

# INTRODUCTION

Throughout its history, prime-time television has portrayed many faces of government. From the stone-faced Sgt. Friday of *Dragnet* . . . to the corrupt county commissioner Boss Hogg in the *Dukes of Hazzard* . . . to the principled and plainspoken president in *West Wing*, viewers have seen both the virtues and vices of government workers and the institutions they represent. To capture this diversity and the major changes in TV's trends, we are engaged in analyzing the portrayals of all characters identified as civilian public sector employees, as well as program themes involving government practices and performance.

Our first study, *Government Goes Down the Tube: Images of Government in TV Entertainment*, commissioned by the Council for Excellence in Government and released in 1999 examined the program themes and characters in a sample of 1160 fictional prime-time series episodes from the 1955 through 1998, which were either randomly selected from the Library of Congress Broadcast Archive Collection or, beginning with the 1992 season, videotaped by CMPA researchers. To bring this research up to date, we have applied the same sampling procedures to 161 episodes from the 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 seasons. This report focuses on the changes and activities from the 1992 - 98 sample to this new sample of contemporary series.

To identify the most salient aspects of character and plot line, we used the social scientific method of content analysis. This method, which produces objective and systematic descriptions of communication content, is described in an appendix to our previous report. In brief, it involves classifying print or broadcast material according to a priori rules and procedures that permit the results to be tested and replicated. The Center for Media and Public Affairs developed this content analysis system and trained coders to apply it to the specified program material under the authors' supervision.

In each program we identified the tone of each character portrayal, as well as broader thematic treatment related to government. We also classified occupations of all characters, with speaking parts, using the categories developed by the US Census Bureau. This procedure produced a sample of 1,658 characters in episodes that aired during the past two seasons. Of those, 502 were civilian public sector employees at the local, state or federal level. Our previous 1990s sample consisted of 4,160 characters, including 1,307 government employees.

This report differentiates among four major categories of public sector workers: elected officials, including characters who hold or seek public office; civil servants, including mail carriers, clerks, administrators, etc.; public sector workers involved in law enforcement, including those working in the court system (judges and government lawyers) and peace officers (police, sheriffs, etc.); and public school teachers. In addition, we identified several recurring themes related to the practice and performance of government, such as charges of corruption, whether government decisions were guided by public or special interests, and the justice system's treatment of women and minorities.

**TABLE 1**  
**NUMBER OF CHARACTERS**  
**1999 – 2001**

<b>GOVERNMENT OCCUPATIONS</b>		502
Law Enforcers		297
Judges		23
Lawyers		26
Federal Agents		52
Local Police Officers		196
Public School Teachers		36
Elected Officials		17
Other Civil Servants		152
<b>OTHER OCCUPATIONS</b>		1156
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>1658</b>

**TABLE 2**  
**NUMBER OF CHARACTERS**  
**1992 - 1998**

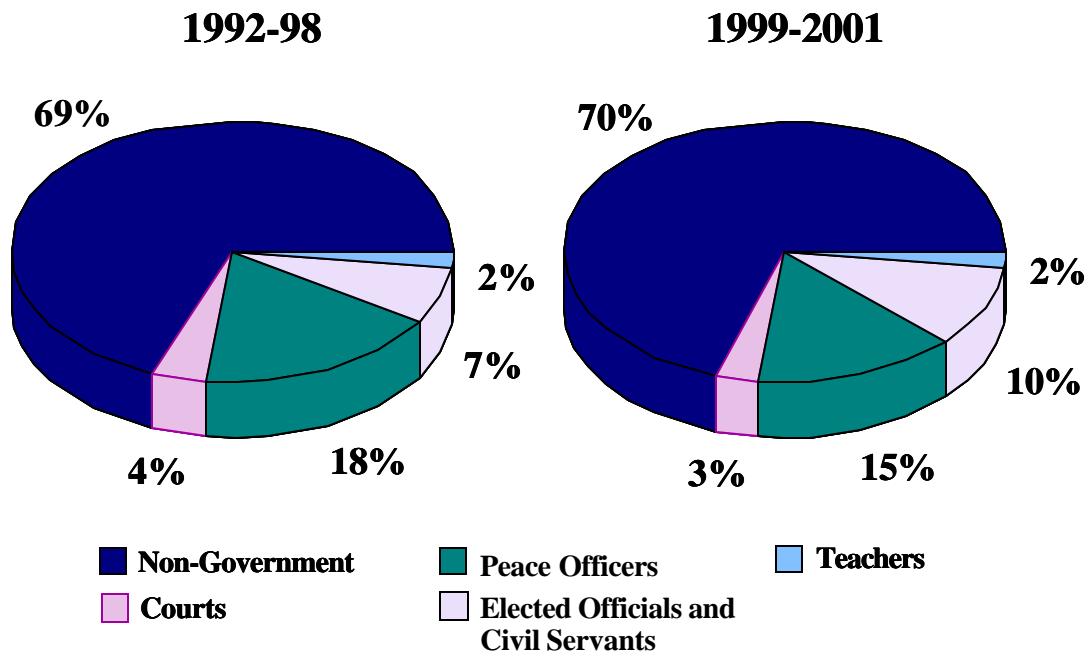
GOVERNMENT OCCUPATIONS	1307
Law Enforcers	935
Judges	101
Lawyers	71
Federal Agents	96
Local Police	588
Local Sheriffs	33
Other	46
Public School Teachers	101
Elected Officials	67
Other Civil Servants	204
OTHER OCCUPATIONS	2853
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4160</b>

