

The Rise of Governance Television, 1999-2019

by

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Abstract

In this dissertation I identify a new fictional genre of entertainment TV: “governance television.” This genre presents the behind-the-scenes workings and operations of government and comprises scripted dramas and comedies of primetime television. I argue that governance television is a component of the American civic imaginary—the way in which the American public understands and imagines its government—in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Unlike other institutions of American life such as the legal system, the criminal justice system, and the medical system, government only became a fertile topic for primetime entertainment at the turn of the last century; between 1999-2019, more than 20 shows within this genre were produced. Within this project, I center the 15 shows firmly set within the American federal government and the ideological work they did. I pay special attention to seven programs featuring the presidency and executive branch: *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999-2006), *Commander in Chief* (ABC, 2005-2006), *Veep* (HBO, 2012-2019), *Scandal* (ABC, 2012-2018), *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-2018), *Madam Secretary* (CBS, 2014-2019), and *Designated Survivor* (ABC, 2016-2019, Netflix, 2019).

These representations of the (dis)function of the federal government repeatedly told stories of crisis and resolution, fostering an ideological trust in the continuity and stability of the American federal government, and through it, American democracy. Twenty years of governance television limited the capacity of at least a portion of the center-left public to imagine a threat to the fundamental structures of the government. This limitation was made

visible during the 2016 presidential campaign when candidate Donald Trump broke political and social norms and then continued to break them throughout his four-year term. By the 2019 and 2020 television seasons, governance television's prominence had diminished as the genre contended with this new type of presidency and the subsequent political fatigue of the television audience. Drawing from scholarship at the intersection of television studies and political history, this dissertation highlights how entertainment television intersects with civic beliefs.

This project uses historiography, discourse analysis of critics' reviews, visual analysis of title sequences, interviews with political consultants, and narrative analysis of more than 200 episodes to interrogate governance television. In the prelude, I provide a brief overview of how concurrent changing trends—intensified political partisanship, increased fiscal pressures on journalism professionals, expanded cable news and talk radio outlets, and shifted entertainment storytelling from episodic to serialized—together set the groundwork for the new genre. Then I track how between 1999 and 2019 critics constructed this genre through intertextual referencing and how the tonal register of the genre varies along the lines of an idealization versus cynicism in parallel to the four presidential administrations of the same years. Next, I analyze how ideas of authenticity and reality are negotiated and incorporated during the process of production. While 'realistic' is consistently a valued quality, I establish the existence of a spectrum of realism outside of which a show might be too realistic to be entertaining or so unrealistic as to be unbelievable. Finally, I analyze recurrent crisis-in-leadership narratives within the seven executive branch shows. These shows articulate heightened anxieties about the stability and legitimacy of American democracy and manage those anxieties with narrative resolutions of institutional continuity even in the face of flawed individuals gaining power.

Introduction: Governance Television and the Civic Imaginary

Between 1999 and 2019, more than 20 fictional entertainment shows set within the American government launched on American primetime television. Fifteen of these productions are firmly set within the three branches of the American federal government. By the numbers, this cluster of shows is not remarkable—more than 75 medical shows and 75 legal shows premiered in the same span of years. However, the medical system and the legal system, along with the criminal justice system, are staples of American primetime television and have been since the 1950s. In contrast, for the first half-century of American television, the government appeared primarily in non-fictional televisual spaces such as news programming and documentaries. As assessed by TV critic Ray Richmond: “In 1999, a show about politics was a hard sell in a market that knew ratings could only be squeezed from cops, doctors, detectives or lawyers.”¹ Yet, by 2017, Frank Rich, executive producer of *Veep* and *New York* magazine writer-at large, summarized the television landscape: “There are so many presidents and vice presidents running around it’s become kind of hysterical.”² In the space of two decades, mining the government for primetime entertainment went from implausibility to abundance.

In this dissertation, I propose that this cluster of shows comprises a new genre on American primetime television that I call “governance television.” Governance television programs feature scripted, fictional versions of the behind-the-scenes decision making of political actors within political infrastructures. In this 20-year period, governance television has included sitcoms, mockumentaries, dark comedies, dramas, miniseries, and science fiction, all

showcasing presidents and the press corps, cabinet secretaries, congresspeople, and chiefs-of-staff, first spouses and speechwriters. Governance television has entries throughout the spectrum of distribution channels, airing on broadcast, cable, premium cable, and streaming services. In this project, I pay special attention to seven set within the executive branch: *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999-2006), *Commander in Chief* (ABC, 2005-2006), *Veep* (HBO, 2012-2019), *Scandal* (ABC, 2012-2018), *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-2018), *Madam Secretary* (CBS, 2014-2019), and *Designated Survivor* (ABC, 2016-2019, Netflix, 2019). The addition of this previously “hard sell” programming to the television landscape invites the question: how have fictional visions of the government in primetime television contributed to the contemporary American civic imaginary?

By civic imaginary, I draw from Charles Taylor’s ‘social imaginaries,’ which, in turn, are indebted to Benedict Anderson’s ‘imagined communities.’ Taylor introduces the social imaginary as “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.” These social imaginaries are shared by large groups of people and make “possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.” Additionally, imaginaries consist of “the way ordinary people ‘imagine’ their social surroundings...carried in images, stories, and legends.”³ Entertainment television is nothing if not “images, stories, and legends,” and thus contributes to these social imaginaries. However, with its focus on the operations and infrastructure of government, governance television is part of a narrower imaginary than everyday ordinary life and common practices.

Thus, I invoke the *civic* imaginary to recognize this distinction. While similar to Lauren Berlant’s “national fantasy” in that by necessity the audiences for these programs share a vision

of uniquely American institutions, the civic imaginary spotlights civic *operations*, rather than a broader sense of citizenship or nationhood.⁴ Despite their differing channels and tones, critics recognized the common discursive function of these programs. That the narratives of governance television are imagined and scripted does not diminish their relevance to a shared social understanding about the machinery of the American government. Further, because many of the decisions of real-world governmental personnel are otherwise undisclosed or obscured, the fictions of governance television, even when recognized as fictions, imply that viewers are getting privileged access to the motivations and negotiations of those in power. I argue that for twenty years, governance television has been providing alternative and parallel visions of the (dis)function of the federal government in contrast to the news media.

The periodization of 1999 to 2019 marks the premiere of *The West Wing* on September 22, 1999, which I argue in chapter two launched the genre, to the 20-months between April 19, 2018 and December 8, 2019 during which five concurrent governance television shows (*Scandal*, *House of Cards*, *Veep*, *Designated Survivor*, *Madam Secretary*) all concluded. These two decades coincide with three changes in presidential administrations, a more than doubling of the amount of money spent in congressional and presidential election campaigns, and a widening of partisan ideological gaps within the American citizenry.⁵ I therefore ask—how did the framing of the federal government in governance television change during these two decades and what relationship did those generic changes have to the evolving real-world political climate?

The alternative visions of the American government presented by governance television are neither uniform in aesthetic style nor tonal register. Over 20 years, the genre shifts from an idealistic to a cynical frame with gestures toward idealism again at the end of the 2010s. These tonal pivot points loosely coincide with the transitions between real-world administrations.

Taylor's use of 'imaginary' incorporates both what "can be something new, constructive, opening new possibilities" and what "can be purely fictitious, perhaps dangerously false."⁶ These two tonal registers make space for both the constructive and the potentially dangerous within a civic imaginary.

Notably, governance television does not tie these sentiments to specific political parties; true-to-life party representation is not the project of governance television. Frank and Claire Underwood (*House of Cards*) are murderous Democratic presidents; Fitzgerald and Mellie Grant (*Scandal*) are murderous Republican—in name at least—presidents. How well their policy positions would fit within the party is debatable. Mackenzie Allen (*Commander in Chief*) is an independent vice president who never planned to be president, and Tom Kirkman (*Designated Survivor*) is an independent Secretary of Housing and Urban Development who never planned to be president. Elizabeth McCord (*Madam Secretary*) serves as secretary of state within the Dalton Administration; Conrad Dalton is a Republican President who becomes an independent because he is denied the party nomination for a second term. Selina Meyer's (*Veep*) political party goes intentionally unnamed and undefined. In the realm of the legislature, *Braindead* skewers Democratic and Republican Senators equally.

The overlap between the political realities of the 2016 election and the subsequent Trump administration and the imaginaries of the concurrent governance television created a challenge for a genre that had previously thrived by presenting a more speculative and reality-divergent vision. These latter years mark a moment of convergence between imaginary narratives and reports from reality. Consequently, I ask how else reality inserted itself into governance television and what ideologies were reinforced and made invisible due to this patina of realism?

The use of consultants with experience working within Washington, D.C. is one avenue through which governance television productions achieves an aesthetic and technical fidelity to the government as a workspace. These visual elements are then reinforced by the integration of real legal and constitutional details into plots. However, the majority of the audience lacks the firsthand day-to-day knowledge necessary to distinguish the real from the fictional, except, perhaps, for exaggerated absurdities such as a president committing murder. Thus, an emphasis on realism may convey prestige for a production, but it also denotes any ideological messaging as inherent and inevitable. I argue that although governance television presents the government within the two seemingly irreconcilable frames of idealism and cynicism, the cumulative impact of visual and procedural realism overrides that apparent opposition.

Yet beneath the surface of contrasting tones, governance television programs share a pervasive ideology of a stable status quo. Although idealism and cynicism toward government appear to be in contention, they share the same function; they are both strategies through which governance television articulates and manages public sentiment about legitimacy and stability within politics. Regardless of an individual character's worthiness or capacities, all plots are resolved—and all anxieties soothed—with a message of continuity and stability of the American system of democratic governance. Governance television is, at heart, a conservative rather than a radical genre.

The dangerous, and perhaps false, element of this genre is not what is included, but what is left out. These television 'images, stories, and legends' about government operations impose a limit on the civic imaginary: an inability to imagine a breakdown of procedure and law that fundamentally threatens the institution of American government. This absent possibility becomes significant when threats to the real-world institution manifest in political actors with no regard

for tradition, procedure, or legality. The extent of their potential destructive impact is outside the bounds of the imaginary, and thus outside the bounds of what can be anticipated and prevented. The alternative visions of governance television can only rehearse temporary crises and not institutional failure; if governance television were to do so, it would stop being *governance* television.

Before *The West Wing*

As told by creator Aaron Sorkin, the origin of *The West Wing* starts when he was expecting to meet producer John Wells for an introductory conversation and instead walked into a pitch meeting. Sorkin had written the 1995 film *The American President*, and the evening before the meeting he had had an off-the-cuff conversation about how its material could be a television series. Thus, in this surprising meeting he pitched "a television series about senior staffers at the White House" that would initially use material cut from the film script. Originally scheduled to premiere during the 1998-1999 television season, *The West Wing* was delayed until 1999-2000. Producer Wells and Sorkin described the cause for this this delay during an interview 15 years after the premiere:

Wells: I was in the throes of *ER* at the time and had a six series deal at NBC, so I took it to them and told them I wanted to do this [*The West Wing*] as part of the deal. They didn't want to make it. They felt that people didn't care about politics and it just wouldn't work. But the way my deal was structured, they had to either make it or give it back to me to set up someplace else so they finally said "Well okay, we'll make it but we don't want to make it this year."

Sorkin: The Lewinsky scandal was happening at the very time I was writing the pilot and it was hard, at least for Americans, to look at the White House and think of anything but a punch line. Plus a show about politics, a show that took place in Washington, had just never worked before in American television. So the show was delayed for a year.⁷

Each contextualizes the potential for a television show about politics—a television show about the government—as risky, reflecting the industrial logic of the time. Wells reports that the NBC executives assumed audiences wouldn't care, while Sorkin proposes that audiences wouldn't take it seriously.

Based on the television shows that had been tried before *The West Wing*, both assumptions seem well grounded. Of the shows explicitly set within the machinery of politics and government produced before 1999, the vast majority were comedic. The 1962 primetime sitcom, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, is one of the earliest examples of an attempt to fictionalize government on US television. Like its namesake film, it featured a new senator going to Washington, D.C. to represent a small town. Unlike the 1939 Frank Capra film, which was lauded with awards and added to the United States National Film Registry, the television version was cancelled after twenty-five episodes and is largely forgotten.

ABC, CBS, FOX, and NBC all tried to find the situational humor within the government, and all failed to find sufficient audiences and ratings. Sitcoms *Grandpa Goes to Washington* (NBC, 1978), *Hail to the Chief* (ABC, 1985), and *Women of the House* (CBS, 1995), a spin-off of the popular *Designing Women* (CBS, 1986-1993), were cancelled after one season, with none producing more than thirteen episodes. The sitcom *Mr. President* was part of the FOX network's first season, premiering in May 1987 and cancelled by February 1988. It survived for twenty-four episodes, which is more than NBC's *The Powers that Be* (1992-1993), a senate-based sitcom with the illustrious pedigree of Norman Lear as executive producer. ABC's *Karen* (1975) tried a different approach by featuring a lobbyist as the sitcom protagonist rather than a president or senator. *Karen* was also canceled after thirteen episodes. TV critic Ray Richmond summarized these aborted attempts to put fictional politics in primetime: "Until *West Wing*

surfaced in 1999, no series in the history of scripted TV entertainment had really made a go of telling an inside-the-White-House story.”⁸

NBC and HBO produced an hour-long drama and an experimental comedy, respectively, but notably each of these aired in a non-traditional format for a limited number of episodes. NBC’s *The Bold Ones: The Senator* (1970-1971) was one of four hour-long drama series under the *Bold Ones* umbrella that aired in a rotating order during the same time slot from 1969-1973. The other three include *The Bold Ones: The New Doctors*, *The Bold Ones: The Lawyers*, and *The Bold Ones: The Protectors*. Through *The Senator*, the *Bold Ones* added government to this set of shows representing institutions of American life—the medical system, the legal system, and the law enforcement system. But while these others were and continue to be mainstay genres of American entertainment television, it is not until 1999 and *The West Wing* that government rejoins the arena of primetime drama.

Finally, filmed and aired six election cycles before the premiere of HBO’s *Veep* (2012-2019), *Tanner ’88* (1988) is an early entry into HBO’s original programming. Written by political cartoonist Garry Trudeau and directed by Robert Altman, *Tanner ’88* is a comedy/mockumentary miniseries that blends fiction and fact. It features (fictional) Representative Jack Tanner and his campaign staff as he runs for the Democratic presidential nomination. The series incorporates cameos from many people such as (real) Governor Bruce Babbitt, who was running for the Democratic nomination, and (real) Senator Bob Dole, who was running for the Republican nomination at the time. These recognizable politicians appear on camera talking about or interacting with Tanner as if he is one of them. Rather than airing at a regularly scheduled weekly time, episodes were shot and aired in coordination with scheduled

events within the 1988 election calendar such as the New Hampshire primary, the debate between leading Democratic candidates, and the Democratic convention.

Election campaign-focused, *Tanner '88* emphasized the political rather than the governmental, a distinction I clarify in the following section. *Tanner* also highlighted the escalating importance of public relations and press management to be a successful politician. Thirty-two years after *Tanner* aired, Vikram Murthi writing for *The AV Club* asserted, “There would be no *West Wing* without Robert Altman and Garry Trudeau’s HBO political satire,” an evaluation with which *West Wing* creator Aaron Sorkin fully agrees.⁹ Despite this list of attempts at entertainment television set within the government, some commentators still declared, “Until President Bartlet (Martin Sheen) moved into the White House on *The West Wing*, we had never had a president starring in a TV series.”¹⁰

Wells’ assessment of NBC’s hesitation was based on what had been previously tried and had largely failed on primetime; Sorkin’s addition points to what had been playing out on television news rather than primetime. Months of investigations, affidavits, and appeals led President Bill Clinton to testify before a grand jury and then announce on national television on August 17, 1998, that he had had an “improper physical relationship” with a White House intern. Almost exactly four months later, the House of Representatives approved two articles of impeachment, sparking the first impeachment trial of an American president in 130 years. According to contemporaneous polling, only 15% of the public watched all or a lot of the trial and only 34% watched some of it, but reporting and commentary were pervasive.¹¹

More broadly, Bruce A. Williams and Michael Delli Carpini argue that the scandals surrounding and throughout the Clinton presidency exhibited the hyperreality of the changing structures of American journalism and that “what mattered most in the ongoing media discourse

of the Clinton scandals was the discourse itself.”¹² Part of this discourse included the legal investigations to discover the truth and the debates within the press and punditry about how much this truth mattered. Another part drew from the history and legacy of other public scandals and media events such as Watergate and the O.J. Simpson Trial.

A third component Williams and Delli Carpini note was how popular culture genres contributed to how people contextualized the Clinton scandals: “Films like *Wag the Dog*, *Primary Colors*, and *An American President*, and television shows like *Spin City* – direct commentaries on the contemporary state of politics – occasionally became part of the discourse about the Clinton scandals” but also “the connection between popular culture and the Clinton scandals was more subtle [as compared to TV specials explicitly featuring interviews with Monica Lewinsky], based on the similarity of the underlying issues, values, or beliefs that were tapped rather than on direct references to contemporary events or politics.”¹³ Although fictional stories about presidents abound in film—from *Gabriel Over the White House* (1933) to *Air Force One* (1997), from *Kisses for My President* (1964) to *Olympus Has Fallen* (2013)—if TV’s audiences were automatically linking the fictional governmental shows to real events, and those real events had saturated the television, it is no wonder that the NBC executives were skeptical about attempting government in primetime once again.

Ironically, or perhaps symbolically, 20 years after *The West Wing*’s premiere, multiple governance television shows had to grapple with how the spectacle of the concurrent presidential administration impacted their productions. The November 2016 election of Donald Trump, a bombastic and divisive reality TV star, called into question the appeal of fictionalized government; when the actual president pushes the bounds of belief, what role could or does fictional government play in the American imagination of civic operations?

Why “Political TV” is Not Enough

Political television is a term that has been applied to talk show interviews with politicians, documentaries, late-night comedy/satire shows, television events, and fictional scripted shows, among others. Chuck Tryon’s *Political TV* includes everything from advertising and news to satire, sketch, and melodrama, while for Jeffrey Jones “new political television” is specifically a genre of entertaining talk shows that have turned their attention to issues of politics.¹⁴ In their assessment of “political fictions” in UK television, Liesbet van Zoonen and Dominic Wring characterize them as “those programmes or series that primarily tell stories about fictional politicians” in the form of drama, thrillers and comedies.¹⁵

R. Lance Holbert offers a structured typology of nine different categories at the intersection of entertainment TV and politics.¹⁶ This model is built along two axes: audience expectations (reception) and content explicitness, and each axis is divided into three levels. Audience expectations about the content range from “Political as Primary” (high) to “Political as Secondary” (low). The content axis ranges from “Explicit” with political messages as a primary goal (high) to “Implicit” in which political messages are only implied (low). This model provides some potentially useful distinctions—satire versus talk show interviews, fictional political dramas versus reality-based programming—but it also encompasses a vast majority of entertainment in low implicit, low expectations category of “lifeworld content.”

Acknowledging the inherent ambiguity of the term “political film” and how that term can be used to describe both films depicting political machinery such as institutions and films with political significance, Terry Christensen and Peter Haas offer a quadrant typology for where the political intersects with entertainment film.¹⁷ The axes in this model split the political component of political films along two dimensions, content and intent, resulting in four categories: pure

political movies (high political content, high political intent), socially reflective movies (low political content, low political intent), politically reflective movies (high political content, low political intent), and auteur political movies (low political content, high political intent.) “Pure political movies” are the films that “focus on politicians, elections, government, and the political process” and “have at their core a political message that any viewer can perceive.”¹⁸ These films may narrowly “criticize specific aspects of the political process” or may offer “a broad critique of the entire political and social system.”¹⁹ Purity in this case is not an evaluation of political viability but of legibility and transparency. However, Christensen and Haas also include “social problem and documentary films” within this category, reinforcing a distinction between the “purely political” from the governmental. Similar to Holbert’s inclusion of “lifeworld content,” this model of low and high political content and intent can be applied to all films, rendering the term “political film” functionally irrelevant.

Ian Scott offers the distinction between “films about politics” and “political films.”²⁰ For Scott, the films about politics have a distinctive and ideological iconography, whereas the political films make more thematic arguments about democracy and social power. Similarly, for Brian Neve and Richard Rushton political films are about the “interplay between dominant and oppositional ideologies.”²¹ While political films may also be films about government, they do not have to be. Films such as *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) and *The Great Dictator* (1940) are exceptions rather than the rule.

Within the structure of *Hollywood’s White House: The American Presidency in Film and History*, Peter C. Rollins and John E. O’Connor introduce a further dichotomy within the category of films about politics: the historical and the fictional. Historical films represent real world events and people, whereas the fictional uses the trappings of government institutions to

tell new stories.²² This split is echoed to varying degrees in Jeff Meme and Christian B. Long's collection, *Film and the American Presidency*, which focuses on films analyzing the fictionalized lives of historical presidents with a few chapters acknowledging their fully fictional cousins, and Iwan W. Morgan's *Presidents in the Movies: American History and Politics on Screen* only features historical narratives and biopics. Though these films include the business of government, that is not the emphasis.²³ Instead, these films focus on mythmaking for or critique of a specific president or administration. These biopic films and television shows contribute to the civic imaginary but in a different way than fictional entertainment; these productions present a vision of what was, while the fictional productions, aesthetically realistic but divorced from the known historical trajectory, represent a vision of what might be.

Part of challenge these models face is a fungible application of 'politics' within political television or films or entertainment that often elides definition or treats 'political' as self-explanatory. However, Andrew Heywood (2013) provides four different potential definitions: politics as the art of government, politics as public affairs, politics as compromise and consensus, and politics as hierarchies of power, all of which in some way describe "the activity through which people make, preserve and amend the general rules under which they live."²⁴ These definitions range from politics comprising the actions of government to politics as the struggle over limited resources and political power as the ability to achieve a desired outcome. It is the application of this latter definition, which undermines the effectiveness of categories such as "lifeworld content" or political films as reflecting social and political conditions and ideologies; as representations, all media incorporate hierarchies of power, just some are made more intentionally legible or are legible to different audiences than others.

Thus, while each of these definitions of political entertainment, political film, and political TV provides useful articulations of the dimensions at which political intersects with popular culture, they also conflate meaningful differences under the umbrella of political. For example, in *Political TV*, Chuck Tryon distinguishes between dramas—melodramas of political process and melodramas of national security—and comedies as different types of political television.²⁵ Within ‘comedies’ he includes both serialized, scripted programming such as *Veep* and episodic, sketch comedy such as *Saturday Night Live*, but acknowledges that these two types of programming operate on different production times lines. I assert that this is not a minor difference. As will be discussed in more detail in chapters 3 and 4, serialized, scripted programs envision alternate worlds with personalities and crises divergent from our own. The longer production timeline and the personal, storytelling goals of the production staff largely remove any one-to-one mimicry or commentary on specific events. However, sketch comedy such as *Saturday Night Live* responds to and comments on real events within a weekly time frame. As Frank Rich, an executive producer on *Veep*, described in an interview with *The Atlantic*, “Alex Baldwin doing Trump [on *Saturday Night Live*] is terrific, but watching the current news being satirized eight months later—which is the kind of time lag we’d be talking about—would fall flat.”²⁶ Both types of programming contribute to the civic imaginary, but these different production timelines result in different discursive functions, one of representation of an alternative reality and one of (comedic) contextualization of our shared reality. From this viewpoint, *Saturday Night Live*’s weekly sketch comedy shares more in common with nightly or weekly comedy talk shows than with serialized primetime programming, whereas *Veep*’s is more aligned with melodramas of political process. Tryon also includes political advertising, which has a persuasive function and news reporting, which traditionally has an informative function,

under the umbrella of political television. These different discursive functions combined with an indistinct definition of ‘politics,’ renders the category of political television functionally meaningless.

Each of these televisual formats—news, advertising, talk shows, sketch comedy, and scripted primetime—contributes to cultural meanings and sentiments regarding government. Envisioning fully realized alternative versions of the machinery, personnel, and art of government sets ‘governance television’ apart from other types of ‘political TV.’ Tryon specifies that melodramas of political process deal with “the business of passing legislation, holding elections, conducting trials, or otherwise managing the affairs of running a government.”²⁷ Emily Apter similarly categorizes TV political serials as unique from other political popular culture because they allow “viewers to discern the pressure of the death-drive in political ambition, and...to grasp that which is extra to statecraft: elements of ambiance, milieu, and infrastructure in the function and dysfunction of political institutions.”²⁸ Legislation, statecraft, infrastructure—these are the governance of governance television., and within 30 to 60 minutes-a-week episodes, these shows impose narrative elements such as exposition, conflict, climax, resolution, and denouements onto the complex processes of this system. This does not mean I eschew the use of “political” entirely; we call them politicians, after all.

One significant quality that distinguishes television from other media of popular culture telling these stories is the format of long-form storytelling and larger ensembles. The presidency, or a single politician, as a synecdoche for the operations of the entire White House is a common device for films about the government. This rhetorical act emphasizes the role and personhood of the president, while simultaneously making less visible all those others who work at the behest of

the White House and the Executive Branch: agency and department heads and deputies, communications staff, policy researchers, chiefs of operations, etc.

However, in translating these stories from film to television, the role of the president is consistently only one amid an ensemble cast. Martin Sheen (President Jed Bartlet) may get final billing during the title sequence of *The West Wing*, but he shares that billing with Dulé Hill (Charlie Young, Personal Aide to the President); Allison Janney (C. J. Cregg, White House Press Secretary); Richard Schiff (Toby Ziegler, White House Communications Director); John Spencer (Leo McGarry, White House Chief-of-Staff); and Bradley Whitford (Josh Lyman, White House Deputy Chief-of-Staff) throughout the series. Others including Stockard Channing (Dr. Abbey Bartlet, the First Lady); Rob Lowe (Sam Seaborn, White House Deputy Communications Director); Joshua Malina (Will Bailey, White House Deputy Communications Director), and Janel Moloney (Donna Moss, Senior Assistant to Josh Lyman) are included in the credits, depending on the season in question. Although changed in production, the original intent of the show was for the president to appear only rarely, focusing instead on these staff positions. Similarly, on *Commander in Chief*, Harry Lennix (Jim Garner, Chief of Staff) and Ever Carradine (Kelly Ludlow, Press Secretary) get featured billing alongside Geena Davis (President MacKenzie Allen) and *Madam Secretary*'s titles featured actors playing members of the Secretary of State's staff. These shows, and others like them, expand the fictional vision of governance operations from a spotlight on the presidency to a wide beam, illuminating the intricacy of procedures and personnel within the government.

That television programs can provide this more encompassing view of governance is a product of their serialized, open narrative structure. Television shows that extend for eight, or thirteen, or one hundred fifty-five episodes have greater flexibility to incorporate characters

beyond a president than two-hour films. This flexibility expands the narrative possibilities from the nobility, insignificance, or crookedness of the office holder to the function, or disfunction, of the federal government apparatus.

There are two types of shows that live on the debatable periphery of governance television: melodramas of national security and election narratives. Narratives about national security perform different discursive and ideological functions from those melodramas and comedies of political process. Although television shows featuring the FBI or CIA are set within a government agency, their narrative and ideological emphasis on fear and threat, order and safety, rather than the day-to-day operations of civil service, constructs an investigative-procedural-action-thriller-military generic cluster rather than one of governance.²⁹ This distinction sets programming such as *The West Wing* and *Veep* apart from FBI-shows such as *Bones* (2005-2017); *Criminal Minds*, (2005-2020); *Quantico* (2015-2018); or *FBI* (2018-present). One might think of these as shows about government employees rather than shows about governing; a show about a United States postal worker would be similar. Some shows that start as action-thrillers such as *24* and *Homeland* have episodes and seasons later in their runs, which feature governing decisions at the highest levels.³⁰ Additionally, shows about elections such as *Battleground* (2012) are more aspirations to governance than governance themselves. As with all genres, governance television has fluid, porous, and changeable generic boundaries, and this project does not aim to arbitrarily limit them.

Research Design

I adopt Julie D'Acci's 'circuit of media studies' as a methodological design, focusing on a specific site for each chapter, while acknowledging that the sites of text, reception, production, and sociohistorical context inform each other.³¹ Each site contributes to governance television's

ultimately conservative ideology by reinforcing messages of institutional stability, regardless of tonal register or momentary crises. To determine the programs within governance television, I searched for the terms “political drama” and “political comedy,” as well as relevant terms such as “president” or “senator” in Tim Brooks and Earle F. Marsh’s *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows, 1946-present*.³² This compendium provided a preliminary list of potential governance television programs through the 2006-2007 television season. I developed this list further as detailed below.

Discourse and Visual Analysis

For chapter two, I conducted a discourse analysis of critical reviews of television shows on the initial list. In this analysis, I acknowledge that critics are specialized viewers and tied as much to the site of production as reception. I began by collecting reviews from *The Hollywood Reporter* and *Variety*. The critics in these trade publications have extensive exposure to both entertainment content and personnel and are writing for an audience with the same. With that audience in mind, these critics are more likely to use intertextual references as shorthand for specific characterizations. These reviews established the novelty and impact of *The West Wing*. I expanded my sampling to national publications including *The New York Times*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *People* to assess whether the associative patterns within the industrial publications were consistent when targeted toward broader audiences. Finally, I used convenience sampling to assemble reviews at more locally targeted newspapers such as the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* and the *Orlando Sentinel*.

After gathering reviews of *The West Wing*, I searched these publications for other mentions of the show. These references generally took four forms. The first is the straightforward comparison within a review of another program such as *First Monday* being

called “a judicial *West Wing*” in the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette*. From these associative connections, I expanded the list of governance television programming, post-2007 through 2019. The second set of references to *The West Wing* appeared in opinion or commentary articles regarding the show’s cultural impact. The third focused more on industrially relevant information such as reporting on ratings, renewals or casting, and the fourth were in the context of cast member and crew’s projects outside *The West Wing*. I discarded the majority of the third and fourth categories of references as not relevant to the representation of government on primetime television, although these documents revealed the piloted-but-not-produced shows mentioned in chapter two. Finally, I identified other consistent and prominent shows that served as intertextual references, such as *Veep*, as well as the shows that were produced and cancelled in relative obscurity. Longer lasting series understandably produced more discussion than series cancelled after three episodes.

To augment the argument regarding the temporal clustering of idealism and cynicism as the two tonal registers of governance television, I conducted a visual analysis of the title sequences of the listed shows. For more commercially successful shows, I relied on official DVDs as the source for these title sequences. For less commercially successful shows, I referred to fan uploads on YouTube and Vimeo. This introduces the possibility of unofficial or fan-created title sequences rather than those that aired with the original broadcast; however, I conduct this analysis under the assumption that the obscurity of these shows precludes the creative efforts of these individuals.

Informant and Respondent Interviews

To investigate the site of production, I conducted six interviews during summer and fall 2020 with political consultants to three governance television shows. Governance television

shows augment their writing staffs by drawing from the expertise of those who have been employed by the federal government, and these consultants fill a unique position because they inform the final product without the power to decide how that information is implemented.³³ Interviews were conducted as phone calls as per interviewee preferences. This format allows for consideration of vocal tones, pauses, and laughter, but cannot contextualize responses with body language or environment. All interviews were between thirty and sixty minutes, with one interview taking place in two thirty-minute sessions. These conversations took the form of both informant and respondent interviews. As experienced professionals in government and newcomers to Hollywood, interviewees reported observations and interpretations of their roles and responsibilities, and as viewers, interviewees integrated personal opinions, taste, and judgement with social discourse.³⁴ Although some interviewees worked on the same production, their perspectives and processes, as with all individuals, are distinct. Interviews were transcribed and coded using a grounded theory approach, with patterns in the data generating categories and conclusions.³⁵

Interviewees include (in alphabetical order) Robert (Bob) Bauer, consultant to *House of Cards*; Eric Lesser, consultant to *Veep*; Anita McBride, consultant to *Veep*; Bob Okun, consultant to *Designated Survivor*; Kal Penn, performer on and consultant to *Designated Survivor*; and Eric Schultz, consultant to *Designated Survivor*.³⁶ As will be explored in more detail in chapter three, each of these consultants held positions within the White House ranging from White House Counsel to Assistant Secretary at the Department of Education to Associate Director at the White House Office of Public Engagement, and some worked in additional government agencies and branches such as in the Senate. All biographical details are drawn from my interviews and from publicly sourced documents. In addition to my personal interviews,

published and public interview sources for both my interviewees and for other consultants contribute to my analysis.

I was put in contact with the majority of these consultants through members of my social network and reached one through a direct email. This process produces a convenience sample that is biased towards recent productions. Additionally, of these six interviewees, four are white men, one is a white woman, and one an Indian American man. While clearly a larger sample would be necessary for a generalization, it is worth noting how the demographics of my interviewees reflect the predominance of white men in both Hollywood and the American political world.³⁷ Productions that hire multiple consultants at one time seem to prioritize political-party diversity rather than demographic.³⁸ When the demographically-narrow group of people involved in television production hire their political consultants from the demographically-narrow pool of government experts, we should be aware that this selection potentially creates a recursive alignment in point-of-view between experts and creatives.³⁹ At the same time, if, as will be discussed in chapter three, the majority of information these experts provide is technical and factual, then how much those details replicate a specific lived experience is debatable. How or how much the demographic identities of the political consultants impact the representation of government on screen is beyond the scope of this study.

I want to acknowledge that both Hollywood and Washington, DC are social networks and the potential constraint of social pressures on an individual's willingness to directly criticize peers within a semi-anonymized study. All criticisms expressed were given with good-willed intentions and acknowledgement that the final production of the resultant shows was out of the hands of their colleagues. Additionally, interviews took place during a contentious and divisive presidential campaign. So as not to discomfort my informants, I deliberately did not include

personal party affiliation within my questioning, nor did we discuss the representation of different political parties' policies within different television shows. However, interviewees served within either Republican or Democratic administrations and inferences can be drawn from those histories. Within direct quotations, pauses, stutters, and asides have been lightly cleaned for clarity, and unless otherwise indicated, direct quotations are the result of personal communications.

Narrative Analysis

For chapter four, I conducted a narrative analysis of crisis of leadership plots within seven shows in the broader corpus: *The West Wing*, *Commander in Chief*, *Veep*, *Scandal*, *House of Cards*, *Madam Secretary*, and *Designated Survivor*. These shows were selected because they focus on the executive branch, and each has at least two plots involving temporary or permanent transitions of power and their constitutional remedies.

Prior to this study, I was already familiar with *The West Wing*, and so I focused my attention on the first/second episodes detailing an assassination attempt and fourth/fifth season episodes that include a kidnapping. Thus, I watched the first season's final episode "What Kind of Day Has It Been," the second season's two-part episode "In the Shadow of Two Gunmen," the fourth season's final episode "Twenty Five," and the fifth season's first two episodes, "7A WF 83429" and "The Dogs of War" to analyze the treatment of these crises and their resolutions. Additionally, I viewed the second season episode "Life on Mars," which includes a vice presidential resignation. Finally, I watched the seventh season episode "The Cold" in which Vice-Presidential Candidate Leo McGarry dies before election day through to the finale "Tomorrow." In chapter four, I analyze the candidate-dies-before-inauguration plot through *Scandal's* more dramatic president-elect assassination, but *The West Wing* anticipated this

scenario ten years earlier. In total, I watched 17 full episodes and approximately 12 hours of *The West Wing* to conduct this narrative analysis.

I was less familiar with the other six shows prior to this study. Thus, I watched the entirety of *Commander in Chief* (18 episodes, approximately 12.5 hours), focusing on the pilot episode and “The Elephant in the Room,” in which the president needs an emergency appendectomy; the entirety of *Designated Survivor* (53 episodes, approximately 38 hours) due to its premise of catastrophic governmental destruction and the subsequent rebuilding; and the entirety of *Veep* (65 episodes, approximately 30 hours). Even when not directly addressed, the full series of *Designated Survivor* and *Veep* informed my interviews with the political consultants who worked on those shows.

I searched episode summaries and recaps to determine the most relevant episodes of *Scandal*, *House of Cards*, and *Madam Secretary*. This resulted in my viewing of *Scandal*’s season two episodes “Happy Birthday, Mr. President,” “Blown Away,” “One for the Dog,” and “A Criminal, a Whore, an Idiot, and a Liar” which show a presidential assassination attempt and its procedural repercussions, as well as all of season 6, in which an election goes awry. In total, I watched 20 episodes of *Scandal* (approximately 14 hours) to analyze these storylines, as well as additional episodes involving election rigging, the death of a vice president, and other constitutional shenanigans.

Similarly, *House of Cards* repeatedly engages with issues of executive power. I concentrated on the final episodes of seasons one and two in which Congressman Frank Underwood becomes first vice president and then president, four episodes in season four that detail the aftermath of an assassination attempt, and all of the season five—13 episodes about election chaos, an impeachment investigation, and a presidential resignation. This accounts for

19 episodes and approximately 19 hours of viewing. The complexity of *House of Cards*' interwoven plots also required watching selections from other episodes for contextualization.

Finally, I watched 17 episodes (approximately 12 hours) of *Madam Secretary*: season two episode "The Show Must Go On" in which the secretary of state becomes the acting president; four election-based episodes in season three; the season four episode "Sound and Fury" in which a brain tumor impacts the president's decision making; and the entirety of the sixth season, which details an investigation into an election.

Cumulatively I watched approximately 209 episodes (137.5 hours) to conduct the narrative analysis of chapter four. While watching I took detailed notes, concentrating on constitutionally informative dialogue and camera shots. I watched additional series in total or in part to inform my analysis throughout this dissertation. These series can be found in appendix A.

Structure of the Dissertation

The first chapter briefly details changing trends in the media industry, American politics, and American journalism that collided in the second half of the twenty-first century, setting the stage for the operations of government to become a viable option for primetime television. Although these industries are separate in that they have different incentive structures, these incentives came to have a symbiotic relationship, with shifts in one domain necessarily creating shifts in the others. The most extreme example of this alignment was the increased salience of the 24-news cycle in the mid-1990s and its heightening through the 2000s and the 2010s. This larger outlet for news reporting reinforced a stylistic shift in journalism over what stories were considered news that began post-Watergate. As politics and politicians were often the subject of those stories, press relations and image management became a necessary and visible part of politics. Additionally, the style of television storytelling came to incorporate more serialized

elements within a predominantly episodic landscape as distribution technologies shifted to the digital, giving audiences more viewing options outside scheduled viewing.

In chapter two I argue that governance television performs a discursive function of visualizing a civic imaginary on television. This function operates on both a textual and generic level, imagining government from a specific affective perspective and in tension with the concurrent presidential administration. As professional viewers and knowledgeable audience members, critics do the rhetorical work of constructing governance television as a genre, although that is not the term used within the industry. A successive visual analysis of the iconography of the title sequences of these shows reveals two sentiments with which to frame government: idealistic and cynical. Shows within these poles form temporal clusters such that idealistic shows were produced against the backdrop of the presidential administrations of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush and cynical shows were produced during Barack Obama's second term. The election of Donald Trump disrupted this trend because cynical governance television shows were suddenly acting as augurs of the future, rather than exaggerated distortions of the present.

Chapter three approaches the production of governance television through the eyes of hired consultants with career experience in Washington and often in the White House. As largely liminal staff members, these consultants have a unique view of the production process, because they have direct access to the goals and values of the showrunners and executives without having direct influence on the final product. The political consultants were also informed viewers who analyzed shows they had not worked on and watched for pleasure through the lens of both realism and entertainment value. Ultimately 'realism' or 'realistic' as a primary value reoccurred throughout these interviews, although tempered by other concerns such as storytelling and

humor. The aesthetic and technical details contributed by these political consultants increase the perceived realism of the productions for lay audiences and create referential shorthand for Washington, D.C. insiders.

Finally, chapter four uses textual analysis of seven shows set within the executive branch to explore the ways in which real constitutional processes are applied, correctly and not, to narratives of crises in leadership. Assassination attempts, medical emergencies, resignations, and unusual elections reoccur throughout the two decades. These scenarios embody the increased public anxiety over the legitimacy of elected leaders but assuage those anxieties by reaching a resolution, whether a worthy or an unworthy individual temporarily holds the office of president. This repeated narrative arc with its aura of realism signifies American governmentality, and in turn, American democracy as a stable institution with a plan for continuity even in the face of the most catastrophic disasters.

