[Some moderate spoilers contained herein.]

I’m working through a number of different theories about why “House of Cards” is so profoundly wrong about American politics while still being a rather entertaining and addictive show. Maybe it’s actually a comedy. Maybe it’s being written by an evil political scientist who knows full well how the American political system works but is aggressively (and most effectively) trolling other political scientists. Maybe it’s just a lazy adaptation of a show about British politics. I’m still not sure.

Certainly part of the problem is that I’m too close to the subject matter. It’s like watching “ER” with a physician (a mistake I’ve made): Some very mundane things are going to be excessively dramatized because that’s far more interesting to a mass audience. If a patient has a bacterial infection, is given a dose of antibiotics and gets better a few days later, that’s a pretty accurate depiction of medicine, but it’s hideously boring television. Now, make it a botched diagnosis, tainted medicine or a super-bacterium, and that’s way more interesting, but it will make a physician crazy because that basically never happens. I get that. But “House of Cards” seems to go beyond hyping the routine. It aggressively depicts things as they are not. Below are a few examples of “lessons” we learn from the show:

**There are only one or two smart people in Washington.**

Frank and Claire Underwood start off at the beginning of Season 1 as the Democratic majority whip and the head of a small environmental nonprofit organization, respectively. Within two years, they are the president and first lady, all without a competitive election. They did this because they are able to game out people’s behavior and incentives and — this is the key point — **no one else is**. Much of Washington is just a bunch of naive rubes who want to keep their jobs and avoid bad press, and Frank and Claire are able to exploit that naivete every time. “The West Wing” could certainly get preachy and self-righteous at times, but one thing it got right was that there are lots of smart people in Washington and they’re all working against one another.

The world according to 'House of Card's' Frank Underwood(2:32)

“House of Cards” politician Frank Underwood is known for his ruthlessness and witty one-liners. Here are his thoughts on becoming powerful, navigating the halls of Congress and stroking egos -- all D.C. staples. (Jhaan Elker/The Washington Post)

**Congressional leaders hand-pick presidential nominees.**

Early in Season 3, we see the Democratic congressional leadership meeting with President Underwood to tell him that they want him not to run for reelection and that they will be backing someone else, whom they will choose later. This is a form of presidential nomination that went out of style in the 1820s. Congressional leaders may be influential in these sorts of decisions (there’s [some evidence](http://www.amazon.com/Game-Change-Clintons-McCain-Lifetime/dp/0061733644) that Sens. Harry Reid and Ted Kennedy encouraged Barack Obama to run for president in 2008, and their support was crucial to his decision to run), but they are just a handful of the hundreds or even thousands of party insiders involved at this stage.

*[*[*Should you be embarrassed that you already finished the entire third season?*](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/style-blog/wp/2015/03/05/should-you-be-embarrassed-that-you-already-finished-house-of-cards/)*]*

**Party leaders have a secret list of potential presidential candidates.**

Underwood is convinced that the Democratic leadership has a secret shortlist of potential presidential candidates, and he’s willing to pay an extremely high price to get his hands on that list so he can short-circuit those people’s career ambitions. As anyone with even a passing familiarity with American politics knows, there is no secret list of presidential candidates. If you want an idea of which candidates a party is considering for the next presidential election, start with current or recent U.S. senators, governors and vice presidents. Then cross off those who are over 75, have life-threatening illnesses or criminal records, or are clinically insane. Award bonus points to those from populous, competitive states. That’s your list.

The last time a major political party nominated someone for president who didn’t fit the above description was in 1952, and that was Dwight Eisenhower. So, yeah, a party may grant an exemption if you, like, defeat the Nazis in the biggest war in history. But beyond that, it’s just a long parade of senators, governors and veeps for the better part of a century.

**The solicitor general could make a great presidential candidate.**

Can you name the current solicitor general? No? That’s my point. To be fair, the one on the show had investigated the previous president in a high-profile case, so maybe we can think of her as a combination of a pre-Supreme Court Elena Kagan and Kenneth Starr.