There was considerable continuity in the visibility of government workers over time. The proportion of characters with some local, state, or federal government affiliation dropped slightly from 1990s levels, down from 31 percent of all characters in census-coded occupations in that decade to 27 percent during the past two seasons. But the proportion of characters that viewers would most likely associate with “government officials” (public officeholders and civil servants) rose slightly, from 7 percent of all characters in the 1990s to 10 percent currently. There were also similarities over time in the visibility of various occupational sectors within the broad category of “government workers.”

As a reflection of television’s perennial attraction to cops and robbers series, precisely half (50%) of all government employees were peace officers of one sort or another – mainly local police, but also federal agents, local sheriffs and the like.

The proportion was even higher in the previous decade, representing almost three out of five roles (58%). A smaller but nonetheless substantial block of characters represented the justice system in the roles of judges and prosecuting attorneys – one in ten government roles (10%) in the current sample, one in eight (13%) during the 1990s. The core group of government officials – officeholders, civil servants and staffers – made up one-third of the current sample (33%), up from one-fifth (21%) in the previous decade. In both samples the smallest group was comprised of public school teachers – 7 percent during 1999-2001 and 5 percent from 1992 to 1998.

**FIGURE 1**  
**OCCUPATIONAL DISTRIBUTION**



As in our previous studies, we will consider the portrayals of these various groups in turn, while providing comparative data on the tone of each group's portrayal during the 1990s and current samples. Also as before, we will consider separately the thematic elements of the plotlines, which represent more overt assertions about the success or failure of government institutions, above and beyond the indirect evidence provided by the portrayals of the individuals who make up these institutions.

## ELECTED OFFICIALS

In the 1990s, prime-time's elected officials were neither visible nor virtuous. Just 2 percent of the characters we coded were office holders or office seekers. Further, office holders were among the least admired characters in prime time. Negative characters outnumbered positive ones by nearly a two to one margin (36% to 21%), a stark reversal of the two to one positive margin for all other public sector employees combined (38% to 19%). This poor showing surpassed the overall totals of 30 percent positive and 22 percent negative portrayals among all census-coded occupations.

Office holders during this period didn't just bend the law, they broke it – three times as often as other characters. Even those who did nothing illegal were often driven by greed or self-interest rather than principle. For example, in *The Powers That Be*, a befuddled Senator Powers was pushed by his ambitious wife to run for President. Other politically oriented series such as Linda Bloodworth Thomason's *Women of the House* and *Hearts Afire* never rose above cheap sexual jokes and stock stereotypes about incompetence and corruption.

In Hollywood "high concept" vernacular, if you asked what has changed since then in television's portrayal of public officials and the process of governing, the answer would most likely be "Two words: *West Wing*." In terms of both audience and critical response, this is the most successful series set in government's executive branch since *Benson* left the airwaves 15 years ago. *West Wing* followed in the footsteps of two recent commercially successful feature films about life in the White House, *The American President* and *Dave*. Like both these films, the series incorporates elements of both comedy and drama, while presenting a largely sympathetic picture of presidential leadership.