Notably, this project makes no claims about the potential pedagogical aspects of governance television; the goal of this project is not to make an argument that audiences *learn* about government from television. As Danny Goldberg writing in *The Nation* in 2020 after the conclusion of a number of prominent governance television series in 2018 and 2019, “A fictional series about Washington is not “news,” but in a culture in which a large percentage of voters make decisions based on emotions, a drama that directly addresses political issues is one part of the mosaic that forms contemporary mythology.”⁴⁰ I conclude that by repeatedly reinforcing the continuity and stability of American government irrespective of idealism or cynicism and with the gloss of realism, governance television restricted the boundaries of that imaginary. For a largely liberal portion of the citizenry, those restrictions had a detrimental effect when Donald

Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and subsequent administration upset the norms of political behavior, revealing that what was once inconceivable, was in fact, possible.

Notes

¹ Ray Richmond, “A Strong Constitution.”

² Frank Rich, “Frank Rich on How American Politics Came to Look So Much Like *Veep*.”

³ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 23.

⁴ Lauren Berlant describes the “national fantasy” as the images, narratives, monuments, and sites that circulate through the person or collective consciousness to make national culture a local experience. See Lauren Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy*, 5.

⁵ For more details on money spent in politics, see OpenSecret’s “Total cost of Election (1998-2020).” For more details on polarization, see Pew Research’s “In a Politically Polarized Era, Sharp Divides in Both Partisan Coalitions.”

⁶ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 183.

⁷ Aaron Sorkin and John Wells, “The Definitive History of The West Wing.”

⁸ Ray Richmond, “A Strong Constitution.”

⁹ Vikram Murthi, “There Would Be No *West Wing*.”

In a taping of final episode of *The West Wing Weekly* podcast—final until the 2020 reunion special—Eli Attie, a West Wing writer and producer and former speechwriter for Vice President Al Gore remarked, “I remember him [Aaron Sorkin] just telling me how great it [Tanner ‘88] was, and telling all of us how he couldn’t believe that when The West Wing premiered, more people didn’t see the influence of Tanner on The West Wing.”

¹⁰ Diane Holloway, “It’s Almost Time.”

¹¹ Pew Research Center, “Senate Trial.”

¹² Bruce A. Williams and Michael X. Delli Carpini, *After Broadcast News*, 141.

¹³ Bruce Williams and Michael X. Delli Carpini, *After Broadcast News*, 143-145.

¹⁴ Chuck Tryon, *Political TV*; Jeffrey Jones, *Entertaining Politics*.

¹⁵ Liesbet Van Zoonen, and Dominic Wring, “Trends in Political Television Fiction in the UK,” 267.

¹⁶ Lance R. Holbert, “A Typology for the Study of Entertainment Television and Politics,” 445.

¹⁷ Terry Christensen and Peter J. Haas, *Projecting Politics*.

¹⁸ Terry Christensen and Peter J. Haas, *Projecting Politics*, 8-9.

¹⁹ Terry Christensen and Peter J. Haas, *Projecting Politics*, 9.

²⁰ Ian Scott, *American Politics in Hollywood Film*, 11.

²¹ Brian Neve, *Film and Politics in America: A Social Tradition*; Richard Rushton, *The Politics of Hollywood Cinema*.

²² Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor, *Hollywood's White House*.

²³ Jeff Menne and Christian B. Long, eds, *Film and the American Presidency*; Iwan W. Morgan, *Presidents in the Movies*.

²⁴ Andrew Heywood, *Politics*, 2.

²⁵ Chuck Tryon, *Political TV*.

²⁶ Frank Rich, "Frank Rich on How American Politics Came to Look So Much Like Veep."

²⁷ Chuck Tryon, *Political TV*, 15.

²⁸ Emily Apter, "Political Serials," 108.

²⁹ Those agencies are part of the Department of Defense and Office of the Director of National Intelligence, respectively, and both report to the executive branch.

³⁰ Including acting presidents, over the course of eight seasons, the original run of *24* (2001-2010) had approximately nine presidents who appeared in at least one episode.

³¹ Julie D'Acci, "Cultural Studies," 432.

³² Tim Brooks and Earle F. Marsh, *Complete Directory*.

³³ Television shows about the operations of local government hire consultants with specialized knowledge of local governments. One example of this is *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015) hiring Scott Albright, a Santa Monica, CA city planner.

³⁴ Thomas R. Lindhof and Bryan C. Taylor, *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*, 177-180.

³⁵ Thomas R. Lindlof and Bryan C. Taylor, *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*, 250-252.

³⁶ Kalpen Modi performs under and is credited by the stage name Kal Penn.

³⁷ Scott Frank notes in his analysis of science consultants that of the 10 Hollywood consultants he spoke with only two were women and all were white. The gender breakdown was "fairly representative of the US science and engineering" but the racial breakdown "reflects the ethnic makeup of the entertainment industry more than that of the science workforce." Scott Frank, "Reel Reality," 436.

As of 2016-2017 people of color and women were disproportionately underrepresented in all key roles within the Hollywood entertainment industry at anywhere from a 5:1 underrepresentation to a less than proportionate breakdown. Similarly, as of 2017, people of color and white Hispanic or Latino people made up 37.2% and women made up 42.6% of the Executive Branch. An initial review of people hired to the role of political consultant (Appendix B) reveals that the hires do not reflect these statistics, much less the proportion of women and people of color in the total population. See the UCLA's *Hollywood Diversity Report 2019* and "Federal Executive Branch Characteristics (FEBC): Fiscal Year 2010 to Fiscal Year 2018" by the U.S. Office of Personnel and Management for more details.

³⁸ Consultant Anita McBride noted that on *Veep*, "They were really good about balancing, having Republicans and Democrats work on the show and people who could bring different sets of experiences to them." Similarly, the *Designated Survivor* consultants I interviewed worked for both Democratic and Republican administrations. Over the course of seven seasons, *West Wing* marketing promoted its employment of both Democratic and Republican consultants as notable feature.

³⁹ See Appendix B for a partial list of individuals who have served in government and then worked as political consultants or creatives to governance television shows.

⁴⁰ Danny Goldberg, "*Madam Secretary*, RIP."

Chapter 1 Previously On: Journalism, Media, Politics, and Storytelling

To discuss how trends in American politics, American journalism, and the American media industry came together to lay the groundwork for a dramatic, fictional version of government to find a receptive television audience is either to default to the founding of the United States or to default to an artificial starting point. Narrow the field to merely journalism and politics on television, too, starts from almost the beginning of the commercialized television industry as a nation-wide field. It is not my project here to write a history of American media, American journalism, and American politics, singularly or as combined forces, although I draw heavily from histories that have already been written. Instead, I will describe how these institutions developed larger and larger influences on each other, modulating each other's incentive structures such that by the end of the twentieth century their alignment-convergence and omnipresence made a primetime, fictional version of government a curiosity but not a surprise.

By 1952, just as access to television access was expanding across the country, the broadcast networks' limited news divisions covered the presidential nominating conventions. Two years later, Robert Montgomery, film actor and television host of *Robert Montgomery Presents* (1950-1959), was regularly traveling to the White House to advise President Dwight Eisenhower on "lighting, camera angles, wardrobe, and vocal delivery" as the first official media consultant in White House history.¹ While previous twentieth-century presidents used a variety of media strategies and advisors for information and image management, Eisenhower's

administration was “the first full-blown television presidency.”² Presidential debates joined the broadcast schedule in 1960, setting in place the formula for reporting on these events that continues today.

Television became the dominant medium through which citizens viewed the behaviors of their elected representatives: the statements of spokespeople; press conferences; the pomp and circumstance of televised party conventions every four years; and the direct address of a president every year at the State of the Union. A legacy of radio, the nightly news was expanded to claim 30 minutes of the evening broadcast hours, and television productions such as “A Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy” and annual specials showing off White House holiday decorations augmented the overtly political appearances to give the public an inside view of the White House. One-off events of this kind demonstrated the historical, personal, and intimate side of political life, but that seeming intimacy belied their nature; these behind-the-scenes tours were just as carefully constructed as any stump speech or debate. Through these many formats, the television became the prime access point for audience-citizens to encounter political actors.

All political and social transitions have roots earlier than their visible manifestations and ‘changing trends’ implies movement from one existent thing to something new. To attribute trends that come after to a single event is to ignore the inherent complexity of social institutions. Thus, I propose multiple artificial starting points, before concentrating on the decade immediately preceding *The West Wing’s* launch in 1999. In 1971 *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* defied the federal government to publish the leaked Pentagon Papers, leading to a Supreme Court Decision severely limiting the government’s ability to enact prior restraint. President Nixon founded a secret ‘unit’ to gather dirt on Daniel Ellsberg, the leaker, through both

legal and illegal means, with the aim of turning the public against him. This unit broke into the Democratic National Committee's offices, leading directly to the Watergate scandal and President Nixon's resignation.

Watergate is a story of opposition between the public service goals of journalism and the enforcement might of the federal government. Journalist Matt Bai argues that Watergate was also the launch of a new scandal-driven generation of journalists. Gary Hart, a front-runner candidate for the Democratic party's presidential nomination in 1988, was the first major politician to experience the impact of this shift. After several rumors of extra-marital affairs were published, Hart off-handedly challenged journalists to follow him around and claimed that they would be bored. Reporters from the *Miami Herald* took up this challenge, and in doing so confirmed the rumors, leading Hart to withdraw from the race. Bai argues:

Beginning with Watergate and culminating in Gary Hart's unraveling, the cardinal objective of all political journalism had shifted, from a focus on agendas to a focus on narrow notions of character, from illuminating worldviews to exposing falsehoods. Whatever sense of commonality between candidates and reporters that existed in McGovern's day had, by the time my generation arrived on the scene, been replaced by a kind of entrenched cold war. We aspired chiefly to show politicians for the impossibly flawed human beings they were—a single-minded pursuit that reduced complex careers to isolated transgressions.³

From this perspective, by centering political scandal and celebrifying investigative journalists, Watergate is an instigating factor in the move to focus on the private sides of politicians as much as their public appearances. These private motivations and decisions are at the heart of the behind-the-scenes storytelling of governance television.

In the second half of the twentieth century, objective news reporting became only one of many styles of 'news' and journalism, when previously the 'objectivity norm' had been predominant.⁴ Along with the more serious political influence of Watergate, tabloidization spilled over from tabloid newspapers to television with programs such as *Entertainment Tonight*

(1981-present), *A Current Affair* (1986-1996), *Unsolved Mysteries* (NBC, 1987-1997, CBS 1998-1990, Lifetime 2000-2002), and *Hard Copy* (1989-1999).⁵ While some programs within this magazine form such as *48 Hours* (1988-present) and *20/20* (1978-present) did conduct reporting, many were non-investigative programs with the trappings of news reporting, but often with little information beyond a headline. John Caldwell derides tabloid television, arguing that “lacking even journalism’s fetish for context and backstory, tabloid and reality producers have become masters of the closed representational loop.”⁶ In contrast, John Langer finds potential value in this more sensational form, asserting that the representation power of this ‘news’ (or news-lite) provides insight into ideological values not always visible in the traditional news.⁷ This need for the sensational and the intimate further broke down what was acceptable and not acceptable to air or discuss on television. These types of stories further prioritized the representation of politicians as individuals rather than as a small part of a larger political infrastructure. While *The West Wing* engaged with salaciousness only through the lens of potential political repercussions, for shows such as *Scandal* and *House of Cards*, plots of extramarital affairs, black mail, or skullduggery were as central as political maneuvering.⁸

Between Watergate and Gary Hart, the television news industry experienced two major upheavals that also contribute to the blurring of lines between news and entertainment. The first is the expansion of cable news channels, which brought with them the advent of the 24-hour news cycle. First CSPAN in 1979, then CNN in 1980 became more widely available as cable became more widely available during the 1980s and especially the 1990s. Crisis events have been fortuitous for CNN’s ratings since its inception; the 1986 Challenger Explosion was one of the first of these events to make CNN more salient in the American consciousness. CNN was the only broadcaster covering the launch live as the explosion happened. Although far more people

saw the event in taped replay, this live foresight signaled the commercial value of CNN—and more importantly, the 24-hour news format. With the number of outlets for reporting on government expanding, the political narratives of contest, anxiety, and critique flourished.

In addition to news-dedicated channels, the expansion of cable introduced another specialized channel: Comedy Central. Overtly branded as comedy, this channel produced programs such as *Politically Incorrect* (1993-2002), *The Daily Show with Craig Kilburn* (1996-1998), *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (1999-2015), and *The Colbert Report* (2005-2014). Like the soft-news magazine shows before them, these comedic comedy programs adopted the trappings of news broadcasts with an anchor, a chyron, and main stories. These shows also blurred the lines between entertainment, news, and politics.

The second upheaval was the 1987 repeal of the Fairness Doctrine, which set in motion the rise of ideological talk radio, particularly conservative talk. Although this dissertation is focused on television, this change in radio had outsized influence on political discourse in the late-1980s and especially the early 1990s. The deregulation of the Fairness Doctrine meant that stations no longer needed to maintain a sense of partisan neutrality. Instead, hyper partisanship, embodied by conservative radio host, Rush Limbaugh, became an incentive as listeners self-selected news that reflected their existing world views.⁹ These two trends, 24-hour news and partisan commentary, reached maturity on television in 1996 with the launch of the conservative-leaning Fox News channel and the progressive-leaning MSNBC.¹⁰ After Watergate, the content of the ‘news’ became as personal as it was informative, and the style of journalism, at least on the 24-hour channels, became just as much commentary and punditry as reporting—with no clear markers of which is which.

It was during the Clinton Administration that the presidency and political process became demystified as never before. The 1992 election brought with it a new type of candidate. While press relations and media management had been a crucial part of American politics for decades, the Clinton campaign used those strategies in the open with full acknowledgement. He had the expertise of longtime friends, Harry Thomason and Linda Bloodworth-Thomason, film and television writers, directors, and executive producers. They facilitated Clinton's image as 'the man from hope' and scheduled his appearance on Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show*, where more viewers saw Clinton's appearance than "had caught his speech at the convention."¹¹

However, after the election the Clinton administration also experienced a media backlash. "By the fall of 1998, all notions that one could make clear-cut distinctions between serious and less serious news outlets, between news and non-news genres, even among sources, producers, and consumers of news, had been effectively destroyed."¹² One reason for the ubiquitous blurring of entertainment and politics, image and reality, is that Washington politics "often plays out in the media as entertainment."¹³ In primetime, governance television mirrors this blending of the personal with the public and the informational with the opinionated, but without the previous expectations of information and objectivity that were assigned to the news. Only in this modern age of saturated twenty-four-hour news coverage, in fact does *The West Wing* somehow become possible.

However, the 'Republican revolution' of 1994 midterm elections marked the first time in 40 years that Republicans controlled both the House of Representatives and the Senate. Newt Gingrich, a rising Congressional star understood that emphasizing conflict over compromise was a strategy to activate a base of voters, and he led the 'Contract with America' campaign, which contributed to this win. Subsequently he was elected to Speaker of the House in 1995. This

election marked the embrace of a strategy of abrasive politics, which intentionally steered political discourse away from disagreement-with-the-likelihood-of-compromise to gridlocked, partisan opposition. Rather than appealing to young, urban voters, the Republican party under Gingrich appealed to angry ones. With the increased radio and television news outlets, the barriers to reaching voters who were already inclined toward deregulatory policies, the confrontational approach, or both decreased. “In the 1990s, the advent of three all-news cable stations (CNN, FNC, and MSNBC), coupled with the growth of the Internet, vastly inflated the outer reaches of the punditocracy by opening up dozens, if not hundreds, of new slots in news programming.”¹⁴ Although the amplified visibility would seem to offer more outlets for constituents to hear directly from representatives, a parallel increase in the public relations and media coaching machinery amplified the controlled and rehearsed nature of public appearances.

Gingrich’s leadership led directly to the government shutdowns of 1995 and 1996 and the first presidential impeachment trial for over 100 years. This impeachment trial was the culmination of the intermixing of tabloids with journalism. That a president would commit perjury and obstruct justice is a matter of good governance. That a president would commit perjury and obstruct justice to hide an extramarital affair is a matter for *Entertainment Tonight*. Referring to the Bush (43) administration’s response after the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, Frank Rich noted, “only an overheated 24/7 infotainment culture that had trivialized the very idea of reality (and with it, what once was known as ‘news’ could be so successfully manipulated by those in power. In an earlier America, it would have been far harder for a White House to get away with so many hollow spectacles and misleading public statements for as long as it did.”¹⁵ With this heightened partisanship, public trust remained below 50% during the four years of Bush’s (41) term and below 40% for the majority of the Clinton administration. Except

for a brief spike following the 2001 attack, public trust between 1999 and 2019 rarely topped 30%.¹⁶

One more change within the television industry also made space for governance television. The majority of entertainment television of the 1980s and 1990s was episodic. This format allowed viewers to keep up with a show if they missed an episode and made a program more attractive for strip syndication. Jason Mittell argues that technological developments allowing recording and rewatching and increased competition from cable channels led to the greater presence of serialized narrative storytelling in the 1990s and 2000s.¹⁷ The multiple, concurrent plots and large ensembles of “complex television” fit the representational needs of a bureaucracy as intricate as that of the United States government.

“Governance television” responds to a public desire for explanations about the workings of government institutions in an era when explanations by elected politicians induce skepticism due to both partisan animosity and perceived inauthenticity. The terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, and the wars that followed, heightened the awareness of the critical choices made, and not made, by governmental leaders, while also prompting an unrequited public desire for explanation and comprehension about what occurred. In the seventeen years since the launch of the war in Iraq, there has been little-to-no accountability for the false pretense of “weapons of mass destruction” used by the Bush administration to justify the conflict.

More recently, although 34 people were indicted as a result of the Mueller report investigating Russian interference in the 2016 election, these indictments did not reach the higher echelons of the Trump administration as many observers expected. *Salon’s* Amanda Marcotte notes the similarities between the two events. “The Mueller report is weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in Iraq, all over again... the public is being fed a fake Mueller report, just

as the public was being fed what amounted to fake intelligence about WMDs in Iraq.”¹⁸

Underlying this connection is a critique of those in power using the political public relations apparatus to conceal falsity and malfeasance and the inability of the mediated news commentary to hold officials accountable even when their misdeeds have been documented.

Transparency and rationality become inaccessible in an era of “alternative facts.” The stories told about government in fictional television, however, presents the rationalization of the political actors. Characters clearly articulate their decision-making processes. Control rests in the hands of knowable characters, whether that knowledge reveals motives devoted to duty and public service or motives of sordid power grabs and personal ambition. In 2021, sound and video clips of press conferences, interviews, and the occasional momentous Congressional vote circulate endlessly through the 24-hour news cycle, while meetings among caucuses and cabinets take place behind closed doors, without the same degree of scrutiny. Tell-all books turn politicians and staffers into media stars, albeit temporarily and depending on the exclusivity of the gossip. With so many contributors to the political discourse, this dissertation asks what fictional, scripted television uniquely offers to the civic imaginary?

Notes

¹ Alan Schroeder, *Celebrity-in-Chief*, 219-220.

² See Susan Douglas, “Presidents in the Media” in *Recapturing the Oval Office* and David Greenberg, *Republic of Spin* for timelines of the development of the White House’s relationship with the press corps, image and information control, and public relation management.

³ Matt Bai, *All the Truth is Out*, 228.

⁴ Michael Schudson, “The Objectivity Norm in American Journalism.”

⁵ Tabloidization was one of a number of terms used to describe this dissolution of boundaries between news and not-news/entertainment. Other terms include newszak, schlock journalism, and infotainment.

⁶ John Caldwell, “*Tabloid TV*,” 325-353.

⁷ John Langer, *Tabloid Television*.

⁸ The first episode of *The West Wing* features speechwriter Sam Seaborn unknowingly having sex with an escort. While he does not continue a sexual relationship with her, he does support her as a friend through to her law school graduation. When Vice President John Hoynes reveals classified secrets in the context of an extramarital affair, he resigns from the office out of recognition of his mistake. Alternatively, on *House of Cards*, more than once, an extramarital affair ends with murder.

⁹ Susan Douglas, *Listening In*, 294.

¹⁰ MSNBC originally had a more balanced approach and covered a diversity of news topics, but by 2007, had solidified into a liberal-leaning, politics-focused brand.

¹¹ Alan Schroeder, *Celebrity-in-Chief*, 229.

¹² Bruce A. Williams and Michael X. Delli Carpini, *After Broadcast News*, 136.

¹³ Gregg Kilday, “The Two West Wings,” 39.

¹⁴ Eric Alterman, *Sound and Fury: The Making of the Punditocracy*, 7.

¹⁵ Frank Rich, *The Greatest Story Ever Sold*, 2-3.

¹⁶ Pew Research Center, “Americans’ View of Government: Low Trust, But Some Positive Performance Ratings.”

¹⁷ Jason Mittell, *Complex TV*.

¹⁸ Amanda Marcotte, “Bill Barr's Fake Mueller Report.”

Chapter 2 Civic Reality, Civic Imaginary

Tomorrow night we do an immense thing. We have to say what we feel. That government, no matter what its failures are in the past, and in times to come, for that matter, the government can be a place where people come together and where no one gets left behind. No one gets left behind, an instrument of good.

— Toby Zeigler, “He Shall, from Time to Time,” *The West Wing*

You do your best. You try to serve the people, and then they just fuck you over...And you know why? Because they're ignorant and they're dumb as shit. And that, ladies and gentlemen, is democracy.

— Selina Meyers, “Election Night,” *Veep*

Even though a number of films in the 1990s about an American president and their staff, across action, comedy, satire, and romance, found commercial success, in 1999, the industrial lore about entertainment television said that politics was an undesirable topic.¹ In other words, “until *West Wing* came along, who knew there was an untapped national thirst to see a White House populated by brainy idealists with a keen sense of public service?”² Seven years earlier TV critic Ray Richmond marked this novel venture, “an original from the outset” that had the potential to be “Hollywood’s revenge on Washington.”³ In 2016 having been off the broadcast schedule for ten years but available in streaming distribution, *The West Wing*, a show with “the radical idea...that people might still be passionate about principle, about government, about their jobs,” became not revenge, but refuge “from the vitriol and ill-will...coursing like poison through contemporary politics.”⁴

The West Wing is significant, but it is not singular. The representation of politics that was risky and emergent in 1999 had become almost residual by 2019; by the mid-2010s, prime time

had a “bandwagon of projects with Washington politics as a backdrop.”⁵ Neil Genzlinger’s *New York Times Review* of HBO’s 2016 Lyndon Johnson biopic film *All the Way*, reported that this play-to-television adaptation had more competition on television than in the theater because “muscular political drama is an entire genre on the small screen, whether it's made up (“The West Wing” and all its thematic offspring) or based on historical events.”⁶ I argue that *The West Wing* and its ‘thematic offspring’ form a cohesive genre of governance television. Shows within this genre present government through an idealistic or cynical lens. Although producers vocally deny making ‘political commentary,’ the lens each show adopts is responsive to the concurrent presidential administration, creating an alternate vision of government from that seen in the news media. Right from the beginning of the genre, governance television fulfilled this function; *The West Wing*’s dignity was an antidote to “the long-running White House comedy about Bubba Clinton’s exploits.”⁷ Shifts between these tones reveal more about changes in public political sentiment than about changing ideological approaches to government. Indeed, as explored further in chapter four, this tonal dialectic serves to mask the ideology of continuity which pervades all governance television.

Jason Mittell argues that the assumption of a shared setting or other textual characteristic as the single determinant of a genre ignores the cultural function of genres and their work as discursive clusters.⁸ The existence of presidents and vice presidents within the texts is not what defines the corpus of shows I identify as governance television; presidents and vice presidents show up in programming such as Fox’s *Prison Break* (2005-2009, 2017) or the Disney Channel’s *Cory in the House* (2007-2008), but those programs have little to nothing to do with governance. Similarly, as previously articulated, ‘political TV’ has been applied broadly by theorists across genres and functions, diminishing clarity about the politics to which it refers.

Although popular press applies the label of ‘political’ to the shows of interest, at the level of function, politics and governance are not interchangeable.

Instead, I argue that the shows within governance television share a discursive function of envisioning the behind-the-scenes action and art of governance as a part of a national fantasy of which the shared setting of government is a part. Based on this shared discursive function, governance television is comprised of texts in both the traditional industrial categories of comedy and drama, texts produced across broadcast networks, basic cable channels, pay-cable channels, and streaming-original distribution, and texts about different branches of the American government. This function breaks down into two parts: one at the level of the individual text and one at the level of the genre as a whole, both contributing to the shared civic imaginary. At the individual level these texts contribute an affective characterization of American government. By affective characterization I mean idealistic, optimistic, service-oriented versus cynical, corrupt, inept, self-promoting, etc. There is a dialectical tension in the preferred readings of the shows between a celebration of the possibilities of government and a condemnation of its pettiness and flaws.⁹ At the generic level, governance television offers a two-decades long fictional representation of government as an alternative to the concurrent real government in power.¹⁰

In many ways the generic level is acting as an institutional version of Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical model of social interaction.¹¹ Mediated images of the real government—press conferences, speeches, rallies—are the public-facing frontstage self of government. Fictional governance television is the backstage, behind-the-scenes self. That one is real and one is fictional does not diminish this relationship. By existing within the same distribution stream of television, they mutually construct how the government is understood and imagined, appealing for audience ratings and votes simultaneously. The textual and generic levels are complementary.

With both functioning simultaneously, one expected outcome would be that shows produced during the same presidential administrations would have similar or closely related affective sentiments.

An example of both levels of this function can be seen in Tim Goodman's review of *The West Wing* for the *SF Gate*. At the level of the text, the show is about "the president of the United States, the people who work in the White House and the day-to-day realities of politics. And not cynical, irony-laden politics and situations either. No, on "The West Wing" soapy do-gooderism is played up to operatic proportions and somewhere Frank Capra is standing at attention, saluting Old Glory, a tear in his eye." The show approaches government with a sincere, empathetic, and patriotic point of view. He also writes, "The great American soap opera that is "The West Wing" could never have made it post-Watergate but seems absolutely essential post-Monicagate... as we near the post-Clinton days, our disappointment long ago turning to unsentimental jadedness, how many among us could stand up and say that politics is noble, that politicians are representatives of the people and that clashing political ideologies are set aside for the common good?"¹² Goodman not only identifies the show's uplifting point of view, he positions that point of view as a change from, or perhaps inverse to, to the unsentimental jadedness of the Clinton Era.

Charlotte Brunsdon observes, "changes within genres, and the differential prominence of different genres at different periods, can often be best understood in relation to wider sociohistorical factors."¹³ American politics have clearly marked moments of change: campaign, election, inauguration, term. Between 1999 and 2019, the United States went through three of these transitions within the executive branch: from President Bill Clinton in 1999 to President Bush in 2000 to President Obama in 2008 to President Trump in 2016. Thus, while the discursive

function remains consistent, as the political climates shift, I argue that the affective characterizations, the expression of that function, respectively shift. Although producers of governance television value realism, there is also a limit to how closely they want their shows to adhere to reality, as will be seen in chapter three. A civic imaginary as an *imaginary* necessitates some difference with or deviation from the civic reality. Should shifts in sociohistorical factors events lead to governance television mirroring events within reality too closely, this discursive function would be undermined or made ineffectual.

One important note is that by alternative I do not mean a political party alternative. Real governments and fictional shows do not consistently map onto Democrat vs Republican representations; in other words, a Democrat in power in the real government does not produce a Republican leader in the fictional government, or vice versa. Over the two decades that I analyze, half the time a Democratic president was in office (Clinton 1999-January 2001, Obama January 2009-January 2017) and half the time a Republican was (Bush (43) January 2001-January 2009, Trump January 2017-2021, by inauguration dates). With Democrat Barack Obama in office, *House of Cards* featured a Democratic president, *Scandal* featured a Republican one, and *Veep*'s party affiliations remained intentionally undeclared. Nor do affective characterizations align with political party. Idealistic *West Wing* features a Democratic administration, as does cynical *House of Cards*. These mix-and-match combinations divorce governance television's representative functions from partisanship—governance television contributes to an institutional civic imaginary rather than a vision of a specific political party.

Governance Television as Culturally Constructed Genre

Before analyzing how governance television has or has not fulfilled its discursive function, I will establish that there is a corpus of texts, which are the genre's building blocks and

not simple a set of televisions shows that share a setting. I am not concerned with whether governance television is recognized as a genre in abstract; I use the term genre to mark a set of texts grouped together under a rubric. This section recognizes how critics built the governance television through intertextual referencing and characterizations within their reviews. In other words, critics did the discursive work of categorization and rhetorical action that constructs genre.¹⁴ Jonathan Gray states that critics are privileged viewers who “occupy a hybrid space between the media and the audience...supposedly neutral and objective” and “reviews hold the power to set the parameters for viewing, suggesting how we might view the show (if at all), what to watch for, and how to make sense of it.”¹⁵ Critics consistently describe and evaluate how a new show envisions government through a defined affective lens and is in tension with the real administration. They never use the term ‘governance television,’ using ‘politics’ instead.

But what critics call political dramas (or political comedies), and what I name governance television, is a cultural shorthand for representations of the machinery and personnel of the government as distinct from politics as hierarchies of power; politics as the domain of the public affairs, rather than the private sphere; and politics as the process of compromise and negotiation.¹⁶ The genre’s edges are delineated but porous and responsive to cultural and social changes; governance television programs are included within ‘political television,’ but are more likely to be associated with one another rather than with the other types of ‘political television’. Following Mittell’s method of genre historiography, I argue that this genre has been, by critics, at least, “culturally constituted, defined, interpreted, and evaluated” since 1999.¹⁷

From its launch and even more lauded second season, the “love letter to politics” *West Wing* became a touchstone for the governance television that came after. In Fall 2000 NBC premiered *DAG* (2000-2001), a sitcom featuring Delta Burke and David Alan Grier as the First

Lady and the Secret Service agent assigned to her. Like Burke's previous attempt at a Washington-based sitcom, CBS's *Women of the House* (1995), DAG is more of a show set within government than a show about governance, "turning the White House into someplace that could have been swapped with any other work environment."¹⁸ Reviewers compared the show to previous NBC sitcoms, to other sitcoms titled to match the star—DAG refers to both David Alan Grier and his character Jerome Daggett—and to *Saturday Night Live*. In addition to the comedy comparisons, the setting and the network contributed to an assessment against the standard of its one-year older dramatic sibling: "The success of "The West Wing" proves that viewers have plenty of interest in the workings of the White House, but NBC's new comedy "DAG" is taking things a bit too far" and "As an administration, DAG loses in a landslide to NBC's The West Wing, which has more energy, style, and humor."¹⁹ This first attempt at a government-based show after *The West Wing* sits at the liminal edge of governance television, nodding toward the existence of the internal workings of government but focusing on relationships between characters as a main focus.

The 2001-2002 television season saw two mid-season attempts to dramatize the Supreme Court: CBS's *First Monday* (2002) and ABC's *The Court* (2002).²⁰ In a textualist assumption about genre, the most natural fit for shows set in the Supreme Court would be as legal dramas, because weekly episodes feature cases being argued and rulings declared. Featuring the Supreme Court, these shows might be the most legal of legal dramas. Instead, *First Monday* could have been "a judicial West Wing" and was instead "what "The West Wing" has wrought."²¹ "Poor Supreme Court," wrote Julie Salamon, in an unflattering *New York Times* review, "The White House got 'The West Wing,' the Supremes are stuck with 'First Monday.'"²² When reviews of *First Monday* did reference a legal show it was *JAG* (1995-2005), a show about the cases of

military lawyers. This connection was made not because *JAG* is a legal drama, but because both shows share Donald Bellisario as a creator.

The Court had a direct link to *The West Wing*, through producer John Wells. It, too, was a “Supreme Court Drama In the *West Wing* Mold.”²³ Although Caryn James named *The Court* “the first successful *West Wing* imitator,” in the *New York Times*, for Steve Johnson at the *Chicago Tribune*, *The Court* was lacked the polish of *The West Wing*, “the precedent setter for governmental process drama,” but had intelligence and dignity.²⁴ Although *The Court* focused on legal decisions, Johnson emphasized the somewhat missing “governmental process.” Since the swift cancellation of these two shows, the Supreme Court has been reserved for biopic films such as *Muhammad Ali’s Greatest Fight* (2013), *Confirmation* (2016), *Marshall* (2017), and *On the Basis of Sex* (2018), all of which focus on Supreme Court Justices as characters in conflict, rather than the day-to-day institutional processes. These shows make visible that governance television as a genre is broader than merely the White House, although, as will be seen, executive branch shows have been the most commercially successful.

The Supreme Court abandoned, Congress became the next real estate for broadcast networks to take a swing at with NBC producing a not-quite *West Wing* spinoff with the mid-season *Mister Sterling* (2003) and CBS going the sitcom route with the buried-in-the-summer entry *Charlie Lawrence* (2003). Both programs were premised on a Washington outsider entering national politics: Josh Brolin as a newly appointed Independent Senator and Nathan Lane as a newly elected gay Representative, respectively. *Mister Sterling*’s creator, Lawrence O’Donnell, was previously a producer, writer, and performer on *The West Wing* and a producer and writer for *First Monday*. This pedigree immediately placed *Mister Sterling* within the context of its NBC predecessor. It was “as close to a *West Wing* spin-off as we’ll get until Rob

Lowe agrees to do Sam Seaborn, Fightin' Speechwriter," "a 21st-century version of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*," or "*The West Wing* meets *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*."²⁵ Like the Supreme Court before them, these Congressional shows did not find ratings support.

The early 2000s also saw some experimental, governance television-hybrids on premium cable in the form of HBO's *K-Street* (2003) and Showtime's *American Candidate* (2004). Like *Tanner '88* before it, *K-Street* is a mock-documentary from a prestige filmmaker; the show marks Steven Soderbergh's first venture into producing and writing television. Starring political consultants and media personalities James Carville and Mary Matalin, *K-Street* blends real people and fictional characters, scheduled events and fictional plots. Noting that *K-Street* largely features Democratic politics, rather than the in-power Republicans, Alessandra Stanley remarked in her review: "From *The West Wing* to *K Street*, Hollywood's vaunted look inside Washington is really a peek at other outsiders wanting to get in—or back in."²⁶ Semi-fictional Washington had a more partisan perspective than fully fictional Washington ever had. However, whereas *The West Wing* continues to find relevance 20 years after its premiere, *K-Street* has been disowned by HBO to such an extent that as of Summer 2021, it has no presence on HBO Max, despite the constant and churning need for content to fill streaming channels. *American Candidate*, on the other hand, was a "cynical application of reality-show prosthetics over a political skeleton."²⁷ This show, from R.J. Cutler, the producer of the Clinton-campaign documentary *The War Room* (1993), applied the elimination structure of *Survivor* to the nominal goal of finding a viable candidate for U.S. President—and a cash prize. A poor oracle considering *Veep*'s success ten years later, Brian Lowry wrote of these two shows "maybe the inherent problem is simply that pay TV and politics shouldn't mix."²⁸

By mid-decade, critics acknowledged that shows about government were no longer exceptions in a sea of police, lawyers, doctors, and reality TV stars, and instead were a trend. *The West Wing* was the “gold standard of the genre.”²⁹ ABC’s *Commander in Chief* (2005-2006) introduced a new variation with a woman as president, but for one reviewer the show fell “short of the gravitas and realism of *The West Wing*.”³⁰ If *The Court* and *First Monday* were potential judicial *West Wings*, NBC’s *E-Ring* (2005-2006) was a potential military/national security version. Set in “those scenes on *The West Wing* when the Joint Chiefs assemble in the ‘situation room,’ the titular e-ring refers to the Pentagon. Like *DAG*, WB’s *Jack and Bobby* (2004-2005) marks a peripheral entry.³¹ This show is about two brothers, one of whom would grow up to be the President of the United States. Created by “a fitting consortium of *The West Wing* and *Everwood* execs,” *Jack & Bobby* focused on the family drama and integrated politics through flashforward interviews with people who worked with the presidential brother.³² Slightly more successful than their precursors, just like those judicial and congressional flubs, *Commander in Chief*, *E-Ring*, and *Jack & Bobby* did not make it past their first seasons. When *The West Wing* concluded in 2006, Justin Neal highlighted the lack of successful political follow-ups: “You’d think audiences were ready for more political fare, and more public officials as TV protagonists. But subsequent attempts - *The Court*, *Mister Sterling*, *Jack & Bobby*, *First Monday* - never caught on. *Commander in Chief*, which debuted last fall to mandate-like numbers, has nosedived in the ratings and become less about politics and more about family squabbles.”³³

After this series of commercial failures, television networks continued to develop governance television but paused on production. CBS commissioned a comedy, *Sex, Power, Love & Politics* (2006), about “staffers in their mid-30s who work on Capitol Hill;” ABC developed *See Kate Run* (or *See Cate Run*) (2009), a dramedy with a similar format to *Jack &*

Bobby, telling a story in both the present and in flashbacks to a lawyer who would eventually run for President. CBS tried again with *House Rules* (2009), “which follows the freshman class of Congress as they begin their careers in Washington;” and ABC tried again with *Georgetown* (2011), “a sexy soap centered around the young people behind the power brokers of Washington, D.C.”³⁴ Although almost all of these shows featured recognized stars in their casts, none was picked up after the pilot was produced. ABC even tried to adapt the successful British political comedy, *The Thick of It* (UK 2005-2012, US 2007), and this, too, never made it past a pilot.

Because these shows were not produced, they cannot fulfil the function of governance television. They are still relevant, however, because looking only at TV schedules suggests that studios and networks abandoned governance television after this series of cancellations. The existence of these pilots reveals continued experimentation. Additionally, local governance television shows and governance television-adjacent shows, did make it to air. CBS’s *The Good Wife* (2009-2016) was initially a legal and family drama with secondary-political inflected plots, but later seasons featured races for Illinois Governor, Illinois State’s Attorney, and a Vice Presidential nomination on Hillary Clinton’s 2016 ticket. NBC’s *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015) kept its governance firmly within the borders of Pawnee, Indiana, and, although NBC’s *The Event* (2010-2011), had a U.S. President as a main character, this “*Lost*-esque” science fiction-conspiracy thriller was more concerned with alien mysteries than with governing.³⁵

However, 2012 to 2016, from election season to election season, was a dam bursting. This is the abundance Frank Rich referred to. Governance television shows appeared on broadcast, cable, premium cable, and streaming channels and as sitcoms, mockumentary, dark comedies, dramas, miniseries, and science fiction. These shows included NBC’s sitcom *1600 Penn* (2012-2013), ABC’s evening soap opera *Scandal* (2012-2018), the first-run syndicated

sitcom *The First Family* (2012-2015), USA's miniseries *Political Animals* (2012), HBO's comedy *Veep* (2012-2019), and Hulu's first original production *Battleground* (2012). The following year Amazon's first original production *Alpha House* (2013-2014) and Netflix's first original production *House of Cards* (2013-2018) joined the field, and the year after that two-female led shows, CBS's *Madam Secretary* (2014-2019) and NBC's *State of Affairs* (2014-2015). ABC's premiered the most catastrophic entry with *Designated Survivor* (2016-2019), and CBS what might be the most outré entry with *BrainDead* (2016), a television show about gridlocked government as a product of alien invasion.

Critics described these new shows within the classic logline format of "*Show A* meets *Show B*." *Show B* was often, but not exclusively, *The West Wing*, the "gold standard of the genre." *Scandal* was "*The West Wing* as seen by Ms. Rhimes, not Aaron Sorkin. Instead of witty banter and wonky politics this drama offers meaningful monologues and lots of sex and romance" or just "*The West Wing* for Dummies."³⁶ *Political Animals* was trying to "take *The West Wing* and turn it into *Dallas*."³⁷ *Designated Survivor* was "a political thriller where *24* meets *The West Wing* and has a fling with *Air Force One*. As more and more shows aired, this discursive network gained complexity and transformed into a multi-nodal web. Series with higher ratings, more buzz, and longer runs gravitated toward the center of the generic cluster. Each premiere was a new node, and every comparison and analogy reinforced governance television as a cohesive cultural construction.

