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# Swansonomics: Using “Parks and Recreation” to Teach Economics

L. Brooke Conaway and Christopher Clark<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Based on a first-year multidisciplinary course, Swansonomics is a class where students examine the libertarian beliefs espoused by the character Ron Swanson from the television series *Parks and Recreation*. The show provides great examples of rent seeking, fiscal policy issues, social policy issues, and bureaucratic incentive structures. These *Parks and Recreation* video clips can be used in any class to cover a variety of issues. Examples of topics include the expected economic consequences of specific political or economic philosophies, unintended consequences of policies, various systems of taxation, public and private incentive structures, and varying degrees of capitalism and government intervention.

## Introduction

This paper is based on a first-year multidisciplinary course taught at a liberal arts university. The course covers a variety of topics, with particular emphasis on different economic systems, varying degrees of capitalism, government intervention, and public choice issues. It is meant to introduce students to economic concepts through the use of the popular TV show, *Parks and Recreation*, and in particular the character Ron Swanson. An example syllabus for the course is provided in the appendix and we discuss how this particular class was taught; however, the paper is organized so that these *Parks and Recreation* video clips and quotes can be used as tools for teaching economic concepts to undergraduates in any class.

To improve student application of economic concepts, several innovative pedagogical methods have been explored. Tinari and Khandke (2000), Mateer and Rice (2007), Hall and Lawson (2008), Hall et al. (2008), and Krasnozhan (2013) suggest ways to use music to teach economic concepts. Willingham (2009) noted that students tend to remember everything they see on television, but do not remember lecture material. The role of visual media in information retention has led to the increasingly popular pedagogical approach of using video clips in the classroom.

Ghent et al. (2010) show how episodes of *Seinfeld* can be used to teach economic concepts, Luccasen and Thomas (2010), Gillis and Hall (2010), and Hall (2014) show that the same can be done with episodes from *The Simpsons*, and Kuester et al. (2014) use episodes from *The Office*. [Leet and Houser \(2003\)](#) illustrate how classic films and documentaries can be used to teach principles courses, while Mateer and Stephenson (2011) discussed film clips that can be used to teach public choice. Based on this previous work and thanks to the newfound fame of Ron Swanson of *Parks and Recreation*, we believe there is a way to wrap the topics covered in various economics courses in a culturally relevant shell that will help solidify the application of economic concepts.

## Who is Ron Swanson?

*Parks and Recreation* is a television show on NBC created by Greg Daniels and Michael Schur. This mockumentary comedy series follows the lives of those working in the Parks and Recreation Department of

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Pawnee, Indiana. Nick Offerman plays Ronald “Ron” Ulysses Swanson, the director of the department, who is known for outwardly professing to be a libertarian and for his humorous quotes related to government, meat, and general manliness. The irony of his character is that he works for the government, yet would like to see all of it, including the Pawnee Parks and Recreation Department, privatized and the money returned to taxpayers. He particularly enjoys using his job as a way to limit the reach and spending of the Pawnee local government.

Ron Swanson’s initial small cult following has ballooned into a mainstream phenomenon since the show recently ended its sixth season. Now many college students recognize his trademark mustache and deadpan humor. This recognition is the catalyst to get students to look at economic concepts in a new light with an interesting pop culture twist. Though his character rarely shows emotion and his political philosophy is vilified by many, he has managed to become a break out star and fan favorite. Ron has many admirable qualities that provide some common ground for those with differing political views.<sup>2</sup> We hope his humor and outlook on life will be good facilitators for discussions on relevant political issues, particularly how his libertarian ideas might play out in the real world.

Video clips from the show can be shown through a Netflix account, which currently hosts seasons 1 – 6. Ron’s quotes, season and episode numbers, and starting and ending times for each clip are included in Table 1.

[Please see table 1 on the following page]

Other clips from the show that can be shown in conjunction with the original Ron quote are also provided in Table 1. The quotes are divided into three general headings with specific concepts that can be covered using each quote. Articles covering real world issues related to each topic, as well as other video clips, can be used in the discussion to illustrate application of concepts. Links for real world application articles that supplement these quotes are provided in Table 2, which is located in the appendix. The remainder of the paper includes a discussion of these quotes, and the topics, video clips and real world application articles related to each.

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<sup>2</sup> Chaney (2012)

**Table 1. Ron Swanson Quotes and Economic Content**

Episode	Quote	Economic Concepts
<b>Topics in Principles Courses</b>		
Season 5 Episode 16 "Bailout"	"I'll have the #9." "Sir, that's a party platter. It serves 12 people." " I know what I'm about, son." (17:15 – 18:29; Season 5 Episode 1 "Ms. Knope Goes to Washington" 1:30-2:40)	Consumer preferences, legislation based on the idea of irrational consumer preferences
Season 3 Episode 6 "Indianapolis"	"Just give me all the bacon and eggs you have. Wait...wait. I worry what you heard was: Give me a lot of bacon and eggs. What I said was: Give me all the bacon and eggs you have." (19:29 – 20:00)	Consumer preferences, obesity and moral hazard
Season 2 Episode 15 "Sweetums"	"The whole point of this country is if you want to eat garbage, balloon up to 600 pounds and die of a heart attack at 43, you can! You are free to do so. To me, that's beautiful." (11:00 – 11:20; Season 5 Episode 2 "Soda Tax" 4:11 – 5:20)	Fat tax, large soda bans, obesity problem, role of government, substitution, inferior goods
Season 2 Episode 15 "Sweetums"	"I call this turf 'n' turf. It's a 16 oz. T-bone and a 24 oz. porterhouse. Also, whiskey and a cigar. I am going to consume all of this at the same time because I am a free American." (18:11 – 19:50)	Regulations concerning drugs, smoking, abortion, prostitution, etc.
Season 2 Episode 18 "The Possum"	"You've got hazardous chemicals over there." "Yeah, which only I am breathing. It's the same liberty that gives me the right to fart in my own car. Are you going to tell a man he can't fart in his own car?" (5:19 – 6:20; 6:50 – 7:18; 10:58 – 12:00; 17:57 – 18:50)	Protecting people from themselves, externalities, allocation of common resources under private vs. public ownership
Season 2 Episode 22 "Telethon"	"Give a man a fish and feed him for a day. Don't teach a man to fish...and feed yourself. He's a grown man. And fishing's not that hard." (11:10 – 12:00; Season 5 Episode 1 "Ms. Knope Goes to Washington" 0:00-1:09)	Tragedy of the Commons, overfishing, genetically modified food, environmental issues
Season 2 Episode 9 "The Camel"	"I got my first job when I was 9 working at a sheet metal factory. In two weeks, I was running the floor. Child labor laws are ruining this country." (2:50 – 3:19)	Sweatshops, child labor, minimum wage and safety regulations, monetary and non-monetary wages, fair trade goods
Season 3 Episode 10 "Soulmates"	"I love Food and Stuff. It's where I buy all of my food and most of my stuff." (12:45-13:10; 5:50-6:28)	Wal-Mart vs. mom and pop shops, competition , predatory pricing, unionization
Season 2 Episode 8 "Ron and Tammy"	"On my death bed my final wish is to have both my ex-wives rush to my side so I can use my dying breath to tell them both to go to hell one last time. Would I get married again? Absolutely. If you don't believe in love, what's the point of living?" (3:30 – 4:20; Season 2 Episode 1 "Pawnee Zoo" 6:40 – 8:20)	Enforcing voluntary contractual agreements, marriage equality debate
Season 5 Episode 17 "Partridge"	"Do you know if one can pay court ordered settlements in gold? ... I'm not sure how much money I have, but I know how many pounds of money I have." (16:48 – 17:10)	Commodity backed vs. fiat money, inflation tax, monetary policy, bitcoin

*Notes: Running times for each clip are provided in parentheses. Some quotes also include additional clips from the show that are relevant to the corresponding concepts.*

