



Using TV to teach? Teaching civics and democratic ideals through *The West Wing* and *House of Cards*

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Keywords: classroom engagement, political interest, political knowledge, television drama

Highlights:

- Combining television shows allows us to increase student interest and knowledge of politics
- Use of only one show can increase either interest or knowledge, but not both.

Purpose: The typical Introduction to American Politics course has a plurality (if not majority) of students who take the course to satisfy a general education requirement rather than having a deep interest in the subject. It is also difficult because students lack interest and knowledge about the topic. Yet, many believe they know everything they need to in order to have opinions on the topic. This paper seeks a way to increase political interest and knowledge among students who are taking an introductory course.

Design/methodology/approach: Using two well-known television programs, *The West Wing* and *House of Cards*, the study tests whether students gain an interest in politics and learn more about the topic when a class incorporates clips from popular shows. The study consists of 4 semesters with different treatments to determine the effects of each show and when the shows are combined on student interest, knowledge, and perceived political engagement.

Findings: Students report being more interested in politics in a course that uses *The West Wing* because of its positive views toward American democracy. Yet, they are not necessarily more knowledgeable or feel that participation is important for doing well in courses. On the other hand, students in the *House of Cards* condition felt more knowledgeable about politics but were actually less interested in politics.

Research limitations/implications: This study was completed in a small, rural, and largely conservative liberal arts college in the United States. While the students accurately reflected the student body at the institution, they were not representative of college students overall.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Instructors of Introduction to American Politics courses have many competing goals. There are civic goals which prepare students for life in the electorate such as voting, being informed about politics, and using one's voice (Barrett & Greene, 2017; Thomas & Brower, 2017). Another goal is to make sure students understand the conflictual nature of the American political system and that the *Schoolhouse Rock* (a famous children's educational cartoon) version of events may be nice but is ultimately impossible (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1996). Many students are taking the course as a general education class as part of the core curriculum required by universities and not because of a deep interest in politics. This means instructors must focus on engaging students academically, increasing retention, and increasing knowledge of the material. However, we live in an environment where individuals shirk collective responsibilities (Putnam, 2001; Mansbridge, 2017), and today's college students are likely to be turned off by politics in general (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; Wattenberg, 2012).

It is difficult to engage students in questions about the nature of democracy and its ability to be harmed by leaders even without the polarized environment of current American politics. Yet, we know that students can use social media, like Twitter, to learn about civic engagement (Woodall & Lennon, 2017). Music also has the ability to engage students in ways that create deeper learning (Soper, 2010). And, there is consistent evidence for the use of film and television as a pedagogical tool in the political science classroom (Young, Baum, & Prettyman, 2021; Brandle, 2020).

This paper analyzes the use of popular political television shows in a small, rural, public university in the upper Midwest of the United States that is not academically selective. The students skew conservative and a plurality of students are enrolled in public service preparation programs. Yet, this paper argues that video clips from popular political television shows increase interest, clarify concepts, and engage students in the learning process.

Drama television can be an imperative learning tool bringing real world issues into a format that makes sense to college students (Hunt, 2001). Other research explores the impact of using the award winning *The West Wing* to engage students in a classroom (Beavers, 2003). There is evidence that fictional political shows provide similar quality political content as newspapers (Nitsch, Jandura, & Bienhaus 2019). Yet, with an increasingly polarized environment, *The West Wing* presents too optimistic of a view of democracy and began before many of today's students were alive. I argue that by pairing *The West Wing* with *House of Cards*, one can more readily get students to think about the positives and negatives of the American political system. These shows present dramatic and fictionalized views of American government, but with enough realism that they relate to consistent themes in politics. Both have elements of truth and also areas of pure fantasy.

These shows, which present vastly different views of American democracy, allow faculty to engage in a variety of questions. From a base level, these shows provide competing narratives about campaigns and governance. *The West Wing* focuses on high

ideals and lofty rhetoric while *House of Cards* retreats to Machiavellian maneuvers and back room deals. The shows depict different perspectives on the role of politicians. President Bartlet from *The West Wing* serves the country to the detriment of his personal health while President Underwood from *House of Cards* is willing to sacrifice other lives for personal power. *The West Wing* encourages us to believe that it is possible to have a functioning government where individuals put aside their differences for a common good, while *House of Cards* encourages us to believe in utilitarian behavior above all. Ultimately, these shows engage students to think about political actions as functions of ideology, character, and a desire for power, but also to consider what the fundamental aim of governance ought to be.