One example of this process can be seen in how *Veep* is initially compared to relevant others and then becomes the relevant other to which new shows are compared. *Veep* is a direct descendant of creator Armando Iannucci's previous projects, the deeply profane British governance television and its film spin-off, *The Thick of It* and *In the Loop* (2009), and just about

all critics were sure to mention this linkage of personnel and approach. As a television show about a female Vice President, critics summoned memories of a previous show featuring a woman politician, although Brian Lowry found that the first season of *Veep* “unlike, say, *Commander in Chief*...doesn’t really get caught up in gender issues.”³⁸ Emily Nussbaum, reviewing *Veep*’s second season, enhanced this connection to women in politics, noting an improved characterization made *Veep*’s Selina Meyer “Leslie [Knope’s] Black Swan,” referencing the lead character of the genial, local-governance comedy of *Parks and Recreation*.³⁹ By *Veep*’s fifth season, Kristi Turnquist pronounced the show “a bracingly tart counterpoint to the soaring sentimentality of *The West Wing*.”⁴⁰ Through production history, similar premises, and tonal contrasts, *Veep* was situated within the existent cluster.

However, the impact of an April 2012 premiere, rather a traditional broadcast launch in the fall, the prestige auspices of HBO and award recognition, and the star power of Julia Louis-Dreyfus elevated *Veep* to join *The West Wing* as a new keystone of governance television. For Tim Goodman *Alpha House* covered much of the same political territory as *Veep* but suffered in comparison because the latter was “exponentially funnier.”⁴¹ Similarly, in reviewing *1600 Penn*, Goodman invoked both the aspirational drama and the caustic comedies in one breath:

While *1600 Penn* isn’t going to be all soapbox lecturing and smart, earnest politics like *The West Wing*, [Jon] Lovett clearly has ideas on how to make the setting provide fodder. Not every political bit works, and the series has yet to indicate whether it wants to tap into *Veep* or *The Thick of It* territory.⁴²

Alternatively, Brian Lowry triangulated his review of *House of Cards*. That show “remains coy about party affiliations” like *Veep*, “does a marginal job fleshing out supporting players” like *Political Animals*, and integrates cameos with more dignity than “all the NBC synergy in *1600 Penn*.”⁴³

It is clearly a part of a critic's job to inform readers about what to expect from a new television show. One of the most straightforward ways of doing that is to reference previous work, so there is no surprise that these titles repeat over and over throughout these reviews. However, there is an ever-increasing number of television shows, films, and other media that are options for these comparisons. While acknowledging that all media fits with multiple generic categories, the choices critics make to contextualize a show prioritize some aspects over others. For example, critics also compared *Scandal* to other primetime soap operas, especially with female leads. But a preponderance of critics invoked *The West Wing*, thus emphasizing government as a particularly salient part of *Scandal's* makeup.

I belabor this point for three reasons. The first is to provide an overview of twenty years of governance television in all its variations, critical successes, commercial failures, and iterative riffs. The second is to emphasize the consistency and prevalence of critics treating governance television as a genre through intertextual references among shows' reviews, often by-passing or complicating standard industrial categories of comedy and drama. While also assessing formal and aesthetic qualities, the functions of affectively framing government and mirroring, moderating, or distorting a vision of the concurrent real government is equally prevalent.

Finally, in an era of increasing narrative complexity, genre hybridity, and abundance, recommendation algorithms are playing an ever-increasing role in exposing audiences to their viewing options through associative, predictive categories. Many of these streaming recommendation algorithms are proprietary black boxes, limited by catalog availability and incentivized to promote wholly owned original productions over others. As of spring 2021, Netflix, for example, uses thousands of codes to categorize its television and film offerings. These include political comedies (2700), political documentaries (7018), political dramas (6616),

and political thrillers (10504). They also include British political dramas (3250), cerebral political dramas (814), critically acclaimed emotional political dramas (3820), and understated foreign political dramas (3987), to name a few. In many ways, the granularity of this sorting algorithm is both the culmination of, and a mockery of, the work critics' reviews do to construct genres. A 2021 carousel of titles related to *House of Cards*, for example, produces *Designated Survivor* and *Madam Secretary*, and respectively, *Designated Survivor* summons *Madam Secretary* and *House of Cards*. *The Crown* (2016-present), *Borgen* (2010-2013), and *Designated Survivor 60 Days* (2019), a South Korean adaptation, also appear in these suggestions, extending governance television beyond American borders. However, *Designated Survivor* search also recommends more conspiracy-oriented television programs such as *Bodyguard* (2018), *Shooter* (2016-2018), and *Quantico* (2015-2018), eliminating any difference between 'melodramas of political process' and 'melodramas of national security,' even though they perform different ideological functions. Most importantly, none of these searches includes *The West Wing* or *Scandal*, although they once did. *Scandal's* streaming rights moved from Netflix to Hulu on May 20, 2020, and *The West Wing's* rights moved from Netflix to HBO Max on December 25, 2020.⁴⁴ One can manually search for these two programs, resulting in similar results to the *House of Cards* and *Designated Survivor* recommendations, but those links are obscured without that active intervention. The Netflix user interface, with its endless scrolling, signifies media abundance while obfuscating the generic gaps. Critics' reviews have no such limitations.

What began with one significant hit and a number of stumbles turned into an "onslaught of D.C.-set political series" by the mid-2010s.⁴⁵ Yet, within approximately a year and a half *Scandal*, *House of Cards*, *Veep*, *Madam Secretary*, and *Designated Survivor* all produced their finales, and few new productions have entered the market to take their place. Twenty years after

The West Wing's premiere, governance television has slowed down, if not paused. That ebb is the focus of the fourth and final sections of this chapter.

Aesthetics of Idealism, Aesthetics of Cynicism

Empathy, intelligence, and a belief that government is “an instrument of good” is at the heart of *The West Wing's* DNA. Alternatively, “*Veep*, like ABC's *Scandal* and Netflix's *House of Cards*, reflects many voters' view that politicians can't be trusted.”⁴⁶ If, as Jonathan Gray argues, title sequences introduce genre, characters, and tone, redirecting televisual flow and transporting us “out of real life and into the life of the program,” then the aesthetics of the title sequences of individual shows will introduce the tonal registers of the diegetic worlds and their views of government. Due to evolving styles and the economics of different distribution channels, the governance television title sequences vary in length and graphic complexity between 1999 and 2019, but they clearly display differing approaches governance iconography, transporting viewers out of the real world of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, or Donald Trump, and into the world of Jeb Bartlet, Mackenzie Allen, Selina Meyer, or Fitzgerald Grant. I do not analyze all the shows previously identified as a part of the genre; some are unavailable and some, such as *BrainDead's* musical recap, take an imaginative approach. Instead, I want to emphasize the prevalent iconography and clear contrast between idealistic shows and cynical ones.

What is the life of *The West Wing*? From the very beginning, the show establishes that the world of *The West Wing* is the world of the White House—“a symbol of the presidency, American government, and its people” and “a constant reminder of the democratic importance of what these characters did.”⁴⁷ Episodes begin with a five second bumper of a black and white image of the White House filtered through a translucent close-up of an out-of-focus waving

American flag, still recognizable from its red and white stripes. A military drum cadence scores the clip, and the text “The West Wing,” fades in. This bumper leads into a “Previously on *The West Wing*” voiceover by one of the main cast members, before relevant scenes from previous episodes play. An episode title as white text on a black background marks the start of the new episode. Three-to-five minutes later, the full main title sequence begins, usually as a dramatic or comedic exclamation mark.

Awash in patriotic, nostalgic, and inspirational iconography, the title sequence confirms the ‘life of the show’ suggested by the bumper. The same waving flag filter is layered over the presidential seal. The title briefly appears, before the show introduces the main cast members, one by one. Each character is captured in short moving clips and black-and-white still images. In between names, more black-and-white b-roll shows parades and helicopters, men shaking hands and a speaker at a podium. The flag filter fades in and out, transition between the characters and generic images of government at work. Through it all, orchestral strings, brass, and cymbals play W. G. Snuffy Walden’s Emmy-award winning theme music. The title sequence is almost a minute long, a somewhat standard length for 1999 and an almost unheard-of length for a broadcast network television show twenty years later.

The red, white, and blue of the flag and the photograph of the White House are metonymic signs of American democracy. The black-and-white pictures confer a sense of historicism, “giving archival aura to people and politics, cultures and corporations” and evoke authenticity and nostalgia for an abstracted past.⁴⁸ The waving flag adds patriotism and unity as this visual device serves as the bridge from one cast member to another. These visual signifiers are augmented by the music. Composer Walden describes this theme as “a little bit of taps, a little bit of gospel, and a little bit of Copland,” which “underscores the power of the

presidency.”⁴⁹ The prominent cymbals, French horns, and major arpeggios closely reference Aaron Copland “Fanfare for the Common Man” (1942), a wartime composition that came to auditorily represent the American Century.⁵⁰ Tim Goodman summarized this effect during the show’s first year:

From the stirring music at the beginning, and throughout the show, to the blurred flag waving gloriously in the frame to the distant shot of the White House and then the 44 minutes of pro-politics, pro-Constitution, pro-government dramatics that follow, ‘The West Wing’ is a kind of love poem to the Founding Fathers.⁵¹

The title sequence introduces *The West Wing* as a “essentially a fantasy about an idealized president and his staff” and “a love letter to optimism.”⁵² The world of *The West Wing* is one of dedicated public servants who celebrate each other’s successes and resolve differences through thoughtful conversation. The main characters in the Bartlet administration were “too ideological, too fair-minded, too optimistic, too witty, and too gorgeous to exist anywhere beyond the small screen.”⁵³ At a panel in 2019, Aaron Sorkin, creator and head writer for the first four years of the series, summarized his point of view: “I feel romantic and idealistic about American institutions and Americans.”⁵⁴ At its core, *The West Wing*’s vision of the government is as a tool for improving people’s lives.

The West Wing was the most commercially successful governance television show until the glut of 2012. But *Commander in Chief*, *Mister Sterling*, and the Supreme Court attempts shared *The West Wing*’s optimistic vision with some key variations. In *Commander in Chief* that vision came with a feminist twist. Creator Rod Lurie was “good at writing impassioned, idealistic dialogue” and “[Geena] Davis [brought] the right amount of ambition, idealism and self-confidence to the role [President MacKenzie Allen].”⁵⁵ Bill Sterling, the titular *Mister Sterling*, is a “realistically idealistic young iconoclast,” who after being appointed to a senate seat under the assumption that he is a Democrat, reveals that he is an Independent who is more

interested in policy than press relations and will not commit allegiance to either party.⁵⁶ Whereas the inhabitants of *The West Wing*'s Washington—Democrats and Republicans, politicians, staffers, and press—have basically good motives, *Mister Sterling*'s politicians are focused on jockeying for power, while its press corps jockeys for attention. On *Commander*, President MacKenzie Allen regularly faces off against Nathan Templeton, the almost-cartoonishly conniving, chauvinistic Speaker of the House. Although these characterizations appear to cast the government in a negative light, Sterling is the righteous outsider who is determined to effect change, and through his protagonist eyes, that change seems possible. Allen is the elected Vice President, but her gender and lack of party affiliation confer outsider status. Even though Templeton is more experienced in political dealings, Allen regularly succeeds in achieving her primarily progressive policies goals over his objections and maneuvering. On this show, too, the venal impulses within government can be overcome through righteous determination. The outsider who can change the direction of the politicking status quo is also the approach of the short-lived *First Monday* and *The Court*, both of which introduce new moderate Justices who would be the deciding vote on a Supreme Court with an even partisan split. All of these shows acknowledge American government as imperfect but improvable. The system can ultimately work toward a more fair and just society.

The title sequence aesthetics reinforce this reading. *First Monday* draws from the same musical score as *The West Wing*'s orchestral Americana, and, even at only 10 seconds long, *Commander in Chief* does the same. Like the *West Wing*, *Commander in Chief* features a black-and-white photo, using the aura of authenticity to offset the ahistoricism of a woman as president. *First Monday* appeals to the same sense of tradition and legacy by layering pictures of the cast over sepia-toned images of the Constitution and headlines about notable Supreme Court

decisions. *Mister Sterling's* theme music takes a more youthful approach with guitars and drum set rather than Copland but uses the same architectural metonymy as *The West Wing* by ending the sequence on Sterling standing with his back to the camera, gazing at the Washington Monument. A deference toward tradition and history is embedded within the idealism of these shows.

Red, white, and blue also play a prominent role in the aesthetics of these government fantasies. Thick, vertical translucent lines of color slide over images of the *Mister Sterling* cast, and *Commander in Chief's* brief sequence starts from a red-and-blue splash screen that becomes purple where the colors meet. Party affiliation, and the lack of it, is aesthetically codified. This visual technique of layering red, white, and blue filters over characters extends beyond title sequences, as well. The 2014 ad campaign for *State of Affairs* featured “[Katherine] Heigl’s face blended into the stripes of the American flag.”⁵⁷ This color palate is so successfully embedded with the schema of democracy that it is shared across both idealistic and cynical shows, a visual bolster to the discursive construction of the critics’ reviews.

Veep's title sequence, too, prominently incorporates red, white, and blue, but as a send up of the patriotic trappings rather than a celebration of them. By 2012, public opinion and image management rather than patriotic tradition emerges as a theme in governance television title sequences. For Selina Meyer, the titular VP of *Veep*, public image and backroom dealings are equally important priorities, and she and her team are often inept at both. Constantly insulting each other and fumbling protocol, ambition is the primary driver of all their decisions. After a presidential election gets unexpected complicated, Meyer self-righteously derides, “You try to serve the people, and then they just fuck you over.” Somewhere between farce, satire, and cringe

comedy, in *Veep*, working for the public good rather than personal advantage is an ideal declared in speeches and laughed at afterwards.

In this caustic, cynical comedy, public opinion rather than public service drives the ‘life’ of the show. *Veep*’s 10-second title sequence features floating images of newspaper articles with prominent headlines. The first frame is positive press coverage, and a jagged red line, suggestive of polling, moves diagonally upward across the frame. Another screen of positive coverage, and the line continues to climb. However, a third screen with headlines such as “Senator Crashes Out,” “Selina’s un-super Tuesday” changes the trajectory and the line begins a rapid descent. The opening ends with an image of Selina Meyer in a red suit, sitting at a desk with pen in hand encircled by a ring of stars, white on a blue background, and a ribbon of red, white, and blue stripes floating over the bottom of the circle. The VEE of VEEP is in a matching blue with the P in red. For later seasons the headlines adjust to match events of the series. In other contexts, the desk image would be a conventional representation of a politician at work. However, coming after the visual narrative of the failed campaign, the role is a consolation prize rather than an achievement. For the sixth season, after Meyer is no longer in office, the title sequence changes to solely a red, white, and blue graphic with the title. The removal of the jagged line of public opinion affirms its use as a paradigmatic sign for politics.

Alpha House, too, emphasizes the relevance of the press in politics. In this comedy, four Republican senators live together in a house in Washington. The humor is less consistently bitter than *Veep*, but the show regularly makes humor from issues such as corruption charges and dark money. This title sequence begins with a quick montage of stock photos of Washington, D.C. including the Capitol building, the Marine Corps War Memorial, and the Potomac River, and a Pennsylvania Avenue sign. These images lead into introductions for the four main characters.

Two of the characters are seen on the Senate Chamber, one giving a speech, the other sleeping at his desk. The other two characters have been spliced into existent video footage of press conferences. One stands behind Mitch McConnell, and the other stands behind a speech by Barack Obama. The sequence ends with all four men walking together towards the camera. However, rather than looking at the audience, they each look down at the cellphones that they hold in front of them, ignoring each other. Unlike *Veep* which creates fake headlines, *Alpha House* uses the opening sequence less to transition viewers out of the real world and more to transition the fictional characters into the real one. This blended atmosphere is strengthened when politicians such as Senators Elizabeth Warren and John McCain appear on screen.⁵⁸ It is the use of press conferences themselves, however, that clues audiences into what the priority in the world of these legislators; making policy takes second place to being seen.

Appropriately for a soap opera rather than a comedy, *Scandal*'s approach is more menacing. Originally a show about crisis management with a client-of-the-week, *Scandal* progressed to include a tangle of secret agencies, conspiracies, affairs, murders, and election rigging. On the title card SCANDAL is spelled in a thick san-serif font over a black background. The letters appear to be transparent with images such as a flag, characters' faces, and the White House filling the spaces as if through a keyhole. Fittingly for a show premised on crisis and image management, the sound of a camera's shutter snapping accompanies the text. Rather than actively trying to be seen, *Scandal* emphasizes Washington as a place of being watched.

State of Affairs and *Designated Survivor* take similarly graphic approaches. Fittingly for their action-thriller components, their title sequences transform that common government iconography of red and blue lines into threats. In the former, about a CIA-analyst assigned to brief the White House, a screen wipe of red ends the cold open to reveal blocky white text on a

black background. Three red lines continue the movement of the wipe, crossing out STATE OF AFFAIRS. In the latter, about what comes after almost all significant Washington politicians are killed in an attack on the Capitol, the invading red lines come from the top of the frame. As these red lines descend into a navy background, they reveal the moving silhouette of a man in a trench coat. He becomes the “I” in the white text of DESIGNATED SURVIVOR when it fades in. The majesty of idealistic *West Wing*’s waving flag is transformed into a joke within cynical *Veep* and a threat within suspicious *State of Affairs* and *Designated Survivor*.

Of these 2012 and beyond title sequences, *Alpha House* is approximately 30 seconds, *Veep* and *Designated Survivor* are approximately 10, and *Scandal* and *State of Affairs* are mere seconds. *House of Cards*, on the other hand, takes 90 seconds to introduce its world, in part because as the first Netflix original, it does the double duty of introducing the show and introducing Netflix as a production studio. *House of Cards*, a “gleefully manipulative” “immorality play,” is an adaptation of a British series of the same name.⁵⁹ Frank Underwood, a congressman with murderous ambition to higher power, acts as the “Machiavellian tour guide [through] the corrupt underbelly of government.”⁶⁰ The title sequence is a fully scored montage of sped-up video clips taken from dusk until dark of buildings, bridges, statuary, and the Potomac. Jeff Beal, who composed the music for *House of Cards*, described his assignment: “the show is [about] the dark corners, what you don’t see and what really happens as opposed to sort of the *West Wing*, you know, heroic, more aspirational, the sort of “Hail to the chief,” you know, Washington that your typical film score gestures about the capital and politics.”⁶¹ The resultant music is a combination of piano and bass, with a lonely trumpet issuing a call to arms, which is adjusted for the second season to skew darker. Through this lens, the world of *House of Cards* is neither appearance-obsessed nor graphically threatening, and it is not a place for a righteous

outsider to make a difference. Instead, *House of Cards*' Washington is a place of grand monuments and no people. This montage embodies the ideological message of institutional stability detailed in chapter four. Not only are individuals interchangeable, but they are also removable, and the institution of government keeps moving forward regardless.

Madam Secretary is an exception to this trend in both aesthetics and affective characterization. Elizabeth McCord is former CIA agent who is recruited by her former boss, now the President of the United States, to be the secretary of state. Her husband, Henry McCord, is a former Marine Corps captain, a theologian, and an instructor of ethics at the National War College. Unlike many couples on television, they are functional and supportive of each other and their children and are effective in their jobs. Unlike Selina Meyer, McCord is a thoughtful, empathetic leader who is respected by her team. Similarly, the president she works for, Conrad Dalton, is more Bartlet than Underwood. The title card reflects this tilt toward the idealistic. The text MADAM SECRETARY in gold with a star beneath it is overlaid on a faded black-and-white image of the Capitol building, revisiting the monumental and historical aesthetics of the previous cluster.

As a group, these shows establish two treatments of government, each with nuance. Idealism can live in pro-social policymaking or within an imperative to 'clean up' politics. Ineptitude, corruption, and mistrust are all different flavors of governance television's cynicism.

Bush and Obama: Defining the Era

By recognizing the group of shows that construct governance television and textual-level function of characterizing Washington and government, I turn my attention to their generic-level discursive function: creating a civic imaginary against the backdrop of a civic reality. From its very beginning, *The West Wing* presented a stark difference from "Bubba Clinton." Premiering

in the final year of the Clinton presidency after the media circus of the Clinton impeachment and all that led up to it, *The West Wing* was a political fantasy, particularly for liberals. On primetime television, the jaded disappointment spurred by twelve years of Republican ‘New Right’ deregulation, diminished taxation on the wealthy, and social policy driven by the moral majority and seven years of a ‘New Democrat’ centrist compromising on social issues, reduction in the social safety net through welfare reform, increased criminalization of minor crimes through the “Three Strikes” bill, and a failure to reform the healthcare system, was transformed into a fantasy of effectiveness, empathy, and pro-social compromise. President Bartlet’s Democratic Administration was a vision of what could have been.

One year into the show, however, the political environment shifted with the 2000 election. *The West Wing* held elections in 1998 and 2002 instead of 2000 and 2004, a tactic *Scandal* replicated 12 years later, holding diegetic election years in 2010, 2014, and 2018 instead of 2012 and 2016. Thus, *The West Wing* avoided direct on-screen comparisons of Bartlet’s campaign to that of Al Gore and George W. Bush. This did not prevent cultural comparisons. WB Studios president Peter Roth captured this impulse: “It is a presidential year, and I think *The West Wing* reminds us of the candidates and politicians we wish we could have.”⁶² People even lightheartedly polled the fictional ‘candidate’ against the real ones. Finally, after the unusual outcome of an uncertain election decided by hanging chads off ballots in Florida and a Supreme Court ruling designed to never be precedent, Al Gore’s concession speech on December 13, 2000 preempted *The West Wing* from NBC’s broadcast schedule. This displacement only confirmed *The West Wing* as an alternative vision of what could have been. One presidential contender replaced another within the space they share in an audience member-citizen’s home—the television screen.

George W. Bush's win meant *The West Wing* suddenly had a new real-world antagonist; "a newly installed conservative Republican administration made the action seem especially fictional," and the show had to adjust.⁶³ The show had only a year to try to compensate for this dynamic, when the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001 completely ruptured the connection. The show sought to acknowledge the event with the swiftly produced didactic episode "Isaac and Ismael," (October 3, 2001), but otherwise the third season proceeded as planned. If Bartlet had previously been a Democratic President against the genial 'compassionate conservatism' of Bush, he was now a president in a mirror world in which 9/11 never happened. What was previously an alternate vision of a shared reality, became an alternate reality in full.

This did not change *The West Wing's* ideal vision for government. If anything, it emphasized the contrast as the Bush administration pushed the country into two wars based on lying to the public and to Congress. Brooke Gladstone of National Public Radio's *On the Media* notes, "as faith in government erode[d], *The West Wing* pull[ed] eyeballs of American Democrats who crave an alternate reality, much as Rush Limbaugh captured the ears of Republicans two decades ago."⁶⁴ These eyeballs amounted to strong, but not remarkable Nielsen ratings between 1999-2000 (ranked 27th in primetime for the year), but increased ratings during the second (2000-2001) and third (2001-2002) seasons, rising to 13th and 10th for the season, respectively. Aaron Sorkin's departure at the end of the fourth season, amidst a storyline of a kidnapped daughter and the Twenty-fifth Amendment made this change in tone possible. But *The West Wing's* somber turn did not diminish its central idealistic core and its role as a non-Bush vision. Only in the seventh and final season did ratings for *West Wing* drop out of the top forty. Looking back on *The West Wing's* seven years, TV critic Ray Richmond concluded, "Throughout its 156 episodes, *West Wing* has held office during one of real-life America's more

contentious and controversial periods — and attempted to mirror parts of that reality back to its viewing audience.”⁶⁵

The West Wing was not alone in this reflective endeavor. For the 2004 election, TV executives “discovered that politics can make compelling television.” *American Candidate*, *K Street*, and *Tanner on Tanner*, a revisit of *Tanner ’88*, as well as non-fictional television came out of this realization.⁶⁶ *First Monday*, too, was close enough to the real Supreme Court in its casting to be recognizable but was “careful to steer away from blatant parallels...The Supreme Court, long off-limits to dramatic interpretation, has taken enough hits to its reputation of late that it could use this bit of well-packaged Hollywood mythologizing.”⁶⁷ However, after the 2000 election, Tim Goodman proposed that *First’s Monday’s* “mystery component in the scheme of checks and balances...might have been more reverential and intriguing before the outcome of the last election.”⁶⁸ He found *First Monday’s* version of the Supreme Court not successfully distanced from the real thing, thus less successful in its discursive function.

Commander in Chief was another part of this political zeitgeist. This show, featuring an Independent and a woman as president was more similar to *The West Wing* than the Bush administration. When trying to explain *Commander in Chief’s* difference, Rod Lurie, the show’s creator, emphasized the family element that was less prominent in *The West Wing* rather than any policies or tone.⁶⁹ A woman president could share righteous idealism as long as she also cared for and spent time with her children. The *Tampa Bay Times* reported that President George W. Bush challenged *Commander’s* star Geena Davis to a debate, offering to put a real president and a TV president on a stage together.⁷⁰ Some also saw *Commander in Chief* as a premonition of what might be if Hillary Clinton ran for the presidency in 2008. *The West Wing*, *Commander in*

Chief and their shorter-lived kin produced between 2000-2008 formed a cluster of idealistic governments as alternative visions to the Bush administration.

The governance television developed during the Obama administration, an administration founded on a message of ‘hope and change,’ was almost unrecognizable from what came before. As the next campaign season started in 2012, cynicism, skepticism, and corruption replaced the idealism and optimism of a decade earlier. *Veep*, *Scandal*, and *House of Cards*, were the dominant examples of this moment. Hank Steuver of *The Washington Post* quickly identified this difference and how *Veep* matched the moment of 2012: “It’s as if all of Aaron Sorkin’s hyperverbal *West Wing* strivers have had every last trace of their idealism scrubbed away, leaving only their raw ambition and incessant yammering. The result is sublimely — if sadly — appropriate to the present-day vibe, the deeply cynical Washington in which we live and work.”⁷¹ However, in her review of *Veep*’s first season Maureen Ryan of the *Huffington Post* critiqued the lack of distance between what *Veep* was putting on screen about what people already imagined: “Its central assumption -- that the political process is broken and every person in Washington, D.C., from the lowliest staffers right up to the top players, is simply out for him or herself -- appears to negate the show's own purpose for existing.”⁷² It is not that *Veep* replicated the Obama Administration itself; instead it was public sentiment that reduced the effectiveness of *Veep*’s function as an imaginative alternative.

Similarly, writing at *Scandal*’s finale, Danial D’Addario concluded that it was a defining television show of the Obama era because “the show was so closely tied to the national mood of the Obama presidency.”⁷³ The mood he refers to is one of racial tension, connecting the challenges of a Black woman protagonist, the first Black woman lead of a network show in over

40 years, to a time when the first Black American president made race a salient issue by just being in the room. D’Addario continues:

Much as *The West Wing’s* early run during the George W. Bush administration allowed a liberal audience to play out a fantasy of high-minded national stewardship, *Scandal’s* airing during a time of relatively little real national scandal allowed viewers to play out what seemed like the vicarious fun of an unendingly churning new cycle filled with nothing but drama from Washington...*Scandal* will on the very short list of series that defined the Obama years, both for its willingness to engage deep conversations on race and its escapist vision of a world in which scandal was still fun.

The mood of the Obama Administration was also one of little drama or scandal outside the complications of the legislative process. This lack left room for an imagined version in which drama and scandal dominated every facet of life.

The Obama era also saw a growing acknowledgement of the fictional by the real, and of the real by the fictional. But rather than challenging them as President Bush did, the Obama White House celebrated these representations of their institution. President Obama hosted a viewing party for *1600 Penn*—penned by a former speechwriter—and imitated Frank Underwood on April Fool’s Day 2015. An opening video for the 2014 White House Correspondents Dinner featured “Vice President Selina Meyer” hanging out with Vice President Joe Biden. As they journeyed around the White House and Washington, Meyer slipped her book into an Oval Office bookshelf, they were interrupted in the White House kitchens by Michelle Obama, called up House John Boehner, and ran into Nancy Pelosi at a tattoo parlor. There, Meyer and Biden got matching “45” tattoos. In the end of this video, Julia Louis-Dreyfus acknowledges that she is not the vice president and has to go to the Correspondents Dinner. In April 2016, Allison Janney, who played the press secretary on *The West Wing*, gave a briefing in character in the White House press room. This stunt both highlighted the upcoming White House Correspondents Dinner and was an opportunity for Janney to draw attention to the opioid

epidemic. In the run up to the 2016 presidential campaign, the cast of *Scandal* helped to fundraise for Hillary Clinton, a type of event that would multiple in 2020.

Trump: Convergence, and Political Fatigue

The 2016 election, like that of 2000, resulted in divergent results between the popular vote and the electoral college. In the years between, the partisan animosity articulated by House Speaker Newt Gingrich intensified through the Tea Party to become John Boehner's "We're going to do everything — and I mean everything we can do — to kill it [President Obama's agenda], stop it, slow it down, whatever we can" and Mitch McConnell's "The single most important thing we want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term president." That polarization crystalized in 2016 with the arguably populist, arguably nationalist rhetoric of Donald Trump's Make America Great Again (MAGA) campaign.

Donald Trump's campaign and presidency also restructured the news media environment. During the campaign Trump received an estimated two to five billion dollars of free news coverage and 62% of the candidate-focused TV coverage of the campaign for the Republican presidential nomination.⁷⁴ The direct-to-the-public outreach of Twitter, which only saw an official @POTUS user handle in 2015, became a bullhorn for proclamations rather than an augmentation of official press releases. While the Obama administration may have had a strained and restricted relationship with the news press, the Trump campaign and administration had an outright contentious one. Donald Trump proclaimed the press the "enemy of the people" and "disgusting." He did not attend the annual White House Correspondents' Dinner, celebrated for fostering a communal atmosphere between politicians and reporters and criticized for fostering overly friendly relationships, for any of the years of his term, the first president to skip it entirely during his term.

In this atmosphere, fictional governance television shows became an even more prominent part of political discourse. At the April 15, 2017 Tax March in New York City, a protester held up a sign reading “Frank Underwood is looking pretty good right about now!”⁷⁵ As the Trump administration’s press secretary Sean Spicer fumbled a press conference, an enterprising citizen created a mashup of the video with *Veep* reaction shots and credits. During the summer of 2019, political anthropologist Yarimar Bonilla tweeted about the protests in Puerto Rico by saying, “If the Puerto Rico uprising was a Netflix series, the governor’s resignation would be the end of season 1 and this past week of shenanigans the wonky season 2. I’m really looking forward to the original storyline in Season 3, which I assume starts today at 5:01pm.” Her allusion to Netflix’s series *House of Cards* is made all the more explicit with responses including “#HouseofBrisacas” and “*House of Cards*, boricua version.” During the 2020, Pete Buttigieg, running for the Democratic nomination for president, referenced *Veep* as the most accurate show about politics. Governance television was no longer an entertaining fantasy; it was a cultural shorthand for hopes, fears, and context about current events.

David Smith writing for *The Guardian* noted, “From the start, it has been hard to imagine two men more different than Obama, 56, a mixed-race intellectual married to one woman for a quarter of a century, and Trump, 71, a white thrice married businessman and reality TV star who has boasted about grabbing women’s private parts.”⁷⁶ If governance television is a genre responsive to sociohistorical change, then the ending of the Obama era would impact governance television production, reception, or both. Part of the pleasure of watching *Scandal*, or *Veep*, or *House of Cards* during the Obama administration was that the plots were so exaggerated that even if you bought into its perspective about Washington as a place of self-serving manipulation, that that cynicism was somewhat tempered by the depth of the fiction.

The bitter comedy of *Veep*, the murderous melodrama of *House of Cards*, and the soap opera revelations of one conspiracy after another of *Scandal* that were entertaining and distant against the backdrop of the Obama Administration now had an altogether different challenge: What does cynical entertainment look and sound like when reality emulates previously inconceivable primetime fiction plots? What can cynical entertainment look and sound like when the funhouse mirror loses its ability to distort? Under the Trump administration, a show with a new scandal every week was not even an exaggerated version of reality, much less a clear fantasy alternative.

At the time of the 2016 election, *Veep*, *House of Cards*, *Scandal*, and *Madam Secretary* were well-established series that were suddenly within drastically changed political and media landscapes. A president who murders a Congressman and a journalist or a supreme court justice seems less fantastical when a presidential candidate claims, “I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn’t lose any voters.”⁷⁷ A scheme on *Scandal* to rig an election based on the results of one county in Ohio is suddenly more prophetic with a real election decided by fewer than 80,000 people and electoral margins under one percent in three states. Heading into *House of Cards*’ final season, Yvonne Villarreal summarized the effect of this transition:

Born during the Obama administration, the political series immediately drew recognition for mirroring the more corrupt side of government. But like most politically themed shows of this moment, the real-life twists and turns of the current administration often challenge any attempt to fictionalize modern American politics. Suddenly the theatrical vision of “House of Cards” looked startlingly like the news cycle.⁷⁸

Scott Foley, who played Jake Ballard on *Scandal*, articulated a similar sentiment: “*Scandal* will also be remembered in the current context of the political landscape [2018] in that when it initially aired, it was a show that was ludicrous in its portrayal of Washington and ever since the

election [of Trump] last year, it's not ludicrous at all; it's almost tame."⁷⁹ When *Veep*'s sixth season premiered in April 2017, reviews and commentary inevitably referenced the Trump Administration alongside the aftermath of the Meyer Administration. As described in Jen Chaney's *Vulture* review, "*Veep* season six is not intended to be a commentary on what our 'cocksuck of a country' did to Hillary Clinton, nor is it an exploration of the Trump era. It's just that occasionally, purely by accident, it feels a little bit like one."⁸⁰ *House of Cards* looked like the news, *Scandal* became tame, and *Veep* felt like commentary on the Trump era.

This disruption began from the very start of Trump's administration. While all presidential inaugurations are media events, January 20, 2017, Donald Trump's inauguration day, was significant for the production of governance television. On the one hand, the marketing team for *House of Cards* took advantage of the timing. Netflix released a short teaser for the upcoming fifth season of *House of Cards*.⁸¹ In the 30 second clip, the stripes of an America flag are visible, waving in a strong wind and children's voices recite the pledge of allegiance. A filter on the lens deepens the hue of the red stripes and turns the white ones and the clouds behind the flag grey. As the camera pulls back, it reveals that the flag is hung upside on a flagpole in front of the US capitol building.⁸² The date 5.30.17 appears on screen, and the sound transitions to the music from *House of Card's* title sequence. This video was first distributed on Twitter with the quote, "We make the terror" in reference to a line from the fourth season of the show (@HouseofCards, January 20, 2017). The combination of the caption with the darkening filter, the upside-down flag, and the anonymous children's voices produced what reporters considered a "distressing," "haunting," and "chilling message."⁸³ By releasing this promo on inauguration day, the sinister, governmental disorder promised by the upcoming television season suggests a similar promise from the upcoming presidential administration.

On the other hand, *Scandal*, along with *Grey's Anatomy* and *How to Get Away With Murder*, was scheduled to return to broadcast on Thursday, January 19, 2017, the evening before the inauguration. This lineup, known as TGIT (Thank God It's Thursday) was a major part of ABC's schedule, attracting consistent ratings. However, this launch was delayed until January 26th, although ABC's publicity campaign had already emphasized the original date of January 19. Channing Dungey, President of ABC Entertainment, explained this change to the broadcast schedule as ABC News displacing TGIT in order to air a pre-inauguration 20/20 documentary special, *America's First Family: The Trumps Go to Washington*, despite nothing similar having been produced and broadcast for the last inauguration.⁸⁴ Even though this special only filled an hour of the normally three-hour block, the channel decided to wait a week and air all three midseason-premieres on the same night. However, this inauguration special also presented the opportunity to distance the storyline within *Scandal's* sixth season and particularly the first episode, "Survival of the Fittest" from the inauguration. The episode includes the assassination of Frankie Vargas, the Democratic presidential candidate, as he gave his victory speech on election night. About this plot, Dungey told *The Hollywood Reporter*:

We talked about the episode back in November. The truth of it is, we do feel that it is a fictional show about fictional characters; this fictional narrative also builds very much on season five. I do think that in talking about the show and recognizing that it's fiction, we in November felt like, 'You know, this is fine; it's a story, a TV show.' When you look now at where the mood of the country is, I'm not unhappy about the fact that because ABC News had a special they wanted to run that we were able to push everything by a week. But I stand by the story and think it's a fantastic episode. I think that in this current climate, I think it's better that we're airing it a week later.⁸⁵

In this explanation, Dungey emphasizes *Scandal's* fictional nature repeatedly, a rhetorical move that places the television show in contrast to something unspoken but implied: reality. That Dungey felt the need to characterize a well-established show in this way to an industry publication indicates a heightened concern, within television executives at least, that the show

would be received differently in January 2017 than it was when the previous season ended in May 2016. Executives at ABC opted to delay *Scandal's* sixth season premiere in order to reinforce its distance from reality through distance from the inauguration on the programming schedule, while executives at Netflix took advantage of this changed reception environment to advertise the upcoming season of *House of Cards*, leaning into the sense of shared public sentiment. In both cases, the change in political administrations had material consequences of marketing and scheduling.

Veep and *Scandal* had five seasons to solidify an audience before the 2016 election, and *House of Cards* had four seasons. *Designated Survivor* premiered in September 2016, only two months before election day. *Designated Survivor's* first season, produced during the 2016 presidential campaign but long before the election, tried to negotiate both suspicion and aspiration. The season had two ongoing storylines that eventually converged. In the first, lowly Secretary of Housing and Development Tom Kirkman, is the only member of the order of succession to survive a catastrophic attack during the State of the Union. As he takes on the job, he is utterly unprepared for, many of the conflicts he runs into are resolved through an inspiration and patriotic speech. The second storyline follows the FBI investigation into the convoluted conspiracy that caused the attack. This story line is more action-oriented and includes putting many government staff members and elected politicians under suspicion, sometimes correctly and sometimes as red herrings. At its launch, Tim Goodman recognized the potential for *Designated Survivor* to fail in providing an adequate alternative: "Unless *Designated Survivor* turns into *The West Wing* by the second or fourth episodes, what viewers will get is a series where an unqualified man becomes president, which might be a little too close to reality

for some.”⁸⁶ By January 2017, after Donald Trump’s win but before his inauguration, *Designated Survivor*’s ratings had dropped from a 2.2 to a 1.2.

In a conversation with *Entertainment Weekly*, Channing Dungey attributed at least some of the decline to “White House politics fatigue.” Dungey continued that although the show’s seven-day ratings improved against the overnights, “It’s challenging right now in terms of making political shows just in general because there are big changes afoot in the world we live it.”⁸⁷ In *Designated Survivor*’s second season, produced after the start of the Trump Administration, President Kirkman’s dedication to service and leadership and political challenges became much more prominent. Some reviewers saw this change in focus as a shift to be more like *The West Wing*.⁸⁸ While there were many contributors to this shift in focus, not least of which was a change in showrunners, *Designated Survivor*, as a less established show than *Veep* or *Scandal* was also nimbler in adjusting to the new political landscape and offering an idealistic alternative to the cynicism of the administration rather than an overlap. Yet, *House of Cards* concluded in 2018, and then *Veep* and *Designated Survivor*, as well as *Madam Secretary* concluded in 2019. Twenty years from *The West Wing*’s premiere, four headline governance television shows went off the air. These examples are bookends for two decades of governance television.

Repercussions and Genre Pause

In September 2020, writing about *Entertainment Weekly*’s election year special collector’s issue “The Ultimate Guide to The West Wing,” Sydney Bucksbaum noted: “Considering the state of politics in 2020, it’s no wonder why so many people are either rediscovering or watching *The West Wing* for the first time.”⁸⁹ While the cynical shows that were still in production had to adjust to the Trump presidency, “for many in the Trump era, the show

is an idealistic alternative reality.”⁹⁰ However, *The West Wing* also went through a reckoning, which began in 2012 and accelerated from 2016 onward. What were the repercussions of twenty years of *The West Wing* circulating through the cultural consciousness? What is the future for stories about the day-to-day governance, debates, and decision making?