**Table 1. Continued**

**Ron Swanson Quotes and Economic Content**

Episode	Quote	Economic Concepts
<b>Topics in Comparative Economic Systems and Institutions</b>		
Season 4 Episode 19 "Live Ammo"	"I have so many ideas. Some are simple like take down traffic lights and eliminate the post office. The bigger ones will be tougher, like bring all this crumbling to the ground." (3:47 – 4:23)	The difference between anarchy and libertarianism, an introduction to the various economic philosophies
Season 5 Episode 16 "Bailout"	"The free market is a jungle; it is beautiful and brutal and should be left alone. When a business fails it dies and a new business takes its place. Just let business be business, and let government be government." (17:19 – 18:29)	Capitalism, competition, creative destruction, economic freedom, rule of law
Season 1 Episode 4 "Boys' Club"	"My idea of a perfect government is one guy who sits in a small room at a desk, and the only thing he is allowed to do is decide who to nuke." (18:00 – 18:39)	National defense, public goods, the size of government as a % of GDP
Season 3 Episode 1 "Rainy Day"	"Capitalism: God's way of determining who is smart and who is poor." (4:23 – 5:19; Season 4 Episode 17 "Campaign Shake-up" 1:30 – 2:40, 10:08 – 11:06, 11:22 – 11:58, 15:08- 17:09, 17:56-20:22)	Progressive income tax, transfer programs (e.g. Social Security, Medicare, ACA, etc.), income inequality, redistribution, degrees of capitalism
Season 5 Episode 16 "Bailout"	"Capitalism is the only way, Leslie. It's what moves our country forward. It's what makes America great and England okay and France terrible." (17:15 – 18:29)	Public vs. private incentives, rent seeking vs. creative destruction, degrees of capitalism
Season 6 Episode 1 "London Part 2"	"Just thought you needed some fresh air...even if that air is filled with the foul stench of European socialism." (26:49 – 28:30; Season 5 Episode 16 "Bailout" 7:50 – 9:38)	Socialism, communism and Marxism, government monopolies and production
<b>Topics in Public Choice</b>		
Season 5 Episode 19 "Article Two"	"There are only three ways to motivate people: money, fear, and hunger." (10:08 – 11:09)	Incentives and the idea of self-interest, bureaucratic self-interest, public vs. private charity
Season 1 Episode 2 "The Reporter"	"I like Tom. He doesn't do a lot of work around here. He shows zero initiative. He's not a team player. He's never wanted to go that extra mile. Tom is exactly what I'm looking for in a government employee." (19:00 – 19:10; Season 5 Episode 18 "Animal Control" 0:00 – 1:20; Season 5 Episode 16 "Bailout" 0:00 – 1:40; Season 2 Episode 23 "The Master Plan" 8:39 – 11:40)	Public vs. private incentives, public vs. private pay, inefficiencies of government
Season 1 Episode 5 "The Banquet"	"I enjoy government functions like I enjoy getting kicked in the nuggets with a steel toed boot." (5:38 - 18:15)	Politics and rent seeking, post office vs. UPS store, public school monopolies
Season 5 Episode 5 "Halloween Surprise"	"Am I interrupting anything important?" "Impossible, I work for the government." (0:00 – 0:08)	Inefficiency, public unions vs. private unions

*Notes: Running times for each clip are provided in parentheses. Some quotes also include additional clips from the show that are relevant to the corresponding concepts.*

**Table 1. Continued**

**Ron Swanson Quotes and Economic Content**

Episode	Quote	Economic Concepts
<b>Topics in Public Choice Continued</b>		
Season 1 Episode 1 "Pilot"	"I think that all government is a waste of taxpayer money. My dream is to have the park system privatized and run entirely for profit by corporations, like Chuck E. Cheese. They have an impeccable business model." (15:48 – 16:19)	Public, common, club and private goods
Season 2 Episode 15 "Sweetums"	"I think the entire government should be privatized. Chuck E Cheese could run the parks – everything operated by tokens. Drop in a token, go on the swing set. Drop in another token, take a walk. Drop in a token, look at a duck." (2:38 – 3:00)	Privatization of parks, roads and other goods and services
Season 1 Episode 2 "Canvassing"	"There's a new wind blowing in government, and I don't like it. All of a sudden there's all this federal money coming in and Paul, the city manager, is telling us to build parks, start new community programs. It's horrifying." (9:05 – 10:00)	Government spending on public goods, free rider problem
Season 5 Episode 15 "Correspondents' Lunch"	"I have a joke for you. The government in this town is excellent and uses your tax dollars efficiently." (2:00 – 3:00)	Inefficiencies, rent seeking and government spending
Season 2 Episode 23 "The Master Plan"	"Once a year every branch of government meets in a room and announces what they intend to waste taxpayer money on. For a libertarian such as myself, it's philosophically horrifying." (4:44 – 5:20; Season 5 Episode 21 "Swing Vote" 0:00-1:10, 6:29-8:29, 10:55- 12:00, 13:30-14:40, 16:20-17:20, 18:09-19:30, 20:00-21:00)	Government spending, political incentives, budget cuts and fiscal policy
Season 5 Episode 21 "Swing Vote"	"I believe in cutting useless government projects. I also believe in cutting useful projects, future projects and past projects. The Hoover Dam is a travesty." (0:00 – 1:10)	Concentrated benefits and dispersed costs problem, government debt
Season 3 Episode 1 "Go Big or Go Home"	"Cursing: there is only one bad word – taxes." (4:23 – 5:19) *Note: Ron does not actually say this, it is on his Swanson Pyramid of Greatness	Progressive income tax, Fair Tax, flat tax, VAT, sin taxes
Season 3 Episode 14 "Road Trip"	"It's never too early to learn that the government is a greedy piglet that suckles on a taxpayer's teat until they have sore, chapped nipples." (4:29 – 4:50; 6:04 – 7:00; 10:32 – 11:10; 17:02 – 17:50; 20:50 – 21:21)	Taxes of all forms, who pays taxes (1% vs 47% discussion), the Tea Party, Atlas is Shrugging, interest groups and rent seeking for tax breaks
Season 5 Episode 16 "Bailout"	"The government should not prop up a failed business. That would be like giving food to a mortally wounded animal." (8:00 – 9:40; 6:09 – 7:10; 11:00 – 12:19; 13: 40 – 15:09)	The bailouts and stimulus, bailouts and moral hazard, the cost of saving certain jobs

*Notes: Running times for each clip are provided in parentheses. Some quotes also include additional clips from the show that are relevant to the corresponding concepts.*

## Evaluating Ron's Views: The Structure of the Class

The Swansonomics course was designed as an introductory course on comparative economic systems meant for students who are primarily freshmen non-majors. Our aim was to make the subject more interesting to modern students by linking it to *Parks and Recreation*, and in particular Ron Swanson. This course places a major focus on alternative capitalist systems, including significant coverage of public choice issues as they relate to this comparison. [Djankov et al. \(2003\)](#) argue that comparative economics is not dead, but rather the focus should be shifted to a comparison of alternative capitalist systems as most of the world moves away from the traditional socialism of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Economic educators can use the format of this Swansonomics class as a way to generate interest in what [Djankov et al. \(2003\)](#) call "the new comparative economics."

Because the topics we cover in Swansonomics vary broadly across fields, we have tried to format this paper in a way that makes it easy for educators to incorporate these video clips into a variety of classes. When using these clips, it would be worthwhile to remind students that they are designed to get them to think about the economic concepts rather than making them fans or opponents of individual *Parks and Recreation* characters. Video clips can be integrated into lessons in a variety of ways, such as showing the clip after a lecture as an example of application and as a way to facilitate a discussion. Alternatively, video clips can be shown in the middle of lectures to solidify a concept and break up the monotony of lecture-style teaching.

As another example, we structured the Swansonomics course in the following way. Students were first introduced to the topic with a relevant *Parks and Recreation* video clip. This seemed to make students more excited to learn about and discuss the concepts covered. Also, the show's humor helped to grab their attention at the beginning of the class. Next, the relevant lecture material was covered and students were expected to give feedback during the lecture. For example, students may be asked, "Why do you think Ron hates taxes?" and later asked, "Why are tax revenues important?" This provides a good segue into covering the different types of taxes and their various effects, costs and benefits.

Relevant current event articles and other video clips were used after the information was covered to reinforce concepts and illustrate real world applications. Students were then given time outside of class to find relevant articles to bring to the next class period. They were expected to turn in written assignments evaluating these articles using economic concepts learned in the previous class period. Each student was also expected to present the information to the rest of the class. Using legitimate economic concepts, students then argued for or against what they thought Ron's position would be concerning the article's content. This generated interesting class discussions and critical evaluation of different points of view. It also forced the students to work on concept application. Overall, the class was structured so that the amount of time spent on application and debate was about the same as the amount of time spent on presenting the material to the students using lectures and video clips.

As a means of reinforcing concepts, students were also expected to turn in policy memos. These are short 2-3 page memos advocating for specific changes to particular government policies. Students were allowed to choose the specific government policies they thought should be changed. They were expected to turn in written assignments presenting concise arguments for specific changes, including research and using economic concepts to support their recommendations. Students also presented their memos to the rest of the class.

This informal method of student presentation and discussion obviously works best with smaller classes, but larger classes could be divided into groups and expected to engage in a more formal debate. Each group could be assigned to one side of an issue and expected to prepare arguments outside of class before engaging in a formal debate with another group assigned to the opposite side. These debates could be held periodically throughout the semester or at the end of the semester once all lecture material has been presented, and the number of debates could be limited to one or two issues chosen by the instructor. Economics courses are not known for requiring group work, so this could be a way to incorporate a group project into any class.

An example syllabus for the Swansonomics course is provided in the appendix, and examples of relevant articles that can be used for real world application and concept reinforcement are provided in Table 2, also in the appendix.

### **Ron Swanson Quotes, Relevant Discussion Topics, and Article Application Examples**

Below is a discussion of the quotes and relevant *Parks and Recreation* video clips from Table 1, as well as relevant topics that can be covered for each. The quotes have been grouped into three categories for ease of integration into various courses. Links for application examples for each topic are provided in Table 2 in the appendix next to the corresponding Ron quote.

#### ***Topics in Principles Courses***

The following quotes apply to issues typically covered in principles courses, but they can be used in upper level courses as well. The quotes primarily concern consumer preferences, mutually beneficial exchange, and externalities. Each provides a good set up for discussing economic concepts as applied to various highly politicized issues. We often find that students enjoy using economics to analyze interesting controversial topics.

