

Political Television and Perceptions of American Politics

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I want to address the following questions: how does the new cycle of politically-minded prime-time series contribute to or defeat viewers' senses of the possibilities for effective political action? Do programs encourage political self-education by presenting an inviting picture of how power works in American society, or a glamorously perverse depiction of the governmental sphere? Or do they, conversely, add to a disabling nihilism about politics and its corrupt environment, attacking the idea of worthwhile political activity with a fatal knowingness far beyond what television presented in almost all pre-*West Wing* political fictions? What are the models being presented for meaningful political activity, and where are power, and hope, located?

To address these questions, I will concentrate on three of the many series that treat these issues: *The Newsroom*, *House of Cards*, and *Veep*. First, let me state for the record that I do not think any television entertainment show, even when it treats political issues, has a responsibility to foment senses of political engagement or activism. It is nice when it happens, though – at least when it contributes to activism for political positions with which I agree. When a show instigates activism with which I politically disagree, I would rather it had instilled apathy and listlessness in its viewers instead. Second, I recognize that such shows are polysemic, and in this short presentation I cannot account for many of the possible readings and negotiations with which viewers encounter the texts. I will merely identify a few noteworthy threads that seem pertinent here; we can discuss further complexities when we open up the conversation to everyone, if you like.

The Newsroom, *House of Cards*, and *Veep* offer three distinct tones in their approach to American politics. *The Newsroom* is full of angry earnestness, and disappointment at the failings of the news media and the political momentum of the far right. *House of Cards* delights in a dark vision of the amoral machinations of power, and pictures a Washington full of deceit, self-serving manipulation, and utter disregard for the common good. *Veep* offers a vision of politics with many similarities to *House of Cards*, but with a more comic tone, and a mood of skeptical exasperation more than a cynicism that has moved beyond despair to perverted delight.

All three of the series identify the media as central to American politics, as watchdog, conduit, and pest, in the respective series. *The Newsroom's* model for civic action is centered on the responsible journalist, who pierces politicians' obfuscations and the excesses of pressure groups. This paradigmatic citizen is hampered by the industry's reliance on profits, advertising, and pressure from other elites. The show has represented activism by those outside of the

corporate-government sphere by depictions of the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street, two populist outbreaks that the media scramble to understand. The show depicts the Tea Party as rife with ignorance and extremism, and manipulated by corporate elites for their own ends. The show's take on Occupy is a bit more complicated; it faults the movement for its leaderlessness, vague goals, and unprofessionalism. Yet it shows some respect for its basic impulses. The more conventional, older journalists are slow to recognize its importance and frustrated by its unwillingness to play by the rules of successful activism as they see it, but younger, new media reporters show enthusiasm for its ability to ride the zeitgeist. *The Newsroom* thus sees political action by non-elites as possibly effective intrusions, but as rarely successful in practice when bucking established powers.

House of Cards sees political action by those outside of Washington power circles as even more Quixotic. The only significant outside group that is even acknowledged in the first season is the teachers' unions, and their defense of the right to collective bargaining is doomed by sell-outs and mis-steps at the national leadership level, because that is where the real action is. The real depiction of the public occurs when lead character and House Majority Whip Frank Underwood addresses a raving lunatic outside of Congress, and tells him that no one will listen to him here, so he might as well calm down. He does. Ultimately, the nihilistic treatment of politics is assuaged for the viewer by the pleasures of epistophilia, the access to insiders' knowledge the series purports to supply to its powerless audience. The dominant pleasure is identification with the anti-hero as the smartest guy in the room and wielder of power, a conflation that flatters its audience's intelligence to structure their viewing into a cynicism ripe for authoritarian exploitation.

Veep has a similar dynamic of uncovering the dysfunctions of purported democratic processes, often leading straight to cynical surrendering to the status quo. However, while the public is depicted as fickle and superficial, and the media as predatory and even more superficial, the haplessness of the Vice-President's operation may offer a vision of political accessibility and efficacy. Rather than masterminds and puppets, the politicians and their minions are depicted as occasionally well-meaning clowns, or at best as moderately competent individuals overwhelmed by the various forces arrayed against any meaningful progress in the polity. This could of course feed a cynical take on our politics, but it could also inspire some viewers to think that civic activism may not be completely worthless. If this group of unimpressive individuals could actually operate close to the centers of power in the Republic, perhaps a smart, concerted effort by a political or social movement could have some impact too. It doesn't seem to take much to be players in this game, even if the game ends up usually to be ridiculous. However of a stretch this may be, it is a less fearsome vision of our nation than showing Frank Underwood or the Koch brothers steamrolling the rest of us at this political moment.