STREAMING CITIZENSHIP: HOW POLITICAL TELEVISION SHOWS CONSTITUTE AMERICAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how contemporary political television programs model American citizenship through the portrayal of political leaders and how these models of citizenship constitute American national identity. To understand how popular television rhetorically functions for a modern audience, I examine three specific texts: Netflix's *House of Cards,* HBO's *Veep,* and CBS's *Madam Secretary.* Relying on Charland's conception of constitutive rhetoric, Fisher's narrative paradigm, and Dow's model of rhetorical criticism, I conduct a rhetorical analysis examining citizenship and identity. *House of Cards* models American citizenship through identification by antithesis in that the show asks the audience to identify collectively in antithesis to the values carried by Frank and Claire Underwood, thereby constituting Americans as virtuous, or truthful. *Veep* constitutes Americans as compassionate and competent, which are directly linked; it also constitutes Americans as feminine. *Madam Secretary* constitutes Americans as protectors of the American way of life, which is operationalized through a Family Values ideology. This dissertation provides an important link between how political discourse rhetorically functions constitutively in American citizenship and public identity, and how popular culture both reflects and constructs rhetorics of reality.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my grandmothers, Grandmama Judy Carpenter and Grandma Mary Henry. I couldn't have done it without you; you were both my anchors, always believing I could do anything. You modeled strength and intelligence. I hope this dissertation makes you proud.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

> I study television because I think it is important, because I think it could be better, and because I want people to take it seriously. I also study it because I like it. (Bonnie Dow, *Prime Time Feminism,* p. xiii)

The popular and poignant show *House of Cards* presents a petty politician who will do anything—even murder—to get his way. Another popular show, *Madam Secretary,* portrays a principled official who uses diplomacy to serve national and international interests. These two views of political leaders seem to be in stark contrast. However, they work together to constitute American national identity through their depiction of American leaders as citizens. Kaklamanidou and Tally published a 2017 anthology of essays examining how American politics and politicians are portrayed in contemporary television. These essays articulate the ways modern television shows reflect the current state of real-world politics. These and other scholars argue that television shows and pop culture provide a lens through which Americans can understand what is happening in the government. Many scholars also articulate how real-world politics shapes American national ideology. Similarly, much research has been conducted on what fictional representations tell us about government and the presidency. However, little attention is devoted to *how American identity is constituted through fictional narratives* regarding politics in the field of rhetoric. I seek to unpack what we can learn about Americans through these fictional representations. More specifically, this dissertation moves our rhetorical knowledge forward by, first, analyzing how constitutive rhetoric operates in fictional political television shows. This is a new application because I am not only assessing how these shows represent government, but how the address citizenship and, therefore, how their rhetoric functions constitutively in relation to national identity. The three case studies in this dissertation

thus serve as a novel application of existing theory. Second, this dissertation makes the argument that fictional political television shows constitute American national identity in much the same way that real-world political rhetoric does. This conception of pop politics and fictional narratives advances the field's understanding of constitutive political rhetoric, and serves as a foundation for future inquiries into the construction of American national identity.

Fictional narratives are equally important to ones in the "real world" for how we understand both politics and citizenship because our understandings are always text-based. Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles (2006) examine this phenomenon specifically in regard to the presidency. They argue that our understanding of the office of the presidency, or of a particular president, is always mediated and constructed through texts. We have no understanding of a president except through texts. Based on how a fictional president is portrayed, the audience's perspective may change regarding the person and the office. Indeed, "given its constitutive character, each presidentiality invites the continued scrutiny of the ideologies and boundaries that circumscribe the presidency and presidents in U.S. political discourse" (p. 2). Using their analysis as a basis, I expand upon their concept of a textually-bound presidentiality to suggest that political offices are also always only understood through texts. Our conceptions of governance, politicians, and therefore citizenship, are always text-based. Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles foreground the text, investigating how the writers of the show considered the presidency and social issues. They do not, however, investigate whether audience members similarly identified with the writers' assumptions; rather, they identify and make clear the constitutive elements of the show. Similarly, I will foreground the television shows I am examining. Because texts form the basis of our understanding of politics, fictional political texts have equal

salience in constituting how Americans see their government and themselves. In this dissertation, I examine how political television shows constitute American national identity.

Television shows that depict American politics provide models of American citizenship through their portrayal of political leaders. While many shows portray political activity, and while the argument can be made that most activities undertaken by characters on-screen could have political implications, when I refer to *politics* in this dissertation, I am referring to a specific context. Here, by *politics* I mean actions taken by particular political actors; specifically, I am examining fictional political television shows that portray the federal government. Therefore, when I refer to *politicians,* I mean political actors who work in elected or appointed federal government positions (members of the Legislative and Executive branches specifically); when I refer to *politics,* I mean the work, activities, or rhetoric of these individuals that directly result from, or impact, their role as politicians. The characters portrayed on-screen enact, implicitly or explicitly, some sort of "ideal" American. Because these shows are fictional political television shows, they portray officials whom the public interpret as models. This modeling is discussed in more depth in this chapter's section entitled "Citizenship and Its Role in American National Identity. While not all of characters are meant to be a moral American, they each provide a representation of what a citizen "should" look like, do, or believe. By envisioning and "trying on" this character, audience members connect the character to their own citizenship. By situating certain values as ideal, other values are inherently positioned as less ideal, less valid, or un-American. Thus, those in society who exhibit the less-desirable values are situated as un-American. Contemporary television shows therefore "safeguard the core of American ideology" (Kaklamanidou, 2017, p. 105). Ideology forms the basis of identity, and television shows are thus constitutive of American identity.

To elucidate how popular television shows cultivate a collective American identity, I first turn to a discussion of national identity construction more generally. In this case, I am specifically interested in the formation of a collective American national identity. Previous scholarly work primarily focused on how politicians, and particularly the President, rhetorically represent Americans. However, collective identity construction must require participation from the people who make up that collective. Though the American public is quite diverse sociologically and economically, an undercurrent of a collective American identity exists. Walzer (1992) argues that the term "American" is unique because it is a chosen rather than a "native" country. We have no inherent "people;" the vast majority of Americans are immigrants (or are descended from them).[1] Therefore, identity constitution is especially salient in the United States because it is *all we have* to collectively identify us. Moreover,

> there is no country called America . . . it is a name that doesn't even pretend to tell us who lives here . . . The adjective [American] provides no reliable information about the origins, histories, connections, or cultures of those whom it designates. (pp. 23-24)

Walzer's point is that the term "American" has no inherent association for its people except that they have voluntarily chosen to identity this way: "the United States is an association of citizens . . . the people are Americans only by virtue of having come together" (p. 27). Thus, Americans know who they are individually and collectively only by examining what is expected of one another, as mutual citizens. The process of identity formation takes place both through articulation by authority figures and by individual and collective discourse by citizens.

1. Walzer does devote some attention to the indigenous peoples who are often excluded from American identity. This exclusion certainly ought to be recognized, however, a larger analysis of the ways in which indigenous populations have been systematically removed from the land and excluded from American citizenship is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Elements of national identity are often presented in politicians' speeches. Beasley (2011) has argued that collective group membership is dictated through the president; past and current presidents have tried "to develop and maintain feelings of shared national identity within a wildly diverse democracy . . . presidents have told the American people [who] they are" (pp. 3-4). Thus, this diverse population is united by a collective identity often narrated by one individual. This type of identity construction by presidents has been especially important when policy decisions might be questionable, such as during war times (Heuer, 2018). The risk of upsetting the public with war efforts led the president and officials to enforce certain elements of the American public's ideology through oratory such that the constructed collective identity was made to reinforce the given policies (p. 223). In order both to garner support and to ensure that the entire nation bought into the associated war efforts, the President had to reinforce the values he expects from citizens of the nation. Here, collective identity construction can be viewed as a top-down process.

While authority figures play a large role in constructing "Americanness," individuals must also take part in the process by adhering to the articulated values and by joining in the discourse surrounding accepted values and beliefs. Dubriwny (2005) argues that group identity can arise through collective rhetoric, or the process by which individual experiences articulated together can form an overarching vocabulary by which a community can understand themselves as a collectivity (p. 396). This process, however, is not overtly apparent. Rather, as Beasley (2011) articulates, we should understand it as an indirect development in which discourse "subtly reinforces the audience's presumed collective identity as national subjects" (p. 9). This means that national identity is understood more broadly as "shared beliefs" rather than as a single definition that any American could concisely sum up (Beasley, p. 44). Beasley further argues

that shared beliefs center on specific ideals which a community has been asked to adhere to, and that "Americans are Americans because they share certain ways of thinking" (p. 46). Those ways of thinking, or shared beliefs, McGee (1975) terms *myths*. The national myths, though shared across the nation, may change over time. Yet even with fluctuations in the specific make-up of myths, American national identity is enduring. This is because, Hale (2004) explains, "group membership criteria and group membership itself tend to change over time as people come and go and develop new traditions and ways of life, but a group itself nevertheless endures as a way of structuring social life" (p. 461). Belonging to the group—being an American—structures social life for citizens and residents of the United States. Deutsch (1953) asserts that "a common culture, then, is a common set of stable, habitual preferences and priorities in men's [sic] attention, and behavior, as well as in their thoughts and feelings" (p. 88). Though culture is evident in the tangible actions of citizens, it goes deeper into "an invisible *configuration of values*, of do's and don'ts, of rules for discriminating between actions as good or bad" (italics original, p. 88). Adherence to these values and preferences indicates one's belonging to the group. This adherence is only possible by ascribing to the national myths.

To understand shared identity, McGee (1975) explains, scholars must critique rhetorical documents to uncover "the people's" ideology. In this dissertation, when I refer to "ideology," I am referring to what McGee denotes as the people's "repertory of convictions" (p. 249). These are the epistemological and ontological beliefs that structure how a public enacts citizenship both individually and collectively. Though "the people," or the audience of rhetorical documents, are a construct, their ideology is very real. In other words, as Anderson (1983) asserts, a nation is "an imagined political community . . . because even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members," but a sense of camaraderie remains because they are connected by texts

such as newspapers that reinforce shared language (p. 6). Individuals within a nation have a common education that is based on shared texts.

Shared texts serve an important function in constructing national identity. Mercieca (2010) argues that America's national identity is built on certain "fictions," or stories Americans tell about who they are (p. 6). Americans develop these identity narratives "in response to their existing political contexts" (p. 211). This approach—understanding national identity and citizenship as founded upon certain fictions—guides how I assess the politically-charged texts of popular culture[2]: "thinking of political theory as political fiction . . . allowed us to think about the relationship between America's political theory and the stories Americans tell themselves about their government; it has also highlighted the inherently constructed nature of political theory" (p. 212). The term "political theory" in *Founding Fictions* refers to discourse that "attempts to influence how political communities are constructed and maintained" (p. 14), or a theory or idea that supposes there is a "best kind of government" (p. 13). Conceiving of these narratives as political fiction "focuses on the constitutive role" that political theory and discourse play in how audience members function as citizens (p. 32). Our very American identity, Mercieca tells us, is built upon narratives presented by the founders of the country or current political leaders. We absorb, accept, and act upon these narratives in ways that reinforce elements of the narrative. Importantly, "a political fiction can both describe the underlying assumptions of a community's political theory *and* can be called upon to convince citizens that political policies and practices correspond to preexisting political theory" (p. 28). Furthermore, this understanding of identity as always inherently constructed—a fiction—also helps us understand how both "real-world" and on-screen narratives and representations of American citizenship influence American identity.

2. In this project, I will use the terms "popular culture" and "pop culture" interchangeably. "Pop culture" is a shortened form of "popular" that has become accepted and utilized in common parlance.

This is because "we find examples of a nation's political fiction in any kind of text that describes or is premised upon that nation's view of its government" (p. 27). In this dissertation, then, political television shows serve as texts that rhetorically construct political fictions; they are texts that both describe and are based on how Americans view government. Moreover, in this dissertation, I have defined *political* as the work, activities, or rhetoric of political actors who, through their work, activities, and rhetoric, serve as models of an ideal American. Fictional political television shows represent both government entities and individuals, and models of ideal citizenship. I argue, therefore, that, in an increasingly mediated society, scholars much examine mass media and pop culture texts to understand the American people's ideology, political myths, and national identity.

While the proliferation of media texts inspires scholarship, some important findings in political science should also spur our curiosity toward the educative nature of pop culture. We know that political knowledge leads to "better" civic behavior, such as more political engagement (Weinschenk & Dawes, 2018, pp. 530-548). Traditionally, political theorists believed that advanced education was the main factor in increasing the public's political knowledge. Yet scholars have been befuddled as to "why political participation has failed to increase with rising levels of education in the United States" (Berinsky & Lenz, 2011, p. 358). In other words, more people are going to college, yet people know less about politics. Galston (2001) puts it this way:

> overall levels of political knowledge have hardly budged over the past half century. This is a remarkable finding in light of the fact that political knowledge is highly correlated with levels of formal education . . . the percentage of Americans with college degrees is

> vastly higher than it was 50 years ago. How can it be that political knowledge has failed to increase? (p. 222)

Clearly, higher education is not having the effect on political knowledge we would expect. This means that other sources must also influence American perceptions of politics and might be able to fill the gap. Barabas, Jerit, Pollock, and Rainey (2014) corroborate this. They argue that "as political information becomes more available (e.g., in news stories and on television), levels of knowledge also increase" (p. 843). This availability is increasingly outside of a collegiate environment; rather, it is taking place largely through the media. The more often audience members see political figures or topics on television, the more knowledge they will gain about these topics. Furthermore, Volgy and Schwarz (1980) explain that television shows educate us about "what is happening around the nation and around the world" (p. 153). As a result, our view of events taking place in the real-world political scene "flows partly from characterizations of current events interpreted to us (and for us) by a variety or news and entertainment media" (p. 153). The media provides frameworks through which we understand events and issues. Jackson (2009) asserts that "increasingly, Americans use images, plots, and characters from the popular culture to help understand the world around them" (p. 29). Examples of this include referring to friends who hold similar political beliefs as an on-screen character by that character's name ("Oh, you're such a Hank Hill"[3]). Because of this, "those who spend relatively more time with movies ought to have a higher level of political knowledge than others. This indeed appears to be the case" (p. 58). As such, pop culture texts serve an important political education function in that they increase political knowledge in audience members.

3. Hank Hill is the main character of *King of the Hill*, an animated comedy about life in Texas. Hank is politically conservative.

In this dissertation, I analyze three political shows--*House of Cards, Veep,* and *Madam Secretary*—in three separate case studies and answer the following research questions:

How do contemporary political television shows model American citizenship through the portrayals of political leaders?

How do these models of citizenship constitute American national identity?

Once again, in this dissertation, I am defining *politics* as the activities and words of individuals that have resulted from, or that impact, their role as politicians. And, in this dissertation, I am narrowly defining *politician* to refer to members primarily of the Executive branch of the American government. While depictions of other politicians exist (for example, we could also examine how *Parks and Recreation* models citizenship), representations of the Executive branch are most common in political television, and therefore will have the most salience in conversation with other political texts. Therefore, for the purposes of this dissertation, I define *political television shows* as those programs which depict politicians who are or become members of the Executive branch. This makes political televisions shows both political rhetoric and pop politics texts. We can conceive of *pop politics* as those texts which are either widely circulated in popular culture or which are created for popular media (such as social media, entertainment news outlets, television programming other than traditional television news networks/shows, etc.) that depict the individuals, communication, or actions that make up both fictional and real-world political rhetoric. In this introductory chapter, I provide an overview of the theoretical underpinnings and literature that guided my research. To understand how these television shows function rhetorically for a modern audience, we must first begin with an understanding of the current real-world American political climate. This will necessarily impact the identity that is constituted through popular culture. I then turn to an overview of pop politics

as rhetorically constitutive. Next, I offer a discussion of citizenship and its role in national identity. I conclude by previewing the three case studies contained in this dissertation; I argue that these three shows present models of citizenship for the American public that cultivate lenses through which they can view their collective national identity.

The Influence of Trump and the 2016 Election

It's an understatement to simply remark that the 2016 election cycle was noteworthy. Ultimately, Donald Trump ran an unusual campaign that worked for several specific reasons. Trump was, unexpectedly, elected as President of the United States on November 8, 2016 (Krieg, 2017). Due to his outsider status, "Mr. Trump's nabbing of the presidential nod embodies a dramatic shift in the political paradigm," one that caters to those dissatisfied with the political elite and slow wheels of bureaucracy (Perdue, 2016, n.p.). Zurcher (2016) argues that the five most important elements of Trump's victory were: the turnout of voters who were typically rural white men and less educated; that he was a political outsider; the perpetuation of the Comey and Clinton email scandal; a unique campaign (in terms of which cities he chose to visit and how much (or little) time he chose to spend on campaigning); and an avowed dissatisfaction with incumbents in Congress. These factors worked together to create a stunning election; however, the most notable trend is the displeasure with career politicians. This distaste is evident both in real-world politics and through on-screen narratives.

Donald Trump set himself apart as a political "outsider," and this strategy worked to his advantage. Dissatisfaction toward those in government has increased over the last 50 years (Gallup News, 2018). According to the Congressional Institute (2017), "the truth is, Congress hasn't functioned as an effective legislative body for some time" (para. 1). Additionally, Swift (2017) reports that "more than one in five U.S. adults cite dissatisfaction with the government

and political leadership as the most important problem in the country" (para. 1). This is not a partisan issue, either. Chappell (2014) reports that "among Republicans, Democrats and independents, dissatisfaction with the U.S.'s political leadership topped all other issues" (para. 1). Interestingly, distaste for real-world government affairs is increasing, yet fictional portrayals continue to proliferate.

Furthermore, current political television shows, while running during the Trump presidency, were often created during Obama's tenure. Thus, how Obama portrayed the presidency will be reflected—or rejected—in fictional representations of the presidency and political life. Vaughn and Mercieca (2014) argue that "there is a rhetoric of presidential expectations that has grown more heroic since the Progressive Era . . . we judge all presidents based upon both our heroic expectations and how they handle their various burdens" (p. 2). In assessing Obama's presidency, they argue that he "both embraced and diminished heroic expectations" (p. 261). As a result, Obama served to further America's expectations of a heroic American government, while also pushing back against it in various ways. This is primarily demonstrated in his language choice and, surprisingly, Obama and Trump actually use quite a bit of similar language. Krebs and Ralston (2017) found that "on two key [rhetorical] dimensions, Obama and Trump look similar—and stand in marked contrast to other presidents" (para. 8). First, both presidents use first-person pronouns far more than any preceding presidents; "Obama's rhetoric is 69 percent more self-referential than the presidential average, and Trump exceeds Obama by another 20 percent" (para. 9). The second feature the presidents share is tenacity, or forceful language. Again, both Obama and Trump use this type of language significantly more often than previous presidents. This form of communication, then, is altering

how audiences expect presidents to communicate. Biden's presidency is still relatively new, but his communication style will inevitably continue to influence fictional depictions going forward.

Though Trump and Obama are rhetorically similar, there was incredible conservative pushback against Obama's presidency. Conservatives felt that Obama used divisive language, and prominent politicians and news hosts (for example, Marco Rubio, Jeanine Pirro, Chris Christie, and Bill O'Reilly) expressed that the extreme political divisiveness we saw in the 2016 election was established during the Obama presidency (Cummings, 2018). Though an increasing political divide was evident during Obama's tenure, much of this division is rooted in racism. Beauchamp (2018) argues that "there is tremendous evidence that Trump voters were motivated by racial resentment (as well as hostile sexism), and very little evidence that economic stress had anything to do with it" (para. 6). Indeed, Reny, Collingwood, and Valenzuela (2019) found that "white voters are increasingly perceiving the Democratic Party as the party of racial and ethnic minorities and racially liberal policy and the Republican Party as the party of White Americans and racially conservative policy" (p. 95). This undoubtably influences how political parties are portrayed on television. For instance, is the fictional president a Republican or Democrat? And what might that say about what a "good" American looks like (in terms of race, gender, etc.)? Furthermore, Kopf (2017) reports that "while Obama's approval plummeted among whites during his presidency, it increased slightly among nonwhites" (para. 4). Clearly, race plays a significant role in how the Obama presidency is viewed. Each of the shows examined in this dissertation have an overwhelmingly white cast and, in each show, the president is white. Though the shows aired during Obama's presidency, none of the shows could imagine a world in which a black president took office.

Trump leveraged conservative outrage with Obama by pledging "to 'cancel every unconstitutional executive action, memorandum and order issued by President Obama'" (Rudalevige, 2016, para. 1). Trump also regularly attacked Obama personally and professionally, with sometimes shocking accusations, "including the claim that Obama had founded ISIS" (M. Conway, 2016, para. 3). All of this occurred in a campaign season that was "overwhelmingly negative in tone and extremely light on policy" (Sutton, 2016, para. 4). Indeed, "over the course of the entire campaign, Clinton was covered more negatively than Trump, with 62 percent negative . . . compared to Trump's coverage, which was 56 percent negative" (para. 4). Thus, the entirety of the 2016 election cycle was marked by cynicism and negativity. While this is not a dramatic shift in tone in relation to previous campaign and election cycles, as negativity has been an increasing trend, this campaign season did still outpace previous years in terms of vitriol. The unusual nature of Trump's campaign which ultimately led to his success, combined with the remarkable negativity present in politics and media make it an ideal time to examine political messages in popular culture, as they may more closely adhere to, or more obviously diverge from, "real world" American political messaging.

Pop Politics as Rhetorically Constitutive

Pop politics rhetorically constitutes American collective identity. As previously defined, I consider *pop politics* to be artifacts which become widely circulated primarily as entertainment (though many of these often have an educational or political purpose, such as political art; one example of this is the "Hope" poster featuring a red, white, and blue portrait of then-candidate Barack Obama, created by Shepard Fairey in 2008), or those which are specifically created to be featured on popular media outlets such as social media or other entertainment outlets or programming (examples include memes, comedic or satirical political sketches on the television

program *Saturday Night Live*, and, of course, fictional political television shows). These artifacts make clear the overlap between informative or persuasive political rhetoric and entertainment. In this section, I present an overview of constitutive rhetoric in general, then discuss how pop politics specifically is constitutive. With this knowledge, we can then delve into how citizenship is constituted, as well as how it relates to national identity.

Constitutive rhetorical theorists posit that discourse constructs reality. Austin (1962) asserts that, often, "to *say* something is to *do* something" (p. 12). Biesecker (1989) elaborates, arguing that rhetoric "is the name given to those utterances which serve as instruments for adjusting the environment in accordance to the interests of its inhabitants" (p. 113). More specifically, communication constructs how individuals and groups perceive reality, which leads them to act in ways that change or continue the way the world functions. In this way, communication leads to action. Therefore, utterances (which, in a digitally-mediated era, ought to be understood as more than verbal; tweets can count as utterances, for example) influence people and change the world. Jasinski (1993) argues that "every narrative text creates one or more 'persuasive communities'" (p. 469). These communities—audience members—participate in the world that has been constructed by a given text.

One example of an audience being constituted by a text is retold by Charland (1987). He articulates that texts are constitutive of identity and ideology. In his assessment of the Canadian White Paper "which presents those in Quebec as Quebecios requiring and deserving their own state," he concludes that the White Paper itself, and the discourse surrounding it, constituted a new identity for citizens (p. 135). In other words, it "constituted at least close to half of Quebec voters such that they, as an audience, were not *really* Canadians" but were instead identified as Quebecios (p. 135). In this way, the White Paper "paradoxically both reveals the peuple and

makes it real" (p. 138). The identity was not recognized prior to the White Paper (p. 139). The identity is made real through the process of writing, publishing, and reading the White Paper, then agreeing with its assertion collectively with others. Once an identity has been introduced, individuals may choose to wear this identity and act in the world through this new identity. *This is what we might refer to as a collective identity.* Collective identity is negotiated through themes and speech acts that are rearticulated through culture. McGee (1975) asserts that the idea of a collectivity is a fiction, yet groups tend to subscribe to this notion. Therefore, "ideology is material because subjects enact their ideology and reconstitute their material world in its image" (p. 143).

Evidently, texts are rhetorical, and rhetoric has constitutive power. However, there is another question to answer here: *which* texts are constitutive? In other words, what texts count as rhetorical, and which texts deserve scholarly attention? Ultimately, I argue that, while all texts can be constitutive, popular culture texts are uniquely constitutive and persuasive. Indeed, because popular culture artifacts are designed to appeal to our senses, they are "soothing" such that they limit the audience's perceptions of learning (McLuhan, 1967). The audience is unaware of their education through popular culture but are profoundly influenced by their consumption. Specifically, television programs contribute to identity construction. Morley (1992) argues that though audiences may or may not absorb specific messages from a given episode of a television show or movie, "they may well retain general 'definitions of the order of things'—ideological categories embedded in the structure of the specific content" (p. 73). In fact, the nature of pop culture texts, such as comic strips, can be used to "disrupt prevailing discourses" (Gilbert & Lucaites, 2015, p. 381). In this way, pop culture can both reinforce and challenge typical notions of the expected societal structures. Televised stories deeply impact social structures and how

individuals identify themselves within those structures. Morley argues that, to fully understand pop culture messages, we should not only ask, "what is a programme saying," but also, "what is taken-for-granted (what 'doesn't need saying') within the programme?" (p. 76). The messages that are left unsaid are those that are already automatically understood and accepted by those watching. Thus, television messages have material power. Television "performs two simultaneous functions . . . illustrating dominant ideals and teaching youth how to act" (McClain, 2015, p. 26). Individuals locate themselves in their environment by how they perceive their own identity, how they perceive others' identities, and how they believe they are viewed by others. Identity is understood and constructed through narratives.

Narratives provide structure to our interpretations of reality, and therefore influence our adoption of political behaviors. In understanding how pop culture texts are constitutive, I draw heavily from Fisher's (1987) arguments regarding the narrative paradigm. He argues that values are inherently woven into all pieces of discourse (pp. 109-110). Specifically, "we know that fictive forms of communication can have rhetorical intentions and consequences" (p. 158). This is because the rhetor "has built a story with an unmistakable moral" that is depicted and represented "through stories of several lives, different yet morally alike" (p. 169). Audience members then absorb the values within a story and decide whether to accept or reject these values based on other stories they have heard. To put it a different way, Horkheimer and Adorno (1944/1972) explain that "the whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry" (p. 126). They give the example of someone who has just watched a movie and now "sees the world outside as an extension of the film he [or she] has just left (because the latter is intent upon reproducing the world to everyday perceptions)" (p. 126). Now that the individual has an additional lens through which he or she views the world, future producers will take that

into account as they strive to represent "real" life on-screen; thus, "the illusion [prevails] that the outside world is the straightforward continuation of that presented on the screen" (p. 126). Popular culture, then, is participative in this consensus-building toward a collective mythos. In particular, television shows that depict political actors[4] are even more salient, as they form a citizen's understanding both of government and of one's own position in society.

One way pop politics texts function rhetorically is through their depiction of political leaders. For example, Bodnick (2016) asserts that shows can represent presidential candidates and serve as endorsements of the roles those candidates play. *Madam Secretary* depicts a woman as the Secretary of State; many viewers took this character to be a representation of Hillary Clinton. Another political television show, *Designated Survivor,* on the other hand, portrays "a man without political experience as commander in chief" (Wigler, 2017, para. 3). This is particularly relevant as the current president, Donald Trump, also does not have a political background. Alternately, *Veep* portrays a woman as the president, but Framke (2016) characterizes it as "HBO's comedy about the high toxin levels in American politics" (para. 2). Clearly, *Veep* is not a show designed to suggest confidence in the political system. Similarly, *House of Cards* depicts a president without moral scruples. However, Klarer (2016) argues that it does depict a man who is quite capable, and who is able to wield political forces easily. *House of Cards* represents the president as a powerful man who manipulates to get his way. It seems that popular portrayals of the presidency suggest that Americans should view the president as a powerful person capable of overcoming difficulties, yet who may not base the decisions they make on a strong ethical background.

4. Political actors: Those who take part in political action in some way (politicians, government staff, citizens, etc.).

How television portrays politicians is important constitutively for several reasons. First, as Meyer (2002) argues, "in present-day media societies television plays the dominant, paradigmatic role in the institutional domain, one that pervades and stamps all of the other media" (p. 1). Serialized shows tell audiences what to care about, how to act, and what authority figures they should respect. Additionally, Hart (2012) argues that television "offers psychological intimacy between us and our elected officials" (p. 271). This means that people feel affinity for political actors whom they have never met. Fictional representations of the president are especially important because they have changed how the public views the presidency. Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles (2006) argue that "a fictional depiction of the presidency offers what we have previously called a 'presidentiality,' or a discourse that demarcates the cultural and ideological meaning of the presidency for the general public" (p. 2). Furthermore, "mimetic representations of the presidency frequently offer audiences new realities of this political institution or new renditions of the biographies of the men who have served as America's chief executive" (p. 4). "Mimetic" depictions are those that are intended to mimic "real" life. Thus, they represent the current values and expectations, adapting to those expectations over time (Dow, 2002, p. 262). The public is meant to see these fictional representations as revealing of the president or the office's true nature, even when they are aware that what is being portrayed is fictitious.

