the way a parent would usually punish a child.

Finally, this set of episodes presents a critique of hypocrisy. For example, teachers who have never had sex, or are unqualified are teaching sex education. When Mr. Mackey, the school guidance counselor, starts teaching the boys about sex, he runs into a problem; he has no idea how sex works. Stan inquires, “Dude, haven’t you ever had intercourse, Mr. Mackey?” And he replies, “Well, sure I have! It’s just…I was about 19 at the time, so it’s been about 21 years…m’kay. Let’s see. Uh. I’m pretty sure I took the-yeah I took the penis, and I bu-uh…what the hell did I do with that damned thing?” Miss Choksondik, who teaches the girls about sex is no better. She also has limited sexual experience and her main tactic for teaching is to make the girls so scared of sex that they will never even think about it as an option. “Well, let’s start with our
first lesson then, shall we? [she writes on the board SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES] That’s right, because unless you get boys to wear condoms you can and will get a sexually transmitted disease from them!” This parodies sex education classes and is an example of how not to teach a group of fourth grade students about sex. The facts are ignored, there is over-exaggeration of consequences and the overall lessons are just plain silly! It is a critique of the use of scare tactics as well as an example of the different ways adults and kids view the world. The most absurd parody in the episode is when Mr. Garrison is recruited to teach the Kindergarten class about sex. Rather than teach at their level, he teaches them lessons based on his personal experiences, giving graphic details about sexual positions and beginning the lesson by showing the class how to put a condom on another person using his mouth.

Another area of hypocrisy in “Proper Condom Use” is that while Miss Choksondik and Mr. Mackey are busy teaching the kids about safe sex, they end up having unprotected sex themselves. This is a contradiction, where their behavior does not match their actions. After Miss Choksondick scares all of the girls into believing they will instantly contract a deadly STD from even being in the same room as a boy who is not wearing a condom, she herself is so desperate for sexual contact that she ignores her own rules.

Hypocrisy is presented in multiple ways in “Butt Out.” First, the young adults who lead the anti-smoking presentation at school think that they are “cool” and influence the kids not to smoke. But instead the kids are embarrassed by the group; thus, instead of achieving its intended goal, “Butt Out” actually prompts the kids to smoke. Rather than just explaining the reality of smoking to kids, out of touch adults are hired to “act cool”
and try to persuade kids not to smoke. Second, Rob Reiner is repeatedly shown criticizing smoking for being unhealthy while growing fatter due to eating incredibly unhealthy foods, a contradiction as it is clear that his unhealthy lifestyle is making it difficult for him to walk, get out of cars, or talk without sweating profusely. So while he is preaching about unhealthy behavior in smoking, he is engaging in equally unhealthy behavior through overeating. When he arrives in South Park, in order to get out of the limo, he has to rub butter all over himself because he is too fat to fit through the door. As he tries to get out of the limo, he eats handfuls of butter. When he first appears in the episode he is on the phone stating, “I don’t understand it. I pushed a law for higher taxes on cigarettes, I lobbied to get images of cigarettes removed from movies and art, I forced smokers out of bars and parks, but I still get letters from parents saying their kids are doing it. Apparently people still don’t understand how bad smoking is for them. Don’t they know how dangerous it is to their health? Don’t they know the hazard of second hand smoke?” The whole time Reiner is on the phone, he is sweating as he eats three enormous cheeseburgers

Moreover, Reiner spends millions of his own dollars in an effort to get smoking banned. While he accuses the tobacco companies of lying, spending huge amounts of money, and tricking kids into smoking, Reiner himself is engaging in the exact same bad behavior. He explains his plan to the kids (all while again eating a gigantic fatty meal of a cheeseburger and fries), “All right kids, here’s what we’re gonna do. We’re going to sneak you into the tobacco company by saying you want a tour for a school paper. Once you’re inside I’m gonna take photos of you then we’ll publish them, saying that the tobacco company invited you over to seduce you into smoking. Got it?” The kids point
out that this is lying and Reiner justifies this stating, “We’re just leveling out the playing field. The tobacco companies lie to you about the dangers of smoking. If we’re gonna take them down, we’ve gotta lie right back.” Again it is the idea that the ends justify the means. Reiner has no qualms about criticizing the underhanded tactics of tobacco companies, but he proceeds to use more nefarious tactics than they do—eventually attempting to kill Cartman so that he can make a commercial that shows a little boy dying from second hand smoke. Once again in these episodes out of touch adults are teaching kids to be cool by not smoking. Rob Reiner, who is hugely overweight and obviously unhealthy, is advocating health issues. Parents are using lies to tell their kids not to use drugs. Thus adults are portrayed as hypocritical and divorced from the reality of their childrens’ lives.