As a kind of “Mr. Smith Goes Realpolitik,” *West Wing* uses speeches, soliloquies and angry exchanges to make the grand rhetorical flourishes that have always marked political dramas. Many previous series, however, came across as preachy and unrealistic in overlooking the way politics really works. Perhaps the greatest strength of *West Wing* is its ability to jump from high blown rhetoric to practical politics. But the wheeling and dealing is not cynical; it is driven by real issues and sincere commitments. Politicians and staffers on the *West Wing* are always very aware of the political consequences of their actions, but their awareness goes beyond what will further their careers. Their activities are not devoted solely to obtaining or retaining power as an end in itself, but as a means of making America a better place for all its citizens. While this is hardly news to political scientists, it is a world apart from typical television portrayals of government and politics.

**TABLE 3**  
**TONE OF PORTRAYALS - SELECTED OCCUPATIONS (%)**  
**1992 - 1998**

	POSITIVE	NEGATIVE	NEUTRAL	TOTAL	INDEX SCORE*	NUMBER OF CHARACTERS
COURT SYSTEM	46	13	41	100%	+33	194
PEACE OFFICERS	40	19	41	100%	+21	854
TEACHERS	34	18	48	100%	+16	107
PRIVATE ATTORNEYS	41	26	33	100%	+15	191
MILITARY	35	19	46	100%	+16	200
DOCTORS	39	25	36	100%	+14	349
OTHER PROFESSIONALS	39	28	33	100%	+11	222
OTHER HEALTH PROVIDERS	14	7	78	100%	+7	208
JOURNALISTS	23	18	59	100%	+5	294
OTHER WHITE COLLAR	21	18	61	100%	+3	803
BLUE COLLAR	18	18	64	100%	0	517
CIVIL SERVANTS	16	18	66	100%	-2	242
BUSINESS	31	39	30	100%	-8	558
ELECTED OFFICIALS	22	31	47	100%	-9	67

\* Index Score represents percent positive minus percent negative portrayals.

Note: Percent may not sum to 100 because rounding error.

**TABLE 4**  
**TONE OF PORTRAYALS - SELECTED OCCUPATIONS (%)**  
**1999 – 2001**

	POSITIVE	NEGATIVE	NEUTRAL	TOTAL	INDEX SCORE*	NUMBER OF CHARACTERS
1. COURT SYSTEM	43	14	43	100%	+29	49
2. DOCTORS	40	17	43	100%	+23	117
3. PEACE OFFICERS	37	19	44	100%	+18	248
4. PRIVATE ATTORNEYS	48	22	30	100%	+16	96
5. OTHER PROFESSIONALS	33	21	46	100%	+12	113
6. OTHER HEALTH PROVIDERS	16	6	78	100%	+10	82
7. MILITARY	28	20	52	100%	+8	65
8. CIVIL SERVANTS	30	22	48	100%	+8	152
9. OTHER WHITE COLLAR	26	19	55	100%	+7	160
10. BLUE COLLAR	22	22	55	99%	0	112
11. JOURNALISTS	18	20	6	100%	-2	73
12. ELECTED OFFICIALS	29	35	35	99%	-6	17
13. BUSINESS	27	37	35	99%	-10	158
14. TEACHERS	25	39	36	100%	-14	36

*\*Index Score represents percent positive minus percent negative portrayals*

*Note: Percent may not sum to 100 because of rounding error.*

Another strength of the *West Wing* lies in the depth of its characters. In many cases prime-time's political characters have been shallow and superficial, with seemingly no life or activities beyond their political advancement. In *West Wing* we see characters who have love lives, families, hobbies, interests and even introspection about what they are doing, why they are doing it, and how well they are doing at it. This gives the characters an extra dimension necessary for the audience to connect with their being movers and shakers of the body politic.

*West Wing* was directly responsible for giving elected officials the second most improved image that we recorded among all occupations, although the overall difference was not dramatic. The proportion of positive roles increased by eight percentage points (from 21% to 29%), while negative portrayals dropped by one percentage point (from 36% to 35%). The combined index change of +9 raised elected officials two rungs up the ladder, going from dead last in the occupational rankings in the 1990s to twelfth currently, ahead of business characters and, more surprisingly, teachers.