Two repercussions of *The West Wing* have been previously addressed: the first was inspiring a generation of politicians to enter public service. This generation came into power in the Obama administration, firmly solidifying the circular link between governance television and governance. The character Matt Santos, the Latino Democratic candidate for president during the 7th and final season of *The West Wing* was inspired by a new, young senator named Barack Obama. Like fictional Santos in 2006, Barack Obama would go on to win the next election. Audiences inspired by the Bartlet team and presumably, the future promised by a Santos victory, would go on to work in the real-world parallel administration.

The second repercussion was an increased salience in the cultural consciousness when Donald Trump was elected 10 years after the show concluded. In the years since the finale, *The West Wing*'s legacy had been celebrated at regular anniversary intervals with screenings and panel discussions.⁹¹ Between those formal events, TV bloggers (re)watched and recapped the episodes and at least two podcasts dedicated to talking about every episode were produced.⁹² During the Trump administration, *The West Wing* became a balm to chaos and a coping mechanism for people disturbed by the state of politics and looking for an alternative, even an imaginary one. This return to prominence reinforces the theory that part of the function of governance television is to provide an alternative—*The West Wing* was a vision of hope for many during the mistrustful years of the Bush administration and became that vision again during the corrupt years of the Trump administration.

The fantasy of an idealistic civil institution does not prepare the citizenry for a version of that institution that is anything but civil. However, there is a third repercussion. *The West Wing* may have been a comfort to some, but to others the idealistic fantasy of its world was a false promise that had negative effects on real world politics and overshadowed a political ideology that included a benevolent interventionist imperialism—a similarity with the Bush administration. *The West Wing*'s legacy was revisited by television reviewers and politics commentators alike. In this reflection, authors more forcefully disentangled the formal dramatic characteristics that marked the show as quality or prestige TV, and what it communicated about both the democratic process and ideological values. Headlines read: “Why 'The West Wing' Is a Terrible Guide to American Democracy,” “How Liberal Fell in Love with the West Wing: Aaron Sorkin’s political drama shows everything wrong with the Democratic worldview...,” “America took *The West Wing* Too Seriously,” “The West Wing is 20 years old. Too many Democrats still think it’s a great model for politics,” and “The West Wing failed us.”⁹³ This is not a critique of *The West Wing* and shows like it envisioning a different world; it is a critique of audience members allowing that vision to too strongly impact their view of the world. Danny Goldberg notes in *The Nation* that “a fictional series about Washington is not “news,” but in a culture in which a large percentage of voters make decisions based on emotions, a drama that directly addresses political issues is one part of the mosaic that forms contemporary mythology.”⁹⁴ It is the feeling that *The West Wing* engendered in its first-run and the feelings it assuages after, that these critics think we should be cautious of.

Five governance television shows ended their runs within a year and a half during Donald Trump’s administration. Of these three were dark visions of the worst of Washington, one featured a strong, competent female lead and an idealist, if interventionist viewpoint, and the last

killed all of Washington and built it back from the ground up. Shows end or are cancelled for many reasons, including finishing their narrative arcs. *House of Cards* ran into trouble after lead Kevin Spacey was fired due to sexual misconduct allegations. *Veep* completed the planned story, as did *Scandal*. *Designated Survivor* never quite found the audience. However, the loss of the contrast with the Obama administration transformed these shows from imaginary alternatives to short-term augurs, fundamentally undermining their discursive functions.

This is not to say that production on all governance television stopped at the election of Donald Trump. In October 2019, BET launched *The Oval* (also known as *Tyler Perry's The Oval*) a soap opera take on governance more in the vein of *Scandal* than *The West Wing*, and as of February 2021, *The Oval* has been renewed for a third season. *The Oval* is on the television station periphery and has a soap opera element--but it features a biracial family, itself maybe possibly enough of an alternative to the racism of the Trump administration.

In 2020 CBS sent *Ways & Means* (formerly called *The Whip*) to pilot. This show “revolves around a powerful congressional leader ([Patrick] Dempsey) who has lost faith in politics and finds himself working secretly with an idealistic young congresswoman from the opposing party to subvert the hopelessly gridlocked system he helped create. Together, they’ll attempt to save American politics...if they don’t get caught.”⁹⁵ During filming, co-writer Mike Murphy described pitching the show to Dempsey and telling him, “We have this plan to kind of do a show that is not based on the immediate political reality, but has some of the same themes – everybody’s so dug in that they can’t get anything done.”⁹⁶ Unlike *BrainDead*, which proposed a fantastical cause of Congressional gridlock, *Ways & Means* would propose a solution—but presumably with enough drama to be entertaining. Murphy articulates how an entertainment program can respond to the contemporary political zeitgeist, without tying it to specific people or

events. Murphy continued, describing the tone of the show: “A lot of the show is hope versus cynicism, and hope breaks out in Congress and God help us, actually catches on a little.”⁹⁷

Written during the tension of the Trump Administration, this project’s optimistic perspective demonstrates a continuation of governance television as distorted or inverted mirror of government.

However, as of May 2021, CBS has passed on picking up the series. Nellie Andreeva of *Deadline* theorizes that “after a grueling Presidential campaign and two impeachment trials amid a pandemic, there appears to be some political fatigue, which likely impacted the project’s prospects, along with its ability to sell internationally.”⁹⁸ Which scripts and shows get sent to pilot and then picked up requires a complicated decision making process, balancing the shows a channel already has programmed, the shows competitors will air, upfront costs and potential returns, assumptions about audiences’ future tastes, and, perhaps, quality. That suspected “political fatigue” describes CBS executives’ sense of what audiences do and do not want to see in entertainment in 2021. Even with a name-brand star attached, governance television—political television—may see a pause similar to between 2006-2012.

Within governance television are two dialectics at work: the idealism and cynicism *within* governance television as a genre, and the discursive relationship *between* the genre and the real government. The simultaneous existence of two competing and inimical points of views—idealism vs cynicism, real vs fiction—reveals the contemporary civic structure of feeling: polarization and conflict are inherent in government as an institution.

Notes

¹ Examples include *Dave* (1993), *Clear and Present Danger* (1994), *The American President* (1995), *Air Force One* (1997), *Wag the Dog* (1997), *Bulworth* (1998), *Primary Colors* (1998), and in some ways, *Independence Day* (1996).

² Barry Garron, “Mister Sterling.”

³ Ray Richmond, “The West Wing.”

⁴ John Poniewozik, “Television: Capital Ideas” and Sarah Lyall, “They Can’t Get Enough.”

⁵ Brian Lowry, “House of Cards.”

⁶ Neil Genzlinger, “Review: Bryan Cranston Shines.”

⁷ Justin Neal, “Fall TV Preview: Rookies of the Year.”

⁸ Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television*.

⁹ I use preferred readings here to recognize that audiences receive shows in different ways. Within governance television, readings can often correlate with audience members’ positions along the political spectrum. For example, while a generation of young politicians found *The West Wing* inspiring, one of the consultants I spoke with for chapter three found President Bartlet to be sanctimonious and preachy. Conservative critic John Podhoretz vehemently criticized the show as a liberal fantasy. In these critiques, he recognized the preferred reading but was not swayed by it. Podhoretz was then hired as a consultant to the show.

See Stuart Hall, “Encoding, Decoding,” in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–1979*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: Unwin Hyman, 1980), 128–38 for a further discussion of preferred readings.

¹⁰ It is this part of the function that complicates an integrated analysis of local governance television and federal governance television. Viewers across the country will have differing local governments, but a shared federal one.

¹¹ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*.

¹² Tim Goodman, “‘The West Wing’: A Show to Believe In.”

¹³ Charlotte Brunsdon, *Television Cities*, 12.

¹⁴ Jason Mittell argues genre is “a process of categorization that is not found within media texts, but operates across the cultural realms of media industries, audiences, policy, critics, and historical contexts. In “Genre as Social Action,” Carolyn Miller similarly writes that genres are “rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations.” She expands this definition: “Genre refers to a conventional category of discourse based in large-scale typification of rhetorical action; as action, it acquires meaning from situation and from the social context in which that situation arose.”

¹⁵ Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 166–167.

¹⁶ Andrew Heywood, “What is Politics?”

¹⁷ Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television*, 19. Mittell’s method of genre historiography centers the genre category as the object of analysis, rather than an individual text as an example of that genre. See Jason Mittell, “Before the Scandals—Genre Historiography and the Cultural History of the Quiz Show,” *Genre and Television* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 29-55 for more details.

¹⁸ Michael Speier, “DAG.”

¹⁹ Jay Handelman, “A ‘DAG’ger In the Heart of Comedy,” and Hal Boedeker, “*DAG* Wastes Its Stars, As Well As Viewers’ Time.”

²⁰ The same season included a take on international relations in a post 9/11 world, Fox’s *The American Embassy*, a “hollow hybrid of *The West Wing*, *Felicity*, and... *Ally McBeal*.” Michael Speier, “The American Embassy.”

²¹ Terry Kelleher, “Picks and Pans Review: *First Monday*” and Rob Owen, “TV Reviews: *First Monday* Guilty of Mediocrity.”

²² Julie Salamon, “Television: Review; Justices Divided, Searching for Drama.”

²³ Caryn James, “Television Review; Supreme Court Drama in the *West Wing* Mold.”

²⁴ Steve Johnson, “Storytelling Makes This a *Court* of a New Order.”

²⁵ Ken Tucker, “Capital Offenses”; Terry Kelleher, “Mister Sterling”; and Alessandra Stanley, “The TV Watch; Who Knew?”

²⁶ Alessandra Stanley, “Television Review; Inside Washington Politics, Turned Inside Out,” *The New York Times*, September 14, 2003, N40

²⁷ Brian Lowry, “Reality Searches”

²⁸ Brian Lowry, “Reality Searches”

²⁹ Barry Garron, “Commander in Chief.”

³⁰ Barry Garron, “Commander in Chief.”

³¹ Additional peripheral entries might include CBS’s *Citizen Baine* (2001) a family drama about a former senator, NBC’s *Outlaw* (2010), featured a former Supreme Court Justice who returns to practicing law, bypassing governance television in favor of legal drama, and EPIX’s first original comedy *Graves* (2016-2017) about a former President coming to understand the repercussions of his governance.

³² Gillian Flynn, “Jack & Bobby.”

³³ Justin Neal, “The Dark Horse.”

³⁴ Nellie Andreeva, “CBS, Fox beefing up pilots”; Vincent Terrace, *Encyclopedia of Unaired television Pilots*; Nellie Andreeva, “Pilots are picked up, pushed out and cast”; Nellie Andreeva, “Options open for four pilots”; Nellie Andreeva, “*Lone Star* Leads Book Pilots.”

³⁵ By *The Good Wife*’s fourth season, politics—albeit campaign politics rather than governing—became a more prominent part of the show through various campaigns for Governor of Illinois, Illinois State’s Attorney, and, in the final season during 2015-2016, to be Hillary Clinton’s running mate in the presidential election.

Lily Moayeri, “The Event.”

³⁶ Alessandra Stanley, “Washington Spin Doctor, Heal Thyself” and Brian Lowry, “Scandal.”

³⁷ Tim Goodman, “Political Animals.”

³⁸ Brian Lowry, “Veep.” This review is of *Veep*’s first season. As the show progresses, issues of gender and politics become more prominent. For example, see chapter three and the context Anita McBride provided for a storyline about women politicians being judged by their appearance.

³⁹ Although this project focuses on shows about the federal government, I do not suggest that “governance television” *only* includes those programs. Although fewer local governance shows are as central to the discursive formation of the genre as *The West Wing* and *Veep*, some such as *Parks and Recreation* and *The Good Wife* are still prominent.

⁴⁰ Kristi Turnquist, “In TV Politics.”

⁴¹ Tim Goodman, “Alpha House.”

⁴² Tim Goodman, “1600 Penn.”

⁴³ Brian Lowry, “House of Cards.”

⁴⁴ In addition to being determined by Netflix’s streaming rights at any particular moment, each of these searches is also geographically constrained. International access and streaming rights are determined country-by-country such that these searches may produce different results elsewhere.

⁴⁵ Brian Lowry, “TV Review: Amazon’s *Alpha House*, Season 2.”

⁴⁶ Kristi Turnquist, “In TV Politics.”

⁴⁷ Janet McCabe, *The West Wing*, 61.

⁴⁸ Paul Grainge, “TIME’s Past in the Present,” 385. For more extended discussions of the ideological implications of black and white versus color photography see Roland Barthes, *Camera Obscura* (London: Vintage, 1993) and Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1979).

⁴⁹ W. G. Snuffy Walden quoted in Lynn Elber, “TV Shows Hum with Walden’s Tunes.”

⁵⁰ Mandalit del Barco, “On ‘Fanfare for the Common Man.’”

- ⁵¹ Tim Goodman, “*The West Wing*: A Show to Believe In.”
- ⁵² Bernard Weinraub, “Leader of the Free World” and Steve Heisler, “*The West Wing*: “Bartlet For America.”
- ⁵³ Justin Neal, “The Dark Horse.”
- ⁵⁴ PaleyFest 2019, “The West Wing on the 20th Anniversary: A look back with Aaron Sorkin,” October 4, 2019
- ⁵⁵ Alessandra Stanley, “Accidental President with a Feminist Twist” and Barry Garron, “Commander in Chief.”
- ⁵⁶ Tom Shales, “Mister Sterling.”
- ⁵⁷ Ramin Setoodeh and Brian Steinberg, “Difficult Recipe.”
- ⁵⁸ These images make *Alpha House* unusual for actively referencing the real world; most governance shows acknowledge the historical record only up to a set point. For example, *The West Wing*, within the first four seasons at least, makes no reference to presidents after Eisenhower, and *Veep* goes as far as Reagan before branching into an alternative timeline.
- ⁵⁹ Tim Goodman, “House of Cards” and Alessandra Stanley, “Political Animals That Slither.”
- ⁶⁰ Yvonne Villareal, “Politics and the Arts.”
- ⁶¹ Hrishikesh Hirway, host, “Episode 7: Jeff Beal House of Cards (Main Title Theme),” *Song Exploder* (podcast), April 1, 2014, <https://songexploder.net/jeff-beal>.
- ⁶² Peter Roth quoted in Bernard Weinraub, “Leader of the Free World.”
- ⁶³ Bill Carter, “*West Wing* Comes to Terms with G.O.P.”
- ⁶⁴ Brooke Gladstone, “Madame President,” *On the Media*, NPR. September 23, 2005.
- ⁶⁵ Ray Richmond, “A Strong Constitution.”
- ⁶⁶ Gloria Goodale, “As Nation Gets More Political, So Does TV.”
- ⁶⁷ Steven Oxman, “First Monday.”
- ⁶⁸ Tim Goodman, “Deadly ‘First Monday.’”
- ⁶⁹ Rod Lurie interviewed on Brooke Gladstone, “Madame [sic] President,” *On the Media*, NPR. September 23, 2005.
- ⁷⁰ Andy Borowitz, “Bush Challenges Geena Davis to a Debate.”
- ⁷¹ Hank Steuver, “*Veep*: A Playful Pander in Washington’s Zoo.”

- ⁷² Maureen Ryan, “*Veep* HBO Review: Political Comedy Misses the Mark.”
- ⁷³ Danial D’Addario, “Scandal Helped Define the Obama Era.”
- ⁷⁴ Nate Silver, “How Trump Hacked the Media.”
- ⁷⁵ Robbie Clemovich (@robbiebklyn), “Tax March NYC,” Instagram, April 15, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BS6rsUnBX61/>
- ⁷⁶ David Smith, “The Anti-Obama.”
- ⁷⁷ *House of Cards*, “Chapter 11”; *House of Cards*, “Chapter 14”; *Scandal*, “Nobody Likes Babies”; and CNN, “Trump: I could shoot somebody and not lose voters.”
- ⁷⁸ Yvonne Villareal, “Politics and the Arts.”
- ⁷⁹ Scott Foley quoted in Lesley Goldberg, “*Scandal*: The Cast Answers Series-Finale Burning Questions.”
- ⁸⁰ Jen Chaney, “*Veep* is Back.”
- ⁸¹ Netflix, “House of Cards.”
- ⁸² According to the US Flag Code, the upside-down flag, which *House of Cards* had used since the beginning of the series, is a “signal of dire distress in instances of extreme danger to life or property.”
- ⁸³ Frank Pallotta, “*House of Cards* Releases Distressing New Teaser”; Michael Ausiello, “*House of Cards* Season 5 Premiere Date”; and Liz Calvario, “*House of Cards* Season 5 Teaser Trailer.”
- ⁸⁴ Matt Webb Mitovich, “Delaying Grey’s/Scandal/HTGAWM Return.”
- ⁸⁵ Lesley Goldberg, “Inside ‘Scandal’s’ Killer Election Twist.”
- ⁸⁶ Tim Goodman, “*Designated Survivor*: TV Review.”
- ⁸⁷ James Hibberd, “*Designated Survivor* ratings.”
- ⁸⁸ Allison Shoemaker, “The West Wing.”
- ⁸⁹ Sydney Bucksbaum, “EW celebrates *The West Wing*.”
- ⁹⁰ Sarah Lyall, “They Can’t Get Enough of *The West Wing* Right Now.”
- ⁹¹ Examples of these anniversary events include ATX Television Festival 2016, “The West Wing Administration,” June 11, 2016, and PaleyFest 2019, “The West Wing on the 20th Anniversary: A look back with Aaron Sorkin,” October 4, 2019.

⁹² For example, Steve Heisler at the *AV Club* began recapping his experience of watching *The West Wing* for the first time on June 1, 2009 and concluded on October 29, 2012, having watched the first four seasons. Podcasts include *The West Wing Weekly* with Hrishikesh Hirway and Joshua Malina (2016-2019) and *The West Wing Thing* with Dave Anthony and Josh Olson (2019-present).

⁹³ Yair Rosenberg, “Why *The West Wing* is a Terrible Guide to American Democracy,” *The Atlantic*, October 1, 2012; Luke Savage, “How Liberal Fell in Love with *The West Wing*,” *Current Affairs*, June 7, 2017; Jay Willis, “America Took *The West Wing* Too Seriously,” *GQ*, September 20, 2019; Emily VanDerWerff, “*The West Wing* is 20 years old. Too many Democrats still think it’s a great model for politics,” *Vox*, September 16, 2019; Clint Worthington, “*The West Wing* Failed Us,” *Consequence*, September 23, 2019.

⁹⁴ Danny Goldberg, “*Madam Secretary*, RIP.”

⁹⁵ Lesley Goldberg, “Patrick Dempsey to Star.”

⁹⁶ Mike Murphy is one of those rare few, discussed in the following chapter, who transitioned from political work to the creative space within Hollywood. As a political consultant, he advised Senator John McCain and Mitt Romney (in his time as governor of Massachusetts) as well as others including the advocacy group Republican Voters Against Trump.

⁹⁷ Mike Murphy, “Q&A with the co-writers of CBS pilot *Ways and Means*.”

⁹⁸ Nellie Andreeva, “CBS Pilots Update.”

Chapter 3 Crafting Realism

“So many people feel they know it,” says Rhimes of the White House. “Getting it right just felt so important.”

— Shonda Rhimes, August 26, 2020¹

In the preceding chapter, I focused on a polarized, fractured view of government as a structure of feeling revealed by the discursive relationship between governance television shows and their contemporaneous real-world government administrations. Governance television encourages that comparison as a preferred reading by presenting fictional but realistic alternative worlds. This chapter examines who gets to create that realism—or at least contribute fact to fiction—how they produce that realism and what gets disregarded, and how they evaluate realism in their own and others’ creations. I answer those questions through interviews with a unique set of individuals: political consultants to governance television shows. The subsequent chapter will explore how the use of real, constitutional procedures contributes to an ideology of continuity and stability, even in the face of unfit individuals gaining power.

Scott Frank, studying the roles and responsibilities of science consultants for Hollywood productions and educational programs, proposes two services that consultants provide to the media industry:

- (1) They furnish the cues that allow filmmakers to give fictional images and situations on screen a greater sense of perceptual realism; and
- (2) Through the social force of symbolic capital they are presumed to possess, both enable the filmmakers to feel better about the products they create and become part of the studio publicity machine that tries to impress upon us, the viewing public, that their production partakes of the Real.²

Consultants draw from their expertise to increase the show's perceived realism, and, due to the 'real' being socially valued, add prestige and symbolic capital to the production.³ Frank argues that the industry lore assumes audiences care about realism in the presentation of science, and that lore is backed up anecdotally with stories of viewer complaints when things are not absolutely correct.⁴ An association with science professionals lends prestige to a production because "that prestige derives from the presumed intelligence and education of the consultants (possibly in conjunction with the stereotype of Hollywood denizens as shallow and base) and particularly as those qualities reflect their close relationship to reality—which is to say 'authentic', as opposed to cinematic."⁵ Frank studied consultants including archeologists, physicists, and biologists who worked on projects such as *Jurassic Park*, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, and *The X-Files* among others. However, the American public's view of science and of government as institutions are not equivalent; according to Pew Research, as of 2019 86% of respondents reported a fair amount or a great deal of confidence in scientists to act in the public interest as compared to 20% who trusted the government in Washington to do what is right most of the time or just about always.⁶ Scientists' intelligence and education may confer social capital to a production, but years of denunciations of those same traits as elitist or out-of-touch make that value less certain for productions featuring government.

However, three factors suggest to me that political consultants do bring social capital to their productions. The first is that the consultants' main contributions are technical details rather than the presentation of divisive policy positions; this focus avoids at least part of the concern of elitist versus populist politics. The second factor is that the majority, if not all, of the consultants are not household names; in the credits, the title 'political consultant' invokes expertise but is abstracted from partisan politics. The third is that over twenty years, governance television

productions kept employing political consultants and promoting that employment within the show's marketing machinery. The industry, at least, views this position as a value add.

Reverberating throughout my conversations with the political consultants on governance television staffs as well as in public interviews is the attestation that the value of their role is enhancing the realistic—the accurate, the correct, the actual, the verisimilitudeinous, the believable, the perfect, and the getting-it-right. This assortment of close synonyms outlines the same primary characteristic—realism and a feeling of authenticity.⁷ Although the theoretical distinction between realistic and realism is largely tangential to the day-to-day work of making television, a brief overview of how realism has been theorized is useful to parse the different applications of realistic within the production process.

'Perceived realism' or 'realism perception' is often used within cultivation, aggression, childhood development, and media literacy research to explain television's transportation or persuasion effects. Updating and expanding W. James Potter's 1988 "Perceived Reality in Television Effects Research," Rick Busselle and Bradley Greenberg detail the inconsistent conceptualizations and measurements of this term within the media effects literature.⁸ Perceived realism has variably been measured on the dimensions of magic window/factuality, social realism, plausibility-probability, identity/identification, and personal utility ala uses and gratifications. Additionally, typicality has been used as a combination of plausibility and probability.⁹ These different dimensions have been found to operate on at least four different levels of abstraction: global (television as a whole), genre, series, and episode. Depending on the specificity of stimuli and measurement questions, these different levels can produce contradicting results; viewers may find a specific genre unrealistic but find a specific series or episode within that genre realistic.¹⁰ Realism within this paradigm is drawn as much from the

knowledge and beliefs of the watcher as from the content. Additionally, new media formats such as virtual or augmented reality games may add additional complications. Based on the wide variance in dimensions and levels of abstraction, Busselle and Greenberg argue for greater conceptual clarity in perceived realism research.

One of the central early components of perceived realism is ‘the magic window.’ The magic window describes the effect of treating the screen not as the proverbial ‘window on the world’ but as a literal one. At the low end of this dimension, viewers believe that what appears on screen *is* reality. At the high end, despite recognizing that entertainment television programs are fictional, viewers still perceive them as “realistic as representations or reflections of the way people behave and the way events occur.”¹¹ The shift from low to high often occurs as age increases, but not definitively so. Within the magic window dimension, Potter proposes a syntactic level and a semantic level, where the syntactic refers to the style—the visual appearance and language—of a program and semantic refers to the meaning or substance—the themes, behaviors, and messaging—of a program.¹² Although ideology is not part of Potter’s media effects rhetoric, this semantic level of realistic representation models the relationship between realism and everyday beliefs.

Like Potter, John Fiske considers both form and content as avenues through which television constructs a sense of reality. He argues that realism describes “a socially convincing sense of the real” made up of the “discursive conventions by which and for which a sense of reality is constructed.”¹³ Through referencing sociality and constructedness, Fiske alludes to the spectatorship that is central to perceived realism. Fiske, through Colin MacCabe and Roland Barthes, emphasizes realism as a common-sensical discourse, which is distinct from a “fidelity to an empirical reality” and ultimately concludes that the ideologically-grounded form—“the way it

[realism] makes sense of the real”—weighs more heavily than content—“what it [realism] says the real consists of.”¹⁴ This process of ‘making sense’ of television activates the same normative framework as our everyday social experiences.¹⁵ If realistic describes the facts that constitute the world, then realism incorporates a sense of truth beyond mere fidelity and reproduction. This ideological slant differentiates the operation of realism within television as compared to the indexical realism of capturing physical space ascribed to by some classical film theorists.

Stephen Prince further expands the conception of realism to account for computer-generated and digitally altered screen images that ontologically do not and cannot capture reality, but to which the standard of realism is often applied. He proposes a system of referential realism and perceptual realism. Referentially realistic images “bear indexical and iconic homologies with their referents,” whereas a perceptually realistic image “structurally corresponds to the viewer’s audiovisual experience of three-dimensional space.”¹⁶ Prince offers the example of *Jurassic Park’s* dinosaurs as images that are referentially fictional—there are no live dinosaurs walking around in the world as referents—but perceptually realistic in that their sounds, textures, and movements correspond to similar real-world attributes. More broadly, referential realism refers to the relationship between the observable world and the filmed image, and perceptual realism “designates a relationship between the image or film and the spectator.”¹⁷

Although Prince is focused on visual images—what Potter would consider the syntactic and Fiske would consider the content—this model is useful for analyzing governance television because, like dinosaurs, the inner workings of Washington, D.C. are more fantasy than firsthand knowledge for most viewers. Through televised speeches in the Oval Office or on the White House lawn, the annual State of the Union in the US Capitol building, CSPAN’s unending still camera, or the occasionally filmed meeting in a regal-looking conference room, the American

public has visual fragments of the real against which to assess the realistic. However, these fragments are limited to public spaces and special events and do not cover the day-to-day governmental operations, the narrative focus of governance television. The boundary between perceptual realism and referential realism regarding something like the appearance of the Oval Office is perhaps more porous than that regarding dinosaurs, but at best, the referent has already been mediated once through the television camera.

The goal of this chapter is not to redefine or re-theorize what realism on/in television is; the consultants I interviewed gestured toward a sense of realism through related concepts, but *realistic* was the dominant framework for articulating their responsibilities. However, these theoretical distinctions between syntax and semantics, content and form, referential and perceptual offer entry points for clarifying the aspects of realism consultants are attentive to. The accuracy of badge colors and Sunday-wardrobes that the political consultants contribute serve more as a veneer to the story than as elements of the story themselves, surface “texture” and “color,” style but not substance.¹⁸ The political consultants paint a realistic patina over an imaginary storytelling core. However, that overlay of aesthetic fidelity and technical details contributes to blurring the boundary between style and substance and reinforcing governance television as an alternative, believable representation of government.

From Hollywood to Washington

Apart from regulatory structures, the flow of people between Washington, D.C. and Hollywood has been primarily understood as a unidirectional from the West coast to the East: the Hollywood powerful impacting American politics through money; the Hollywood specialists impacting public relations through technical knowhow and marketing sophistication; and the Hollywood stars lending fame to amass votes. Political consultants on entertainment shows

reverse this flow and highlight the modern ubiquity of knowledge and prestige sharing between American politics and American entertainment.

In *Citizen Hollywood*, Timothy Stanley argues that contemporary Hollywood-backed financing has transformed the process and style of political campaigns by increasing the rate of money flowing into campaigns, transforming politicians into celebrities, and reducing complex issues into simple narratives. He contends that the 2012 election was “one of the, if not the, most Hollywood-influenced elections in history” due to both the direct funds contributed by Hollywood celebrities to the campaigns and the ways in which these celebrities were incorporated directly into the campaigns and fundraising efforts. Stanley predicts that 2016 would see even more Hollywood-influence, and that prophecy was fulfilled by a reality television star becoming the Republican candidate. Stanley concludes that 2012 “was an election about motivating ideological bases,” and those ideological divides can be understood through the different film celebrities speaking at the Republican and Democratic conventions. The Republicans put Clint Eastwood, a conservative, white film star in his 80s on stage, while the Democrats featured Kal Penn, a progressive 35-year-old film star of Indian descent. From different generations and heritages, these Hollywood bodies and the characters they are most associated with became signifiers for party values and visions and the intensifying tribalism of the major parties.¹⁹ These speakers demonstrate the pervasive collision of entertainment and politics as Hollywood stars act as stand-ins and spokespeople for politicians. As discussed in the previous chapter, the 2020 national conventions, held in a virtual format due to the Covid-19 pandemic, emphasized not only a collision of entertainment and politics, but of governance television and government. Actors hosted the four nights of televised programming, with Kerry

Washington, star of *Scandal*, leading the third night, and Julia Louis-Dreyfus, star of *Veep*, emceeding the final evening.

Not only money and people, but also Hollywood techniques have transformed the performance and management of politics. Kathryn Brownell points to the role Hollywood has played by facilitating “an age of ‘showbiz politics’—a political environment shaped by the marriage of advertising, consulting, and entertainment and reliant on the active construction of politicians as celebrities to gain political legitimacy and success.”²⁰ Brownell’s narrative follows the presidency and its attendant consultants through to the Cold War, before jumping ahead to compare *Primary* (1960) and *The War Room* (1993), films made about the presidential campaigns of John F. Kennedy and Bill Clinton, respectively. She notes that these films demonstrate the changes in campaign staffs and strategies between 1960 to 1992; “by the time of Bill Clinton’s election, the line between politics and entertainment—which was hotly debated during the 1920s and 1930s, feared during the 1940s and 1950s, and slowly accepted by the 1960s and 1970s—had fully disappeared.”²¹ *The West Wing* and other governance television came to fill the space that line had occupied.

David Greenberg’s *Republic of Spin* covers similar territory through the lens of the steadily more sophisticated media “spin doctors” attached to every presidency from T. R. Roosevelt to Barack Obama. Greenberg argues, “the steady refinement of presidential spin gave rise to a pervasive anxiety about political persuasion, expressing a fundamental concern about the future of American democracy in a time of a strong presidency, far-reaching mass communications, and sophisticated professional techniques.”²² Within those far-reaching mass communications—radio, television, internet—political content and entertainment content share a distribution stream. *The West Wing* fictionalizes this exchange of personnel in two episodes. In

the first season episode, “20 Hours in L.A.,” a studio executive offers Press Secretary C.J. Cregg (and offscreen, speechwriter Sam Seaborn) a job in film development, and in a second season episode, “In the Shadow of Two Gunmen,” a flashback reveals that prior to being hired to the “Bartlet for America” campaign, Cregg worked as a PR agent for a film studio. Although both scenes are played for humor—Cregg tries repeatedly to clarify what “development” is in the context of film production and had been fired from her PR job the same morning as the campaign job offer—the exchanges reveal an underlying assumption that skills within the entertainment industry and the political arena are reasonably interchangeable.

While Brownell and Greenberg track politicians adopting the strategies of media celebrities, media celebrities brought those strategies directly to Washington by becoming politicians themselves. During the last 40 years, screen actor Ronald Reagan and television and film personality Donald Trump became president; comedian Al Franken and actor Fred Thompson became senators; and musician Sonny Bono became a House Representative, among others. Media celebrities have also joined the political ranks on the local level, such as actor Arnold Schwarzenegger and pro-wrestler Jesse Venture becoming governors, as well as numerous city mayors. While a recognizable name does not guarantee a win, in an oversaturated media environment, Hollywood fame adds weight to the start of a campaign.²³ In governance television, the reverse occurs; Washington expertise, through the personage of a political consultant, does not guarantee ratings success, but initially contributes prestige to a production.

Who Defines Realistic

As with most television shows, at the launch of every new governance television program, there is a publicity blitz featuring members of the production team or stars in the cast to create buzz, and then continued interviews, teasers, or behind-the-scenes features aimed at

sustaining interest over multiple seasons. Studies of film and television production personnel have traditionally focused on these “above-the-line” figures: casts, writers, directors, producers, and showrunners.²⁴ With governance television, there is an additional sub-sub-sub genre of journalism in entertainment and political publications, as well as occasionally in outlets intended for wider public appeal: features about the shows’ political consultants.²⁵ Within this format, the political consultants resemble the above-the-line staff in that their role and contributions are considered promotionally advantageous to the production. By being on the staff list, the political consultant adds respectability through association.

More recently, media production studies have looked at the “below-the-line” personnel who contribute to the production process in often invisible or unacknowledged ways to serve someone else’s creative vision. This, too, accurately describes the work of political consultants, which is always in service to other staff members’ needs and not under their own independent, creative control. However, the majority of these consultants do not define “themselves in relation to the work they did on behalf of television industries”²⁶ as do below-the-line workers. For the consultants I spoke with, this work is an add-on or tangential to a main career; as will be seen in the following section, for Kal Penn, the consultancy was literally an add-on to his acting contract.

Political consultants, then, do not fit neatly into either of these categories. Scott Frank characterizes science consultants as “liminal figures in the entertainment industry—on the production team but not of it, outsiders who are brought inside for a brief moment.”²⁷ Political consultants, too, are liminal figures; neither above nor below the line, these specialists are, if anything, beside the line.

Some of the consultants I interviewed served decades within the federal government, while others served for a single digit number of years. Some moved between branches, legislative and executive, and some worked only under the auspices of the White House. As can be expected, everyone has a specialty: the legal system, military operations, policymaking, communications and outreach, or protocol. Despite the wide variance in their histories, my interviewees largely performed the same responsibilities for their specific productions. I translate them here in more career-specific detail to inform the question of ‘who fills the role of political consultant, and then I will outline how their informal recruitments make visible the interwoven nature of Hollywood and Washington, D.C. social circles.

Biographies

From the beginning of production, *Veep*'s team included political consultants with wildly varying points of reference. Anita McBride entered the political arena as a volunteer for the 1980 Ronald Reagan campaign. After completing her college education and volunteering again for the 1984 campaign, she started her government service in 1985. During her 30-year career she served within four presidential administrations in roles including Director of White House Personnel, Chief of Staff to First Lady Laura Bush, and Special Assistant to President George W. Bush for Management and Administration. If McBride contributed experience from within Republican Administrations to *Veep*, Eric Lesser brought experience from within a Democratic one. After college, Lesser became involved in national politics, joining the 2008 Obama campaign, and then working during Obama's first term in what he described as “a small cubby office...about 40 feet or so down the hallway from the Oval Office door” as Special Assistant to David Axelrod, a Senior Advisor to President Obama. In this position he had long workdays filled with briefings and meetings with the various arms of the White House such as the press

secretary, the speechwriters, the policy team, the foreign policy team, and the scheduling and advance staffs. Before leaving the White House, Lesser became the Director of Strategic Planning for the White House Council of Economic Advisers. After leaving the White House he completed a law degree while simultaneously running and being elected to the Massachusetts State Senate, where he still serves as of 2021.

Lesser is not the only member of the Obama White House who went on to consult on a governance television show. Robert “Bob” Bauer, an established legal advisor and litigator in Democratic politics, served as Barack Obama’s personal attorney and advisor, and then general counsel for both his 2008 presidential campaign and 2012 reelection campaign. From 2010 to 2011, Bauer served as White House Counsel, working with other members of the White House staff on issues of national security, executive power and constitutionality, and vetting potential Supreme Court nominees, among other responsibilities, as well as overseeing a staff of more than 30 lawyers involved in the day-to-day legal needs of the president. In addition to his legal work, Bauer has chaired commissions, teaches at the New York University School of Law, published books on election law and executive power, and consulted for *House of Cards*.

For its three seasons and fifty-three episodes, *Designated Survivor* had five showrunners/head writers and two different distribution channels. These changing creative visions brought with them changes in political consultants. I spoke with three separate consultants to the show: Bob Okun, consultant on season two; Eric Schultz, consultant on season three; and Kal Penn, who was also a performer on the show and consulted throughout the three-season run. Whereas Eric Lesser and Anita McBride worked concurrently on *Veep*, these serial consultants offer insight into how approaches to realism can vary throughout the run of a series.

Bob Okun entered American politics following college. He joined Representative Jack Kemp's office and the House Republican Research Committee support team to work on issues of taxes, airline and other transportation (de)regulations, energy policy, and telecommunications. He became the Assistant Secretary for Legislative Affairs, a Senate-confirmed position, within H. W. Bush's Administration, and when the presidency changed hands following the 1992 election, Okun continued to work on the floor of the House as a Staff Director. Okun then became the head lobbyist for Comcast (né *NBCUniversal* né *NBC*) for the next 16 years, a position he describes as definitively "not in the creative lane." In 2011, he left NBC to launch his own government relations and media business strategy firm. It is within this capacity that he joined the staff of *Designated Survivor*.

After the second season cancellation and Netflix pick-up, the new *Designated Survivor* production team brought on a new consultant: Eric Schultz. Schultz entered politics at the local level by interning for the newly elected Chuck Schumer in his Syracuse office during college. He refined his skills in rapid response and story management working on statewide and national campaigns and as Communications Director for Chuck Schumer and the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee. That strategy, message management, and crisis communication experience came in handy when Schultz was hired to the Obama White House as part of a team dedicated to responding to a series of congressional oversight investigations. He laughingly and bluntly explained this job, "There was this saying that nobody ever wanted to see me in a meeting or in their office because they knew something bad was happening." He later served as White House Principal Deputy Press Secretary under Josh Earnest.

The third consultant to *Designated Survivor* that I spoke with has a circular journey between the two coasts. After starring in the film *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* and

then in the television show *House*, Kal Penn “famously left Hollywood to serve in the Office of Public Engagement in the Obama Administration” for two years.²⁸ This departure was a product of the concurrent factors of the 2008 writer’s strike putting the production of *House* on hold, the 2008 presidential campaigns getting under way, a *House* co-worker, Olivia Wilde, inviting Penn to be her plus-one to a campaign event. At the event, then-Senator Obama responded carefully and deliberately to Penn’s policy question, and impressed, Penn went to Iowa to volunteer for the campaign. When Obama won, he joined the White House as an Associate Director in the Office of Public Engagement. There he worked—intending to stay for one year but continuing for two. Penn described his responsibilities as “focused primarily on outreach to young people; outreach to Asian-American and Pacific Islander communities; and outreach to the artists’ communities, which mostly meant the nonprofit arts and arts education.” When *Designated Survivor* was pitched to him, he was initially concerned that “it’s going to look like, he just took this White House job so he could do a White House show.” However, the show’s balance of governance, family, and conspiracy, as well as the specific character arc for Seth Wright, his speech writer-cum-Press Secretary-cum-Communications Director role, persuaded him to join the cast to potentially become, what *TV Insider* referred to as “Hollywood’s most reluctant Method actor.”²⁹

Anita McBride, Bob Bauer, and Bob Okun represent a generation of politicians with decades of experience. They entered the political arena when only films provided fictional looks at the backstage operations of the government. In contrast, Eric Lesser, Eric Schultz, and Kal Penn all came of age at a time when *The West Wing* served as a weekly representation of what day-to-day government work might be like. These six comprise the main sources for this chapter, and together they demonstrate that there is no one career path that inevitably leads a government staff member to become a political consultant to a primetime television show.

