How Donald Trump and the 2016 Presidential Election Eclipsed Frank Underwood’s Election in ‘House of Cards’

Charna Flam

Chapman University, flam@chapman.edu

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How Donald Trump and the 2016 Presidential Election Eclipsed
Frank Underwood’s Election in ‘House of Cards’

A Thesis by

Charna Flam

Chapman University
Orange, CA

Dodge College of Film and Media Arts

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Committee in charge:

Leah Aldridge., PhD, Chair

Nam Lee, Ph.D.

Rebecca Forster, Ph.D
The thesis of Charna Flam is approved.

Leah Aldridge, Ph.D., Chair

Nam Lee, Ph.D.

Rebecca Forster, Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT

"How Donald Trump and the 2016 Presidential Election Eclipsed Frank Underwood’s Election in ‘House of Cards’"

by Charna Flam

In 2016, the U.S. faced a seismic change in national politics and the evolution of the entertainment industry. As the rise of streaming services had finally hit its stride, Netflix, the industry disruptor, had released a steady stream of critically acclaimed series, most notably beginning with the platform’s first original program, House of Cards. The series’ main character, Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey) would become a fixture within the television landscape at the time, as both political dramas and anti-hero series were at all-time high, but what the writers of House of Cards did not expect was how their plotlines would come to life mere months after the season four premiere. In March 2016, House of Cards debuted its fourth season chronicling President Frank Underwood’s bid for re-election, all while a populist candidate with no prior public service, Donald Trump would pursue the Oval Office. Donald Trump would then fill the historic election with unfamiliar controversies that voters were not accustomed to. As the real election progressed, the distorted cynical fictionalization of reality in the political thriller began to reflect reality. This thesis examines how the real and fictional presidents handled controversies, interacted with women, and associated with the alt-right movement; and attempts to establish how House of Cards lost its cynical tone as the real world's socio-cultural sphere began to reflect the dark hyperbolic events that occurred in Frank Underwood’s Washington D.C.
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**Introduction**

By 2016, *House of Cards*, a political thriller about U.S. national politics was in its fourth season, and its narrative arc centered on fictional President Frank Underwood’s election run. *House of Cards* became notorious for its dark and cynical tone, the thriller packed the series with ruthless murders, blasé betrayals, and double-crossing politicians, into a world filled with continuous lies. The series initially captivated audiences for its ability to present a seemingly outrageous and inconceivable political environment led by a villainous politician. The extreme juxtaposition was at its most impactful as the series aired during President Barack Obama’s administration, as the series presented an alternate fictional Washington D.C. to the real, “dignified,” and “honorable” institution during President Obama’s administration, with the real 2016 U.S. election between former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, the first female candidate of a major party, and real estate mogul, Donald Trump, the populist candidate with no prior public service. As the real-world U.S. presidential campaign progressed, Donald Trump would fill the historic election, with unfamiliar controversies that voters were not accustomed to. Trump would then build a campaign on disparaging minority groups, from the Latino community,¹ Black community,² and Muslim community,³ become a part of a criminal “hush money” scandal,⁴ and reignite dangerous sexist and misogynistic comments.⁵ Suddenly, a distorted cynical fictionalization of reality in a political thriller began to reflect reality, as the real world's election reflected a dark socio-cultural shift through Frank Underwood’s Washington D.C.

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⁴Kara Scannell; John Miller; Jeremy Herb; Devan Cole. "Donald Trump indicted by Manhattan grand jury on more than 30 counts related to business fraud" *CNN Politics*. March 31, 2023.
Netflix’s first original program, *House of Cards* (2013-2018) attached director David Fincher, stars Academy Award-winning actor Kevin Spacey and Emmy-nominated actress Robin Wright, and emerged during a very different political and cultural environment from when it concluded. The development of *House of Cards* began at the start of the election of President Obama in 2008 and premiered following Obama’s second election win in 2012. During this time period, anti-hero-focused shows were at an all-time high on cable channels — i.e. *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), *Mad Men* (2007-2015), *Damages* (2007-2012), *Dexter* (2006-2013), and *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) among them. Simultaneously, a large number of scripted shows about Washington D.C. and politics, such as *Scandal* (2012–2018), *Veep* (2012–2019), *The Americans* (2013–2018), *Madam Secretary* (2014-2019) and *Designated Survivor* (2016–2019), were populating streaming services, network, cable, and premium cable channels.\(^6\) Scholar Yigit Tikgoz attributes the rise of the anti-hero to the growth of the industry and separate televisual brands' interest in attracting more viewership.\(^7\) The affinity for these complex anti-hero stories has been recognized as an opportunity for audiences to “resonate with their own [negative] behaviors and attitudes.”\(^8\) While the combination of recognizing audiences' affinity for the anti-hero and its successful contribution to the industry, it leads to the industry’s pattern of depicting negative behaviors and attitudes, and as a result, TV presents the opposite of reality — i.e. Obama’s dignified administration — providing the culmination of two expanding entertainment trends, the peek into politics and the acceptance of resonating with the anti-hero.


By 2013, Ted Sarandos, former Netflix Chief Content Officer and current CEO, had to create original content as they were heavily dependent on licensed content originating from broadcast and cable outlets. Sarandos goes on record to state Netflix’s fiercest competition was HBO: “The goal is to become HBO faster than HBO can become us.” To “become” HBO meant adopting the cable leader’s “quality TV” approach, through narrative complexity, pedigree talent, and high production values. Netflix then enlisted A-list and pedigree talent (Kevin Spacy, Robin Wright, David Fincher) with a proven and popular genre of TV: the political drama. As a result, Netflix becomes an industry disrupter — due to its ability to rid of an existing business model of rental and mailing services as it advanced a new type of business: the streaming service. Streaming services would become internet-based platforms that deliver uninterrupted access to film and television. This would lead to more scripted, unscripted, and infotainment series for the industry disruptor.

*House of Cards'* season four’s timing coincided with the 2016 election, which points to a notable shift, not in the show’s thematic and narrative focus, but in the cultural context in which it was consumed, making the series' fourth season in 2016 the focus of this paper. *House of Cards'* fourth season premiered with all 13 episodes in the midst of the real election’s primaries and caucuses, on March 4, 2016, just after the real election’s pivotal Super Tuesday, March 1, 2016.

The series originally premiered with 13 episodes on February 1, 2013. The drama series was adapted by Media Rights Capital from the BBC 1990 series, adapted from Michael Dobbs’ 1989 novel of the same name. In 2008, Media Rights Capital (MRC) brought the concept to David Fincher, who had decided the series needed an expert writer to transfer parliamentary

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9Peter Kafka. "How HBO could have become — or bought — Netflix." *Vox.* November 18, 2021
drama to Congress, Beau Willimon, writer for *The Ides of March* (dir. George Clooney, 2011) and former political aide to U.S. senators, Chuck Schumer, Howard Dean, and Hillary Clinton, wrote the pilot.\(^{10}\)

In early 2011, Willimon had concluded writing, leading the team to search for a home for the series. Before the series was shopped around, Spacey was attached alongside Fincher. The A-list director who is notorious for elevating projects to embrace the dark and cynical (e.g. *Zodiac, Fight Club, Seven*) joined the project on the heels of his 2010 Academy Award-winning film, *The Social Network*. Ahead of bringing the series to networks and cable channels, MRC pitched directly to Netflix. As a fan of the BBC series, Ted Sarandos, Netflix’s Chief Content Officer at the time, analyzed Netflix’s data and learned Spacey, Fincher, and political dramas were widely received by subscribers.\(^{11}\) Soon after, Sarandos decided *House of Cards* would be the series that introduced audiences to Netflix’s original programming. By March of 2011, Netflix had outbid HBO and AMC, for the new series, promising $100 million for two seasons and 26 episodes.\(^{12}\)

Those who joined Spacey and Wright, included Michael Kelly, Justin Doescher, Derek Cecil, Jayne Atkinson, Corey Stoll, Kate Mara, Nathan Darrow, Mahershala Ali, Boris McGiver, Paul Sparks, Molly Parker, Neve Campbell, and Jeremy Holm. As creator Willimon wrote the fourth season with Bill Kennedy (*American Odyssey*), Melissa James Gibson (*The Americans*), Kenneth Lin (*My America*), Frank Pugliese (*Law and Order*), and John Mankiewicz (*House*).