The primary reason for choosing *The West Wing* and *House of Cards* is that they represent different visions of democracy in the United States and they are both award winning dramatic shows. However, they also resonate with students in a variety of ways. *The West Wing* resonates with the student already interested in politics. Evidence indicates that a generation of political actors grew up watching the show (Weiner, 2012; Journell & Buchanan, 2013; Davis, 2015). *House of Cards*, on the other hand, appeals to students who view politics from a more cynical perspective. It draws students without interest in the subject into the drama of seeking power at all costs. The shows highlight a different theme about the goal of politics, and both bring in different segments of a student body. Finally, they also connect well with material used in an Introduction to American Politics course. I will return to this later, but important themes appear routinely in these shows and allow for examples to appear readily in the minds of students.

The paper will proceed as follows. The next section will provide a brief background of *The West Wing* and *House of Cards*. Then, the paper introduces and discusses relevant literature to growing engagement, interest, and knowledge in the classroom through the use of popular culture. Next, the paper develops hypotheses about the paired use of *The West Wing* and *House of Cards* for student engagement in the course, retention of information, and interest in politics more broadly. I then discuss the research design for testing the hypotheses. The sixth section discusses findings and the final section concludes.

2 BACKGROUND

The West Wing begins in the late 1990s and responds to many of the same political and Constitutional topics faced by the Clinton White House (Lehmann, 2003). The show is seen as a realistic perspective of life in the White House because *The West Wing* employed many different former presidential staffers (Beavers, 2003; Popejoy, 2010; Epstein, 2013). *The West Wing* ran for 7 seasons with strong ratings and wide critical appeal. It has been widely hailed as one of the top television shows at the end of the broadcast era (Sheffield, 2016). *The West Wing* won 28 Emmys throughout its run on NBC for acting and technical work. It should be noted that the author's aunt was a set designer for *The West Wing*. Many political writers discuss its influence on the political process even today (Rosenberg, 2012; Moylan, 2016).

The main character of *The West Wing* is president Jed Bartlet (Martin Sheen). Bartlet is a Nobel winning economist, that serves as the governor of New Hampshire before beginning an outside bid at the presidency. Bartlet conceals his Multiple Sclerosis (MS) from the country until his third year in the presidency. Bartlet's health deteriorates throughout the series, but is seen as a heroic figure that fights through difficult ethical issues with poise (Azad, 2008; Dursin, 2017).

The two biggest complaints against *The West Wing* are its eternal optimism in the goodness of people (Ulrich, 2014), and its unfailing liberal interpretation of the current political climate. Characters in the show believe in the power of American democracy (Lehmann, 2001; Dursin, 2017). The liberalism of *The West Wing* makes it hard to accept many of the premises of the show for its detractors (Podhoretz, 2003). This idealism leaves viewers either wanting more in order to feel nostalgic, or dismissing the show entirely (Mouton, 2003).

For everything overtly positive about the political process represented in *The West Wing*, *House of Cards* represents a cynical interpretation of politics. *House of Cards* is a drama produced for and exclusively available on Netflix. It is an adaptation of a 1990 four-part BBC miniseries. *House of Cards* ran for six seasons, and won seven Emmy awards while having 56 nominations. *House of Cards* presents, at best, a Machiavellian perspective on politics. It begins with a Congressman, Frank Underwood, who has been spurned for the Secretary of State position declaring that he will get even. Over the next few seasons of the show through murders and back room politics, Underwood becomes the Vice President. Eventually, Underwood becomes the president after convincing the president to resign. However, all of Frank Underwood's schemes start to become public and he resigns the presidency leaving the job to his wife, Claire. The online appendix presents a deeper character and plot description of *The West Wing* and *House of Cards*.