1) *“I’ll have the #9. “ “Sir, that’s a party platter. It serves 12 people.” “I know what I’m about, son.”*

*“Just give me all the bacon and eggs you have. Wait...wait. I worry what you heard was: give me a lot of bacon and eggs. What I said was: give me all the bacon and eggs you have.”*

Many times legislation is passed under the assumption that consumers make irrational decisions. Legislation regarding incandescent light bulbs and energy efficient clothes dryers are good examples. These quotes help motivate a discussion on rationality, consumer preferences and legislation intended to alter consumer behavior. They can also be related to the topic of moral hazard. For example, students may consider how Ron’s diet might change if he were not covered by health insurance.

These quotes can also be used in conjunction with the next quote (2) and related to regulations meant to encourage healthy food choices. In the episode “Ms. Knope Goes to Washington,” Ron is responsible for throwing the annual parks department barbeque. He makes his rules explicitly clear – there will be no vegetables at this barbeque. This video clip can be used to initiate a discussion on healthy food regulations for public schools, particularly Michelle Obama’s Healthy, Hunger-free Kids Act.

1) *“The whole point of this country is if you want to eat garbage, balloon up to 600 pounds and die of a heart attack at 43, you can! You are free to do so. To me, that’s beautiful.”*

Here, the role of government in the obesity problem can be discussed. In addition to Ron’s quote, a clip from the episode “Soda Tax” can be shown, which explores government regulations meant to lower obesity rates. In the clip, Leslie Knope is trying to pass a soda tax in Pawnee, which has a growing obesity problem. She decides to target sodas because of the large sizes offered by a local fast food restaurant. The owner of the restaurant argues that the large sodas offer a huge amount of value for the consumer, yet Leslie argues that no one needs a 512 oz. “child size” soda (roughly the size of a small child).

The ideas of demand and consumer surplus, substitution, inferior and normal goods, regressive taxes and the role of government in policing individual choices can all be discussed. Students may enjoy coming up with examples of inferior food goods and comparing the nutrition in those goods to the nutrition of foods that are considered normal goods. To motivate application, students can be asked the following question, “Based on what you know about inferior goods, why might Mississippi (or, the South in general) have the highest rate of heart disease?” They can then infer why taxes on sodas and junk food might be paid primarily by the poor. Students can also relate this quote to the problem of moral hazard when people



are covered by health insurance, and how behavior might change if more people are insured as a result of the Affordable Care Act.

- 2) *“I call this turf ‘n’ turf. It’s a 16 oz. T-bone and a 24 oz. porterhouse. Also, whiskey and a cigar. I am going to consume all of this at the same time because I am a free American.”*

*“You’ve got hazardous chemicals over there.” “Yeah, which only I am breathing. It’s the same liberty that gives me the right to fart in my own car. Are you going to tell a man he can’t fart in his own car?”*

These quotes provide a starting point for discussing the role of government in what people choose to do with their bodies. Asking the students to think about the extent to which government should protect people from themselves is a great way to generate a lively discussion. Various topics, such as regulations making drugs illegal, cigarette and alcohol taxes, prostitution, smoking bans, and abortion, can be explored. Here students can discuss the different incentives for buyers and sellers in black markets compared to legal ones. A good current topic to discuss with students would be marijuana legalization in Colorado and Washington.

Another interesting topic would be government bans on smoking in private establishments and the newly emerging laws regarding e-cigarettes in private establishments. In discussing these bans, students can learn about the problem of negative externalities. Ron’s quote concerning his car provides a great example of a situation where there are no negative externalities created by his behavior. Students can contrast that situation with others where externalities are created, the government’s role in the presence of externalities, and resource allocation under private ownership compared to public ownership.

- 3) *“Give a man a fish and feed him for a day. Don’t teach a man to fish...and feed yourself. He’s a grown man. And fishing’s not that hard.”*

This quote can be used to motivate discussions concerning environmental issues, like the tragedy of the commons. By not teaching a man to fish, Ron may get more fish for himself. This could be used as an illustration of the incentives of private individuals when using commonly owned resources, and students can think about why we would see overfishing in public waters if “fishing’s not that hard.”

In the episode “Ms. Knope Goes to Washington,” Leslie is in D.C. trying to get federal funding to clean up the Pawnee River. Here, students can consider the incentives for citizens to take care of public property compared to their own private property. In this clip, Leslie gives Andy a tour guide book to help with navigating the city, but then immediately tells him to throw it away because she will be his guide to D.C. Andy then throws the book directly into the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool; Leslie, of course, makes him get the book out of the pool. Here students can consider how public property would be treated if each person had to clean up his own mess, like Andy, compared to a situation when city workers are responsible for cleaning it up. This clip is a great introduction to the tragedy of the commons, pollution, and the government’s role in the presence of environmental externalities.

- 4) *“I got my first job when I was 9 working at a sheet metal factory. In two weeks, I was running the floor. Child labor laws are ruining this country.”*

Sweatshops and child labor in poor countries are often pointed to as negative effects of freer international trade. Students will likely want to talk about the impact on poor countries from developed nations whose economic systems rely on free trade policies. They can discuss whether people in poor countries are being exploited or benefited when rich countries buy goods produced with such controversial labor. Here, the difference between non-monetary wages (e.g. safety) can be contrasted with monetary wages. The effects of buying fair trade goods can also be covered.

A few current examples can be used here, such as Raveena Aulakh’s undercover report on a sweatshop in Bangladesh and the Rhana Plaza collapse. The students can also read Nicholas Kristof’s article on the impact of sweatshops in Africa. A report on the use of sweatshop and child labor to make goods for

Walmart from the Global Labour and Human Rights Committee can be covered, which provides a good segue into the next topic.

5) *“I love Food and Stuff. It’s where I buy all of my food and most of my stuff.”*

This is clearly a reference to Walmart and serves as an opportunity to discuss the debate surrounding the effects, both good and bad, of the way Walmart does business. This is also an opportunity to discuss the concepts of economies of scale, predatory pricing, consumer welfare, payment schemes, and minimum wage. Students may also want to address arguments made against Walmart by websites like [www.walmart1percent.org](http://www.walmart1percent.org) and the expected effects on various groups if Walmart were to allow unionization.

6) *“On my death bed my final wish is to have both my ex-wives rush to my side so I can use my dying breath to tell them both to go to hell one last time. Would I get married again? Absolutely. If you don’t believe in love, what’s the point of living?”*

Here the concept of voluntary contractual agreements can be discussed, particularly in the context of the marriage equality debate. Students can consider whether people should be free to make voluntary contractual agreements as long as all parties involved understand the terms. They can also consider the role of government in enforcing these contracts. The “Pawnee Zoo” episode examines this debate in an entertaining way. Leslie thinks it would be cute to spend public funds to have a penguin wedding at the local zoo. Unbeknownst to her, both penguins are male, and this public display results in criticism from the members of the Society for Family Stability Foundation.

The foundation spokeswoman asks Leslie to resign from her public position for using tax dollars to take a public stance in favor of gay marriage. While Leslie’s intent was merely to be cute, she runs with this stance to garner support from Pawnee’s homosexual population. Students can discuss the role of government in marriage, legal definitions of marriage, enforcement of contractual agreements, and tax incentives or disincentives for marriage.

7) *“Do you know if one can pay court ordered settlements in gold? ... I’m not sure how much money I have, but I know how many pounds of money I have.”*

This is an opportunity to introduce the concept of money, how it functions, and its various forms. The differences between commodity backed and fiat money can be discussed here, which leads naturally to a discussion of the Federal Reserve System and monetary policy. Students may benefit from applying what they learn about monetary policy to real examples, such as the Great Depression and the Great Recession. In addition, Zimbabwe always provides a particularly good example of the problems with hyperinflation. Students can discuss why Ron might want to hold gold over dollars and why inflation acts as a tax on savings. We find that students also like to discuss private currencies, like bitcoin.

### ***Topics in Comparative Economic Systems and Institutions***

Given that most students do not major in economics, we can safely assume that most graduate without ever having taken a comparative economic systems class. Yet, those graduates will often hear the terms socialist<sup>3</sup>, Marxist<sup>4</sup>, capitalist<sup>5</sup>, communist<sup>6</sup>, or similar terms in their everyday lives. Comparative economic systems classes were once very popular, due in large part to the cold war debate between capitalism,

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<sup>3</sup> DeCoursey (2008)

<sup>4</sup> Ferrara (2012)

<sup>5</sup> Rensin (2012)

<sup>6</sup> Farah (2014)

socialism, and communism; however, even those majoring in economics have become increasingly unexposed to comparative economic systems classes.

Siegfried and Wilkinson (1982) showed that in 1950, 59% of economics programs offered comparative economics courses and 63% were offering the course by 1980. Siegfried and Bidani (1992) found that 66% of programs in liberal arts colleges and 55% of programs in colleges of business offered comparative economic systems courses in 1980. But, according to Petkus, et al. (2012) those courses have become significantly less popular. Only 34.6% of economics programs offered comparative economic systems courses in 2012.

The debate between different economic systems is still going on, particularly over the government's role in mixed economies, and we want our students to be able to critically evaluate this information. Unfortunately, most students do not want to sign up for a course called Comparative Economic Systems. Because the demand for these classes is relatively low, one way to increase student exposure to the concepts would be to work this discussion into other more popular classes, such as Public Choice or Economic Growth.