Some entertainment shows have more of an effect on ideology that others. Anderson and Kincaide (2013) report that audiences who watched comedy news shows were actually more informed about current events than those who watched traditional news reports (p. 172). Becker and Bode (2017) also note that representations of real politicians have profound impacts on public perceptions in what they call The Fey Effect: "watching Tina Fey's caricature of Sarah

Palin on SNL [*Saturday Night Live*] made viewers think more negatively of Palin . . . and ultimately weakened their likelihood of voting for the Republican ticket on election day" (p. 3). In addition, viewers who watch comedy news shows trust the media and "the electoral process" less than Americans who do not view these shows (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006, p. 362). Not only do television shows impact the trust audience members have in government but the media can also change how viewers describe and see themselves. Anderson and Steward (2005) describe the "Sex and the City Voter" (p. 597). This term described young women during the 2004 campaign and was used to represent all members of this group as "white, middle to upper-class professionals" who are "sexually appealing and available" (p. 597). This description served to homogenize women voters, reducing their agency (pp. 603-9). In this way, not only did the news media alter how voters were viewed, but they were also using a term that originated with a television show, thereby utilizing popular culture as a force for identification. This example elucidates the link between identity and pop politics. To fully understand how national identity is constructed and enacted we must also understand the role of citizenship in cultivating national identity.

Citizenship and Its Role in American National Identity

Collective American identity is constituted through pop culture, and notions of citizenship provide the basis for understanding identity. In this section, I first connect citizenship and national identity to pop culture texts. Then, I provide a description of the role citizenship plays in understanding national identity in the United States. Together, these areas of study contribute to our understanding of how pop culture texts depict "ideal" citizenship norms for viewers to emulate. When articulating national identity, however, I do not presume that there is some timeless identity that all Americans will ascribe to. Indeed, scholars including Mercieca

(2010) have explained that what makes a "good" citizen can change over time (as evidenced by a deep distrust of democracy in the early days of American life, yet our deep reverence for the concept now). Rather, I conceive of national identity as consisting of various snapshots in time. My analysis specifically examines how citizenship is constituted for a "twenty-teens" America (approximately 2010-2020). As discussed previously, the current political climate is vastly different from previous eras. Therefore, modern Americans may conceive of citizenship and their collective national identity is different ways than previous Americans. Furthermore, America is increasingly fragmented. With exploding viewing options, audiences no longer all watch the same shows. Thus, the messages audience members receive about citizenship will also be fragmented. When I argue about a collective national identity, I do not assert that all Americans ascribe to this same national identity. Rather, I argue that citizenship is articulated through texts to constitute national identity in a particular way such that audience members *believe* that all Americans should ascribe to that identity. In other words, audience members of a particular show gain notions of what Americans look like, do, and believe; audience members therefore expect that other American citizens will hold these same views. American national citizenship, then, is necessarily fragmented even as it attempts to be collective.

Scholars have historically conceived of citizenship in two primary, distinct ways: Citizenship as Nationality and Citizenship as Political Participation. The first, based on nationality, defines citizenship in terms of the *rights* afforded to a person by the government (Bendix, 1964). By the start of the 1800s, United States citizenship was conceived of as individual economic freedom, or the right to work, and earn and spend money (Marshall, 1950, p. 17). Throughout the 1800s, notions of citizenship developed into having and gaining certain civil rights, such as education.

The second conception of citizenship examines how the quality of citizenship is constructed through the civic actions members of a nation take. Shklar (1991) sums up the difference between the two ideas as "citizenship as nationality is a legal condition; it does not refer to any specific political activity. *Good citizenship* as political participation, on the other hand, concentrates on political practices, and it applies to the people of a community who are consistently engaged in public affairs" (italics mine, p. 5). There is a distinction, therefore, between nationality-as-citizenship (citizenship as a legal standing that affords certain rights) and *good* citizenship (citizenship enacted by an individual in specific ways). Today, we "tend to regard citizenship as constituted in specific acts" (Asen, 2004, p. 190). Therefore, we can see that, thus far, citizenship has shifted over time from something defined by the government as certain rights, to something defined by individuals through their specific actions. For example, Bohman (1999) conceives of citizenship as something to be "worked out" in a public sphere, something that is determined by discourse and then enacted. Zaeske (2002), too, conceives of citizenship as something that is enacted. She describes the women who signed antislavery petitions and argues that these women used their signatures as a civic and political action. By her conception of citizenship, then, citizenship must be claimed. Shklar (1991) also argues that "citizenship in America has never been just a matter of agency and empowerment, but also of social standing as well" (p. 2). Social standing is defined here as someone who is "an 'earner'" (p. 64). In fact, "the dignity of labor in general, and as an essential element of citizenship" is fundamental to our understanding of American identity. Furthermore, Schudson (1998) articulates that the economic contributions of Americans continue to be defined by policies. Federal income tax was legislated in 1913, and thereafter, "'taxpayer' would become a synonym for citizen" (p. 204)—and it would especially come to mean a "good" citizen. In these ways,

then, citizenship was conceived of as something that one had to enact by taking certain specific actions.

Asen (2004) asserts that this idea of citizenship being constituted through specific acts does not provide the full picture. Instead, he suggests shifting our conceptions once more to view "citizenship as a process. From this perspective, citizenship does not appear in specific acts per se, but signals a process that may encompass a number of different activities" (p. 191). This process is performed in many ways. For example, Rahn, Brehm, and Carlson (1999) assert that "people use their beliefs about authorities to draw inferences about their own status in a group" (p. 113). Thus, understandings of individuals and institutions in government influence how citizenship and national membership is understood. This adheres to Asen's suggestion of a "discourse theory citizenship" that "conceives of citizenship as a *mode of public engagement*" (italics original, p. 191). Thus, citizenship becomes a performance (p. 203). Ultimately, "'America' is not an overarching synthesis . . . but a rhetorical battleground, a symbol that has been made to stand for diverse and sometimes mutually contradictory outlooks" (Bercovitch, 1993, p. 355). Citizenship is constantly being rearticulated and re-understood. Murphy (2003) asserts that

> the meaning of citizenship must be understood as contingent upon the context in which it is enacted and the manner in which it is articulated and publicized. Citizenship is more than a legal designation. As a discursive construct representing democratic ideals, the idea of citizenship holds explanatory power, directing how Americans understand the meaning of democratic self-governance, their role in the process, and the relative health of American democracy. American citizens understand the idea of democracy, and, thus,

the idea of citizenship and their role in democratic life, by exposure to and identification with the most popular and public forms of citizenship enactment. (pp. 194-195)

Therefore, citizenship is not found in certain actions that people take but rather is continually determined and re-determined by one's beliefs and conception of belongingness. Citizenship, then, is based on whether one believes he or she belongs to the larger group. In this way, national identity is interwoven with the discourse of citizenship. National identity is often articulated for citizens by political leaders and elites.

Elites—both political and economic—have rhetorically constructed citizenship throughout the nation's history and, in particular, political leaders use their positions to define ideal citizenship. At the beginning of the United States' nationhood, leaders needed to channel "the volatile emotions of a revolt into the structures of a (rhetorically) homogenous nation" (Bercovitch, 1993, p. 42). Though (white, male) members of this new nation had legal citizenship, the implications of this legal status needed to be rhetorically constructed (Mercieca, 2010). Similarly, Skocpol, Cobb, and Klofstad (2005) argue that elites drive civic behavior by performing citizenship in particular ways that are emulated by "lower" classes. Therefore, citizenship is a discourse that can be understood as a performance that is exclusive and driven by certain elite models. This rhetorical construction has continued throughout the nation's history. For example, Dorsey and Harlow (2003) argue that "by retelling America's origin as the epic struggle of immigrant heroes engaging in daring deeds in the North American wilderness, Theodore Roosevelt attempted to define the meaning of America for the modern era" (p. 62). Presidents have always worked to modify the definition of citizenship for modern Americans.

Schools, too, functioned as the main system by which people were socialized into prevailing notions of citizenship. Dorsey and Harlow (2003) assert that "public schools sought to

acculturate and to assimilate immigrant children . . . emphasizing the concepts of democracy and capitalism in school curricula (p. 56). Ravitch and Viteritti (2001) argue that textbooks were considered "instruments to create a new American society" (p. 16). Furthermore, Holmes (2001) asserts that, throughout American history, schools have been considered to be "agents of moral citizenship" (210). Thus, historically, schools have been used to instruct children in the "appropriate" ways of enacting citizenship.

Together, presidents, politicians, and public education have played an important role in defining citizenship. Thus far, I have discussed the nature of the constitution of citizenship. Now, I want to make explicit the link between citizenship and collective identity. Moreover, both collective identity and notions of citizenship are directly linked to how politicians **model** citizenship. As previously discussed, Mercieca (2010) explains that American national identity is always built on narratives and texts from previous and current political leaders. Beasley (2011) articulates that the president defines group membership by clarifying how Americans ought to define themselves. These elements of national identity become more clear when read in the context of how Stuckey and Hoffman (2006) situate politicians as models of ideal American citizenship. Stuckey and Hoffman argue that "by virtue of their position as national leaders presidents help define the behavior and characteristics of 'good' citizens" (p. 972). Presidents rely on the values of a given time to shape and voice their ideologically-bound statements. Furthermore, not only do presidents define citizenship through their speeches but they also embody ideal citizenship. Stuckey (2004) points out that

> by grounding public speech in their own characters, presidents inhabit a larger representative role and reshape the office to their own personalities. Rather than merely

> speaking to the people, they claim to become something of a surrogate of 'the people,' simultaneously enacting and enunciating our national values and national identity. (p. 8)

Presidents provide a rhetorical model for Americans to understand an idealized version of national identity. Fictional presidents, through their rhetorical choices, also provide a model, or a framework, through which viewers can understand American national identity. Citizenship is depicted on-screen through television shows because, as Maddux argues, on-screen characters portray a "model" for viewers in that they see civic action displayed in a particular way as a representative stance for them to emulate. Therefore, the values and actions portrayed on-screen impact the off-screen world. Moreover, as Mercieca, Beasley, and Stuckey and Hoffman make clear, politicians model what citizenship should look like for Americans. And, as I will explain in this section, viewers interpret fictional political leaders similarly to how they interpret real-world politicians. In this way, characters portrayed on television, and especially political characters, provide a model for viewers to emulate.

We cannot ignore, however, that defining citizenship also means defining who is not allowed to participate (Bennett, 2009, p. 3). Bennet argues that

> being a good citizen connotes more than forced service on a jury or in an army. As a signifier forever in process, citizenship is always partial in its constitution of identity . . . citizenship establishes those who belong from those who do not, defining norms that are often blatantly hostile, intolerant, and xenophobic. (p. 8)

Thus, citizenship is constructed by acknowledging—explicitly or implicitly—who does *not* count as a citizen. Shklar (1991) puts it succinctly: "the tension between an acknowledged ideology of equal political rights and a deep and common desire to exclude and reject large groups of human beings from citizenship has marked every stage of the history of American

democracy" (p. 28). By articulating who is not afforded specific rights of citizenship, Americans can understand what a "good" American ought to do.

I argue that 1) politicians rhetorically construct citizenship and that 2) *fictional* politicians depicted in popular media also serve an educational role in socialization into citizenship. While many scholars have investigated how presidents rhetorically define "Americans," little has been said about the ways in which fictional politicians serve a similar function. We know that audiences tend to conflate fictional and real-world presidents, viewing their values as similar (Morely, 1992; Holbert, et al., 2003, "The West Wing as endorsement"). We also know that television shows "influence how citizens come to understand social norms and lifestyle choices" (Holbert, Shah, & Kwak, 2003, p. 49). In addition, research has demonstrated that fictional representations of politicians influence audience's expectations of the real-world president (Phalen, Kim, & Osellame, 2012). What these ideas tell us is that audiences rely on pop culture representations to define how they ought to view real-world politics, and that audiences have trouble distinguishing between values espoused by a fictional president and a real-world president. If real-world politicians are constituting citizenship, then audiences expect that a fictional politician will do the same.

As politicians (fictional or non) are defining citizenship, they are also defining national identity. I have so far articulated that citizenship is understood as membership to a specific group. While citizenship is often enacted through participation in certain civil rights and other means of asserting one's identity, this enactment is based on a desire to belong to the larger group of Americans. Therefore, when citizenship is defined by those in power, it is also asserting what one must do to belong. Thus, the way citizenship is articulated influences how audiences view their communal identity. Definitions of citizenship do not just define what one individual

must do to belong; definitions of citizenship define what it means to be an American. Therefore, citizenship is always about national, collective identity.

Popular television shows model citizenship through portrayals of political leaders, and citizenship is constitutive of both individual and collective national identity. In the following section, I preview my specific case studies. These case studies examine modern television shows that depict government actors. Fictional representations give the audience a chance to engage with prevailing narratives about the role of citizenship. Before I can introduce my case studies, however, I must first reflect on one political television show that has received an abundance of scholarly attention.

Today's shows often follow the example of *The West Wing.* This show received scholarly attention because it displays a particular and compelling image of the person that inhabits—and the institution that makes up—the presidency. Holbert, et al. (2005) argue that "not only is the show potentially influential in terms of its sheer reach, but the picture of the American presidency offered on the program is qualitatively distinct from the messages citizens engage when consuming news content" (p. 509). The show is also "largely a duplication of the American presidency and the nation's dominant view of itself" (p. 171). In other words, *The West Wing* depicted a president and his staff as an ideal model of citizenship for audience members and Americans to follow by reproducing the values demonstrated in the United States at the time (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2006, p. 152). The shows that followed *The West Wing* have introduced different facets of the political sphere and invite the audience to peer into the lives of other government actors. I would suggest the public has been presented with a variety of models of ideal citizenship. *The West Wing* represented the views of the time it was situated in; more current shows have followed suit and depicted models for the citizenry moving forward,

yet these new shows have yet to receive much critical examination. I seek to examine a range of modern television programs to understand how American citizenship is currently depicted, and to articulate the constitutive consequences of these representations.

Dissertation Structure

In the following case studies, I elucidate how television shows construct popular notions about the American political system and citizenship, and I bring to light the predominant messaging in pop culture today. Additionally, I will ask and answer two questions. First, how do contemporary political television shows model American citizenship through the portrayals of political leaders? And second, how do these models of citizenship constitute American national identity?

To develop a well-rounded understanding of fictional political narratives on television, I draw from three current shows. These shows were selected due to their prevalence in popular culture and unique presentations of the government. I propose to analyze how these television shows construct depictions of the American government and how these depictions shape public understanding about the function of political rhetoric.

Methods

In this dissertation, I will conduct a rhetorical criticism. Wichelns (1925/2010) articulates that “rhetorical criticism is the criticism of rhetorical discourses” (p. 10). To understand the role of the rhetorical critic, we ought to understand how rhetorical texts arise. Vatz (1973) argues that rhetoric translates given situations into meaning. Rhetors (messengers) choose which situations are salient; meaning is not inherent to events because we learn of events or facts by means of communication. All situations are simply translations, depictions through language. Viewing rhetoric as a "creation of reality" rather than a reflection of reality imbues both the rhetor and

critic with moral significance and responsibility. Rhetors have the choice of whether to make situations and events salient. Rhetorical criticism, then, is interpreting how rhetors (authors, speakers, or other communicators) have interpreted reality for an audience. This is important because, as Black (1970) argues, rhetoric can have far-reaching implications on morality and how individuals learn about their environment. Indeed, Dow (1996) asserts that

> the heuristic value of criticism, in my view, is both theoretical and political. In theoretical terms, it means that the argument should, in addition to revealing something interesting and useful about the text itself, reveal something interesting and useful about the *kind* of symbolic activity that the text represents [such as television programming, or political television shows] . . . politically, the heuristic value of criticism . . . is its capacity to engage our thinking about the political implications of discursive practice. To the extent that criticism teaches us something about television and how it works, it tells us something about the world and how it works." (italics original, p. 5)

In this way, the rhetorical scholar makes apparent the inner workings of communication, exposing its constitutive nature.

When approaching a text, a rhetorical critic will generally take one of two perspectives. Black (1980) describes them as:

> the theoretic or etic viewpoint, which . . . interprets the transaction [text] in terms of a pre-existing theory; and the non-theoretic . . . or emic viewpoint, which approaches a rhetorical transaction in what is hoped to be its own terms, without conscious expectations drawn from any sources. (pp. 331-332)

In other words, in the first perspective, a critic takes a theory and uses it to interpret a rhetorical text. Jasinski (2001) argues that this is "methodologically driven criticism" which uses deduction

to arrive at a point (p. 256). The problem with this method, Black (1980) explains, is that when applying a particular lens (theory) to a given text, "the critic is disposed to find exactly what he or she expected to find" (p. 333).

The second perspective, however, Jasinski (2001) refers to as "conceptually oriented criticism . . . which might be thought of as a back and forth movement between text and the concept or concepts that are being investigated simultaneously" (p. 256). More specifically, a scholar will begin with an interest in some type of phenomenon, such as "the phenomenon of power" (p. 257). This interest will lead the critic to see how this phenomenon arises textually. Then, "concepts like style and decorum emerge as a way for a critic to organize his or her thinking about the relationship between power and the discursive practice" (p. 257). This means that the critic will utilize specific concepts from previous theoretical assumptions as a way to consider the phenomenon within a given text. To conduct the criticism, "various specific reading strategies might be employed (emphasizing issues of argument, structure, style, etc.) but, in conceptually oriented criticism, these strategies cannot be organized in any a priori fashion" (p. 257). Thus, in rhetorical criticism, one does not seek to simply apply a previous theory or method to a new text. Rather, a critic takes a previous theory and uses it as a lens through which to consider this new text. Black (1980) conceives of a critic using this approach as a psychoanalyst. His or her "training and experiences instruct him [or her] in where to look, but not in what to see . . . the emic [inductive] critic may well have *topoi* [topics or themes] in which to begin his [or her] exploration," but the criticism is led by the text itself (p. 334). In this way, theory is valuable "most for its explanatory potential and for the vocabulary or set of assumptions it provides to make sense of symbolic processes" (Dow, 1996, p. 17). I think of theory as a lens through which the critic looks at a text; it provides a particular perspective

through which to assess the text. However, the theory should not simply be painted on to a text. Dow (1996) suggests that "the more foregrounded the theory, the more likely it is that the artifact illustrates the theory. Conversely, the more foregrounded the artifact, the more likely it is that the theory helps understand the artifact" (p. 17). In other words, if the theory is at the forefront of criticism, it is likely that the artifact is simply "proving" the theory. Little additional scholarship is gained. However, if the artifact is foregrounded in the criticism, the theory is helping us understand the nuances of the artifact. My approach is this inductive, rather than deductive, criticism. Just as Dow foregrounds the text itself, I will similarly foreground the text. This means that while I will consider contextual elements such as real-world political rhetoric, I do not interpret how audience reactions may or may not align with the nature of the rhetoric within the text itself. In other words, I am rhetorically analyzing the text to understand its rhetorical construction and constitutive potential; I do not, however, assess or make claims about the text's rhetorical *effects.*

Black (1978) argues that critics must not only understand and evaluate discourse, but must also define the nature of criticism. Here, I define the boundaries of my criticism. Because I approach my criticism inductively, I must first define my text, then explain the theories or concepts that will influence my criticism. In defining my text, I take as my example Dow's (1996) study of feminism in popular television, *Prime-Time Feminism.* In this dissertation, then, *text* means "all of the television series that I analyze" (p. 6). To conduct my analysis, I will "make arguments that explain what I see as patterns occurring within each series . . . generally, then, I define 'text' at the level of the series, rather than the episode" (p. 6). Using the series as a whole is important because "when a series becomes an artifact for a critic, it becomes possible to do the kind of close reading that reveals patterns of plot and character, recurring rhetorical

strategies, and ultimately, repetitive rhetorical function" (p. 22). I will, of course, cite specific examples that demonstrate my arguments, and these examples will come from various episodes and seasons. However, the artifact being critiqued is the series as a whole. Because texts must be understood within their context, I also draw from other relevant texts, such as news articles or reviews of the shows, as well as historical or political texts that discuss the salient topics portrayed on-screen, again following Dow's example.

As Jasinski articulated, a scholar will begin with a general phenomenon and refer to other theories or concepts to understand how that phenomenon functions textually. I am interested in how citizenship is portrayed, modeled, enacted, and constituted through political television shows. To guide my criticism, I first rely on the theoretical foundations I have thus far discussed in my introductory chapter. Specifically, I draw from theories of constitutive rhetoric, political rhetoric, popular politics, and citizenship. Because each case study examines a different text, different specific theories and literature will be utilized in each chapter. In addition, as I mentioned previously, I rely on Fisher's narrative paradigm to understand how these three specific television shows constitute identity. Fisher (1984) provides a lens through which to view rhetoric: all communication is storytelling, and humans are essentially storytellers. Dubriwny (2013), agrees, suggesting that discourse is narrative in format, and these narratives are inseparable from the context of how individuals identify themselves as members of society and/or separate from society. Meaning and significance are found in understanding narrative structure.

Therefore, I will utilize the framework of a narrative criticism to guide my use of these theoretical frameworks during my analysis. More specifically, this approach helps me better answer my research questions (How do contemporary political television shows model American

citizenship through the portrayals of political leaders? And how do these models of citizenship constitute American national identity?). Given the inherently narrative nature of television, a narrative analysis is ideal for understanding and breaking down the characteristics of a show. The specific elements of a narrative criticism will help me understand how citizenship is depicted, confronted, and engaged on-screen. Moreover, my research questions ask about how citizenship is modeled through particular portrayals of political leadership, and how these models constitute citizenship. The models are necessarily narrative in nature, and the values can only be embodied by a character within a story. Therefore, to understand how the model functions, I must examine the evident narrative quality of the show.

Narratives are also fundamental to how audiences understand their own lives and their communities. Foss (2009) explains that "narratives organize the stimuli of our experiences so that we can make sense of the people, places, events, and actions of our lives. They allow us to interpret reality because they help us decide what a particular experience is about" (p. 307). Narratives give structure to the very understanding audiences have of their own personhood. How an audience understands citizenship, then, will also be bound up in stories.

A narrative analysis focuses on critiquing several specific elements of a text. To do so, the critic should observe the text, examining how these elements are evident and how they function to further the messages conveyed by the story. For example, as a critic examines the causal relations in a narrative, she might ask, "what cause-and-effect relationships are established in the narrative? How are connections made between causes and effects? How clearly and strongly are the connections between cause and effect made?" (Foss, 2009, p. 314). By considering how causal relations are established, conveyed, and embodied on-screen, the critic gains a deep understanding of the messages within the text. I will pay attention to five particular

elements that Foss (2009) articulates: characters, events, theme, causal relations, and setting. In paying attention to these elements of the narratives of the three shows I examine, I will be able to conduct a close reading of how citizenship is enacted in these categories (example: Characters—who counts as a citizen?; Events—what types of events does a "good" citizen participate in?), and how these messages constitute citizenship in particular ways. Though I utilize the foundations of narrative criticism to guide my rhetorical analysis, I most importantly am conducting an inductive criticism.

Jasinski (2001) makes clear that an inductive criticism begins with the critic's interest in a specific topic. In the case of this dissertation, I am interested in how citizenship is modeled and enacted onscreen to constitute national American identity. To investigate this topic, I use narrative criticism as a lens through which to view my texts. Narrative criticism, in this inductive method, is not directive; rather, it gives me a general idea of where to look to see evidence of constitutive rhetoric and citizenship in political television shows. Thus, narrative criticism will help us understand the nuances of the artifacts, while still keeping the artifacts appropriately foregrounded.

Case Study 1: *House of Cards*

Several shows, such as *Scandal* and *Designated Survivor*, depict fictional political actors who are tied to intrigue and manipulation, which is of interest in a time characterized by political skepticism and cynicism. One show in particular exemplifies this idea: *House of Cards*, a Netflix original based on a British Broadcasting Corporation miniseries (1990), features Frank Underwood, a wily politician with his view set on higher and higher offices. His methods are ethically questionable. Friedersdorf (2014) argues that "*House of Cards* reveals our alarming inability to resist or condemn the powerful *even when their depravity is revealed to us in the*

most unambiguous terms" (italics original, para. 22). Underwood is revered even as he is reviled. Tease (2017) asserts that the show "explores the very possible consequences of the political machine unhinged, affirming popular theories of the State as a corrupt and inhuman system and providing a lens through which to consider the real effects of democracy run amok" (p. 253). Jones and Sonderlund (2017) make an important argument about the current state of popular culture:

> What unites characters [such as King Joffrey of *Game of Thrones*, Olivia Pope of *Scandal*, and the Underwoods of *House of Cards*] is not only the space they occupy in political discourse but the fact that all of them achieve power by exercising their virtuosity in conspiratorial behavior . . . these protagonists' schemes and machinations reflect a conspiratorial mode in popular culture and elsewhere in which conspiracy serves as the hinge connecting interpersonal relationships to political decision making." (p. 834)

What makes this show even more important is that "numerous moments in this latest installment of *House of Cards* reflected this moment in history perhaps a little *too* well" (Desta, 2017, para. 1). The show had an uncanny ability to depict actual political events in Washington, D.C. As Tease (2017) puts it, "its fourth season anticipates the climate of fear that Donald Trump has cultivated in only a matter of months in the White House" (p. 253). Therefore, we ought to understand the messaging behind the show as a lens to understanding how modern perceptions of American identity are constructed. *House of Cards* depicts a man without scruples repeatedly engaging in unethical behavior for unethical reasons. However, the outcome is clear: he is successful and ambitious. In this way, Francis Underwood provides a model of American citizenship. *House of Cards* functions as an anti-model for Americans and constitutes American national identity as one of truth.

Case Study 2: *Veep*

Veep, another American show based off a British series, follows a group of government staff who stumble through mishaps and are focused on their own political careers rather than the constituents' needs. Though airing on the American network HBO, *Veep* is "written wholly by British men" (Parker, 2012, para. 2). The rhetors of this show view American politics as outsiders, lampooning the American government in their storytelling. Still, "the show has bipartisan appeal (Supreme Court colleagues Elena Kagan and the late Antonin Scalia used to watch together)" (Terris, 2017, para. 17). The show ultimately "conjures forth a world of hapless, information-saturated politicians and bureaucrats whose lack of respect for everything, most especially the voting public, overwhelms any illusion of either competent public servants or an informed voting public" (p. 197). This type of show is not designed to develop trust in the political system, and therefore is important to examine. Selina Myers, the main character of *Veep,* is not a competent politician, family member, or friend, yet she has advanced her political career. Myers is cynical about the political system and asks the audience to adopt this stance as well.

When comparing the show to real-world politics, Terris (2017) argues that in D.C., "incompetence often outweighs malevolence," making real-world politics "more 'Veep' than 'House of Cards'" (para. 17). This series might also feel more real to audience members because as J. Conway (2016) argues, the "hand-held camera movements and quick cuts give a sense of immediacy" to the viewer (p. 195). Importantly, this show (unlike the other two in this dissertation) is a comedy. Comedies generally function by "poking fun" at some element of society. Here, the show attempt to remove layers of complexity surrounding politics for comedic

effect. The result, however, is that viewers simply see political figures lambasted. *Veep* models through antithesis femininity, and constitutes Americans as compassionate and competent.

Case Study 3: *Madam Secretary*

Most current shows about political figures are negative in tone, such as *House of Cards* or *Veep*, in which the main characters are conspiratorial, cynical, incompetent, or some combination of these. This show, on the other hand, depicts predominately honorable and competent politicians. Assessing these messages is important so that we can compare and contrast notions of citizenships based on tone.

Interestingly, this positive take on government representatives features a female lead. *Madam Secretary* features a female Secretary of State who must contend with familial and governmental situations. She does so with grace and dedication, ultimately representing a laudatory view of government representatives. Indeed, Roots (2017) argues that the main character, who is "above all, *not jaded,"* provides hope for the audience about the state of the nation (italics original, para. 6). Additionally, the show is significantly silent on whether the President and Cabinet members are Republican, Democrat, or Independent. When the show first aired, many believed the character was meant to be based on Hillary Clinton's tenure as Secretary of State (Moeller, 2014). Ultimately, Moylan (2014) argues, *Madame Secretary* draws viewers because plotlines are not so complex that those unfamiliar with current events will feel lost but engages with international affairs enough that political junkies will remain interested. Through this show, viewers develop a framework for understanding American citizenship, which makes this show relevant to modern rhetorical and political thought. *Madam Secretary* models citizenship as Family Values, and constitutes viewers as protectors of the American way of life.