Despite its popular and critical success, *West Wing* has not yet had time to produce the program clones that highly rated shows typically spin off. The combined favorability ratings of all elected officials in other shows was almost identical to what we found during the previous decade. For example, amid the buzz created by *West Wing*, *Spin City* is an often overlooked workhouse of prime time. An episode we viewed contained this fairly typical exchange between the comically obtuse Mayor Winston and a new deputy mayor:

*Deputy Mayor Crawford:* Sir, about being late this morning – I'm sorry.

*Mayor Winston:* I'm having trouble waking up these days. I moved the alarm clock across the room. You know – get up, turn it off? But after two days, I just moved my bed over there. I see from your bio that you're "relaxed, easygoing, and comfortable at work or play."

*Crawford:* Sir, that's the J. Crew catalog.

**TABLE 5**  
**CHANGES IN TONE OF OCCUPATIONAL**  
**PORTRAYALS**

	RANKINGS		INDEX CHANGE*
	1999 - 2001	1992 - 1998	
COURT SYSTEM	1	1	-5
DOCTORS	2	6	+11
PEACE OFFICERS	3	2	-3
PRIVATE ATTORNEYS	4	4	-3
OTHER PROFESSIONALS	5	6	0
OTHER HEALTH PROVIDERS	6	8	+1
MILITARY	7	5	-7
CIVIL SERVANTS	7	11	+6
OTHER WHITE COLLAR	9	10	+4
BLUE COLLAR	10	12	0
JOURNALISTS	11	9	-9
ELECTED OFFICIALS	12	14	+9
BUSINESS	13	13	-3
TEACHERS	14	3	-34

*\*Index Change represents the change in index scores from the 1992-98 sample to the 1999-01 sample.*

Nonetheless, in view of the programming patterns that have long marked the prime-time schedule, we would expect the advent of a new breed of political drama before many more seasons pass. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, *West Wing* is already partly responsible for a change in television's thematic treatment of government. In the 1990's sample, three out of four themes (76%) criticized the political system by presenting politics as a dirty business, and political institutions as failing the citizens they are intended to serve. In the current sample, this figure was nearly reversed, with 62 percent positive and 38 percent negative instances.

The difference is illustrated by the response of then-Governor Bartlett to a dairy farmer who criticizes him during his presidential campaign for voting against price supports for milk.

Yeah. I screwed you on that one.... And not just you, a lot of my constituents. I put the hammer to farms in Concord, Salem, Laconia, Pelham, Hampton, Hudson....

Today, for the first time in history, the largest group of Americans living in poverty are children. One in five children live in the most abject, dangerous, hopeless, back-breaking, gut-wrenching poverty any of us could imagine. One in five. And they're children. If fidelity to freedom and democracy is the code of our civic religion, then surely the code of our humanity is faithful service to the unwritten Commandment that says, "We shall give our children better than we ourselves received."

Let me put it this way: I voted against the bill because I didn't want to make it harder for people to buy milk. I stopped some money from flowing into your pocket. If that angers you, if you resent me, I completely respect that. But if you expect anything different from the President of the United States you should vote for someone else.

**TABLE 6**  
**THEMES OF EPISODES**

<b>1992 - 1998</b>	<b>SUPPORT</b>	<b>CRITICIZE</b>		<b>NUMBER</b>
<b>POLITICAL SYSTEM</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>74%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>LEGAL SYSTEM</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>70%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>73%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>1999 - 2001</b>	<b>SUPPORT</b>	<b>CRITICIZE</b>		<b>NUMBER</b>
<b>POLITICAL SYSTEM</b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>LEGAL SYSTEM</b>	<b>81%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>71%</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>42</b>

## **CIVIL SERVANTS**

Civil servants were more visible than politicians during the '90s, but they were also among the least admired groups of public sector employees that we studied. Twenty-two percent were shown in a positive light, barely half the rate of positive characters we found among law enforcers. But what most defined the image of civil servants was their lack of definition, as reflected in their large proportion of neutral roles (58%). Television in the 1990s rarely built shows around workers in government agencies. Civil servants were frequently shown as robotic paper shufflers or abrasive malcontents who were too lazy, apathetic or self-absorbed to serve the public.