Elitism exists in these episodes, and is frequently presented in a “we know better than you do” attitude. The schools continue to have uninformed (or over-informed in Mr. Garrison’s case) teachers teach kids who are extremely young information about sex that they do not understand or need to know.

The episode with Rob Reiner fully embodies South Park’s anti-elitism message. At one point he is in a bar with the children when he notices someone smoking:

**Reiner:** Would you mind putting that death stick out?

**Man:** But, uh, this is a bar.

**Reiner:** Isn’t smoking illegal in bars here?

**Bartender:** Not in Colorado.

**Reiner:** Oh my God! What kind of backward hick state is this?
Man: Look man, I work fourteen hours a day at the saw mill. I just got off work and I need to relax.

Reiner: Well when I need to relax, I just go to my vacation house in Hawaii!

Man: I don’t have a vacation house in Hawaii!

Reiner: Your vacation house in Mexico then! Whatever it is! Look, you are putting my life and these boys’ lives in danger by smoking that in here! And I’m not gonna tolerate it! I will end smoking in bars in Colorado! There will be no more smoking here!

Reiner is obviously out of touch with the common man. He fails to comprehend that a blue-collar worker does not have the same options for relaxation that a rich celebrity might have and that a beer and a cigarette at the end of the day is something he chooses to do to unwind. This parody exemplifies the anti-elitist message of South Park as Reiner is such an elitist that he cannot see that his perspective is offensive and ridiculous. A saw mill worker would not have a vacation home, but in Reiner’s elitist world, everyone has access to the same resources he does.

Finally, the closing messages at the end of each of these episodes are calling for rationality and truthfulness from parents. The message at the end of “Proper Condom Use” is delivered by Chef:

Chef: Schools are teaching condom use to younger students each day.

But sex isn’t something that should be taught in textbooks and diagrams. Sex is emotional and spiritual. It needs to be taught by family. I know it can be hard, parents, but if you leave it up to the schools to teach sex, you
Stewart don’t know who they’re learning it from. It could be from someone who
doesn’t know, someone who has a bad opinion of it, or even a complete
pervert.

Miss Choksondik: He’s right. I never knew how special and personal
sex was until just recently.

Sharon: This whole mess started because we couldn’t talk to our boys
ourselves.

Sheila: It’s easier just to leave it up to the school, but it’s just not a school
subject.

Principal Victoria: Then it’s decided: no more condom classes in grade
school.

Stan: But Chef, when is the right age for us to start having sex?

Chef: It’s very simple, children. The right time to start having sex
is…seventeen.

Kyle: Seventeen?

Sheila: So you mean seventeen as long as you’re in love?

Chef: Nope, just seventeen.

Gerald: But what if you’re not ready at seventeen?

Chef: Seventeen! You’re ready!

Stan: Well, I guess we got a while to wait before we have to worry about
sex and diseases, huh?

This represents multiple perspectives. The show presents a conservative
perspective of traditional morality, where sex education comes from home and is not
mandated by the government through the schools. It presents a liberal secularist world view with Chef’s declaration that the age seventeen is the right age to have sex no matter what. Finally, it presents a populist perspective in that sex is personal and kids are kids and the way it was being taught wasn’t helpful to anyone.

At the end of “My Future Self and Me,” Stan finally confronts his parents about their actions. The final message evolves out of their conversation:

**Stan:** I know all about Motivation Corp! All I’ve been trying to get you guys to do is admit that you lied to me!

**Randy:** Oh…well…son, we’ve just been trying to make sure you know how dangerous drugs like pot are.

**Stan:** I’ve been told a lot of things about pot, but I’ve come to find out a lot of those things aren’t true! So I don’t know what to believe.