An Important Note About Citizenship in These Case Studies

All three of these shows situate a white woman as a main character. In both *Veep* and *Madam Secretary,* the woman is *the* main character (as opposed to *House of Cards,* where the most predominate main character is the woman's husband). This is incredibly important to understand for a number of reasons. First, because politicians have incredible definitional power, and fictional representations retain this power, the positioning of women in political offices is significant. In these shows, women are allowed to model ideal citizenship for viewers. However, it is also important to note that none of these shows feature a woman (or man) of color as a main character. While *Veep* and *Madame Secretary* do both feature black women as recurring characters, these women do not have nearly the same screen time, or representation power, as the main character. Furthermore, both of these shows primarily only feature *one* black woman, while the other characters are overwhelmingly white. Therefore, the shows are, on the one hand, exciting in that they depict women as decision-makers and capable government agents who serve as models of citizenship—as men have been doing since our nation was founded. This is a step forward. On the other hand, the shows are disappointing in that those who are "allowed" to take office and count as models of citizenship are white. As I discuss how citizenship is modeled and depicted in these shows, it is important to keep in mind that the picture of citizenship is inherently exclusionary. Only a certain type of woman (white) is portrayed as capable of taking office. This means that as these representations constitute citizenship, they only constitute it such that certain people are included. Or, they only constitute citizenship such that certain attributes are included. While this is always the case (privileging certain qualities over others), in combination, these shows are particularly exclusionary.

Each case study examines one television show in isolation. In the conclusion, I take up the predominant, overarching themes evident in all three shows to gain a more robust snapshot of the time period. These pop politics texts contribute to the plethora of political and cultural texts audiences will come into contact with as they come to understand "Americanness," citizenship, and collective identity.

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CHAPTER II

"CONSPIRATOR IN CHIEF"

Democracy is so overrated. (Frank Underwood, *House of Cards*, "Chapter 15")

Francis Underwood, the main character of the Netflix original *House of Cards,* can only be described as ambitious. He, along with his wife Claire, connives, deceives, and murders his way to the top of the political food chain. This series, based on a 1990s BBC miniseries of the same name that was, in turn, based on a novel written by a British political insider, captivated audiences with the wily adventures of the Underwoods and their associates. The male Underwood begins the show as House of Representatives Majority Whip. By exploiting his friendships and alliances, Francis (who commonly goes by Frank) sets in motion a plot to remove the current Vice President. In turn, Frank sets himself up as a prime candidate for the same office. Once taking on his new role, Frank nurtures a ploy to impeach the sitting President. When this succeeds, Frank becomes President of the United States—without ever receiving a vote from the public. Frank uses this position to situate his wife as Ambassador to the U.N. Before long, though, Frank must run for re-election. In the meantime, he convinces his Vice President not to remain on the ballot with him and instead hosts an open convention for the Vice Presidential position. Unbeknownst to the country, Frank and Claire are undermining this open convention by convincing key players to nominate and vote for Claire. Ultimately, Frank is elected as President and Claire as Vice President. Throughout Frank's career, though, many journalists and other politicians have attempted to reveal his conniving and illegal activities. During his term as president, it appears that some may besmirch the Underwood name to a point from which Frank cannot return. To maintain the Underwood pseudo-oligarchy, Frank resigns,

leaving the presidency to Claire. All of this conspiracy takes place in just five seasons of the show.

The sixth season opens with the audience discovering that Frank is deceased (the character was killed off following allegations against the actor, Kevin Spacey, discussed later in this chapter). The remainder of the season, which closes out the show, follows Claire's tenure as President.

House of Cards is notable because it has many elements that are unique. First, it is a notable show because "it literally changed the face of television. It was Netflix's experiment with binge-watching" (Shebar, 2017, para. 2). [5] For this reason alone, it is important for scholars to assess, as it drives the changes of television-viewing. The show also has many other unique characteristics. The main character, Frank, regularly breaks the fourth wall, resulting in an "intense relationship" with the audience (para. 33). The audience therefore feels connected to this politician in ways they do not connect to their own "real" politicians, whom they may never meet. Indeed, Underwood's remarks to the audience provide him with an opportunity to clarify his motives for the audience, "a quality that the sludgy political communicators of the real world, with their dog-eared talking points dreamed up by a kid in a room at 4 am, can only envy" (Murphy, 2013, para. 5). Furthermore, this Shakespearean device (Hestand, 2017) serves as "an important way to blur the distinction between the show and reality, and theater and politics" (para. 9). By choosing to portray the character in such a way, Frank seems more real to viewers. Simultaneously, the show asks audience members to consider their own relationship to government, and the spectacle therein.

5. Netflix does not release viewership or ratings (Molla, 2017), so it is difficult to determine how popular this television show is/was.

Another unique element of the show is the way it portrays increasingly shocking scandals. The show's creator and executive producer remarks that "we're always pushing the bounds of plausibility, but everything in the show is actually possible" (NBC News, 2015, 1:47). Indeed, "some politicians do find that House of Cards realistically captures Washington, D.C. as portrayed on the show. According to Kevin Spacey, former President Bill Clinton told him that the show was 99% accurate" (Thompson, 2015, para. 3). Many other politicians have mentioned that "the lust and drive for power portrayed on the show is real amongst those who populate the halls of Congress" (para. 3). Frank Pugliese, the co-showrunner, asserts that "'the most terrifying thing is not that we may be like politics, but that politics has become like a TV show'" (Strause, 2018, para. 1). We must ask, then: is the show imitating reality, or influencing it? Pugliese points out that "the show can ask questions about what kind of government you want and how you can be involved" (Strause, 2018, para. 5). In other words, the show is designed to ask the audience to interrogate the assumptions about government, and to confront their complacency. Opperman (n.d.) argues that "the question that drives House of Cards seems to be: is there more to politics than pure spectacle?" (para. 3). The show's focus on aesthetics and art "points to the more fundamental concept that appearance drives politics. Politics IS theater, or at the very least, its own kind of performance" (paras. 5-8). While audience members binge-watch *House of Cards* for the spectacle, they may also question whether they anticipate this kind of drama from their elected officials. Thus, the show invites Americans to consider their relationship to governance and citizenship—and morality. The characters also make the show unique. Many scholarly perspectives on the show address both Frank and Claire (the two leads), as well as other characters. For example, Palmen, Derksen, and Kolthoff (2018) argue that Frank "fit[s] the profile of the psychopathic leader" (p. 437). Not only can Frank be assessed psychologically,

scholars have also addressed the gendered presence of the characters. Hast (2018) proposes that "in House of Cards, spheres of influence are related to a militarised form of masculinity in which violent solutions are preferred and celebrated" (p. 437). While audiences may think this show revolutionary, Keller (2015), says the show actually fits into the genre of morality dramas, which were popular "in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries" (111). This, combined with its Shakespearean elements actually point to *House of Cards* as a modern take on classic themes. The timelessness of the story allows the characters to influence how we view ourselves and our real-world politicians. For example, Hamilton (2018) tells us that "Americans have traditionally had a penchant for demanding that their politicians present personas of perfection and light while at the same time requiring them to participate in the underworld of sensationalistic media and unchecked capitalistic machinery" (p. 41). *House of Cards* sheds light on what might be going on behind the scenes of the political theatre. In doing so, Keller (2015) argues,

> the invocation of medieval dramatic villains in a contemporary story of political ambition and intrigue allows the audience to both admire and abhor the spectacle of American politics, to remain simultaneously horrified by its callous disregard for the interests of the country and amused and entertained by the maniacal and efficient pursuit of self-interest. (p. 120)

All of this is important for how we understand how politicians ought to act. It is important, too, because, as Hast (2018) explains, "the main characters are also national bodies, which perform the state, its narratives and identity" (444). The fictional representation of politicians takes on additional significance because they not only represent politicians themselves, they also represent the identity of the country. In this way, how politicians are portrayed on-screen has real-world implications.

Not only do representations of individuals and professions matter, but the attitudes apparent within shows matter. Manoliu and Bastien (2018) studied the impact of pop culture on the audience's cynicism. The found that "there was no significant change in the level of cynicism in the control group, but there was a significant change among participants in the *House of Cards* group, which moved from a mean of 4.50 to 5.01 points" (p. 556). On the other hand, "there is a slight decrease of cynicism among The West Wing viewers, from 4.69 to 4.45 points" (p. 557). Political television shows that feature an attitude of cynicism and unethical behavior increase that attitude in the audience, while shows that feature ethical characters and positivity reduce cynicism. This is valuable to understand, because cynicism toward the government in Americans is rising. Currently, about 20% of Americans say they trust the government; when Pew began surveying Americans on this 1958, about 75% said they did (Pew Research Center, 2019, April 11). *House of Cards* not only reflects this trend but also, as Manoliu and Bastien point out, drives it.

For all of these reasons, *House of Cards* is a uniquely influential show. However, in the context of real-world events (especially the #MeToo Movement), it takes on additional significance. A larger analysis of the #MeToo Movement and its implications are outside the scope of this chapter; however, the events I am about to relay certainly influence how audiences understand the show and therefore are important to understand in the context of this rhetorical analysis. In October 2017, The New York Times broke the news that Harvey Weinstein, a powerful Hollywood producer, had been paying his way out of sexual harassment accusations over the course of several decades (Kantor & Twohey, 2017). As allegations against Weinstein began to pour forth, actress Alyssa Milano tweeted, "if you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet" (Milano, 2017). Thousands of people replied to

and retweeted this message (Pflum, 2018). This brought awareness to the Me Too movement, begun in 2006 by Tarana Burke, which seeks to "help survivors of sexual violence" (me too).

Then, in 2017, actor Anthony Rapp told BuzzFeed News that Kevin Spacey, the actor who portrays Frank, made sexual advances toward him when Spacey was 26 and Rapp was 14 (Vary, 2017, para. 2). Netflix was quick to halt production on *House of Cards.* The connection to Weinstein in Rapp's announcement was apparent: "Rapp stated on Twitter that he was coming forward in solidarity with the dozens of women who've made allegations against Harvey Weinstein, as well as other assault survivors" (Romano, 2018, para. 12). Rapp was not the only one to speak out; "more than 30 accusers have come forward against Spacey with allegations that span decades" (para. 16). The Old Vic Theatre in London had Spacey serve as their Creative Director from 2004-2015. Following the initial allegations, they set up a hotline for victims to report other instances. They received at least 20 calls (Lawless, 2017). After Rapp's allegations, Spacey took to Twitter to address them. He deflected from the allegations by "coming out as gay" (Romano, 2018, para. 10). In the midst of the unfurling situation, Spacey was ousted from the *House of Cards*. This is significant because as a "two-time Academy Award winner, Spacey is one of the biggest names to lose work and standing in Hollywood since The New York Times and The New Yorker detailed sexual harassment and abuse allegations against film mogul Harvey Weinstein" (Lawless, 2017, para. 9). This therefore has implications not only for the show's plot but also for all of Hollywood and Americans in general who seek solidarity within the #MeToo movement.

Spacey's absence significantly changed the final season of the show. With Frank gone, Claire becomes President of the United States. The final season "opens with Claire, now a widow, roughly 100 days into her presidency. She's unafraid to stand in her power, but also

struggling to break free from Frank's looming presence" (Villarreal, 2018, para. 4). The entire season echoes Frank's specter, keeping the audience from fully embracing Claire's presidency. In fact, "almost every episode features characters wondering about what happened to the former president, quoting things he said, or obsessing over his legacy" (Gordon, 2018, para. 5-6). Gordon (2018) argues that the show's attempts to recast her in Spacey's position — most notably, with Frank's trademark reality-breaking monologues to the camera — are unconvincing. Rarely does Claire get the chance to whip up the same devilish plots that made her husband such a force to watch (para. 4). However, this is better than the alternative: showrunner Gibson "thought it would be especially 'perverse' for the story of a woman in power to be denied because of the actions of a man" (Fernandez, 2018, para. 4). Furthermore, Friedman (2018) argues that the season is "also a pretty convincing take on how the first Madam President might present herself" (para. 3). (Of course, Friedman's article is titled "The first female president will not carry a handbag," and primarily assesses Claire's attire. The fact that this New York Times article was published is indicative of the inherent differences and issues the first woman president might face. After all, where is the Times piece on Frank's suits?).

In this chapter, I present my analysis of *House of Cards* and specifically answer two key research questions:

> How do contemporary political television shows model American citizenship through the portrayals of political leaders?
>
> How do these models of citizenship constitute American national identity?

In Chapter One, I made explicit the link between models of citizenship through political leaders and the constitution of American collective national identity. To review, Americans view political leaders as models of an idealized form of citizenship, or the qualities one would expect

an ideal citizen to embody. Americans also expect that political leaders will define American national identity through their rhetoric (such as speeches) as well as through their political and personal actions. In this way, viewers will expect to see fictional representation of political leaders as models of citizenship, and will therefore understand this model of citizenship as defining the qualities of an ideal American. Thus, group membership will be defined by these qualities, and will call into being an American public who embody these qualities. I argue that *House of Cards* models American citizenship through identification by antithesis, in that the show asks us to identify ourselves as Americans in antithesis to the values carried by Frank and Claire Underwood. *House of Cards* highlights the crossroads between "real" and fictional mediated political identities, and how representations of politicians construct American national identity. The show constitutes American national identity as virtuous. To structure these arguments, I first review constitutive rhetoric and specifically identification by anthesis/division. Then, I present my analysis, in which I unpack how notions and portrayals of truth paint Frank and Claire as successful, yet ultimately unhappy and corrupt. In this way, the show constitutes the American public as virtuous by situating the Underwoods in opposition to the audience.

Identification by Antithesis

In *House of Cards,* the showmakers constitute viewers as "other" than the Underwoods. They do this subtly, by distancing the audience from the Underwoods' actions through character reactions to the Underwoods misdeeds, and by presenting the Underwoods as distasteful. Specifically, *House of Cards* constitutes Americans as virtuous. It does so by presenting the Underwoods as corrupt yet powerful. We discover that the Underwoods are utterly deceitful, manipulative of their power, and utilitarian in their relationships. While their value system does provide them with countless opportunities to succeed, the Underwoods are ultimately miserable,

ruining their own lives and that of those around them. In this section, I unpack the value system portrayed on *House of Cards* to understand how it constitutes Americans as virtuous. The characters on *House of Cards* provide an anti-model for American citizens. Burke (1967) would call this "identification by antithesis," in which a community identifies themselves in opposition to something else. Importantly, this is a very American trait, as "our Constitution was framed with feudal monarchy as the enemy. Yet by its very nature it removed this enemy; hence the very government itself took over this antithetic role" (p. 50). The American nation was founded through identification by antithesis, and this method of identification is still used in American political rhetoric. For example, Burke argues that "a candidate would have considerable difficulty explaining to the voters exactly how his proposed policies would work. But if he says, 'they are against the policies of so-and-so,' that statement somehow makes things seem clear (p. 50). Because this form of identification is easily understood by Americans, *House of Cards* is able to function rhetorically to constitute Americans as *not* like the Underwoods. Through its narrative structure, *House of Cards* depicts the Underwoods utilizing various values and experiencing negative consequences as a result of their indiscretions. Thus, the show is able to constitute Americans as virtuous by asking them to identify with the opposite values. In this way, the audience and the show socially construct, together, an ideal American national identity.

Truth

In 2018, the International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics published a special issue on the idea of "post-truth politics." Many scholars argue that we are currently in an era of post-truth in global politics, yet the idea of a post-truth society is not new. Notions of truth dictate how we interpret all of politics and plays a gargantuan role in *House of Cards*. For this reason, we must

first unpack how truth is portrayed in real-world politics before we unpack how truth is portrayed in *House of Cards*.

In modern American politics, truth has become an issue at the forefront. Though post-truth is a current buzzword, Fuller (2017) argues that the concept originates with Plato and the Sophists (p. 472). These scholars were "were less concerned with the truth itself than with the conditions that make truth possible" (p. 476) and were "concerned more with the mix of chance and skill in the construction of truth than with the truth as such" (p. 472). Keyes's 2004 tome, *The post-truth era: Dishonesty and deception in contemporary life*, was published long before *House of Cards* or even Obama's terms. And books about presidential deception have been published about recent presidents, such as Alterman's *When presidents lie: A history of official deception and its consequences,* in 2005. Yet Alterman (2004) argues that "before the 1960s, few could even imagine that a President would deliberately mislead them on matters so fundamental as war and peace" (para. 1). Indeed, Blake (2013) correlates this sentiment to the classic, apocryphal story of George Washington's declaration: "I cannot tell a lie" (para. 1). However, "by the time of the Iran/contra scandal in the mid-1980—little more than a decade after Nixon's public disgrace—lying to the public had become an entirely mundane matter, one that could be easily justified" for the greater good (Alterman, 2004, para. 2). Blake (2013) goes on to argue that presidential lying became more common—or at least better known—as time went on, recounting that

> while preparing the country for World War II, Franklin Roosevelt told Americans in 1940 that 'your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars.' President John F. Kennedy declared in 1961 that 'I have previously stated, and I repeat now, that the United States plans no military intervention in Cuba.' All the while, he was planning an invasion of Cuba. Ronald Reagan told Americans in 1986, 'We did not, I repeat, did not

> trade weapons or anything else [to Iran] for hostages, nor will we,' four months before admitting that the U.S. had actually done what he had denied. (paras. 9-11)

Even presidents we deem to be truthful, such as "'Honest Abe,'" lied, Blake tells us: Lincoln "lied about whether he was negotiating with the South to end the war," and he lied about slavery because "he told the American public and political allies that he didn't believe in political equality for slaves" (paras. 12-13). Modern readers will also be familiar with President Bush Sr.'s broken pledge of "no new taxes," President Clinton's lies under oath while in office, and the "weapons of mass destruction" scandal under President W. Bush. So, with all of these falsehoods, we might presume that Americans have become accustomed to presidential lying and are no longer upset by such falsehoods. However, under President Obama, there was outrage over his false claim that "if you like your health care plan, you can keep it;" in fact, it was PolitiFact's Lie of the Year in 2013 (Huffington Post, para. 1). Clearly, Americans are dissatisfied with the state of truth-telling in politics.

Ideas about truth came into sharp focus when Oxford Dictionaries selected "post-truth" as their word of the year in 2016, in the aftermath of both President Trump's election and the Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom (Steinmetz, 2016). This suggests that Americans are conflicted about notions of truth—is there still a possibility of truth in politics, are we beyond the ability to distinguish between facts and spin? Though it has recently become a popular term, the concept of "post-truth" is not new and has influenced American culture throughout our history. Indeed, Lilleker (2018) queries, "given that relative truths are as old as politics itself, how then has post-truth only been coined as a phrase and a phenomenon in 2016?" (278). Currently, "nearly two-thirds (64%) of [American] adults say it is hard to tell the difference between what's true and what's not true when listening to elected officials" (Pew Research Center, 2019, July 22 para. 3).

At the same time, Beinhart (2019) reports that, in a recent study, "instead of 'likely voters' (as polled) punishing the contestants for lying, they rewarded them. The more a candidate lied, the higher they rose in the polls" (para. 16). This finding is startling, and suggests that American society is definitively post-truth. If Americans reward candidates for lying, politicians will lie more often, making it even more difficult for Americans to distinguish between truth and fiction. We must read *House of Cards* in light of this convoluted relationship to the truth that American audiences will bring. In fact *House of Cards* brings into question the assumptions voters have thus far made about truth, and invites the audience to reconstitute themselves as truth-tellers and truth-seekers rather than as those who reward liars. Donald Trump is also unique in his rhetoric in that "he has openly embraced conspiracy rhetoric" (Neville-Shepherd, 2019, p. 182). Neville-Shepherd (2019) argues that conspiracy rhetoric allows Trump to "purport that not only does truth not matter in politics, but that we should not judge our leaders for lying since lying presupposes that truth applies as a norm" (pp. 184-185). Richards (2018) asserts that "post-truth politics" refers to the idea that "there is a much reduced importance attached to establishing the truth value of propositions that have political consequences. Whether or not a claim is 'true' matters less than it used to, or may not matter at all" (p. 401). While many scholars have sought to uncover the causes of the modern post-truth society, other scholars have critiqued the pushback from it. For example, Mejia, Beckermann, and Sullivan (2018) assert that "much post-truth scholarship and reporting carry . . . racial nostalgia" (p. 110). They go on to argue that Post-truth criticism can be dangerous because: (1) it often fails to recognize the uneven benefits and consequences of our historical and contemporary truth-telling regimes; (2) it often expresses nostalgia for those supposedly simpler days when the truth meant something; and (3) it re-centers whiteness throughout. In essence, much post-truth criticism is concerning because in

demarcating 2016 as the beginning of our post-truth era, it effaces the epistemological, ontological, and axiological danger experienced by people of color throughout American history. (p. 113)

Mejia, Beckermann, and Sullivan (2018) ultimately explain that the post-truth era is not an "epistemological rupture" with truth, but with whiteness, since rhetorics of whiteness in the United States have always been bound up with falsehoods. Coleman (2018), too, critiques the outrage around the modern understanding of post-truth, arguing that the public's obsession with objective truth is actually the problem: "post-truth [is] a pathological consequence of the modernist tendency to regard political truth as an objective phenomenon . . . the conceit of objective political truth has undermined public confidence in the language of politics" (p. 158). Coleman's claim is linked to Plato and the Sophists' ideas that, while evidential truth does exist, in rhetoric and politics, truth is constructed.

It is clear that truth has become a vast public issue in American political life, and we ought to expect, therefore, that notions of truth will be reflected and explored in popular culture. *House of Cards* emerges in the midst of America's swirling conflicts over truth in politics, both drawing from and contributing to the public's fears. The show constitutes Americans as virtuous by providing an anti-model in the Underwoods, who seem immune to truth-telling. Here, I unpack how the show constitutes Americans as truthful. First, we will examine how the narrative structure of the show works to constitute Americans as truthful. Next, we will investigate a specific example of Claire's lying that demonstrates how the show situates the audience in opposition to her, and therefore identifies the audience by antithesis as virtuous. Finally, we will examine a couple examples of Frank's duplicities and how they impact other characters. His ill

deeds and manipulation of truth are depicted as distasteful and harmful; we will discover how the show utilizes this distaste to constitute audience members as distinctly other than Frank.

First, the nature of the narrative in *House of Cards* situates the audience to grapple with truth. Frank Underwood often speaks directly to viewers, giving the show an aura of authenticity. However, even in these asides, Frank doesn't always clarify his true motivations. We are left wondering whether we are also being manipulated by him. This is intriguing considering the main characters' names: Frank and Claire. "Frank" means someone who is open and honest, and Claire is derived from the same Latin root word for clarity (Oxford Dictionary). From the beginning, then, we are fixated on the nature of truth in *House of Cards.* However, for the main characters of *House of Cards,* truth is irrelevant, as we will explore in detail below. Yet more importantly, their deceit ultimately leads to their downfall. Frank is forced out of office and is ultimately killed. Claire ends up alone, hardly in a place of victory. By presenting the Underwoods as an anti-model and encouraging viewers to understand the practical consequences of the Underwoods' actions, the show asserts that deception is not only *not* beneficial to the liars, but is also un-American. *House of Cards* asks viewers to participate in this discourse of citizenship and truth, and ultimately constitutes Americans as virtuous. Viewers are convinced that truth is an American value, and that citizens ought to be truth-tellers.

The Lying Lover—Claire

Claire's lies often negatively impact those who trust her, which allows the audience to dis-identify with her. We see these negative impacts in "Chapter 22," through an instance of Claire's toxic deceit. Through this scene, *House of Cards* portrays two very important elements of the show. First, we understand Claire's relationship to the truth—the truth is a tool, and facts do not matter. Second, the audience is able to understand how this relationship to the truth is

harmful. In addition, a reporter who is assigned to cover the issue finds the situation ridiculous. Her attitude provides a lens for the audience to view the situation through, as well.

Claire has been in an on again-off again relationship with a man named Adam Galloway, an artist. She cheats on Frank with him, though Frank seems to know that this is happening. The issue here is not that she is deceiving Frank; rather, Frank's biggest concern is that the news of Claire's affair will get out and hurt their political careers. Though it appears that Claire has feelings for Galloway, her ambition means more. The news of their relationship does leak to the public, when a photo taken by Galloway of Claire asleep is slipped to reporters. Claire calls Galloway and asks him to deny that he took the photo. It is clear that he cares for Claire and wants to help her; he tells her he'll do whatever she thinks is best. He also tells her, "it's a shame it takes this for us to talk to one another." As the conversation continues, Galloway tells Claire that he has met someone new. Claire is quiet for a moment, then responds, "oh" quietly. The scene is dimly lit, and Claire has walked away from the staff members who were observing her call; this is meant to be private. Claire tells Galloway flatly, "wow, things happened quickly." It is clear from this scene that Claire does care for Galloway; she appears jealous that he has moved on, even though she is unwilling to leave Frank for Galloway. The scene also depicts Galloway as tender toward Claire; his care for her is genuine. This makes her betrayal all the more heartrending.

Galloway willingly does what Claire asks, but she has a trick waiting for him. Galloway denies publicly that he had a relationship with Claire or that he took the photo, just as Claire asked. He asks that the media leave him and his fiancé out of the situation. When he mentions his fiancé, Claire starts a bit, and continues watching the news conference with a sad expression. Then, Claire and Frank have a press conference in which Claire tells the American public that

Galloway did indeed take the photo as a favor to her and Frank, and that she was not having an affair with him. She suggests that Galloway lied in his own statement. Galloway is dumfounded, and hurt. He did precisely what Claire asked, assuming that she would follow through with what she had promised to do. Instead, she lies to the world. The show therefore depicts Galloway as the sympathetic character. When Claire remarks that she's not sure why Galloway would deny taking the photo, Galloway, who is watching the statement at home, makes a confused and surprised expression. He eventually turns to his fiancé and says, breathlessly, "they're fucking lying," then he turns quickly back to the screen to see what else will be said. By the end of the Underwood's statement, Adam has a pained expression on his face, eyes wide. He sighs and sags with disbelief, putting his head in his hands. Later, Claire and Galloway discuss what happened on the phone. Claire remains calm, unattached, while Adam's voice is angry. Claire asks Galloway to now confirm the Underwood's side of the story. He does not want to, so Claire softens and says, "I'm sorry I lied." Galloway hangs up, and Claire tells Frank, "I think he'll do the right thing." Claire's apology is not genuine, but is intended to get someone to do what she wants—another lie.

Claire has destroyed her relationship with someone she cares deeply for due to her lies. Because she has not wielded truth, Claire wounded herself and Galloway. Not only has Claire used untruths to further her political career, but she also damaged Galloway in the process, and made it impossible for Galloway and herself to reconcile. Yet neither Claire nor Frank are perturbed by the lies. When Claire attempts to apologize to Frank for having to address the rumors, Frank tells her, not unkindly, "not another word . . . we'll put this behind us, just like we've always done." While he seems to be supportive of Claire, she tells him, "part of me wishes that you'd be more upset." Frank simply brushes this off, saying that the reason this story was

leaked was to hurt Frank, and Claire should be the one who is upset. Claire avoids making eye contact with Frank for most of the duration of this conversation. Ultimately, Claire declares that getting upset would be "wasted energy" for both of them. Frank's lack of reaction indicates that he does not really care if Claire has an affair so long as she is willing to lie about it to the public.

In the midst of the unfolding web Claire is spinning, the show inserts a scene with a press pool. One reporter, who is supposed to be reporting on the affair, decides to leave the press conference before it begins. She says that it is "bullshit," and that she wants to do something meaningful with her time. Clearly, the entire situation is trivial. Though the reporter is not aware of the Underwood's deceit, she is disgusted by triviality of the focus on this situation at the expense of real political issues. This attitude provides the audience a means through which to understand the situation. The lying and back-and-forth are trivial compared to larger issues in the world, yet Frank and Claire spend energy, time, and money to support their lies, all out of self-service. Claire and Frank care far more about their political ambition than about their friends, or the American public whom they are meant to service, and they twist the truth to achieve their political goals. Because the show depicts Galloway as hurt and damaged by Claire's lies, the audience is situated in opposition to Claire. She is not portrayed here as someone to root for, but rather as a wrecking ball. In other words, the wrecking ball is made up of lies. This example of being an American is distasteful. Interestingly, while Claire's affair and her lies to Galloway hurt Galloway, they seem to do little to affect Frank. Claire wishes Frank would be more invested emotionally in the situation, but he refuses to focus on the affair and instead emphasizes how they will spin the situation. Claire and Frank's relationship does not seem so enviable now, with its lack of emotional support and its focus on communication as spin. In this way, too, the audience is positioned opposite Claire and Frank. Frank also ruthlessly utilizes untruths to cover

up his own misdeeds and to mislead people around him. His relationship to the truth provides an anti-model for Americans who seek to understand their citizenship.

Coverups and Conspiracy—Frank

Frank's relationship to lying is very evident in several situations and, much like Claire, the show situates Frank as dishonest; his dishonesty is harmful not only to those around him but also to the American public. This sets viewers up to see Frank and Claire as anti-models, and constructs an ideal American identity that is virtuous. To understand how the show situates Frank as dishonest, and to identify how this is harmful, I will examine a few specific scenarios from *House of Cards.*

A primary way Frank's deceit is evident is how he handles the coverup of the two murders he commits. Frank kills Congressman Peter Russo and journalist Zoe Barnes. Frank had had first tried to help Russo's career (only insomuch as it helped Frank move toward his own career goals, of course), but Russo began to get in the way. To avoid having to deal with the situation, Frank left a passed-out Russo in a running car in a closed garage ("Chapter 11").