The series itself begins with a Presidential election concluding, as Francis Underwood, the South Carolina congressman, and House majority whip, celebrates the win of fellow democrat, President Garrett Walker (Michel Gill). But very quickly, President Walker reveals to Frank that

\(^{10}\)Caitlin McDevitt. ""House of Cards' writer."" *Politico*. June 26, 2013


\(^{12}\)Ibid. "A Drama’s Streaming Premiere."
his earlier promise of appointing him as Secretary of State has been revoked because he wants
the congressman to maintain his role in the House to promote the President’s policies. As the
three seasons would unfold, Frank would make the move from House majority whip to Vice
President, and then manipulate President Walker into giving up his seat, and by default, Frank
would become President. Ultimately, leading to the fourth season which follows Frank as he
navigates running for office, and needing the votes from citizens, rather than manipulating the
politicians in his party. Along the way, Frank would kill journalists, blackmail his party
members, and commit violence against women; as a result, *House of Cards* unknowingly
prepared American voters for what would become the unorthodox campaign that Trump would
embrace.

As for what brought upon one of the more contentious elections in recent American history,
it has not been confirmed what motivated Donald Trump to run for President. However, several
media publications, journalists, and political scholars have speculated on an array of ideas. Each
is rooted in recognizing and understanding who Donald Trump was before he became the 45th
President. Ahead of his pivot to politics, Trump was regarded as a real estate mogul, successful
businessman, and media personality.13 Throughout his role in American culture, Trump would
form a sense of intimate accessibility with the public, which began when he first entered the
public eye during the 1980s. In 1987, Trump’s connection with the public was enhanced by his
business advice book, *Trump: The Art of the Deal*. This was followed by his expansion into
entertainment in 1996 when he owned the Miss USA, Miss Teen USA, and Miss Universe
beauty pageants. Later, Trump would host and become the central personality of the NBC reality

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Then on June 16th, 2015, Trump began his Presidential campaign a year in advance and declared he was running to “Make America Great Again.” Following his “eccentric” announcement, the unlikely candidate’s decision was fervently discussed by the public throughout the entirety of the election cycle, due to his lack of experience and polarizing statements. Soon after his announcement in August 2015, Politico published “Trump on why he’s running: I did it for me,” in which Trump explains he decided to run because “‘I did not want to look back in ten years and say I could have done that or I could have done that.’ Trump said… ‘I had to do it for myself.’” Still in the race in March 2016, The New York Times published “Donald Trump’s Presidential Run Began in an Effort to Gain Stature,” speculating the businessman ran for office after attending the White House Correspondents dinner, where President Obama made jokes at Trump’s expense: “That evening of public abasement, rather than sending Mr. Trump away, accelerated his ferocious efforts to gain stature within the political world. And it captured the degree to which Mr. Trump’s campaign is driven by a deep yearning sometimes obscured by his bluster and bragging: a desire to be taken seriously,” wrote reporters, Maggie Haberman and Alexander Burns. Speculation went far beyond the news cycle, with political scholars attempting to pinpoint what sparked Trump’s decision to follow through with a Presidential campaign in 2016, versus his previous hints at possible campaigns in 1988 and 1999. On June 16, 2015, scholar Benjamin C. Waterhouse inferred in his comprehensive analysis of Donald Trump as an individual, and politician, titled “Donald Trump: Campaigns And Elections” that the possibility of presidential ambition from Trump could be due to the possibility of being an asset to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Whether it was personal

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ambition, revenge, or foreign meddling, Trump managed to defeat 16 Republican contenders for
the nomination, all while developing a historic campaign.

As social media emerged and gained traction throughout the 2000s and 2010s, President
Obama was the first president to use social media for his campaign, seen with his use of
Facebook and Instagram during the 2008 presidential election. Following that lead, Trump then
developed a campaign that continued the use of social media.¹⁸ And a large part of the success of
Trump’s campaign was the excessive media coverage and consumption, and his use of Twitter,
more specifically his ability to make himself accessible to the public. Similar to Obama, Trump’s
use of Twitter allowed him to send out his thoughts and ideas at a moment’s notice, no longer
solely relying on traditional campaigning communication methods — e.g. press releases,
campaign speeches, rallies, and interviews. He was able to talk to citizens while both, he and the
public, were able to passively participate, via social media, in the illusion of a conversation about
the campaign, which then allowed consistent unscheduled and informal appearances in our daily
lives. Trump’s campaigning was unlike former modern nominees, he made his ideas very
accessible to the public, never straying away from a certain topic. Trump could, and would, talk
candidly about whatever he deemed worthy and piqued his interest. Waterhouse attributes this to
“his experience in television.”¹⁹ Explaining that Trump knew “how to get attention with
outrageous, unconventional, and often untrue statements. He also used social media, especially
Twitter, to communicate directly to the people (a practice he maintained while he was
president).”²⁰ In “Watching House of Cards in the Age of Donald Trump,” scholar Amy
Woodbury Tease attributes Trump's win to his unique ability to channel accessibility and gain
large support during 2016. While Trump’s accessibility reached a peak throughout his use of

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¹⁸Barbara Bickart, Susan Fournier, and Martin Nisenholtz. “What Trump Understands About Using Social Media to Drive
Attention.” Harvard Business Review. March 1, 2017
Twitter, this tactic clearly identified the candidate’s savviness for media manipulation. Yet, what makes Trump’s media manipulation and accessibility so impactful, was how it became an extreme version of Frank Underwood’s manipulation of the television viewing audience on House of Cards, through his use of breaking the fourth wall. Tease says:

“[Frank] invites his viewers to see the world through his eyes by breaking the fourth wall, bringing us into the know through sideways glances and snarky asides, and creating a strange intimacy between himself and ‘the people’ that mirrors the Twitter effect that Trump has cultivated and that some have likened to trust. And this is where those who follow will falter.”

The series’ use of the fourth wall has been repeatedly attributed to its similarities to Shakespeare’s Hamlet,21 which provides the audience to invoke a deeper level of intimacy between the character and audience, “as a way of inclusion on the trickery.”22 Ultimately, this intimacy, whether a fabrication or not, still contributed to Underwood and Trump’s ability to manipulate the media. Both Frank and Trump volunteered their intentions and actions to audiences, through direct addresses to audiences and voters. Those who engaged with the two were actively seeking them out, but that does not negate how the two took that opportunity to manipulate the audience and voters into their world. The two presidential hopefuls incite intimacy with voters and audiences, but the effects invoke different responses and make the series lose its edge. Frank, and the fictional world of House of Cards, is understood as a scripted piece of fiction, and as a result, has no actual bearing on the audience’s lives. Whereas Trump, his campaign, and his comments are real, and as a result of his actions and constant media coverage, would eventually increase anxiety among media consumers on a global scale.23

22Ibid, 44
While Trump was able to entice and manipulate news outlets with his unusual campaigning, streaming services isolated themselves from live news coverage, including the industry’s biggest disruptor, Netflix — which was first founded by Reed Hastings and Marc Randolph as a DVD rental service in 1997. By 1999, the company offered the subscription-based model, and then in 2007 launched the video streaming service, which was free for its existing DVD-rental subscribers. By the 2010s, Netflix executives launched original programming. By 2013, *House of Cards* had finally hit subscribers' screens. Ted Sarandos explained to *The New York Times*, his enticement with *House of Cards* and the decision to break into original programming, “‘Yeah, people will be tempted to think that it’s a real-life portrayal of life in D.C.,’ Mr. Sarandos said. ‘It’s not at all. It’s a piece of fiction that is incredible. It’s not an attempt to portray the nastiness of Washington. It’s an attempt to portray the nastiness of mankind.’” Netflix’s prestige show starring Kevin Spacey, with David Fincher attached, *House of Cards* “legitimized” Netflix.