The one character in *The West Wing*, Josh Lyman, who engages in realpolitik regularly is scolded for this behavior. He gets into trouble for pushing a Democratic member of Congress too far who ends up joining the Republican Party instead. While there are moments of "real" political behavior, it is treated as being unbecoming of those in the White House. The characters speak with moral clarity and high-minded devotion in a profession that regularly lacks it, and they speak ill of the main character to display this dispassionate view of power—John Hoynes who becomes a disgraced former Vice President (Lehmann, 2003). In contrast, opposing figures in *House of Cards* become sympathetic because they are so thoroughly dismantled by the Underwoods. While disagreement in *The West Wing* remains mostly professional, it is hard to feel bad for the other side. Yet, it is nearly impossible to have much respect for either Frank or Claire Underwood based simply on how they treat others throughout *House of Cards*.

The shows by themselves do not present an accurate or complete picture of the American political system. *The West Wing* simplifies the political process to what happens inside the White House, almost entirely ignoring Congress or other bureaucratic actors. *House of Cards* shows the legislative process and politics inside the Executive branch. On

this count, *House of Cards* presents a more complete picture of politics than *The West Wing*.

House of Cards creates a system where a singular figure (or two) can literally ruin the American electoral system while the rest of the political class has almost no agency itself to fight these central figures. *The West Wing* has storylines in which the protagonists do not win all the time. In *House of Cards* there is very little discussion about policy from a normative perspective where competing views debate about what is best for the country, whereas this occurs regularly in *The West Wing*. On this front, *The West Wing* is a more accurate indicator of the political system than *House of Cards*.

At the risk of oversimplification, *The West Wing* presents an unfailing positive view of American democracy. It is a caricature of what *could* be. It presents a view of American democracy and government that is not consistent with Federalist Papers number ten and 51 because it expects too few factions and too little political gamesmanship. On the other hand, *House of Cards* presents an unfailing negative perspective on power and the political process. It is an oversimplification of our worst fears about politicians. Yet, it assumes there are no other politicians able to check the power of leaders gone awry. It takes a journalist to dig into Frank Underwood's lies to determine his corrupt and illegal activities. *House of Cards* is unrealistic not because people want power but because there are too few people to check the behavior of Frank and Claire Underwood.

Yet, these shows balance each other in that their weaknesses are clear and they present discussions on complex issues we still debate today. *The West Wing* and *House of Cards* have storylines devoted to privacy, the death penalty, electioneering, foreign policy, and identity politics. The shows also highlight conversations about Constitutional issues related to the power of Congress and the Presidency. In short, while the shows are by themselves imperfect representations of the political process, taken together they provide material to critically engage the strengths and the weaknesses of our Constitutional system.

Both of these programs were popular dramas and won awards for their acting and technical direction. Therefore, they provide opportunities for emotional engagement (Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan, & Tower, 2005), which will hopefully increase interest in the material. Doing this allows students to analyze the shows and evaluate the relative accuracy of their devotion to the American system. This is often difficult to accomplish in an introductory political science classroom (Damron & Mott, 2005).

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

The primary concerns for most faculty teaching an introductory course such as Introduction to American Government are that many students will be uninterested in the material, unengaged in the class, and will not learn or retain information. Television shows and film can be a great benefit to a classroom environment through increasing engagement, connection to information, and at least self-reported knowledge about the topic. However, the choice of material is important (Gokcek & Howard, 2013; Brandle,

2020), and it must be done with careful consideration of the goals to be met. In general, we know that classroom engagement, retention of information, and class performance are related to each other (Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Brandle, 2020). Further, political science courses that engage and are accessible to students increase political interest (Hoffman & Young, 2011).

College students today have lower political interest than students a generation ago (Longo & Meyer, 2006; Milner, 2010). The generation coming of age today is less likely to talk about politics with friends or vote even as social media often highlights the importance of politics in our lives (Milner, 2010; Wattenberg, 2012). This lack of political interest is often ingrained in students' minds based largely on the experiences and the environment in which they grew up (Lawrason, 2017). This is especially troublesome considering that one is likely to form their political opinions that will influence them throughout life at a time when they are uninterested in learning about the political world (Young et al., 2021). Students of public opinion in American politics are well aware that many Americans have, at best, a cursory knowledge of the facts of the game let alone the context of politics (Converse, 1990; Kinder & Kalmoe, 2017). Yet, we know that taking a political science course can have a positive impact on how much interest one has in politics (Hillygus, 2005), especially if the course effectively uses popular culture references (Deets, 2009; Gokcek & Howard, 2013).