For example, the US Postal Service was epitomized by the lovable but bumbling Cliff Clavin, a member of the long-running sitcom *Cheers*. Cliff's lack of professionalism was alluded to in several episodes, and he often faced disciplinary action for various job infractions. And Cliff was a role model for government workers compared to the unsavory Newman of *Seinfeld*. Contradicting the Postal Service's famed motto, rain, snow, sleet and any other inclement weather usually interfered with his appointed rounds.

Echoing the improved image that we found among public officials, however, civil servants are now being more positively portrayed in both relative and absolute terms. Their positive portrayals increased from 22 to 30 percent of characters, producing an index of +8. This represents a change of +6 over time, placing them third, behind only public officials (+9) and doctors (+11) in their increase in favorability. Even more impressive, civil servants leaped from tenth to sixth place in the favorability index. This climb four rungs up the ladder was matched only by doctors among the 14 groups in our comparisons.

None of these characters plays a leading role, but some are continuing characters. Among these is *Judging Amy*'s social worker mother, Maxine, who reluctantly leaves her retirement to assist her overworked former colleagues in providing human services to the disadvantaged. One exchange of dialogue is notable for what is *not* said about government workers. When her former boss tries to coax her into returning, Maxine says, "Sean, you have an office full of competent social workers." He replies, "No, I don't. I have an office full of well-intentioned and under-experienced social workers."

Note that he does not attribute the problem to lack of motivation, ineptitude, or bureaucratic red tape. Instead he presents his workers as dedicated and lacking experience rather than competence. This contrasts sharply with an episode from *King of the Hill* in our 1990 sample, in which a social worker is portrayed as a rigid busybody who takes a child away from his loving parents because of his obtuse rigidity in applying the rules.

Other characters appear only in a single episode, mostly to further the plot by working for the welfare of other characters. For example, in an episode of *Third Watch*, a paramedic goes far beyond the call of duty in assisting the child of a poor and frightened Hispanic immigrant, who speaks little English. After determining that the child is asthmatic, he ends up personally offering to set up an appointment at a clinic and even give them a ride and back.

Stereotypes of government bureaucrats still persist, but to a lesser degree and mostly in lesser known shows that do not get the intense press coverage of *West Wing*. Probably the most negative portrayal of civil servants appeared in the recently cancelled *Norm*. This show focused on an errant ex-hockey player who, after too many brushes with the law, is sentenced to do community service as a social worker. (It is notable that Norm is punished by giving him a government job that is usually associated with dedication and service to the less fortunate.) One workplace scene illustrates the comic disdain with which the popular culture still often treats the public sector:

*Mr Denby:* Norm! What is your dog doing at work?!

*Norm:* Remember when you told us to keep an eye out for a level 1 clerical assistant?

*Denby:* Don't -- don't -- Don't tell me you hired wiener dog!

*Norm:* No, sir, technically, you did when you signed this authorization form.  
Remember you encouraged us to find someone with a disability.

*Denby [reading from application]:*  
"Applicant has no thumbs, has 3 inch legs, and speaks absolutely no English."  
This -- this -- This is atrocious! He's fired! Get rid of him. Get rid of him now.

*Norm:* Come on, sir, you can't fire wiener dog. He's a good man.

*Laurie:* Actually, as crazy as it sounds, you really can't fire him. If you terminate a worker with no notice, the union automatically files a grievance. I'm afraid it says right here [reading], "Before you fire anyone, you have to state the specific problem, and then give them two weeks to improve their performance."

*Denby [turning to face wiener dog]:*  
Hello, wiener dog. I'm sorry to say that I'm unhappy with your job performance. You've got two weeks to improve your typing skills and learn to talk!

*Mr. Dibenedetto:*  
Denby!

*Denby:* Oh, hello, Mr. DiBenedetto. I didn't know you'd be stopping by. What brings you down from your lofty perch in administration?

*Mr. Dibenedetto [hugging and stroking wiener dog]:*  
Hey, look at this guy! Hey, hey, hey, how you doing' there, little fella?! I hear you hired somebody with no thumbs and 3 inch legs. I'm glad we're finally hiring the disabled around here. So, where is this courageous mess?

*Norm:* Well, right now, you're sexually harassing him, sir.