But what audiences and critics could not understand in 2013, was the “binge model” of distribution, which Netflix launched in 2012 with their acquisition of the Norwegian series *Lilyhammer*. While not a new concept, the binge model increased in use once Netflix made its content accessible via the internet-based service. The 21st-century binge model followed the 20th-century binge models of broadcast schedules of back-to-back marathons and DVD series collections. But as scholars Jani Merikivi, Matti Mäntymäki, Antti Salovaara, and Lilong Zhangby explain in “Binge Watching Television Shows: Conceptualization And Measurement” by 2013, there was new “unrestricted access and use of the content, no episode is missed or in

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24Jani Merikivi; Matti Mäntymäki; Antti Salovaara; Lilong Zhang. "Binge Watching Television Shows: Conceptualization And Measurement" (2016) 1.
conflict with other shows, and very importantly, users can easily extend their sittings to their
liking.” Although met with skepticism, Hastings defended their rollout decision:

“In a letter to investors [Hastings] said, ‘Linear channels must aggregate a large audience
at a given time of day and hope the show programmed will actually attract enough
viewers despite this constraint. With Netflix, members can enjoy a show anytime, and
over time, we can effectively put the right show in front of members based on their
viewing habits… In contrast, Internet TV is an environment where smaller or quirkier
shows can prosper because they can find a big enough audience over time,’” reported
Forbes.

With an immediate hit, Netflix then had legitimacy within the industry and was able to develop,
produce, and release a string of critically acclaimed original programs, including *Orange is the
(2016-Present), and *Ozark* (2017-2022). While Netflix ushered in new viewing habits, audiences
were given the ability and decision to binge-watch their favorite programming, but audience
viewing patterns had not changed as much as the industry. But as C. Shao explains in “Television
Viewing Habits Revisited: The Role of Audience Habits in the Streaming Age,” although
audiences had more agency on when to watch their programs their habits were changed ever so
slightly. Ultimately, Netflix had altered the entertainment landscape more so than viewing
habits, as Laura Osur wrote in “Netflix and the Development of the Internet Television
Network.”

Yet this has not prevented Netflix from continuing to release programs through the binge
model, and this is seen clearly through the platform’s consistency in inundating audiences with

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25 Ibid, 1.
darker and cynical content — i.e. the rapid stream of consuming the dark and cynical worlds of Orange is the New Black, Narcos, Ozark, and House of Cards. What was once interpreted as a hyperbolic storytelling technique had begun to disappear as the real world began to reflect Frank Underwood’s Washington D.C. The loss of tone would be a reaction to many strikingly similar instances in which Trump and Frank were similar. As the alt-right movement increased its presence, both politicians would find themselves engaging with the white nationalist groups while still pandering to the minorities in an effort to gain their votes. The two would also exhibit a very unique ability in evading multiple controversies during their election year, from their nepotism to sex worker scandals and their manipulation of data and cyber security. Additionally, in their overall treatment and mistreatment of women, from those close to them to those they find threatening, Frank and Trump would strike several similarities, ultimately making House of Cards a less fictional show, but more impactful in its ability to resemble reality.

The comparison between Trump and Frank has been studied previously, from various angles, but most of the literature examines the earlier seasons of the series. The three later seasons are rarely discussed, which premiere during Trump’s campaign and his administration. A majority of the literature, including pieces from Amy Woodbury Tease, Zac Hestand, Sandrine Sorlin, and Joli Hamilton, examine who Frank is. In Yigit Tikgoz’s “The Rise of The Anti-Hero” there is a comprehensive analysis of how Frank is an anti-hero and how his character is developed, but scholars Jan Derksen, Emile Kolthoff, Emile, and Désiré Palmen explain in great detail the psychology behind Frank and Claire. While Dara Greenwood, Angelique Ribieras, and Allan Clifton explain the affinity audiences have for the anti-hero and what attracts audiences to engage with these characters. While analyses of the anti-hero archetypes dominate the literature, very few pieces analyze Frank’s character in comparison to Donald Trump. Those that position
the two do so very briefly, including Tease’s “Watching House of Cards in the Age of Donald Trump.” Additionally, since the series earlier seasons were examined more closely than the later seasons, the character of Zoe Barnes (Kate Mara) and the role of journalism was examined by scholars Patrick Ferrucci, Chad Painter, Patrick Jones, and Gretchen Soderlund through their respective articles, “Print Versus Digital: How Medium Matters on House of Cards” and “The Conspiratorial Mode in American Television.” A majority of the analysis of Trump that I have utilized comes from the news publications articles as the events occurred.
Methodology

This analysis is a case study examining how Netflix’s first series was able to provide a highly dramatized political thriller that would begin to reflect the reality of American politics as the streaming service would become a disruptor. The combination of scholarship along with the popular sources is how I approached my analysis of the fictional and real politicians. I referenced several articles from the following publications, CNN, The New Yorker, The New York Time, The Washington Post, Fox News, Wall Street Journal, Politico, Newsweek, The Los Angeles Times, The Guardian, and Time Magazine. In addition to the popular source news publications, I utilized Pew Research, the ACLU, ADL, and several research institutions’ analyses of the growing extremist organizations. The combination of these popular sources, research studies, and scholarship provided an analytical approach through several points of reference, allowing for a holistic analysis of the two politicians. Although this study includes several different types of sources, due to the close proximity of the series conclusion and Trump’s administration there is not an abundance of research on the two as a combined subject, this paper is an attempt to fill this gap. Lastly, while there are several sources, the political leanings of popular outlets frequently shaped how Trump would be viewed and therefore my analysis includes several popular sources that would not endorse the candidate and presented themselves with more biased rhetorics.
The Resurrection of White Supremacy Through the Underwood Legacy and Trump’s Validation

As Donald Trump increasingly gained more recognition throughout the election, he permitted a long-lasting movement to come to the forefront. As the election year continued, Trump’s presence in the political sphere signaled to the growing alt-right movement, comprised of white supremacists and white nationalists, that they had protection and were granted a proxy mouthpiece, through his larger and louder voice. Trump legitimized the alt-right movement — which is defined by the ADL as “a segment of the white supremacist movement consisting of a loose network of racists and anti-Semites who reject mainstream conservatism in favor of politics that embrace implicit or explicit racism, anti-Semitism and white supremacy.”

Trump encouraged the movement to join the mainstream, with his racist and xenophobic comments and “Make America Great Again” campaign promises, from “Build the Wall” to the Muslim ban. By examining Trump and Underwood’s racial engagements I will show how Trump's association with the alt-right ultimately minimizes the impact of House of Cards’ introduction to the Underwood legacy’s involvement with white nationalistic movements.

Trump’s role in the evolving movement began when he announced his run for president in June 2015. The speech would develop into a diatribe against the U.S.’ bordering neighbor, Mexico, and its immigrants. Most notably, Trump said Mexico was “bringing [in] their worst people” to the U.S., claiming these immigrants were criminals and “rapists.”