Student engagement in the classroom is one of the most important predictors of student outcomes in the course (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). However, it is difficult to predict, define, and explain engagement in the classroom (Kuh, 2001; Handelsman et al., 2005; Albert, Pettit, & Terry, 2016). Handelsman et al. (2005) find that self-reports of engagement relate to the four dimensions of building skills, participation, emotional engagement, and performance engagement. Further, they find that emotional engagement, which is strongly related to finding ways to make the course material relevant and applying it to one's life, has the strongest relationship with end of class engagement self-reports. While the evidence that higher engagement leads to better grades is unclear (Handelsman et al., 2005; Brandle, 2020), one can argue that at the least students enjoy the course more (Brandle, 2020), and it leads to better classroom interaction (Centellas, 2010).

Another goal of the general education classroom is to increase the retention of information taught in the survey course. This is especially difficult when discussing politics because many students are uninterested in the subject, which makes it less likely that students store information about the topic in long-term memory (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008). Scholars have found that increasing student interest and engagement in the course material does lead to higher retention of information (Young, Carranza, & Perrin, 2018). McCarthy (2014) provides evidence of statistically significant improvements in student learning for both games and simulations over lecture-based classes for international politics courses. Political comedy has been shown to generate familiarity with politics which increases interest and leads to greater information about the political world (Lawrason, 2017). Thus, it seems clear that different types of learning opportunities

allow for a better chance of retaining information in a classroom as well as building critical thinking skills (Damron & Mott, 2005).

Yet, this does not neatly correlate to increasing political knowledge, which is another goal of most introductory political science courses. In general, it is difficult to meaningfully determine political knowledge through the use of a static battery of questions (Montgomery & Cutler, 2013). This is even more accurate when comparing across classrooms as instructors focus on different components in their introductory political science courses (Beaumont, Cogley, Ehrlic, & Torney-Purta, 2006). As a result, supposedly objective measures of political knowledge are a problematic way of testing student understanding. Using clips from a show and not connecting it to the broader themes does not lead to more knowledge about the topic than simply taking the course (Leckrone, 2013). Brandle (2020) found that the introduction of different content did not increase course or exam grades, but it did improve learning through self-reflections and more detailed written assignments. Baumgartner & Morris (2008) summarize that engaging teaching styles may not increase test scores, but these styles do increase political interest and self-reported knowledge about politics.

One of the primary ways that instructors seek to successfully engage students is through the use of different entertaining media in the classroom (Lawrason, 2017). Dramatic shows, and entertainment in general, have proven to be effective ways to teach students about politics (Beavers, 2003; Soper, 2010). Popular culture, such as television shows or movies, can produce better grades, retention of information, and student enjoyment of the course (Simpson & Kaussler, 2009; Lobasz & Valeriano, 2015). As Engert and Spencer (2009) find, the use of film can help teach students about a variety of different aspects related to the political arena. This extends to discussions about theoretical explanations for behavior (Simpson & Kaussler, 2009).

Most of the discussion above relates specifically to International Relations courses rather than American Politics courses; but, some cautionary advice exists concerning the use of film or television in the classroom. Some have found that focusing on one or two specific shows allows students to better understand the themes and issues because they build an understanding about the backstory (Beavers, 2003; Deets, 2009). One does not need to show an entire episode or movie in order to effectively use visual media in the classroom (Paddock, Terra Nova, & Giles, 2001; Waalkes, 2003). The use of visual media is not a panacea. The use of movies or television shows does not alone make teaching effective (Brandle, 2020), instead it must be paired with active discussion to keep students from passively viewing material and missing the broader points (Gokcek & Howard, 2013).