Frank's dishonesty about these situations damages many people. In Season 1, Zoe and Frank had begun a relationship based on exchanging favors to help one another advance their own careers. Frank used Zoe as a tool. He tells Claire about their relationship, including that he is sleeping with Zoe. Claire asks whether it will be a problem, and Frank explains that he has her firmly under his control. Frank also only contacts Zoe when he needs something from her, such as when he wants to leak a story. Their relationship is based on Frank's access to communication channels (not true romance or friendship), so that he can manipulate the truth in his favor. Eventually, Zoe begins to suspect Frank of killing Russo, and she pesters him about it. Frank continually denies that he had anything to do with Russo's death, blaming it on Russo's drug

habit. When Zoe persists, Frank kills her, too. Zoe's friends and boyfriend are devastated and terrified. In fact, her boyfriend, Lucas, turns to vengeance, and later tries to assassinate Frank. In this situation, Frank is not the hero but rather wreaks physical and emotional destruction throughout countless lives. By depicting the ashes of Zoe's relationships, the audience is situated to see Frank's actions and lies as off-putting and disturbing. His actions are not something to emulate but to run from. Frank not only lied about his actions but also took extreme steps to make sure the truth remained hidden. Of course, we might understand Frank's desire to cover up the truth of Russo's murder, since Frank would lose all of the political power he had worked so hard for if the truth came out and he was put in prison. In this way, the audience might be sympathetic to Frank's continued untruths. However, when he takes his dedication to untruths so far as to commit murder a second time, the audience is no longer positioned as sympathetic. It is clear that lying about one wrong action led to another death. And lying about this second death, Zoe's, leads to further negative consequences not only for Zoe's loved ones but also for Frank's trusted companion, Doug. By depicting the negative consequences of deceit for Frank's acquaintances, the show takes a definite stance on dishonesty. Specifically, the show does not condone Frank's actions. Though he continues to be the protagonist and to succeed, he is not a sympathetic character. The damage to those around him is too severe.

As those around Frank are faced with repercussions for his actions, the audience is also positioned to dis-identify with Frank's actions. The repercussions for these deaths are enduring throughout the show. Zoe's death takes place at the beginning of Season 2, and seems all but forgotten by Season 5. However, those who knew Zoe have not forgotten their suspicion, and Frank's masterpiece of lies threatens to be revealed through a Department of Justice investigation. Frank asks Doug, his loyal chief of staff, to take the blame for Zoe's death. Frank

discovers that a reporter thinks that both Doug and Frank killed Zoe. Frank is angry that the reporter is getting information from someone in the White House, and, in a conversation with Claire, suddenly changes demeanor from angry to pitying. He says, “oh Doug. Poor Doug.” Claire, with recognition dawning on her face, says “yes.” Frank goes on, grimly, “he’s an unlucky person.” Claire, with a pleased expression, replies, “always has been.” The audience can see their plot hatching as the Underwood’s demeanor changes from angry and resigned to pleased. Their pleasure at someone else’s misfortune—especially someone who has demonstrated extreme loyalty to them—is disturbing. Claire invites Doug to join the Underwoods for dinner. However, Doug does not seem pleased by this request. In fact, his facial expression is one of trepidation or confusion. He seems to know that a trap has been set. He is positioned as the sympathetic character here rather than the Underwoods, and the audience is therefore positioned once again in opposition to Frank and Claire.

As audience members are situated to view the Underwoods as an anti-model, they are situated also to view truth as an inherently valuable tool, one that can provide great power if abused, but also one that will destroy when wielded dishonestly. At dinner, Frank tells Doug, “no one knows what happened to her [Zoe], and no one ever will,” suggesting that even Frank does not know what happened and that the stories of Frank’s involvement in Zoe’s death are false. Even when asking Doug for an incredible sacrifice, Frank still relies on untruths to persuade. Frank begins to ask Doug to take the blame, but Claire interrupts and says, “we need you to implicate yourself in the death of Zoe Barnes.” Doug appears thunderstruck, staring numbly at Claire. Both Claire and Frank are leaning forward across the table with consoling gestures and words, while Doug’s stunned expression slowly morphs from shock to disappointment and hurt.

He looks down at the table and swallows hard. He appears to be shaking his head slowly and breathing quickly. He asks to be excused from the table and walks away.

By depicting Doug's pain, and the Underwoods seeming lack of empathy, *House of Cards* situates the audience as "other" than the Underwoods. Their lies hurt people they are close to, and the audience is not asked to emulate this behavior. Rather, the audience is constituted as truthful by viewing this anti-model in the Underwoods. Frank not only lies to the American public with this shift of blame, but he also asks Doug to lie, as well. Never, throughout the five seasons of Frank's life on the show, does he ever show remorse for his murders. He simply twists truths to fit his needs.

The show asks audience members to consider the Underwoods and wonder, "is this the ideal American?" Based on the destruction they cause it is clear that they are not ideal. Therefore, the Underwoods serve as an anti-model. Another significant example of Frank's manipulations—and how he serves as an anti-model—occurs through President Walker and Raymond Tusk in Season 2. Tusk is a businessman who works closely with Walker. Frank does not like this working relationship and, once he is apprised of a new deal for building a bridge being made between Tusk, Feng (a Chinese businessman), and the United States government, Frank quickly goes to work undermining the agreement. Frank tells the audience, "when a man like Raymond Tusk gets involved in state diplomacy, you can be sure he's not after the Nobel Peace Prize. He's an opportunist. But so am I. Maybe this is my opportunity to loosen his grip on the President" ("Chapter 18"). At first, it seems that the audience is being positioned here to root for Frank. His untruth-telling and scheming is fascinating to watch primarily because he is so successful at it. As he is hatching his plot in this episode, an outcome favorable to Frank seems assured. Similarly, Frank's asides to the audience position viewers as his confidants, a position

usually reserved for those who are in cahoots. However, it is very clear that the Underwoods do not regard those close to them as worth of special consideration. From the previous example, we know that Frank does not hesitate to demolish Doug's reputation to save his own, even after years of loyalty and companionship from Doug. And Claire is quite willing to lie to her lover if it suits the Underwoods' political achievements. Therefore, confidants or no, the audience should be very wary of 1) believing everything Frank says to us and 2) of thinking we are safe from his schemings.

With a healthy air of suspicion established, then, the audience is actually positioned to be distrustful of Frank and therefore to view him as an anti-model for ethical behavior. Underwood, as Vice President, lies to the Secretary of State about the details of the agreement, and leaks information to the press. However, when Feng suggests to Tusk that Frank has been deceitful in relaying these details, Frank assures Tusk and the President that Feng is the one who is lying, going so far as to label Feng corrupt. Frank is therefore lying to government officials, friends, and the American people: "If Feng is representing his government's interest, then why is he telling Raymond one thing and telling me another?" Walker tells Frank and Tusk not to speak with Feng anymore, but Frank immediately arranges another meeting with Feng. Tusk, in a later meeting with both Frank and Walker, tells the President that Frank met with Feng. Frank lies about this meeting. Ultimately, Frank's schemings get Tusk out of the President's good graces, allowing Frank to have more of the President's ear. Ruining this deal with China also looks bad for the President, which sets the stage for Frank to later pull the rug out from under Walker and make his own bid for office. While this is a masterful example of Frank's manipulations of the truth, as he is lying to three parties simultaneously (how does he keep his stories straight?), it also demonstrates his ambition and lack of empathy for others. Walker seems to believe that

Frank is a friend. Walker has trusted Frank to become Vice President and to be in control of sensitive negotiations. In reality, Frank has been manipulating him throughout their relationship. As Frank tells the audience, "In Gaffney [Frank's hometown] we had our own brand of diplomacy. Shake with your right hand, but hold a rock in the left" ("Chapter 18"). Ultimately, Walker's political career suffers mightily due to Frank's interference, and Frank actively works to undermine Walker so that Frank might gain more political power. Frank does not seem bothered by the negative effects to Walker. While he is working to undermine the deal, Doug tells Frank that Feng will not go through with the deal unless certain changes are made. Frank tells Doug, in a sarcastic tone, "well that will *greatly* upset the president." Doug asks if they should acquiesce to Feng's demand, and Frank stops what he is doing, turns to Doug, and declares, "absolutely not. We want the president angry." Then, he turns to the camera and adds, "the tricky part is making sure he doesn't direct it toward me." Unperturbed, Frank goes back to munching on onion rings. Nor does he seem bothered that the American public is lied to. He tells Doug very matter-of-factly that they will leak false information to the press; though he tells this to Doug in private, he makes no effort to sound secretive. In fact, he does not seem to think this is a big deal at all; his vocal volume never hushes, nor does he suggest to Doug that this plot is precarious. Doug, too, does not seem surprised at this duplicity. Frank uses lies to the American people to further his own agenda, and Americans are left with false information. Though the show does not suggest to us that we ought to be outraged by this—in fact, the mention of lying to the media, and therefore the public, is merely a blip in the episode. It is not the focus of the plot, and it is barely mentioned. However, it does center the audience in opposition to Frank because we are the Americans who would have been lied to if Frank

Underwood were our real-world Vice President. His lack of remorse and his willful deceit might lead to more power for Frank, but they do not make him a sympathetic character.

Furthermore, Frank links himself to the Confederate army during the situation with Feng, which further suggests to the audience that we should be opposed to Frank. Frank meets a Civil War reenactor who claims to be a relative of Frank's. Frank is fascinated by this man and who he portrays, and starts reading about his forefather. Frank does tell the audience, "I personally take no pride in the Confederacy." However, his rationale for this is that you should "avoid wars you can't win, and never raise your flag to an asinine cause like slavery" ("Chapter 18"). Later, while meeting with Feng, Frank asks, "Do you know how Grant defeated Lee? He had more men. That's all. And he was willing to let them die. It was butchery, not strategy, which won the war." Frank spits this statement out with disgust, indicating his preference for strategy. On the other hand, Frank has been using war metaphors to describe how he is approaching the negations with Feng, Tusk, and Walker. He tells the audience that he needs to avoid the bullets that will come, and after meeting with Tusk and Walker, he tells us that the bullet grazed his check but that he is not hurt too badly. He is aligning himself against the Union army, who did not rely on strategy. He clearly tells the audience that he is a master strategist. When he subtly suggests during the meeting with Tusk and Walker that Tusk might be the one lying, he looks at the audience and snaps both of his fingers at us while quirking an eyebrow, a gesture that suggests that he has made a superior argument. In the United States, the Confederacy is not the hero. By aligning himself against the Union side of the Civil War, Frank alienates himself from his audience.

Not only does Frank situate himself apart from the audience, allowing us to be constituted as definitively other than him, he also highlights the whiteness of his presence. The Underwoods are meant to serve as an anti-model for the audience, and the entire show of *House*

of Cards defines by antithesis. It is therefore important to understand that the vast majority of characters on the show—and especially those with political power—are white. This scene, depicting the Civil War enactment, particularly emphasizes Frank's presence as white. Frank has stated that slavery is "asinine" and that the Confederacy should not have chosen this as their cause; however, he does not otherwise condemn the Confederate army. In fact, there is little discussion of the issue of slavery in this episode. The only non-white character in this episode is Feng. Frank can side with the Confederacy—or, at least, not align with the Union—due to his whiteness. His family is linked to the Confederate army because of his white lineage. Both the episode and Frank situating himself as a strategist in opposition to the Union army highlight the inherent whiteness on display in Washington, D.C. and in governance. As the show constitutes Americans as antithetical to the depiction in *House of Cards*, the ideal American national identity does not depend on whiteness. Instead, the ideal American identity is solely based on virtuous truth-telling.

Truth Is So Underrated

The narrative structure of *House of Cards* depicts truth as an important value. Specifically, the Underwoods abuse truth, and suffer many consequences as a result. Therefore, the show constitutes Americans as virtuous by allowing identification by antithesis. The audience is asked to identify with truth in opposition to how the Underwoods interact with truth. In combination with the other values the audience is asked to take on, this constitutes Americans as virtuous. This case study contributes to the field's knowledge of the constitutive potential of fictional political texts by examining constitutive rhetorical theory in light of a new case, and in the context of an anti-model.

Altogether, *House of Cards* depicts the Underwoods as liars. In this chapter, I have sought to answer: 1) How do contemporary political television shows model American citizenship through the portrayals of political leaders? And 2) How do these models of citizenship constitute American national identity**?** We have discovered that *House of Cards* provides an anti-model of sorts. The Underwoods are a poor example of American citizenship. By becoming embroiled in their storyline, the audience is wary of becoming like the Underwoods. The show asks audience members to consider a life marked by lies and manipulations, and queries whether the audience is prepared to take on the negative consequences of this lifestyle. *House of Cards* is a depiction of lies and ambition taken too far. While truth is a central theme in the show, it is centered on *untruth.* It allows the audience to envision what life might look like living under this value system. The show makes a spectacle of ambitious political actors, and though their rise to success is compelling, both Frank and Claire—as well as most other characters on their show—end up with a life in shambles. The audience may at first identify with the Underwoods, as their ambition is appealing. However, as the show progresses and both Underwoods lose relationships, respect, and happiness, the audience wishes to identify elsewhere. In fact, the show constitutes Americans as virtuous through identification by antithesis. Americans are defined here by what they are not. They are not the Underwoods. By providing the Underwoods as an anti-model, *House of Cards* constitutes the American public as virtuous citizens who utilize truth for good. Because we are defined in opposition to the Underwoods, we are asked not to use truth in the ways they do. *House of Cards* constitutes an ideal American, a better version of the America we currently are. Because the show reflects "real" politics, and attitudes and values that might actually be portrayed in the lives of current and former American politicians, the show allows viewers to reflect critically on the

consequences of an Underwood-esque ruler. If all Americans are to act as Frank does, what will happen? Nothing good, the show seems to tell us. By viewing an extreme version of twisted truth, *House of Cards* presents a compelling case for truth telling, constituting Americans as ideally virtuous.

By inviting the audience to participate in the show, *House of Cards* provides a promising view of a potential future. Though the show itself is dismal, its very depiction of a terrible political landscape peopled by liars also implies the option of the opposite. If the Underwoods, successful as they may be, are unhappy and demolish those around them—not to mention misleading the American public while they are at it—what might it look like instead if Americans as a collective revered truth, and upheld it? This depiction is not portrayed on *House of Cards,* but its potential is there within the story. The audience is invited to participate in constructing these fictional options, and to live out the consequences. By participating in constructing their own identities, audiences are constituted into an ideal American identity with truth at its center.

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CHAPTER III

"MAYBE!"

The level of incompetence in this office is staggering (Selina Meyers, *Veep*, "Fundraiser").

Veep depicts Selina Meyer and her staff as they bumble their way through American politics. Selina spends much of her time trying to impress the President, members of Congress, and the American public. Her staff work their hardest to impress Selina, all while gossiping about her and other public figures. Selina's family, too, is full of drama: her on-again, off-again relationship with her ex-husband features largely throughout the show, and Selina's daughter, Catherine, is a continual thorn in Selina's side. The mess the characters' working and personal lives sustain creates the foundation for the show's political drama.

We learn from the opening theme that Selina ran an unsuccessful campaign for President, but was ultimately selected to be Vice President. When the President resigns unexpectedly, Selina is suddenly thrust into the presidency, becoming the first female president. This earns her both praise and disdain. Soon, Selina's term ends and she must run for office. Her campaign is difficult, but she selects someone she believes to be a friend, Tom James, as her running mate. In an unexpected twist, the electoral college serves up a tie, and the election must be decided in Congress. Selina's running mate betrays Selina and also attempts to become President. However, the Congressional vote ultimately goes to a surprise winner, Laura Montez. Selina is out of office, and Montez is widely hailed as the first female president. Selina takes offense to this characterization, and spirals to the point of becoming institutionalized (or, "going to a spa"). While she is out of politics, Selina works to establish a presidential library and write a memoir. Unsatisfied with this life, Selina decides to run for president again. After three unsuccessful tries

in a row, her former staff and her family attempt to dissuade Selina. Undeterred, Selina runs a difficult, gaffe-prone campaign once again. Ultimately, though, this time Selina does become President. The series ends with Selina's funeral, twenty-four years in the future. Much as her attempts to gain significance and attention throughout her life were futile, television coverage of her funeral is interrupted by breaking news of the death of beloved actor Tom Hanks.

The Most Accurate Show on Television

Veep sparks interest due to its comedic nature. It is also interesting because the creator of the show, Armando Ianucci, is British rather than American, though the show covers American politics (Jim, para. 10). Ianucci is known for creating a similar British political comedy, *In The Thick of It.* This outsider perspective makes *Veep* different than Netflix's *House of Cards* or CBS's *Madam Secretary,* which both feature American writers and creators. Ianucci ran the show for four seasons, then passed it off to David Mandel. Importantly, Mandel's view of the show, and of people, is that people do not really change (Hart, 2017). That is why there is very little character development over the course of the show, even though we would expect to see the characters present very differently in the final seasons than they do earlier on; Mandel believes that this reflects the static nature of human personalities. The creators of this show give *Veep* a different flavor than many other political shows today. First, because *Veep* was created by someone who is not American, we are given a different portrait of American politics—one that could be considered either more or less real. Second, due to Mandel's conception of static traits, the characters do not grow to become better people by the series' close. This provides a dour depiction of American political actors.

Incompetence is a central theme of the show, highlighting Mandel's perception of static human nature. In fact, Cosman (2014) published an index of the most incompetent characters on

the show. Another ranking, by McEntee (2019), rates Selina, the main character, at number twelve, which is second-to-last (first is least incompetent, thirteen is most incompetent). This is important because "*Veep* hinges on having a fool at its center, someone the comedy can tornado around . . . like many unskilled politicians, Selina makes up for her lack of savvy by barking orders, spreading lies and having Gary fetch her smoothies. She's a train wreck you can't not watch" (para. 14). Indeed, Powers (2019) characterizes Selina as "ignorant of everything from the Constitution to the ideals she's supposed to be espousing. Her one worthy achievement - helping free Tibet - only matters to her because it can be used to let her run for president again" (para. 9). Of course, Wilkinson (2019) argues

> she and her staff initially come across as bumbling, but eventually you realize they have to have done *something* right to be working for the vice president, or running a presidential campaign that comes within a Constitutional hair's breadth of success. They may be fools, but they're not stupid. (para. 9)

In other words, the staff seem incompetent, but they are still successful. This is precisely the point of the show: the characters are bumbling and ridiculous, and have managed to hold on to proximity to power nonetheless.

To allow for its satirical nature, *Veep* has made sure not to state what political party Selina or the fictional president are members of. This way, the show can "skewer the habits and style of all politicians" rather than "the platforms of either party" (Schaal, 2019, para. 3). The show also does not have the same recent modern presidents as true American history because they want the emphasis to be on lampooning politics in general, not specific politicians (Wilkinson, 2019). Still, the writers did consult with real-world politicians while writing. For example, they asked Mitt Romney to describe what it was like to lose the Presidential election so

they could accurately depict those emotions and scenarios on-screen (Locker, 2017), and they consult with political actors "from both sides of the aisle . . . that worked in different White Houses" (Molloy, 2017, para. 5). The show's ability to critique both parties makes the show feel real. In fact, Tommy Vietor, a former Obama staffer, reports that

> 'as people who worked in the White House always get asked, okay, what's the most real? Is it 'House of Cards? Is it 'West Wing'? And the answer is, it's 'Veep.' Because you guys nail the fragility of the egos, and the, like, day-to-day idiocy of the decision-making.' (Molloy, 2017, para. 3)

Martin, O'Mally, a former presidential candidate, also articulates that *Veep* is "the most accurate show on television" (Terris, 2017, para. 13). Because the show is able to depict the difficult realities of politics, Mandel argues that he would like the audience to take their viewing and turn it into something useful. He suggests that audience members should "ask what they can do about the screwed up political situation . . . we hold up a mirror and say 'This is politics. What are we doing about it?'" (Jim, 2019, paras. 7-8). Viewers, then, should not be inactive participants in the political realm, but should be moved to action by Veep. In other words, audience members should take the show as an anti-model for their behavior, and ought to enact opposing (more beneficial) values in their day-to-day and political lives. Sheeler (2018), too, argues that *Veep* is meant to inspire the audience toward social change through her analysis of how the show fits into Burke's burlesque frame. While the show reflects a current reality, burlesque invites the audience to "seek transformation of the social order" (p. 267).

The characters of *Veep* do their part to depict American politics such that the audience will be moved to action. Indeed, Sanchez (2019) asserts that the show is "a toxic valentine to D.C. sleaze" (para. 2). Selina was written as an anti-hero, someone we simultaneously root for

and abhor (Jim, 2019). Other characters, too, are meant to have no redeeming qualities. The actor who plays Jonah, Timothy Simmons, says that he appreciates that the finale of the show "might remind people that even though you've come to love these characters, they aren't good people . . . I want people to empathize with [Jonah] . . . but I also want them to pay for ever having that reaction" (Snierson, 2019, para. 28). In another article, Simmons reports that he thinks the characters are "beyond redemption" and that "it's better that way" (Bella, 2017, para. 1). If the characters did have growth arcs, the audience might forgive their former incompetence and sleazy actions. Because the characters remain statically immoral, audience members may be driven to become more involved in making changes in the "real world" realm of politics.

The first three season of *Veep* aired during Obama's presidency, and season four was written before Donald Trump became president (Crouch, 2017). As season four aired in the early days of Trump's presidency, audiences noted that the show felt eerily similar to what was taking place in real life. Sanchez (2019) asserts that "*Veep* was ahead of its time, and reality has finally caught up. In its final year the show was a little less fun and a lot more dread-inducing (but still mostly fun)" (para. 4). Similarly, Mandel reports that

> 'it's getting sort of frightening' how closely the series about a political system where idealism is trumped by compromise tends to echo real Washington politics. 'Sometimes when we sit around to come up with a storyline, we think 'What's the stupidest thing a president could do? What's the worst thing a president's press secretary could say?' and right now some of those things seem to be happening on a daily basis.'" (Serjeant, 2017, paras. 4-5)

As Young (2019) argues, "when Veep first aired in 2012 . . . the show was funny because things couldn't really be that bad in Washington" (p. 67). However, the show now cannot simply

function satirically but must instead be read as parody, because Trump "and his administration have made it difficult to differentiate reality from fiction" (p. 67). The show, then, functioned to first forecast and then reflect modern American political life. Mandel explains that this is also what made writing the show more difficult in later seasons (Turchiano, 2019). Originally, the show appeared to let the audience see behind the scenes of "real" political life, asking the audience to gasp in horror at politicians' ineptitude and crass lifestyles. He argues, "'so often, it was shocking how incompetent her staff is. Well, turn the TV on and you can see that'" (para. 2). In the Trump presidential administration, the show feels less comedic and more documentational.

Not only does the show feel real because we see striking parallels to our current political realities, but the storytelling structure of the show itself also lends an air of reality. Conway (2016) argues that *Veep* seems so real to the audience because "digimodernist texts . . . mimic nonfictional forms to project a world that is just as it appears" (p. 185). For example, the show uses "a single-camera, behind-the-curtain aesthetic inspired by documentary film, which simulates the feeling of secret insider access" (p. 184-185). This form of storytelling "allows viewers accustomed to the hypermediated spectacle of government to experience fictional political events in an apparently real, apparently depoliticized way: as if they were glimpsed for the very first time" (p. 187). This provides an immediacy for the audience, as they feel that the depiction of politics they are viewing is quite real. Furthermore, as a satirical show, *Veep* functions as "a didactic rhetorical (and moral) device that primarily uses the techniques of hyperbole, ridicule, irony, and derision to draw attention to and criticize prevailing socio-cultural shortcomings or individual follies and abuses of power" (Young, 2019, p. 62). In this way, the audience becomes educated about real political issues through viewing *Veep.*

In this chapter, I present my analysis of *Veep* and specifically answer two key research questions:

How do contemporary political television shows model American citizenship through the portrayals of political leaders?

How do these models of citizenship constitute American national identity?

I argue that this show is an anti-model for American national identity. The show constitutes American national identity as competent and compassionate and, importantly, these qualities are linked. Much like with *House of Cards, Veep* operates by identification by antithesis. The show asks Americans to dis-identify with the characters of *Veep* and to identify themselves directly in opposition to the values espoused and portrayed on-screen. In this way, both shows constitute Americans aspirationally. Unlike *House of Cards*, however, *Veep* is widely regarded as an unfortunately realistic depiction of D. C. political actors. This makes the show's functioning as an anti-model even more salient. Americans tend to view politicians as our models for citizenship. If *Veep* is an accurate representation, the show seems to argue, Americans should certainly not be modeling themselves after real-world politicians. Instead, *Veep* provides an anti-model to strive for. While this is similar to how *House of Cards*'s anti-modeling functions, *Veep* differs in that it is a self-aware anti-model, actively representing and reviling American politicians while inspiring Americans to imagine for themselves better qualities to identify with instead. As previously discussed in both Chapters One and Two, political leaders model the qualities of an ideal citizen, and call forth a collective American identity that reinforces those qualities. Fictional politicians also serve as models, and some fictional politicians are able to serve as anti-models through the nature of their fictional political realm. *Veep* also differs from *House of Cards* in that the main character is a woman. Selina may share characteristics with

Frank, but her gender plays a role not only in how she functions politically but also in how she is interpreted by the audience.

"I Can't Identify as a Woman!"

To gain a clear picture of how Selina and *Veep*'s antimodeling operates in a unique way, I now provide a review of literature on women in politics and popular culture. First, I investigate the problems faced by women candidates in general, then problematic media coverage more specifically. Finally, I dive in to how women are depicted as presidents within fictional media.

Women politicians face many barriers. Sheeler and Anderson (2013) published a book specifically investigating "the backlash against female presidentiality" (p. 3). They argue that "women candidates have been running for US president since before they won the right to vote" . . . a fact that might surprise readers! . . . "but they have been stymied by a uniquely American milieu that combines narratives of hard work, equal opportunity, and limitless potential with a tacit but forceful proscription of women's political authority" (p. 3). The fact that the world is still yet to see a woman in the presidency despite their long efforts (and including the candidacy many thought would end this paucity, Hillary Clinton's campaign for the 2016 election) supports Sheeler and Anderson's arguments regarding the limits set for women in politics.

The 2020 election ushered in a momentous Vice Presidency, allowing Kamala Harris to be the first women to hold this office. This does indicate that barriers may be dropping for women, but it is also important to note that Harris was not truly elected to office, as the vice-presidential ticket is selected by the presidential candidate. Voters elected "Biden-Harris," not "Harris for VP." Furthermore, Harris was only available to be nominated as Vice President because her campaign for the presidency was unsuccessful. In Sheeler and Anderson's (2013) investigation of Sarah Palin's campaign rhetoric and the media coverage of her hopeful vice-

presidency, they note that popular framings of the presidency "work to place women and femininity outside the realm of presidentiality" (p. 131). Women who wish to campaign for office, then, must work doubly hard to both adhere to presidential stereotypes and to overcome feminine stereotypes.

Though we have never seen a woman in the highest office, Americans think they have a pretty good idea of how a woman president would operate. Uscinski (2012) found that "poll respondents, when asked about how a woman might fare in certain aspects of the presidency, 75 percent said that a female president would perform worse than a male candidate in the area" (2012, pp. 121-122). This statistic both represents how opinion is based on the stereotypes regarding the masculinity of public office, and how their public perception functioned to continue to keep women out of the presidency. Belt (2012) articulates that

> the tendency of the public and the press to stereotype has endured even though female candidates do not set their issue priorities or run their campaigns in ways that conform to these stereotypes. Instead, female candidates tend to campaign on largely the same issues as male candidates and to run their campaigns in many of the same ways. (p. 208)

Stereotyping kept women out of the presidency, and it has also impacted other leadership positions available to them.

Surprisingly, though, studies have demonstrated that, in general, "when women run for office, they win at the same rate as men" (Pearson & McGhee, 2013, p. 439). In fact, "in most election cycles since 1958, women have been nominated for Congress at the same rate as men, and in several recent election cycles, Democratic women have actually been more likely than men to win their primaries" (p. 440). However, there are some caveats to these findings. First, Nguyen (2019) reports that women have to be exceptional to be elected. According to Pearson

and McGhee (2013), women wait to run until they believe they are supremely qualified, and then work harder once in office by bringing more bills. They also found that in "nonincumbent candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives from 1984 to 2010, we find that female candidates in both parties are indeed better candidates" (p. 440). Based on this, however,

> women should win at higher rates than men, but they do not. When we include candidate experience and other important control variables—including those where we find sex and partisan differences—in multiple regression models predicting victory, we find that Democratic women are actually less likely to win than Democratic men. Moreover, Republican women are less likely than Republican men to win even without these statistical controls. (p. 440)

In other words, women will not run until they believe they are exceptionally qualified, because, according to Bauer (2015), "stereotypes lead to the female candidate being rated as less qualified to be a senator and a future presidential candidate compared to candidates in the other conditions" (p. 699). Wagner (2019) argues that the success of a woman candidate is due to "receptiveness to women" (p. 446), which measures "the level of a political context's familiarity with women in positions of power" (pp. 446-447). English, Pearson, and Strolovitch (2019) argue that "while gender congruence was not significantly related to women's choices about which political actors represent them the most, it was significant for men ($p \leqslant .05$)," suggesting that men prefer to be represented by men more so than women value being represented by women (pp. 790-791). The success of a woman candidate often is found in the level of receptiveness to women in the candidate or "legislators' home state. More often than not, it is a state's political environment that has both created and directed their political lives" (Wagner, 2019, pp. 446-447). And, as Anderson (1999) notes, "even democratic societies historically have

had strong prohibitions against the public use of power by women," as women were more often expected to work within the private sphere (pp. 605-606). Though it is unclear how to increase a region's receptiveness to women, it is clear that it plays a large role in the success of women candidates.