Trump would continue to rehash and reignite the 20th-century prejudices against Latinos — including those from Latin America and Spanish-speaking countries, as well as the U.S. Latino community — concentrating on the falsehood that all Latino immigrants were criminals. Donald Trump was

30 Ibid, "Donald Trump announces US presidential run with eccentric speech."
fixated on the Latin American country Mexico, continually focusing specifically on Mexicans, falsely declaring “They’re sending people that have lots of problems and they’re bringing their problems.” Trump continued, “They’re bringing drugs, they’re bringing crime, they’re rapists, and some I assume are good people but I speak to border guards and they tell us what we are getting.” Additionally, Trump would take to Twitter to express his racist sentiments, tweeting repeatedly about Mexico, but also sharing alt-right publication’s pieces — e.g. on July 3, 2015, he tweeted, “Our Southern border is totally out of control. This is an absolutely disgraceful situation. *breitbart* We need border security!” A large part of his campaign was his promise as President to “build a wall,” sparking interest from citizens and gaining support from the start. As the campaigning process continued throughout the summer of 2015, more candidates ran for the nomination and provided a peek into their campaign promises, and Trump would maintain his anti-Latino rhetoric as the driving point for his growing campaign.

Trump’s initial and repeated claims, “They’re bringing drugs, they’re bringing crime,” were met with both objection and encouragement, urging the candidate to continue this type of rhetoric. He then focused on not just the Latinos, but more minorities, from Muslim to Black Americans, by disparaging several communities throughout his campaign. While Trump’s initial announcement brought upon critiques and proposed policy against Latinos, by December 2015 the candidate had released an announcement intending to ban Muslims from entering the country, following a deadly mass shooting that was suspected to come from ISIS sympathizers. The announcement read, “Donald J. Trump is calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country’s representatives can figure out what is going on.”

The statement continued, “Until we are able to determine and understand this problem and the

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33 Ibid, "Donald Trump: Ban all Muslim travel to U.S."
dangerous threat it poses, our country cannot be the victims of horrendous attacks by people that believe only in Jihad, and have no sense of reason or respect for human life.” This 2015 announcement was eventually fulfilled by his executive order soon after he was inaugurated in January 2017. At the time voters, journalists, and political analysts attributed this to be a tactic in attracting voters when he felt his campaign was in jeopardy. Ironically, his tactic worked, the support for Trump would in fact increase when he would proclaim xenophobic sentiments, and provide “solutions” for these voters, which permitted and encouraged Trump to continue to attack and question minorities.

In August 2016, now the Republican Presidential nominee, Trump shifted to cultivating Black voters by asking, “What the hell do you have to lose?” Adding, “You’re living in poverty, your schools are no good, you have no jobs, 58% of your youth is unemployed – what the hell do you have to lose?” This divide and conquer strategy aligns with America’s history with politicians and the Black community but also aligns with Frank’s pandering to the Black community, more specifically Black churches and clergy members, in the fourth season.

Race-baiting is an old strategy used by every politician in U.S. history, and *House of Cards* expectedly incorporated it into the series. But while Frank’s situation was a need to confront his white nationalistic past and be contrite, Trump was blasé and dismissive of the Black voters. So for audiences, Frank’s connection to white nationalism was anti-climatic and anachronistic due to Trump’s courting them through the entirety of the election cycle. Audiences are able to

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34 Ibid, "Donald Trump: Ban all Muslim travel to U.S."
37 Ibid "Donald Trump Calls for Barring Muslims From Entering U.S."
39 Ibid, "Donald Trump: Ban all Muslim travel to U.S."
anticipate this behavior from Trump, because Frank’s ulterior motives played out for audiences in March 2016, and by August Trump had followed suit.

While white nationalism has ebbed and flowed in the U.S. since the country’s inception, Trump’s 2015 candidacy elevated its resurgence, aided by social media. A large portion of Trump’s supporters could also be identified as white evangelical Christians. In the 2016 election, 81% of evangelical Christians voted for Trump, with 16% voting for Clinton. By Trump’s second election in 2020, 59% still supported the President and believed the Trump administration had been “fighting for their beliefs and advancing their interests” and “has been winning recently on political matters important to them.” In addition to evangelical Christians, 88% of Trump’s supporters were white voters, according to Pew Research. Any ambivalence for Trump’s alliance with the white rule of law becomes increasingly clear with endorsements from David Duke, the Proud Boys, and white Evangelical Christians. According to the Anti-Defamation League, Duke is “America's most well-known racist and anti-Semite, promoting anti-Semitic and white supremacist views.” Duke was instrumental in the American white supremacist movement, the Ku Klux Klan’s resurgence in the 1970s, as well as one of the leading pioneers of self-proclaimed, “respectable racists,” by camouflaging the far right’s racist ideas into “hot-button issues.” Additionally, the Proud Boys formed in the midst of the 2016 election cycle, perpetuating Islamophobic, anti-Semitic, homophobic, transphobic, misogynistic,

46 “Ku Klux Klan.” Anti-Defamation League. No date.
and xenophobic sentiments. Trump’s affiliations with white nationalists would not undermine his campaign instead it would unite his base. While Trump would appeal to the alt-right, he would still attempt to appeal to the minority groups he had repeatedly disparaged and ridiculed, ultimately turning to the old strategy of pandering to these communities.

This notion of appealing to the community for the vote the politician needs, while being an ongoing plot point throughout the series, becomes increasingly obvious after Claire sabotages Frank’s pursuit of the Black Southern vote. In the season’s third episode, “Chapter 42,” Claire seeks her revenge on Frank after he sabotaged her own political aspirations by exploiting U.S. racial and white supremacy connections. She plants an election hurdle that seriously hurts Frank’s campaign in an effort (and eventual success) to join his presidential ticket. The episode begins with Frank going to his hometown in South Carolina, and attending a church with predominantly Black congregants. Soon after his successful day with the Black church-goers, a photo of Frank’s father with a Ku Klux Klan member is released to the press. This sets in motion that Frank comes from a legacy of white supremacists, all while he tries to obtain and sustain the Black community’s votes. Immediately, he has to remedy the situation and is met with extreme apprehension. Then a photo of Frank with a Civil War reenactor is released to the public, and this Underwood “legacy” is solidified. Frank has lost his home state and the demographic he was trying to cater to. But it is not until the final scene does the audience know exactly who pulled off this sabotage.

In the episode’s final minutes, Frank is seen going through his safe, which holds the aforementioned compromising images, the visual representation unveils who could have done the betrayal as Frank slowly and then instantaneously realizes who betrayed him. The camera angle, movements, and framing indicate to the audience that the sabotage likely came from

someone close. The scene begins with a tracking shot as Frank’s back is to the audience. As the camera grows closer to Frank, the focus directs the audience to fixate on his back. Symbolically the shot shows the ease and intimacy behind the betrayal, and how Frank was “stabbed in the back” by someone close to him. As soon the audience is presented with Frank’s face, he naively picks up a ring box and within a split second without completely opening the box, he discovers it's empty, and rage pours over him.

The camera then switches instantaneously to its previous position, with the audience only seeing Frank’s back, but then Frank whips his head around and speaks directly to the audience and says “I knew it, but I did not want to believe it.” This moment immediately invites the audience into the moment of recognition. The audience is a part of the betrayal, his vulnerability to the audience is deliberately showcased for the audience to feel intimately involved in the betrayal. The brief moment of intimacy, through this quick phrase, not only invites the audience to align with him but forces the audience to join his moment of strife. The intimately involved audience becomes a part of the narrative. While the inclusion of the audience is a standard for the breaking the fourth wall, in this particular case the audience is found siding with a morally fraught character. Frank’s ability to involve the audience, makes those watching unknowingly and unintentionally take the side of the manipulative white nationalist sympathizer, Frank.