Little academic research exists on *House of Cards* (Sorlin, 2016), but several scholars have studied using *The West Wing* in a variety of different avenues including teaching (Rollins & O'Connor, 2003; Journell & Buchanan, 2012; Journell, 2013). One of the reasons that *The West Wing* generates conversation in classrooms is the passion about policy that is not seen among many politicians (Beavers, 2003). The show also highlights a civic responsibility that does not exist in popular culture, thereby encouraging students to

engage in the political process (Beavers, 2003; Ulrich, 2014). *The West Wing* invites viewers to disagree with it primarily because of its clear ideological bent and can help students on both sides of the political aisle understand the importance of dialogue (Mouton, 2003). However, this discussion can be too fast for some students, necessitating a teacher to stop and discuss context (Journell & Buchanan, 2012). Popular culture shows like *The West Wing* or *Borgen* have a high degree of content overlap with political journalism (Nitsch et al. 2019); but, do not have an impact on real-world political discussion or coverage (Boukes, Aalbers, & Anderson, 2020). Overall, *The West Wing* provides instructors with the opportunity to build civic skills and create political discussion with students, especially when one connects the show to real events and offers repeated opportunities to engage with the show (Journell & Buchanan, 2012; Journell, 2013). However, *The West Wing* requires the instructor to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the show with students in order for them to critically engage with the show (Popejoy, 2010).

4 HYPOTHESES

Building off the literature review, there are several hypotheses about the use of *The West Wing* and *House of Cards* in an Introduction to American Politics course that I test. Evidence indicates that film, when used carefully, can play an important role in how students think about the content of the course. However, since the two shows present a different image of American democracy, I believe the effects will be dependent on which show is used in the class. Anecdotally, students would discuss *The West Wing* as if it existed in a different time period; and, for them, it does. To many students, *House of Cards* represents a more accurate interpretation of politics than *The West Wing*.

The use of television shows that encourage discussion and make the course content come alive will increase overall interest in politics. A generation of students became engaged with politics due to *The West Wing* (Weiner, 2012; Journell & Buchanan, 2013; Davis, 2015). There is no existing data on the impact of *House of Cards* for students. Personally, many students have discussed an interest in the show as a launching point to the study of politics. However, *House of Cards* shows the pejorative view of politics that many people have. As a result, I expect students to have higher levels of political interest after completing a course that uses *The West Wing*, but not *House of Cards*. When a course utilizes both *The West Wing* and *House of Cards*, I expect students to have increased interest after the course. This is because engaging material often creates a higher interest in the course material (Deets, 2009; Gokcek & Howard, 2013). I do not expect an effect when using only *House of Cards* in class because of its negative portrayal of politics.

Hypothesis one: Students will report increased interest in politics when the course utilizes The West Wing.

Hypothesis two: Students will report increased interest in politics when the course incorporates both television shows compared to the baseline.

The West Wing may increase student interest in politics, but it rarely addresses things outside of presidential politics. On the other hand, *House of Cards* spends more time in legislative politics, realpolitik, and allows students to understand motivations of rational actors more clearly. As a result, I believe that students will report learning more about politics through a semester utilizing *House of Cards* than in *The West Wing* condition or the baseline semester. I do not expect students to report learning more about politics when using *The West Wing* due to its optimistic vision of democracy. Similar to Hypothesis two, I expect the effects of *House of Cards* to overshadow the lack of effects for *The West Wing* when testing how much students learn.

I will test both self-reported learning about politics as well as student performance in class. I will look at more objective measures of knowledge in the form of exam grades and final course grades, with the belief that these are imperfect measures of knowledge to determine if the effects are perceived, grade impacted, or both (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; Brandle, 2020). As a result, I will test performance in the course in each of the conditions, but do not have expectations about the outcome.

Hypothesis three: Students will report knowing more about the political process following a course that incorporates House of Cards compared to the baseline.

Hypothesis four: Students will report knowing more about the political process following a course that incorporates both television shows compared to the baseline.

As noted above, research indicates that popular culture increases classroom engagement. The use of dramatic shows like *The West Wing* and *House of Cards* encourages students to stay actively involved in the course. Students will be able to relate the content of the course to the clips shown, thereby increasing interest in the academic content of the course. I expect to find that students believe classroom engagement is more important for success in the class when using these clips. I will also look at end of semester evaluation comments to determine how engaging the course material was to students.