Over time, many have suggested that the barriers to women in politics are dropping. While we have seen more women in office, many of these optimistic projections have not appeared to come true. Vavrus (2000) explains that 1996 was considered the Year of the Woman, as more women ran for and were elected to office. It was suggested that women might now always be accepted into office, but that has not necessarily proven true. After 1996, Peter (2016) suggested that, globally, women were taking more and more positions of leadership, and that "it appears that the emergence of women leaders currently in power is the highest it has ever been with the election or appointment of some twenty-two female heads of state and leaders in 2015" (p. 63). This seemed to set the stage for a female president in the United States. Peter, writing before the 2016 election, argues that with a Hilary Clinton presidency, we would start to see an age of women in power. Of course, Clinton was not elected. While women have made gains in politics, there are still many barriers present, as is evident both in real-world politics and onscreen in *Veep.* Some of these barriers are due to the problematic ways the public media covers women candidates.

Sheeler and Anderson (2013) assert that "the hegemonic masculinity of the US presidency retains significant rhetorical force in the twenty-first century because it is so uniformly and thoroughly constituted by rhetorics of presidentiality" (p. 171). These rhetorics include mediated discourse through news organizations, popular media, official White House correspondence, educational texts, social media, and many other outlets. All of these areas

collectively inform and reinforce how the public interprets the presidency, but the news media has large sway over how the public interprets current candidacies. For this reason, I will focus specifically on how the news and popular media problematically report on and represent women candidates.

Kari Anderson has done much work to articulate how sexism influenced Hilary Clinton's career and the political careers of other women. In the 2008 campaign, Anderson (2011) argues that political communication was "pornified"; "pornographic metaphors, images, and narratives infiltrated U.S. political culture in ways similar to their earlier emergence in advertising and popular culture (p. 328). This pornification reveals the barriers to women that have been perpetuated despite the seeming gains globally:

> metaphors of pornography construct women candidates in ways that reveal the persistence of cultural stereotypes about women political leaders, despite the progress evidenced by Clinton's and Palin's candidacies. The emergence of the pornification frame signals a twenty-first-century backlash against the gains women have made in the U.S. political system. (p. 329)

Resistance to women in politics is also evident in Selina's discourse on *Veep*. At one point she tells her staff, "No, no, no, I can't identify as a woman! People can't know that. Men hate that. And women who hate women hate that, which, I believe, is most women" ("The Choice"). This onscreen resistance reflects how real women politicians have been reviled and continue to be subjects of scorn in reporting. Anderson (1999) also examines how the term "bitch" impacted Clinton's "discourse and political identity" (p. 600), arguing that "sexual containment strategies" have been in use throughout American history and that "the fear of outspoken, politically active women has informed much of popular culture and political discourse throughout the twentieth

century" (p. 601). Certainly, news framing of women candidates perpetuates the perceived masculinity—and, therefore, inappropriateness of a woman in office—of the presidency.

It has been established that news stories perpetuate gender bias, but in the 2016 election fake news became a prominent issue, and a purveyor of gender bias. For example, Stabile, Grant, Purohit, & Harris (2010) report that

> evidence of disparities in how women versus men are covered in both traditional print media and on social media platforms can be seen in counts of keywords typifying the scandals—real and imagined—with which each candidate is associated. We find terms associated with fake news stories denigrating Clinton as weak or predatory to be much more in evidence than terms associated with Trump's actual scandal (also known as "Pussygate") precipitated by the release of the Access Hollywood tape in which he is heard to say of women that you can do anything with them, including, "Grab 'em by the pussy." (p. 499)

In this way, fake and "real" news work together with social media to reinforce gender stereotypes and barriers to women candidates. Both real candidates such as Hillary Clinton and fictional politicians such as Selina Meyer contend with gender-based stereotypes and barriers. It is impossible to separate the portrayal of Selina as a politician and candidate from gender.

Selina Meyer is not alone as a fictional woman president. Though she is the first female president in her fictional universe, she is not the first fictional female president her audience will be familiar with. In interpreting Selina's presence, the audience will utilize both real-world and fictional rhetorics of presidentiality. Sheeler and Anderson (2013) argue that popular media which posit a woman president each suppose "that women and men are equally qualified to serve as US president" (p. 42). At the same time, these fictional representations "reinforce the norms of

presidentiality by failing to critique its masculinity, militarism, and whiteness" (p. 42). They go on to argue that if these representations provide "little challenge to the traditional presidential persona, it might be that the task of rewriting presidentiality is difficult when situated within the familiar contours of the Oval Office, the White House, and contemporary US political culture" (p. 65). In other words, these representations all suggest that a woman president is possible, while at the same time reinforcing the public's perception of a masculine presidency. They conclude: "fictional presidentiality, then, both constitutes and reflects the norms of actual presidential culture" (p. 174). In fact, in the majority of instances of a female president on television or in film, the woman became president due to some unfortunate circumstance rather than through election (Goren, 2012, p. 98). One example is the show *Commander in Chief,* in which a woman becomes Vice President, then ascends to the presidency only when the elected president resigns. This is true for *Veep,* too; Selina becomes president because her predecessor resigns. Similarly, we ought to consider Kamala Harris's Vice Presidency when reflecting on these now-concluded fictional texts, and the ways in which it was both created by rhetorics of presidentiality, and the ways in which it will continue to shape these rhetorics. When another woman becomes president later in *Veep,* she is only selected through special circumstances, as well. This reinforces our idea that women face great challenges in becoming president, and that the public is hesitant to elect a woman. The choice of a female main character, and the depiction of her struggles to achieve the presidency, inevitably reflect and shape American expectations of women candidates.

Identification by Antithesis in *Veep*

Veep, as a comedy, caricaturizes Washington, D.C. politics. In doing so, it highlights real elements that Americans expect to see depicted in politicians and government, yet the show takes

these qualities to the extreme. By exaggerating these specific elements, the show highlights problems within the political establishment, and asks the audience to consider other, better ways of doing things. In this exaggeration, the audience is first asked to consider whether these are really the qualities they desire in their elected and unelected government actors. Second, and more importantly, the audience is asked to consider whether these values are really American. In other words, *Veep* provides an anti-model for American viewers, such that they are constituted in opposition to the characters onscreen.

By depicting politicians as greedy and selfish, *Veep* primes the audience to dis-identify with Selina and the other characters. Specifically, *Veep* constitutes Americans as compassionate and competent. Selina and her staff, though they have achieved very prominent careers, are essentially incompetent at their jobs. Yet, this is not because they are actually inept. Rather, their screwups often are a result of self-absorption or ceaseless striving for recognition that prevents them from making wise decisions or completing tasks effectively. In the following section, I describe instances of when the characters demonstrate their lack of compassion and therefore lack of competence, and how these situations serve as an anti-model for American citizens. Moreover, *Veep* uniquely links competence and compassion. Just as with *House of Cards, Veep* provides Americans with "identification by antithesis", in which a community crafts their identity based on what they are *not* (Burke, 1967). This allows for a collective construction of an American national identity which is defined in opposition to what is portrayed onscreen in *Veep.* As I discussed in the previous case study, this type of identification is common throughout American history, and it therefore functions effectively rhetorically through *Veep* to constitute Americans as unlike Selina and the other characters. The narrative qualities of *Veep* depict the characters as callous and self-absorbed, and therefore incompetent. Thus, the show is able to

constitute Americans as compassionate and competent by inviting them to identify in opposition to these characters.

Veep constitutes Americans as compassionate and competent by highlighting how disgusting the characters' actions are. The program is designed as a comedy but, as the showrunners articulate, the show is also designed to make us think about what could be better. Mandel asserts that he hopes "there are residual actions after viewing the show" (Jim, 2019, paras. 7-8). So, by depicting how the characters act and how we see them as utterly incompetent, we are able to distance ourselves from them. We want more first from our elected officials and therefore from ourselves. We cannot elect better representatives until we become better collectively. Therefore, *Veep* asks the audience to be better than the characters. And, because the show represents very real negative characteristics of American politics, the antimodel is also aspirational, providing a new and better way of enacting political life. This means collectively buying into a national identity of compassion *so that* we can be competent. The characters on *Veep* are focused on advancing their own careers. At first, one might expect that this would mean that they are excellent at their jobs—after all, they work for the Vice President. However, because the characters are focused on getting ahead, they disregard the needs of others. Because their jobs are in public service, this is especially troubling. In fact, it leads to their general incompetence. Rather than attempting to succeed at their jobs, the characters focus on projecting the *image* of success. This takes so much effort and time that their real jobs are neglected. To understand how these qualities are portrayed on the show, I will first examine how the show depicts the characters' incompetence, and then I will turn to a discussion of the characters' self-absorption.

"Not Great, Admittedly"—Competence and Ineptitude

In American politics, perceptions of competence are tied to political parties (Green, 2017). If the party in office is doing well with their policies, they are perceived as more competent. And voters who are affiliated with a given party tend to view that party as more competent. For this reason, it is valuable that *Veep* does not specify a party for Selina or the other characters, as this allows viewers to consider the incompetence of government in general rather than associating it with one party or another. When considering candidates, voters often rely on physical cues. Klofstad, Anderwon, and Nowicki (2015) found that vocal pitch, for example, plays a key role. Speakers with lower pitch tend be rated as more competent—and therefore more electable—than those with higher pitched voices, for both male and female candidates. Therefore, the public's perception of competence has an impact on who gets elected, but competence is not always judged through *actual* competence but rather through external, and often unrelated, cues (such as height). In other words, rather than evaluating candidates on their history, voters tend to evaluate politicians based on appearance or personality as substitutes for measures of credibility. For women in particular, issues of competence are salient. Female candidates are rated not only on perceptions of competence, but also perceptions of warmth (Brown, Phills, Mercurio, Olah, & Veilleus, 2018). Selina Meyer appears to depict neither competence nor warmth to viewers, yet she has become Vice President. We must presume that she either appeared competent and warm to voters, or that voters care less about these qualities in a Vice President. After all, Selina only became the president's running mate after her own presidential campaign failed. We are not sure why she failed, as this happened before episode one, but we might presume that it had something to do with how America viewed either her specifically or women candidates in general, especially given her later struggles to become

elected. It is clear that competence factors into how the public selects politicians, but *Veep* reveals the errors of the external cues Americans might rely on. Specifically, the characters, including Selina, are quite inept.

From the beginning of the show, the characters of *Veep* demonstrate incompetence, situating the viewer to disidentify with the characters. The first episode, "Fundraiser," introduces us to Vice President Selina Meyer who, desperately trying to gain significance, has unveiled her plan for an alternative to plastic utensils: utensils made of cornstarch. Selina tells her chief of staff, Amy, "if I can get cornstarch utensils in most federal buildings by the fall, well then, the Veep has landed!" Selina heads to a meeting with an expected "50 or 60" members of Congress, but walks in to find just a handful of people there. Selina asks under her breath, "is this the right room? Are we early, or . . ." More and more people begin leaving the meeting, and Amy tells Selina that a blog published a tweet from the Veep's office: "76% of government buildings now have cornstarch utensils. Let's make it 100. Let's make plastic utensils extinct!" Selina sighs and says, "oh, great, we've upset the plastics industry. This whole building is bankrolled by plastics!" Amy replies, "this is why nobody showed up." As Amy tries to figure out how to mitigate the new crisis, Selina gets a cup of coffee with a cornstarch spoon to stir it with. Selina pulls the spoon out of the cup to reveal that it has warped badly from the heat and is bent nearly in half. "Are you kidding? Do these not bend the fuck back?" she asks Gary, her body man. "No" he tells her. Later, Selina must attend an event in place of the president. She asks Amy whether the utensils at this event are plastic or cornstarch, and Amy tells her to "stay away from both. The utensils are politicized." Jonah, the White House liaison, shows up right before the Vice President's speech to redact the speech heavily, because the president does not want "anything in the papers tomorrow about oil, okay? Or plastics. Nothing about cornstarch." Unfortunately, the

entire speech is about the Clean Jobs Initiative, which relies heavily on pushing cornstarch utensils. The speech is left essentially content-less, and Selina must wing it as best she can.

This episode demonstrates the characters' incompetence in several ways, and each of these instances prime the audience to view the characters with disdain. First, the utensils that they are advocating for are essentially useless, but it seems to be the very center of their current platform. None of the staffers checked to make sure that these utensils were viable before they decided that the Veep would push them as part of her Clean Jobs Initiative. Second, they did not consider that siding with the new utensils would upset the plastics industry. This is a huge oversight; as Selina notes, most members of Congress rely on plastics for funding, and appeasing the industry takes precedence over impressing the Vice President of the United States. Finally, even after Selina and her team realized their error, they still wrote and prepared a speech that relied heavily on cornstarch utensils and the Clean Jobs Initiative, meaning that when it was edited, there was not enough content for the Vice President to give a full speech from. These mistakes made Selina look foolish and caused more work for the staffers. While the situation is humorous, it is also disturbing. These are massive mistakes for the Office of the Vice President, and it leads one to wonder how the staff could have missed such major issues. In this way, the audience is situated to be disgusted or concerned by the actions of the characters, and to therefore dis-identify with their values. The scene also positions the audience to query whether real-world politicians and staffers might be similarly incompetent. Audience members recognize the ridiculousness of government agents who are incapable of doing their jobs correctly, especially when these agents are working for nearly the highest office possible. These are the people we trust to run the country, and they are bumbling along haphazardly.

By presenting extreme situations of incompetence and blundering political agents, *Veep* constitutes Americans as aspirationally competent. Another episode that displays the incompetence of Selina and her staff is "Joint Session," in season 4. In this episode, Selina has become President and must give the State of the Union address. Her staff struggles to write the speech, realizing that many of Selina's policy stances are undecided, as she has just recently become President due to the former president's, Hughes, resignation. Selina asks them to include a section about her "vision for the future," but "for now, just put a marker that says 'future whatever.'" As the team continues to write, Dan, one of Selina's staffers, remarks, "there's still no content in this speech. It's like a diet souffle." Though the staff have now been working for Selina for at least four seasons, they still struggle to complete basic tasks. Again, this is humorous, but it does not inspire confidence in the governing. Because of the cringe-worthy nature of the staff members' incompetence, the audience is poised to identify in opposition to the values portrayed by the character onscreen.

To fill out her speech, Selina meets with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The Joint Chiefs suggest that the United States stop manufacturing the N620 submarine, which is an outdated Cold War-era machine, freeing up $50 billion in the budget. Selina is delighted to announce this in her speech and makes her way over to Congress to commence the event. Just before she's supposed to begin, Congressman Furlong walks in to present some bad news to her staff:

> 1900 submarine jobs in my district that this announcement will torpedo . . . You think the whole sub is made in one place? Because the fin, or whatever the fuck, it comes from one factory in one state. And then this little round fucking window comes from another place. All right? And the fuel rods are from Cheesedick, Wisconsin. We are going to lose votes and seats everywhere . . . You can wave bye-bye to the Families First bill [a key bill

> Selina is promoting] because the lawmakers in these districts are going to Vulcan death-grip you to fuck.

Unfortunately, Selina's speech has already been loaded into the teleprompter, and the staffers panic. Ben rushes to tell Selina that the districts will not support the submarine cuts and therefore will not support the Families First bill. Selina asks Ben to remove the cuts from the speech, as she walks in to begin speaking. The staff cannot keep the speech rolling in the teleprompter for Selina to read while editing the speech. Thankfully, the team remembers that Selina has a paper copy of the speech, and she can read from that while they make changes. Unfortunately, Gary tells them, "I've got her glasses." Gary and Selina had decided he would hold her glasses because, in her pocket, they were "ruining the line of her dress." So, just as Selina begins speaking, the text disappears from her teleprompter and is replaced by a \: emoji.

Much like in the above example, Selina has little to say and must improvise. After the team is finally able to get the text loaded, Mike realizes that they have uploaded the wrong version of the speech; "this version still has placeholders in it, and the next section just has 'future whatever,'" Jim, the Director of Communications for the former president, tells everyone. This version also still has the former president's spending plan, so, rather than announcing $50 billion in *cuts* as she had hoped, Selina announces that she will be *investing* "$60 billion in the new N620 submarine fleet. That's a further $10 billion investment in this vital and modern defense system." She says this distastefully, with a sour look on her face. After the speech, Selina asks her staff testily, "What the hell was I reading . . . this speech was supposed to *perfectly* define my presidency." While laughable, this episode is also stressful to watch, as it not only invites the viewer to visualize themselves in this very scenario, but also asks audience members to consider that this is how politics is worked out in the day-to-day. Perhaps the

President's policy solutions are not well thought-out at all, and instead are inserted accidentally into the teleprompter last-minute. This suggestion allows the audience to critically examine their own national identity. Is the American public largely competent, or incompetent? And how would the public prefer to identify? More specifically, this incident feels uncomfortably realistic, allowing the audience to mentally inquire whether their government officials are actually this incompetent (and perhaps recalling specific incidents from their own lives that have previously suggested this incompetence on the government's part). By depicting reality, the show allows the audience to be aspirational and to envision a better value system for the American public, one in which competence driven by compassion is the highest value.

This situation also highlights Selina's gender. Historically, the American military has been a masculine presence, excluding women. All previous presidents serving as Commander in Chief—both in real life in the world of the show—have been male. Selina is already breaking ground by making massive budget cuts to the military, as this is generally an unpopular policy position for any politician, much less for the first female president. Not only is the topic precarious politically, it is even more so based on Selina's gender. Furthermore, Selina's incompetence is revealed when we discover that she failed to consider how jobs would factor in to this policy stance. The issue is now tied to gender, and her incompetence is also now tied to her gender. Moreover, the person who reveals this misstep to the team is a male politician, which indicates that he is somehow more competent than Selina in considering and making big policy decisions. Though gender is not overtly discussed in regard to how this scene plays out, it is important to analyze how stereotypical assumptions about gender factor in to how the issue is perceived by the other characters as well as by the audience at home.

A final episode that perfectly captures the characters' incompetence, and which allows viewers to further disidentify with the characters and their value system, is "Iowa." This episode covers another Selina campaign (the fourth presidential run she will make, to be exact). The episode opens with Selina flying to an event where she will announce that she is running. Amy and Dan, two of Selina's top staffers, have arranged to have a crowd at the airport for when Selina lands. As the stairs descend from the plane and Selina steps out, she proclaims, "Hello, Iowa! I'm . . . " She abruptly stops speaking and all we hear are birds chirping. Selina looks around the empty tarmac and asks, "Wait a minute. Where is everyone?" Selina calls Amy, asking what is going on, and tells her "I'm standing here with my dick in my hands, in Cedar . . . Falls, Iowa!" Amy replies tersely, "Ma'am, we're in Cedar Rapids!"[6] Selina, outraged, throws the phone and screams, "This is supposed to be *New* Selina!" "New. Selina. Now." is her campaign slogan, and her statement indicates that while prior campaigns have had issues of incompetence, this campaign was expected to be different and, therefore, more competent. From the very beginning of her new campaign, Selina and her team cannot even arrange an announcement of her candidacy. Their lack of coordination indicates that many staff members have erred. Selina tells Ben, "If Mohamad Atta had you people booking his travel, he'd still be alive today. Which from his perspective, would be a massive fuck-up." To make sure that nothing like the airport incident happens again, Selina has Amy come up with a "full autopsy" of the previous campaigns' issues. In a meeting with top staffers, Amy reports that there was a "reluctance on the part of the candidate to take responsibility for mistakes." Selina shoots back, "What? No, you were the one who made mistakes." Ultimately, many of the issues Amy found originated with Selina, but Selina quickly stops Amy from discussing the report. It is clear that,

6. This incident calls to mind the "Four Seasons" press conference by Trump's team. For a general overview, see Wikipedia's article, "Four Seasons Total Landscaping Press Conference."

while the staff have many areas of incompetence, Selina also displays incompetence regularly. Not only does she demonstrate incompetence, Selina does not own up to her mistakes. As an anti-model, this provides a further area for viewers to depart from Selina's value system.

It is also important to note how Selina's gender may play into her difficulty in getting elected. While the focus is on the incompetence of the main characters, it is important to note that Selina is also portrayed as out-of-touch and incompetent. Because she is the first female Vice President and, later, the first female President, her incompetence is not just interpreted as the incompetence of a politician but also as the incompetence of a woman. As the campaign continues, Amy suggests that Selina announce her candidacy at the same place where she announced her first presidential campaign nine years previously. When they arrive at the location, Selina tells her team, "let's go launch this rocket." Dan leans over to Kent and says, "I just hope it's the *Colombia*, not the *Challenger*." Kent replies, "both exploded, killing all on board." This is a clever metaphor for the Meyer campaign, as her previous campaigns have all figuratively combusted—and this one threatens to—damaging the careers of all involved. Selina and her team walk to where they expect to find a stage set up, ready for her announcement. What they find, however, is a small podium with bunting draped haphazardly across it. Dan says, "This was all supposed to be done like six hours ago." Selina adds, "and, I mean, the tents aren't even here." Ben hustles over to inform Selina that "back in 2008, your campaign did not pay the bill for your announcement." Selina pleads to Amy, "can we just pay this townie and get on with it?" Amy, panicked, replies "it's too late, the press is already arriving!" Selina, incensed, says, "so, the national press is now arriving to this giant metaphor for a . . . *clusterfuck* of a campaign."

In the meantime, they also manage to put the mayor of Lurlene, Iowa in a coma (the mayor is a dog—perhaps highlighting the incompetence of our elections?—and Selina

accidentally fed him chocolate). Additionally, Selina asks the team to hire Keith Quinn, but when he arrives, she says they hired the wrong person. When the team reassures her that this is indeed Keith Quinn, she yells at them, "It is not my job to know what Keith Quinn does or does not look like!" Selina and her team must now find ways to occupy Quinn because "the press cannot know that we hired the wrong guy."

Throughout this episode, we see evidence that Selina and her staffers struggle to complete basic tasks. As we will discover in the next section, each of these characters are extremely self-absorbed, more concerned with their own image and advancing their careers than with supporting those around them or the American public. Ultimately, it is their lack of compassion that leads each of the characters away from competence; because they are self-absorbed, they fail to pay attention to what they need to do to be successful and competent in their current situations. The show uniquely ties these two qualities together, allowing one to lead to the other. Together, these two ideas work to constitute Americans as the direct opposite: compassionate, and therefore competent. If the staffers on *Veep* are incompetent due to their lack of compassion, then Americans who want to collectively identify as competent must embrace compassion.

"The Skyscraper of Shit Has Arrived"—Disdain Versus Compassion

Ethics are inherently tied to political action. Yet Porter (2006) differentiates between general political ethics and compassion, in which political actors including citizens feel empathy for and connectedness to others. *Veep* constitutes Americas as compassionate, meaning that they, collectively, feel empathy for their fellow American and have a sense of connectedness or togetherness, with a recognition that when one member is harmed, all are harmed. This is in contrast to the characters on Veep who are self-absorbed and actively denigrate those around

them. In fact, Levitats, Vigoda-Gadot, and Vashi (2019) found that "to develop responsibility, individuals must feel connected to others and see themselves as part of a larger entity" (p. 847). Specifically, those in public service who develop or obtain a higher emotional intelligence and ability to have compassion are actually more effective at their jobs. This is important for how we view *Veep,* as it is clear that the characters do not feel connected to one another or the American public, and therefore, according to Levitas, Vigoda-Gadot, and Vashi, have probably not developed the responsibility necessary to demonstrate competence. In this way, competence and compassion are linked.

The previous section included an extensive depiction of the ineptitude of the characters. Because this ineptitude is influenced by their callousness, it is important that we next discuss compassion in American politics. Perceptions of compassion are often linked to political party. Messner (2007) argues that American politics often favors perceptions of masculine toughness over compassion, which is stereotyped as feminine. This has policy implications and impacts both how politicians portray themselves and who voters will elect. Importantly, this also has implications for how Americans might self-identify. If candidates that display compassion are ridiculed in media and politics, Americans may also choose to downplay or eliminate displays of compassion. If a lack of compassion is a masculine trait, Selina certainly strives to portray herself as a more traditionally masculine candidate through her language use and the policies she adopts (discussed in much more detail later in this section). Importantly, Messner argues that political conservatives tend to emphasize these masculine qualities more often than liberal candidates. Brooks (2004), too argues that conservatives have a reputation for a lack of compassion.

Which party, then, is more compassionate? It largely depends on who you ask. Certainly, Republicans emphasize that compassion and their masculine qualities can coincide. Messner (2007), in an analysis of Arnold Schwarzenegger's political rhetoric, found that

> a leadership masculinity without compassion is now symbolically untenable. But the new hybrid hegemonic masculinity always leads with the muscle. Muscle must first and foremost be evident; compassion is displayed at appropriate symbolic moments, suggesting a human side to the man. (p. 475)

However, studies have found mixed results as to which parties are actually more compassionate. Graham, Nosek, and Haidt (2012) found that "in general, people overestimate how dramatically liberals and conservatives differ" on values such as compassion (p. 8). They argue that partisans on each side exaggerate the degree to which the other side pursues moral ends that are

> different from their own. Much of this exaggeration comes from each side underestimating the degree to which the other side shares its own values. But some of it comes, unexpectedly, from overestimating the degree to which ''typical'' members of one's own side endorse its values. (p. 12)

Brueck (2018), too, reports on a study that found that conservatives are similar in compassion, but "are simply more likely to extend that empathy only to their kin" (para. 12). Long (2019), found "that Democratic and Republican Party voters are similar, on average" in valuing compassion (para. 6). The differences in perception, she argues, are result of party leadership rather than individual values, because "political speeches by Republican and Democratic leaders vary in the amount of compassionate language they use" (paras. 17-18). Democratic leaders rely on compassionate rhetoric more often (para. 20). Similarly, Morris (2020) has found that the vast majority of studies find a link between people who measure higher in empathy and those who

tend to have politically liberal standpoints. On the other hand, Brooks (2004) found that "conservatives have slightly more compassionate attitudes than liberals—for example, they are 3 percentage points more likely to say they have tender, concerned feelings for the less fortunate than liberals (74 percent to 71 percent)" (p. 59). Results seem significantly mixed.

With this in mind, how should we conceptualize compassion in politics? Schieman, Upenieks, and Bierman (2019) argue that religious beliefs may factor in to how these values manifest. They report that "the common caricature of the "cold-hearted conservative" and the "caring liberal" are supported by the predictions of empathy—in which self-identified conservatives have lower levels of empathy than self-identified liberals *but only when levels of personal religiosity are low."* (italics original; p. 361). Brooks (2004), too, found that "religious people are far more likely—15 points (79 to 64 percent)—than secularists to have these feelings" (p. 59). Additionally, Brooks argues that "the religious Right and religious Left are both far more compassionate than secularists from either political side" (p. 66). Of note: Brooks's findings appear to predominately be based on measures of generosity, or who gives money to charitable causes. Still, Brooks argues that "on the basis of the compassion exhibited by the larger part of Republican-voting conservatives, the Republicans have a more legitimate claim to being the party of compassion than do the Democrats" (p. 66). It is clear, then, that there is political and academic disagreement over which parties and voters are truly more compassionate. Schieman, Upenieks, and Bierman do acknowledge that they are not sure if the trends they observed would continue today, as political polarization and harsh tone have increased in American politics. This observation would certainly also hold true for Brooks's study, as his results were found previous to Upenieks and Bierman's.