Parties do not nominate people like these for president. Not even close. The main reason is that nominating someone for the presidency entails risk: Can this person actually function well as a candidate and win votes? Will this person advance the policies we like and not cave the moment public opinion starts to shift? This is why parties tend to nominate people with some history of behaving as a public official and running in multiple elections.

Some candidates also bring certain votes to the table, whether it’s African Americans, labor unions, evangelical Christians, Southerners, or anyone else. This makes the party’s job easier when it’s trying to mobilize half the electorate to turn out. The solicitor general brings approximately zero people to the table.

Parties cannot elevate a complete unknown to the presidency in less than a year. And even if they could, they probably wouldn’t want to.

*[*[*The Fix: What does this show really say about our politics?*](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2015/02/27/what-does-house-of-cards-say-about-our-politics-really/)*]*

**People will trade away their Social Security benefits to help the unemployed.**

I’m still struggling to understand the political logic behind Underwood’s America Works program. (That program, by the way, is just a retread of fake-President Bill Mitchell’s proposal in “[Dave](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0106673/),” **which was a comedy.**) First of all, as [Dan Drezner](http://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/03/03/is-house-of-cards-crueler-to-wonks-or-operatives/) notes, exchanging one for the other makes no sense. Ending payments to retirees while offering work to younger poor people is not really a trade-off; retirees are giving away a huge chunk of their income in exchange for absolutely nothing. And there’s no reason to think that America Works would be popular. Obamacare is unpopular in part because it primarily benefits the minority of people who didn’t have health insurance before 2010, and there are far fewer unemployed people than uninsured people. America Works would be quickly labeled a massive redistribution program that benefits just a handful of people.

But the main problem is that the Democratic Party consists of many interest groups who are hellbent on preserving Social Security. Even if you could convince people that it’s bankrupt ([which it isn’t](http://www.cnbc.com/id/101860799#.)), they’re not going to get on board with a program that would end those payments. No one with such designs would be permitted to get near the House leadership, no less the White House. And any president who tried would never get the support he needed to win renomination.

**A president might appoint the first lady to a key ambassadorial position.**

The Clinton administration endured substantial public criticism when Hillary Clinton was given an unofficial role in managing health-care reform proposals within the White House. People deride Michelle Obama as some sort of Marxist demon because she recommends eating vegetables and exercising. The idea of appointing a spouse as ambassador to the United Nations without any sort of actual qualifications or training is just filled with conflicts and problems. No one would do it or approve it. [And it is also illegal](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/in-the-loop/wp/2015/03/06/frank-underwood-finally-goes-too-far/).

**Ambitious people are basically sociopaths.**

Frank Underwood is able to get what he wants in Washington only by shamelessly manipulating people and occasionally murdering them. No one else does these things because they are not ambitious and are thus constrained by conventional morality. It’s a rather sad portrayal.

Our political system is organized around the principle that ambition is a good thing. Politicians will try to achieve and preserve power by making promises to voters and interest groups and delivering on those promises. I swear I once read this book called “The Federalist Papers” or something, and it argued that one person’s ambitions can be made to counter another’s, avoiding some of the worst excesses of the trait.

Ambition isn’t a disease. We want ambitious people in government.

**You can sell legislation by having a novelist write a book about you.**

I didn’t understand what this plot was all about, and I don’t think the show did, either. Imagine President Obama trying to sell the Affordable Care Act by having John Grisham shadow him around the White House during 2009. What’s the point? Whose mind will be changed, even if the book did somehow come out before the bill came to a vote? And the author was picked because of an online review he wrote about a video game?

**Presidents occasionally have arguments with God and desecrate cathedrals.**

I can’t even. But in fairness, [“The West Wing” started it](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYcMk3AJKLk).

**White House chiefs of staff** **are so unrecognizable that they can be stopped and frisked by police for no cause and can buy murder implements in small towns without being identified.**

Okay, that’s probably correct.

I will say that Season 3 becomes considerably better by mid-season when it starts dealing with international affairs. No, that plot doesn’t make a ton of sense either, but at least it pits Underwood against another scheming, intelligent sociopath (the president of Russia), rather than just have him being the only clever person in Washington.

At the end of the day, “House of Cards” is a show about mean people doing mean things, and it does that well.

But if you want to understand American politics, watch just about anything else.

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