These Ron Swanson quotes and video clips provide an interesting way to expose students to topics from comparative economics systems. The following quotes provide a structure for discussing the spectrum of economic systems, from pure market economies to pure command economies, which can be condensed down and integrated into a variety of classes. If students don't want to sign up for comparative classes, maybe we can bring some of the material to them. We discuss many relevant examples in this section, and as in the previous section, links to these examples are provided in Table 2 in the appendix.

8) *"I have so many ideas. Some are simple like take down traffic lights and eliminate the post office. The bigger ones will be tougher, like bring all this crumbling to the ground."*

Students should recognize terms like capitalist, socialist and communist, but are probably not able to correctly define or describe the specific philosophies. They are unlikely to know the difference between an economic philosophy and a political one, or the links between the two. Students may also be willing to tell you where they fall in the political/economic spectrum, despite the fact that they just admitted they can't define what those positions actually mean. It is at this point that it may be time to show them a paper by [Klein and Buturovic \(2011\)](#) that indicates individuals do a pretty bad job correctly answering economic questions that force them outside of their political comfort zones.

The above quote is a good way to incorporate a basic introduction to the various political and economic points of view, and how political philosophies are linked to economic philosophies. Most of the Swansonomics course was devoted to studying varied degrees of capitalism, but we think it's worth spending a brief amount of time explaining the two ends of the spectrum – anarchy and communism. This quote in particular is a nice set up for the discussion of anarchy and the different types of anarchist views.

Comedian Andy Cobb made a video depicting Somalia as a libertarian paradise. His video clip can be shown as an example of someone who doesn't know the difference between a pure market economy and anarchy. Ron Swanson is generally described as a libertarian, and that is how he refers to himself, but some of his views lean a bit more toward anarchy. Here, it would be useful to define anarchy and give some examples, so that students do not think of the two philosophies as synonymous.

The 1997 Albanian rebellion can be discussed as an example of the disorder that can result from a lack of stable institutions. Students can also read about medieval Iceland as an alternative example, and they can discuss Iceland's competing chieftains and voluntary associations as a means of rule enforcement. Students can also study the 1991 government collapse in Somalia. Leeson (2007) provides an interesting comparison of economic indicators under General Barre's "scientific socialism" and those indicators after the government collapse. Students can also be introduced to the tradeoff between disorder and dictatorship, as outlined by [Djankov et al. \(2003\)](#).

9) *"The free market is a jungle, it is beautiful and brutal and should be left alone. When a business fails it*

*dies and a new business takes its place. Just let business be business, and let government be government.”*

This quote provides a good opportunity to discuss how markets function when some basic rules are in place, such as the protection of private property rights, impartial contract enforcement, and rule of law. Here the specifics of a free market, the definition of capitalism, and how a pure market economy would function can be covered. This is also an opportunity to discuss the benefits of competition, the role of incentives and the importance of profit, loss, and pricing signals. Leonard Read’s *I, Pencil* should help students understand the complexities of the market in meeting the needs of consumers. It is also worth discussing how capitalism as people perceive it in practice appears to differ from what many endorse as an economic philosophy.

Students should be able to discuss the differences between capitalism, as endorsed by Ron, and cronyism, what we generally see in practice. Holcomb and Castillo (2013) have written a short overview of various crony systems compared to the ideals of classical liberalism that Ron seems to admire. At this point students could be introduced to some basic public choice issues, such as bureaucratic incentive structures and rent seeking. Other *Parks and Recreation* examples that can be used here are provided in the *Topics in Public Choice* section of this paper.

This is also a good opportunity to introduce some of the problems that arise in a pure capitalist system. For example, a *Salon* article discusses how a for-pay fire department in Tennessee allowed a man’s house to burn down because he did not pay for firefighting services. This will allow the students to contrast the benefits and costs of limited government rules, and the tradeoffs associated with additional government services.

10) *“My idea of a perfect government is one guy who sits in a small room at a desk, and the only thing he is allowed to decide is who to nuke.”*

Here, public goods can be introduced and this quote can be linked to something Ron seems to think is a legitimate function of government – national defense. In particular, public goods and the free rider problem can be covered. This is also an opportunity for students to discuss what they feel are legitimate functions of government. Should the government spend more or less on defense, healthcare, transfer programs, education? If a student feels, for example, that spending on education should be increased, ask the student how he would fund this additional spending. Increased taxes? Cutting spending on other programs? This really drives home the opportunity cost concept.

11) *“Capitalism: God’s way of determining who is smart and who is poor.”*

Students can now begin to think more about outcomes under varying degrees of government intervention and capitalism. Several topics can be discussed here, including economic freedom, poverty, and wealth inequality. A major political concern is wealth inequality, and showing the “Wealth Inequality in America” video is a way to generate discussion on this issue. Students can be exposed to issues such as income mobility, income levels and shares, and various ways to measure inequality. For example, a paper by Stevenson and Wolfers (2008) can be introduced to show that the experience gap between the rich and poor has fallen in the US over time, though measures of wealth and income inequality have risen.

Discussing the differences between inequality created in markets and inequality created by government intervention can help students think about some of the reasons inequality exists. The change in intergenerational inequality over time in the US is an interesting example, and programs like Social Security and Medicare can be covered. Clips from the “Campaign Shake-up” episode can be shown to illustrate how policy may be influenced to favor the old over the young.

In this episode, Leslie Knope is trying to get elected to the city council. She knows in order to do this she needs the “gray vote,” or the vote of the elderly population in Pawnee. To get their vote she starts the Ramp Up Pawnee initiative, which would force all buildings in Pawnee to provide wheelchair ramps. Her election opponent, Bobby Newport, offers a competing initiative called Rise Up Pawnee, which would put

an electric chair lift on every outdoor staircase in town. These clips provide a good example of why spending on the elderly makes up such a large percentage of federal spending and the rent seeking that occurs when government distributes resources to specific groups.

These programs can be covered as examples of government distribution of resources compared to market distribution of resources. Programs like Medicare and Social Security are often used in countries that are considered capitalist, so students can be introduced to the *Economic Freedom of the World Report*, by Gwartney et al. (2013), as a way to measure varying degrees of capitalism. From this report, students can see that the US may not be as capitalist as they originally thought. Many often think of Canada as less capitalist than the United States, in part, because of Canada's health care system. Yet, the United States ranks nine places behind Canada in overall economic freedom. The correlation between low economic freedom scores and poverty can also be illustrated using this report.

Once students have had a chance to look at the economic freedom index rankings, they can begin to think about the various policies that would impact this score. As alternative capitalist systems are compared, topics such as taxation, health care, education, and regulatory burden can be explored. From here students should begin to think about the size of government and its effect on the economy. How big should the government be? What effect does government size have on economic growth? Students can also consider the effects of large government debt and the effects of big cuts in government spending. Examples of clips concerning fiscal issues and government spending cuts are provided in the *Topics in Public Choice* section of this paper.

12) *“Capitalism is the only way, Leslie. It's what moves our country forward. It's what makes America great and England okay and France terrible. “*

*“Just thought you needed some fresh air...even if that air is filled with the foul stench of European socialism.”*

The bulk of the Swansonomics course was spent on mixed economies and varying degrees of capitalism; however, a brief overview of command economies was provided at the end. As mentioned earlier, students are unlikely to be able to define words like socialism, communism, or Marxism. Here, students learn the definitions of these words as well as the arguments for and against such institutions. Holcombe and Castillo (2007) provide a discussion of these terms, cover the differences between them, and provide real world examples of each.

It may also be worthwhile to explore various government actions that many refer to as socialist by using the following clip. In the episode “Bailout,” Leslie initiates a plan to prop up a failing video rental business. She argues that, “The Pawnee Video Dome is a place with tremendous community value where people gather to expand their horizons.” Ron's response to this is to announce at a public hearing that, “This action by Councilwoman Knope is nothing more than a thinly-veiled government bailout and I for one refuse to let her turn this town into a socialist hellscape.” Students can discuss the definition of socialism as applied to this example and then relate this discussion to other real world policies that many consider socialist.

### ***Topics in Public Choice***

The following quotes are most relevant to public choice topics, specifically the efficiency of the public sector compared to the private sector and the different incentives faced by each. The Swansonomics course incorporated these public choice topics into the above discussion of varying degrees of capitalism. We feel these topics helped to drive home the issues of rent seeking and problematic incentive structures. But, any class covering public choice issues could incorporate these *Parks and Recreation* examples.

As discussed by [Mixon \(2010\)](#), video clips can be beneficial for teaching public choice concepts given the rarity of specialized undergraduate public choice textbooks. Others such as Burgess et al. (2010) and

Mateer and Stephenson (2011) have explored inventive ways of teaching public choice to undergraduates. Mateer and Stephenson (2011) note that film clips used in conjunction with textbook readings may work best for public choice issues covered in introductory classes, while clips accompanying influential public choice papers may be more beneficial for upper level courses. As in the previous two sections, links to the relevant examples discussed below are provided in Table 2 in the appendix.