Evidently, both parties currently strive to appear compassionate. Interestingly, this is a more recent trend. Conservatives have historically labeled liberals as "bleeding hearts," turning compassion into a weapon. The term first appeared in 1938, and made a resurgence in 1954 prompted by Joe McCarthy;s use of term to denigrate the "extreme Left Wing" (Laskwo, 2017). More recently, Conservatives have worked to reframe the concept of compassion so that they can be labeled the party of empathy. Dionne (1997) argues that conservatives are the new "bleeding hearts" because they believe that if governments would step out of the way, churches and generous conservative citizens would provide private donations and services to those in need. George W. Bush's 200 campaign notably sought to reframe the party with his label of "Compassionate Conservatism" (George W. Bush Institute, 2018). Bush states that

> I felt compelled to phrase it this way because people hear "conservative" and they think heartless. And my belief then and now is that the right conservative philosophies are compassionate and help people. Compassionate means you care about people and the policies you enunciate help people. (para. 3)

Bush is acknowledging, then, that there was a public perception of the Republican party as lacking compassion, and he actively sought to reframe that. Teles (2009), too, supports that

> compassionate is not the first word that comes to mind when reflecting on the Republican party before the presidency of George W. Bush. Compassion was seen by most conservatives as a private virtue, insufferably woolly-headed as a guide to public action. (para. 1)

Bean (2014) notes that there is a marked difference (for conservatives) between helping "the poor" and the "deserving poor." Tomasi (2004), too, describes the idea of "pauperism," which suggests that people in hardship brought it upon themselves by a moral or character flaw, and

therefore any government aid must help break this cycle so that the poor can better themselves. Along these lines, Tomasi argues that "political liberals have reason to support compassionate conservatism as a matter of justice" (p. 345). Both Bean and Tomasi utilize the compassionate framework to argue that conservative policy readily fits in to compassionate rhetoric. Moreover, they argue that liberal policy is harmful and is therefore not truly compassionate. Stryker and Wald (2009) confirm that there has been a strong push by Republicans to reframe how the value of compassion has been defined in conservative rhetoric. It is clear, then, that both parties work to define themselves through a lens of compassion while simultaneously rhetorically excluding their opponents from this lens. In other words, the rhetoric of each party defines compassion narrowly such that their own policies appear more compassionate than the opposing party.[7] Though compassion has been supported by both parties for most of recent political history, there has been a turn away from this value with Trump and conservative media. Long (2019) reports that

> the Republican voters who didn't support Trump were similar to Democrats on the survey with respect to their answers about compassion. Their average scores on the compassion items were the same. This is in line with the other survey data showing that liberals and conservatives, and Republicans and Democrats, are largely similar in these personality measures of compassion. But Trump supporters' answers were not in line with these findings. Instead, their average responses to the broad compassion questions were significantly lower. These answers showed that Trump supporters were lower in personal compassion. (paras. 30-32)

7. For a fascinating example of how conservatives have rhetorically redefined compassion, see Feder, D. (1997, January 13). Killing us with kindness: How liberal compassion hurts. *The Heritage Foundation.*

Altogether, then, it is difficult to define which party is truly more compassionate because both parties use empathy and compassion as core values for themselves. Both parties have also sought to make it clear that the opposing party lacks compassion, though many studies suggest that these are primarily stereotypes and not actual personal value differences. The one difference to note is that the 2016 election and subsequent presidency are outliers in modern political rhetoric. We can surmise, then, that in general, Americans value compassion and respect for others. Selina and her staff serve as anti-models of this value, defining the audience in opposition to their heartlessness.

Respect for others and self-absorption are difficult to co-mingle. This makes the setting of the show significant, as Washington, D.C.'s presence in the show highlights and creates the self-absorption of the characters. When Selina is the Vice President, getting an opportunity to visit the White House is important. The audience understands that the White House is essential largely due to Jonah's presence. He regularly reiterates that he works in the West Wing, and that he is the White House's liaison. Everyone, including the audience, becomes exhausted from his self-aggrandizing and repetition. It is also clear that Selina wants more access to the White House because it gives her more power. When Selina has more power, she spends more time in the White House and more time in D.C. In season two, Selina is depicted more often at the White House than in season one, which reflects her path to the presidency. When she has less power, she spends less time in the White House or D.C. For example, in season three, Selina is on the campaign trail because she is trying to become elected. Therefore, she is in various cities and states rather than D.C. And in season six, Selina has suffered an embarrassing defeat, and her new office is in New York City—and not a very glamorous part—rather than in D.C. Still, being in D.C. means that the media and the American public are always watching, so image is of

massive importance to the characters. This shapes how the characters view themselves and the situations they find themselves in and may lead to some of their worse moments.

One such self-absorbed moment for Selina occurs after her "non-announcement" of her candidacy. As the staff recovers from the "non-announcement," they tell Selina that she needs to explain to voters why she wants to be president. This turns out to be more difficult for her than anyone expected. Selina asks her daughter-in-law, who also runs her Foundation, "why would you want to be president?" Next, Selina asks Amy why she would want to be president. Amy replies, "so I can nuke America." Selina tells Gary, "that's actually not bad." Selina laments, "Ugh, why do I have to tell people why I want to be president? I mean, I don't want to hear about *their* jobs." It is clear that Selina is uninterested in the American public's day-to-day lives, a clear example of her lack of compassion. Later, Selina tells Gary,

> you know what I would like to tell people, but obviously I can't? I should be president because it is my goddamn turn. I was a game-changer. I took a dump on the glass ceiling, and I shaved my muff in the sink of the Old Boys club. But for three years, Hughes kept me chained to a radiator in some basement in Cleveland. So, as far as I'm concerned, America *owes* me an eight-year stay in the White House, and this time, I want a war!

Finally, Selina tells Gary just to write down that she wants to "give Americans a better deal or some fuckin' crap like that." Selina does not have a real reason for wanting to run for president except that she feels entitled. In fact, she cannot even come up with a fake reason, and she agonizes for the entire episode over one small line in her speech. Despite her many years in politics and her many attempts at becoming president, she does not seem capable of completing this speech. Her disdain for the American public hinders her competence, and her self-absorption limits her ability to articulate a meaningful rationale for her presidency (beyond, "I want it").

This, too, feels all too real to viewers. We have seen countless examples of self-absorbed politicians disregarding their constituents needs as they seek out self-serving positions or luxuries (Ted Cruz's recent excursion to Cancun comes to mind (Parker, 2021). Again, by portraying something that is akin to reality, the show allows viewers to consider the values they would prefer to see in Americans as a contrast, thereby constituting the American public as compassionate.

Although Selina's failure to muster up a reasonable reason for wanting to be president is depressing, it is also evident that she is frustrated with the sexism at play in the political world. While "it is my goddamn turn" is not a compelling reason to vote for a candidate, it is a sentiment that women viewers can identify with. Selina's Vice-Presidency is groundbreaking, yet Sheeler (2018) argues that the nasty nature of Selina's political ambitions serve to highlight the inevitability of her failure as a women in government. I argue instead that Selina's depiction serves to actually constitute Americans as "feminine." By "feminine," I mean what is traditionally understood as the feminine communication style, and the values we would typically expect women, but not necessarily men, to hold. More specifically, while we prefer men to be compassionate, they are not excoriated for failing to act compassionately. Women, on the other hand, are reviled for their lack of compassion, and this is part of what makes Selina such a distasteful character. As discussed previously, Selina uses a traditionally masculine communication style, and is far more vulgar in her language than Americans typically expect from women. If, then, the audience is positioned to identify in opposition to Selina, then we are constituted with traditionally feminine qualities. In essence, this compassionate American is a direct reversal of masculine politics, and instead asks Americans to draw upon feminine styles of communication to care for one another. It is interesting to note that Selina's gender makes this

constitution even more impactful, because her masculine style of communication and discompassionate attitudes are in contrast to what the audience expects from women, while simultaneously being in line with what Americans expect from their politicians. To make this comparison clearer, we can compare Selina's portrayal with Frank Underwood's (from the previous case study). Both characters lack compassion and use a harsh communication style. And while the audience is asked to use Frank as an anti-model, it is not clear that this leads to constituting the audience as "female." Selina's gender brings this element of the anti-modeling from *Veep* to the forefront. Thus, while the show does highlight the sexism apparent in American politics, as Sheeler notes, it also turns those notions on their head by prompting viewers to reject Selina's rhetorical and moral style.

Another episode that highlights Selina as disdainful is "Some New Beginnings." This episode exquisitely depicts how little care each of the characters has for those around them. The staffers have no affection for one another and cannot put down their work long enough to celebrate a marriage. Two characters are getting married: Mike McLintock and Wendy Keegan. At the wedding, Mike and Wendy ask all of their guests to surrender cell phones to a bowl for the duration of the ceremony and reception. Yet when major news breaks, even the bride and groom cannot resist fishing out their phones. Everyone else does the same . . . except for Selina, because she is not attending the wedding. Instead, she is on a book tour. None of the characters—including the bride and groom!—can bear to put those around them above their own careers. Selina does not enjoy connecting with American citizens while on her tour; for the viewer, this is concerning, as Selina is someone who has dedicated her life to public service through politics. At one point, she decides she is leaving for the day, but the people queuing up to meet her are told she will be back soon.

Selina cannot bring herself to attend the wedding of someone she has worked closely with for many years. Moreover, Selina is not on her book tour to genuinely connect with the American public who come to meet her. Rather, she looks for any excuse to escape from these average citizens. This is hardly endearing to the audience, themselves members of the average American public, and posits that perhaps viewers should not identify with Selina's value system. In fact, Selina's value system is inflated to such an awful extreme that she serves as an exaggerated anti-model for viewers. While average real-life politicians or Americans may exhibit some of Selina's worst qualities, it is rare to find someone who so overtly disdains the wellbeing of others. In this way, the show constructs Selina as an extreme version of the worst qualities that the American public is discouraged from identifying with. Later in the episode, Selina must attend the funeral of a politician. She will give a eulogy, but rather than expressing genuine sadness about the man's death, Selina uses the funeral as a networking event, spending her time trying to connect with a campaign manager. Neither a wedding nor a funeral inspire Selina's sympathy. Neither can convince her to think of others. Instead, her focus is eminently and eternally on her own career and self-advancement.

Throughout the show, Selina demonstrates massive disrespect to those who are experiencing tragedies. When Selina hears that there has been a catastrophic mudslide in Idaho, she says, "I don't mean to sound disrespectful but I find mudslides to be the funniest disaster" ("Morning After"). Her remark occurs in the midst of explaining why she does not want to provide aid to the state, as they did not back her during her campaign (which, when the show aired in 2017, felt extreme, but President Trump is reported to have echoed similar rhetoric in his presidency (Bierman & Stokols, 2020)). In another episode, Selina wants the news cycle to change, and remarks, "where's a tsunami when you need it?" ("Omaha"). This is not the only

time Selina wishes for a disaster to take the news cycle off an issue. In “Iowa,” when Selina wants to announce her candidacy for president, but her announcement is not set up (discussed above), there is a mass shooting in the United States and twenty-seven people die. Selina is gleeful because the news will not report about her (second) failed announcement, and because she could not possibly announce right then “out of respect” to the victims. In fact, Selina tells her staff “we have to send something nice to that shooter.” In that same episode, another shooting takes place, this one at a school. Selina asks, “Muslim or white guy?” The staffers are not sure, and Selina asks which one is better for her. Ken tells her, “white guy,” and Selina replies, “fingers crossed.” This is the extent of their conversation about the school shooting; the staff and Selina do not express sadness for the children affected. Rather, they are most concerned about how this will affect the campaign. And if two were not enough shootings for one episode, a third one takes place while Gary is fetching Selina a smoothie. Dan tells Selina that there was a shooting at a Home Depot and the interstate has been closed. Selina is not saddened by the shooting, but she does declare, “Jesus, Mary and Jamba Juice, I want that smoothie!” She is more impatient that the interstate closure has affected her smoothie craving than that people may have died.

These instances position audience members in direct opposition to Selina for many reasons. First, as a current and/or former Vice President or President, Selina is given a Secret Service presence and is unlikely to suffer personally from this type of shooting. Second, many Americans have been personally affected by gun violence, and probably do not find themselves sympathetic toward a character making these jokes. Finally, according to a 2019 Gallup poll, “48% of U.S. adults are "very" or "somewhat" worried” about dying in a mass shooting (Brenan). While this episode aired before the poll, we can still presume that nearly half of

viewers were or are fearful of mass shootings. A politician who responds so flippantly, then, will situate these audience members such that they will be inclined to identify compassionately with the victims, rather than with Selina's stance of self- (and smoothie-) absorption. The show also depicts what viewers can expect from real-world politicians, such as Rahm Emmauel's suggestion to never let a crisis go to waste. In this case, the show flips gender expectations because women are expected to be "softer" rhetorically, or more compassionate.
As the audience opposes Selina and her value system, they will also be primed to embrace contrasting values. In this way, the show is able to constitute a new identity for Americans, one of a compassionate and competent public.

Reflecting back on the instance of Selina's campaign announcement—the one she missed when she flew to Cedar Falls instead of Cedar Rapids—we can also take note of the audience who are there to support Selina's campaign. They reflect the correct values, or the opposite values of the anti-model. The audience, made up of ordinary Americans, are there to support the candidate. They are at the right place (and are therefore more competent than Selina's team) and they are enthusiastic for her run (making them more compassionate than Selina). The citizens themselves serve as a contrast for Selina and the values demonstrated by her team. The audience can identify with the average Americans on the show and their general value systems.

As in *House of Cards*, the vast majority of the characters are white. This indicates that most political actors in America are white Americans. Still, because this show serves as an anti-model, it allows viewers to imagine a different American identity, one in which whiteness is not forefronted. Of course, there is not a specific model of what this might look like, and because whiteness is inherently bound up in readings of American popular culture, it may be difficult for audiences to imagine this new way of being. Similarly, *Veep* is an important show because it

depicts a woman as, first, Vice President, then President. Unlike Claire in *House of Cards*, Selina is the true main character of the show. This portrayal is important because, as discussed above and in the previous chapter, representations of political leaders, including representations of women in political power, hold vast sway over public opinion of women in office. In addition, because political television shows are constitutive of American national identity, gender representations matter. When politicians are represented as male and with traditionally masculine qualities, our constituted national identity will also hold traditionally masculine values. While a depiction of a female politician provides the opportunity to emphasize additional values or even de-emphasize other values such as traditionally masculine qualities, *Veep* does not do so. Selina is bound by the American expectations of politicians which, at least in the 2010s, still necessitate stereotypically masculine styles. However, because she serves as an anti-model, Selina's gender representation actually provides Americans with the opportunity to collectively dis-identify with those values and qualities and instead embrace more stereotypically feminine qualities such as compassion. This dissertation primarily assesses how *Veep* models citizenship, but we should also note that the show necessarily influences audiences' perceptions of government. As Sheeler (2018) argues, Selina fails in office due to her gender. This representation further supports that subversiveness of *Veep*'s anti-modeling, as it situates Americans in a profoundly divergent position that we would typically expect. Once again, Selina's gender uniquely and powerfully allows the constitutive nature of the show to function.

The Level of Compassion in This Country is Staggering

By depicting the characters of *Veep* as self-absorbed and disdainful, the show situates viewers as other than the characters. Audience members are asked to investigate their assumptions about American values, and to dis-identify with the values portrayed onscreen.

Specifically, *Veep* depicts an anti-model for Americans, and constitutes Americans as compassionate (and feminine!). Moreover, the characters' lack of compassion often inspires their incompetence; as Americans are constituted in opposition to *Veep*'s characters, the public is constituted as both compassionate and competent. These values, then, are the new collective identity for Americans to adhere to, and they are asked to reject the values of *Veep*'s characters. This case study investigates how fictional politicians model citizenship and therefore constitute American national identity, which expands our understanding of constitutive rhetoric in the context of pop politics. Furthermore, this case study strengthens the link between notions of citizenship as modeled by political leaders and the simultaneous constitution of collective identity that occurs as viewers are interpellated into a certain way of viewing their country, themselves, their fellow Americans, and the world.

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CHAPTER IV

"DECENCY, DIGNITY, AND RESPECT"

We are not politicizing this wedding. And no one is having a damn coup! (Russell Jackson, *Madam Secretary,* "Leaving the Station")

In the first episode of *Madam Secretary,* Elizabeth McCord, a former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operative and current professor, is approached by the President of the United States, who also happens to have been her boss at the CIA. President Dalton offers Elizabeth the recently vacated Secretary of State position (vacated due to the unexpected death of the former position-holder). After much agonizing, Elizabeth takes the role and moves her family to Washington, D.C. Her husband, Henry, a religion professor, and their three children, feature prominently in the show. Elizabeth keeps the deceased former Secretary of State's staff but must convince them to work well with her. Over time, they become fiercely loyal to Elizabeth. Elizabeth never intended to become a political actor, but she begrudgingly becomes one, and an excellent one at that.

This procedural show features some overarching plotlines, but most stories are wrapped up in each episode. One longer plotline involves the apparent murder of the former Secretary of State, whose death Elizabeth feels compelled to solve. Another overarching plotline involves Elizabeth's rocky relationship with the President's chief of staff, Russell; their interactions evolve over time until they are ultimately friends. When Elizabeth becomes president (surprise!) in the final season, Russell agrees to serve as her chief of staff. Elizabeth's candidacy comes as somewhat of a shock to the audience because she repeatedly denied having interest in public office. She originally took the role of Secretary of State as a favor to her friend, so she could "serve at the pleasure of the President." Many other plot arcs also revolve around Elizabeth's

family, such as several involving Stevie, the eldest daughter's, love life. Henry, too, gets screen time for his career, which varies throughout the show from religion professor, to military ethics professor (as a former Marine, Henry is qualified on this subject), to covert operative, to presidential task force member. Throughout the show, Elizabeth's talents in diplomacy are showcased. Flashbacks to her time in the CIA provide context for current conversations with foreign diplomats. Each episode features a crisis (often of international importance) for Elizabeth and her team to solve, and Elizabeth uses her connections and savvy to conveniently wrap up most plot points in 45 minutes of show time. The show is distinctive because Elizabeth manages to be an engaged wife, mother, and friend, all while serving her country with excellence and grace.

The Ideal American Family

In this chapter, I analyze *Madam Secretary* to answer two specific research questions: First, how do contemporary political television shows model American citizenship through the portrayals of political leaders? And second, how do these models of citizenship constitute American national identity? I argue that *Madam Secretary* does serve as a model of an idealized notion of American citizenship by portraying Elizabeth McCord and her family as protectors of the American way of life. Of course, "American way of life" is narrowly defined by the show to include white, upper-middle class families. Moreover, the McCords are members of the political elite. All of these factors influence how the audience will read the ideal American family and American way of life, and, importantly, how these elements overlap. The notion of an American way of life will be more overtly explained as we examine the history of the rhetoric of family in the United States.

The McCord family represents a supposed ideal American family. The McCords spends ample time together even though both parents have demanding careers. Elizabeth and Henry also have a close marital relationship, and the family relationships are situated as endearing. In contrast to *Veep,* in which Selina finds her daughter to be a nuisance, or *House of Cards,* in which the Underwoods choose to remain childless to pursue their political careers, *Madam Secretary* features a thriving family dynamic in which each member of the family flourishes and adores the other members. By portraying Elizabeth and her loved ones as family-oriented, the show positions the audience to identify with the values they espouse and embody, preparing viewers to collectively view Americans as family oriented. As we will discover, the notion of "family," and more specifically, "family values," has been politically weaponized to establish and maintain a particular way of life that is necessarily exclusionary. In this chapter, family values is defined as a lens through which to view individuals and communities; it is a measuring stick designed to assess which members of the country are adhering to the "appropriate" methods for allowing families to flourish. Importantly, family as a value is important to both political parties and, indeed, to most Americans. However, when I refer to "family values," I am specifically referring to the ways in which particular groups in American culture (notably, the Republican party and the American conservative right, and American Evangelical culture) have weaponized family values rhetoric to narrowly define what it means to be a "good" family and, therefore, a "good" American. To differentiate between family values as an ideology and family values as valuing family, I will capitalize Family Values in reference to the constructed ideological definition. This definition has been constructed over time through specific political and religious lenses, and relies most predominately on white, middle-to-upper class families with heterosexual, married parents. This ideology is also based on a strict adherence to specific sexual

morality and gender norms. As has been previously established in this dissertation, constituting collective identity necessarily entails identifying what a community is *not.* By constituting Americans as family-oriented, and by defining family in a very particular, and exclusionary way, *Madam Secretary* constitutes viewers and the American public collectively as protectors of this particular (so-called) "American way of life."

The American Way of Life

Madam Secretary is a fascinating piece to view and analyze in part because it is produced by esteemed actor Morgan Freeman. Freeman's production company, "Revelations Entertainment," states that their products "reveal truth" ("About," n.d.). The use of "reveal" rather than a term such as "depict," indicates that Revelations Entertainment believes that truth is not directly evident, but must instead by uncovered. In other words, their movies and shows are designed to depict what viewers ought to believe. This optimism makes the show idealistic and hopeful, and a purposeful depiction of American citizens. Executive producer McCreary also states that the show was created as a piece that "inspires people to their better selves" (Carson, 2016, para. 5). Together, the producers seek to reveal to Americans, then, what their best selves ought to be (or, more specifically, what the ideal selves are that the writers and producers wish to constitutively demarcate their audience as). *Madam Secretary* serves as a model for the American public. In fact, in a *Medium* article, Jose (2019) writes that the McCord's marriage is "utopian," setting a standard that no marriage can live up to. Of course, this romanticization is precisely the point; because the characters serve as a model for the audience, they must necessarily be an idealist vision of what American values *could* or *should* be—and not what they already are.

For Elizabeth McCord, her true identity involves cultivating a thriving family life in the midst of one of the most important careers a person can have. Nettleton (2017) sums up well Elizabeth's family orientation: "Madam Secretary also avoids clichéd family plot lines . . . McCord is warm, loving, and deeply engaged with her three children" (para. 9). Similarly, Nettleton asserts that Elizabeth and Henry's marriage is an ideal depiction, one in which the spouses truly love and cherish one another. She argues that "[Henry] tosses the parenting ball back and forth with his wife with competence and good humor," and supports her career with "no rancor, jealousy, or sarcasm" (para. 10). Each episode of the show ensures that viewers will see evidence of Elizabeth's tidy and loving home life. Owen (2014) humorously remarks that "the domestic plots sometimes get shoehorned into the A-story in the most unbelievable way: in episode two while in the midst of a Benghazi-like embassy attack, Elizabeth goes for a stroll through a park with her husband" (para. 9). Foregrounding these plot elements serves to keep the family at the forefront of both Elizabeth and the audience's minds, as we see Elizabeth nearly flawlessly tend to—sometimes simultaneously—weighty matters of state and weighty matters of marriage and parenting.

Madam Secretary's executive producer Barbara Hall asserts that the writers incorporated family moments frequently into the show "because one of the mission statements for the show has always been to show people in these important positions . . . as being people who have lives like our own" (Jacobs, 2018, para. 2). From the beginning, then, family was an intentional element of the program, and if the show serves as a model, then frequent family moments should both resonate with audience members while simultaneously calling them to be more involved. In other words, by depicting characters whose values are similar to viewers, the show primes audiences to identify with the characters. Due to this identification, audience members can then

accept the model the show portrays for American identity. Though the show centers on Elizabeth's role as a parent, Henry is also an exceptionally involved parent. When dropping their middle child off at college, for example, the family assumes that Henry will be the primary parent since Elizabeth's job necessitates her presence. There is no negotiation over this being a mother's responsibility, or even a job for both parents; Henry and Elizabeth manage parenting equitably, and without gender stereotypes.

Not only does parenting factor into the McCords' family dynamic, but their marriage is strong, as well. Hall articulates that the writing team worked hard to represent "a healthy, functional" marriage, with "conflict resolution . . . and keeping romance alive in the relationship" (Jacobs, 2018, para. 5). These are public servants who daily work long hours to do right by their country, while still maintaining family involvement. Many found the family focus endearing; Ninneman's (2019) article for *Medium* features a summary lead that states, "family makes this show worth viewing." Lyons, in a 2019 *New York Times* article, also reports that "the family stories were often the best part of the show" (para. 7). We can understand, then, that the familial nature of the storylines were a more compelling reason to tune in than the political plots.

If viewers appreciated the familial element of the show, it might be because family is a common value in the United States. To understand how this concept functions rhetorically in *Madam Secretary,* we will examine the history of family rhetoric in the United States, the coining of the idea of "Family Values" and how this linked American Evangelicals and the Republican party, the coded language within Family Values that has racist assumptions, and the gender implications of this narrow definition of family, as well as the state of the family in the United States today.

Throughout the history of this country, scholars have been concerned that the definition of family was headed toward crises. May (2003) reports that

> since the founding of the United States, fears of the collapse of the family have evoked not only concern for the fate of individuals in their private lives, but the much more ominous specter that in the wake of familial decline, the entire society would unravel. (para. 2)

If the nuclear family were to disintegrate, the argument went, "our" way of life would, too. Much of the concern toward the supposed decline of family life resides within the "neoliberal vision of society, in which healthy, stable families produce healthy, stable children;" and, therefore, that unhealthy families produce unhealthy children (Bender, 2018, p. 539). Neoliberal economic ideology is often associated with conservative political beliefs, and, as we will discuss, Family Values and conservative politics are inextricably linked. Much of the fear of the devolution of family life was/is racially motivated as well, and those who fare poorly in society are deemed to be morally deficient. Kohler (2020) argues that "just as a central tenet of neoliberalism is that individuals deserve the rewards and punishments they incur from largely unregulated markets, family security is framed as the result of individual choices pertaining to marriage and childbearing (p. 146-147). This takes the blame off of the system and puts it back on the individuals or families. By absolving the system, those who benefit from said system avoid losing power. At the same time, the fear of losing power can motivate doubling down on exclusionary policies in the name of valuing family. To better understand the ways in which Family Values rhetoric has flourished in American political conversations, let's now turn to a discussion of how family has been defined through the linkage of evangelical values with the Republican party, and how these values are evident in *Madam Secretary.*

The strong emphasis on family within *Madam Secretary* might be due to its link to religious faith. As we will discover, American Evangelicals have linked the idea of valuing family political rhetoric; more specifically, this idea of Family Values unites Evangelicals and the Republican Party. *Madam Secretary*'s family orientation is overtly linked to religious faith. Schlumpf (2018) reports that "Catholic screenwriter and co-executive producer Joy Gregory . . . works in storylines of redemption, spiritual struggle and even overt references to faith" (paras. 3-4). Though Elizabeth's faith—or lack thereof—is not a feature of the show, Henry McCord's profession may indicate to viewers that the McCords are a religious family. Indeed, Darling (2016), writing for *The Gospel Coalition*, a website featuring conservative Evangelical articles, encourages its readers to watch the program because "you don't have to be a liberal to believe the State Department can be an influence for great good in the world" (Darling, 2016, para. 6). Evidently, the author believes that both he and Elizabeth share a worldview. *U. S. Catholic* also lauds the show, suggesting to its own readership that *Madam Secretary* "wonderfully" depicts an effective yet "bold" Secretary of State. By publishing positive reviews of the show, both *the Gospel Coalition* and *U. S. Catholic* endorse *Madam Secretary* for their religious followers. People of Christian faith, then, may feel that their worldview is reflected by the characters in *Madam Secretary* in a way that they would not see in other recent depictions of government. Part of this perceived similar worldview may have to do with how Elizabeth's values family. American Christians have been major proponents of Family Values in American politics.

One of the most popular and influential Christian ministries, Focus on the Family, states that its "Foundational Value" is "nurturing and affirming the God-ordained institution of the family" ("Our Vision," 2021). The founder of Focus on the Family, James Dobson, later also founded "Focus on the Family Action" in 2004, a "political organization dedicated to 'the

defense of moral values and family'" (Russell, 2004, para. 1). Dobson did so because his original organization has "advocacy restrictions" as a 501(c)(3) non-profit, and also because he believed that liberal politics were "'tearing families apart, undermining marriage, belittling Christian values and endangering our children'" (para. 1). Evidently, evangelical Family Values have become tied to conservative politics.[8] The GOP's (2021) current website states, under their "Issues" page, that

> The family is the bedrock of our nation. When American families flourish, so too does our country. Our Party's economic and social policies, including tax reform, education, health care, and the sanctity of life, should always promote and strengthen that most sacred bond. ("Family Values")

Yet the linking of Family Values from evangelicals to the Republican party happened over time. Dowland (2009) argues that "Christian right leaders envisioned the family as the central unit of American society, and they framed their political activities throughout the 1980s and 1990s as a defense of the "traditional" family" (p. 607). He states that

> the genius of the movement was to frame opposition to abortion, feminism, and gay rights as "defense of the family." After all, who was going to argue against families? By the end of the 1970s, the Christian right had devised rhetoric that made liberal reformers enemies of the family and positioned "family values" as mainstream fare. (p. 608)

Family Values has proven to be an enduring bridge between conservatives and evangelicals. In fact, Johnson and Tamney (1996) found that "traditional family values" strongly influenced "the outcome of the 1992 presidential election" long after the heyday of family values politics of the

8. For a comprehensive history of how American Evangelicalism became linked to American political conservatism (both including and beyond family values), see Kobes du Mez, K. (2020). *Jesus & John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation.* New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation.

‘70s (p. 98). Indeed, membership in a strict church environment increased the likelihood that voters would elect someone whose political policy platform could “achieve traditional goals,” including Family Values (p. 107). Furthermore, Krugman (2021) recounts an even more recent event, this time from J.D. Vance, “who is now a Republican Senate candidate in Ohio,” and who “lashed out at the ‘childless left’” (paras. 1-2). The Republican Party and American Evangelicals have both sought to enforce a specific notion of Family Values.

This enforcement has been possible due to the massive media industry that politically conservative Evangelicals have created (Kobes du Mez, 2020). Wilcox (2020) agrees: “there is no organic political counterforce comparable to what white, evangelical Christian churches provided to neoliberalism” to disrupt this dominant ideology surrounding Family Values (p. 153). The lack of a counterpart has led to “policy choices, cloaked in the language of family morality,” that disadvantage families that do not meet the supposed ideal of those usually white, middle-to-upper class, hetero- and cisgender-normative families with rigid gender norms (p. 147). The supposed ideal has clear implications for how race and gender are interpreted in family systems.