While the cohort of political consultants is small to begin with, there is a smaller group of people who incorporated Hollywood political consulting into a career. These include Tammy Haddad (Haddad Media), Richard Klein (McClarty Associates/McClarty Media), and Michael Feldman and Adam Blickstein (Glover Park Group). Tammy Haddad, who connected both Anita McBride and Eric Lesser to *Veep*, has partnered with HBO on a number of government-centric projects in addition to *Veep* such as HBO films *Game Change*, *Confirmation*, and *All the Way*, and also partnered with Amazon on the Senate-based comedy *Alpha House*.³⁰ Richard Klein, who consulted on and produced the first season of *Designated Survivor*, is a former speechwriter for President Clinton and Special Assistant for International Security Affairs at the Department of State and has served as a political consultant to more than 20 film projects including entries in the *Mission: Impossible* series, the *Fast and the Furious* series, and *White House Down*, as well as television show *Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan*. This consulting work is formalized under the umbrella of McClarty Media, described on the company's website as "the firm's film and media advisory practice that works with studios, production companies, writers and directors to successfully and accurately bring complex and politically or culturally sensitive stories to movie screens worldwide."³¹ Glover Park Group (GPG), largely focuses on communications and press relations, but also does audience research and creative development and production. Michael Feldman, a GPG founding partner and former traveling Chief of Staff to Vice President Al Gore, has worked for films such as *The Hurt Locker* and *American Sniper*, as well as the television show *Madam Secretary*, and Adam Blickstein, a GPG Senior Vice President and former Strategic Planner and Public Affairs official in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, consulted for both *Madam Secretary* and *House of Cards*.³² Whereas the individuals I interviewed consulted on the day-to-day concerns of the production team, the work of these formalized

consulting firms ranges from immediate production questions to bigger picture marketing strategies for film and television projects.

There is a final group of notable people who have brought their Washington work experience to Hollywood in creative capacities beyond consulting. These rare few transition into the above-the-line roles such as writers, producers, and performers or into production studio executive positions. While their work does not always reference back to their government expertise, many of these creative careers start that way. These Washington-to-Hollywood migrants include but are not limited to Eli Attie, Lawrence O'Donnell, Dee Dee Myers, Jon Lovett, Jay Carson, and Alexander Maggio, all of whom became writers for governance or governance-adjacent television shows.³³

Attie was a writer and producer for *The West Wing* and since has been a writer and producer on shows in a range of genres, and O'Donnell became a writer, producer, and actor on *The West Wing*, a writer and producer on the short-lived *First Monday* about the Supreme Court, and the creator and executive producer of the short-lived *Mister Sterling* about a new Senator. He then went on to host a political commentary show on MSNBC. Dee Dee Myers was a consultant and story contributor to *The West Wing*. She became a co-host of a political talk show and contributor to *Vanity Fair*, among other publications, and was a Managing Director at the Glover Park Group. Myers most prominently entered Hollywood as an executive rather than a writer, by becoming the head of corporate communications for Warner Bros in 2014. In 2020, Myers rejoined the political arena to become California Governor Gavin Newsom's chief economic advisor. Lovett created the single-season White House sitcom *1600 Penn* before co-founding the podcasting/media company Crooked Media with other Obama staffers, and Carson was a producer on *House of Cards*, the screenwriter of the Gary Hart film *The Front Runner*, and the

creator of *The Morning Show*. Maggio first joined the writer's room of the government-thriller television show *Homeland*, before becoming a writer and story editor for *Madam Secretary*. Entering Hollywood through the writer's room—as opposed to acting or directing—is the through line of these trajectories and reinforces the overlap between the skill of writing political speeches, white papers, and policy positions and the skill of writing entertainment scripts.

Finally, Judy Smith, crisis management expert and former Deputy Press Secretary to President George H. W. Bush, entered Hollywood from a different angle. After her time in the White House, she worked as Senior Vice President for Communications at NBC. She was also an executive producer, a consultant, and the inspiration for—albeit dressed up and with plot twists including election rigging, murder, and an affair with the president—*Scandal*. Her contribution to the production goes beyond D.C. expertise to providing the very premise for the show.

Recruitment

Each of these consultants had various levels of familiarity with the television production process before joining their specific shows. As a lobbyist for NBC/NBCUniversal, Bob Okun understood the business and regulatory sides of the television industry, and Bob Bauer knew of television production second-hand through conversations with his son, Luke Bauer, a Vice President of Development and Production at CNBC. Yet, both were at least one step removed from the hands-on creative process. Some political consultants were jumping into something completely new. For Eric Schultz, *Designated Survivor* was his “first experience in that space [entertainment television].” Similarly, Eric Lesser “had no history in Hollywood or in movies or in screenwriting or anything like that. [He had] no background in any of that” when he joined

Veep. Anita McBride explained, “I didn't know anything about production and entertainment, other than enjoying it myself as a consumer.”

In a 2014 interview with *The Hollywood Reporter*, Michael Feldman asserted the value political consultants bring to Hollywood productions as interpersonal: “We have relationships with administration officials, members of Congress, columnists or reporters who don’t usually cover entertainment.”³⁴ Although Feldman is speaking more directly about pitching films and television to journalists as entry points to discuss topical issues, his statement affirms that relationships are an enormous asset to strengthening one’s credentials for this type of consulting work. Indeed, those relationship were called upon during the production of *Madam Secretary*. Creator Barbara Hall explained to *Parade* magazine:

We have a consulting group called Glover Park, who are former officials from all over the government, and they put us in touch with former State Department people, former White House advisors, former Pentagon staff. They’re not people who are currently in those positions, but they’re technical advisors. We run everything through them, and then they put us in touch with other experts... We’ll give them a dilemma we want to address, and they help us find the various ways it could be resolved.³⁵

Those personal relationships also served as the initial entry points into the job for McBride, Bauer, Okun, Lesser, and Schultz. After Tammy Haddad made the introduction, McBride spoke with Armando Iannucci, the creator of *Veep* and showrunner for the first four seasons:

I told them straight out, I said, ‘Armando, I've worked in the White House for many years. I know a lot about the complex, particularly being in management and operations... But I never worked for a vice president.’ And I said, ‘I'm married to someone who was the vice president's aide... that's my frame of reference and how I know the role.’

The husband she referred to, Timothy McBride, had also worked in the White House, including in the Senate-confirmed position of Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Trade Development. However, it was his five years as George H.W. Bush’s personal aide and private secretary, while

Bush was vice president and then president, that was advantageous to *Veep*. One of the main characters, Gary, fills that exact job. McBride continued, “I know enough about the interactions of the staff between the White House staff and the vice president's staff, but I never worked for a *Veep* myself. And that didn't matter to them [*Veep*'s production team].” McBride's wide-ranging knowledge of management, procedure, and protocol was compelling to the HBO team, which “liked the fact that [she] had so many different years and experiences.” McBride's lack of personal experience specifically in the Office of the Vice President “didn't matter” enough that she was a part of the consulting team for *Veep* for all seven years of the production.

Tammy Haddad also reached out to Eric Lesser. As he tells it: “I was in line registering for [law school] classes and my cell phone rang. And it was a friend of mine, Tammy Haddad...she called me and said that there was this new show that was being done by HBO and that the creator was Armando Iannucci, who came from *In the Loop* and *The Thick of It*, which were two incredible BBC shows.” Concurrent to attending Harvard Law School, he was recruited to work on *Veep*, work which continued through his campaign for State Senate in 2014. For both McBride and Lesser, working on *Veep* was, as Lesser put it, an opportunity that “fell into [their] lap[s].”

None of Bob Bauer's legal experiences predicted a career that would include consulting on a fictional television show. Instead, Jay Carson reached out to Bauer's wife, Anita Dunn—an equally highly respected political strategist and former member of the Obama White House—to ask if Bauer would be willing to consult on *House of Cards*. After speaking to Carson and some of the show's other producers, Bauer agreed. With Carson (and others) filling the day-to-day role of consultant, Bauer's contributions were more narrowly focused on what he describes as “the

depiction of the White House counsel and the relationship between the White House counsel and the president.”

Bob Okun knew *Designated Survivor*'s second season showrunner, Keith Eisner, through previous work on an unpicked-up pilot.³⁶ Eisner connected Okun to the producers who were looking for someone to offer a different vision of D.C. than had been highlighted in the first season. *Designated Survivor*'s third season showrunner Neal Baer wanted “someone who has swum in the water and really knows the cultural minutiae, the nomenclature and slang” and, as Eric Schultz told *People* in 2019, Baer and Schultz had met socially “through mutual friends.”³⁷ His work as *Designated Survivor*'s political consultant was a far cry from his former around-the-clock, seven-days-a-week White House position. With a friendly phone call, each of these opportunities for consulting materialized where the social network of government employees intersected the network of entertainment production relationships.

Kal Penn's path to become a consultant was different. He explained that as part of negotiating his contract, he suggested the option of consulting in addition to performing. Thus, consulting became an augmentation and a monetary add-on to his responsibilities as a cast member. Of the extra gig, show creator David Guggenheim remarked to *TV Insider*, “We were already game for using his insights and the request to do it in an official capacity came from Kal...He knows all these great realistic details, like what it's like in the White House during March Madness and how the president follows the brackets.”³⁸ Kal Penn added that his knowledge contributed balance to the consulting team which included Richard Klein. Penn explained, “his [Klein's] experience was mostly...towards the military side of things rather than the internal workings of the political. So, he and I worked together on that. And it just sort of came as a natural fit.” The complexity of governance television plots meant that a consultant or

consultant team with a breadth of knowledge across many aspects of the federal government was valuable. Despite the multiple showrunner changes and distribution channel transitions, realistic details remained a desired quantity, and Kal Penn's consulting persisted.

The revolving door between federal employment and industrial lobbying is famously critiqued for the leakage between those who make policy and those subject to that policy. These political consultants and creators reveal a second revolving door between those who make (or at least those who staff those who make) policy and those who make fictional, entertainment versions of those policies and present them to the American public. But as John Fiske points out, "the difference between the exercise of power in these domains is crucial: economic power is open and obvious, discursive power is hidden, and it is its hiddenness...that enables it to present itself as common sense, an objective, innocent reflection of the real."³⁹ Lobbyists impact economic power, whereas television consultants impact discursive power. This second door of entertainment may have less immediate consequences on legislation, regulation, and public policy, but more long-term consequences on governmental discourse and how the audience imagines those legislations, regulations, and policies in action.

Putting the Real in Realistic

If individual political consultants—as opposed to the firms—are recruited via a friendly phone call, many of their formal duties take the same form. Across different productions, these duties break down into roughly the same responsibilities: reviewing scripts, generating ideas with/for the writers, and answering urgent and specific production questions. As Eric Schultz described the need: "These are all writers who are excellent storytellers, but they've never worked in politics, campaigns, and government in their lives." Some of these activities happen remotely, while others involve a trip to the writer's room or the set. But these trips are exactly

that—visitations rather than habitations. Except for political consultants like Kal Penn who have an additional role on the production as an actor, writer, or producer, political consultants are more tourist than resident. The impromptu, irregular nature of these responsibilities is a part of what makes the position ‘beside-the-line.’ The types of questions they receive predominantly concern the referentially realistic—with the hope for associated perceptual realism.

Bob Bauer outlined his involvement in *House of Cards*:

I was asked whether I would be willing to talk on the phone? I did that. Read some scripts? I did that. And then also I once went to a writer's room meeting in New York City that [Beau] Willimon had convened to discuss plot development at some point in one of the seasons of *House of Cards*...They were sometimes quick hit questions. They'd get me on the phone and ask me whether something seemed realistic or not, say, in the depiction of the White House Counsel or the relationship of the White House Counsel to the president. So, I could easily dispose of that. Occasionally, I'd have to read a script and send an email.

These “quick hit” questions “were typically questions about how things work, whether the script departed so radically, even for dramatic purposes, from how things worked that it just wouldn't pass the sort of institutional or legal test...checking on the verisimilitude of scenes and roles.”

Bauer intimates a recognition by the production team that scripts would deviate from real processes by narrative necessity but that there was a distance or range within which fictionalization was acceptable and outside of which was undesirable. Like a rubber band, the boundaries around realistic could be stretched, but there was a limit before they broke.

Both Bob Okun and Eric Schultz visited the *Designated Survivor* cast and crew on set in Toronto during their separate seasons. For Okun, that visit was useful in establishing relationships because “maybe three quarters of [his] questions came from people who were doing costumes, set designs, and they really just wanted to be super authentic. And then probably another twenty-five/thirty percent of the questions came from the writers who wanted to just make sure they were accurate with how Washington was working and how processes were

working.” Like Bob Bauer, Bob Okun described the urgency of the calls he received, questions with a deadline of “I need this answer in an hour.” Okun quantitatively emphasized the production design questions; Schultz, on the other hand, emphasized questions from the writers: “I spoke to writers regularly...as they were figuring out the arc of the season and the big threads/storylines. I spent a few days in the writers' room with them and then after that was just in touch with them on a weekly basis. They would call in with ad hoc questions. Then I would help troubleshoot...I also reviewed every script of every [*Designated Survivor* Season 3] episode.”

The ability to answer these diverse “quick hit,” “ad hoc” questions relied on the specialized knowledge these consultants developed over the course of their political careers and brought to their productions. Consultants also called on their network of relationships when necessary, as Michael Feldman noted above. Bob Okun echoed this point, highlighting that being able “to admit that you don't know everything and to have a broad set of resources to call upon” was key to being successful in this type of work, and that he “called people in different law firms, people who had worked in different administrations who [he] knew...people were just so, so willing and delightful to work with. People were really, I think, tickled to be asked, and they were very cooperative.” Beyond simply good will and kindness, this casual assistance speaks to the second advantage Scott Frank argued consultants bring to a production: prestige and social capital. This gain in prestige is likely mutual. The production gains by enhancing its efforts to be realistic, and the assisting individual gains capital twofold: the pride of impacting a mass market entertainment product and the advantage of completing an easy favor.

Kal Penn used personal connections to not only answer questions but also to give his production team a firsthand referent experience:

I organized a tour of the White House for the writers and the actors, whoever was able to make it. That was probably the one time I actually called in a favor. And I said, ‘Hey, can we do this?’ And to be fair, I feel like most administrations, if it's a research trip, they would let you do it. I think the perk that we got was that Ferial [Govashiri], who was the president’s personal aide in the Outer Oval at the time, was very generous and said, ‘Look, you guys happen to be here when he's not in the office. So, if you want to bring in the team by and look at the Oval Office as well, you can.’ That was a particularly cool thing to be able to do.

Personal relationships across Hollywood and Washington boundaries led to the majority of these consultants getting the position, and personal relationships within Washington boundaries helped them fulfill the urgent requests with all parties in the transaction gaining some type of bragging rights.

Anita McBride fielded similar questions from production staff and art designers as much if not more than from writers:

When the show was first presented to me and I read the first script, I remember responding saying, holy cow... I was here to be a technical consultant. Right. This is where the flags go. This is where the seal goes. This is sort of where, you know, things are organized in the Oval Office or the West lobby. I mean, I really helped them—they had an amazing Set Designer, and they wanted things to be perfect and accurate. And that was my role. But I also read the scripts and would correct things. The titles of different positions were incorrectly named or just things that I knew from working in the White House would make sense or not.

While details such as the placement of flags or job titles may have been correctable by an art scout or researcher, McBride’s “just things I knew from working in the White House” represent a distinct set of knowledge so naturalized to political insiders as to be second nature, but obscure or invisible to outsiders.

After describing this process, McBride recounted her initial experience giving feedback on the scripts and politely learning the boundaries of her role:

When I read the first script, I said, ‘We really don't talk this way.’ I mean, the language, the F-word was like every other word. I said, ‘We just don't talk that way in the White House.’ And I remember the writers responding back, ‘Thanks for all your technical edits. This is great. We will write the comedy.’ And I remember laughing and saying, ‘OK, I get my place here.’

Here, both she and the writers equate the visual, physical, and hierarchical details she contributed to the show, the empirical reality, with the technical as differentiated from the tonal (funny). Eric Lesser, understood his responsibilities on *Veep* similarly and that “the nature of [his] position was to be in the background and to work with the writers.” The goal of *Veep*’s production staff was to get aesthetic and technical fidelity “perfect and accurate”—as long as it didn’t disrupt the comedy.

Kal Penn understood his job as a consultant on *Designated Survivor* was to contribute knowledge when needed with the ever-present possibility of being overruled:

My role is to present the information as it would be accurate. And their role [the writers] is to write a damn good show that entertains people and sells the ad space...Our [the consultants’] roles are not to urge anybody to do anything. Our roles are to just explain what would or wouldn’t happen. And let’s say you tell somebody this is wrong, and the writer says, ‘Yes, we’re doing it anyway. So now, what would help make it more realistic?’ Well, sometimes that is an impossible question. But sometimes you’re like--OK, you’ve got this person who would never be in the same room as the president. But you’re saying you’re going to put them in the same room because of the plot. And I get it, so at least to put the right colored badge on them. You know, it’s little things like that.

Bob Okun, too, experienced the tension between real processes and what writers wanted to happen on screen. He added, “I don’t remember a single instance where they [the writers] said, ‘I don’t care what you say.’ They were really attentive to reality. But they realized, as I did, that they also have some license to stretch.” Regarding the imperative to ground *House of Cards*’ “lively drama” within a “realistic framework” Bob Bauer noted, “I tried to be helpful within the parameters that they set for the mission that they were trying to accomplish.” Another aspect of the consultancy’s beside-the-line nature is this proper place within the delineated parameters of the production. Consultants offered corrections without control that their input would be accounted for within the final filming. If, as Bauer observed, there is a lower limit on perceptual realism and how far the fiction can stray from reality, then there is also an upper limit at which

referential realism is undesirable because sticking too close to reality impedes the narrative or humor.

On every set, the consultants were aware of this tension between the imperative of the writing team to produce entertaining, popular fiction and the desire to signify authenticity through production details. Okun continued, “That’s the beauty of television...Keith [Eisner] and his team were really trying very hard to really be as close to actuality as possible. I think they appreciated what I was doing, but I fully appreciated the fact that it was created, too.” Eric Schultz directly observed the pull between day-to-day facts and storytelling fiction: “Obviously, it’s still Hollywood. It’s still a television show. It’s not actual real life. It’s not a documentary. So, as a showrunner, Neal [Baer] still has his imperatives, but they definitely wanted as much texture and color as possible.” Kal Penn added that this relationship between form and content doesn’t have to be oppositional and can, instead, be complementary. Especially during the third season and the move from ABC to Netflix—particularly the move away from broadcasting’s primetime regulations, “the more archaic rules the networks have to follow”—for Penn, “the stories and the relationships were heightened by the accuracy.”

Kal Penn, Bob Okun, and Eric Schultz attest to the desire by the showrunners, writers, and production staff across all three seasons of *Designated Survivor* for authenticity, actuality, and a feeling of reality. However, decisions regarding that sense of fidelity to the actual federal government versus a focus on drama and storytelling came from those in charge; each of the showrunners or executive producers wanted “to know the reality of the political world being depicted” but how that knowledge and the value of realism was implemented or disregarded in favor of entertainment values was balanced and rebalanced by each creative in charge.⁴⁰ Penn, present for all three seasons, described how some of the showrunners “want[ed] to try and get

this as right as possible” while others “viewed their role as telling the best stories, period, and did not...necessarily equate that to grounding it in a reality.” Eric Schultz described the impetus for bringing him on staff during the transition between the second and third season: “There was a lot...that felt inauthentic. And Neil [Baer], having taken over the show and the writers there wanted to correct that as much as possible.” Although accuracy is articulated as a desired quality across every season, as the leadership shifted, the implementation of that accuracy on screen shifted based on personal preference and style.

This is not to suggest that political consultants contribute *only* the technical details of job titles and badge colors to the shows they worked on. Especially as relationships deepened and these consultants were brought into writers’ rooms, their personal experiences—and those of their friends and colleagues—were incorporated into or provided inspiration for the writing. For instance, one of the inauthenticities that Eric Schultz targeted in his feedback was the glamorous production design, the “Hollywood-ization” of the White House. He explained, “If you remember what the White House situation room was like in the first two seasons of *Designated Survivor*, it looks like an international global command center. It’s really a conference room.”⁴¹ He convinced the *Designated Survivor* season three writers that the White House was less glamorous than previously portrayed and that it had all the problems of historic buildings, including rats: “I had one in my office. There were a number of stories of rodents scurrying around, and so I think the writers were really into that story line because, again, the contrast that everyone thinks the White House is sort of glamorous, spectacular, immaculate sort of building. When, in fact, inside, it’s fairly rundown.” The bureaucracy associated with addressing a rodent problem within the White House became a tertiary, or possibly quaternary, storyline in the second episode of the third season, “#slipperylope.”⁴²

An additional storyline grounded in lived experiences is in the sixth episode of the third season, “#whocares,” when staffer Dontae is mugged on his way to work.⁴³ Both Schultz and Penn mentioned the potential for violence they experienced living within Washington, D.C. and the history of White House staffers being mugged. The show departs from reality, though, when President Kirkman learns about this attack from Dontae and how common it is. Schultz specified that during his administration, President Obama was never really informed about these incidents.⁴⁴ Even considering this gritty storyline, Penn described *Designated Survivor* as “a much shinier, kinder version of DC than the reality. And I mean that both in terms of the politics and the actual city.” Even with rats, on *Designated Survivor* a sense of glamour and shiny idealism seeped in with the politics.

Rather than identifying areas for potential drama, the consultants on *Veep* had the possibly more challenging task of identifying the parts of government process that can go wrong so the writers could harvest them for comedy. Anita McBride highlighted the second episode of season two, “Helsinki,” when Vice President Selina Meyer travels to Finland for trade negotiations.⁴⁵ McBride heard this foreign travel plotline at a dinner with Iannucci and the other writers:

And I said, ‘Oh, yeah, I have a thought.’ I said, ‘You know, one of the things that happens when you go overseas, there’s an exchange of gifts...It’s a long tradition of protocol. An exchange of gifts, leader to leader...One thing you can do—because it happened to us—without going into detail—is you choose a gift based on intelligence that you get from the State Department protocol office on what that particular leader likes or doesn’t like, what their interests are.’ And I said, ‘If you get the wrong information, which doesn’t often happen, but it can, you can end up being embarrassed by giving the wrong gift or giving something that makes no sense for that particular leader.’ And they loved that.

During the following season, the show included a story about Selina Meyer cutting her hair just before a presidential debate.⁴⁶ Her team is concerned about managing the press coverage of the

new, short style and joke to one another about its boyish qualities. At the season premiere, star Julie Louis-Dreyfus described the broader inspiration for this story:

Female politicians get a lot of crap for their looks...If they make a change, if they don't make a change, if they stick to something they know. There's a lot of scrutiny about how female politicians present themselves, so I thought, let's do something about that. Let's cut her hair and see what happens, and if it doesn't look good, that's OK, and if it does look good, that's OK.⁴⁷

McBride discussed the issue of potential fallout of this storyline with Dreyfus and grounded the topic of "female politicians get[ting] a lot of crap for their looks" in the real-world example of the psychological analysis in the press of Hillary Clinton's changing hairstyles during her time in the White House. Although this story was not based on Hillary Clinton, the real events and reactions provide a model that the writers can then stretch and exaggerate.

Given this focus on technical details, it is worth noting that there is one area of governance television not concerned with accuracy but often mistakenly perceived to be so: aligning on-screen events with contemporary political events. Despite audiences and commentators interpreting the fictional stories and plots as inspired by real political happenings, the assumption of a one-to-one relationship is usually mistaken. Eric Lesser explained the production timeline:

Production of the seasons and of the episodes was pretty long. It's a major television production, so there's a fairly long trajectory of conceiving of the episodes, writing the episodes, casting episodes, post-production of the episodes, and then when they actually air. So, it wasn't designed the way a nightly comedy show is where they're doing contemporaneous commentary on things immediately in the news.

The consultants reported that on the production set current political events were usually not reference points. *Designated Survivor*, premiering in September 2016, was in production on its first season as the fields of potential 2016 presidential candidates narrowed, and the campaigns intensified. Penn describes:

It [the 2016 election] did not come up at all. It certainly didn't come up in any of my conversations, and I really loved that. I loved that I was part of a fictional show that didn't respond to anything happening in the current climate... To me, it's much less interesting when you react in any way to something that's happening in the real world.

All the consultants agreed that governance television is not a ripped-from-the-headlines genre, and yet this perceived correlation between news reporting and governance television is persistent.

One example of this assumption in action were the responses to *Veep's* final season's plot of China interfering with the US Presidential election on Selina Meyer's behalf. The reveal of this interference occurred in "Super Tuesday," an episode which aired on April 28, 2019.⁴⁸ The Mueller Report, the official investigation of Russian interference in the 2016 US Presidential election was published only ten days earlier on April 18, 2019. However, regarding this timing, the *Hollywood Reporter* reported:

To anyone who thought *Veep* might be ripping from the Trump-centered headlines, [David] Mandel says this final season storyline has been in the works since he took over from series creator Armando Iannucci after season four [2015]. 'It's all part of a three-year process and this Meyer Fund [storyline] goes back deep into last season,' he says. 'Now, of course, we're seeing the connections with the Meyer Fund and the Chinese. This is some of what's wrong with Washington, D.C. in general; with lobbying and with foreign money. It's all interconnected and you can trace the dots over our sort of three-year arc. Last week was just a funny coincidence.'⁴⁹

Similarly, this overlap between fictional stories and contemporary discourse occurred following a January 2018 episode of *Madam Secretary* in which President Dalton experiences a change in personality due to a brain tumor. As his behavior becomes more erratic, his Cabinet must decide whether to invoke the Twenty-fifth Amendment or not. Some reactions to this episode interpreted this plot as paralleling President Trump's behavior and as partisan commentary exploring the potential to remove him from office via the Twenty-fifth Amendment. However, in a 2018 interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, Barbara Hall explained this misinterpretation:

No, the recent headlines about President Trump's mental health didn't inspire the episode, insists executive producer Barbara Hall. The script was actually written in October, she says. Even the episode's title, "Sound and Fury," though awfully similar to *Fire and Fury*, Michael Wolff's now bestseller about Trump's first year in office, was created last year... 'It's very easy to trace,' Hall says EW [sic] of the episode's timing. 'Look at the process for making a TV show. It takes a month to break a story and we shot it in mid-November.' That said, Hall relishes the opportunity to dramatize the challenge of removing the president from office.⁵⁰

Despite audience perceptions that the events happening on entertainment television rehearse or rebut events being discussed on journalistic television, Mandel and Hall assert zeitgeist and coincidence. They also appeal to the dramatic possibilities to be found within the government structure, ungrounded in the specifics of a particular administration. Following *Madam Secretary's* finale in 2019, Hall addressed this issue of dramatizing possibilities with *Parade*:

Really what we do is we take things that are just starting to be discussed, or you're just starting to hear about it, and then we game it out to the most dramatic conclusion. But what has been happening, especially lately, is everything is moving at such a pace, and everything is moving in the most dramatic fashion, so we end up being parallel with the headlines in a way we don't intend, but it just worked out that way... It just seems to happen that we game these things out, and then the next thing you know, they're out there in the news.⁵¹

Although governance television is a part of the social discourse about the concurrent administration, it is not a synchronous conversation. The realities of primetime television production usually prevent a timely one-to-one relationship between events and episodes.⁵²

The production of *Scandal's* season 4 episode, "The Lawn Chair" demonstrates the risk of grounding the fiction too firmly in real world events.⁵³ This episode, aired on March 5, 2015, grapples with police brutality and the killing of unarmed Black men. When Brandon Parker is shot by white police officer Jeffrey Newton, Clarence Parker, Brandon's father, brings a lawn chair and a shotgun to guard his son's body where it lies in the street. Newton claims Parker had a knife, but Olivia Pope's team investigates, and their findings eventually prompt a confession that Newton planted the knife. Many viewers correctly identified the inspiration of this episode

as the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014. Brown's body was left in the street for four hours after his death. Shonda Rhimes, creator and writer of *Scandal*, discussed this influence with *Elle* magazine:

I woke up knowing that we were going to go write "The Lawn Chair" after Ferguson. I watched that coverage and was horrified. I woke up the next morning with this image of this man, of a lawn chair and a shotgun and a child underneath him. The episode came out of that. We shot that episode in October or November. I remember thinking, This is going to feel dated when it comes out. And then the police just kept killing black men. Literally the [day before] it aired, they released the Ferguson Report, and it was worse than the press had ever thought.⁵⁴

An episode inspired by an event in August was filmed two to three months later and aired four to five months after that. Rhimes' concern that the episode would feel "dated" by the time it aired was unfortunately proven wrong due to the ongoing pattern of police killing Black men and the rarity of legal accountability, but the perception of direct relevance was not a guarantee when the episode was written and produced. For *Veep*'s team, the caution about too much accuracy was that it would detract from humor; for *Scandal*, too much grounding in reality, too much alignment between referential realism and perceptual realism, was concerning due to a fear of falling too far behind the discourse by the time the episode is broadcast.

However, showrunners, writers, actors, and political consultants all have the same access to political journalism and news as any citizen; they are reading the same headlines, and they are not oblivious to or unresponsive to general political sentiments. In the same *EW* interview, Executive Producer of *Madam Secretary* Barbara Hall continued, "Anything that's even remotely in the national discussion becomes something we like to explore."⁵⁵ Eric Lesser explained that *Veep*'s production team "w[as] very interested in the news and follow the news closely and were very knowledgeable about the news and about politics. We would certainly chat about whatever was happening." He added:

The show spanned both the Obama and the Trump presidencies...people actually had a little bit of a different lens after Trump became president...so many scenes, I remember in the earlier seasons, where we would say 'It's just way too farfetched' or 'That would never happen' or 'That's totally unrealistic.' And then we had a reality show star become the president, and it was like everything was thrown out the window in terms of what was realistic or appropriate or not.

The rubber band of factual discourse stretched to include what formerly would have been dubbed as too radical a departure from believability. The new real-world administration broadened the storytelling possibilities by confirming that what was previously inconceivable was, in fact, possible.

These shows aspire to realistic representations by drawing from the expertise of political consultants to dress fictional stories in the aesthetic and technical trappings of reality. Referential realism can enhance a story, such as rats in the walls of the White House, or detract from other prioritized goals, such as the humor of vulgar and profane language within the presumed respectability of politics. Regardless of long production timelines, referential realism is also imposed on shows by viewers due to coincidental imbrication of scripted plots and real-world events. Although there are limits to perceived realism beyond which believability fades, these limits are flexible rather than immutable and are linked to changes in the contemporaneous political environment. Contributing factual knowledge about day-to-day governmental arcana confers social capital to the show, the political consultants, and any colleagues with whom they confer. However, the scriptwriters and not the consultants are the ultimate determinants of how and when that knowledge is implemented. As will be seen below, when the writing stretches believability to a breaking point, it is the show that loses credibility, and not the political consultants.

Watching for Realism⁵⁶

The irony underlying accuracy as a production priority is that the Washington-insider consultants and their colleagues are the only audience members for whom ‘correctness’ or ‘verisimilitude’ can function as a heuristic for quality; as one consultant put it, “I’m super atypical; I’m part of the swamp.” They are the only viewers who can recognize both the syntax and semantics within this genre. Thus, there are two types of audiences for governance television: a majority which will watch the show purely through the lens of perceptual realism and a minority of political specialists who are attuned to both the perceptual and referential.

The lay audience has little information with which to evaluate the representational precision of governance television; although the technical details are the main focus of political consultants’ jobs, the accuracy of job titles or the placement of flags in the hallway is largely inscrutable to non-D.C. viewers. Kal Penn related that when he was stopped on the street and asked about *Designated Survivor* “the majority of people go, ‘That’s crazy. Do you think that could ever happen?’ And then it’s like, ‘Yeah, it’s based on literally how the government is set up. That’s what happens. You know, God forbid, if there’s a catastrophic attack like that.’ So, I think that would be the biggest thing most people don’t know—that that’s how the chain of command operates or what’s called the order of succession.” Eric Schultz described showrunner Neal Baer wanting the show to appeal to an audience “so even if you’re not familiar with government or politics or how a White House operates...the viewer [would] have enough confidence that what they were watching felt authentic.”

Members of the production staff presume that they need to explain the specifics of civil procedures to the American TV audience, and statistically, they are correct. In 2016, when *Designated Survivor* premiered, the Annenberg Public Policy Center found that only 26% of the

American population could name all three branches of government and 31% could not name any.⁵⁷ In a world in which audiences are ignorant of the reality of the very premise of the show—that in case of an emergency during the State of the Union, the designated survivor can continue to lead the government—the attention to technicalities of who attends which meeting and which chair they sit in, the *feeling* of authenticity, seems counterintuitive. Despite this reality, these profit-driven entertainment productions invest time, money, and care into details opaque to the majority of the audience.

Having lived through the real thing, one might guess that political consultants have no interest in watching fictionalized versions of the federal government. Alternatively, after experiencing the real thing, one could guess that they would be deeply invested in watching the representation of their work lives. The reality is somewhere in the middle. All the consultants I spoke with watched, at minimum, episodes of the show they worked on as research, and many have watched at least some episodes of related programs. Interviewees mentioned some shows more than others. Unsurprisingly, the long-running, award winners—*The West Wing*, *Veep*, and *House of Cards*—were the most commonly name-checked. *Designated Survivor* and *Madam Secretary* were also mentioned with *Scandal* acknowledged only when prompted. But for every staffer who has seen the entirety of *The West Wing*—and, if the right age, been inspired to join the government because of it—there is a D.C. insider who has never seen a single episode.⁵⁸

Although technical fidelity is the main focus of consultants as television employees, as television viewers, consultants assess qualities of storytelling and relationships in addition to aesthetic accuracy. One consultant praised *The West Wing* as “best-in-class” due to its longevity, attributing much of that success to Aaron Sorkin’s writing and the “repartee and dialogue.”⁵⁹ However, the show was “very aspirational which always kind of bordered on unrealistic

storylines.” Here, the consultant integrates issues of content and form into their evaluation of the program’s quality. Although they didn’t specify whether ‘aspirational’ was an accurate description of the mood within real-world government work, they distinguish among dialogue and character interactions (entertaining); the tone of the show (aspirational); and storylines (unrealistic). A different consultant commended *The West Wing* as “a good show and popular,” but when assessing the aesthetic details and physical space, found the “movements through the West Wing and what things look like” to be mostly “inaccurate.” For this viewer, rather than aspirational, the show is “sanctimonious” at times with the character of President Jeb Bartlet “made out to be some kind of demigod.” Yet, while the tone may be unappealing and the physical details incorrect, the show still received an overall evaluation of “good.” Ironically, technical accuracy or inaccuracy, the main domain of consulting, was only minorly consequential when grading the overall quality of the show, even for those with the ability to judge those technical and aesthetic details.

The West Wing has become the template for governance television comparisons, though as an archetype to be emulated or a prototype to be iterated on depends on taste. McBride, who was working in the White House when *The West Wing* premiered, noted that it was the first of these shows to come out, so before then “you had nothing really to compare it to” other than films about government. After *The West Wing*, in addition to a comparison with the real world, realistic is used to compare one governance television program with another. In thinking about *Designated Survivor*, one consultant explicitly compared President Tom Kirkman to President Jeb Bartlet. To them, both characters are aspirational and idealistic and share similar left-of-center political goals, despite President Bartlet explicitly being a Democrat and President Kirkman explicitly being an Independent. However, *Designated Survivor* was “a little more

grounded in reality” and President Kirkman was “not anywhere near being a carbon copy of the West Wing president” because he sometimes lost his conflicts. Here, aspiration and idealism alone are less realistic than aspiration, idealism, and loss.

For every time someone described *The West Wing* as “aspirational,” someone described *House of Cards* as “dark.” A consultant directly articulated this contrast: “*House of Cards* is in many respects the inverse of *West Wing*, or *West Wing* was very much like a show about the better angels of politics. *House of Cards*? Definitely not.” Kal Penn theorized that this difference may have something to do with changes in real-world political behavior. “The late 90s, through early 2000s, D.C. and the present day, D.C., it was very, very caught up with games of power. And my experience with the D.C. of the Obama world was that it was less caught up with power transactions...it's things like that where I think *House of Cards* was very much what people were used to and what D.C. maybe has returned to in some way.” Penn’s periodization coincides with the tonal shifts between idealization in the early to mid-2000s and cynicism in the spate of governance television shows launched in 2012 and 2013.

In addition to identifying the accuracies they contributed to their own productions, the political consultants underscored the inaccuracies of others. Multiple consultants not only compared *House of Cards* to *The West Wing*, but also compared early seasons of *House of Cards* to later seasons. They praised the first two or three seasons of *House of Cards* as entertaining, addictive, and polished with strong production design and acting. However, it “completely jumped the shark” and was “not believable because you had actual murders going on there.” While politics may seem cutthroat, literal murder undermined the referential realism of the technical details:

I thought, *House of Cards* did excellent the first season and a half or two. And then it just got preposterous...the first couple of seasons were quite realistic, down [to] the way the

office looked and the way they tried to count votes and pressure other members from everything from running primaries against them, to helping do fundraisers to committee assignments. And...to me and, I think, a lot of my colleagues and friends—the other thing that...they really played the Washington inside press game very well...the mayhem and the murder and it just became absurd, so that most of my colleagues just stopped watching it.

Although aesthetic fidelity such as the physical space alongside office dynamics and policymaking initially feel realistic, it is a plot stretched too thin—and too lethal—that shifts the show from excellent to “more and more distant from anything resembling reality.” Storytelling outweighs accurate draperies.⁶⁰ This shift between seasons also reinforces the essential difference between governance television and individual films about government; governance television has characters, settings, and stories that audiences live with over time, leaving room for complex and contradictory reception of a single show.

Of the three most discussed shows, the realism of *Veep* inspired the widest range of interpretations. One consultant thought *Veep* captured “the sort of tempo in Washington and the sort of, not only the egos and the personalities, and the obtuseness of some people, but just the sort of rapport that staff has and sort of really captures a lot of ridiculousness that we deal with on a day-to-day basis.” However, another consultant, caveating that “most people who have worked in government disagree with me” described not getting into *Veep* specifically because they “never found it particularly realistic.” Moreover, they added, “What I mean by that is I didn't find the relationships to be grounded. And that bothered me.” As seen above, McBride, who worked on *Veep*, praised the set designs and the adoption of protocol-specific stories such as the botched gift exchange, but also identified the crude language as not a part of her experience within the White House. Alternatively, *Veep*'s writing and Dreyfus's performance were lauded, but one consultant felt this show was the most unmoored from the real world:

I credit the lead and Dreyfus's ability to be so bawdy and funny and I thought the writing there, the comedic writing was terrific. I didn't think that really hewed to reality very

much, though. So, whereas I think *West Wing* and *Designated Survivor* were much more—I think even *House of Cards* was more realistic...*Veep* was very entertaining, though...the self-absorption and self-centeredness was just captured so well—of the different political players and the ambition, the staff, was really good. But it's very hard to compare that to the other shows, which I think tried to be more reality-based. So, I think they could take a lot more creative license with *Veep*.

Genre is introduced here as another aspect contributing to the intersection between realism and governance television. Despite capturing the tone and relationships among the staff members, *Veep*, the only comedy in the conversation, is put in opposition to the other programming, dramas that are “reality-based.” In this consultant’s eyes, there are limits to how much reality any comedy-governance television show could capture; apparently, government is not an inherently funny place. Notably, when the political consultants become viewers, genre, relationships, tempo, plot—all elements of form and perceptual realism—overtake referential realism and fidelity of content as the determinants of realistic.

Governance television was a ‘water cooler’ topic for those working in the White House and the wider government. The television shows acted as shared reference points and nomenclature, a reflection, however much skewed, of their culture and lives. Asked to reflect on the ways government employees responded to *The West Wing*, writer and co-producer Lawrence O’Donnell explained, “When I worked in Washington, nobody watched any TV at all...I was very surprised that they latched onto this thing [*The West Wing*] as quickly as they did.”⁶¹ In addition to the plots and the aesthetic technicalities, politicians articulated a referential realism regarding how the characters on screen were similar to people they had known or observed on the job. McBride explained:

A lot of ways people who worked in the White House and the halls of the Congress or somewhere else in the government will remark on the accuracy of the photos, the locations, the details, because they know those so intimately and will also remark on those that are not accurate at all... friends and colleagues from years and years of working and three administrations would definitely compare notes and talk and laugh about different things, different characters who were similar to characters we would have

worked with. Particularly in the case of *Veep*, the Jonah Ryan character, who was always very...officious about showing his blue pass, his West Wing pass. And we all knew people like that... it's just one of those funny characteristics. It's human nature that was so amplified in the character of Jonah Ryan.