After that brief fourth wall moment, Frank then aggressively slams the safe closed, gaining Claire’s attention who slowly comes to the room to face her husband. Wearing a black dress, traditional mourning attire, Claire’s presence and costuming indicate, without the assistance of Frank’s verbal accusation, that she was in fact the saboteur.

Throughout the series, Frank is repeatedly shot from a low angle, which expresses power and control over the characters and situation. Throughout the majority of this scene, there is no
upper hand the two are at eye level, their entire bodies are framed with medium shots — there is no competition, they realize that they’ve met their match now it's time for them to reach a truce. This is when Frank’s saboteur, his wife, proposes that she joins his campaign ticket as Vice President.

Claire then approaches Frank and joins him on the couch as she finally explains how far she wants their partnership to go. Claire joins Frank, who physically opens himself to her, ultimately giving a visual indication that these two are about to make amends and will in fact be on the same team very shortly. Placing the two on the same level and the same object indicates to the audience that they in fact are combining forces once more. However before they do, their typical dynamic is presented one last time. Claire is now below Frank, who then physically looks down upon her as the camera frames him from a low angle, and Frank viciously proclaims “I would rather have spineless Donald Blythe as my Vice President [Frank’s current sitting VP], than a woman who’s never held elected office.” Claire retorts with “You’re losing to a woman who’s never held elected office,” but now the camera frames the two with a medium-wide shot, removing the indication of a power struggle. The framing presents Frank as the larger subject in the foreground and Claire in the background as the small object, which signifies their previous unsteady dynamic. Again Frank turns to Claire and attempts to assert his dominance and power by proclaiming Claire has never had to work for anything, and storms away. However, Claire meets her husband once more at eye level and says “I can be a part of your campaign or I can end it. I’ll do whatever it takes, too. Just like your father. But I will not let this go.” While this scene does not identify the moment of destruction, it documents the downfall of Frank. The clear loss of power and betrayal is a direct result of the politician believing his hard work, i.e. his campaigning, has been completely decimated. Frank has to face the repercussions of being
associated with alt-right movements, and losing “the vote” he so clearly strives to gain, as well as his support from his home state. This particular scene closes off the episode’s scandal with a quick solution of Claire becoming Vice President, which provides an examination of how minor the show might think this movement is in the real world. The story arc of the Underwood alt-right legacy exists for an hour, Frank and his team remedy the situation for just the sake of his campaign. There are no larger ramifications. Frank’s presence, as the President, does not allow for the movement to gain traction.

As scholars Patrick Jones and Gretchen Soderlund detail, the show consistently presents the public as “invisible and impotent,”50 this particular story arc is a clear identification of how much the Underwoods find the public disposable, and only render them useful when it comes to polling and votes. In Jones and Soderlund's piece, “The Conspiratorial Mode in American Television,” the two acknowledge how House of Cards delivers its characters through this heightened implementation of political conspirators and a world of political conspiracies. While the two scholars acknowledge the Underwoods’ election facade is used to attract voters, the notion is that these “acts” are found in the extreme circumstance of fictional power-hungry politicians. However, while the KKK photograph and Claire’s betrayal plotline, is a brief story in the series, it still presents the idea that politicians will manipulate voters, who they deem inept, to gain the votes. These narrative conventions tie Frank’s faults to his characterization and domestic melodrama, temporarily minimizing the race issues and ultimately propelling Claire’s political aspirations.

Additionally, the alt-right movement does not become an ongoing plot point throughout the fourth season, it does not negate the creators' ability to pinpoint a growing fear within the

culture: politicians will engage with more extreme and radical groups if it means they can win the vote. Frank’s photograph with the Civil War reenactor was an act of posing with a more politically radical individual, in an effort to score the vote, even if that meant flirting with the fringes. Again, Frank’s instances are isolated moments that do not go on to define his campaign — or the show for that matter. But his intentions in engaging with these circles and then remedying the fallout, achieve the same goal as Trump, maintaining the white nation. Audiences are now presented with an outrageous campaign controversy, that ultimately at the time and soon after, does not seem completely outrageous. Frank’s actions are to “protect” his campaign, Trump’s are to excel his campaign. The ultimate use of these movements, while covertly having been used to benefit politicians, are used in entirely different ways. The absurdity of Trump’s association, encouragement, and support of the alt-right movement becomes so astounding, the white nationalist plot line in a vicious thriller becomes minute.
The Teflon Politician

As the fourth season concludes, Frank manages to maintain his position as President but also is about to engage in a very contentious election that involves voter suppression, a revote, and a data mining revelation. All of this unfolds in the fifth season, leading Frank to win the election through heavy manipulation of the government. The thought of election data manipulation in March 2016, is an unfathomable plot point that works to raise the stakes of the drama. But once Trump enters politics, the absurdity of Frank’s manipulation of data and seemingly unbreakable persona becomes more believable. Trump, like Frank, faces a series of controversies throughout 2016, from his involvement with the Cambridge Analytica scandal to the Entertainment Tonight hot mic clip and including his family in the administration, each of which would typically derail or remove the average or pre-Trump politician from his goals and powerful position. The varying plotlines that would propel House of Cards into a twisted political drama would reveal distinct similarities between Frank Underwood and Donald Trump that make the real and fictional politicians two sides to the same coin, with the unique ability to evade and weather controversy, rendering both “teflon.”

The two had an affinity to “keep it in the family.” Before Trump’s election, the businessman had companies with his three eldest children at the helm. Donald Jr., Eric, and Ivanka had large stakes in their father’s businesses, but by 2016, the three (and their significant others) would serve on Trump’s presidential transition team. Trump, attempted to install members of his immediate family in key administration positions throughout his campaign.51 Inevitably, Ivanka’s husband, Jared Kushner, became a senior adviser, who would handle “brokering peace in the Middle East, building a border wall, reforming the criminal justice system, pursuing diplomacy with China and Mexico, and creating an ‘Office of American

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51David Wright. "Trump floats Ivanka for Cabinet, prompting Clinton jab" CNN Politics, August 5, 2016.
Innovation’ dedicated to revamping how the government works.” However, Trump’s inclusion of his family consistently invoked vigorous debate, whereas Frank’s constant inclusion of Claire in his political career, was helpful rather than hurtful. Throughout the series, Claire rises from the founder and leader of an NGO, the Clean Water Initiative, to becoming the U.S.’ ambassador to the United Nations, to Vice President to President. Claire’s trajectory matches Frank’s level of manipulation; she pushes her husband to go against the Senate and appoint her as ambassador, but eventually, she resigns. Later she assists her husband in running for reelection, emphasizing their relationship, and as a result, she becomes the incentive for citizens to vote for Frank. As previously mentioned, Claire leverages this and forcefully orchestrates Frank to nominate her for the Vice President position. Season four concludes with the married couple and now the Presidential ticket, anticipating the election, with Frank eventually winning, and Claire taking over after Frank’s character is killed off the show, ostensibly due to actor Anthony Rapp’s claims of sexual assault from Kevin Spacey in 1986.\textsuperscript{53}

In addition to keeping family as close advisers, both the fictional and real presidents utilize and manipulate the public and the cyber world to their advantage. As social media and cyber security have become undeniable elements of 21st-century society, this sector of technology is still in relative infancy stages. While the internet has existed for decades, the growing possibility of attacks and data leaks has not declined as technology’s impact increases. While the topic of cyber security is discussed on a global level and across a myriad of industries, the Cambridge Analytica scandal that was unveiled in March 2018, still came as a shock to the general public. On March 17, 2018, Matthew Rosenberg, Nicholas Confessore, and Carole Cadwalladr of The New York Times released their investigation detailing how Cambridge


Analytica, the voter-profiling company misused 50 million Facebook users' personal data for Donald Trump and the 2016 election.\textsuperscript{54} Simply, Facebook exposed its users’ raw data to Cambridge Analytica, which was a political consulting firm that worked on Trump’s 2016 campaign. The firm acquired the data from Russian-American academic Aleksandr Kogan. The entire data breach became an international scandal that impacted the 2016 U.S. presidential election; and was promptly followed by Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg testifying during a U.S. Congressional hearing detailing the data breach.\textsuperscript{55} While the direct impact of the scandal has not been able to accurately attribute whether or not Trump was able to sway and gain votes for the election, the President’s involvement with the scandal and lack of consequences contributed to his unusual ability to evade major controversy.

