

Political Television and Perceptions of American Politics

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Dramas depicting Washington's political culture have gained what appears to be an increasing prominence in the era of on-demand television. *Scandal* star Kerry Washington has not only gained iconic status for her role as Olivia Pope but also played a vital role in commenting on *Saturday Night Live's* hiring practices. The CIA ticking-clock thriller *24* was revived several years after its initial cancellation, in part because of demand that was identified by tracking the show's popularity on Netflix. Finally, the Netflix series *House of Cards* has become such a significant part of DC culture that prominent politicians have lined up to be on the show, while the show's anti-hero, Frank Underwood, placed a cleverly staged prank phone call to Senator (and presumed presidential candidate) Hillary Clinton. Meanwhile, the popularity of these series has inspired the production of at least two news fall series, *Madame Secretary*, about a female *Secretary of State* who has presidential ambitions, and *State of Affairs*, Shonda Rhimes' new series about the interactions between a CIA agent (Katherine Heigl) and a president (Alfre Woodward) whose son was killed during the Iraq War.

While other dramas, including Aaron Sorkin's *The West Wing*, have explored this territory in the past, this fascination with Washington's political culture seems to have reached a new level of intensity. What I'd like to explore through this panel is to make sense of the conditions that have made this possible and to make sense of what the popularity of these shows might be saying about wider perceptions of Washington politics. It's tempting to focus specifically on the pessimistic messages about DC political culture. Underlying virtually all of these series is, of course, the assumption that Washington, DC, is hopelessly corrupt. In fact, the show *Scandal* has at its core the idea that scandal is the normal order of business in the nation's capitol. Similarly, *House of Cards* depicts Frank Underwood, a Democratic minority whip from South Carolina, as driven merely by the ambition to obtain more power, not by any specific principles. And the political thrillers that focus prominently on intelligence work (*24*, *Homeland*, etc.) also seem to suggest extreme levels of corruption, to the point that *The New York Times* characterized this cycle of dramas as exhibiting a "post-hope politics."ⁱ Such perceptions are not unwarranted in a cable news environment that thrives on scandals, both manufactured and real (Benghazi, etc). In addition, these shows seem to confirm the perception, widely discussed in the news media, that American citizens have little power over national policy, whether due to campaign financing or some other factor.ⁱⁱ

But looking at cultural representations of DC politics isn't enough. Not surprisingly, contemporary political drama is almost invariably characterized by what Jason Mittell has referred to as "narrative complexity." In this sense, drawing from David Bordwell via Mittell, we might ask about the *historical poetics*

of contemporary political drama, raising questions about the historical context in which these shows—and the meanings they articulate—are being produced, circulated, and consumed.ⁱⁱⁱ Thus, a wide range of industrial and cultural factors might contribute to the widespread popularity (or at least the visibility of these shows). These complex narratives might also invite more subtle forms of identification that challenge our sense of national identity. While past political thrillers suggest that preserving the nation—and the utopian values it represents—is of paramount importance, a number of contemporary shows have complicated things. In particular, (although I am somewhat behind) I am interested in thinking through the use of narrative techniques to position viewers to identify with the husband and wife Russian spies in *The Americans* or even the ambivalent identification with Frank Underwood in *House of Cards*.

I recognize that many of these shows have small but energetic audiences that may be atypical. In fact, Derek Thompson has provocatively asked whether *House of Cards* should be considered a hit, raising important questions about the metrics we now use for measuring a show's popularity.^{iv} As Thompson notes, the second season of *House of Cards* drew an estimated 2-5 million viewers during its opening weekend, which is not an insignificant figure, although it is somewhat smaller than the most popular network shows. Yet it was one of the most frequently discussed shows, a distinction that inspired Thompson to postulate that "popularity is weird." The reception of these shows suggests they are doing important work, both in terms of what they say about political culture and how they say it, and I hope this panel can work through some of these questions.

ⁱ Adam Sternbergh, "The Post-Hope Politics of 'House of Cards,'" *The New York Times*, January 31, 2014.

ⁱⁱ Allan J. Lichtman, "Who Rules America?" *The Hill*, August 12, 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, pre-publication edition (MediaCommons Press, 2012-13).

^{iv} Derek Thompson, "Is House of Cards a Hit?" *The Atlantic*, February 24, 2014.