13) *“There are only three ways to motivate people: money, fear, and hunger.”*

This quote provides an introduction to the idea of incentives and self-interest. We find that students often relate self-interest to greed and think of the two as synonymous. To clarify the definition of self-interest it may be helpful to discuss Leslie Knope and Ron Swanson as two individuals who are equally self-interested, but have different preferences.

Ron is usually portrayed as someone who is self-interested in the sense that he is primarily concerned about himself, his family, and his close friends. Leslie, on the other hand, is often portrayed as someone who is happiest when working tirelessly to help others, even strangers. To the non-economist she may seem anything but self-interested, but to the economist she merely has a different utility function than Ron. It is also important to point out to students that self-interest holds not just for business owners and consumers, but also for government officials. This is an interesting way to introduce students to one of the fundamental concepts in public choice.

14) *“I like Tom. He doesn’t do a lot of work around here. He shows zero initiative. He’s not a team player. He’s never wanted to go that extra mile. Tom is exactly what I’m looking for in a government employee.”*

This quote works as an introduction to the incentive problems that plague governments. In addition to the clip of Ron’s thoughts on Tom, two other video clips can be shown to help explain the problem of incentives. In the episode “Animal Control,” Leslie Knope tries to find out why stray animals are running wild through the town and is introduced to the incredibly incompetent Animal Control Department.

In conjunction with this, a clip from the episode “Bailout” can be shown. Here, Tom Haverford has recently opened a new business in Pawnee and he hired his best friend’s sister to work there. It is clear from the clip that she’s a terrible employee. After showing these clips, the incentives of public and private entities can be discussed. In these clips, the incompetent government employees get fired, but the incompetent private employee does not. The costs of not firing incompetent public employees, like the ones working at Animal Control, can be contrasted with the costs of not firing incompetent private employees, like Mona Lisa Saperstein.

A relevant current event can be added by discussing the activities of employees of the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). Mark Calabria outlines the SEC’s response to the question, “Why can’t we fire failed regulators?” Clear shirking during the 2008 financial crisis was discovered, yet the SEC Chair Mary Schapiro said that to fire these employees “would harm the agency’s work.”

Another clip from the episode “The Master Plan” can be shown to illustrate bureaucratic behavior. Here, two state budget auditors have to determine where budget cuts can be made and Ron is excited that he gets to see these budget cuts first hand. In typical bureaucratic fashion, Leslie defends every penny spent as necessary – even the job of Jerry Gergich, the butt of all office jokes, who is routinely portrayed as being terrible at doing everything. This is a good example of the budget maximization incentive outlined by Niskanen (1975).

15) *“I enjoy government functions like I enjoy getting kicked in the nuggets with a steel toed boot.”*

In the episode “The Banquet,” Leslie’s mother is receiving a lifetime achievement award for government service – the Tellenson Award. Here, Leslie is trying to impress a zoning board member in order to get zoning approval to build a new park. After unapologetic flattery and schmoozing seem to fail, Leslie’s mother tells her it’s time to resort to blackmail. At first Leslie refuses by saying, “I want to win a

Tellenson Award someday. They don't give lifetime achievement awards to people who do things like that." Her mother responds, "Sweetheart, they only give lifetime achievement awards to people who do things like that." Her mother then describes the top government bureaucrats at the dinner as "the nastiest, most diabolical people you'd ever want to meet," and explains how each gained such powerful government positions. Students may often associate such tactics with private businessmen, and not with local or state government officials, but this provides a great example of rent seeking within government. This can also be related to rent seeking by private businesses to gain favor from powerful bureaucrats.

Besides government functions, this quote can also be applied to the feeling many get when dealing with government offices like the DMV. The importance of customer satisfaction and competition can be discussed in terms of the long lines experienced at the post office, the DMV, and bread lines under socialism. Richard Velotta (2010) provides a good example of bureaucracy limiting the ability of the DMV in Las Vegas to respond to higher consumer demand. Other related topics that can be discussed include increased competition for the post office due to FedEx and UPS, or Lysander Spooner's private post office. Competition for public schools due to increased school choice can be used as an alternate topic.

Here, government created monopolies can be contrasted with monopolies generated under capitalism. Leonard Read provides a good example of the differences between government monopolies and monopoly power under capitalism by using Standard Oil as an example. Rent seeking for government granted monopoly power can also be covered.

16) *"Am I interrupting anything important?" "Impossible, I work for the government."*

This quote provides a good opportunity to discuss unions, both public and private. The relatively recent controversy of public union protests against Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker can be discussed. The Hostess shut down of Twinkie production, in part due to private union protests, can also be discussed as a current event. This would also be a good opportunity to talk about teachers' unions in public school systems.

When discussing unions, the students may be asked about their opinions on whether Ron would support unions. As an interesting side note, the students could read an article detailing the public union support of Leslie Knope's run for city council on the show. The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees is publicly endorsing the fictional character, Leslie Knope, in her fictional run for city council on the show. Students can discuss why they think Ron would not support unions, but Leslie might – although neither says as much on the show. Students may be asked to read *The Communist Manifesto* and discuss Marx's theory of labor compared to labor compensation and competition in a capitalist economy.

17) *"I think that all government is a waste of taxpayer money. My dream is to have the park system privatized and run entirely for profit by corporations, like Chuck E. Cheese. They have an impeccable business model."*

*"I think the entire government should be privatized. Chuck E. Cheese could run the parks – everything operated by tokens. Drop in a token, go on the swing set. Drop in another token, take a walk. Drop in a token, look at a duck."*

Here students can be introduced to the differences between pure public goods and goods people tend to consider as public simply because they are publicly provided. Students can also explore the idea of privatizing public services, such as the management of Central Park in New York. An interesting point to discuss with students is how well they think government adapts to the ever-changing and varied preferences of its people compared to private businesses.

Another interesting case study deals with the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board. Currently in Pennsylvania only state run liquor stores may sell alcohol, but grocery stores, drug stores and gas stations want the ability to sell beer and wine. To prevent a bill from passing that would allow the privatization of alcohol sales, the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1776 union began airing a commercial that

claims the privatization of alcohol sales would kill children. Students can watch the commercial and discuss the motivations of this union and the effects of privatization.

18) *“There’s a new wind blowing in government, and I don’t like it. All of a sudden there’s all this federal money coming in and Paul, the city manager, is telling us to build parks, start new community programs. It’s horrifying.”*

*“I have a joke for you. The government in this town is excellent and uses your tax dollars efficiently.”*

*“Once a year every branch of government meets in a room and announces what they intend to waste taxpayer money on. For a libertarian such as myself, it’s philosophically horrifying.”*

These quotes can facilitate a discussion on fiscal policy and government budgets. Once video clips of the above quotes have been shown, students can discuss what they think the federal government spends most of its money on. We find that students often have been given incorrect information about spending, especially military spending. There are a number of clips from the episode “Swing Vote” that can also be shown to stimulate discussion of government spending and budget cuts. This episode shows Ron and Leslie fighting over budget cuts for the local mini-golf course. The course was getting \$9000 a year in subsidies from the city government and Ron wants to cut this program. To stop the cuts, Leslie panders to a city councilman by taking him to the mini-golf course and buying him things. This is a great example of rent seeking on Leslie’s part.

Students can be shown a relevant real world example of this behavior in Prichard, Alabama. The city still funded a public golf course, even in the face of bankruptcy. The topic of government spending can also include why governments might pay more for things than private individuals who are spending their own money, such as the \$98,670 outhouse in Alaska or the \$400,000 camel statue in Pakistan.

19) *“I believe in cutting useless government projects. I also believe in cutting useful projects, future projects and past projects. The Hoover Dam is a travesty.”*

Here students can be introduced to the concept of concentrated benefits and dispersed costs. LearnLiberty has published a video, “Why Politicians Don’t Cut Spending,” that provides a good description of these ideas as they relate to budget cuts. This is a good opportunity to discuss why most voters are rationally ignorant when it comes to government policies, and why we might see government policies that are unpopular with average voters from both major parties continue to remain in place (e.g. subsidies given to large corporations).

Students have likely heard that the federal government has a large debt, but they may not know how large the debt is or the difference between a deficit and a debt. This would also be a good place to discuss the effects of large debts and the debate on how to reduce the debt. Real world examples can be introduced, including the Canadian experience from the 1990s as outlined by Veldhuis et al. (2011). Smith (2014) discusses various methods used to address debt problems, their effectiveness, and their political feasibility.

20) *“Cursing: there is only one bad word – taxes.”*

*“It’s never too early to learn that the government is a greedy piglet that suckles on a taxpayer’s teat until they have sore, chapped nipples.”*

This is an opportunity to discuss the various approaches to taxation, including progressivity, consumption taxes (the Fair Tax), flat taxes, value added and excise taxes, sin taxes, the “death” tax, and negative income taxes. This is also the point at which tax burden can be introduced using several clips from the episode “Road trip.” In this episode, Ron explains to an elementary school student how taxes work. A young girl on a field trip to the parks department is supposed to find an employee to interview so that she can write an essay on why government matters. She interviews Ron, who eats half of the girl’s lunch to illustrate income and capital gains taxes.