As the fictional election proceeds, Frank continues to poll unfavorably, all while The Washington Herald’s Tom Hammerschmidt (Boris McGiver) publishes a piece about Frank and his various crimes, focusing on how Frank pushed his predecessor out of the position, and testimonies from his former Chief of Staff and Senate Majority Whip. When Frank is projected to lose, he and his team then have to prevent the situation from escalating, leading Frank to greenlight both a cyber attack to present the idea that the election is rigged and the murder of hostages in order to distract voters from his crimes and focus on domestic terrorism.

The scene in which Frank decides this cyber attack is a necessity occurs during the eleventh episode, “Chapter 50,” when Frank and his chief of staff, Doug Stamper (Michael Kelly) meet with data scientist Aidan Macallan (Damian Young). Aidan is the key figure who helped aid the administration in staging a cyber attack in an effort to win the 2016 election. The scene begins with Doug bringing Aidan to a hidden stairwell in the White House, reciting


“You’re officially briefing me on ICO-related surveillance activities. You never saw or spoke to the president.”

As Doug brings Aidan to the foot of the stairwell, Frank appears at the top of the level and with his back to a spiral stairwell with vertical metal bars and greets Aidan, with “Mr. Macallan.” Aidan spots up above the president and greets him, “Mr. President,” with Doug interjecting “The President is in his residence, not here.” Frank remains atop the stairwell, in the shadows. The president is backlit by a dark yellow hue, signifying the egomania of the president, as well as the caution he and Doug are taking within the stairwell. These shots do not theoretically allow Aidan or the audience to place who the looming presence is. While the president is not “there,” the visual presentation depicts this very sentiment, never giving a true glimpse at who is the man in the shadows. Additionally, this camera angle and placement of Frank at the top indicate his stature, rank, and most importantly his powerful control. The extreme difference in positioning from the floor to the top of the stairs symbolizes the president is about to demand such an outrageous and criminal request, that only he could and would get away with.

But as Aidan explains how data algorithms work and can be manipulated to be advantageous to Frank, the president slowly walks down the stairs into the stairwell light, revealing his face, and exposing his identity. Frank's descent is shot from a low angle, with a presumed point-of-view shot from Aidan, still indicating Frank’s power. Frank then takes a seat midway on the stairwell, and sits between two metal poles, still positioned higher than Aidan, but the view of Frank is never obstructed by additional items, just lighting. While framed between metal bars would indicate a type of imprisonment, the placement of Frank with no obstruction signifies the president has this unique ability to become unscathed by controversy. He is in the
midst of conducting a cyber attack to become president, which inevitably does come to fruition.
Additionally, as the final two episodes continue, Frank meets with The Washington Herald’s Tom
ahead of publishing his piece, there is the looming possibility he could be destroyed by these
revelations, but Frank finds a loophole and creates a more disastrous incident, permitting the
execution of terrorists.

The season concludes with this demand, and Frank breaks the fourth wall, for the first
time with Claire, declaring “That’s right. We do not submit to terror. We make the terror.” This
final quote, with the addition of Claire, explicitly indicates to the audience, that these events are
deliberate and the consequences will not impact the Underwoods. Rather, the couple will
continue to successfully manipulate these situations, and controversies, in order to reap the
benefits but more importantly punish those who attempted to cross them. This moment of
declaration provides insight for the audience as to what the Underwoods will do next. As a result,
the audience is a part of the crime. The inclusion of the couple’s joint decision, provides a
stronger sense of intimacy, due to the fact the audience now has another direct relationship,
now with Claire. It provides the opportunity, whether or not the audience wants it, for the
audience to be a part of a “team” of morally fraught politicians. The audience knows the
narrative is about to become much darker, knowing to anticipate death and terrorism in the
following season. Frank and Claire have now involved the audience in such a sinister moment,
ultimately implicating the audience. While the beliefs of the audience may oppose Frank and
Claire’s, it does not forbid the audience to unknowingly be a part of the criminal schemes.

Frank’s relationship with the women in his life, from his wife to his mistress, Zoe Barnes
(Kate Mara), blatantly proves his disregard for women and his apathetic misogynistic attitude.
Throughout the first four seasons, Frank is seen on multiple occasions getting into heated
altercations with his wife, but the President’s ability to apathetically dispose of other women
becomes increasingly similar when he enlists his staffer, Doug, to take care of Peter Russo’s
(Corey Stoll) prostitute Rachel Posner (Rachel Brosnahan). While the plotline following the
demise of Rachel concludes before the fourth season, the ongoing arc and the President and his
team’s effort to cover up a sex worker’s involvement with a public official becomes increasingly
similar to Trump’s “hush money” scandal with Stormy Daniels and Michael Cohen. The fictional
and real briberies both occurred during election years, in House of Cards it occurred during a
gubernatorial race, while Trump’s was during the 2016 presidential election. At the time, Trump
was able to avoid the controversy and maintain his front-runner status, allowing him to win the
election. The controversy itself revealed he had paid former adult film actress Stormy Daniels to
stay quiet about their affair ten years prior. However, the money that Daniels received was given
to her by Trump’s longtime attorney Michael Cohen, who transferred the funds from the Trump
Organization, and then reclaimed the money, and provided a reimbursement under the guise the
transaction was legal expenses. Again, one of the series’ ongoing narratives had preemptively
teased audiences with the outrageous inclusion of a politician paying off a sex worker for
engaging in an affair with the campaigning politician. While Frank, unlike Trump, is not the
offender, he still stands as the fixer and permits illegal activities. This plotline and real event both
then also signal that the conspiratorial mode of politics that scholars Jones and Soderlund
identify as the driving element of the series, and has then lent itself to America’s reality.

Although “fixing” the controversies that Frank faces are presented throughout the
duration of the first three seasons and ahead of the real 2016 election, it does not detract from the
writers' ability to create plotlines that both they and the audience would have deemed
implausible, that ultimately come to fruition. As scholar Michele Hilmes explains, the intention

is for TV to draw audiences “into the dramatic situation.” But in the case of *House of Cards*, this motivation has since been muddled, due to the series' unconscious proposal of how American politics and the presidential election would unfold as the series would air. Unlike the KKK photograph, each of the aforementioned fictional controversies manages to drive the series into darker and more cynical directions. While these stories do not run in tandem, the combination of bribery, nepotism, and data mining for election manipulation each align with Trump’s real controversies. As the writers raised the stakes with each new plotline the series developed and embraced the outrageous controversies, they unintentionally began to anticipate and confirm Trump’s real controversies. The major difference between the two would be the level of plausibility for the separate worlds. The murder of Rachel meets the expectations of the series, but the Stormy Daniels scandal, while initially shocking the real public, meets the stakes of the Trump campaign. The same is for Trump’s inclusion of Jared Kushner versus Frank’s inclusion of Claire, while the two initially seem to be ludicrous elements of the politicians’ lives, once they persist onwards they meet the expectations of both administrations. Last and most shocking, is how the fourth season’s concluding plotline of data manipulation would ultimately occur in reality and this startling similarity would also occur in tandem with the fourth season’s premiere throughout 2016.