Hypothesis five: Students will report believing classroom engagement is more important in conditions where either show is used compared to the baseline condition.

5 DESIGN

The research for this paper uses Introduction to American Politics courses at a small regional public university in the upper Midwest of the United States. The student body is largely conservative as many come from rural areas. Further, the university has a large percentage of students who study criminal justice with the Introduction to American politics being required for students in that major. The criminal justice degree prepares students for jobs in law enforcement or corrections and is known mostly as a career preparation program for the university.

Because I want to test three different treatments, the study takes place over four different semesters. The first semester, Spring 2017, enrolled 33 students and did not incorporate any of the videos and will be treated as the baseline condition. The second semester, Fall 2017, used *The West Wing* only and had 49 students enrolled. The third semester of the study, Spring 2018, enrolled 28 students and used only *House of Cards*. The final semester, Fall 2018, had 58 students enrolled in the course and used both *The West Wing* and *House of Cards*. Using the four-semester treatment allows me to look at the effects of each show individually and corporately on political interest, accumulation of knowledge, and classroom engagement.

Table one presents summary statistics about the students enrolled in the course each semester. According to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) the university is balanced between men and women, but it is not surprising that the majority of students in this class identify as male given the majors that feed into the class. The percentage of underclassmen who took the class is also not surprising given it is a 100-level course. One notices the percentage of students who are criminal justice majors taking the class is higher in fall semesters than in spring semesters, but the overall percentage of students who are taking it for that reason or as a general education course is at least 89% in each semester. University wide, 14% of students are 25 or older, and that reflects the average of 14.3% of students in the class who are non-traditional. Finally, 85% of the student body at the university identifies as white, which is consistent with the demographics of the class. Overall, the student body of this university is not representative of college students overall; but, the demographics of the class are representative of the university with the exception of gender.

Table 1. Demographics of students in introduction to American politics

Variable	Spring 2017 (Baseline)	Fall 2017 (<i>WW</i>)	Spring 2018 (<i>HOC</i>)	Fall 2018 (both)	Total
Percent Female	30.3%	46.9%	39.3%	36.2%	38.7%
Percent Underclassmen	72.7%	69.4%	71.4%	60.3%	67.3%
Percent Criminal Justice	45.5%	61.2%	50.0%	63.8%	57.1%
Percent General Education	48.5%	30.6%	39.3%	34.5%	36.9%
Percent Non-Traditional	9.1%	12.2%	21.4%	15.5%	14.3%
Percent Non-White	12.1%	16.3%	10.7%	12.1%	13.1%

I used carefully curated clips and episodes of *The West Wing* and *House of Cards*, presented in the online appendix, to highlight broader themes and then encouraged debriefing in a multitude of ways. In short, the clips revolved around units of the course and were focused on highlighting main aspects of that unit that were more conceptual in nature. The goal was to provide students with a dramatic example of an important concept that is sometimes difficult to understand. They focused on examples of filibusters which

is an important thing to explain about the U.S. Senate, the power of the Supreme Court, the dynamics between Congress and the Presidency and how that plays into policy confrontations. Clips were also chosen to look at themes of free speech, human nature and the ability to have self-government, and the potential success of a Constitutional democracy.

In the baseline condition I did not have students watch clips from these shows. In the *West Wing* condition (Fall 2017), students would watch one clip or episode for each chapter of the textbook. In the *House of Cards* condition (Spring 2018), students would watch one clip or episode of the show for each chapter of the textbook. And, in the final condition (Fall 2018), students watched one clip from each show. More discussion on the specific clips is in the Online Appendix, but students did watch the first episode of each show in the first week of the course in order to understand more about the characters in the show.

When tasked with watching an entire episode, students would watch it outside of class, but I would show clips in the middle of a lecture to break up the conversation. I would routinely refer back to the clips and relate them explicitly to content. Students were expected to write answers, outside of class and in attendance checks, about how the clips and episodes relate to the broader themes of the chapter and the course. Finally, students were also tasked with discussing the clips and episodes watched outside of class and how they relate to material from the chapter during the beginning of the lecture with a time to reflect on “Big Picture Questions“ of the day. This repeated use of connection allows students to move beyond the entertainment aspect of the shows and into the deeper goal of understanding more about the nature of the American political system with these shows as one avenue to do so.