**Randy:** Well, Stan, the truth is marijuana probably isn’t gonna make you kill people, and it most likely isn’t gonna fund terrorism, but…Well son, pot makes you feel fine with being bored and it’s when you’re bored that you should be learning some new skill or discovering some new science or being creative. If you smoke pot you may grow up to find out that you aren’t good at anything.

**Stan:** I really, really wish you just would have told me that from the beginning.

**Sharon:** He’s right. If we use lies and exaggerations to keep kids off drugs, then they’re never gonna believe anything we tell them.

**Randy:** Well, there’s only one person I can blame! Motivation Corp!
First, the parents finally are truthful with Stan, and Randy’s true description of pot seems to use reason to convince Stan not to get involved with drugs. Stan finally understands why adults discourage their children from using drugs. The show presents the idea that rather than using fear appeals, scare tactics, and lies, adults should be honest with kids about the realities of drugs or alcohol, and trust that if they give their children the right information they will make good decisions. Ironically, the parents, though, still do not take responsibility for their role in the debacle, as Randy blaming Motivation Corporation, rather than himself.

The message at the end of “Butt Out” is one against extremism and advocates the rights of people to make informed choices. As the boys tour the tobacco factory they learn that they have been told inaccurate things about Big Tobacco and the show presents Big Tobacco as being a rational voice that admits the deadliness of its product but believes in the rights of individuals to choose to smoke if they want to.

**Kevin Harris:** My name’s Kevin Harris and I’m the vice President of Big Tobacco. Come on in. How about a little history first? [he stops by a portrait of Native Americans seated by a campfire] Native Americans were the first to cultivate the tobacco plant. They smoked it in pipes for medicinal and ceremonial purposes. The first successful crop of tobacco was cultivated in Virginia in 1612 [stops by a picture of Pilgrims harvesting tobacco] Within seven years it was one of the country’s largest exports.

**Kyle:** So tobacco helped to build America.
Kevin: That’s right. Over the next few centuries the tobacco business was so great that many slaves were brought from Africa to work the field.

Cartman: Why it means, if it weren’t for tobacco, many of our black friends wouldn’t be here today.

Kevin: And so for centuries, tobacco production flourished. Nobody was even aware of any dangers back then, until, in 1965 [stops at a framed tobacco warning] when Congress passed an act forcing all tobacco companies to put the Surgeon General’s warning on their packages. So now, everyone knows the dangers of smoking. And some people still choose to do it, and we believe that’s what being an American is all about.

Kyle: That sounds perfectly reasonable.

In other words, the show presents the populist idea that America is about individual choice, whether that choice be healthy or not. With the addition of warnings on cigarette packs, as well as information given at schools, on television, and by parents, people are aware of the dangers of smoking. But the tobacco companies provide tobacco for those who are willing to put their health aside and who choose to smoke. It is not the role of people like Reiner to stop people from smoking anymore than it is the role of people to stop Rob Reiner from eating. Moreover, at the end of the episode, Stan states, “It wasn’t the tobacco companies’ fault that we smoked. It was our fault, us! We should take personal responsibility instead of letting fat fascists like him tell us what to do!” Again the message is one of personal responsibility.
In answering the first research question—What qualities of *South Park* make it appeal to both liberal and conservative audiences?—this study found that *South Park* parodies multiple political subjects and does not contain a strong liberal or conservative point of view within the program. *South Park* presents issues from multiple perspectives by using parody and ridiculous situations. While different ideologies are reflected in episodes, the polysemous nature of the show allows for audiences from different ideologies to relate to the messages of the show, often seeing an “imagined other” represented by different characters. Thus, a liberal watching the show may perceive it to be anti-conservative while a conservative watching the show may perceive it to be anti-liberal. In reality, the show parodies both sides of the political spectrum and tends to represent a populist and anti-extremist ideology.