# LAW ENFORCERS

In the fantasy world of prime-time television, the most frequent activities involving government take place in the courtroom and the station house. As a result, law enforcers dominate the government work force on prime time. They constituted 22 percent of all characters in census-coded occupations during the 1990s, a level of representation that easily outstripped that of all other government workers combined. Shows such as *NYPD Blue*, *Hudson Street* and *Courthouse* gave police, judges and prosecutors prominent roles during this period.

Law enforcers in the '90s retained the predominantly favorable image they have enjoyed from TV's earliest days. The virtues of law enforcers far outstripped those of characters in private sector occupations, which had a collective positive rating of 28 percent. Slightly fewer than one in five law enforcers were bad guys, and about three in five were neutral, giving them a favorable margin of better than two-to-one.

However, images of law enforcement in the 1990s also echoed trends toward realism and moral ambiguity that took root in the 1980s. Series like *Law and Order*, *NYPD Blue*, and *Homicide: Life on the Street*, all featured the gritty, morally conflicted milieu that borrowed from *Hill Street Blues*. During this period, viewers saw cops who sometimes abused the law they tried to enforce, judges who made rulings against their own better judgment, and prosecutors who reluctantly cut deals that were less than just.

As a result, although police dominated the airwaves in sheer numbers, they scored in the middle of the pack as role models. Their 42 percent positive and 19 percent negative ratings matched the overall figures among all law enforcers. Often police officers were coded as mixed characters – well-intentioned but flawed or misguided. For example, the cops on *NYPD Blue* resorted to violence while interrogating a suspect who allegedly shot a detective. Indeed, some law enforcement officials were bad apples to the core. For example, *Walker, Texas Ranger* featured a prototypical racist Southern sheriff who murdered nonwhites that came to his town. Moreover, law enforcement in prime time is not just a matter of individual cops catching crooks. Many shows probed the mechanics and morality of the justice system itself, including corruption, police brutality, and the treatment of women and minorities. A majority (58%) of the shows that dealt with such subject matter concluded that the system was failing its citizens.

As television meets the new millennium, law enforcement remains the most visible part of government in prime time. Appearances range from cops in old stand-bys like *Diagnosis Murder* to new series like *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* and *The Job*. Over and above these focal shows, cops (and to a lesser extent judges) show up in a variety of shows. Most cop shows these days continue to focus on the gritty mean streets. Standouts in this vein of inner city realism include such old timers as *NYPD Blue*, *Law & Order*, and *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, as well as new offerings like *The Job*, *Big Apple*, and *Third Watch*.

While such gritty shows work hard to reflect the complexities and systemic issues that confront law enforcement, there remains a small group of more traditional moralistic cop shows. *Martial Law* (CBS), *Walker Texas Ranger* (CBS) and *The District* (CBS) are three of the best known. These shows share a strong denunciation of crime or immoral behavior and a staunch defense of the virtues of law enforcers. The combination of these two categories – old-fashioned heroic roles and those that sympathize with urban cops and judges doing their best in a tough job – ensured that peace officers would remain near the top of the occupational ladder in their favorability ratings. As in the 1990s, positive portrayals of these law enforcement officials roughly doubled the negative ones (by 37% to 19% currently vs. 41% to 20% in the 1990s).

Within television's overall occupational hierarchy, these law enforcement officials fell from second to third, as medical doctors supplanted them in favorability. But that reflects a sharp increase in positive portrayals of doctors in such shows as *ER*, *Gideon's Crossing* and *City of Angels*, rather than any dropoff in favorable roles among peace officers. Further, judges and prosecutors easily retained their positive image as television's most favorably portrayed occupational group. In both samples, officers of the court were seen in a positive light over three times as often as a negative one – by 48 to 14 percent in the 1990s and 43 to 14 percent currently.

Finally, as we found with political dramas, the most obvious change in prime-time's presentation of law enforcement is thematic rather than individual. Although the mix of good and bad guys has remained relatively stable for the past decade, the dialogue and plotlines have become more supportive of the system's ability to mete out justice. In fact, four out of five thematic treatments in the current sample cast the justice system in a favorable light. That represents a complete turnaround from the 1990s sample, in which seven out of ten shows highlighted shortcomings in the system.