Drawing from the assumption that everyone was watching, or at least aware of these shows, Eric Lesser adds that the on-screen characters would act as referents for describing colleagues:

Among people in politics, they could relate in certain elements to what *Veep* was showing, especially the hairy, craziness behind the scenes. And it became common like in D.C. or in the political circles. 'That person's a Dan' or 'that person's an Amy,' or actually Jonah. It almost became shorthand.

As a member of the generation inspired by *The West Wing*, he also linked members of the Obama White House with characters on that show, such as speechwriter Jon Favreau with fictional speechwriter Sam Seaborn. From *Veep*, Lesser personally identifies most with the characters Amy and Gary, but adds, "You wouldn't be honest in politics if you weren't acknowledging that there was a bit of a Dan and a little bit of a Jonah in everyone...the goal is to keep those characters stamped down as much as you can." Dan and Jonah, ambitious and officious, provide an exaggerated, entry point for fast characterization or self-reflection. These fictional characters, and governance television more broadly, acts as a shorthand language through which real world political actors recognize pieces of themselves and their colleagues.

Realism as Ideological Currency

Because they are attuned to both the referential and perceptual realism, when politicians and staffers around Washington use governance television programs as shorthand, they do so recognizing the boundaries between truth and exaggeration. This is, however, a minority position; most viewers are not members of the rarefied Washington, D.C. social network. Unlike the dinosaurs of *Jurassic Park*, which audiences know to be unreal despite expert animation, the US government is a real place, just one that the audience lacks firsthand knowledge of beyond

the already-mediated space of televised events. Combining this unfamiliarity with the high degree of technical details, aesthetic fidelity, and syntactic accuracy that political consultants contribute and with coincidentally meaningful air dates, the border between referential realism and perceptual realism loses precision. Anita McBride noted that “these shows, because they were all so different and showed different sides...they really created more knowledge and a connection between viewers and average citizens to these positions and these roles. I mean, both the good and the bad. But in a weird way, it created an awareness.” Irrespective of any impacts on civic knowledge, viewers who know no alternatives see the day-to-day workings of the government through the perceptual realism of governance television.

By enveloping the fictional, thrilling, farcical plots of governance television within spatial, linguistic, and visual accuracy, those plots become all the more convincing or persuasive—except when they delve into murder, and perhaps not even then. John Fiske argues that “realism’s desire to ‘get the details right’ is an ideological practice, for the believability of its fidelity to “the real” is transferred to the ideology it embodies.”⁶² If the vision of the world created on fictional television is successful at being perceived as ‘realistic,’ then the ideologies within that vision, too, become convincingly realistic. The following chapter will thus analyze the ideology that these governance television shows convey.

Notes

¹ Shonda Rhimes quoted in Sarah Medford, “How Shonda Rhimes Built Her Oval Office.”

² Scott Frank, “Reel Reality,” 428.

³ See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990) for a discussion of symbolic capital as prestige conveyed through association, which is “inextricably intertwined” with economic capital.

⁴ Scott Frank, “Reel Reality,” 447-448.

⁵ Scott Frank, “Reel Reality,” 439.

⁶ Cary Funk et al., “Trust and Mistrust in Americans’ Views of Scientific Experts” and Pew Research Center, “Americans’ View of Government.”

It is important to note that the research on scientific experts took place before the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020, whereas the research on government trust took place after the start of the pandemic.

⁷ All of these descriptors were variously used by interviewees to explain their responsibilities as political consultants. Respondents used these terms largely interchangeably and polysemously, without intentional differences in connotation. It is outside the scope of this project to distinguish among authenticity, accuracy, actuality, etc. as theoretical concepts. However, I do want to note that there is a potentially fruitful space to explore the difference between terms that describe the text such as correct and perfect and terms that describe the experience audiences have when watching the text such as believable.

⁸ Rick W. Busselle and Bradley S. Greenberg, “The Nature of Television Realism Judgments.”

⁹ Alice Hall, “Reading Realism,” 632-633.

¹⁰ Rick W. Busselle and Bradley S. Greenberg, “The Nature of Television Realism Judgments,” 260.

¹¹ W. James Potter, “Perceived Reality and the Cultivation Hypothesis,” 162.

¹² Potter’s use of semantic and syntactic in “Perceived Reality in Television Effects Research” to describe perceived realism suggests an overlap with either Fredric Jameson or Rick Altman’s similar use within genre theory. However, Potter’s semantic/syntactic is centered on viewer perceptions of various aspects of the text, rather than those qualities within the text itself.

¹³ John Fiske, *Television Culture*, 21.

¹⁴ John Fiske, *Television Culture*, 21, 25.

¹⁵ John Fiske, *Television Culture*, 42-45.

¹⁶ Stephen Prince, “True Lies,” 32.

¹⁷ Stephen Prince, “True Lies,” 32.

¹⁸ Eric Schultz, Personal communications, May 14, 2020.

¹⁹ Timothy Stanley, *Citizen Hollywood*, 5-6.

²⁰ Kathryn Brownell, *Showbiz Politics*, 4.

²¹ Kathryn Brownell, *Showbiz Politics*, 226-227.

²² David Greenberg, *Republic of Spin*, 6.

²³ Lara Zwarun and Angela Torrey, "Somebody versus Nobody," 673.

²⁴ See Leo Rosten, *Hollywood: The Movie Colony, the Movie Makers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1941); Hortense Powdermaker, *Hollywood: The Dream Factory: An Anthropologist Looks at the Movie-Makers* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1950); Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Allen, *The Producer's Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), and Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983) as examples of production studies focused on above-the-line workers.

²⁵ Examples of headlines from feature articles include "EMMYS: Jay Carson Is The Go-To-Pol Guy On 'House Of Cards'" (Joe Utichi and Anthony D'Alessandro, *Deadline*, June 14, 2014); "Hollywood's D.C. Spin Doctor on Why Politicians Matter for Oscar, 'Noah's' Success and His 'Madam Secretary' Role" (Tina Daunt, *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 25, 2014); "This Mass. Senator's Side Hustle Is For HBO's Political Comedy 'Veep'" (Eric Lesser Interview by Callum Borchers, *Radio Boston* from WBUR, April 26, 2019); "Top Obama Adviser consulted on Designated Survivor's Netflix reboot, Adding West Wing Rats and Hanky Panky" (Sandra Sobieraj Westfall, *People*, June 7, 2019).

²⁶ Vicki Mayer, *Below the Line*, 2.

²⁷ Scott Frank, "Reel Reality," 428.

²⁸ Juju Chang, John Kapetaneas, and Lauren Effron, "What It's Like to Be"

²⁹ Ingela Ratledge, "*Designated Survivor*: Kal Penn."

After our initial conversation, Kal Penn clarified that he was not practicing method acting for *Designated Survivor*.

³⁰ "About: Tammy Haddad, President & CEO," Haddad Media.

³¹ "Richard Klein," McLarty Associates.

³² "Adam Blickstein: Senior Vice President" and "Michael Feldman: Founding Partner and Managing Director," Glover Park Group.

³³ Before transitioning to Hollywood jobs Eli Attie was Vice President Al Gore's Chief of Staff and speechwriter; Lawrence O'Donnell worked for Senator Daniel Moynihan and became the Staff Director of the United States Senate Committee on Finance; Dee Dee Myers served as White House Press Secretary during the Clinton Administration; Jon Lovett was a speechwriter for the Obama Administration; Jay Carson was a political strategist and policy advisor, the Communications Director for the William J. Clinton Foundation, the Press Secretary for Hillary Clinton's 2008 presidential campaign, and the Chief Deputy Mayor of Los Angeles; and Alexander Maggio was a Defense Intelligence Agency analyst.

³⁴ Tina Daunt, “Hollywood’s D.C. Spin Doctor.”

³⁵ Paulette Cohn, “*Madam Secretary* Creator Barbara Hall.”

³⁶ Prior to *Designated Survivor*, Eisner worked on the governance television-adjacent show *Graves* and would go on to work on *Madam Secretary* after *Designated Survivor*’s first cancellation.

³⁷ Sandra Sobieraj Westfall, “Top Obama Adviser Consulted.”

³⁸ Ingela Ratledge, “*Designated Survivor*: Kal Penn.”

³⁹ John Fiske, *Television Culture*, 43.

⁴⁰ Kal Penn, Personal Correspondence, August 4, 2021.

⁴¹ Sandra Sobieraj Westfall, “Top Obama Adviser Consulted.”

⁴² *Designated Survivor*, “#slipperyslope.”

⁴³ *Designated Survivor*, “#whocares.”

⁴⁴ Sandra Sobieraj Westfall, “Top Obama Adviser Consulted.”

⁴⁵ *Veep*, “Helsinki.”

⁴⁶ *Veep*, “Debate.”

⁴⁷ Mara Siegler, “Julia Louis-Dreyfus Explains.”

⁴⁸ *Veep*, “Super Tuesday.”

⁴⁹ Jackie Strause, “*Veep* Boss on Election Rigging.”

⁵⁰ Lynette Rice, “*Madam Secretary* Tries to Impeach.”

⁵¹ Paulette Cohn, “*Madam Secretary* Creator Barbara Hall.”

⁵² One exception to this is *The West Wing* episode “Isaac and Ishmael,” the first episode aired after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The script was written and shot within three weeks and aired on October 3, 2001. The narrative takes place outside of established plotlines and functions largely as a ‘bottle’ episode. The White House is on lockdown, and a tour of high school students are stuck inside. As they wait out the threat in the cafeteria, various main characters walk-in and debate concerns about terrorism and security. Reactions to this episode and this approach to addressing 9/11 on primetime television, both at the time and in the twenty years since, have been decidedly mixed.

⁵³ *Scandal*, “The Lawn Chair.”

⁵⁴ Shonda Rhimes, “Shonda Rhimes on Power, Feminism, and Police Brutality.”

⁵⁵ Lynette Rice, “*Madam Secretary* Tries to Impeach”

⁵⁶ Out of respect for the potential impact of criticism on personal relationships, within this section I have anonymized responses that include evaluative opinions.

⁵⁷ “Americans’ Knowledge of the Branches of Government is Declining,” Annenberg Public Policy Center.

However, in the 2020 survey, 51% of Americans could name all three branches of government, the highest result since the survey began in 2006. Additionally, Americans’ ability to name all five rights protected by the First Amendment also increased since 2017. K-12 civics education has not notably changed in the intervening years, so these results are suggestive that the spread of politics and civics into other aspects of everyday life between 2016 and 2020 has had a pedagogical effect.

⁵⁸ There are many anecdotes of Obama Administration staffers and journalists who were inspired to enter politics and reporting due to *The West Wing*. In my interview Eric Schultz said, “*West Wing* was one of the shows that will always be dear to me, and I think probably prompted my interest in politics.” Similarly, Eric Lesser, in a 2012 interview with *Vanity Fair* explained, “I remember when they were first promoting *The West Wing*, and I was like, ‘Oh, man, I can’t wait to see that.’” For additional examples of *The West Wing*’s influence see Juli Weiner, “*West Wing* Babies,” *Vanity Fair* 54, no. 4 (April 2012): 158.

⁵⁹ Of the main shows referenced by interviewees, *The West Wing* ran for seven seasons and has the largest number of episodes at 156, *Scandal* ran for seven seasons and 124 episodes, *Madam Secretary* ran for six seasons and 120 episodes, *House of Cards* ran for six seasons and 73 episodes, *Veep* ran for seven seasons and 65 episodes, and *Designated Survivor* ran for three seasons and 53 episodes. This range in episodes for the same number of seasons is due to the difference between shows produced in the classic model of primetime broadcasts and shows produced for streaming and premium cable distribution, with seasons half as long.

⁶⁰ Steve Arnold, “Tour the High-Drama Sets of *House of Cards*.”

⁶¹ Lawrence O’Donnell “The Dark Horse.”

⁶² John Fiske, *Television Culture*, 36.

Chapter 4 Crisis of Leadership, Continuity of Government

Do you understand that we live in a democracy with laws and rules and civil discourse?
— Olivia Pope, “One for the Dog,” *Scandal*

Let the Constitution do its job...I know it looks messy. Democracy's messy. But guess what? There is a method to that madness.
— Joe Scarborough, “Chapter 57,” *House of Cards*

As the fifth season of *Veep* begins (April 24, 2016), Selina Meyer, the titular VP of *Veep*, and her team must decide what to do in the aftermath of a presidential campaign that resulted in an electoral college tie on election night.¹ The team learns that the vote count in Nevada is close enough to trigger an automatic recount. Meyer originally lost the state, so the stakes are high. If Nevada's six electoral votes flip after the recount, she wins the presidency. When Meyer asks, “What do we do?” staffer Richard Splett confidently chimes in with details about the Nevada recount procedure: certification, requesting a recount, checking 5% of precincts, and a hand recount if necessary. The rest of the team stare at him agape, so he explains:

Richard Splett: I actually did my doctorate in recount procedures in the West.

Amy Brookheimer: You have a doctorate?

Richard Splett: Two. Constitutional law and veterinary medicine, which was my fallback.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, writers and showrunners operate under the assumption that American audiences have little-to-no civic knowledge, and therefore details need to be explained if they are central to the plot. *Veep* showrunner David Mandel told *The Hollywood Reporter* that when figuring out how to cover obscure points of election law, he had to be

creative about the “very boring stuff...By putting it in Richard’s mouth, we were able to get away with something without putting the audience to sleep.”²

In this final chapter, I turn my attention to that ‘boring stuff’ and the narratives it enables: crises of legitimacy and leadership. Over and over on *The West Wing*, *Commander in Chief*, *Veep*, *Scandal*, *House of Cards*, *Madam Secretary*, and *Designated Survivor* presidents and vice presidents are assassinated or resign; medical emergencies have constitutional impacts; and unusual or unforeseen circumstances set-off unprecedented, and often ahistorical, processes. Each program puts its own spin on these scenarios. Resignations in governance television can be due to scandal, ambition, or a need to take care of family. Personal animosity, complex conspiracy, and racism are all motivations for assassinations and attempted assassinations. Brain tumors and psychological counseling provoke doubt by the Cabinet, and electoral college ties and voting irregularities lead to intricate election results.

Although these television shows certainly include day-to-day issues of governance such as the challenges of working with Congress to pass legislation, international diplomacy and military conflicts, and responding to constituent needs, these crisis-of-leadership narratives deserve attention due to how far they depart from the historical record as detailed in the following sections. Each of the seven shows contains *at least* two of these scenarios, translating what should otherwise be extraordinary into a regular occurrence; within twenty years, two presidents die, three elections are decided by congressional votes, four presidents are shot, and five vice presidents resign. The repetition of these events speaks to larger ongoing public anxieties about institutional structure, rather than the policy decisions and agenda of any one administration. When these events do not fundamentally alter the structure of either the television show or the government it portrays, those anxieties are appeased.

In the face of almost thirty years of real-world presidents whose legitimacy was questioned, twenty years of governance television asserts the power of the founding documents and the law as bulwarks against institutional collapse. Two hundred years after the first peaceful transfer of American presidential power, these shows remind viewers that the Constitution is "sacredly obligatory upon all."³ By uplifting the Constitution to mythic status, governance television conflates democratic ideals with the procedural functioning of the American government.

In presenting these atypical transitions of power, governance television gives voice to increasingly salient twenty-first century social anxieties about the United States' political and governmental operations. That anxiety arises from a mix-and-match of contested issues from both sides of the political spectrum: the moral character of public leaders, increases in executive power following a terrorist attack, public lies by a presidential administration to justify a war, Congressional gridlock as a successful opposition strategy, and an escalating political culture of denying the individual and institutional legitimacy of leaders one does not support.

On governance television, these narrative crises are the "rudimentary expression" of anxieties about the social order that Fredric Jameson argues mass media must express before it can manage them.⁴ If these crises present anxieties about governmental collapse, then resolving these conflicts with constitutionally planned-for procedures alleviates that fear. What looks like disorder has been anticipated; what looks like catastrophe returns to calm. The 'very boring stuff' is not merely technical details to add realistic flavor to dramatic situations; instead, it is ideologically meaningful, affirming over and over that the Constitution will guide the way through these moments of democratic disorder, regardless of individual fitness.

It is worth noting that although these governance television shows repeatedly uplift constitutional procedure as the solution to uncertainty and repeatedly celebrate the significance of the first woman President of the United States, the combination of those factors results in a series of women who only become president through emergency circumstances or elections of questionable legitimacy.⁵ While not the focus of this chapter, the repeated iteration of this pattern suggests a woman becoming president is, in fact, one of those crises that must be solved with the Constitution. Through textual analysis of seven television shows focused on the executive branch, I argue that regardless of deserving or corrupt individuals gaining power, the gravity of ‘continuity of government’ pulls the ideology of governance television toward the stability of the status quo.

This chapter is not intended to comprehensively address every episode during which one or more of these procedures are mentioned or enacted. Rather, it is to emphasize governance television's repeated articulation of these orderly, technical, and, to most viewers, obscure systems. Thus, I organize this chapter neither chronologically by television show nor by categories of crisis. Instead, I emphasize how governance television invokes the procedural arcana that manage presidential transfers of power: Article II and the subsequent presidential Succession Acts, which establish the order of succession; the Twenty-fifth Amendment, which dictates executive appointments outside national elections and the temporary or permanent transfer of power in case of incapacity; and the Twelfth and Twentieth Amendment, which outline the procedures in the face of indeterminate election outcomes.

A Brief History of Modern Doubts in Presidential Legitimacy

Andrés Martínez writing in *The Washington Post* on the 2017 inauguration of Donald Trump, argued "he [Trump] will be our fourth consecutive leader to assume the office with a

segment of the electorate questioning his legitimacy. On that score, Trump doesn't represent a new crisis for American democracy but rather an escalation of one that's been building."⁶ David A. Graham extended the concern from not only acceptance of the president by the electorate, but also by the legislative branch. He emphasizes Trump's two immediate predecessors but acknowledges that one may have to reach back to 1992 "for a president unanimously accepted by Congress."⁷ Peter Beinart echoed the sentiment the following year writing in *The Atlantic* in response to the death of former President George H. W. Bush. "Bush was the last person to occupy the Oval Office whose opponents saw him as a fully legitimate president...Since then, every president has faced some sort of crisis of legitimacy."⁸ These men peg this crisis of legitimacy—and of democracy—back to the 1992 election. With each successive administration during the almost thirty years since, the grounds on which presidential legitimacy could and would be questioned expanded, escalating precipitously during the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

In the 1992 presidential contest between incumbent President George H. W. Bush and Governor of Arkansas William Jefferson Clinton, Clinton's win revealed that neither a lack of military service nor accusations of sexual misconduct nor receiving only 43% of the vote were disqualifiers for the presidency. During the presidential campaign, Representative Bob Dornan, an outspoken and extreme member of the Republican party called Clinton a “world-class womanizer” and a “draft-dodging philander,” and once Clinton held the office, he lobbed “illegitimate” at the president.⁹ His criticisms of Clinton included perceived character flaws rather than doubts about the legality or legitimacy of either of his elections. Dornan lost his bid for reelection in 1996 in the same election in which Clinton won a second term. However, his focus on flaws in Clinton’s character culminated two years later with the first impeachment trial

of a president in 130 years. What started as a criminal investigation into real estate investments resulted in an impeachment for charges of perjury and obstruction of justice regarding sex with an intern. In the years since, the legacy of Clinton's administration has been critiqued, for the most part, more on policy grounds and his centrist influence on the Democratic Party than on his personal failings.

The 2000 election made the issue of presidential legitimacy and institutional stability urgent and salient with the first election for over one hundred years to have differing outcomes between the popular vote and the electoral college. The *Bush v Gore* decision by the Supreme Court to stop the recount of votes in Florida undermined the idealistic claim that in a democracy all votes mattered equally. Indeed, Gallup made the question of legitimacy explicit by polling after the court decision: If George W. Bush is declared the winner and is inaugurated next January, would you accept him as the legitimate president, or not? To which 80% of interviewees responded that they would accept him as the legitimate president.¹⁰ However, after the inauguration when asked: Thinking about the circumstances surrounding last year's presidential election, which of the following describes your view of whether President Bush is a legitimate president? 73% of respondents accepted Bush as president, 15% said "they do not accept Bush as the legitimate president now, but might in the future," and 11% said "they will never accept Bush as the legitimate president."¹¹ In the same poll, half the surveyed public answered that Bush had stolen the election or won on a technicality. Unlike the questioning of Clinton on the grounds of his character, the divergent popular and electoral results and the intervention of the Supreme Court sparked questions regarding the legitimacy of the election process itself.

In addition to the tenuous election outcome, Bush's genial persona and malapropisms in the face of stronger-minded counselors such as Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Don Rumsfeld, and Senior Advisor Karl Rove undermined his image as a leader, as did policy and publicity failures such as declaring "Mission Accomplished" in 2003, eight years before the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, and his botched response to Hurricane Katrina. Pew Research reported in 2019, "Public trust [in the government in Washington always or most of the time] reached a three-decade high shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks but declined quickly thereafter. Since 2007, the share saying they can trust the government always or most of the time has not surpassed 30%."¹²

During the 2008 election, questions of legitimacy expanded to include racial identity. With Barack Obama receiving the Democratic party's nomination, what had previously been the domain of white men, now seemed open to a man of color. Obama's citizenship became a central factor of the 'birtherism' conspiracy theory during the election. Although this conspiracy claimed to be making a legal argument about the constitutional requirement of United States citizenship at birth to hold the presidency, the inconsistent application of this objection reveals its racist underpinnings.¹³ This election prompted the creation of the "Tea Party," a coalition opposing the Obama Administration policies while rhetorically modeling themselves off the historic Boston Tea party, itself an act questioning the legitimacy of British rule and taxation over the American colonies. Obama's legitimacy was also questioned because of his limited elected service at the national level with only three years in the Senate prior to the presidency.

Finally, the election of Donald Trump in 2016 brought together multiple previous questions of legitimacy--lack of military service, lack of previous elected office, sexual misconduct accusations--with additional concerns about temperament and character. Following

this election, in which the electoral college and popular vote outcomes once again diverged, Gallup again made legitimacy an explicit issue to poll. It asked: Now that Donald Trump has been declared the winner and will be inaugurated in January, will you accept him as the legitimate president, or not?¹⁴ In this poll, legitimacy is distinguished from both trust and approval.

That Gallup asked these questions about the 2000 and 2016 elections and not 1992, 1996, 2004, 2008, or 2012 demonstrates legitimacy's denotative link to legal or constitutional proceedings rather than other characteristics such as sexual propriety, military service, or race. This linkage aligns with Max Weber's three types of legitimate authority for leaders: traditional, charismatic, and legal.¹⁵ For Weber, traditional authority derives from inheritance, custom, or religious tradition. Charismatic authority is grounded in the traits of an individual and can be wielded by religious leaders, celebrities, and demagogues, as much as by traditional politicians; charismatic authority lives in the relationship between a leader and an audience. Although the modern political public relations apparatus revolves around manipulations of appearance to establish individual charm and popularity, increased exposure and the opportunity for mishaps as well as networks of counter-publics have made this type of authority more precarious. Legal authority is rooted in rationality, bureaucratic statutes and consistent legal structures and, for Weber, provides the basis for modern democratic leadership.

The founding of the United States as a democratic republic with elected representatives was a deliberate move away from the monarchy and inheritance system of Great Britain and has the built-in mechanism of separate-but-equal branches to theoretically reign in a demagogue should one gain power. Within governance television, the legal authority of the Constitution provides stability in the face of two overlapping circumstances: the legitimacy of the individual

(who is in office), which is dictated by the orders of succession and the Twenty-fifth Amendment, and the legitimacy of the institution (how they got to the office), which is outlined by the Twelfth and Twentieth Amendments.

One main story arc of the third season of *The West Wing* (2001-2002), is that President Bartlet concealed his diagnosis of relapsing/remitting multiple sclerosis during his first campaign. That secret is revealed to the public during his campaign for reelection. He is investigated by Congress and ultimately censured. This Congressional critique largely focuses on the idea of lying or fraud rather than legitimacy. In 2001, three years after an impeachment due to perjury, presidential lies about their private lives—a medical condition for Bartlet and sex for Clinton—were a source of anxiety. Seventeen years later, legitimacy replaced lying as the premiere source of anxiety. Season three of *Designated Survivor* (June 2019) begins with the aftermath of a poorly received State of the Union. Although we do not hear the whole speech, we see President Kirkman watching a replay. As he castigates both parties for being obstructionist, a man from the audience yells "Illegitimate" loudly enough to be caught on the camera. Kirkman replies during the speech, "'Illegitimate' is not an argument, sir."¹⁶ This fictional moment is a modification of Representative Joe Wilson interrupting President Obama by yelling "You lie" during the president's first address to a joint session of Congress in September 2009. Illegitimacy as political accusation reached its pinnacle at the conclusion of the 2020 election when the incumbent president vociferously questioned the integrity of the election processes with no evidence and refused to commit to a peaceful transfer of power. With political legitimacy becoming a more salient issue in the mid-1990s and through the first two decades of the twenty-first century, it is no surprise that governance television rehearsed many variations on this theme.

Order of Succession: From Presidents to Vice Presidents¹⁷

The Order of Succession is the clearest articulated example of anticipating a need at a potential moment of crisis. In the 230 years since the Constitution of the United States was adopted, the president and the vice president have headed the executive branch. As stated in Article II of the Constitution: "In Case of the Removal of the President from Office, or of his Death, Resignation, or Inability to discharge the Powers and Duties of the said Office, the Same shall devolve on the Vice President."¹⁸ As of December 2020, forty-four different people have held the job of president; forty-eight have filled the office of vice president. As a result of eight presidential deaths—four from assassination, four from illness—and one resignation, nine of those forty-eight vice presidents ascended to the presidency. Improved medical care and security procedures have decreased the frequency of executive branch deaths with the last vice-presidential death in 1912 (illness) and the last presidential death in 1963 (assassination).

The death of William Henry Harrison on April 4, 1841 provoked the first implementation of this section of this Article, and at the time there were multiple interpretations. Opponents to Vice President John Tyler interpreted 'the Same' as referring to the "Powers and Duties," while Tyler and his supporters interpreted it as referring to "said Office."¹⁹ While there were "fragments of debate" regarding succession during the drafting of the Constitution, this detail had not been clarified.²⁰ The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court refused to give an official interpretation.²¹ This conflict was the difference between the vice president becoming acting president until the next election or becoming president in full. As will be seen in the following section, this distinction between the temporary "acting" position and permanent change is relevant in fictional administrations as well. Two days after Harrison's death, Tyler took the presidential oath of office, and in the first cabinet meeting following Harrison's death, asserted

his place as the president. On April 9, 1841, he delivered an inaugural address, stating "for the first time in our history the person elected to the Vice-Presidency of the United States, by the happening of the contingency provided for in the Constitution, has had devolved upon him the Presidential office."²² Each of Tyler's actions—re-swearing the oath of office, assuming the lead in a cabinet meeting, and delivering an inaugural address—asserted that he was now the president, not due to individual ambition, but by mandate of the Constitution.

Although the battle over the correct title occurred mainly in newspapers," Congress also debated the issue of "president" vs "vice president, now exercising the office of the president."²³ The Wise Resolution largely ended the question as to whether vice presidents assume the office or merely the duties upon the death or resignation of the president; vice presidents become presidents in full. This procedure of office inheritance has been enacted for the ascensions of Millard Fillmore, Andrew Johnson, Chester A. Arthur, Theodore Roosevelt, Calvin Coolidge, Harry S. Truman, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Gerald Ford, as of 2020, the only person to become president without having been elected to either that office or the Vice Presidency.

On governance television, Article II succession guides both anticipated (through manipulation) and unanticipated ascensions. *Commander in Chief* (2005) grounds its premise in this procedure.²⁴ The pilot begins by introducing Vice President Mackenzie Allen on a trip to France. While at a choral performance, she is interrupted by Jim Gardner, the White House Chief of Staff, and Melanie Blackston, the US Attorney General, informing her that the president has had a stroke leading to major surgery and will need months of rehabilitation. They continue, "He's not gonna be in condition to stay in office. The Twenty-fifth Amendment would kick in. The vice president assumes the presidency."²⁵ Allen asks, "What happens now? Do I take the oath, or..." She trails off as Gardner and Blackston exchange a look:

Jim Gardner: We need you to resign, Mac.

Melanie Blackston: You see, if you resign, Nathan Templeton could move into office.

MacKenzie Allen: Oh, I know it would move Nathan Templeton into office. The question is why on earth would I want to move *this* Speaker of the House into office?

Gardner justifies this request for a resignation by pointing out that Allen is an Independent and not a Republican like the current president and Speaker of the House, and thus has different socioeconomic ideals. She makes no commitment as they leave to get on Airforce 2 and return to the United States. The show cuts to the title sequence. Within the first four minutes of the show's pilot, the dialogue has succinctly explained the procedure for a vice president taking on the presidency in the case of presidential incapacitation, as well as introduced the extended succession order; in the absence of a vice president, the Speaker of the House assumes the presidency.

Following the title sequence, the vice-presidential children unknowingly enact an abbreviated version of the historical congressional debates regarding the order of succession. Horace Calloway makes the constitutional argument: "You're next in line. That's the rule. That's the Constitution." Rebecca Calloway responds with concerns about administrative continuity: "I just think that people voted for what President Bridges believes in...you know, if you can't deliver, then maybe you should step aside." They are asking the essential question: which more legitimately captures the democratic ideal of representation through elections: continuity of an elected administration or continuity of an elected party?

The first Presidential Succession Act in 1792 expanded on Article II to place the Senate president pro tempore and the Speaker of the House after the vice president in the order of succession and "for the next ninety-four years... [they] were the only successors after the Vice President."²⁶ However, concern over vacancies in the Senate and the House rose throughout the 1880s along with concerns about a possible "political transfer of the administration when the

opposition party controlled Congress."²⁷ In other words, Congress was anxious over the possibility that there would be a presidential vacancy during a term of divided government, such that filling the vacancy would transfer power from one party to another. The Presidential Succession Act of 1886 removed the Congressional officers from the order of succession and substituted members of the executive cabinet. Neither the 1792 Act nor the Act of 1886 were ever implemented.

However, concern over the unelected nature of the cabinet positions and the ability for presidents to appoint their potential successors prompted yet another change to the Order of succession. The Presidential Succession Act of 1947 defined the order of succession as recognized today: Vice President, followed by the congressional officers, the Speaker of the House and the Senate President pro tempore, followed by cabinet members the secretary of state, secretary of the treasury, secretary of defense, and so on. The current succession structure repositions the Congressional officers before the cabinet Secretaries allowing for the possibility of a change in party with a change in executive branch leadership. *Commander in Chief* exploits this possibility for dramatic effect by having the vice president herself be of a different party from the president, rather than the Speaker of the House.²⁸ These continual adjustments to the order of succession signify Congress's attempts to balance the democratic value of electoral representation with the value of leadership experience and continuity of the elected party.

After he comes out of surgery, President Bridges, knowing that he will leave office, pushes Allen to resign because she does not share the same vision of America that he does. He tells her, slurring slightly, "I will not resign until you do." In response to a direct presidential request, Allen begins preparing her resignation speech. However, that same evening, Bridges dies in the hospital, officially making Allen the president. As the Chief Justice arrives at the vice-

presidential residency, so does Nathan Templeton, the Speaker of the House, who has previously been characterized as an extreme conservative, a “warmonger” who would “bring back book burning and put creationism in the classroom.” He attempts to persuade Allen to resign, but in so doing demonstrates he is a chauvinist as well, explaining that it was not the right time for a woman to be the leader of the free world and calling her selection as vice president a stunt.

It is these final declarations that confirm Allen’s decision not to resign. By contrasting Templeton’s biases and ambition with Allen’s disciplined humility, the show positions Allen as the legitimate new leader, both by procedure and by temperament. She requests the opportunity to address a joint session of Congress the following evening because “we wanna convince the world there's no crisis of leadership, right?” Exactly halfway through the pilot episode, Mackenzie Allen swears the oath affirming “I MacKenzie S. Allen...do solemnly swear...that I will faithfully execute the office of the President of the United States.” The episode goes to a commercial break abridging the complete oath. In her speech to Congress, Allen makes clear the distinction between the individuals who hold the office of the presidency and the institution itself, a sentiment that will be echoed by Claire Underwood on *House of Cards* over ten years later:

The White House was where President Bridges lived, but it was not his home. Nor is it my home now. It is the home of the presidency, the home of American democracy. And though President Bridges' agenda must be respected, my task is not to fulfill the legacy of a man. I have been entrusted with continuing the legacy of a nation and what is best in it. A nation whose magnificent and righteous history will govern its future...I promise to vigorously defend our Constitution.

Allen also fuses “American democracy,” an ideological system for governing, with “the presidency,” the head of the structure of the government that developed out of that belief system. While these are clearly entangled concepts, they are not identical; it is the Constitution (and the corpus of laws that sprang from it) that bridges the gap between beliefs and bureaucracy by

codifying ideals and values in procedure and regulation. Throughout the rest of the eighteen-episode series, various characters from within her family, her staff, and others question her suitability for the job of president. In each instance, the question is resolved by aligning the procedural legitimacy of Allen as president established in the first episode with her continued judicious, vigorous defense of the Constitution.

Whereas *Commander in Chief* performs the ascension of the vice president to the presidency due to presidential death, *Veep* and *House of Cards* use presidential resignation to trigger the same procedure. As addressed in chapter two, *Veep*'s profane, satirical comedy and *House of Cards*' corrupt, malevolent melodrama strike different tones from *Commander in Chief*'s air of dignified, righteous service. Narratively, the order of succession becomes a plot device to advance three very different stories. However, all three shows advance the ideological message that legitimacy is conferred through constitutional process, and democracy, embodied by the American federal government, continues whether or not the ascendant president is honorable, inept, or outright murderous.

One of the recurring jokes within the first two seasons of *Veep* is Selina Meyer's refrain "Did the president call?" which is met with a resounding "No" every time. Although she reveals through a tie-breaking Senate vote at the end of the first season that she is willing to sacrifice personal values and integrity to demonstrate that she is a 'team player,' this attempt to curry White House favor does not result in any more phone calls.²⁹ In the second season, the conflict between POTUS and VPOTUS intensifies as Meyer's approval rating marginally outstrips the president's. Tension between the two becomes so untenable that she will not be his running mate in 2016 and will instead compete for the nomination.

However, Meyer becomes president sooner than anticipated. In the penultimate episode of the third season, as she commits yet another PR disaster, Kent Davidson, a strategist for both Meyer and President Hughes, informs her that the president is resigning. The transition will take place in 48 hours. Meyer's response includes hysterical laughter before collapsing into an ambiguous, contemplative expression. When one of her aides asks, "Ma'am, are you okay?" Meyer replies flatly and with a grimace, "I'm gonna be the fucking president."³⁰ Despite *Veep* establishing Meyer as self-serving, utterly untrustworthy, and ricocheting from one PR disaster to another, the Constitution is clear: "In Case of...Resignation...the Same shall devolve on the Vice President."

In the final episode of the season, *Veep* makes humor out of the process of transferring power.³¹ President Hughes' resignation is off-screen; instead, the narrative jumps immediately to Sue, Meyer's personal secretary, explaining the procedure. She says, "The oath will take place tomorrow at 12:00 noon...You will then acquire the nuclear codes." In a small ceremony in the White House, Meyer places her left hand on the Bible and raises her right hand as requested. Repeating after the justice swearing her in, she states, "I, Selina Catherine Meyer, do solemnly swear...that I will faithfully execute...the office of President of the United States...and will to the best of my ability...preser--protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States...So help me God." This formal process for assuming executive authority is interrupted twice by what the closed captions call a "jingling" as Press-Secretary-To-Be Mike McClintock leans on a large glass lamp.

The following day the Speaker of the House insists that because of the interruption, Meyer missed saying the word "preserve" and needs to take the oath of office again. Until the constitutional procedure is executed exactly, Meyer's claim to the office of the presidency is

unstable. She is forced to conduct the swearing-in again while visiting a factory in New Hampshire. This episode narratively demonstrates that Meyer and team can fumble even the most important—and scripted—political events, and it mirrors the real-world 2009 swearing-in of President Obama. At that inauguration, Chief Justice John Roberts said "faithfully" out of order and Obama echoed his phrasing. Out of "an abundance of caution," they repeated the oath-taking process the following day.³² For Obama and Meyer, like John Tyler before them, the procedure of oath-swearing is an assertion of legal legitimacy and needed to be completed as an attempt to head off external doubt.

Unlike the surprise of Allen's ascendance in 2005 and Meyer's in 2014, Frank Underwood's in 2014 and Claire Underwood's advance three years later are the result of seasons-long manipulations and political strategy.³³ While the full machinations on *House of Cards* are too convoluted to detail here, the second season builds toward the impeachment proceedings of the current president, Garrett Walker. Frank, who maneuvered himself into an appointment as the vice president at the end of season one, works throughout the season with Raymond Tusk, a businessman Democratic donor and confidante of Walker's, to establish a back channel with China that gets more and more politically tangled. Along the way, an investigation into the China trade relationship expanded its purview and discovered that Tusk has been illegally channeling laundered foreign money to a Democratic Super PAC. This discovery leaves Tusk under threat of criminal conviction and jail concurrent to Walker's impeachment investigation.

"Chapter 26" opens with a House Judiciary Committee meeting interviewing Walker's former Chief of Staff, and then Frank being interviewed on *60 Minutes*.³⁴ Frank asserts his support for the president and his own patriotism stating, "I serve this nation and my president, not myself." The Netflix audience, with its behind-the-scenes view of Frank's transactions

throughout the season, recognizes the hypocrisy of Underwood's claim, one of many characteristics—including committing murder—that would make him unfit for office, if fitness—if legitimacy—were only determined by morality, temperament, values, or some combination of all three. Tusk's testimony will be the lynch pin in the impeachment hearings, and Walker and Frank compete for his support. As Frank and Tusk negotiate, Tusk tells Frank directly that it is "always better to offer something your competitor can't...The last time I read the Constitution, the most a vice president could offer was a...smile and wink." A resignation by Walker would make Frank president, giving him the power, per the Constitution, to pardon Tusk.

Tusk chooses to lie to the House of Representatives and blame Walker. In the final ten minutes of the episode Walker resigns under this pressure, making Frank Underwood the 46th President of the United States. As Walker concludes his announcement and walks away, Claire and Frank Underwood stand together in front of the crowd. An unseen man holds out a book, which Claire takes. The man says, "Sir, please raise your right hand and repeat after me. I Francis J. Underwood..." As Frank repeats his name and "do solemnly swear" the camera shot tilts from Frank's face and upraised hand to his left hand, resting on the bible. A jump cut to Frank walking into a room and being addressed as "Mr. President" abruptly interrupts the oath swearing. The episode concludes with Frank alone in the Oval Office. As the camera pushes closer on a slow zoom, the episode and the season cut to black.

In many ways, the murderous, manipulative character of Frank Underwood is the culmination of over a decade of public anxiety from all partisan directions about political actors motivated by power, rather than public service. Through the editing of both the resignation scene and Frank's assumption of power in the White House, the show acknowledges the transfer of power, but makes Frank's legitimacy ambiguous by not showing the completed oath. That

ambiguity comes to fruition forty episodes, an election campaign with an uncertain outcome, multiple love affairs, nefarious dealings, and more murders later. Frank Underwood steps down from the presidency without completing a full term.³⁵ Frank appears to do so under pressure from an investigation by the Declaration of War Committee, but reveals to Claire, his vice president, in the following episode,

Frank Underwood: Everything that has happened...was planned...Don't you see? I've designed this. I wanted you to be the president. I've made you the president.

Claire Underwood: Am I supposed to say thank you?"