Much as in *House of Cards* and *Veep*, the characters of *Madam Secretary* are overwhelmingly white. This trait, of course, influences how audiences will interpret the model portrayed by the McCords and Elizabeth’s team. Furthermore, the values the show professes are largely based on white, protestant, middle-class values. While the show attempts to provide a universal national identity, it is always inherently bounded by the demographic characteristics of the actor and characters on the show. Similarly, the way that Family Values are discussed in American political rhetoric is always inherently coded language. May (2003) argues that “‘family values’ is a term often used as a code and marker of race and class” (May, 2003, para.

5). In fact, May argues, despite the idea that so-called traditional family structure is ideal (such as the opinion espoused by Wilcox, quoted above), "there was never a 'traditional' American family. There has been as much diversity and changes in American families as in any other aspect of national life. But the power for myth continues" (para. 7). Thus, to return to the recurring theme of the American family "in crisis," May asserts that "anxieties about the family emerge at times when national identity, as defined and understood by the American middle class, appears to be threatened—by immigrants, radicals, 'communists,' racial or sexual minorities, or feminists" (para. 8). In this way, American national identity relies on Family Values rhetoric to maintain a specific way of life. *Madam Secretary* first aired in 2014, firmly within Obama's second term. This was a time when conservative (and white) Americans felt that their way of life was threatened, as evidenced not only by the racism faced by the Obama family (Chan, 2016; Fishman, 2013; Samuel, 2016; Thomas, 2009) but also by Donald Trump's subsequent election, which was largely also due to racism in general (Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018; Willimson & Gelfand, 2019) and specifically to racist backlash to Obama's presidency (Beauchamp, 2018; Reid, 2017). The notion of Family Values serves to exclude certain "others" who do not fit into the cultivated mold of ideal American family life. At the same time, Family Values serves to create, perpetuate, and enforce certain gender boundaries. *Madam Secretary* manages to both challenge and reinforce these gender stereotypes.

The previous chapter, on *Veep,* extensively covers the barriers to women in politics in the United States. While an analysis of the gender implications of Elizabeth's job is outside the scope of this chapter, it is important to note that *Madam Secretary* is a positive representation of a woman in a position of power, in contrast to the previous case studies' female characters. This is valuable, because within political discourse, "women's roles as mothers and caretakers in the

traditional family structure are naturalized," (Gring-Pemble & Chen, 2018, p. 88) in that communication and legislation serve to reify women's stereotypical roles as mothers (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, p. 388). Furthermore, views of women's roles and equality have become politicized and are generally split along party lines. A 2017 Pew report stated that nearly 70% of Democrats "say the country hasn't gone far enough when it comes to giving women equal rights with men" while over half of Republicans "say things are about right" (Horowitz, Parker, & Stepler, 2017, para. 2). Annampedu (2021) argues that "in the workplace, even though her colleagues are mostly men, McCord has an aura of authority around her that everyone respects, primarily for her ingenious ideas that often involve negotiating with the enemy for the greater good" (para. 4). This positive depiction of a woman in government is refreshing. Chung (2014), too, argues that McCord is a formidable character: "she's simultaneously intense and calm, assertive and disarming, sarcastic and sincere" (para. 4). Elizabeth manages to be someone who everyone might want to be. The show's positivity is endearing to many, but Chung (2014) finds it unrealistic. She critiques:

> please tell me that a woman with such grave and innumerable daily responsibilities for ensuring peace and human rights around the globe isn't whining about "only" having once-a-week-sex with her absurdly perfect husband and the fact that she can't be available, in the midst of a Benghazi-like debacle, to hear her spoiled daughter . . . complain about her mother being too famous and her father being too supportive. (para. 6)

Ultimately, Chung argues that *Madam Secretary* "reflects fantasy archetype more than reality" (para. 17), something unattainable and therefore, for her anyway, distasteful. Yet, reflecting on Revelations Entertainment's mission, it seems that the producers believe that this high calling

serves to remind Americans of what is possible as our best selves. In other words, if their products reveal truth, but the depiction seems unrealistic, then it must be calling the audience back to their ideal, "true" identity.

We know that television participates in social learning of roles and gender expectations (Greenberg, 1982; Witt, 2000). Studies over the past decades have reported that gender roles are portrayed overwhelmingly stereotypically on television, with women depicted as "dependent" (Long & Simon, 1974, p. 110), "traditional" (which means married and motherly) (Busby, 1975, p. 122), focused on romance and "home and family" (Signorielli, 1982, p. 594), and relationally-oriented instead of ambition-oriented (Lauzen, Dozier, & Horan, 2008, p 211). While some shows today are beginning to challenge some of these assumptions, Couprie, Cudeville, and Sofer (2020), in a study published just last year, found that individuals do still tend to conform to the stereotypes and norms for their gender. While they were specifically examining gender norms in romantic relationships, it is evident that these norms heavily influence gender and role identity. Chiaburu et al. (2014) report, for example, that members of an organization expect less "civic virtue" participation, or participation in the governing of said organization, from women, but only specifically when gender stereotypes have been activated (p. 191). While Elizabeth McCord has an exceptionally lofty career, she still reinforces many gender stereotypes through the show's emphasis on her family role. While a family-orientation is not a bad thing, the emphasis on her position as a wife and mother fits into the long lineage of women on the small screen.

More than the show is a representation of a woman in a high-stakes job *Madam Secretary* is a representation of a woman in a high-stakes career *who expertly manages and supports her marriage and family.* While her powerful profession, and her husband and family's lack of

jealousy or disdain for her career, challenges gendered stereotypes, the consistent emphasis on Elizabeth's family life also serves to reify the gender boundaries women must operate under. This calls to mind Dan Quayle's criticism of the show *Murphy Brown* (Brockell, 2018). Blakemore (2018) contextualizes his critique, arguing that Quayle characterized *Murphy Brown* "as a threat to 'family values'—a position that inherently placed her [Murphy Brown, the character] on the side of the families of color whose single family structures supposedly threatened the white, middle-class status quo of the 1990s" (para. 4). The character and show, then, were a menace to Family Values. Davies and Smith (1998), too, explicate that *Murphy Brown* situated black women as mothering, and the white woman—Murphy Brown—as the character who must seek out wisdom on how to be a mother from these other women. They argue that this threatens white notions of family, as well as white supremacy. Hartman (1992), argues that the show is also threatening to traditional American (read: white, cisgendered, heterosexual) families. Hartman asserts that Quayle, in his speech, "implies that only one form of the family is to be valued or even defined as a family" (p. 387). Because Murphy Brown was a single mother, her depiction threatened so-called traditional nuclear families, and the inherent gender roles assigned to those units. In a similar way, *Madam Secretary* operates within this historic framework that situates families and Family Values in a particular way. It is, of course, important to note that so far in this chapter, the concept of gender roles has presumed heterosexual couplings of cisgender individuals. While there is much scholarship regarding the detrimental influence of hetero- and other gendernormative representations, this chapter does not have space to delve into the ways in which *Madam Secretary* upholds these stereotypes. Still, because the show will always be read within a context that affirms the supposed traditional ideal American family, it is imperative that we note that gender norms, both on television in general

and on *Madam Secretary* specifically, overwhelmingly exclude those who are not white, heterosexual, cisgender, and middle-class individuals, couples, and families. This, of course, is a key element of American Family Values.

Altogether, Family Values has been an enduring lens through which evangelicals and Republicans have cooperated to influence American politics. *Madam Secretary* buys in to this rhetoric, and asks audience members to do so, as well. By depicting an idealized version of family life—one that is white and upper-middle class—*Madam Secretary* constitutes Americans as defenders of the "American" way of life. Though this is an inherently exclusionary definition, family as a value (as opposed to Family Values) is something Americans agree on.

Family resonates with viewers of *Madam Secretary* because it is a key value for Americans. DeFrain (2028) recounts that "over 75% of Americans report a belief that being married is an important value" (p. 74). Furthermore, the Pew Research Center (2018) found that "Americans across the political spectrum placed family at the top" of their values, reporting that "72% of Republicans" and "67% of Democrats" stated that family "provides them with a sense of meaning" (Hughes & Van Kessel, para. 3). Americans value marriage and family, and this value has signaled to politicians that family ought to be a policy and platform regular. May (2003) argues that "the question of 'family values' has become a high-stakes issue" such that politicians in both parties situate themselves as family-focused. Recent presidents have passed policies named to advance support of families, such as Clinton's "Defense of Marriage Act" and W. Bush's "Marriage Initiative" (paras. 2). Though the idea of Family Values is often linked only to the Republican party, both parties express a value of family life. And, though political liberals in America may purport to support diverse families, policies such as Clinton's actually also most often reify the supposed ideal family: white, middle-class, married heterosexual and

cisgender parents. Still, most Americans find family to be important. Thus, the fact that family features prominently in *Madam Secretary* is likely to appeal to Americans at large, and thus serves as a model for an ideal American identity—one in which Family Values feature prominently. Of course, as discussed in the next paragraph, most families today do not look like the traditional nuclear family, with two married, heterosexual parents. Even still, it is clear that the majority of voters consider family to be an important American and personal value. This is important because, in order for the show's creators to constitutively identify Americans, they must construct a vision that adheres to values the audience will be primed to identify with and accept.

However, despite the majority of Americans valuing marriage, "there is no longer one dominant family form in the U.S. (Pew Research Center, 2015, para. 2). In 1960, "73% of all children were living in a family with two married parents in their first marriage. By 1980, 61% of children were living in this type of family, and today less than half (46%) are" (para. 2). Though marriage continues to be a priority to Americans, family situations do not always reflect this value. Furthermore, Wilcox (2020) argues for the Institute for Family Studies, that "while America's educated elite overwhelmingly reject a renewed marriage-centered ethos in public, they embrace a marriage-centered ethos for themselves and their children in private, thereby affording their families a significant cultural advantage" (para. 4). For Wilcox, this advantage is due to the idea that "the American Dream is in much better shape when marriage anchors the lives of children" (para. 6). Evidently, the majority of Americans value family, and are therefore poised to accept on-screen characters who depict idealized versions of family life. By serving as a model of an ideal American, *Madam Secretary* constitutes Americans collectively as family-oriented, thereby reifying Family Values as a key to flourishing.

Madam Secretary as Model

Previous chapters of this dissertation have assessed how some political television shows serve as anti-models for viewers. In contrast, *Madam Secretary* directly models what it portrays as an ideal American. Carson (2016) reports that "what sets *Madam Secretary* apart from *Veep* and *Scandal* and *House of Cards* is that, relatively speaking, it's the earnest one" (para. 3); the show's creators explicitly wanted characters who contrast with negative depictions, such as *House of Cards,* and who instead reveal the "noble side of public service" (para. 3). Gliatto (2014) characterizes the show as a "sophisticated" representation in a location and situation that "teems with smart, powerful adults" (para. 2). These are not the inept public officials of *Veep;* rather, the characters are capable and sincere. The show depicts characters that the audience will choose to identify *with* instead of in opposition to. In this way, the show allows viewers to align themselves with the values Elizabeth espouses and embodies. The show's values are especially evident in family relationships.

Family Values

Elizabeth portrays family as a key element of being an ideal American. Because *Madam Secretary* serves as a model of ideal American identity, it therefore constitutes Americans as those who embrace and preserve Family Values. To understand precisely how family values are constituted in the show, we will examine some specific instances in which Elizabeth and her family model ideal familyhood. Elizabeth and her family reinforce Family Values in their relationships and interactions both with one another and others. Moreover, the presence of Elizabeth's family continually reinforces to the audience that she is a mother, and is therefore fulfilling her family-values duty of motherhood and family involvement. In this way, Elizabeth models Family Values for the audience. The endearing relationships position the audience to

respect and even wish for similar family relationships, thereby constituting Americans collectively as protectors of Family Values. I first investigate how Elizabeth is portrayed as a mother, then as a wife, and then as a protector of the American way of life.

Family First

Throughout the series, we see Elizabeth as an involved mother. The family eats meals together, and, in the first episode, Elizabeth worries about how her new job and the family move will impact her children ("Pilot"). Though Elizabeth does take the job and therefore risks upending the kids' lives, the fact that she takes the children's reactions into consideration indicates her integrity as a parent and as a mother. Her agonized inquires to her husband about whether she has made the correct choice for their family are evidence of the fact that she is a "good" mother—a mother who takes into consideration how her career impacts her children.

This dedication is evident because Elizabeth takes time away from the United Nations General Assembly to be sure to make her daughter feel cared for at college drop off, and reminds the audience that family is her priority. As Elizabeth is the chief diplomat for the United States, her presence at the United Nations is of the utmost importance. She is a present and caring mother first, before she is a public servant. Though Elizabeth often must balance being present for her family and for her job, she does not let others take over or negatively impact the other. While viewers may not *actually* wish for their Secretaries of State to put family over job—after all, many diplomatic issues involve lives at stake—because the show serves as a model, we are not really investigating whether the show portrays accurate or idealized *politicians.* Rather, the show portrays ideal *citizens,* and, according to the show's model, American citizens ought to be family-oriented.

The family feature in every episode of the show, and we actually know more about them and their personal lives than we do about Elizabeth's staff. Many instances demonstrate that family is an important value to Elizabeth. One such event takes up time on multiple episodes, and is situated as an equally important plot point to the global catastrophes taking place on the diplomatic stage. Stevie, the McCords' oldest daughter, performs heavily in the series, and in "The Show Must Go On," Stevie is dating the president's son, who is a recovering addict. She borrows his jacket, but a packet of heroin falls out. Harrison tells her that it's from when he was still using, when he would hide stashes in the hems of his jackets; he tells Stevie that he thought he trashed all of them, but that it looks like he missed one. Stevie is concerned, but before they are able to finish their conversation, Secret Service come to their hotel room and state that they must take both Stevie and Harrison into protective custody immediately—Elizabeth has unexpectedly become Acting President, as Air Force One, holding the President of the United States, appears to have been digitally hijacked, and the Vice President, who would otherwise be next in line, has suddenly had to be hospitalized with a mysterious illness. Ideally, bringing the family all together in one place both suggests that the family of the Secretary-of-State-and-now-Acting-President are of an exceptionally high importance, but it also provides screen time for the characters. This allows Elizabeth to both function as Acting President and, simultaneously, supportive wife and mother.

Elizabeth and Henry are informed that Stevie and Harrison were found together. Remarkably, they find a moment to comfort each other and discuss that they will not address Stevie's relationship situation during the crisis. Stevie confides in Henry that she has Harrison's heroin in her pocket because she rushed to hide it when the Secret Service members arrived. Henry loses his cool, chiding Stevie, "are you out of your mind? In all the world, you choose an

addict and not just any addict, the son of your mother's boss, who happens to be the President of the United States!" Henry is angry that Stevie has made poor decisions, that she has put herself at risk, and that her decisions could have negative impacts for others, including her mother. Ultimately, Henry angrily tells Stevie, "you are gonna have to face the fact that something is compelling you to make the world's most irresponsible decisions," and he commands her to "get out of your own way for a change!" More importantly, though, he instructs Stevie to "get out of your mother's way." While Elizabeth serves as the primary model valuing family, Henry's commentary to Stevie suggests that all family members play a role in supporting one another as a family unit, and that they should consider one another in their actions. Similarly, it supports the family hierarchy, as the children must consider the parents' needs above their own. Parental authority is a key element of Christian Family Values. Stevie is left fighting back tears, and Henry storms off. All of this happens while the family is in lockdown. This event signifies that family is of the utmost importance. The show takes valuable screen time a way from a suspected terrorist plot to zoom in on Stevie's romantic and familial relationships. Clearly, the family issue is essentially as important as the national and global issue, and Henry and Elizabeth are quite involved in Stevie's life. Though Stevie is an adult, their involvement is depicted as emerging from a place of love.

The situation with Stevie has not been resolved in one episode. In the following episode, "The Doability Doctrine," Elizabeth and Henry reveal to Stevie that they have run a follicle analysis on her which revealed that she was clean of heroin. She is angry that they have violated her privacy and trust; Stevie is an adult, albeit one who lives with her parents. Here again, the audience is party to the involvement Elizabeth and Henry have in Stevie's life. While she is upset by their involvement in this instance, she continues to live with them and enjoy a friendly

relationship with them for the duration of the series, suggesting that their involvement is welcome and even ideal. They shoot back that she lied to them about dating Harrison, but she contents that she can date whomever she pleases. Elizabeth retorts that Harrison is not just anyone, "he's my boss's son." This situation is made all the more weighty by the fact that the McCords have a personal relationship with Harrison's parents, and Harrison's father is also Elizabeth's boss. Not only is this sticky enough, but Harrison's is also the First Family of the United States; both sets of parents are on the national stage. Elizabeth and Henry believe that informing Harrison's parents about the heroin is also an ethical issue. Later that day, in between Elizabeth and Henry each dealing with professional and national crises, they catch up by discussing Stevie's situation. Elizabeth asks, "are we more worried about her than [the mysterious death of Russian President] Ostrov?" As it turns out, Henry is indeed more worried about Stevie than the issue of international significance, as he continues without pause his reflection on how they have handled her situation. It is clear that their family not only comes first, but also that, despite the parents frustration with their daughter, they do love and care about her deeply. They worry about not only her situation but also their relationship with her, as Henry worries that they "hit her a little too hard" with their confrontation. Once again, the familial issue is just as, or even more, important than global issues and Elizabeth is expected to devote equal or more attention to her family life.

The episode wraps up with the entire McCord family eating dinner together, openly discussing their feelings with the help of Allison's, the high school daughter and newly minted peer mediator, talking stick. Elizabeth confesses that it is challenging to parent an adult child, and Stevie admits, "you guys are right, for the past year, I have been a total screwup." What began as a heated conversation ends with all three embracing and smiling. While Henry and

Elizabeth wash up from dinner, they ponder over their handling of the situation. Elizabeth queries, “so we’re not horrible parents?” Throughout the two-episode arc, it is clear that Elizabeth and Henry strongly desire to be “good” parents. It appears that they define “good” parenting as supporting their children and also helping them make the right decisions. In this case, the right decision involves considering both personal and national implications of one’s actions. Not only do Elizabeth and Henry take time away from both of their important jobs to discuss their family, but they also impart values to their children. The happy ending to the drama is also significant, as it suggests to the audience that families can overcome disagreements. It places the parents in the role of protector, even over adult children, and it situates them as guides and as those who impart patriotic values. These values serve in both the best interests of the child and in the best interests of the United States. In this way, Elizabeth serves as a model for both her children and the audience.

Elizabeth’s children frequently factor into storylines, and their presence allows the audience to continually remember that Elizabeth is a mother. One theme that demonstrates family involvement is one which I like to think of as “Honey, I Blew Up The Kids.” We might consider that after the first explosive experience, Elizabeth would refrain from including her children in attendance at her events, yet this is not the case. Elizabeth’s family often attend events with her; though her three children seem to be involved in many extracurricular activities, they are available to support Elizabeth. The family involvement between family members is both endearing, allowing the audience to identify with the characters and embrace family as a value, and also allows Elizabeth to perform motherhood regularly. Some of the events Elizabeth’s family attends end in crisis, and Elizabeth’s children are often threatened by danger. In “Passage,” Elizabeth brings her middle daughter to India with her for a state visit. In the middle

of the event, an earthquake hits, leading to an explosion at a factory owned by an American company. In the aftermath, Elizabeth cannot find her daughter, Alison, and she must balance fear for her family as well as smoothing over diplomatic issues which arose from the explosion. Of course, putting the lives of Elizabeth's family at risk incorporates gripping drama into the show. At the same time, it functions to regularly include Elizabeth's family members in key diplomatic issues, reinforcing Elizabeth's role in the family and allowing her to serve as a model of Family Values.

Later in the series, in "Left of the Boom," Elizabeth is hosting a conference which every member of her family is able to attend. Again, the family's presence highlight's Elizabeth's role as mother, and also reinforces that family involvement in supporting one another is required. An attendee wearing a suicide vest detonates her bomb, risking the lives of Elizabeth's loved ones. Not only do these plots allow for a positive depiction of Elizabeth as a concerned mother, but it also conveys to the audience that family members ought to be present to their loved ones even if it means putting themselves in danger. It is unlikely that Elizabeth's family would actually attend quite so many political functions, much less face explosions as often as they do—it is hard to imagine the Albright girls or Chelsea Clinton, for example, being the victims of such repeated threats, so the storylines are clearly functional rather than representative. The family supports her career at a high cost to themselves.

A third instance of explosions impacting the McCord family comes in "E Pluribus Unum," when a targeted explosion rocks the Oval Office—with Stevie inside. While Stevie's presence is not this time directly related to her mother's work, Stevie does only have this job because of her government connections. In this way, Elizabeth's career and presence as a mother both provided this opportunity for Stevie. Stevie is largely unharmed by this event, reinforcing

Elizabeth's work once again. Elizabeth is an exceptional diplomat. More importantly, these episodes demonstrate that Elizabeth is an engaged and caring mother who goes to sometimes extreme lengths to include her children in her work life.

Of course, this emphasis on Elizabeth's family life also highlights the sexism at play for women who have careers; it is doubtful that if the show's main character were a man, we would spend valuable episode time unpacking family involvement. We can consider *The West Wing* as an example; while we know that the president has a family, and while they do feature in the show, the emphasis of the plot primarily focuses on policy or political topics. As discussed previously, women on television are predominantly family-oriented, and stereotypes about women in powerful careers lead audiences to dislike these formidable women. Familial storylines wedged in to Elizabeth's political career keep her motherhood at the forefront of the audience's mind, identifying her primarily as a wife and mom. The audience is never allowed to forget that Elizabeth is a mother first. This representation also serves to reinforce that women can, and even should, "do it all." Elizabeth is an excellent diplomat with a demanding career, and she is capable of expertly managing family conflicts and supporting each member of her family. This is truly an unrealistic depiction—most jobs do not provide the flexibility Elizabeth is afforded to be able to chat with her husband in the middle of serious international disasters (Henry's career also provides him with unique access and security clearance). Furthermore, Elizabeth is able to attend many events for her children that other mothers, who may not have paid leave or flexibility in their work hours, would not be able to. Elizabeth has access to many features other parents do not have, such as a driver for her car, such that she is able to work and/or communicate with family while commuting to work responsibilities. Additionally, Elizabeth's children are all capable of being left home alone after school due to their age; we are

not provided with an explanation of how Elizabeth and Henry managed a dual-career home when their children were little, but we might surmise from external clues (their home, attire, and events) that they are financially capable of affording a nanny or other excellent childcare. Elizabeth's representation of family values is utterly dependent on her access and privilege, and is ultimately an unrealistic depiction of motherhood and family life. Nonetheless, she is a model for what viewers ought to expect from themselves as ideal American citizens. And, because her family is endearing, the audience is situated to identify with the character and to wish their family well. *Madam Secretary*, then, serves to constitute Americans as family-oriented. Parenting is one part of Family Values; marriage is the other key element.

Marriage-Centric Henry and Elizabeth, though they may sometimes disagree, always support one another's careers and always work out their differences by the end of the episode. Tim Daly, who plays Henry, believes that the show "portrays a marriage that's actually working and it's dynamic, but this couple's committed to figuring out how to do it and that have problems that I think make it very relatable for people" (Lee, 2016, para. 4). There are countless examples of their model marriage in the 120 aired episodes (for a compilation, see *Paramount Plus*'s article "#RelationshipGoals We Got From Elizabeth and Henry"); one instance occurs in "Left of the Boom," when Elizabeth and Henry, both of whom have had long days at work, manage to connect with one another that night, discussing their experiences while holding hands. Note that their conversation is sweet and communicative, rather than rushed or cranky, as we might expect. Their connection is a common occurrence, as the two are often catching up on their days in their bedroom, before or after work. They also have a marriage of vitality, exhibited by their frequent flirtations. In "The Rusalka," Elizabeth asks for Henry's help in selecting an outfit for her to wear. She asks him, "which one of these dresses says, 'I'm terribly sorry your heartless autocrat

husband if finally dead?'" Henry remarks, "I know which one makes this heartless, autocrat of a husband glad he's not dead." Elizabeth saucily replies, "Oh my god. That is the lamest come on line ever." Henry, undeterred, shoots back, "and yet it's working." Their interaction demonstrates the strength of their marriage, which, American politicians argue, is the foundation for building healthy families and children. Marriage is an important part of Family Values.

Because Elizabeth and Henry demonstrate their affection and care for one another, it is clear that their marriage is strong. Indeed, unlike the other shows assessed in this dissertation, Elizabeth's marriage is the only one that lasts. Frank and Claire Underwood (*House of Cards*) are essentially separated, and Selina Meyer (*Veep*) is divorced, and ends a subsequent relationship for her career. Furthermore, Frank and Claire consciously chose not to have children (Claire had multiple abortions) so that they could focus solely on their careers, and Selina is a clueless and sometimes cruel mother. In stark contrast, Elizabeth manages family life with aplomb, and the family's affection for one another is evident throughout the series. In fact, they are quite endearing. Not only is Elizabeth an ideal family member, though, Henry is, as well. Lee (2016) argues that "Day's character is prized as the ideal father and husband figure," a character who is "competent" at fathering (paras. 5-6). While this analysis primarily focuses on Elizabeth's role as a wife and mother, it is important to note that her competence in both her career and family life are based on Henry's competence and excellence in his own realms. In other words, if Elizabeth were solely responsible for her children, for example, she would be unable to achieve in her career. Elizabeth serves as the model, but her model is based on a particular family unit.

Each time Elizabeth begins a new job, she and Henry discuss the influence this job will have on the power dynamics of their marriage. After the McCord family moves to Washington, D.C. for Elizabeth's job, she approaches Henry about their romance, remarking to him that "we

used to have sex more often." She asks him whether its due to her new job: "I know some men, they're turned off by women in positions of power." Henry replies, "I totally love women in power positions." When Elizabeth seems confused by his response, he switches course: "I'm completely attracted to your masculine energy." When Elizabeth seems more discouraged by this response, he pleads, "tell me what to say." The issue is never fully resolved as they are interrupted by the buzzing of a cell phone; the fact that it unresolved is telling. It is clear that the audience, like the McCords, will have some discomfort and uncertainty around the unstereotypical career balance between Elizabeth and Henry. We can easily imagine that if Henry were the new Secretary of State instead of Elizabeth, the conversation above would likely not have happened. If it did, it might instead reflect the attractiveness of Henry's new powerful position instead of worrying over Elizabeth's. In the final season, after Elizabeth becomes president, the two have a similar conversation. Elizabeth asks Henry if he feels that they had "more sex before the election," and wonders "is there maybe a power imbalance? Like, you can't take charge with your commander in chief?" Henry retorts, "my subtle psyche can boss yours around any day." To Elizabeth's dismayed reaction, he responds, "I find it sexy that you're my commander." Henry, sensing Elizabeth's dissatisfaction, finally relents, "please tell me what to say." Of course, any marriage would be strained by the demands of public office, and by the presidency specifically. Yet this conversation is too similar to the original episode's to be a coincidence. Though the couple demonstrates a strong romance throughout the series, their first conversation about power dynamics was never fully resolved for the audience. Is Henry intimidated by Elizabeth's powerful job(s)? His inability to placate Elizabeth's concerns seems to suggest that at some level, he does not know how to communicate regarding power in their relationship. These concerns do not seem to manifest outside of these two conversations, but they

are important conversations for the audience, as they happen just as Elizabeth takes office each time. Evidently, the writers assumed that audience members would be asking these questions, as well. And by refusing to resolve the discomfort around a wife in a position of power, the show perpetuates stereotypes in family dynamics, even as it also works to challenge these assumptions. The McCord's marriage, though, is not based on these concerns. The other episodes following their power dynamics discussions contain few references to power discrepancies, and home and family duties are managed with no discussion of traditional gender roles.

Protector of the American Way of Life

Not only is Elizabeth an involved wife and mother, she also protects Family Values in her work. Elizabeth demonstrates her care for family in how she interacts with her staff. In "E Pluribus Unum", Elizabeth asks a staffer to do some work at night, but he seems hesitant. She asks if he has his daughter that night. Although he insists he will work it out, Elizabeth's remark indicates that she is cognizant of the familial responsibilities they all have. Her question was not necessary, but Elizabeth showed sensitivity to the reality that her staffers have the same concern for their own families that she has for hers. In fact, that same staffer later leaves her staff (right as she becomes president!) to be with his family. Elizabeth's Family Values extend beyond her own family members; in this way, she is a protector of Family Values and the corresponding American way of life.

Throughout the series, Elizabeth also connects to her diplomatic missions from a basis of her value of family. We see multiple instances of this in the first episode, priming us to watch for this value throughout the show. First, Elizabeth must negotiate the release of two young Americans from imprisonment in Syria. She meets with the parents of the captives and pleads with them not to go to the media, relying on her experience as a mother to reassure them. When

the parents ultimately do take their story to media outlets, Elizabeth understands that their concern led them to do what they believed would most help their children. She is, after all, pro-family. The situation resolves with the parents greeting their children on the tarmac as the exit their rescue plane; it is a heartwarming reunion, emphasizing the love parents have for their children. This, of course, is portrayed as a prime American value; the two boys bend down to kiss the ground of their cherished country, relieved at being brought home to safety, to family, and to America. Not only does this episode feature a pro-family sentiment, but also a clear pro-American sentiment. More importantly, it links the two together such that being pro-American necessitates being pro-family.