For example, when police officers in *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* are accused of using undue force, their superior defends their actions by showing members of a review board graphic pictures of crime victims:

This little boy's mother stuck his hands on a frying pan until his fingers burned off. This rape victim required 12 hours of surgery to have a steel plate put into her head after her attacker pummeled her with a claw hammer. This one didn't make it. Is there anybody on this panel who doesn't share Detective Stabler's anger for the perpetrators? This man is a good cop. As his commanding officer, I stand with him and every other cop who faces these horrors day after day and has the strength to keep their impulses in check. Now if you can look at these pictures and not understand that ... the problem here isn't [detective] Stabler.

## TEACHERS

Teachers were on the opposite end of the visibility spectrum from law enforcers in the 1990s, accounting for only 2 percent of all census-coded occupations. Throughout the decade they were mainly bit players in prime-time's occupational landscape, playing supporting roles in shows like *The Simpsons*, *Boy Meets World*, and *My So-Called Life*. Nonetheless, they received mostly favorable treatment, with 28 percent playing positive roles, compared to only 17 percent who were negatively portrayed. Their index score of +11 was high enough to place them third among all occupational groups.

Since teaching is not usually treated as a controversial or contentious occupation (as is police work, for example), it came as a surprise to find that teachers have dropped the farthest of any group in television's esteem. In the current sample, they received only 25 percent positive portrayals compare to 39 percent negative. The resulting index score of -14 placed them dead last among all groups. Although such a dramatic turnaround looks surprising, it does not indicate that teaching has suddenly become the occupation television loves to hate. Instead, it represents the Janus face of the *West Wing* phenomenon, in which a single series can shift the profile of a group that is poorly represented in the overall prime-time schedule.

A new series titled *Boston Public* has revived television's longstanding device of using the schoolhouse as an ongoing forum to explore complex social issues and conflict. If teaching is portrayed more negatively than before, it is mainly due to the teachers in this show being portrayed ambiguously, with a full complement of human failings as well as virtues. While such portrayals are more sophisticated and often more compelling, the result is that not a single teacher at *Boston Public* is shown as a purely positive role model. Representative characters include Milton Buttle, who is fired over a long-term affair with a student and trying to cover it up. Then there is Harvey Lipshultz, who teaches American history as if he were in the suburbs in the early 1960s, making the kids say the Pledge of Allegiance and regarding black and Latino students as uninterested in learning. In an opening altercation he tries to send a female student home for not wearing a bra, which only sets off a braless student protest. The vice-principal (Scott Guber) is an overly officious stick-in-the-mud type. The most positive teacher in the school is Lauren Davis, who is idealistic, energetic and supportive. Yet even she cannot escape problems such as racial bias in her grading and discipline. In one episode, after much introspection, she discovers to her dismay that her assumptions about minorities seem to have resulted in her being tougher on minority students.

## CONCLUSION

The central finding of this study is that prime-time portrayals of government are becoming more positive, as are portrayals of its representatives in public office and the civil service. This finding holds true for both individual characters and thematic treatments of government. In absolute terms, the portrayal of government employees is still a mixed bag. But their image has improved relative both to that of the previous decade and to other occupational groups depicted in the current program schedule.

This conclusion reflects the confluence of several distinct trends. First, in the realm of character portrayals, elected officials and civil servants had the most improved images of any group other than medical doctors. Meanwhile, judges and prosecuting attorneys had the most positive images of any occupational group in both time periods. Teachers represented the sole exception to this trend. They had the least positive image of any group, reversing their relatively favorable ratings in the 1990s. But this change reflects the impact of a single series with numerous roles for teachers.

This more favorable view of government employees was matched by themes that emphasized a positive role for government. As Table 6 showed, in the 1990s, three out of four shows criticized politics as corrupt, cynical, or unrepresentative. Among current series, three out of five episodes praised political institutions for serving the public interest. In the 1990s, seven out of ten shows criticized the legal system as unjust, discriminatory, or ineffective. In current series, eight out of ten shows have praised the functioning of the legal system.

When these patterns were combined in a single index of all governmental institutions, the magnitude of this shift in prime-time's perspective became clear. Nearly three out of four government-themed shows from the previous decade (1992 - 1998) found fault with how government works. Among current series (1999 - 2001), nearly three out of four episodes praised the government for working well. Finally, the recent success of NBC's *West Wing* seems to portend a more realistic and appreciative portrayal of public service in future seasons. So if television does not always celebrate the role of government in American life, at least the glass has gone from being half empty to half full.