At the end of the episode the girl's mother marches into Ron's office to complain about the essay her daughter wrote after interviewing Ron. In her essay, the girl answered the question of why government matters very succinctly – "It doesn't." Ron later talks to the girl and tells her that for now she should listen to her teachers and read all the books she can, but that when she turns 18 she can drink, gamble and become a libertarian. The girl reminds him that the drinking age is 21, to which Ron replies, "I know...another stupid government rule." These clips provide a humorous way to introduce the effects of various taxes.

Students are likely to bring up the occupy movement and the question of who pays most of the taxes. An interesting article related to this question concerns Mitt Romney's statement that 47% of Americans do not pay income taxes. This is also a point at which progressivity in various countries could be compared. A relevant current event to discuss would be the problem that France is experiencing where higher taxes are driving people out of the country. Greg Mankiw also has a blog post comparing corporate tax rates in the United States to rates in other OECD countries.

21) *"The government should not prop up a failed business. That would be like giving food to a mortally wounded animal."*

Here the business cycle can be introduced and the Great Recession can be covered, which should naturally lead to a discussion of the bailouts, stimulus spending, and fiscal policy, in general. Several clips from the episode "Bailout" can be shown. In this episode, Leslie wants to save a local video rental store – the Pawnee Video Dome. The business is failing because of cheaper substitutes offered online and because the owner does not try to meet the demands of his consumers. Rather than having videos like *Finding Nemo* available for rent, he mostly has obscure dramas and foreign documentaries. As a member of the city council, Leslie tries to get the Pawnee Video Dome declared a historical landmark, which would exempt the business from certain taxes.

Ron calls this a government bailout and vehemently opposes it. The clips provided in the table will take the students through the process of the bailout and show a best-case-scenario where the business uses the bailout as an opportunity to better meet consumer needs. In the end the Pawnee government effectively owns a successful pornographic video rental business. A history of US government bailouts is provided at Propublica and the students can go through some of these examples to see how bailouts work in the real world, what businesses do after bailouts, and the opportunity costs of such policies. A piece in *US News* discusses the importance of the moral hazard problem and bailouts.

## Conclusion

We initially designed the Swansonomics course as a way to expose freshman, primarily non-majors, to basic economic principles and topics in comparative and public choice economics. The course was set up as a comparative systems course with a particular focus on public choice and policy analysis in mixed economies. The clips discussed in this paper were meant to serve as hooks to engage students who would then learn the economic concepts that drive the political debates occurring all over the world.

In our experience, students taking the first run of the class were much more engaged in learning the concepts than in traditional "chalk and talk" classes; lack of participation was never an issue. Because the class was offered during the summer, classes were two and a half hours long, which is a testament of the ability of these clips to maintain student interest throughout a class period. Because the lectures were broken up by entertaining and engaging video clips, as well as lively debates and discussions, student attention was maintained for a longer period of time. When leading discussions it was clear that students had paid attention to the material. The challenge became less about getting them to pay attention, and more about teaching them application. Interestingly, there were a few students who had never seen *Parks and Recreation* prior to taking the class, yet the feedback they provided was positive and they enjoyed the clips although they had never seen the show.

In setting up this course we thought these clips and examples may be useful not just for our class, but for any class covering these concepts, and that they could be adapted to fit in nearly any economics class, not just in the areas where we've placed them. Given the popularity of *Parks and Recreation* and its ability

to highlight important viewpoints concerning economic/political systems and public policy issues in an entertaining and engaging way, we believe students will find the examples effective and lasting. We feel Swansonomics is a way to pique the interest of modern students, regardless of major, by making the core concepts more interesting and relevant to their lives.

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## APPENDIX

### Sample Syllabus for Swansonomics – Relevant Sections

**Objective:** Upon successfully completing the course, students will be able to apply economic reasoning, critically evaluate a government policy, critically evaluate the economic consequences of the various political philosophies, evaluate how incentives influence decision making, and identify unintended consequences.

**Texts:** All of the following texts can be found for free online. PDF versions are also posted on GA View.

Reed, Leonard - *I, Pencil* (<http://www.econlib.org/library/Essays/rdPnc11.html>)

Marx and Engels – *The Communist Manifesto*  
(<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Manifesto.pdf>)

Holcombe and Castillo – *Liberalism and Cronyism*  
([http://mercatus.org/sites/default/files/Holcombe\\_Cronyism\\_web.pdf](http://mercatus.org/sites/default/files/Holcombe_Cronyism_web.pdf))

Relevant articles for each topic will also be assigned and available on GA View.

**Article evaluation and debate:** Part of your grade in this class will be based on article debates. You will be required to bring in articles that are relevant to class topics. You should use legitimate economic concepts to write a brief 1-2 page evaluation of the article content and turn this in along with a copy of your article. Also, you will present the article's content to the class and then argue for or against what you think Ron's position would be on this issue. If you fail to bring in an article and join in the class discussion, you will not receive credit for that day's article assignment. Your grade will depend on your written evaluations of these articles (15%) and the quality of your participation and arguments made during class debates (5%).

**Policy memos:** You are expected to complete 2 policy memos this semester. Each memo must be a maximum of 3 pages long. These memos should follow this general format: Choose a government policy that you think should be changed, explain the specific changes you would make, and support your position. You will be graded on your spelling and grammar, your ability to effectively convey your position and address opposing arguments using economic concepts, your ability to support your position with legitimate evidence (preferably from a peer reviewed academic journal article or equally reputable source), and on your ability to properly cite that evidence. You are required to restrict the length of your memos to a maximum of 3 pages long in order to help you learn to make concise and focused arguments. You may not do the same topic as another student; therefore, you must get approval from me on your topics.

At the end of the semester you will present one of your revised memos to the rest of the class. You may choose which of your two memos you would like to present, and you will be given time to make improvements to that original memo before you present it. After your presentation, there will be a general discussion where you will address any questions or concerns from the rest of the class about your proposed changes. The quality of your arguments in this presentation and your participation in the discussion of other memos will be graded. Each memo will count for 7% of your grade, and your presentation and discussion participation will count for 6% (i.e. memo one 7% + memo two 7% + presentation/discussion 6% = 20%).

The remainder of your grade will be determined by three exams, each worth 20%.

**Course outline:** A general course topic outline is provided below. Each section starts with a quote from Ron Swanson and the general topics covered in that section are listed next to the quote. All required readings, including current even articles related to each quote, will be posted on GA View.

- 1) "I have so many ideas. Some are simple like take down traffic lights and eliminate the post office. The bigger ones will be tougher, like bring all this crumbling to the ground." – **Anarchy**

- a) “There are only three ways to motivate people: money, fear, and hunger.” – **What does it mean to be self-interested?**
  - b) “I’ll have the #9.” “Sir, that’s a party platter. It serves 12 people.” “I know what I’m about, son.” – **Consumer preferences and rationality, defining value**
  - c) “I call this turf ‘n’ turf. It’s a 16 oz. T-bone and a 24 oz. porterhouse. Also, whiskey and a cigar. I am going to consume all of this at the same time because I am a free American.” – **No rules for consumers or producers: how do black markets operate? Examples: illegal drug markets, prostitution, abortion, etc. How might this resemble resource allocation under anarchy? Resource allocation, contract enforcement, and real world examples of anarchy.**
  - d) “I think that all government is a waste of taxpayer money. My dream is to have the park system privatized and run entirely for profit by corporations, like Chuck E. Cheese. They have an impeccable business model.” – **Other problems with anarchy, tragedy of the commons and the importance of private property rights.**
- 2) “The free market is a jungle; it is beautiful and brutal and should be left alone. When a business fails it dies and a new business takes its place. Just let business be business, and let government be government.” – **Capitalism**
- a) “You’ve got hazardous chemicals over there.” “Yeah, which only I am breathing. It’s the same liberty that gives me the right to fart in my own car. Are you going to tell a man he can’t fart in his own car?” – **Introducing some basic rules: solving the tragedy of the commons with private property rights, incentive to invest when property rights are protected**
  - b) “On my death bed my final wish is to have both my ex-wives rush to my side so I can use my dying breath to tell them both to go to hell one last time. Would I get married again? Absolutely. If you don’t believe in love, what’s the point of living?” – **voluntary contractual agreements and contract enforcement, incentive to invest when contracts are enforced by legal means**
  - c) “The whole point of this country is if you want to eat garbage, balloon up to 600 pounds and die of a heart attack at 43, you can! You are free to do so. To me, that’s beautiful.” – **How do markets work? Supply and demand, inferior vs normal goods, substitutes and complements, etc. How do markets respond to well-intended regulations? Minimum wage and rent control, soda/”fat” taxes, Affordable Care Act**
  - d) “Just give me all the bacon and eggs you have. Wait...wait. I worry what you heard was: Give me a lot of bacon and eggs. What I said was: Give me all the bacon and eggs you have.” **Moral hazard and adverse selection**
- 3) “My idea of a perfect government is one guy who sits in a small room at a desk, and the only thing he is allowed to do is decide who to nuke.” – **Public goods**
- a) “There’s a new wind blowing in government, and I don’t like it. All of a sudden there’s all this federal money coming in and Paul, the city manager, is telling us to build parks, start new community programs. It’s horrifying.” – **Besides setting up basic institutions, what else might we want government to do? Public goods and the free rider problem.**
  - b) “I think the entire government should be privatized. Chuck E Cheese could run the parks – everything operated by tokens. Drop in a token, go on the swing set. Drop in another token, take a walk. Drop in a token, look at a duck.” – **Public goods compared to club, common and private**