Students were required to watch these clips for five chapters and answer questions about the clips as a component of the final grade equaling about eight percent. However, they did receive extra credit for completing work related to ten chapters. The majority of questions were factual, to ensure that students did in fact watch the clips, but the questions always ended with a broader question about the connection between the clip and the chapter. There was one student out of the 168 who did not have access to Netflix. As a result, I worked with the resident advisor to have this student borrow a log in for the semester.

I measure the hypotheses primarily through the use of a pre-test and post-treatment method. At the beginning of the course, students were asked a series of questions on a “get to know you form“ which allows me to know more about their reason for taking the course as well as their general interest and self-reported knowledge about the American political system. They are the same questions I ask of students at the end of the semester in a quick and anonymous survey, which can be found in the online appendix. Doing this allows me to test the difference in answers from the beginning of the semester to the end of the semester. This will be the primary means by which I test hypotheses one and two.

I will use the pre-test and post-treatment surveys alongside looking at exam grades and

final grades in the class to test hypotheses three and four which looked at increasing knowledge about politics. There were a series of overlapping factual questions about American government throughout the four semesters, and I will compare how each class did on these overlapping questions. I will also look at final exam grades even though this is an imperfect measurement of classroom learning (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; Brandle, 2020). To test hypothesis five about classroom engagement, I will use the pre-test and post-treatment surveys. I will also incorporate student responses from the assignments throughout the semester.

The use of surveys from the beginning and the end of the semester allows me to compare the effect of the treatment within a class. I also use a difference in difference test to compare the effect sizes for each condition where it appears a significant difference may occur. I did not ask questions specifically about the use of the shows on engagement, political interest, or political knowledge. However, the course was taught the same way to students in each of the courses and the only change was the use of clips based on the condition. As a result, I feel confident stating a marked change compared to the baseline condition is indicative of the shows. I also do not look at individual students because the final survey was done anonymously due to university rules so I cannot match student views at the beginning of the semester to the end of the semester.

6 FINDINGS

The first hypothesis argues that students will be more interested in politics when *The West Wing* is utilized throughout the course, and the second hypothesis argues that students will have more political interest when in the class that incorporates both shows compared to the baseline condition. Table two presents the measurement of political interest based on the question “Would you consider yourself interested in American politics, why or why not?” that students were asked at the beginning and the end of the semester. The numbers are not consistent throughout the semester because the number of students enrolled in the course is different from the number attending the first day (pre-test) and those attending the last day of the semester (post-test).

Students in the spring 2017 semester indicated the highest level of interest in American politics at the beginning of the semester. At a university that skews conservative this could have some to do with the beginning of the Trump administration stemming from the 2016 campaign where people were highly engaged in political discussion throughout the semester. In general, students in the fall semester had lower scores on political interest than students in the spring semester, which is most likely the result of a higher percentage of students who were criminal justice majors and were required to take the course.

I can compare the answers provided directly since they are the same question in each instance. While it would be nice—or simplistic—to assume random variance to explain those who completed the course at the beginning but did not at the end it is hard to do so. However, at least one study has found that while response rates are lower for online evaluations (which the university uses), the average responses are not systematically

different from in class evaluations (Donmeyer, Baum, Hanna, & Chapman, 2004). As a result, I compare the results from the beginning to the end of the semester with the understanding that it is not a perfect metric.