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The Women of Washington D.C.

During the 2016 campaign, Trump would face a series of incidents that would cause the general public to question his treatment of women, from how he treated his opponent, Hillary Clinton, to how he treated other influential women during his election — even tweeting at the start of the election cycle in 2015, “Hillary Clinton is weak and ineffective- no strength, no stamina.”\(^{58}\) These accusations began to reveal an understanding as to how he approached life: as a powerful man who does not “submit to the rules and laws of society.”\(^{59}\) With this general understanding of who Trump is, it is glaringly apparent that Frank operates with the same outlook. This becomes apparent when both men invoke verbal, physical, and psychological intimidation upon their wives, mistresses, and opponents.

Trump’s relationship with women was widely covered throughout the election cycle, with articles discussing the candidate’s past relationships, current relationships, and general behavior toward women. Ahead of his nomination, in May 2016, *The New York Times* released “Crossing the Line: How Donald Trump Behaved With Women in Private,”\(^{60}\) which provided interviews from over 50 women, with great detail from those who had worked with or for Trump over the past 40 years, as well as those who dated him, or sought his business advisement. The article detailed his crude and manipulative behavior toward these women, which would be echoed by a series of disparaging claims made during the election and Trump's ongoing behavior for the public to see firsthand.

At the very beginning of the election cycle and Trump’s campaign, he attended the Republican presidential debate in August 2015, which was moderated by *Fox News* anchor

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Megyn Kelly. As the moderator, Kelly attempted to address Trump’s previous sexist and misogynistic comments, which he called “off base.” In a subsequent interview, Trump spoke with CNN and remarked “You could see there was blood coming out of [Megyn Kelly’s] eyes. Blood coming out of her wherever.” This incident proved and documented to citizens Trump’s ability to make offhand misogynistic remarks to those that challenge him. This also then sparked a years-long feud between the two. This particular event provoked vigorous debate about how the candidate conducted himself amongst women, specifically women with influence.

Additionally, Trump was able to enhance his intimate relationship with the public by tweeting about the anchor incessantly throughout his campaign and encouraging voters and audiences to boycott her. For example, Trump tweeted on March 18, 2016 “Everyone should boycott the @MegynKelly show. Never worth watching. Always a hit on Trump! She is sick & the most overrated person on TV.” By August 2015 it would become apparent that the candidate would not mitigate his polarizing approach, even if that meant he would publicize his disregard and lack of filter for those who were not like him, i.e. women and people of different races, ethnicities, and religions.

In addition to the 2016 Stormy Daniels scandal, at the tail end of Trump’s campaign on October 7, 2016, footage of Trump on Entertainment Tonight, caught a hot mic moment. The clip includes Trump saying to TV personality Billy Bush, “And when you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything…. Grab ’em by the p----. You can do anything.” This then contributed to the growing MeToo movement — which was focused on publicly denouncing rape culture — and the slow downfall of powerful men, which unfolded throughout Trump’s presidency but left

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the President unscathed. In 2017, *House of Cards* star, Kevin Spacey was exposed by the tidal wave of MeToo accusations of having abused actor Anthony Rapp. Rapp publically disclosed that Spacey sexually assaulted him in 1986 when he was 14 years old. Netflix would quickly take action and the actor would be removed from the series. In 2022, a trial against Spacey would ensue, but the no longer working actor would be found not guilty of the sexual assault allegations. The repercussions that would follow a MeToo accusation of abusers would mean, for many, the end of their careers and become detrimental to their victims’ lives. But as powerful men were exposed and punished (i.e. Spacey), Trump remained a fixture, soon elected President, and supported politician.

Two days after the *Entertainment Tonight* clip was released to the public, Trump and Clinton would have a nationally televised town hall debate, providing the opportunity for the two to discuss the incident and their differences with the public in a more informal format. The debate itself provided voters the opportunity to examine how Trump would recoup from the situation, as well as interact with his opponent. Infamously, Trump said in response to being questioned about the clip, “No, I did not say that at all. I do not think you understood what was said. This was locker room talk. I am not proud of it. I apologize to my family, I apologized to the American people.” Adding, “I have great respect for women. Nobody has more respect for women than I do.” The debate would spend some time focusing on Trump’s earlier claims, but while the American people had access to the audio of the candidate’s misogynistic comments, the analysis of Clinton's body language on stage would also become a clear indicator of his dynamic with women. Trump stood very close to Clinton, and some called his “spatial distance

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68 Ibid “Full transcript: Second 2016 presidential debate”
menacingly close.”

But as scholar Ben Wasike acknowledged in “Gender, Nonverbal Communication, and Televised Debates,” this debate and their body language “reflects research indicating that at close proximity, men elicit more negative emotions than women do.” As one of the major takeaways from the debate, Trump was able to assert his dominance as he would close the spatial distance and “menacingly loom close behind Clinton.” One of the key takeaways from the debate was Trump’s willingness to utilize his power and stature to achieve what he wanted if that was through verbal or physical intimidation of the first woman ever to be the nominee of a major American political party for president.

While voters were able to examine how Trump was able to unknowingly, and knowingly, verbally and physically intimidate women, Frank would provide opportunities where he would psychologically and physically intimidate the women in his life, seen clearly with his mistress, journalist Zoe, and his wife, Claire. The season one relationship between Zoe and Frank begins as a mutually beneficial relationship, and the two have an unspoken understanding that their affair is temporary, which involves the two knowingly exchanging Zoe’s opportunity to write about Frank’s insider information. As Frank provides Zoe with insights into the inner workings of President Walker’s administration she publishes his political motives, all while they carry on an affair. In this relationship Frank holds almost all of the power, he has the strong ability to catapult or terminate Zoe’s ascent and career growth at a moment’s notice. This particular dynamic is not unique and is a typical depiction of how controlling men are frequently afforded an immense amount of power, inside and outside of their personal relationships. Additionally, Zoe’s ability, or lack thereof, to rise within journalism is contingent on Frank and his perception of her. Yet, Frank’s unpredictability is not a surprise to Zoe, nor the audience, because this

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71 Ibid, 261.
scenario is a typical situation, in which a vulnerable ambitious woman has to expose herself to danger in order to rise to the position she strives for.

But once Peter Russo suddenly dies, Zoe and Lucas Goodwin (Sebastian Arcelus) begin to investigate the unexpected death, pointing back to Frank. Frank and Doug uncover Zoe’s latest story, leaving Frank to do what he deems necessary. After luring her to the Metro station under the pretense of forming a truce, Frank pushes her in front of the Metro train car and onto the tracks. Zoe dies instantly, and her presence is no longer a problem for Frank. This particular incident is not the first time, nor the last, that Frank would mercilessly have a “problem” fixed, but it is a completely ruthless act in murdering a woman he once was intimate with. The murder of Zoe, at the hands of Frank, epitomizes his active role in his disregard for anyone, especially women, who get in his way, but it is through the relentless sabotaging and betraying of his wife, that the audience understands how ruthless and cruel the fictional president is.

As the third season concludes, Claire notifies Frank she wants a divorce and goes home to Texas to take care of her ailing mother. At the start of season four, she settles at home, and Frank continues on the presidential campaign, making Claire’s absence that much stronger and detrimental to his campaign — and unknowingly pushing Claire to pivot from being the politician’s wife to a politician. Claire then pursues a local Texas Congressional seat, currently held by Doris Jones (Cicely Tyson), who is pushing for her daughter Celia (LisaGay Hamilton) to take over the seat. By the second episode, “Chapter 41,” Frank and his chief of staff, Doug, work to slowly sabotage Claire’s goals. Eventually, the couple strikes a deal that Claire will attend the State of the Union address so Frank will stop tampering with her campaign.