Frank Underwood: No. But you will have to pardon me. Pardon me for all of my crimes. *As the president you're the only one who can.*³⁶

The normally unflappable Claire doesn't know what to think about Frank's orchestration of his own political downfall. As other characters jostle for position in the new White House, Frank continues to demand a pardon from Claire. He threatens to renege on his resignation, reminding Claire, "It isn't official until I submit a signed letter." Although he has publicly announced his resignation, he continues to have leverage until the proper and complete procedures have been followed. Claire agrees to pardon him after finding the "most strategic time and place." The shot cuts to a close-up of White House stationary with a letter reading, "Dear Madam Secretary [Secretary of State], I hereby resign the Office of the President of the United States." Frank signs his name, completing the resignation process.

Claire's swearing in is largely done in voice over, without the rhythmic repetition of a Chief Justice followed by the president. Her voice is heard as Doug Stamper, Frank's longtime fixer, leaves the White House. The shot only cuts to her with her left hand on a bible and right upraised as she says the words "and defend the Constitution of the United States. So, help me God." Whereas the show signified Frank's questionable legitimacy through editing, leaving his oath uncompleted, Claire Underwood articulates on-screen her dedication to the Constitution. Although Claire has the same murderous history as Frank, arguably her motives include service

than merely the accumulation of power. The statutes and procedures guiding the peaceful transfer of power confer legitimacy to the occupant of the office, irrespective of questions of moral or temperamental worthiness.

In both these sequences, Walker resigning and Frank Underwood becoming president and then Frank Underwood resigning and Claire Underwood becoming president, three constitutional procedures and powers intersect: impeachment, succession, and pardons. Emily Apter argues that “serial politics, like the political serial is...structured by the compulsion to repeat.”³⁷ *House of Card*'s compulsive narrative repetition either creates irony as Frank's presidency ends just as it began, or demonstrates screenwriters running low on unique government-based melodrama, or both. In either case, this pattern reinforces the distinction between individuals and institutions. Individuals cycle in and out of the presidency, but the Office of the President perseveres. Claire, echoing MacKenzie Allen's speech, explains, "We don't live in a home. We live in a house, borrowed and temporary." The individuals filling the office change, but the institution of the presidency continues uninterrupted. As Mark Usher, a political strategist tells Claire, "This is about continuity of government."

Order of Succession: From Presidents to...

Taken together, *Commander in Chief*, *Veep*, and *House of Cards* play out the scenarios when a president has been unable to discharge their duties due to death or resignation. However, presidents are not the only Executive Office holders vulnerable to death or disgrace. Seven vice presidents have died in office, and two have resigned. Prior to the ratification of the Twenty-fifth Amendment, there was no procedural mechanism to fill a vacant vice presidency. The first vice presidential mid-term appointment occurred in 1973 when Gerald Ford was appointed to fill the vacancy left by Spiro Agnew's resignation.

If the succession order only extended to the Vice Presidency, this would leave the government vulnerable during one of these vacancies. For this reason, Congress has ensured continuity through the extended, ordered list of Congresspeople and Secretaries to become president in emergency situations. How accepted this situation would be by the American public as a legitimate transfer of democratic authority is untested as this has never occurred in a real administration. It has, however, been explored by governance television.

Whereas the *Commander in Chief* pilot launched the show with the vice president becoming the president, the *Designated Survivor* pilot eleven years later launched the show with the secretary of housing and urban development becoming the president. The episode begins with white text overlaid on an aerial view of Washington, D.C.: "During the State of the Union, one cabinet member is taken to an undisclosed location. In the event of a catastrophic attack on our government, that cabinet member becomes our new president. They are known as the Designated Survivor."³⁸ Tom Kirkman, secretary of housing and urban development, watches a television monitor in a bunker. The television screen goes to static and a secret service detail rushes into the room. Kirkman opens a window to see an enormous plume of fire, erupting from the Capitol building where the State of the Union takes place. Kirkman, and his wife, Alex are hustled into a motorcade, during which his lead Secret Service agent, Mike Ritter, is notified about the situation.

Tom Kirkman: What is it?

Mike Ritter: It's confirmed. Eagle is gone. Congress, the Cabinet.

Alex Kirkman: Oh, oh, my God.

Mike Ritter: None of them made it. Yes, sir. I'll let him know. Mr. Secretary, we're enacting continuity of government. A D.C. appellate judge will meet us at the White House. Sir, you are now the President of the United States.

A flashback reveals that during the morning of the State of the Union, the president requested that Kirkman step away from his position as secretary of housing and urban

development to accept an ambassadorship, because they do not see eye-to-eye on policy. Kirkman is essentially fired and plans to submit his resignation the next day. Just like *Commander in Chief*, *Designated Survivor* sets in motion questions of individual legitimacy through a resignation request before the character assumes power. Continuity of government does not guarantee continuity of governing agenda.

While this question of legitimacy is a refrain the show returns to again and again throughout its three seasons—when a Michigan governor does not obey federal law, when the rest of the governors need to be convinced to support Kirkman as president, when leaked tapes of therapy sessions reveal PTSD-like symptoms after his wife's death, when his cabinet votes on the Twenty-fifth Amendment—the pilot episode does much of the work to assert Kirkman's procedural rights to be the president, as distinct from his character's fitness or charisma. Notably, of all the crisis scenarios across all seven shows, this is the only one showing a concerted attack on the American government as a whole, rather than assassination attempts as individual vendettas or resignations due to political manipulation.

After being rushed to the White House, Kirkman swears the oath of office and then is taken to an underground, high-tech situation room. In a pause, Kirkman excuses himself to a bathroom. Overwhelmed by panic and the enormity of the situation, he vomits. Seth Wright, a White House speechwriter, is also in the bathroom and begins a conversation without seeing with whom he is talking:

Seth Wright: Did you know President Richmond fired him [Kirkman] this morning? Now he's the president. He's the one the country's gonna be turning to in our darkest hour.

Tom Kirkman: Well, maybe he'll surprise you.

Seth Wright: Yeah, you mean maybe he'll realize he has no business running the country? That he should just step aside, maybe let one of the generals take over or the CIA director, somebody who actually knows what the hell they're doing? Fat chance of that happening. Nobody around here ever gives up power. Kirkland's a follower;

we need a leader. I'm telling you, man, I got half a mind to make a run to Canada. You know what I'm saying?

Wright explicitly criticizes Kirkman's appropriateness to be president on both procedural grounds, the morning firing, and on character grounds, the difference between a follower and a leader. Although Kirkman doubts himself, when faced with others' needs for stability, he steps into the role of leader. That confidence, however much a performance, has influence over

Wright. Later in the episode, another staffer doubts Kirkman's capabilities.

Nikki (a staffer): This is insane. Guy's never been elected to anything. He ran HUD. They find affordable homes for people, which makes Kirkman a glorified real-estate agent.

Unnamed Staffer: He was next in the line of succession.

Nikki: I'm sorry, but no one could have foreseen this.

Wright: Why the hell do you think there's a designated survivor, Nikki? Because this was foreseen.

Wright silences Nikki's objection with an allusion to the order of succession. The answer to the insanity of a catastrophe is to turn to Constitution for guidance.

This episode was produced during the fractious campaign season of the 2016 presidential election and aired in September 2016. Nikki, a fictional White House staffer, gives voice to the real-world heightened anxiety felt on both sides of the partisan divide: that an illegitimate person would become president, where illegitimacy polysemically becomes a stand-in for evaluations of temperament, job experience, political party, policy agenda, gender, age, or all of the above. The unelected career history that Nikki refers to echoes the congressional debates over the various orders of succession and the public debates after the popular-electoral college result split of the 2000 presidential election. Reviewing *Designated Survivor* for *Variety*, Sonia Saraiya wrote that *Designated Survivor* “creates a stunningly symbolic representation of the hopes and fears of the American electorate in 2016. As usual, Kiefer Sutherland has found himself in a role that has its finger on the pulse of a zeitgeist.”³⁹ Two months after this premiere, divergent results in the

popular vote and the electoral college and allegations of election interference by other countries during the 2016 election demonstrated that this anxiety was not unfounded. However, on *Designated Survivor*, at least, these anxieties were managed by the American government continuing to churn. In the event of a catastrophe, the designated survivor becomes the president; in the event of an election, the electoral college winner does the same.

The Twenty-Fifth Amendment: Questioning Individual Legitimacy

Of the different constitutional procedures explored in governance television, the Twenty-fifth Amendment may be the most dramatic and is certainly the most commonly dramatized. At the time of John F. Kennedy's death there was no mechanism to fill a vice presidential vacancy. Lyndon Johnson had previously had a heart attack, so his ascension to the presidency introduced the plausible possibility of a president dying with no vice president in place. The Twenty-fifth Amendment was ratified in 1967 as a solution to that hazard. Unlike the Presidential Succession Acts, which simply list the progression of ascension, the Twenty-fifth Amendment is the recourse for uncertain times.

The four sections of the Amendment codify the procedure first enacted at the death of William Henry Harrison and expanded the directives for emergency transfers of power. The first section of the Amendment declares and that "in case of the removal of the President from office or of his death or resignation, the Vice President shall become President."⁴⁰ This section outlines the standard successions. The second section allows for the nomination and confirmation of a vice president when there is a vacancy in that role. Until the adoption of the Twenty-fifth Amendment, the vice presidency had been left vacant on sixteen separate occasions, and at times for almost a complete four-year term. Some shows play out the research and vetting process as well as the political decision making that goes into the vice-presidential choice but few attribute

this procedure to the Twenty-fifth Amendment by name. Despite this Amendment only having been used historically twice with the appointment of Gerald Ford following the resignation of Spiro Agnew and the appointment of Nelson Rockefeller following Ford becoming president upon Nixon's resignation, the Vice Presidency as a refillable post is taken for granted by governance television shows.⁴¹ More than any other process, the rotating door portrayal of the vice presidency affirms the constancy of the institution over the importance of any one individual.

The third section of the Twenty-fifth Amendment outlines the temporary transfer of power. The president can indicate that they are unable to "discharge the powers and duties of the office" by submitting a written declaration to the President pro tempore of the Senate and the Speaker of the House.⁴² The Vice President becomes Acting President until a second written declaration by the President is submitted, reclaiming the office. Since ratification, this section has been used three times, in the Reagan and George W. Bush administrations, all in planned medical procedures.⁴³ Section 4, which has never been invoked, allows for "the Vice President and a majority of either the principal officers of the executive departments or of such other body as Congress may by law provide, transmit to the President pro tempore of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives their written declaration that the President is unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office."⁴⁴ Through section 4, the president also has a recourse to return to the office by submitting a "his written declaration that no inability exists."⁴⁵ This declaration can be contested by the Cabinet, and the question of ability or inability would be determined by Congress.

Together, these are the relevant constitutional sections for any emergency event that temporarily takes the president out of the action from emergency surgery to unsuccessful, but

wounding, assassination attempts. Unlike the permanent, involuntary change dictated by section one, section 3 of the Twenty-fifth Amendment outlines a temporary, and theoretically voluntary, change in leadership, while section four is an involuntary removal by the Cabinet, with a mechanism for the president to contest. In both situations, the Vice president—or whomever is next in the line of succession—becomes the acting president. The temporary nature of this leadership invites anxiety over the legitimacy of any decision making. Can the temporary occupant change foreign affairs directives or actively oppose political initiatives? What happens when the elected occupant returns at the conclusion of the emergency? Will the acting president give up the highest office in the country once the elected leader is ready to resume?

The relevance of sections three and four of the Twenty-fifth Amendment has played out during assassination attempts on *The West Wing*, *House of Cards*, *Scandal*, and *Designated Survivor* and a medical emergency on *Commander in Chief*—the story that most closely resembles the historical experience of presidents temporarily transferring power for medical necessities. Separately, *The West Wing*, *Madam Secretary*, and *Designated Survivor* all explore the question of mental incapacity rather than the physical incapacity of a gunshot wound or appendicitis. Both *West Wing* and *Commander in Chief* add to their scenarios the twist of a vice presidential vacancy. Finally, *Madam Secretary* takes an almost lighthearted approach to this transfer of power with a series of coincidences that put Secretary of State Elizabeth McCord in the position of acting president for a day. Although each of these scenarios can rightly be termed an emergency for the health and safety of the individual president, the detailed bureaucratic procedures of the Twenty-fifth Amendment make clear that the institution is in no danger. As long as votes are correctly taken and letters are appropriately signed, government will continue to function.

Medical Emergencies

Each program approaches the transfer of power in the aftermath of an assassination attempt differently. All four presidents—Kirkman, Underwood, Grant, and Bartlet, respectively—are wounded by gunshots. Collectively, they depict the range of potential scenarios from orderly to uncertain: a conscious president who can deliberately transfer power (*Designated Survivor*), an injured president, but a fast-acting Cabinet (*House of Cards*), a contested and extended transfer of power (*Scandal*), and a bumbled procedure (*The West Wing*).

On *Designated Survivor*, Kirkman survives a gunshot but is informed by the doctor that he needs surgery to remove any remaining fragments. He tells his team, “I’ll be under general anesthetic for at least three hours. What’s the protocol for that?” Chief of Staff Aaron Shore responds, “If you’re unconscious, that means you’ll be incapable to discharge your duties as president. So, we’ll have to invoke the Twenty-fifth Amendment.” Shore’s language of incapacity and discharging duties almost directly quotes the formal language of the Amendment. Kirkman follows up, “Okay, how do we do that?” Aaron continues to explain out the procedure for Kirkman—and for the *Designated Survivor* audience: “We’ll notify the Speaker of House and the president pro temp of the Senate through a signed and written statement that you’ll be temporarily vacating the office.” Just as *Designated Survivor*’s pilot communicated the procedure and rationale for a designated survivor during the State of the Union, this dialogue fills in more esoteric details of temporarily transferring power.

If these explanations were not thorough enough, the next scene features a press conference during which Seth Wright provides historical references. “Just a reminder, the 25th Amendment has been invoked several times in the past. Both Presidents Reagan and Bush 43 temporarily transferred power to their vice presidents, so this is not unprecedented.” Repeatedly,

Designated Survivor reminds viewers that the Constitution provides the directions for this transfer of power and that there are precedents to follow.

After a few questions from the press, Wright adds that Kirkman will be speaking to new Vice President Peter MacLeish before going into surgery. The audience knows that MacLeish is a part of the larger conspiracy of the season, and Kirkman suspects as much but does not have confirmation. In a subsequent scene, Kirkman advises the Speaker of the House to keep an eye on MacLeish to “make sure he’s working in the country’s best interests, not his own.” Although Kirkman knows MacLeish is not a trustworthy candidate for the office, he also recognizes that the Constitutional Amendment dictates the process and personnel. A surgical complication leads to a tense moment, but by the end of the episode Kirkman has no permanent damage. At yet another press conference Wright is asked if the Twenty-fifth Amendment had been revoked, and he informs the press corps that “as soon as the president was able to reach Speaker Hookstraten and the Senate pro temp, he resumed his duties as commander in chief.”⁴⁶ Ironically, of all the shows analyzed, *Designated Survivor*, a governance show with half the DNA of a conspiracy thriller does the most to assert the orderliness of a transition under the Twenty-fifth Amendment and a return to the rightful, legitimate leader by the episode’s end.

Rather than referencing the precedents of Reagan’s and H.W. Bush’s transfers of power, *House of Cards* contextualizes its attempted assassination through the ambiguous lens of either Reagan or J.F.K. During “Chapter 43” Frank Underwood is shot while working a rope line at a campaign event. His injury is more severe than Kirkman’s—a gunshot to the abdomen rather than the shoulder. A report by a news broadcaster acts as narration over shots of Frank on a gurney and other reactions to the assassination attempt. The broadcaster explains,

We’ve gotten no official statement from the White House as of yet, either the president’s precise condition or the whereabouts of Vice President Blythe. He is believed to be at the

White House. We cannot confirm that, nor do we know if he will take over as acting president, assuming the duties of the presidency under the terms of the Twenty-fifth Amendment to the Constitution. That would seem likely, however, if the president's wounds are as serious as we believe them to be. This is a difficult moment for the country. It is not the first time that a president has been shot in my lifetime or in many of yours. But even for those of us who have experienced this before, it is no less of a shock, it is no less terrifying. It is the moment when our nation's resilience, when our collective strength, the moment when all of that is tested the most.⁴⁷

Without commenting on the apparent older age of the broadcaster, that “time...a president has been shot in my lifetime” could either refer to Ronald Reagan’s wounding by John Hinkley Jr. in 1981 or John F. Kennedy’s assassination by Lee Harvey Oswald in 1963.

The Twenty-fifth Amendment is not only likely in this scenario; section 4 means it is the recourse for an incapacitated president. As Claire flies back to Washington, Vice President Blythe enters a room with the Cabinet. He seems in shock, and a staffer must direct him to the correct chair, the seat reserved for the president. His first action upon sitting is to sign a letter contained in a leather folder. Although the camera does not show the details of the letter, the next line of spoken dialogue refers to Blythe as the “acting president,” suggesting that this letter is the written declaration from the majority of principal officers needed to remove a president from office. In the next scene, the press secretary confirms that “At 12:38 this afternoon, Vice President Donald Blythe was authorized as acting president by the cabinet.” Three episodes, a power struggle with Russia and China, a manipulated organ donor list, and a liver transplant later, Frank Underwood returns to the presidency.

Scandal ups the ante on incapacitating wounds with President Fitzgerald Grant receiving a brain injury when he is shot in “Happy Birthday, Mr. President.” He goes straight into surgery. Although this seems like a clear-cut moment of presidential incapacity and the need to enact section 4 of the Twenty-fifth, *Scandal*, true to its name, draws out this process. Sally Langston,

Grant's vice president asserts that she is in charge. White House Chief of Staff Cyrus Beene, in a signature Shonda Rhimes monologue, shouts her down:

Have you read the whole Constitution, or did you stop in rapture after the second amendment? Allow me to summarize the Twenty-fifth amendment for you. In the case of the removal of the president from office or of his death or resignation, the vice president shall become president. Since none of these things have happened, the only way you're president is if the president himself signs power over to you, or you gather the signatures of the Cabinet.... Now you can walk out, or they [security] can carry you out. And it makes no difference to them, because guess what, they serve at the pleasure of the president, and you are not the president.⁴⁸

Whereas Aaron Shore on *Designated Survivor* described the process in formal terminology, Beene offers a description accessible to a layperson, including differentiating section 3 and the voluntary transfer of power from section 4, which relies on the signatures of the Cabinet to enact the involuntary transfer of power. Beginning his rant with an appeal to the Constitution positions this document as the idealized guiding principle, even for—or perhaps mostly for—assertively ambitious political actors.

Beene sustains this gap in leadership for only so long. Langston is lobbying Cabinet members for their support, and “All she needs is a majority eight signatures, and she's home. She's two away.”⁴⁹ Fitzgerald's team attempts to hold off pressure with a public speech asserting a “living president,” and Beene suggests, “Even with the cabinet members' votes, there might still be a way to avoid this... We find any technicalities, even small ones, exploit them to their fullest.” Their efforts fail, and by the end of the episode Sally Langston is sworn in as acting president. This swearing in ceremony belies the difference between an acting president and a president that John Tyler worked so firmly to establish.

Scandal intercuts the swearing in with news coverage of the event. As Langston pledges to protect and defend the Constitution, the broadcaster informs both his viewers and *Scandal's* that “President Sally Langston makes history today as not only the first president to take office

under section 4 of the Twenty-fifth amendment, but also as the first female Commander in Chief...The president remains in ... And I call him "President" because technically, he is still president as well, President Grant remains in critical condition.” As Grant lies unconscious, Langston gathered the necessary signatures and became acting president. The repeated mention of technicalities, first by Beene and then by the broadcasters, emphasizes how integral these technicalities are to the workings of the federal government. The functioning procedure of the Twenty-fifth Amendment is not a technical detail such as badge color or flag placement, as mentioned by the consultants in the previous chapter. Instead, these technicalities are essential to what makes television set within government, governance television.

On *Scandal*, unlike both *Designated Survivor* and *House of Cards*, the second part of section 4—the written declaration that allows a president to return to the office—becomes a central plot element. Cyrus Beene, Olivia Pope, and Mellie Grant fear that Langston is consolidating power, which will make Fitz’s reinstatement more difficult. The camera shows a close-up of a letter being signed. The letter is addressed to the Speaker of the House and to the President Pro Tempore of the Senate and, although only pieces of it are legible including “Due to an incapacity” and “Further provisions of section four,” it clearly refers to the Twenty-fifth Amendment. The signatory is Fitzgerald Thomas Grant III. When Olivia Pope sees Fitz still unconscious, she confronts Mellie and Cyrus about the letter. Mellie confesses to writing it. Pope explodes: “It is absolutely the worst. It's a federal crime. It's treason. Forging the president's signature on a letter of reinstatement when he's not even conscious is...Do you understand that we live in a democracy with laws and rules and civil discourse?” Like Allen’s speech on *Commander in Chief*, Pope’s outburst reveals the show’s, and governance television’s more broadly, conceptual entanglement of democratic ideals and principles with laws and procedure.

Mellie reinforces this conflation with her response, “So I wrote a letter and I signed it. I broke the law, I broke the Constitution, and I would do it again.” Mellie’s action was both illegal—breaking the law—and illegitimate—breaking the Constitution.⁵⁰

Langston suspects the forgery but is leery of “seeming like a power-grabbing opportunist” if she publicly challenges the reinstatement letter. Instead, she starts a whisper campaign and threatens Mellie with handwriting analysis, which would be evidence of the falsity. In the following episode, Langston calls a meeting of the Cabinet to reveal the forgery, but Grant walks into the meeting to demonstrate his competency. Still weak from his injuries, he explains to Mellie, “Until Sally Langston puts a letter on my desk accepting my reinstatement, I have everything to prove.”⁵¹ After Grant gives a successful and inspiring press conference, Langston offers him “a copy of my letter accepting your reinstatement.” With this final exchange of letters, the constitutional procedure has been fulfilled, political status quo returned, and legitimacy reestablished.

Finally, *The West Wing*, the first produced of the examples here, presents the opposite scenario. If *Scandal* had too many letters, too early, *West Wing* has too few, too late. The first season of the show ends in “What Kind of Day Has It Been?” with a secret service agent saying, “We’ve got people down. People down, people down! Who’s been hit? Who’s been hit?” after shots are fired at President Bartlet and his team. The season two opener, “In the Shadow of Two Gunmen” is one of the show’s few multi-part episodes and earned its director, Thomas (Tommy) Schlamme, an Emmy award for Outstanding Directing for a Drama Series. Like *Scandal*, *The West Wing* combines the aftermath of a shooting with campaign flashbacks. But *The West Wing*’s variation on that pattern is to acknowledge failures in procedure.

When the shooting occurs, President Bartlet is rushed into a car by his head Secret Service agent. The agent sees the president bleeding, and the car turns and races to George Washington Hospital. Although Bartlet is conscious and delays going under anesthesia and into surgery long enough for the First Lady, a licensed medical doctor, to inform his surgeon of his relapsing, remitting MS, unlike Kirkman, he does not sign a letter and set in motion the transfer of power via section 3. A reporter and member of the White House press corps, Danny Concannon, notices this lack in the post-shooting briefing. He asks C.J. Cregg, the press secretary, privately, "The president's under anesthesia. He'll probably be on a morphine drip in post-op. Without the Twenty-fifth, who's in charge?" She answers, likely still in shock, "The vice president, the secretary of state, the national security advisor, the secretary of defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs." Concannon cannot accept this flippant response. "You just named six people. Who's in charge?" Cregg asks for some time to follow-up. This informs Cregg and the audience that there was a procedure to be enacted.

In the immediate next scene, Nancy McNally, the National Security Advisor, advocates to Leo McGarry, Chief of Staff, that they should raise the defense level. Another aide adds, "In which case, the vice president should order the 32nd Tactical on ready-alert and take us to DEFCON 4." The scene continues:

Leo McGarry: Council's office isn't sure he [the vice president] can.

Toby Ziegler: Why not?

Leo McGarry: He [President Bartlet] never signed the letter.

Toby Ziegler: What letter?

Nancy McNally: Customarily, if the president's going to be under a general anesthetic...

Toby Ziegler: He's got to sign a letter giving the vice president power?

Nancy McNally: Absent the Twenty-fifth, the Constitution doesn't give it to him unless the president's dead.

Toby Ziegler: He's hemorrhaging, and he's supposed to draft a memo?

Nancy McNally: Yeah!

C.J. Cregg: I'm getting questions from Danny Concannon on it.

Nancy McNally: It gets more complicated if you'd read Section 202 of the National Security Act of 1947.

C.J. Cregg: Let's assume I haven't.

Nancy McNally: It says that the secretary of defense will be principal assistant to the president on matters relating to the national security.

C.J. Cregg: What does "principal assistant" mean?

Nancy McNally: It doesn't specify.

Toby Ziegler: No, it wouldn't, because this is an area of federal law where you'd want as much ambiguity as possible.⁵²

This question of the missing letter and who was in charge continues into “In the Shadow of Two Gunmen: Part II.” Concannon keeps pressing the question: “Who was in charge? For the three and a half hours the president was under anesthesia.” McGarry revisits the situation with his senior assistant, Margaret Hooper, explaining the circumstances to the audience, once again:

Margaret Hooper: He was supposed to sign a letter?

Leo McGarry: If the president is going under general anesthesia, he usually signs a letter handing over executive powers to the vice president.

Margaret Hooper: And the president didn't sign a letter.

Leo McGarry: Nope. We blew that play.

Margaret Hooper: Is there going to be trouble?

Leo McGarry: We'll see. To be honest with you, I don't really care right now.

Margaret also informs McGarry that she can imitate the president's signature well. Unlike *Scandal*, which allows Mellie's fake to stand, converting illegality into legitimacy under the auspices of constitutional process, *The West Wing* definitively maintains that forging the president's signature is a bad idea.

As the perceived possibility of political illegitimacy in the real world increased, so did the procedural legitimacy even in the face of crisis in the fictional worlds. Whereas the later shows all play out letter submissions and signatures that return an administration to order after a crisis, these *West Wing* episodes from 2000—before the 2000 election with its divergent results and Supreme Court intervention, before the divisive Iraq and Afghanistan Wars in response to the 9/11 attacks, before lies about WMDs and American deaths due to the failures of FEMA in response to Hurricane Katrina, before the sharp increase of partisanship, anti-partisanship, and

polarization of the 2010s—perform disorder and ambiguity without a clean constitutional resolution.

The West Wing presents this flawed procedure as a narrative companion to the campaign flashbacks, which show Bartlet's original rise to presidential power. *The West Wing* manages anxiety over illegitimate political leadership by continually affirming that Bartlet is “the real thing” and “a good man,” even when his administration makes a constitutional misstep. In many ways this is the opposite of *House of Cards*, which followed constitutional procedure reasonably correctly, but in doing so allows a corrupt character to retain power. That both scenarios result in the continued functioning of the American government—as does Mellie's forgery, Meyer's fumbling, and MacLeish's conspiring—signifies that an individual's temperament may be momentarily relevant, but it is the bureaucratic procedure, the exchange of letters, that holds the institution together.

Life threatening gunshot wounds are not the only form of physical infirmity, and in the scenario most closely resembling the historical uses of section 3 of the Twenty-fifth Amendment, fifteen episodes after she became president, Mackenzie Allen falls ill while flying to California on *Commander in Chief*.⁵³ This is technically the second presidential disability on the show, with the first being the aneurysm and stroke experienced by her predecessor. Air Force One makes an emergency landing, and the White House staff and Allen's family learn that she has acute appendicitis. She needs surgery imminently, and before allowing the surgery to proceed, Allen makes clear to all that “We're invoking the Twenty-fifth Amendment.” Throughout the season Allen has had a tense and antagonistic relationship with ambitious, chauvinistic Nathan Templeton, the Speaker of the House, who is next in line to become acting president, because Allen's vice president, Warren Keaton, resigned in the previous episode. Allen's press secretary

underlines this point by telling the press, “The Constitution dictates a line of succession, which will be followed.” However, Allen and her team presume that Templeton will not want the role because it would require him to resign from his voting position in the Senate. However, Templeton accepts the position despite the requisite resignation, and he serves for the rest of the day and overnight as Allen goes into surgery and recovery.

Vice President Blythe on *House of Cards* who describes the challenge of being acting president while Frank was incapacitated as “When I had to take over, the stress, the responsibility...Two weeks as president was about as much as I can handle” and Vice President Langston on *Scandal* who says, “The truth is, your [Fitzgerald Grant] getting shot was the scariest thing that ever happened to me. I haven't slept a night during this whole time. It is not easy being president.” Templeton, on the other hand, describes being acting president as “With the singular exception of our [Templeton and his wife] wedding day, it was the best day of my life.”⁵⁴ Two temporary presidents treat the office with humility, one with eager desire; the Twenty-fifth Amendment has no concern for the temperament of the politician as long as procedure has been legitimately followed.

Mental Inability

Bartlet’s team may have failed to handle the Twenty-fifth Amendment correctly in “In the Shadow of Two Gunmen,” (October 4, 2000) but they got a second chance two seasons later in “Twenty-Five” (May 14, 2003).⁵⁵ A personal tragedy and national security threat, the kidnapping of the president’s youngest daughter, results in a Speaker of the House assuming the presidency. Zoey Bartlet is abducted from a nightclub while celebrating her college graduation. When President Bartlet is told, he is understandably shaken and cannot focus on meetings or decisions. In what Will Bailey, Deputy White House Communications Director, describes as “a

fairly stunning act of patriotism and a fairly ordinary act of fatherhood,” Bartlet decides to step aside for the duration of the crisis. In the last 10 minutes of the episode, he reads his letter to the Cabinet:

Availing myself of the constitutional option offered to this office by Section Three of the Twenty-fifth Amendment, which permits, through written declaration, to temporarily transfer all powers of the presidency to the next in the constitutional line of succession...The article doesn't require the unanimous consent of the Cabinet, but I want it. I want it as clear as can be that this administration stands squarely behind and shoulder to shoulder with the acting president.

Bartlet gets the unanimous consent he requested. This scenario tests the abstraction of ‘inability to discharge duties.’ Rather than the physical incapacity of a gunshot wound or surgery, *The West Wing* proposes that mental disability is also a reasonable and legitimate reason to invoke the Twenty-fifth Amendment.

However, as in the *Commander in Chief* scenario, there is no vice president, because Vice President Hoynes had resigned two episodes earlier.⁵⁶ Instead, the Speaker of the House Glen Walken is called to the White House to assume the role. Like Templeton, he, too must resign his position, because “it's against the law to work for two branches of government at the same time.” And like Templeton, he is from a different party than the president. Will Bailey offers Walken a piece of paper to use as a resignation letter and witnesses the signature, making the action legally recognized.

The cabinet and staff voice anxieties regarding the potential for two simultaneous, opposing leaders, both with apparently legitimate claims to the office. With Walken's resignation, Bartlet explains to the Cabinet members, the staff, and the justice in the room that he's “got two letters. One removing me from power—the other reinstating me. I'll sign the first, and then the justice will swear in the Speaker, and I think Leo's right. The first thing is, how do we announce this?” C.J. Cregg responds, “Well, the president and the Speaker have to make it

clear to the country that there's someone in charge.” This episode does not allow for ambiguity or doubt about who is in charge unlike “In the Shadow of Two Gunmen” two and a half years earlier. Bartlet signs his letter, and Walken is sworn in, serving as acting president for approximately forty-four hours and two episodes, before Zoey is found and Bartlet reassumes the presidency. Procedure is followed by the letter, and legitimate leadership is secured.

Like *The West Wing*, *Designated Survivor* and *Madam Secretary*, in its second invocation of the Twenty-fifth Amendment, explore the unprecedented application of the Twenty-fifth Amendment to mental infirmity, rather than physical.⁵⁷ Following the attack on the Capitol in season 1 that put him in office and the death of his wife earlier in season 2, President Tom Kirkman has been discretely talking to a therapist. In “Kirkman Agonistes” recorded session notes of his confidential therapy are leaked publicly, with his therapist saying (to himself) that Kirkman’s anxiety and depression following the tragic events had potentially led to a variant of post-traumatic stress disorder. He also mentions “decisional incapacity.” This leak leads to public criticism and speculation that Kirkman cannot do the job of president.

When his staff tries to find members of the Cabinet to offer public support, Lyor Boone, the White House Political Director, learns that “the cabinet's been meeting with Vice President Darby all morning.” Boone is confused before abruptly understanding. He runs through the halls of the west wing, gathering other senior staff members along the way to the Oval Office. When Kirkman asks, “What’s going on?” Emily Rhodes replies, “A coup, sir. You need to speak to the vice president right now.” Boone’s realization is that the only reason the whole Cabinet would be meeting with the vice president would be for Twenty-fifth Amendment action.

In the next scene, Vice President Ellenor Darby explains that the majority of the Cabinet voted to have Kirkman removed. “They’re invoking the Twenty-fifth Amendment, section 4.”

Kirkman's legal counsel explains that section 4 allows for the ousting of the president on the basis of mental incapacity. Darby explains that the tapes "raise justifiable concerns about [his] decision-making since [his] wife's death." The scene continues:

Ellenor Darby: We've drafted a letter to Congress. Upon its delivery, you will be removed from office.

Tom Kirkman: And then you will become president.

Ellenor Darby: Yes, sir.

Tom Kirkman: Then why in the hell are we having this discussion?

Emily Rhodes: You haven't signed the letter yet, have you ma'am?

Ellenor Darby: No.

Emily Rhodes: And the cabinet's vote remains unratified until you do.

Ellenor Darby: Yes. I wanted to speak to you first.

Tom Kirkman: The time to speak to me was before the cabinet convened. And you damn well know it!

Ellenor Darby: I could not do that, sir. The process demands secrecy.

Tom Kirkman: Once it's in motion, yes. But not before.⁵⁸

Darby offers Kirkman the possibility of proving his mental competency through the investigation of an independent legal expert. Until the letter is signed, the removal procedure cannot continue.

The following episode features a 'trial' before the Cabinet regarding Kirkman's mental state. Various witnesses testify to moments from earlier in the series, and the odds seemed stacked against Kirkman. When he finally testifies on his own behalf, he questions why he is fighting for a position he never wanted. He explains, "I believe the presidency is more important than a single person...I'm fighting for what I believe is the integrity of the presidency. Because I have heard absolutely nothing here today that would warrant or justify the removal of someone, anyone, from this great office. It's that simple."⁵⁹ This speech turns out to be persuasive. Vice President Darby informs Kirkman that "the majority of the Cabinet wishes [for him] to continue in [his] capacity of president." This is just one of many moments during the series when Kirkman's legitimacy is questioned, challenged, and reaffirmed through the alignment of righteous temperament and procedure. The letter remains unsigned.

The West Wing and *Designated Survivor* suggest that leadership incapacity could be due to being distraught, distracted, or depressed. *Madam Secretary* takes on a different type of emotional turmoil: aggression. President Conrad Dalton responds to a sonic attack on a U.S. Embassy in Bulgaria by threatening military force against Russia. There is no evidence that Russia is behind the attack, and Dalton's rashness is uncharacteristic for the thoughtful man who was once the leader of the CIA. Even when evidence shows that the sonic event was an accidental cross between a Russian listening device and the Embassy's encryption, Dalton will not change his mind.

The Cabinet votes to invoke the Twenty-fifth, albeit with some dissenters. Secretary of State Elizabeth McCord offers Dalton another option; "Invoke Section 3, which is temporary, and we won't send the letter to Congress. All you have to do is submit to a full examination and treatment if...appropriate. And once it's determined that you're better, you can be reinstated." White House Chief of Staff Russell Jackson echoes her statement, "Agree and we don't send the letter. Otherwise, Congress votes on Section 4 tomorrow." Although the Cabinet voted internally on section 4, that vote is not made official until the letter is submitted. This suggested shift in sections has the same impact of making the vice president the acting president but changes the action from the forced removal of the 4th to the voluntary, presumed temporary stepping aside of the 3rd. When an operable, benign brain tumor is discovered, and Dalton is given steroids to reduce swelling, he can now assess his own actions through a more reflexive lens. Section 4 is an uncompleted threat. The episode concludes with Dalton gives a press conference explaining the situation:

Acting president Teresa Hurst will continue to provide steady, experienced leadership...When I have passed extensive medical tests and the doctors say I'm 100% ready, only then will I be reinstated under Section 3 of the Twenty-fifth Amendment. Finally, I'd like to pay tribute to the resiliency of our Constitution, a 230-year-old

document that has endured the challenges of every stage of our nation's journey. Our government is built on an ingenious foundation of principles and laws, and though the people within that system are fallible, the system itself is devised to withstand anything, even an unfit president.⁶⁰

This speech articulates the stability of the institution, even when the individual falters. It also asserts that when the system is working—following the process of the Constitution—democracy is working.

A Coincidence of a Medical Emergency, Contact Emergency, and Mental Inability

Finally, in the most lighthearted exploration of the Twenty-fifth Amendment, in the first episode of the second season of *Madam Secretary*, the White House loses communication contact with Air Force One while President Dalton is traveling back to the United States from an Australian state funeral.⁶¹ Secretary of State Elizabeth McCord asks the generals and staffers in the situation room if anyone has “reached out to the Speaker of the House,” because the previous day, the vice president collapsed and needed emergency gallbladder surgery. Russell Jackson reveals that the Speaker of the House is also on the president’s plane. Jackson then suggests convening the National Security Council to respond if the lost communication is an attack and calling in the Chief Justice to swear in the President Pro Tempore of the Senate who is “next in line.” When the Senator arrives and acknowledges the need for an acting president, the Attorney General explains, “In accordance with the Succession Act of 1947, that would be you, Senator.” However, before being sworn in, President Pro Temps Gates cannot seem to name the current president, referring instead to Ronald Reagan, who served as president from 1981-1989 and died in 2004. His staff explains:

Senator Gate’s Staffer: Senator Gates had a series of mini strokes a few months ago, but we are working diligently to get him through his final term. He has his good days and his bad days.

Russell Jackson: But basically, he's incompetent?

Staffer: To take the oath of office for president? Probably.
Russell Jackson: Then I think we have to go to the next in line.
Attorney General: That would be the secretary of state.

Lost communication and gallbladder surgery initiate an orderly process following the Succession Act of 1947 and result in the swearing in of the secretary of state and protagonist of *Madam Secretary*. She becomes the acting president for a few hours until contact with Air Force One and the elected president is restored.

The Balm of Technocratic Bureaucracy

In these examples from twenty years of governance television, at the conclusion of each enactment of section 3 or section 4 of the Twenty-fifth Amendment, the office is restored to the initial leader. Although there are anxieties associated with partisan transition (*The West Wing, Commander in Chief*) or with the proof of physical or mental incapacity (*Scandal, Madam Secretary, Designated Survivor*), these anxieties are answered with citations of procedure that temporarily pass power from one individual to another. Those anxieties are further eased by an eventual return to the status quo by the end of an episode or a few episodes later. Status quo within governance television does not necessarily mean a ‘good’ public servant in office; it means a constitutionally authorized one.

While these shows entertain the prospect of a deposed leader, they do not commit. It is, perhaps, this possibility of disaster, which the United States has not experienced since the end of the Civil War in 1865, that makes the Twenty-fifth Amendment so appealing to these scriptwriters. The existence of the constitutional processes asserts that the danger is conceivable, but the lack of anything similar happening in the real world for over 130 years categorizes the

scenario firmly as fantasy. The attack on the Capitol during the counting of electoral votes on January 6, 2021 ruptured the unthinkability of institutional disaster.

The written documents—resignation letters, declarations of ability or inability, pardons, the Constitution—crystallize authority and legitimacy. Informed characters explain to their colleagues and the audience the necessary signatures, ratifications, and submissions. Cameras linger on the letterhead, the typed words, and the scrawled signatures. Names on paper move authority from one individual to another, voluntarily or involuntarily, for the good of the country. These events may be unusual, but they are not unanticipated. The visuals reinforce the uplifting of technocratic bureaucracy as a balm to anxiety; if the correct constitutional steps have been followed, the government is stable.