In answering the second, multi-part research question—How does the narrative function to reflect ideology in *South Park*?—this study found that the narrative is instrumental in presenting three populist themes: anti-hypocrisy, anti-elitism, and anti-authority. It is as the story unfolds that these themes are clearly parodied and presented as negative elements of society. In answering research question 2a—How do specific characters reflect ideology?—this study found that these themes are presented through specific characters in each episode. Cartman is frequently a parody of extreme conservative thought and behavior and is used as a negation of the liberal perspective in many episodes. Mrs. Broflovski is a parody of liberalism whose actions frequently become fodder for Cartman. Additionally, adults tend to represent these overriding themes. For example, Rob Reiner is hypocritical, elitist, and uses his authority position
to be a bully. His hypocrisy is highlighted by his incessant eating, while chastising people for being unhealthy for smoking, and his argument that lying is acceptable if it prevents people from smoking. Another example is Miss Stevens, the choir teacher, who embodies the characteristics of authority figures that the show is against and is presented as condescending, ignorant of reality, and as having a distorted perception of reality.

Thus, characters are an important tool for organizing varying perspectives and presenting messages. In answering research question 2b—How do specific elements of the plot reflect ideology—this study found that in addition to themes and characters reflecting ideology, the structure, setting, and style of each episode is reflective of varying ideologies. Often it is the location of an episode, such as the school or the rainforest, as well as the style with which themes are presented that contrasting ideologies appear.

Finally, in answering research question three—How are the specific conservative and liberal elements of the show organized in relation to one another and how does narrative or other elements of the show organize the conservative and liberal elements of the show?—this study found that the specific conservative and liberal elements are the show exist in direct contrast to one another. Conservative characters are contrasted with liberal characters and liberal characters are contrasted with conservative characters. The narrative organizes these elements in such a way that varying audiences will see their own worldview and ideology represented through the plot.

Several broader implications can be derived from this study. First, it is clear that parody is an important tool for sharing social messages. Parody is a softer method of sharing ideas than some others as it is based on humor rather than argument or confrontation. The polysemous nature of parody allows for multiple audiences to relate to
the characters or ideas being mocked. Cartoons in particular are able to create parodies that entertain as well as teach audiences. Significantly, this study finds that the carnivalesque nature of cartoons allows them more leeway with parodies of important figures such as the president or celebrities. In addition, audiences seem to be more accepting of coarse language and crude situations when presented in the childlike format of a cartoon, and this is evidenced by the popularity and longevity of *South Park.*

Second, *South Park* is successful in creating a polysemous message. This is reflective of the idea that audiences are prone to seeing their own worldview in programs. Thus television programs that master the art of parody and mocking anyone and everyone will be successful across broad audiences. Political ideals do not necessarily translate to parody, as what is being parodied is not always the particular political message, rather the hypocrisy or elitism represented in the message. Multiple audiences will interpret the show differently, either as a mockery of specific individuals who have gone to extremes for their purpose or as an attack on specific ideological variants. These and other interpretations are possible, and the combination of humor, parody and populism helps to explain the broad popularity of the show. Moreover, political messages in television shows are often based on the idea of an imagined other. In *South Park,* liberals who watch the show see a parody of their idea of what a conservative is while conservatives see a parody of their idea of what a liberal is.

Finally, overall *South Park* presents a populist view of the world with which many Americans can agree. Conservatives and liberals might each feel that they are being represented through anti-elitist, anti-hypocrisy, and anti-authority messages. Yet, the message supersedes political affiliations in representing a “common sense”
perspective. The arguments are based on common sense and the show frequently derides extremism and behavior from people who seem to be completely out of touch with reality or the lives of the “common man.”

Limitations

There are multiple limitations to this product. First, the scope includes only a small sample subset of episodes. Episodes dealing with different issues might present a different dynamic interplay between conservative, liberal and populist ideals. Second, this analysis focused on two specific variants of the dominant American ideology; liberalism and conservatism. Other variants and other ideologies have not been examined in relation to this show. Third, this analysis showed that specific political values are addressed in a tangential fashion, with specific, timely issues pertinent to each political view being featured. The connection between the ideals of political ideologies and the specific instantiation in contemporary issues deserves further examination. One way to accomplish this is through future study that links together contemporary political activity, long-standing political values and the specific characters and situations in South Park, as well as other popular cartoons.
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