The State of the Union sequence appears at the halfway mark of the season’s second episode, building the suspense as it cuts back and forth between several characters, — Frank,
Claire, Celia, Doris, House Minority Whip Jacqueline Sharp (Molly Parker), Claire’s political consultant LeAnn Harvey (Neve Campbell), and Frank’s former chief of staff Remy Danton (Mahershala Ali) — as Frank delivers his speech to the general public and Congress. The betrayal subtext becomes glaringly apparent, with a cutaway reaction each time Frank mentions a new campaign promise or praises the government’s progress. Several plotlines seemingly come to a close during this scene, the most important story of which is Frank’s endorsement of Celia for the Texas congressional seat, undermining Claire’s candidacy. This endorsement is followed by Frank’s funding announcement for Doris’ breast cancer health care center. Inevitably, this plot point is an ordinary moment for Frank, to sabotage his wife in one seemingly “altruistic” action that is for the “better of the country,” yet when it occurs the surprise and dismay hits each aforementioned character with as much shock as Frank’s killing Zoe. One observes Claire is in a rare vulnerable state, as she sits in a pure white dress amongst a sea of black and gray-dressed individuals. Claire’s vulnerability, like Zoe’s, was trusting Frank. Claire, while a cold and machiavellian character, is not exempt from Frank’s sabotage, and this scene is a clear indicator. More importantly, while *House of Cards* creates a sense of prolonged discomfort, this scene immediately tells audiences things are about to go awry.

The scene still unravels through an unusual storytelling technique, through the point-of-view shots of watching Frank on TV. While the series sparingly incorporates fictionalized footage of real new media stations and anchors, this scene alternates between putting the audience with Frank on the House floor and watching Frank via C-SPAN’s television coverage. However, the audience is with Claire and Frank as he betrays her. The two are framed in medium close-up shots, as Frank slowly divulges he supports both Doris and Celia. Quickly the scene switches to Claire, who is sitting directly next to Celia, and a medium close-up focuses
on Claire as Frank’s voice looms over announcing his endorsement for Celia. The scene then abruptly turns to Claire’s mother in Texas, who is lying in bed watching the speech and instantly transitions to a point-of-view shot, as she is watching Frank on TV in her bedroom, while he proclaims “And I, for one, will support your candidacy with everything I’ve got. And I know Claire will, as well.” The C-SPAN footage then shows Claire at a distance graciously applauding alongside the other patrons. This alternating perspective is significant due to Frank’s ability to manipulate the media and his wife. The “rouge” speech and the couple are covered by C-SPAN with such a detached and distant perspective. The diegetic C-SPAN audience is then positioned as the show’s public, watching a seemingly normal political moment, but due to the nature of the show, the audience is aggressively directed through the intimacy of knowing exactly how and why Frank has sabotaged his wife. Throughout the series, the couple continually and dangerously retaliate against one another and go an eye for an eye. This scene motivates Claire to proceed with sabotaging her husband, and in turn, Frank comes away from their retaliations as the victim, while she blackmails her husband to place her on the ticket as his running mate and his new Vice President.

The episode concludes with Frank breaking the fourth wall, while he’s in his kitchen nonchalantly telling the story from his childhood about a friend, Walter, who stayed overnight in the tree by his bedroom and wouldn’t go home. But as the story concludes, Frank mercilessly recalls how he chopped the tree down to teach Walter a lesson, leaving the young boy with the motivation to get out of the dangerous situation. Frank then says to the camera, “You see all he needed was a little motivation. So I’ll give Claire some time. But for her sake, I hope she comes out of her tree before I have to bring out my ax.” This prolonged moment proves to the audience, that Frank will mercilessly execute the fall of anyone who challenges him, including his wife.
Frank takes no prisoners, and he wants the audience to know that this extends to his wife. He’s signaling to the audience that this sinister manipulation has been a part of his character since childhood. The audience is a part of Frank’s attempts of sabotage, knowing that he has executed the organization and followed through with his manipulative plans. The intimacy in both learning about his childhood and peeking into his extreme actions makes the audience a co-conspirator in his ongoing attacks. Similar to when Frank is betrayed, the audience has become a part of the narrative. However, the audience is explicitly clued into how the narrative will unfold, rather than facing the reaction to the narrative. Frank takes action here, tells the audience, and makes the all-knowing audience an unexpected insider and co-conspirator.

Once Claire joins her husband on the ticket, their relationship returns to its previous state of equilibrium, which both the husband, wife, and audience are accustomed to. The Underwoods are now a team pining for reelection, in whatever way is necessary. Frank’s treatment of his wife indicates his ability to succumb to his ambitions rather than his relationships. Although the couple’s trajectory eventually becomes mutually beneficial, it does not come without consequences. In the particular instance of sabotaging one another throughout the fourth season, the callous treatment of women, specifically wives and mistresses reveal similarities. Similar to the other controversies that impact both the real and fictional presidents, the extremely outrageous moments in Frank’s world, do not equate exactly to Trump’s but still provide an unconscious anticipatory tone. As scholar Joli Hamilton wrote in “House of Cards: Reflection on Dark Eros as Creative Action,” Frank has a keen ability to psychologically harm those around him, including his wife “whom he is ostensibly in love with.”

The fictional president “is unable to relate to the Other in any meaningful way, unwilling to submit to the rules and laws of society.

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This makes him a thoroughly frightening leader.” 73 This notion is abundantly clear when examining Frank’s betrayal and sabotage of Claire and murdering Zoe. While Trump does not have similar instances, the reality of the election does permit voters to see Trump as an individual who does not “submit to the rules and laws of society,” 74 through his treatment of women, from the hot mic clip to his unusual approach at the presidential debates, through interactions with moderators and his opponents. In the case of the fictional show slowly reflecting reality, it is not through the plotlines themselves but the manner in which both presidents interact with the opposite sex. The hyperbolic mistreatment of women is highly dramatized, but Frank’s actions boil down to a character, that does not follow the rules and laws of society, similar to Trump. The major difference, and possible explanatory contribution, is how Trump continuously makes the public aware of his thought process, ultimately providing the stark contrast as to how Frank allows the audience to know what will occur, with the public seemingly unaware.

73 Ibid, 38
74 Ibid, 38
Conclusion

In conclusion Netflix’s ability to enter the marketplace during the early 2010s with such a shocking series allowed the corporation to develop a slate of prestige original content that would ultimately begin to anticipate what the political sphere would slowly develop into. As the platform would expand, its first original program *House of Cards* began to lose its cynical tone as the real world's socio-cultural sphere began to reflect the dark hyperbolic events that occurred in Frank Underwood’s Washington D.C. Its evident Trump’s campaign promises, tactics, and controversies resembled those of Frank Underwoods — while both were extreme versions of events — those events properly reflected the stakes of real and fictional worlds that they took place in. While the focus of this study was strictly the fourth season and the 2016 election, it would be opportune to study the remaining seasons of *House of Cards* in relation to Trump’s administration to follow how the controversies would play out in the real world and fictional world. In addition to analyzing Frank’s character trajectory, it would also be opportune to analyze and examine Claire, but in relation to Hillary Clinton for a comprehensive analysis of the two 2016 candidates.\textsuperscript{75} Additionally, analyzing Netflix’s additional earlier programming in conversation with the Trump election and administration would allow scholars to decipher how Netflix consciously and unconsciously approached political commentary during a historic election and administration.

\textsuperscript{75} Nededog, Jethro. "House of Cards' creator thinks Hillary Clinton is closest to a real life Claire Underwood" *Insider*, July 10, 2015.
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