- goods; public provision of goods vs. private provision of goods, privatization of publicly provided goods and services**
- 4) “Capitalism: God’s way of determining who is smart and who is poor.” – **Problems that might arise in capitalist economies**
- a) “Cursing: there is only one bad word – taxes.” – **How do we pay for a government to enforce basic institutions, provide public goods, etc.? Various forms of taxation**
  - b) “It’s never too early to learn that the government is a greedy piglet that suckles on a taxpayer’s teat until they have sore, chapped nipples.” **Wealth inequality, income mobility, the rationale for redistribution, Social Security and Medicare examples**
  - c) “Give a man a fish and feed him for a day. Don’t teach a man to fish...and feed yourself. He’s a grown man. And fishing’s not that hard.” – **Tragedy of the commons and externalities, overfishing, pollution, the difficulty of assigning private property rights over some resources.**
  - d) “I love Food and Stuff. It’s where I buy all of my food and most of my stuff.” – **Monopolies, predatory pricing, wage disparities, unions**
  - e) “I got my first job when I was 9 working at a sheet metal factory. In two weeks, I was running the floor. Child labor laws are ruining this country.” – **Sweatshops and child labor during economic development, are poor countries exploited by the rich when we rely primarily on capitalism to allocate resources? Which countries rely on capitalism the most and how does that affect economic growth? Economic Freedom of the World Report and economic well-being**
- 5) “Capitalism is the only way, Leslie. It’s what moves our country forward. It’s what makes America great and England okay and France terrible.” **Public choice issues and increased government involvement**
- a) “Am I interrupting anything important?” “Impossible, I work for the government.” – **Profit motives vs political incentives, self-interest in government, efficiency, public unions**
  - b) “I like Tom. He doesn’t do a lot of work around here. He shows zero initiative. He’s not a team player. He’s never wanted to go that extra mile. Tom is exactly what I’m looking for in a government employee.” – **Profit motives vs political incentives, rent seeking vs wealth creation**
  - c) “Once a year every branch of government meets in a room and announces what they intend to waste taxpayer money on. For a libertarian such as myself, it’s philosophically horrifying.” – **Rent seeking and government spending, interest groups and political incentives**
  - d) “I have a joke for you. The government in this town is excellent and uses your tax dollars efficiently.” – **Inefficiencies in government spending, budget maximization incentive, lack of competition**
  - e) “I believe in cutting useless government projects. I also believe in cutting useful projects, future projects and past projects. The Hoover Dam is a travesty.” – **Federal government debt vs deficits, cutting government spending, problem of concentrated benefits and dispersed costs, effects of large debts vs raising taxes and/or cutting spending**
  - f) “Do you know if one can pay court ordered settlements in gold? ... I’m not sure how much money I have, but I know how many pounds of money I have.” – **Inflation and the incentive to finance**

**government spending in the short run, the gold standard, fiat money, central bank independence, private currencies**

- 6) “Just thought you needed some fresh air...even if that air is filled with the foul stench of European socialism.” – **Moving away from capitalism**
  - a) “The government should not prop up a failed business. That would be like giving food to a mortally wounded animal.” – **Market distortions, The Great Recession, causes, proposed solutions, bailouts, stimulus spending, rent seeking and politically connected industries, the opportunity cost of saving certain jobs, Broken Window fallacy**
  - b) “I enjoy government functions like I enjoy getting kicked in the nuggets with a steel toed boot.” – **Corruption and rent seeking, government created monopolies and monopoly power (e.g. public schools, post offices), government production of goods (e.g. the Trabant or food provision under socialism), definitions of socialism, communism and Marxism (costs and benefits)**

**Table 2. Ron Swanson Quotes and Relevant Examples**

Quote	Citation	Links to Applicable Examples
<b>Topics in Principles Courses</b>		
1) “I’ll have the #9...”	Gayer et al. (2012)	<a href="http://mercatus.org/sites/default/files/Energy-Regulations-Protecting-Irrational-Consumers-From-Themselves.pdf">http://mercatus.org/sites/default/files/Energy-Regulations-Protecting-Irrational-Consumers-From-Themselves.pdf</a>
“Just give me all the bacon and eggs....”	Harrington (2014)	<a href="http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/mar/6/1m-kids-stop-school-lunch-due-michelle-obamas-stan/?page=all">http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/mar/6/1m-kids-stop-school-lunch-due-michelle-obamas-stan/?page=all</a>
2) “The whole point of this country is...”	Lusk (2014) Ritterman (2013) CDC (2014)	<a href="http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jayson-lusk/tax-a-cola-spend-more-mon_b_5042672.html">http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jayson-lusk/tax-a-cola-spend-more-mon_b_5042672.html</a> <a href="http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jeffrey-ritterman/tax-a-cola-improve-life-f_b_5052455.html">http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jeffrey-ritterman/tax-a-cola-improve-life-f_b_5052455.html</a> <a href="http://www.cdc.gov/dhdsp/data_statistics/fact_sheets/fs_heart_disease.htm">http://www.cdc.gov/dhdsp/data_statistics/fact_sheets/fs_heart_disease.htm</a>
3) “I call this turf ‘n’ turf...”	Bender (2014)	<a href="http://www.forbes.com/sites/andrewbender/2014/04/19/marijuana-tourism-bringing-big-bucks-to-colorado-or-is-it/">http://www.forbes.com/sites/andrewbender/2014/04/19/marijuana-tourism-bringing-big-bucks-to-colorado-or-is-it/</a>
“You’ve got hazardous chemicals...”	Assoc. Press (2014) Sullivan (2014)	<a href="http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2014/04/marijuana_elementary_school_fourth_grade_rs_selling_pot.html">http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2014/04/marijuana_elementary_school_fourth_grade_rs_selling_pot.html</a> <a href="http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/04/24/when-the-fda-said-it-would-regulate-e-cigarettes-the-reaction-was-swift/">http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/04/24/when-the-fda-said-it-would-regulate-e-cigarettes-the-reaction-was-swift/</a>
4) “Give a man a fish ...”	Leal (2010) Benjamin (2002)	<a href="http://perc.org/articles/helping-property-rights-evolve-marine-fisheries">http://perc.org/articles/helping-property-rights-evolve-marine-fisheries</a> <a href="http://perc.org/articles/free-trade-good-environment">http://perc.org/articles/free-trade-good-environment</a>
5) “I got my first job when...”	Raveena (2013) Kristof (2006) Kernaghan (2006)	<a href="http://www.thestar.com/news/world/clothesonyourback/2013/10/11/i_got_hired_at_a_bangladesh_sweatshop_meet_my_9yearold_boss.html">http://www.thestar.com/news/world/clothesonyourback/2013/10/11/i_got_hired_at_a_bangladesh_sweatshop_meet_my_9yearold_boss.html</a> <a href="http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/06/opinion/06kristof.html?_r=1&amp;">http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/06/opinion/06kristof.html?_r=1&amp;</a> <a href="http://www.globallabourrights.org/reports/200610-IGLHR-Child-Labor-Is-Back.pdf">http://www.globallabourrights.org/reports/200610-IGLHR-Child-Labor-Is-Back.pdf</a>
6) “I love Food and Stuff...”	Reed (2010) “Top reasons...” (2014)	<a href="http://www.fee.org/the_freeman/detail/good-economists-bad-economists-and-walmart#axzz2v054YtNp">http://www.fee.org/the_freeman/detail/good-economists-bad-economists-and-walmart#axzz2v054YtNp</a> <a href="http://walmartpercent.org/issues/top-reasons-the-walton-family-and-walmart-are-not-job-creators/">http://walmartpercent.org/issues/top-reasons-the-walton-family-and-walmart-are-not-job-creators/</a>
7) “On my death bed my final wish...”	Smith (2014) Nishimoto (2002)	<a href="http://mic.com/articles/31107/prop-8-and-doma-the-only-way-to-marriage-equality-is-to-eliminate-state-marriage-licenses">http://mic.com/articles/31107/prop-8-and-doma-the-only-way-to-marriage-equality-is-to-eliminate-state-marriage-licenses</a> <a href="https://www.bc.edu/dam/files/schools/law/lawreviews/journals/bctwj/23_2/06_TXT.htm">https://www.bc.edu/dam/files/schools/law/lawreviews/journals/bctwj/23_2/06_TXT.htm</a>
8) “Do you know if one can pay ...”	Wines (2006) “In dollars...” (2013) Hopkins et al. (2014)	<a href="http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/02/world/africa/02zimbabwe.html?pagewanted=all">http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/02/world/africa/02zimbabwe.html?pagewanted=all</a> <a href="http://www.economist.com/news/finance-and-economics/21576665-grubby-greenbacks-dear-credit-full-shops-and-empty-factories-dollars-they">http://www.economist.com/news/finance-and-economics/21576665-grubby-greenbacks-dear-credit-full-shops-and-empty-factories-dollars-they</a> <a href="http://siliconangle.com/blog/2014/05/06/ask-dr-bitcoin-does-bitcoin-need-banks/">http://siliconangle.com/blog/2014/05/06/ask-dr-bitcoin-does-bitcoin-need-banks/</a>