Elizabeth manages to get the kids home safely by "obliterating protocol," as the president labels her actions: she texted President Dalton's wife to set up a late-night meeting with him. Elizabeth uses her connections and friendship with the president and his wife, demonstrating that she understands the influential role of and importance of family. She also highlights the important role that the president's wife plays. Here, his wife plays an role not only in their family dynamic but also in global politics. Furthermore, President Dalton's wife—who remains unnamed—models the ideal wife, one who has an active social life but also has an active influence on her spouse. While Family Values remain intact, it is also important to observe that we do not see President Dalton interacting with is wife or son here. Very little screen time is devoted to Dalton's family life, and the presence of Dalton's family primarily serves as an outlet to highlight Elizabeth's own Family Values. It is necessary that we see Elizabeth as a loving wife and mother, but it is not similarly necessary that we view Dalton as a loving husband and father.

In the second instance in that episode, Elizabeth attends a state dinner with the King of Swaziland. Elizabeth has been disappointed that she must attend this event, as she is concerned

that it will appear that she approves of his polygamist lifestyle. She manages the situation by emphasizing her own Family Values. The king comments that she has a "nice, small family," and she retorts, "well, I just have the one husband." Thankfully, the king finds this humorous, and refers to his ten wives as "wonderful partners." Elizabeth goes on to greet each wife by name, surprising each dinner attendee, and she appeals to the king for his help in resolving the AIDS epidemic in his country by mentioning his "obvious love of family." She secures his help, and also emphasizes the value of each wife as an individual. In this way, she situates herself as a defender of the American way of life, and defines this American way of life as family-oriented. In this case, she is serves as a conduit for advancing these American values around the world.

As in *House of Cards* and *Veep, Madam Secretary* features an overwhelmingly white cast. An examination of race in this and the other shows could be its own dissertation, as it absolutely influences how American citizenship is collectively constituted. Therefore, it is imperative to note that, as the show constitutes ideal American citizenship as family-oriented, it is always also constituting a particular kind of family as the ideal. Elizabeth's family features five white members, with a heterosexual, cisgendered couple who have never been divorced, and three biological kids who share both parents. They are also securely upper-middle class, and attend private school. Furthermore, because the show situates viewers as protectors of this American, (ideal) family-oriented way of life, it therefore also situates Americans as antagonistic to families and individuals that may threaten this ideal. That not only includes families that do not adhere to the situational norms of the McCords (those who are economically and relationally other than them), but it also situates the audience to view white families as the ideal. Thus, families that do not meet this idea, including members of families who contain non-white members, will be viewed as un-ideal. They do not uphold the American way of life.

We Are Not Politicizing This Family

Madam Secretary situates Elizabeth as a model for American citizenship by depicting her as a person of integrity and a person of strong Family Values. By focusing strongly on what they have depicted as an ideal family, the show also constitutes Americans as protectors of this American way of life. In other words, Americans are family-oriented, but, by viewing Elizabeth make personal efforts to prioritize her family, and by watching her appeal to Family Values more broadly throughout the world, *Madam Secretary* primes audiences to collectively buy in to the notion of Family Values and become supporters of these values. In supporting family values, the audience will also become protectors of the American way of life, which also prioritizes family values. Because political leaders, and representations of political leaders, articulate the boundaries of group membership, and because American collective identity is always built upon the rhetoric from these political leaders, Elizabeth McCord serves as a model of ideal American citizenship. This allows the show to constitute American national identity, as based on the model of idealized citizenship, for viewers and the American public. Importantly, family values rhetoric in America is closely tied to civil religion. While *Madam Secretary* is not an overtly religious show, it is an overtly patriotic show, and it therefore reifies American civil religion through its strong emphasis on Family Values as well as the inherent connection to religion through Henry's profession. While valuing family is positive, Family Values has become a deliberately exclusionary political weapon, marking those who do not adhere to the supposed ideal as immoral and unAmerican. By featuring a female lead, the show pastes Family Values stereotypes onto notions of feminism, allowing women's empowerment to be enveloped into traditional Family Values. This case study, and the two previous, applied theories of constitutive rhetoric, which are typically applied to real-world political settings, to fictional political contexts.

In this way, this dissertation demonstrates how traditional rhetorical theories can be applied to new media. Furthermore, this case study demonstrates the importance of assessing how fictional models of citizenship constitute national identity, as they will reinforce or challenge real-world assumptions.

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CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Popular culture participates in citizens' conceptions of ideal values, their individual identity, and community identity. In particular, political television shows are uniquely constitutive because audience members are already primed to view political actors as models of national values. Not only do political leaders serve as models, however; they also define the nature of group membership for Americans. In this way, they model citizenship and national identity. Even fictional politicians function as models for viewers, and collectively, pop culture texts and consumers of those texts work both with one another and with the larger collective citizenry to construct national identity. *House of Cards, Veep,* and *Madam Secretary* each function constitutively to represent and constitute American national identity at a given time in the nation's history, providing a unique snapshot of that era's notions of citizenship. Throughout this dissertation, I have sought to understand how contemporary political television shows model American citizenship through the portrayals of political leaders, and how these models of citizenship constitute American national identity. In this chapter, I not only answer these questions, but also investigate how these shows work together to constitute American national identity in a collective and particular way.

Textual facilitation of identity works not only through individual texts but also through the collection of texts audiences come in contact with. Each show assessed in this project constitutes a novel collective American notion of citizenship, and these three programs also work in conversation with one another, as well as many other political texts—both real-world (political speeches, news articles, social media posts, and many others) and fictional—to continue to revise the American national identity as history marches forward. While current national identity will

reflect themes of previous notions of collective identity, it will also inherently be its own timely identity. To understand how these shows work in concert, I will first review how each program constitutes American citizenship separately. Then, I will investigate common and contrasting themes from each program and how these themes build on one another in viewers' conception of national identity. Importantly, viewers may not overlap between these programs. Instead, they may view other fictional representations. For example, viewers of *House of Cards* may not view *Veep,* but they may have watched *24, Scandal,* or *Parks and Recreation.* Certainly, each of these shows will vary in their constitution of American national identity, but the discussion of pop politics' role in modeling and constituting citizenship values serves as a starting point for future research. Thus, I will conclude this dissertation with areas in which I believe will serve fruitful for subsequent investigations of how 1) contemporary political television shows model American citizenship through the portrayals of political leaders and 2) how these models of citizenship constitute American national identity. Importantly, I am most concerned with how writers of television shows think about and construct politics, political rhetoric, and pop politics texts, and, therefore, citizenship and identity. I provide one reading of these texts, through the lens of rhetorical criticism. I do not take into consideration texts from the audience themselves regarding their own conception of national identity; rather, I investigate what messages the writers create, and how these texts have the rhetorical power to function constitutively. Altogether, this dissertation provides an important link between how political discourse rhetorically functions constitutively in American citizenship and public identity and how popular culture both reflects and constructs rhetorics of reality. This moves the field forward by analyzing existing theories of constitutive rhetoric, political rhetoric, and pop politics in a new context and new cases that demonstrate these theories. Additionally, this dissertation contributes to our knowledge by

making explicit the link between how fictional politicians *model* citizenship and how those models *constitute* collective American national identity. This constitution is always evolving in conversation with emerging political and social texts and contexts; these case studies assess a particular moment in American history, and therefore provide a foundation for further inquiries into models of citizenship and the constitution of collective American national identity.

The Constitution of American National Identity

While each show provides a unique definition of American national identity, they also contain overlapping elements and themes. These themes specifically address this particular moment. I do not presume to identify a comprehensive constitution of American national identity that would encompass the country's conception through the future. Rather, collective identity must be thought of as an ongoing, ever-evolving entity that ever responds to emerging and historical texts which define, in conversation with one another and the public, over and over, how America sees itself. In any given moment, there will be consistent elements from text to text that will provide clues to the overarching nature of American national identity at that moment. Here, I will locate a few consistent themes in the three television shows addressed in this dissertation. One element I especially want to draw out is the constitution of Americans as feminine. This element is most clear in my analysis of *Veep,* but here I will also divulge how all three programs collaboratively model a feminine identity. Secondly, I will address the narrative elements of the show which emphasize civil religion, and finally I will elucidate how they shows individually and collectively define national identity in exclusionary ways. Before I summarize the case studies, however, I will review the theoretical underpinnings of my arguments. Then, I will summarize the arguments in each case study, before finally comparing and contrasting the depictions from the three shows.

In this dissertation, I have followed Dow's method of rhetorical analysis from her 1996 book, *Prime-Time Feminism.* I also relied on Fisher's (1984) narrative paradigm, which articulates that humans understand communication through the lens of storytelling. Americans construct their identity collectively, relying on narratives constructed through texts. Politicians' speeches play an important role in defining the values Americans ought to hold, but individuals and groups also participate in processing and either adhering to or altering those articulated values. Ideological underpinnings are revealed through shared texts, and texts inform viewers on a given community's values. Asen (2004) argues that citizenship is a process which takes place and is performed over time, and will therefore continually be adapting to the exigencies and rhetorical texts an individual and nation are exposed to. Yet group identities are always inherently also exclusionary; they define both who *is* and is *not* included or allowed to participate in citizenship values or activities. By defining the values that construct citizenship, political and pop culture texts also define national identity, as citizenship is necessarily a collective identity. As defined in Chapter One, I view *politics* as the actions and words of *politicians* (members primarily of the Executive branch of the American government) which directly result from, or impact, their role as a member of the government. *Political television shows* are those programs which depict the above-defined politicians and/or politics, and *pop politics* consist of artifacts which are designed to depict, satirize, or otherwise portray these politicians or political acts, primarily, though not solely, for entertainment purposes. While each of these terms could be and often are more widely defined, this dissertation's purpose is to examine politics, politicians, political television shows, and pop politics within a specific context. Therefore, these terms are here specifically and narrowly defined to allow readers to understand the particular context which we are discussing. While the methods of this dissertation

can and ought to be applied to other political and pop politics texts, that is beyond the scope of this project. Here, I seek to understand how citizenship is modeled and defined by fictional members of government in the executive branch, for this is not only the most common portrayal of government, but also the most salient rhetor of citizenship for the American people.

One cannot be a citizen without a collective to belong to. This collective is historical in the public's imagination, but, realistically, it is always being renegotiated into a timely version. Thus, national identity must be understood as snapshots that are time-bound. Each of my case studies investigates how national identity is constituted by a particular television show, but that identity is one that fits the particular time frame. Specifically, all three shows began airing during Barack Obama's presidency (Obama's tenure covered 2009-2017; these shows premiered in 2013, 2012, and 2014, respectively), and ended during Donald Trump's (2017-2021; 2018, 2019, 2019). This was a time in the United States of intense political tension, division, and increasingly vitriolic attacks against the other party, groups within the United States, and other politicians. The representations portrayed on-screen necessarily are a response to this unique political and cultural timeframe.

House of Cards constitutes Americans as truthful by portraying Frank and Claire Underwood as anti-models for American national identity. This first case study, presented in chapter two, examines this political thriller, which was was Netflix's flagship show and the program that made binge-watching fashionable. *House of Cards* is notable for its political scandals. The Underwoods' trail of untruths cultivates a disastrous ending for them, situating the audience to disidentify with the values the characters embody. The show's plotlines cover intrigue and conspiracy, which are interesting yet distasteful to audience members who fear that this show accurately depicts Washington, D.C. politicians. This allows the show to encourage

audience members instead to value truth. The idea of truth was particularly salient for Americans in the era during which *House of Cards* aired; "post-truth" was a buzzword (see the International Journal of Media & Culture Politics 2018 special issue; Oxford Dictionaries' 2016 Word of the Year, (Steinmetz, 2016); Keyes's 2004 book *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*), and an apt descriptor of political rhetoric. Moreover, *House of Cards* functions constitutively through identification by antithesis by representing a tragic example of American values. I describe two specific instances which exemplify the theme. First, I analyzed Claire's affair with Adam Galloway, and how she ultimately destroys this relationship through trickery and deceit, putting her political ambitions above affection. Second, I investigate the murders Frank commits, and the ways in which these murders intersect with his own affair with Zoe Barnes. All of Claire and Frank's relationships are characterized by twists of the truth or outright lies. Their deceptions situate audience members to view their actions with suspicion, and therefore to identify in opposition to the Underwoods. A final example, in which Frank manipulates President Walker, American business advisor Raymond Tusk, and Chinese businessman Xander Feng, highlights the political ambition, selfishness, and deviousness of Frank's moral character.

Veep constitutes Americans as feminine by situating Selina Meyer as an anti-model who allows the audience to identify with compassion and competence. Constituting Americans as feminine is both surprising and important for the rest of this analysis, so I will delve into a thorough summary of this case study. This second case study, found in chapter three, explores how *Veep* uniquely combines compassion with competence, both of which are worthwhile American values individually, to demonstrate how compassion in fact leads to competence. Selina serves as an anti-model, positioning the audience in opposition to her selfishness. As

satire, Selina's behavior was specifically designed to be over-the-top and repulsive. By never stating which political party the characters are members of, the show allows viewers to critique government and Americans as a whole, and it requires that all audience members interpellate themselves into the anti-model rather than providing loopholes for members of the opposing party who might otherwise think they are exempt because they already identify in opposition to the characters. The writers deliberately attempted to motivate audience members to do better than the characters. Selina and her staff bumble through politics, making inane or catastrophic mistakes. Unfortunately, the backbiting and general self-absorption depicted by these characters is one that many D.C. actors have said reflects real government. Because *Veep* portrays for the audience the ways in which acting distastefully toward one another inhibits competence, audience members will instead be inspired to embrace compassion and, therefore, competence. I unpack several specific episodes that expertly portray this anti-modeling, inspiring instead compassion, competence, and a feminine identity. First, I assess "Fundraiser," the pilot episode of the show, which introduces us to the characters and premises behind *Veep.* In this episode, the characters each continually demonstrate their incompetence by promoting policy options that are useless and upset other important industries. Second, in "Joint Session," in which Selina must give the State of the Union speech, the characters fail to realize that their budget cuts will upset politicians and Americans, and wind up making a worse budget in the process. "Iowa" depicts Selina's campaign for president, in which she and the staffers again consistently miss the mark on what should be basic tasks. Not only does this episode depict their incompetence, but it also demonstrates their lack of compassion, which is the key to their incompetence. Selina cannot think of why she wants to be president except that it is her turn; she deserves this role. "Some New Beginnings" features a wedding in which none of the characters care more about the

nuptials than the political news taking place simultaneously (not even the bride and groom). All of these examples, though, demonstrate that the characters are not inherently incompetent; rather, their lack of empathy for others, and their related self-absorption and conniving, are what keep the characters from enacting competence in their roles. If this show is alike reality, then it positions the audience to be repulsed and to instead pave a better path for national identity and citizenship values.

Veep also constitutes Americans as feminine. This element is important to how we read both this show as well as the others, which I will elaborate upon further later in this chapter. Selina overtly rejects her status as a woman in politics, and instead attempts to utilize a masculine communication style. Her values and communication are distasteful to the audience; because she is an anti-model, the audience can identity in opposition to her masculine style. Moreover, because her communication style is unexpected for a woman, the audience is even more likely to notice the anti-modeling that is taking place. In this way, *Veep* also functions constitutively through identification by antithesis.

Madam Secretary constitutes Americans as protectors of the American way of life. Chapter four contains the third and final case study. Like *House of Cards*, *Madam Secretary* is a political drama, captivating viewers both through Elizabeth McCord's political and familial interactions. Like *Veep*, the main character of this show lacks political affiliation, allowing the audience to all individually and collectively identity with her. I argue that Elizabeth models American citizenship by serving as a protector of the American way of life. Contrary to the previous case studies, in which the main characters served as anti-models through identification by antithesis, *Madam Secretary* is an endearing show, inspiring audience members to identify with the characters. In this way, the show serves as a model rather than an anti-model. The

McCord family represents a definition of an ideal family life; the show's production company claims to reveal truth, allowing this show to participate in the construction of how audiences will interpret values. The show's writers intentionally depicted a particular family setting, one that would both resonate with Americans and would also narrowly define ideal families. I explain the link between Family Values (as opposed to valuing family), American Evangelicalism, and the American political right, and articulate how *Madam Secretary* upholds Family Values rhetoric. Family Values has a long history in American political rhetoric, and it serves to define who counts as a "good" American and, therefore, who is excluded. *Madam Secretary* upholds a particular and exclusionary definition of Family Values, and constitutes Americans similarly as protectors of Family Values and the American way of life. I examine how family is portrayed in several noteworthy examples. First, I assess how Stevie's love life debacle provides ample opportunities for the McCord parents to demonstrate their involvement and care for their children, and that these familial asides serve to continually remind the audience that Elizabeth is a mother first. I also outline the somewhat overdramatic "Honey, I Blew Up The Kids" plots, which again allow Elizabeth to operate simultaneously as an exceptional diplomat and an exceptional mother. Not only is Elizabeth portrayed as a caring mother, but she is also depicted as an ideal wife. Her marriage is loving and supportive. Finally, I examine how Elizabeth is situated as a protector of the American way of life—an American Family Values evangelist in her diplomatic work. Serving as a model for the audience, Elizabeth therefore provides an example for the audience to embody and exalt family values.

Citizenship On-Screen

I want to draw out some points to note from these case studies, and in doing so I will compare the ways these shows have constituted Americans. First, I want to discuss the portrayal

of gender in each of the three programs. As argued in the chapter covering *Veep*, Selina Meyer functions as an anti-model that constitutes Americans as feminine. It does this by positioning Selina as a masculine communicator, as well as by allowing Selina to model (through opposition) compassion, which is a stereotypically feminine quality. While this theme is most evident in *Veep*, the other two shows also contribute to this identity construction. *House of Cards* features characters who use their power to control. We might expect this from Frank, but Claire is also manipulative and dishonest. Women are stereotypically submissive and meek in American gender norms (Vishwanatha, et al., 2021; Bauer, 2018; McCabe, 2012; Cuddy et al., 2015; England, et al., 2011; Gmur, 2006; Judodvalkis, 2003; Werner, 1985), so by portraying both Underwoods, who are also anti-models, as displaying masculine qualities, the audience is again interpellated into a feminine identity. Women are also stereotyped as family-oriented. Yet neither Frank nor Claire desire to be parents, and when Claire does get pregnant in the final season, it is only a strategic move rather than a maternal one. On the other hand, *Madam Secretary* depicts a motherly protagonist, and Elizabeth's husband, Henry, also enacts traditionally feminine qualities. For example, Henry is often the primary parent and, though he was a Marine and therefore has the requisite masculine qualities to qualify as a main character's husband, he also is the ethical voice of reason. These stereotypically feminine qualities serve to model feminine identity to viewers. We might expect that American fictional political television shows would constitute Americans according to the historic masculine ideal, but each show contributes to the constitution of a feminine American national identity through their modeling of the citizenship values portrayed in the characters' actions. This has important implications for how Americans view themselves and their real-world politicians. Because this is an ideal identity, it may allow for critiques of current politicians. For example, several news outlets,

during now-President Biden's campaign, contrasted how masculinity was performed by Biden and then-president Trump (Miller & Gupta, 2020; North, 2020; Viser, 2020). Yet the qualities attributed to Biden, of gentleness, compassion, and familial loyalty, are often attributed to women. Perhaps the constitution of a feminine identity for Americans collectively has begun to take effect.

A feminine identity was previously addressed within the case studies, but one theme that all three shows participate in that I have not previously discussed is civil religion. American civil religion is most evident in *Madam Secretary,* in which religion and America are more overtly linked, specifically through the writers, Henry's profession, and the family values which have historically been expressed through religious themes. However, each of the three shows depict civil religion. Most importantly, they each depict their model or anti-model through politicians, reinforcing the near-worshipful attitude Americans have toward the political elite. Second, all three of the show's introductory credits feature patriotic music meant to produce a particular mindset in viewers, one in which they are open to partaking of political rhetoric. Finally, the characters attitudes toward the country model how viewers ought to perceive the country. Frank and Claire view political office as a tool to get what they want; because they are anti-models, they instead inspire reverence for American government. The same is true for *Veep;* Selina feels entitled to public office because she wants the power it contains. As an anti-model, then, she situates the audience to view public office as public service. Finally, *Madam Secretary* models treating politicians and government with respect. Elizabeth works each day to advance American values, and does not seek office for selfish reasons but instead to serve the citizenry. As a model, she reflects these values to the audience. Reverence and respect for government and its officials perpetuates civil religion.

Civil religion requires allegiance to the American cause. But "American" continues to be narrowly defined. Each case study briefly addressed the exclusionary nature of the constructed national identity. The three shows have this in common; each program constitutes American identity narrowly. All three shows feature an overwhelmingly white cast, and therefore contribute to the continuation of an idealized white national identity. The main characters are all also heterosexual, cisgender, and wealthy. *House of Cards* and *Veep* serve as anti-models, which might allow viewers to disidentify with those elements of the characters' values. Still, the dearth of diversity on-screen has important implications for the constitution of collective identity and who is deemed an ideal American. *Madam Secretary,* of course, as a model for Americans, directly excludes those who do not mirror Elizabeth's family's demographics. Thus, these fictional politicians model citizenship in racially-, economically-, sexuality-, gender-, and class-coded ways. Each of the above themes are evident in all three shows, and therefore collectively influence how national identity is constituted. However, there are many more themes that can and ought to be addressed in future research.

Future Research Agenda

Thus far, I have reflected upon the themes and elements that have already been evident in this dissertation. However, there are many more questions that could be answered by further investigation of these shows, as well as in other areas of political discourse, identity construction, pop politics, popular culture texts, and citizenship. Given the time, I would have answered the following topics in full; because that would make for an ineffectually long dissertation, I instead address them briefly here, laying out not only my own future research plan but also topics for other scholars to take up. First, I began writing this dissertation in 2018, when all three shows were still airing. Since then, each show has concluded, and all three ended with a woman main

character as president. If I were beginning now, I would focus my research on this surprising element of the shows' narratives. It is fascinating that all three series' writers make the creative decision to feature a woman in the role of president, and it has important implications for how the audience will read these models of citizenship and national identity. For example, do the representations of a woman president support the constitution of a feminine identity, or reject it? The office of the presidency has always been masculine; is this upheld or challenged by placing these particular women (Claire, Selina, and Elizabeth) in the Oval?

Not only are there questions regarding how identity is constructed, but I am also curious as to how we might read these plots considering real-world political events. All three programs had their final season after the monumental 2016 election, in which Hillary Clinton became the first woman presidential candidate to be nominated by one of the two major American political parties. Though she was not ultimately elected to the highest office, her candidacy inevitably changed how Americans view women's fitness for office. I suggest that future research investigate how each of these three shows portray a woman president; this should include how she became president (was she elected to office?), the challenges she faces in office (are they similar to challenges faced by male presidents?), and the conversations the characters have about her gender as it pertains to the presidency. That research would expand upon many other investigations into women in politics, both real world and fictional. Sheeler and Anderson's (2013) chapter on women presidents on fictional television shows would provide a basis for said investigation, and this research direction would elaborate on the understanding they have already provided to the field of how fictional representations both reflect and create the public's perceptions of women presidents. While my research has focused on how these depictions influence *citizenship,* fictional representations of presidents also profoundly impact how

Americans interpret their own real-world government. Certainly, these future investigations should examine how women presidents on *House of Cards, Veep,* and *Madam Secretary* model American citizenship for viewers, and how those representations constitute collective American national identity. Furthermore, however, a much deeper examination of gender would be necessary.

While my dissertation has explored the surface representations of gender in each of these three shows, a deeper analysis must be forthcoming. Because these three shows are foundational to understanding future representations of political actors, these specific shows should continue to be researched and assessed. As mentioned above, an analysis of gender in the presidential rhetoric of the women presidents portrayed on screen is necessary, as well as how audience members and the fictional American public responded to these women presidents. In addition, future researchers could compare how male and female characters are represented in ways that both reinforce and challenge gender stereotypes. This analysis should be beyond simply assessing the ways in which male and female *presidents* are portrayed, and should instead focus primarily on how male and female *individuals* are portrayed. This would provide further clarification on how values are modeled by fictional politicians, certainly, but beyond that, it provides an analysis of how values are modeled by fictional *politician-adjacent* characters. This dissertation has emphasized how political actors, both real and fictional, impact values. But research also tells us that characters in general, and not just political characters, influence audience perceptions of stereotypes and values. Therefore, an analysis of the portrayal of gender beyond how the main characters are portrayed would clarify how other characters also model citizenship. It is also important to note that the vast majority of characters on all three shows are heterosexual and cisgender. Very little has been said in this dissertation about how the dearth of

this representation impacts how audience members will interpret citizenship; this gap must be filled by future rhetorical analyses.

Another area that must be further investigated is the ways in which racial stereotypes are represented and reinforced on-screen. As mentioned in each case study, the characters of each program are overwhelmingly white. Much research has already been completed on depictions of race in fictional television, but these three shows contribute to how citizenship and race are interwoven in the public's mind. The shows all aired on different services, indicating the breadth of these stereotypes. Netflix, HBO, and CBS each deliberately depicted white political actors, and this will necessarily impact the constitution of identity. Not only is it important that the main characters of the show are white, which frames how audiences will interpret ideal members of the political elite, but each show also features noticeably few non-white actors. This exclusion necessarily defines American citizenship and identity in a particular and narrow vision. Each case study emphasized that the shows were constituting Americans according to a supposed ideal. It is meaningful, then, that these exclusions are not part of the ideal, and has important implications for how Americans view themselves, how othering occurs in society and on-screen, and how policy is made. An entire dissertation could be written on the depiction of race in each one of these shows, separately.

In order to understand the depths of influence each show has on American citizenship, we must continue to investigate the other values portrayed on-screen. These key areas (women in politics, gender representations at large, racial stereotypes) must be addressed to gain a fully rounded understanding of how citizenship is portrayed and constituted through television. There are also other elements that could be investigated in each television show studied in this dissertation. For example, in *House of Cards,* I argue that truthfulness is the key value portrayed

on-screen. However, another value that I did not have space to address is conspiracy. Future research should unravel the ways in which depictions of conspiracy impact both how audience members understand real-world politics and their own place in the citizenry. In addressing *Madam Secretary*, I argue that Family Values guides the plot. Another value, though, guides Family Values: integrity. Elizabeth McCord is a principled woman, and one could argue that her integrity guides her in all decisions, including the decision to prioritize her family. In other words, while viewers who identify with *Madam Secretary* are gathered into a family-values mindset, they are also positioned to believe that integrity is an important American value. I have proposed just two additional lenses through which to view these shows; other researchers can identify many others, all of which will further explain how these shows contribute to American understanding of national identity.

I have established in this dissertation that fictional depictions of political actors model citizenship for Americans, and constitute American national identity. Due to space limits, I have only investigated three shows here. However, there are many more shows that depict political actors, and even more will be created in the future. To continue to understand the ways in which American national identity is constructed, we must continue to assess the rhetorical models constructed through television shows and other popular culture outlets.

A final area of future research would be to investigate audience reception and reaction to these programs. A rhetorical scholar could investigate audience-created texts such as viewer forums, fan fiction, social media posts, and reviews of the show. A social scientist could survey viewers or otherwise study how audiences interpret the messages delivered on-screen. This form of investigation would further allow scholars to understand how the constitutive potential of fictional political television shows are applied in the real-world. Of course, this line of inquiry

would also always be partial, as texts work in conversation with one another and the audience. This would prohibit scholars from definitively identifying whether a television show "successfully" constituted Americans in a particular way, because by the time survey results had come in, audience members would have come into contact with many other political texts.

I began this dissertation with an epigraph from Bonnie Dow (1996): "I study television because I think it is important, because I think it could be better, and because I want people to take it seriously. I also study it because I like it" (p. xiii). Thus far, I have established that fictional political television shows are important because they model citizenship and constitute American national identity in particular ways, for particular time periods. I have pointed out that political television shows depict certain "ideal" American identities, which are always exclusionary. In this way, I have suggested that fictional political television shows could be, and do, better. I have also argued that people should take fictional political television seriously, because, far from being mere entertainment, it is constantly rhetorically situating audience members to be influenced in their values, their citizenship, their identity, and, therefore, their civic actions. Fictional political television has real-world implications. Most importantly (for me, anyway), I have written this dissertation because I like fictional political television shows. In my quest to uncover how these shows rhetorically and constitutively function, I have found that our leisure activities and our scholarship can overlap. Perhaps, even, they should overlap.

While there will always be further areas of inquiry to pursue (much to my delight), this dissertation argues ultimately that *House of Cards, Veep,* and *Madam Secretary* model citizenship for viewers in narrow, supposedly idealized ways. Each show individually constitutes Americans as truthful, compassionate and competent, and protectors of the American way of life, respectively. Together, these values can be taken as a "super-ideal" American. Moreover, the

shows collectively function to constitute Americans as feminine, and to reinforce civil religion. The so-called ideals portrayed are also always exclusionary, and these exclusions have profound impacts on how viewers will interpret their world. As viewers continue to tune in, they will also be inspired to tune out voices that do not align with their constituted identity. It is necessary to continue examining fictional political television shows as long as they continue to exist.

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