

## **Archie Bunker for President: Television Entertainment and the Transformation of American Politics in the 1970s**

In the 1970s, *All in the Family*, first broadcast on CBS in January 1971, changed television entertainment. The trailblazing and controversial situation comedy was premised on conflicts in the fictional Bunker household, between the reactionary and bigoted Archie Bunker (Carroll O'Connor), his simple-minded wife Edith (Jean Stapleton), their temperamental daughter Gloria Stivic (Sally Struthers), and her idealistic New Left husband Mike (Rob Reiner). Within a year, *All in the Family* was the most popular show on television. The ascendance of the show coincided with a period of increasing political interest in television entertainment as well as a paradigm shift within the broadcasting industry. With the success, producer Norman Lear became one of the most influential men in broadcasting. My dissertation studies how the most popular show on television came to transform the relationship between politics and television entertainment over the seventies.

When *All in the Family* came on the air, television was the most popular medium in the United States yet conversations around television entertainment was still limited to the television pages of newspapers and to trade magazines. Early debates around *All in the Family*, in particular on the question of whether the comedy combatted or fomented prejudice among audiences, moved from the television pages to the opinion and editorial pages, to schools and universities, to churches and synagogues, and to civil rights organizations. The comedy was not just broadcast once a week but became a part of the public conversation, the sermons of ministers, priests, and rabbis, the lectures of teachers and professors, and the seminars and workshops of various companies and organizations. Many praised the show for ridiculing prejudice while others remained concerned of the bigotry of Archie Bunker influencing audiences. The wide conversations formed understandings of the show and increased the reach of the comedy. No consensus on the show emerged among the diverse voices engaging with the comedy. Yet, they all shared a conviction of the political influence of television entertainment. The conviction resulted in considerable efforts over the 1970s to engage with television entertainment.

Activists and advocates attempted to influence the show via both collaborative negotiations and confrontational pressure campaigns. With *All in the Family*, the liberal Lear wanted to deal with contemporary political and social themes which television tended to avoid. At the production company, Lear assumed responsibilities of the networks, including communication with activists and advocates. Soon, the producer came to bring in a committed feminist activist, Virginia Carter, to the production company with responsibility for political relationships. Carter was charged with communication and collaboration with advocates and activists, research on political or controversial social themes, and special screenings for political and educational purposes. By opening the door for various activist and advocacy group, long marginalized in broadcasting by the networks, Lear and Carter provided them a position within the broadcasting and entertainment establishment.

With open conversations of political issues on *All in the Family*, political interests soon turned to the show. Politicians recognized the popularity of the show and wanted to use the television comedy in both electoral and legislative politics. Nobody in Washington understood

the influence of television entertainment better than President Richard Nixon. The president was certain that the producers wanted to undermine him with the comedy and viewed Archie Bunker as open ridicule of his voting base. Close friends in Hollywood, however, convinced Nixon that the intended satire misfired and that audiences applauded the reactionary main character. Thus, the president courted Carroll O'Connor in hopes of winning the endorsement of the actor for his re-election campaign. Concurrently with the campaigns to court actors and producers, however, the president condemned Hollywood. Nixon viewed the news media as the opposition. Recognizing the business model of broadcasting the Nixon administration believed that they could control the television networks by threatening entertainment shows. In their efforts to intimidate and influence the networks, the administration did not differentiate between news and entertainment.

While Nixon proved unsuccessful in his attempts to use *All in the Family* for political campaigns, liberals enjoyed success in Hollywood. Over the 1970s, Hollywood emerged as a key part of the Democratic Party coalition. Liberal producers and stars provided campaigns with funds, advice, and media attention. In presidential campaigns, liberals such as John Lindsay, George McGovern, and Edward Kennedy relied on Carroll O'Connor to reach working-class voters. In Congress, liberals such as Frank Church and Peter Rodino used the show to promote their legislative agenda. Liberal activists within the feminist movement found a champion in Jean Stapleton. With Virginia Carter and Norman Lear, Stapleton turned Edith Bunker into a feminist icon in the struggle for the Equal Rights Amendment. While *All in the Family* failed to elect liberal candidates or enact liberal legislation, the campaigns of liberals did transform the Democratic Party. Hollywood became an important institution within the party. With producers and stars using their shows and celebrity to promote an agenda, the liberals blurred the lines dividing entertainment and politics.

As liberal political interests strengthened their close relationships in Hollywood, the ascendant conservative movement campaigned against the permissive entertainment. *All in the Family* constituted a main target for conservative campaigns against broadcasting. In particular, Christian conservative activists and politicians protested liberal attitudes towards questions of race, gender, and sexuality on television entertainment. The campaigns against television entertainment culminated by the mid-1970s in the political struggle over censorship and the national Family Viewing Hour policy. Conservatives in Congress concerned over sex on television found common cause with liberals worried over violence on television. Together, they pressured the Federal Communication Commission to force the (self)censuring Family Viewing Hour policy on the broadcasting industry. The policy restricted all content not deemed appropriate for a family audience to after nine in the evening. Accusing the government of infringing on freedom of speech, the liberal creative community in Hollywood joined forces. Norman Lear, along with the producing, writing, and acting trade unions, won in federal court. Even as the policy fell out of favor at the networks, the conservative activists promoting the policy enjoyed a victory of sorts as their campaign against television entertainment resulted in increased political influence. Liberals institutionalized their relationship with Hollywood, while conservatives entrenched the entertainment industry as a villain in their political campaigns.

My dissertation shows that *All in the Family* transformed not only American television but American politics. Over the 1970s, the relationship between television

entertainment and politics changed not just because political interests were convinced of the influence of entertainment but because this conviction transformed political campaigns, movements, and institutions. By turning television entertainment into a forum for political debates, *All in the Family* contributed to the increasingly mediated political environment, the growing importance of the creative community within the Democratic Party, the transformation of Hollywood into a target of the conservative movement, and the blurring of news and entertainment in political life in the United States.