The Twelfth and Twentieth Amendments: Questioning Institutional Legitimacy

Whereas the accusations of illegitimacy lobbed at Bill Clinton targeted his individual characteristics and history, the 2000 election with its conclusion determined by the Supreme Court and its divergent popular and electoral college results, brought the legitimacy of the institution of American elections and the democratic process into question. Could elections be trusted if the outcomes are controlled by the legal system rather than the voters? That question intensified in the latter half of the 2010s. The 2010 midterm election saw the culmination of the GOP's plan REDMAP (Redistricting Majority project), a plan to gain GOP control of state legislatures in order to use the 2010 redistricting to gerrymander states in their favor.⁶² This redistricting resulted in the Democratic Party receiving more votes state-wide in states such as Pennsylvania, Michigan, and North Carolina, but Republicans gaining or maintaining control of the state houses. 2010 also produced the *Citizens United v Federal Election Commission* decision, which determined that political spending was protected speech. This ruling allowed an

unchecked amount of corporate and individual spending to flow into elections, nominally divorced from political candidates but aligned with political parties rather than non-partisan issues in practice. In 2013 the Supreme Court ruled that part of the seminal Voting Rights Act was unconstitutional, and subsequently, under the pretense of preventing voter fraud, multiple states passed laws regarding voter identification, facilitating targeted voter suppression. The 2016 election once again resulted in one candidate winning the popular vote and the other winning the electoral college. What is the legitimacy of elections if vote totals do not lead to outcomes?

Finally, the election of 2020 saw the culmination of questioning the legitimacy of American elections. The losing candidate, incumbent President Donald Trump, and his supporters promoted what is now described as the “Big Lie”—a conspiracy theory that the election was rigged or secretly won by Donald Trump, despite certified vote totals. This characterization connects the historical moment to that of the rise of the Third Reich and the anti-democratic government of Nazi Germany.⁶³ On January 6, 2021, this conspiracy reached its zenith. Insurgents gathered in Washington, D.C. and attacked the Capitol as Congress prepared to certify the election results. Here, as elsewhere, real world events trailed their fictional counterparts. In the years immediately before this attack on institutional legitimacy, governance television programs—*Scandal* in 2012 and 2017, *Veep* in 2015, *Madam Secretary* in 2016, and *House of Cards* in 2017--explored scenarios of disrupted, untrustworthy, or otherwise ambiguous elections and their resulting constitutionally-outlined resolutions.

When crises occur during the election and transitions between administrations, rather than while a president is already in power, different constitutional remedies kick in than those previous discussed. Article II of the Constitution contains the original outline for the US election

process including the use of “electors” (the electoral college), a national election day, and qualifications for office. In this iteration of the election process, presidents and vice presidents did not run as a ticket. Instead, the presidential candidate receiving the most votes became president, and the candidate receiving the second most votes became vice president. However, this procedure, somewhat predictably, resulted in administrations with opposing presidents and vice presidents.

The Twelfth Amendment, ratified in 1804, changed this procedure by now having the electors take separate votes for president and vice president, with the assumption that the electors would be more likely to select candidates from the same party. This Amendment also outlined a process for if no one person won an electoral majority. The selection of the president goes to the House of Representatives, with the delegations from each state receiving one vote, and the selection of the vice president would go to the Senate, with each senator receiving an individual vote. The last time this mechanism was used to resolve an election was 1824. Yet, this was the scenario explored in both *Veep* and *House of Cards*.

Veep makes comedy out of the social anxieties about deeply divided modern politics and the close results of many states in recent elections. In the final episode of season four, “Election Night” (June 14, 2015), the contest between Selina Meyer and Senator Bill O’Brien results in an electoral college tie at 269 votes.⁶⁴ As the results of more and more states are solidified, Tom James, the VP candidate on Meyer’s ticket, speaks for both her team and most of the audience when he asks, “What happens when there’s a tie?” Ben Cafferty, one of Meyer’s advisors, answers, “Everybody goes online to try and find out what happens if we get a tie.” The reduction of a constitutional procedure to a Google search emphasizes the uncertainty, obscurity, and absurdity of the situation.

One staffer finds the Twelfth Amendment, another the Twentieth. Mike McLintock, the Communications Director, chimes in. Reading from a tablet, he says:

Mike McLintock: It's actually both. Twelfth is superseded by the Twentieth. They give the House until January 20th to elect the president.

Sue Wilson: Each state gets one vote. First candidate to 26 is the new president and the Senate chooses the VP.

Kent Davison: What happens if it is a tie in the House?"

Sue Wilson: Well, vice president-elect becomes president. Whoever the Senate has picked for VP will be president.

A tied electoral college is unusual for both the characters on-screen and the audience watching. However, “go[ing] online to try and find out what happens” reveals that this potential crisis is not unanticipated. Although *Veep* makes humor out of the apparent complexity of the constitutional details, it also manages social anxieties over election outcomes by articulating the key elements of the Twelfth Amendment step-by-step to the audience. A year before the 2016 election contest between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump produced headlines such as “Here’s What Happens If the Electoral College Ties,” *Veep*’s audience had already watched it happen.⁶⁵

Whereas *Veep* proposes an organically inconclusive electoral college through a tie, *House of Cards* exploits fears about untrustworthy politicians and stages an outright manipulated election. After earlier seasons in which Frank Underwood gained the presidency through first the resignation of the vice president, then the resignation of the president, in season five, Underwood must try to keep the presidency through an election. Frank runs as the Democratic candidate for president with Claire Underwood on the ticket as his vice president. In the face of potential defeat, Frank falsely informs various governors of potential terrorist attacks, leading them to close polling sites early, thus restricting voting access. As a result, lawsuits are filed in nearly every state, states refuse to certify their votes, and neither candidate receives the necessary 270 electoral votes. Frank underlines the chaotic situation by explaining to the audience, “And so, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and half of January have come and gone, and all three branches of

government are in crisis. The Congress is in disarray, the Supreme Court is down a justice and doomed to deadlock, and the executive branch is without a boss.”⁶⁶

But immediately after naming the current crisis, he outlines the constitutionally prescribed resolution for that crisis. He continues:

You see, my feeling is, I think the Founding Fathers, they just got tired. And really, can you blame them? I mean, you can't think of everything... We've had this sort of trouble before. The election of 1800, Jefferson versus Burr. They wound up in a tie. 73 electoral votes each. That was the number required then, and that's when Congress tried to address what the Founding Fathers just couldn't imagine. And, poof, the Twelfth Amendment was born. And it says that if the states don't certify, it's the House that chooses the president and the Senate that chooses the vice president.

He communicates the limitations of the original Constitution, explains the Twelfth Amendment, and affirms that American democracy has identified gaps in planning and come up with solutions. Whereas Meyer's staff had to search for the procedural solution, Underwood understands it and plans to use it to his benefit. The show adds to Underwood's explanation by having the panelists on MCNBC's *Morning Joe*, argue with each other about potential outcomes. In so doing they explain that every state only gets one vote and that candidates need to receive 26. *House of Cards* puts the thesis of this chapter into the mouth of Joe Scarborough, as himself, “Let the Constitution do its job...I know it looks messy. Democracy's messy. But guess what? There is a method to that madness.”

On *Veep*, Meyer summarizes this messiness before sobbing, “So you mean that I...I might lose this election to my fucking vice president?...The rule book's been torn up now and America is wiping its nasty ass with it!” The rule book Meyer refers to are the standard expectations of politics and specifically election nights. People vote, polls close, states are color-coded red and blue by the national news networks, electoral votes are counted, and a winner is announced. However, profanity aside, in this furious exclamation Meyer embodies the growth of public anxiety about the lack of a reliable “rule book” for an election. As one of the *Veep* news

pundits describes, “there’s never been an election like this.” However, if the rule book we use is one of governance rather than politics, namely the Constitution, then it has not been torn up. The process for a resolution, albeit irregular, exists—Meyer’s personal anxiety about losing to Tom James notwithstanding.

After the recount in Nevada has reaffirmed the tie and thrown the election to the House and the Senate, members of the Meyer team are surprised that Vice Presidential candidate Tom James has manipulated circumstances to try to win the presidency for himself. Davison reminds them:

Kent Davison: If no one gets a majority in the House, the vote goes to the Senate. I explained this on election night.

Selina Meyer: I wasn't listening.

Kent Davison: Yeah, but obviously Tom was. Tom James is an acknowledged master of the Senate's rules and procedures. So if it's up to the Senate, Tom is our next president.⁶⁷

This repetition within the series assists the audience in following the esoteric chain of procedural events and to make a joke at the expense of Selina’s team and their lack of attentiveness to expertise.

Veep’s electoral saga ends with a vote in the House in which neither candidate received the necessary majority of votes, followed by a tied vote in the Senate. Adhering to the language of the Amendment which states: “If the House of Representatives shall not choose a president whenever the right of choice shall devolve upon them, before the fourth day of March next following, then the vice president shall act as president, as in case of the death or other constitutional disability of the president,” Meyer’s spiteful current vice president breaks the tie and selects not Tom James, but the opposing vice president as the newly elected president.⁶⁸

Because *House of Cards* layers complication upon complication, as Underwood’s team campaigns for votes through persuasion, cajoling, intimidation, blackmail, and promises, the

final outcome remains uncertain by the delineated inauguration date. The House has deadlocked, and the Senate selects Claire Underwood for vice president. “Chapter 57” ends with the campaign manager for Underwood’s opponent explaining that neither candidate is the president. He says, “The vice president will be acting president for as long as it takes the House to decide.” In the face of “what happens now?” the Constitution provides the answer.

In addition to the House and the Senate resolving electoral college ties, the Twelfth Amendment specifies an inauguration day of March 4, leaving in place an extensive ‘lame duck’ period that would prove problematic. The Twentieth Amendment, ratified in 1933, was designed to fix that lame duck concern by moving the inauguration to January. The Twentieth addresses another issue relevant to crises of leadership and played out during season 6 of *Scandal*; who becomes president should a not-quite-president elect die before taking office? *Scandal* takes on this question over the course of Season 6.

The season begins with election night results in the contest between Republican and former first lady Mellie Grant and the Democratic candidate Francisco “Frankie” Vargas.⁶⁹ To the surprise of her team, Mellie loses the night. As Vargas takes the stage and gives his acceptance speech, he is shot. Unlike the assassination attempts addressed in the previous section, the Twenty-fifth Amendment does not apply because Vargas is not yet the president. Similarly, the Twentieth Amendment would only arguably apply because Vargas is also not yet the president-elect; none of the ratification procedure has taken place. This scenario is one that has no precedent in American history and is the first to trod genuinely murky grounds. Current president, Fitzgerald Grant, turns to David Rosen, his Attorney General, and speaking for a presumably baffled audience asks, “If Governor Vargas dies, who becomes the next President of the United States?” David Rosen explains:

He won the general election, the popular vote. But you know as well as anyone, the President and Vice President of the United States aren't actually elected in the general election. They're elected by the Electoral College, which meets on the first Monday after the second Wednesday in December...A month from now. That's the only election that really matters under the Constitution, and Governor Vargas and Cyrus Beene haven't been elected by the Electoral College. If they had been, if we were having this conversation in late December or early January, then, yes, Cyrus would become president if Governor Vargas died. But right now...Right now, we're in the Twilight Zone, Mr. President.⁷⁰

Here, *Scandal* signals that it is taking a different path than either *House of Cards* or *Veep*.

Those shows articulate the exact constitutional procedures in play to move the plot forward in the former and to create humor and conflict in the latter. Although Rosen describes the importance of specific dates and attributes electoral legitimacy to the Constitution, he does not attribute where they are written and ratified—the Twentieth Amendment. He also emphasizes the date of the meeting of the Electoral College, rather than January 6, the prescribed date when Congress formally receives certifies the Electoral College votes. Tony Goldwyn, the actor who played Fitzgerald Grant, explained that decision; *Scandal* season 6 “doesn’t get that focused on the machinery of the politics.”⁷¹ However, Rosen is correct about the “Twilight Zone” nature of the situation; John Fortier, director of governmental studies at the Bipartisan Policy Center, describes this time between election day and certification as “the worst, most confusing time.”⁷² By dramatizing an inherently ambiguous scenario, *Scandal* sets itself up to cite constitutional details when they are useful and disregard them when they are not.

Fitz understands the stakes of uncertainty. He explains to his Chief of Staff: “This is about reassuring the American people that there is a clear path forward, that there will be continuity in our government, stability in our democracy, a leader they can follow.”⁷³ In the following episode, Fitz links uncertainty about the Presidency to an implosion of the United States.⁷⁴ Like MacKenzie Allen on *Commander in Chief* over ten years earlier, Fitz rhetorically blends continuity of bureaucracy with democracy and nationhood.

Scandal's plots have soap opera-eque levels of manipulation, intrigue, and violence, and this season uses flashbacks to show the relationship dynamics and blackmail leading up to the assassination as well as specific episodes centered on different characters' experiences of the campaign, election, and aftermath. Cyrus Beene, Vargas's running mate, has been accused of orchestrating the murder, been sent to jail, been released from jail, and is still a potential choice for the presidency. In the face of the powerful conspiracy setting these events in motion, Eli Pope, the former head of the covert governmental agency B613 and Olivia Pope's father, invokes the same metaphor as Meyer on *Veep*. He shouts, "There is no Republic!! Look around! The Republic?! Is in ashes. The Constitution is in shreds. We, the people, have been suffocated by their bare hands!"⁷⁵ Meyer's ass-wiped rule book and E. Pope's shredded Constitution express the same sentiment; without the guiding documents of democracy, the nation will burn.

Mellie and Olivia Pope work throughout the season to have Mellie continue to be a viable choice for the electoral college and Congress. By episode eleven, Mellie has had enough maneuvering and uncertainty. The show condenses the vote by the Electoral College and the certification by Congress into this episode. Olivia Pope pushes her to cede the election for good, Mellie makes her appeal: "I just thought of an option. We let the electors decide for themselves... it is up to those 538 electors to decide who is going to be the next president. Now we have to let the system...the Constitution...do its thing." Luckily for Mellie Grant, but baffling procedurally, in the face of an assassinated winning Democratic candidate, *Scandal's* Electoral College selects the losing Republican candidate to become the president-elect.

Continuity of Government Above All Else

The shift between the earliest example of crisis-in-leadership scenarios—*The West Wing's* bumbled procedure in the aftermath of an assassination attempt in 2000—to the most

recent of these examples—*Madam Secretary* and *Designated Survivor* featuring unfinished threats to enact section 4 of the Twenty-fifth Amendment—suggests a change in tolerance for ambiguity when presented with fictional crisis over two decades. Against the backdrop of an increasingly distrustful and angry electorate, governance television performs some of the most tragic possibilities, literalizing fears of unworthy individuals achieving and sustaining power. It then resolves those fears by demonstrating that despite the power of one flawed individual, the machinery of government continues to turn.

Ironically, for primetime entertainment shows focused deeply on characters and relationships, governance television deemphasizes the importance of any individual by reaffirming the fantasy of American democracy as a stable institution. Regardless of service or ambition, it is the nature of the US government for individuals to be inherently transitional: two years for representatives before they must defend their seat, six for a senator, and four for a president. For every empty post, there is another person, another politician, another name down the order of succession. Only the Supreme Court justices do not have this pressure, and that branch has been seen the least on television. Within governance television as within American democracy, individuals are interchangeable and replaceable. Even when the failures of moral authority are made visible—as ambitious, corrupt, or outright murderous figures gain power—governance television reifies institutional legitimacy and legal authority as long as consistent and codified processes of been followed. The correct person is the one next in line to the office of the presidency, the correct documents have been signed and filed, and when the elections to determine new leadership go awry, the House of Representatives and the Senate can step-in to make decisions.

Regardless of the idealism or cynicism explored in chapter two, one result of these repeated narratives, which align the functioning of the government with the functioning of democracy, is that governance television as a genre communicates an ideology of conservation. As *House of Cards* was ending, writer and showrunner Frank Pugliese explained a central tension running throughout the series: “It’s been interested in testing the seams of democracy or democratic institutions. How far can you push the edge until you reach the breaking point?”⁷⁶ Even in the face of the catastrophic death and destruction setting *Designated Survivor* in motion, the government is rebuilt as it was: a cabinet secretary becomes president, new Justices are nominated, new Congressional people are elected. Governance television intrinsically uplifts the power of bureaucracy and the status quo. This inability within entertainment television to imagine the possibilities for change has contributed to a civic imaginary caught by surprise when the norms and expectations of politics were upended following the 2016 election.

Notes

¹ *Veep*, “Morning After.”

² David Mandel, “*Veep* Boss Discusses Richard’s Breakout Moment.”

³ George Washington, “Farewell Address.”

⁴ Fredric Jameson, “Reification of Utopia in Mass Culture.”

⁵ *Commander in Chief* in 2006, *Scandal* in 2012, *Veep* in 2014, and *House of Cards* in 2017 all fictionalize the first woman becoming president or acting president, through someone else’s death (MacKenzie Allen), incapacitation (Sally Langston), or resignation (Selina Meyer and Claire Underwood). Similarly, female presidents who win elections do so with questionable, although ultimately constitutionally resolved, legitimacy. On *Scandal*, Mellie Grant becomes president only due to the election night assassination of her competitor, Frankie Vargas, the arrest of Vargas’s VP, Cyrus Beene, and the vote by the electors in the electoral college (2017). Similarly, on *Veep*, Laura Montez wins the presidency over Selina Meyer through a tie in the electoral college, a tie in the House of Representatives, and a tie-breaking vote by Meyer’s spiteful Vice President in the Senate (2016). Elizabeth McCord, as the first elected female president during the sixth season of *Madam Secretary*, and Selina Myer, as the second female president during the seventh season of *Veep*, both have questionable legitimacy due to foreign campaign interference, from Iran in the former and China in the latter (both 2019). These are not the only ‘first female presidents’ on television; *24*’s Allison Taylor, *Homeland*’s Elizabeth Keane, and *State of Affairs*’ Constance Payton, all come to mind. But even of these duly elected women, the first two are forced to resign and the last is cancelled after 13 episodes. Finally, *Prison Break*’s Caroline Reynolds is a two-fer—she becomes president as the result of an assassination and is also forced to resign (2006-2007). These crisis ascensions of woman presidents are Jameson’s “rudimentary expressions” of American voters’ contesting hopes and anxieties, the desire to “vote for a woman, just not that woman.” In public polling, a majority of voters don’t mind the idea of a woman president, but they do not want to participate in making that a reality. That so many of these women on television shows become president through direct electoral means that have an air of illegitimacy justifies voters’ real-world reluctance, whereas women becoming president through procedurally legitimate but indirect means solves the tension by making the scenario happen without requiring electoral action.

See also Maggie Astor, “How Sexism Plays Out on the Trail,” *The New York Times*, February 12, 2019, and Amelia Thomson-DeVeaux, “Americans Say They Would Vote for a Woman, but...,” *FiveThirtyEight*, July 15, 2019.

⁶ Andres Martinez, “Americans Have Seen the Last Four Presidents as Illegitimate.”

⁷ David A. Graham, “What Happens When a President is Declared Illegitimate?”

⁸ Peter Beinart, “What the Tributes to George H. W. Bush Are Missing.”

⁹ Robert W. Stewart, “O.C. Conservatives Face Loss of Congressional Clout”; Gebe Martinez, “Dornan rebuked after diatribe against Clinton.”

¹⁰ The possible responses to this question included: I accept him as the legitimate president, I don’t accept him as the legitimate president now, but might in the future, or I will never accept him as the legitimate president.

David W. Moore, “Eight in Ten Americans to Accept Bush as “Legitimate” President.”

¹¹ Joseph Carroll, “Seven out of 10 Americans Accept Bush as Legitimate President.”

¹² Pew Research Center, “Public Trust in Government: 1958-2021.”

¹³ When white Senator John McCain, born in the Panama Canal Zone, was the Republican nominee for president against Barack Obama in 2008, his birthplace outside the United States did not receive nearly as much scrutiny as Obama’s Hawaiian birth. Additionally, when white Senator Ted Cruz, born in Canada, ran for the Republican nomination for president in 2016, questions about Cruz’s eligibility were raised but not dwelled upon as Obama’s had been during both previous elections.

¹⁴ Jeffrey M. Jones, “In U.S., 84% Accept Trump as Legitimate President.”

¹⁵ Max Weber, “The Three Pure Types of Legitimate Rule.”

¹⁶ *Designated Survivor*, “#thesystemisbroken.”

¹⁷ Both the Order of Succession and the Twenty-fifth Amendment are intrinsic to the emergency transfer of power and in some situations their procedures coordinate. I have separated them here due to their different histories of implementation.

¹⁸ This quote continues, “and the Congress may by Law provide for the Case of Removal, Death, Resignation or Inability, both of the President and Vice President, declaring what Officer shall then act as President, and such Officer shall act accordingly, until the Disability be removed, or a President shall be elected.”

U.S. Const. art. II.

¹⁹ Jared Cohen, *Accidental Presidents*, 7.

²⁰ Jared Cohen, *Accidental Presidents*, 8.

²¹ Leonard Dinnerstein, “The Accession of John Tyler,” 448.

²² John Tyler, “Address Upon Assuming the Office of President of the United States.”

²³ Leonard Dinnerstein, “The Accession of John Tyler,” 450.

²⁴ *Commander in Chief*, “Pilot.”

²⁵ Here, the show takes liberties with procedure. The Twenty-fifth Amendment should have been invoked on a temporary basis once the President was incapacitated and in surgery, not waiting until after surgery. Whereas *The West Wing* identifies this fumble when it occurs on that show, *Commander in Chief* does not acknowledge it.

²⁶ John D. Feerick, *The Twenty-Fifth Amendment*, 37

²⁷ John D. Feerick, *The Twenty-Fifth Amendment*, 39.

²⁸ Or rather, no party at all as an independent.

²⁹ *Veep*, “Tears.”

³⁰ *Veep*, “Crate.”

³¹ *Veep*, “New Hampshire.”

³² Greg Craig, “Statement from White House Counsel.”

³³ To differentiate Frank and Claire Underwood, I will call them Frank and Claire, rather than by their last names as with other characters, except when obvious. Frank becomes president in *House of Cards*, “Chapter 26,” and Claire becomes president in *House of Cards*, “Chapter 65.”

³⁴ *House of Cards*, “Chapter 26.”

³⁵ *House of Cards*, “Chapter 64.”

³⁶ Emphasis added. *House of Cards*, “Chapter 65.”

³⁷ Emily Apter, “Political Serials,” 113.

³⁸ *Designated Survivor*, “Pilot.”

³⁹ Sonia Saraiya, “TV Review: *Designated Survivor*.”

⁴⁰ U.S. Constitution, amend. 25, sec. 1.

⁴¹ Vice presidential vacancies due to presidential and vice-presidential resignations (*The West Wing*, *Commander in Chief*, *House of Cards*, *Veep*) and presidential and vice-presidential deaths (*Commander in Chief*, *Scandal*, *Designated Survivor*) occur in six of the seven main texts examined here. On multiple shows, these vacancies occur more than once.

⁴² U.S. Constitution, amend. 25, sec. 3.

⁴³ Ronald Reagan underwent surgery for colon cancer in 1985, and George W. Bush had two colonoscopies during his time in office, 2002 and 2007. The presidency may not be good for one’s colon.

⁴⁴ U.S. Constitution, amend. 25, sec. 4, cl. 1.

⁴⁵ U.S. Constitution, amend. 25, sec. 4, cl. 2.

⁴⁶ *Designated Survivor*, “Warriors.”

⁴⁷ *House of Cards*, “Chapter 43.”

⁴⁸ *Scandal*, “Happy Birthday Mr. President.”

⁴⁹ Said by Edison Davis, the Majority Leader of the Senate, to Olivia Pope.

⁵⁰ *Scandal*, “One for the Dog.”

⁵¹ *Scandal*, “A Criminal, a Whore, an Idiot and a Liar.”

⁵² *The West Wing*, “In the Shadow of Two Gunmen: Part 1.”

⁵³ *Commander in Chief*, “The Elephant in the Room.”

⁵⁴ *House of Cards*, “Chapter 46”; *Scandal*, “A Criminal, a Whore, an Idiot and a Liar”; *Commander in Chief*, “The Elephant in the Room.”

⁵⁵ *The West Wing*, “Twenty Five.”

⁵⁶ *The West Wing*, “Life on Mars.”

⁵⁷ Technically, *Madam Secretary* is exploring a physical disability, a benign brain tumor (a meningioma), that leads to a mental disability by pushing on President Dalton’s frontal lobe, but this is not known until very late in the episode.

⁵⁸ *Designated Survivor*, “Kirkman Agonistes.”

⁵⁹ *Designated Survivor*, “Capacity.”

⁶⁰ *Madam Secretary*, “Sound and Fury.”

⁶¹ *Madam Secretary*, “The Show Must Go On.”

⁶² David Daley, *Ratf**ked: Why Your Vote Doesn’t Count*.

⁶³ Andreas Kluth, “The U.S. Mustn’t Follow Weimar Germany and Ancient Rome.”

⁶⁴ *Veep*, “Election Night.”

⁶⁵ Jay Newton-Small and Chris Wilson, “Here’s What Happens if the Electoral College Ties.”

⁶⁶ *House of Cards*, “Chapter 57.”

⁶⁷ *Veep*, “Congressional Ball.”

⁶⁸ Just as *The West Wing* and *Commander in Chief* use vice presidential resignations as setups to explore the procedures of the Twenty-fifth Amendment, *Veep* uses a presidential resignation as a lead-in to explore the Twelfth and Twentieth Amendment. President Stuart Hughes declines to run for a second turn, leaving Vice President Selina Meyer to compete for the party nomination. In the midst of that contest, President Hughes resigns, leaving Meyer to ascend to the presidency, while simultaneously campaigning to be elected to the position she now holds.

In this, Meyer most resembles Gerald Ford, the Vice President who took the office of the presidency upon Richard Nixon’s resignation. While the parallel is imperfect because Meyer had been elected to the Vice presidency, while Gerald Ford had been appointed to the job upon the resignation of Spiro Agnew, both accidental presidents lose their campaigns following their partial-term presidencies. However, whereas Ford lost his election to Jimmy Carter outright, Meyers loses hers in the complex constitutional procedure.

⁶⁹ Here I referred to as Mellie and Fitzgerald or Fitz to differentiate the characters. To differentiate Fitzgerald (Fitz) and Mellie Grant, I will call them Fitz and Mellie, rather than by their last names as with other characters, except when obvious.

⁷⁰ *Scandal*, “Survival of the Fittest.”

⁷¹ Tony Goldwyn quoted in “Inside ‘Scandal’s’ Killer Election Twist.”

⁷² Stephen Ohlemacher, “AP Explains.”

⁷³ *Scandal*, “Survival of the Fittest.”

⁷⁴ *Scandal*, “Hardball.”

⁷⁵ *Scandal*, “The Box.”

⁷⁶ Frank Pugliese quoted in “Politics and the Arts.”

Conclusion: Failures of Imagination

After Donald Trump won the 2016 Republican nomination for president, but before the general election, Masha Gessen, long-time scholar of Vladimir Putin's threat to Russia, cautioned readers that a lack of imagination "is one of the great handicaps as humans and as citizens" and "is not an argument: it's a limitation. It is essential to recognize this limitation and try to overcome it."¹ This caution was aimed at those who thought it was inconceivable that Donald Trump would win the election, because disbelief by the opposition was one of the avenues towards a Trump success. Should the outrageous possibility that he did win occur, Gessen continued:

In some cities, there will be clashes. The police will do their jobs, and this will be reassuring. After all, you will think, the American presidency is a strangely limited institution. It doesn't give Trump that many ways to radically alter the everyday lives of Americans. But that is exactly the problem. President Trump will have to begin destroying the institutions of American democracy—not because they get in the way of anything specific he wants to do...but because they are an obstacle to the way he wants to do them.

They assessed that a certain segment of the public and press was unable to imagine Donald Trump winning the election, and that when that segment stretched their imaginations, the world they saw was one in which any threat Donald Trump, as an individual, posed would be tempered by the institutions of democracy. The checks would work to constrain any impulse, which sent the system out of balance.

It is no surprise that a certain segment of the public and the press was unable to imagine Donald Trump winning the election; for twenty years, governance television had been

contributing a vision of stability and continuity in the face of any disaster to a civic imaginary. Governance television cannot imagine its own destruction and thus cannot imagine American democracy's collapse. The medium and genre that could have envisioned a leader with no regard for procedure or legacy had instead shown that even unworthy leaders satisfy their ambitions by manipulating established procedures rather than destroying those procedures entirely. That is the myth governance television contributed to the liberal civic imaginary for two decades, limiting conceivable possible real-world outcomes. The creative limits of shows about the government helped a showman rise to the top of that government.

John Fiske argues that "the ability of the realistic form to contain oppositional discourses without defusing them completely is predicated on the ability of the viewer to read radically, and to give these discourses semiotic priority over the dominant ideological framework."²

Governance television is a realistic form made more so through the employment of political consultants who enhance the fictional content with realistic aesthetic and technical details. It has within it discourses of idealism and cynicism. These are not stories in which corruption is inevitably punished and righteousness is inevitably rewarded, although there is a fair amount of that. *The West Wing* ended with a seventh season by 'passing the torch' with the election between Matt Santos and Arnold Vinick and the reunion in the future of the Bartlet staff. *Madam Secretary* ends with Elizabeth McCord in the president's chair, surviving a potential impeachment investigation, with crowds outside cheering, "She's my president." On *Veep*, Selina Meyer eventually gets her moment as an elected president, but the term is remembered ignobly. The political shenanigans of Meyer and her team could not truly damage 'America'; the genial, knowledgeable Richard Splett is a successful president 25 years later. However, on *Scandal*, although confessions are made and (some) crimes brought to light, David Rosen, one of

the few characters on the show with genuinely good motives and belief in US law, is killed. Rowan Pope, the former leader of the secret agency involved in many of *Scandal*'s most outrageous plots, confesses to his work in fixing elections, acts of terrorism and more — but he did so for a reason: “I am responsible for the fact that this nation still stands.” He testifies, “I wake up every morning, and I make America great.” The character depicted as the most morally malleable also keeps the institution moving forward.

With these variable outcomes, the discourses of governance television as a genre do not assert a view of the government as either idealistic *or* cynical; these discourses are expressions of social and political polarization as the contemporary structure of feeling. The genre neutralizes and naturalizes this opposition, defusing any radical impulses to imagine a different way for government to function, such as to favor compromise over conflict. Thus, when I refer to governance television as a conservative genre, it is within the conservative-radical dynamic, rather than the conservative-liberal one. The conservation of the genre is an ideological bent toward a trust in tradition and belief in the status quo as stable.

The crisis narratives further reaffirm this conservative turn by repeatedly resolving fears of displaced, incompetent, or malevolent leaders with the next election, the next resignation, or the next letter of reinstatement. Within and across series, the institution never fails. In the face of catastrophe, American government, and through it, American democracy, continues. This ideology of continuity is intrinsic to the genre; if the institutions were to fail, the ‘governance’ of television would cease to be, and the genre’s function of envisioning an alternative world would collapse. Even *Designated Survivor*, a show premised in catastrophe, is ultimately a show about continuance and continuity. During the first season President Kirkman must rebuild the government from the ground up, from selecting new supreme court justices to holding new

congressional elections. By the time the show ends, the country is running the 2020 election as normal—or at least as normal as could be when the in-office president is running as an independent with no party behind him. It's not politicians committing murders nor the first women presidents that forced the American imagination to reconsider what government is, how it works, and what is needed for it to continue to work. It is the actions of the new Trump administration. Traditions are not procedures, institutions are not secure, and democracy is not guaranteed. Governance television, by its very nature, cannot question the institutions or imagine their collapse.

The Trump Administration and its legacy belies that myth of constancy and stability. The recurrent chorus of “constitutional crisis” in the face of multiple impeachments, culminated with a physical attack on the Capitol Building with the aim of stopping the constitutionally mandated counting of electoral votes demonstrates just how close the unimaginable came to be realized. Like the election, this attack was framed as a failure of imagination. Writing for *The Conversation* a day after the attack, Jack Rozdilsnym, associate professor of Disaster and Emergency Management at York University, Canada clarified:

The U.S. was—with an emphasis on was—a place that held the perception that something like this couldn't possibly happen here. Images of intruders storming the symbolic center of U.S. government were reserved for action and disaster films...Prior to Jan 6, in the popular American imagination, violent mobs obstructing legal election processes only occurred in faraway places with a fragile hold on democratic institutions. The perception for America that 'it can't happen here' has been shattered.³

Notably, the “images of intruders” Rozdilsnym references come from disaster films such as *White House Down* (2013) and *Olympus Has Fallen* (2013), and not from *The West Wing* or *Scandal* or even *Designated Survivor*. Instead, the images and stories that entered audiences' homes week after week had not rehearsed this violent contingency. In this way, governance television has, if not failed, not fulfilled its function as fully as possible. Governance television

only contributed specific alternative visions made it to the lexicon of the civic imaginary; a story two-hours long can realize civic disaster; a story 60 or 100 or 150 hours long only rebuilds.

Many factors contribute to television series reaching their conclusions, but it is meaningful that four of the longest running governance television shows ended in 2018 and 2019. For shows launched between 2008-2016, the change from the Obama administration to the Trump administration diminished their ability to envision an alternative government without a radical change in premise. While there were some creative advantages to this change such as the production team of *Veep* gaining greater license to stretch what would previously not have been believable, this change also made evident the ideological lie of the fiction.

Governance television, then, has fallen into a period of what Lauren Berlant calls genre flailing. “Genre flailing is a mode of crisis management that arises after an object, or object world, becomes disturbed in a way that intrudes on one’s confidence about how to move in it.”⁴ Genre flailing occurs when circumstances cause an “uncontrollable disturbance in the object’s stability,” and speaks to readers working with objects as much to the objects themselves. For governance television, both the objects and audiences have lost confidence in the genre’s previous function. For example, while one set of viewers turned to *The West Wing* for comfort, others reconsidered the impact of the show’s depiction of how government works being taken for how government actually works, because “contrary to the hopes of screenwriters and viewers everywhere...how democratic politics actually works [is] through uninspiring compromise and failure.”⁵ In a world in which charismatic, well-meaning staffers are able to change policy through reasoned persuasion and careful debate, individuals who are solely interested gaining and maintaining power, do not fit. This is not exclusively a problem of idealism or *The West Wing*. *House of Cards*, too, “aggressively depicts things as they are not.”⁶ In 2015, professor of

political science Seth Masket critiqued *House of Cards* not for the absurdity of murder, but for its failures to understand Washington by over attributing puppet-master power to only one or two smart people who are also sociopaths. Both versions of governance television, idealistic and cynical, both reflect and create perceptions of Washington that are already within the bounds of audiences' expectations. If the prominence of governance television was a product of perceived operational stability even within party and affective changes, then a civic reality, which exceeds those imagined boundaries of the possible, produces a need to reconsider the role of the televised civic imaginary. As of 2021, that reexamination continues, and federal governance television has largely fallen from the airwaves.

Notes

¹ Masha Gessen, “The Trump-Putin Fallacy.”

² John Fiske, *Television Culture*, 47.

³ Jack L. Rozdilsky, “Thought the U.S. Capitol Attack Couldn’t Happen?”

⁴ Lauren Berlant, “Genre Flailing,” 157.

⁵ Yair Rosenberg, “Why *The West Wing*”

⁶ Seth Masket, “*House of Cards* is the Worst Show.”

Appendices

Appendix A

A Non-Comprehensive List of Governance Television Relevant; Semi-Relevant; and Potentially Related TV Shows

▣ = entire series viewed

□ = select episodes viewed

Executive Branch

- Hail to the Chief (ABC, 1985)
- Mr. President (Fox, 1987-1988)
- ▣ The West Wing (NBC, 1999-2006)
- ▣ Commander in Chief (ABC, 2005-2006)
- E-Ring (NBC, 2005)
- ▣ 1600 Penn (NBC, 2012-2013)
- ▣ Scandal (ABC, 2012-2018)
- The First Family (2012-2015)
- ▣ Veep (HBO, 2012-2019)
- ▣ House of Cards (Netflix, 2013-2018)
- ▣ Madam Secretary (CBS, 2014-2019)
- ▣ State of Affairs (NBC, 2014-2015)
- ▣ Designated Survivor (ABC, 2016-2019, Netflix, 2019)
- Tyler Perry's The Oval (2019-present)

Legislative Branch

- Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (ABC, 1962-1963)
- The Bold Ones: The Senator (NBC, 1970-1971)
- Grandpa Goes to Washington (NBC, 1978-1979)
- The Powers That Be (NBC, 1992-1993)
- Women of the House (CBS, 1995)
- Charlie Lawrence (CBS, 2003)
- ▣ Mister Sterling (NBC, 2003)
- ▣ BrainDead (CBS, 2016)

Judicial Branch

- First Monday (CBS, 2002)
- The Court (ABC, 2002)
- Outlaw (NBC, 2010)

Local (State, City, or Other)

- Spin City (ABC, 1996-2002)
- The Wire (HBO, 2002-2008)
- Parks and Recreation (NBC, 2009-2015)
- The Good Wife (CBS, 2009-2016)
- Boss (Starz, 2011-2012)
- The Mayor (ABC, 2017-2018)
- Mr. Mayor (NBC, 2021-present)

Elections

- ▣ Tanner '88 (HBO, 1988)
- ▣ Battleground (Hulu, 2012)
- ▣ Political Animals (USA, 2012)
- The Politician (Netflix, 2019-2020)

Parody

- That's My Bush! (Comedy Central, 2001)
- Lil' Bush (Comedy Central, 2007-2008)
- The President Show (Comedy Central, 2017)
- Our Cartoon President (Showtime, 2018-present)

Other

Karen (ABC, 1975)
DAG (NBC, 2000-2001)
□24 (2001-2010, 2014)
Citizen Baines (CBS, 2001)
The American Embassy (Fox, 2002)
K-Street (HBO, 2003)
American Candidate (Showtime, 2004)
Jack and Bobby (The WB, 2004-2005)
Tanner on Tanner (2004)
The Event (NBC, 2010-2011)
□Homeland (Showtime, 2011-2020)
□Graves (EPIX, 2016-2017)

Appendix B

Partial List of Political Consultants and Creatives to Governance Television

Former Government Employee	Governance Television Show
Eli Attie	<i>The West Wing</i>
Adam Blickstein	<i>Madam Secretary, House of Cards</i>
Sidney Blumenthal	<i>Tanner '88</i>
Robert (Bob) Bauer	<i>House of Cards</i>
Patrick Caddell	<i>The West Wing</i>
Jay Carson	<i>House of Cards</i>
Alex Cooley	<i>Madam Secretary</i>
Kenneth Duberstein	<i>The West Wing</i>
Michael Feldman	<i>Madam Secretary</i>
Marlin Fitzwater	<i>The West Wing</i>
Tammy Haddad	<i>Veep</i>
Jennifer Hoelzer	<i>Veep</i>
Ronald Klain	<i>Commander in Chief</i>
Richard Klein	<i>Designated Survivor</i>
Eric Lesser	<i>Veep</i>
Jon Lovett	<i>1600 Penn</i>

Frank Luntz	<i>The West Wing</i>
Alexander Maggio	<i>Madam Secretary</i>
Capricia Penavic Marshall	<i>House of Cards</i>
Anita McBride	<i>Veep</i>
David McCallum	<i>BrainDead</i>
Dee Dee Myers	<i>The West Wing</i>
Peggy Noonan	<i>The West Wing</i>
Lawrence O'Donnell	<i>The West Wing, First Monday, Mister Sterling</i>
Bob Okun	<i>Designated Survivor</i>
Martin P. Paone	<i>House of Cards</i>
Kal Penn	<i>Designated Survivor</i>
John Podhoretz	<i>The West Wing</i>
Eric Schultz	<i>Designated Survivor</i>
Judy Smith	<i>Scandal</i>
Gene Sperling	<i>The West Wing</i>
Stuart Stevens	<i>Alpha House, Commander in Chief</i>
Howard Wolfson	<i>House of Card</i>
Amy Zantzing	<i>House of Cards</i>

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