**Table 2. Continued Ron Swanson Quotes and Relevant Examples**

Quote	Citation	Links to Applicable Examples
<b>Topics in Comparative Economic Systems and Institutions</b>		
9) “I have so many ideas...”	Cobb (2009) Wilkinson (1997)	<a href="http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/05/06/somalia-libertarian-parad_n_197763.html">http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/05/06/somalia-libertarian-parad_n_197763.html</a> <a href="http://articles.latimes.com/1997-03-15/news/mn-38531_1_southern-albania">http://articles.latimes.com/1997-03-15/news/mn-38531_1_southern-albania</a>
10) “The free market is a jungle...”	Long (2002) Delingpole (2012)  Pareene (2010) Murray (2010)	<a href="https://www.lewrockwell.com/2002/06/roderick-t-long/the-vikings-were-libertarians/">https://www.lewrockwell.com/2002/06/roderick-t-long/the-vikings-were-libertarians/</a> <a href="http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/jamesdelingpole/100163955/capitalism-has-not-failed-capitalism-has-not-recently-been-tried/">http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/jamesdelingpole/100163955/capitalism-has-not-failed-capitalism-has-not-recently-been-tried/</a> <a href="http://www.salon.com/2010/10/04/libertarian_fire_department/">http://www.salon.com/2010/10/04/libertarian_fire_department/</a> <a href="http://cei.org/op-eds-and-articles/burn-baby-burn-0">http://cei.org/op-eds-and-articles/burn-baby-burn-0</a>
11) “My idea of a perfect government...”	Veuger (2014)  Cowen (2008)	<a href="http://www.usnews.com/opinion/economic-intelligence/2014/09/25/americans-dont-learn-the-true-costs-of-public-investment">http://www.usnews.com/opinion/economic-intelligence/2014/09/25/americans-dont-learn-the-true-costs-of-public-investment</a> <a href="http://www.econlib.org/library/Enc/PublicGoods.html">http://www.econlib.org/library/Enc/PublicGoods.html</a>
12) “Capitalism: God’s way ...”	“Wealth inequality...” (2012)	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPKKQnijnsM">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPKKQnijnsM</a>
13) “Capitalism is the only...”  “Just thought you ...”	“Winter is coming...” (1991)	<a href="http://www.businessweek.com/stories/1991-11-03/winter-is-coming-and-the-soviet-cupboard-is-bare">http://www.businessweek.com/stories/1991-11-03/winter-is-coming-and-the-soviet-cupboard-is-bare</a>
<b>Topics in Public Choice</b>		
14) “There are only three ...”	“The benevolence...” (1998)	<a href="http://www.economist.com/node/179495">http://www.economist.com/node/179495</a>
15) “I like Tom. He doesn’t do a lot...”	Calabria (2011a) Calabria (2011b)	<a href="http://www.cato.org/blog/sec-employees-hard-work-during-financial-crisis">http://www.cato.org/blog/sec-employees-hard-work-during-financial-crisis</a> <a href="http://cnsnews.com/blog/mark-calabria/firing-incompetent-employees-would-harm-agency-s-work-sec-chief-says">http://cnsnews.com/blog/mark-calabria/firing-incompetent-employees-would-harm-agency-s-work-sec-chief-says</a>
16) “I enjoy government functions...”	Romanska (2012) Velotta (2010) Passell (1997)  Goodyear (1981) Seymour (2009)  Reed (1980)	<a href="http://cosmopolitanreview.com/how-i-survived-socialism/">http://cosmopolitanreview.com/how-i-survived-socialism/</a> <a href="http://www.reviewjournal.com/road-warrior/dmv-has-long-line-excuses-delays">http://www.reviewjournal.com/road-warrior/dmv-has-long-line-excuses-delays</a> <a href="http://www.nytimes.com/1997/05/15/business/competition-at-every-turn-has-post-office-on-the-run.html">http://www.nytimes.com/1997/05/15/business/competition-at-every-turn-has-post-office-on-the-run.html</a> <a href="http://www.lysanderspooner.org/STAMP3.htm">http://www.lysanderspooner.org/STAMP3.htm</a> <a href="http://www.troymedia.com/2009/05/21/lack-of-competition-threatens-public-education-systems-survival/">http://www.troymedia.com/2009/05/21/lack-of-competition-threatens-public-education-systems-survival/</a> <a href="http://www.fee.org/the_freeman/detail/witch-hunting-for-robber-barons-the-standard-oil-story">http://www.fee.org/the_freeman/detail/witch-hunting-for-robber-barons-the-standard-oil-story</a>

**Table 2. Continued Ron Swanson Quotes and Relevant Examples**

Quote	Citation	Links to Examples
<b>Topics in Public Choice Continued</b>		
17) “Am I interrupting anything...”	Benson (2013) Koba (2013) Edelman (2010) “Leslie ...” (2012)	<a href="http://townhall.com/tipsheet/guybenenson/2013/07/23/thanks-to-walker-reforms-wisconsin-workers-abandon-government-unions-n1647166">http://townhall.com/tipsheet/guybenenson/2013/07/23/thanks-to-walker-reforms-wisconsin-workers-abandon-government-unions-n1647166</a> <a href="http://www.cnn.com/id/100678728">http://www.cnn.com/id/100678728</a> <a href="http://nypost.com/2010/12/26/rubber-rooms-dirty-old-man/">http://nypost.com/2010/12/26/rubber-rooms-dirty-old-man/</a> <a href="http://laughspin.tumblr.com/post/19178712403/leslie-knope-gets-endorsement-from-real-life-parks-and">http://laughspin.tumblr.com/post/19178712403/leslie-knope-gets-endorsement-from-real-life-parks-and</a>
18) “I think that all government...”  “I think the entire government...”	Gilroy (2010) Stossel (2010) Phillips (2014)	<a href="http://reason.org/news/show/local-government-privatization-101">http://reason.org/news/show/local-government-privatization-101</a> <a href="http://www.creators.com/opinion/john-stossel/making-parks-decent-again.html">http://www.creators.com/opinion/john-stossel/making-parks-decent-again.html</a> <a href="http://www.forbes.com/sites/kellyphillips/2014/05/04/union-privatizing-the-sale-of-alcohol-will-kill-children-lower-tax-revenue/">http://www.forbes.com/sites/kellyphillips/2014/05/04/union-privatizing-the-sale-of-alcohol-will-kill-children-lower-tax-revenue/</a>
19) “There’s a new wind ...”  “I have a joke for you...”  “Once a year ...”	Ferrara (2009) Boccia (2013)  Couri (2014)	<a href="http://blog.al.com/live/2009/11/prichard_council_fears_using_g.html">http://blog.al.com/live/2009/11/prichard_council_fears_using_g.html</a> <a href="http://blog.heritage.org/2013/12/30/mb-1230-booze-pole-dancing-luxurious-hotels-top-10-examples-government-waste-2013/">http://blog.heritage.org/2013/12/30/mb-1230-booze-pole-dancing-luxurious-hotels-top-10-examples-government-waste-2013/</a> <a href="http://www.ajc.com/news/news/national-govt-politics/taxpayers-foot-bill-400000-camel-statue-pakistan/nfQx2/">http://www.ajc.com/news/news/national-govt-politics/taxpayers-foot-bill-400000-camel-statue-pakistan/nfQx2/</a>
20) “I believe in cutting ...”	“Public Choice...” (2011) Smith (2014)	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6uR4lqa7IK4">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6uR4lqa7IK4</a> <a href="http://www.investopedia.com/articles/economics/11/successful-ways-government-reduces-debt.asp">http://www.investopedia.com/articles/economics/11/successful-ways-government-reduces-debt.asp</a>
21) “Cursing: there is only one bad word...”  “It’s never too early to ...”	Moorhead (2012)  Wikipedia “Progressivity...” Delsol (2012)  Mankiw (2011)	<a href="http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2012/sep/18/mitt-romney/romney-says-47-percent-americans-pay-no-income-tax/">http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2012/sep/18/mitt-romney/romney-says-47-percent-americans-pay-no-income-tax/</a> <a href="http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Progressivity_in_United_States_income_tax">http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Progressivity_in_United_States_income_tax</a> <a href="http://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2012/12/18/can-the-last-taxpayer-leaving-france-please-turn-out-the-lights/">http://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2012/12/18/can-the-last-taxpayer-leaving-france-please-turn-out-the-lights/</a> <a href="http://gregmankiw.blogspot.com/2011/02/tax-fact-of-day_23.html">http://gregmankiw.blogspot.com/2011/02/tax-fact-of-day_23.html</a>
22) “The government should not prop...”	Nankin and Schmidt (2009) Slavov (2013)	<a href="http://www.propublica.org/special/government-bailouts">http://www.propublica.org/special/government-bailouts</a> <a href="http://www.usnews.com/opinion/economic-intelligence/2013/09/26/study-shows-bank-bailouts-are-an-incentive-to-be-reckless">http://www.usnews.com/opinion/economic-intelligence/2013/09/26/study-shows-bank-bailouts-are-an-incentive-to-be-reckless</a>