Table 2. Student political interest

Variable	Spring 2017 (Baseline)	Fall 2017 (<i>WW</i>)	Spring 2018 (<i>HOC</i>)	Fall 2018 (both)	Total
Interest in politics beginning of semester	4.09	3.79	3.69	3.62	3.78
Total number completing form beginning of semester (standard deviation)	33 (0.91)	48 (0.94)	26 (0.84)	55 (0.81)	162 (0.89)
Interest in politics end of semester	4.04	4.05	3.37	4.02	3.93
Total number completing form end of semester (standard deviation)	24 (0.46)	34 (0.69)	19 (0.60)	43 (0.71)	120 (0.68)
Mean difference	-0.049	0.267	-0.324	0.405	0.156
Standard error of difference	0.185	0.181	0.214	0.153	0.093

One sees a slight and insignificant decrease during the baseline condition for interest in politics. This may be attributed to the rocky beginning of the Trump administration at a conservative school. There is a measurable increase in reported interest in politics in *The West Wing* condition from 3.79 to 4.06 ($p=.07$ one tailed). The hypothesis argues students would report being more interested in politics after the semester than in the baseline condition. Therefore, I did a difference in difference test between the beginning and the end for the Spring 2017 condition and the Fall 2017 condition. There is a significant difference in the treatment effect of interest in politics for students in Fall 2017 compared to those receiving neither show in the Spring 2017 semester ($p < .001$).

Student interest in politics actually decreases in the *House of Cards* condition, which is unexpected but makes sense given the discussion above about the show and its view of the political process. Students are significantly less likely to be interested in politics after the semester with only *House of Cards*. In the final condition, with both shows, we see that student interest in politics increases from 3.62 at the beginning of the semester to a 4.02 at the end ($p=.005$ one tailed). This highlights that *The West Wing* does increase interest in politics for students. Now, the fall 2018 semester also saw a statewide election taking place which had a marijuana proposition on the ballot that may have increased interest. Many students were against this proposition, because of the large percentage of criminal justice students. Using the difference in difference approach one sees there is a significant difference in the treatment effect from Fall 2018 compared to Spring 2017. Thus, hypotheses one and two are confirmed.

Hypotheses three and four make a corollary argument about political knowledge, but it is *House of Cards* that increases knowledge rather than *The West Wing*. Table three presents self-reported knowledge of politics based on the question, “Would you consider yourself knowledgeable about politics, why or why not?” Students feel less confident in their knowledge of politics than they feel interested in politics. The median student chose the neutral score in all three semesters of the study. Very few students, less than ten percent believe they are not very knowledgeable about politics.

Table 3. Student knowledge of politics

Variable	Spring 2017 (Baseline)	Fall 2017 (<i>WW</i>)	Spring 2018 (<i>HOC</i>)	Fall 2018 (both)	Total
Self-reported knowledge beginning of semester	3.18	3.10	3.27	3.22	3.19
Total number completing form beginning of semester (standard deviation)	33 (0.73)	48 (0.78)	26 (0.78)	55 (0.92)	162 (0.81)
Self-reported knowledge end of semester	3.38	3.26	3.74	3.37	3.40
Total number completing form end of semester (standard deviation)	24 (0.71)	34 (0.71)	19 (0.73)	43 (0.79)	120 (0.75)
Mean difference	0.193	0.161	0.468	0.154	0.215
Standard error of difference	0.192	0.166	0.227	0.172	0.094

The only condition where there is a measurable improvement ($p = .023$ one tailed) in self-reported knowledge is the *House of Cards* condition where the mean score increased from 3.27 to 3.74. The difference in difference testing between the *House of Cards* condition and the baseline condition shows there is a significant improvement in student’s perceived knowledge gain ($p < .001$). In the semester with both being used, there is an insignificant increase in perceived knowledge from 3.21 to 3.37, which indicates that Hypothesis four can be rejected. Students are significantly ($p = .011$ one tailed) more likely to report increased political knowledge at the end of the semester compared to the whole semester when all four conditions are combined.

Self-reported knowledge is only one measure of knowledge, so I look at course grades as another way of testing hypotheses three and four. First, I compared similar questions on multiple choice exams. The course uses three exams throughout the semester with 30 multiple-choice questions on each exam. Out of 90 possible overlapping questions there were 37 questions that appeared in all four semesters of the experiment. I keep record of how students score on each question to determine its validity as a construct, which allows me to determine the percentage that students get on the 37 questions. I only compared

students who completed all three exams, but the final median grade and standard deviation includes all students registered for the course. Table four presents the median multiple-choice score for each of the semesters, as well as the median percent as a final grade in the course.

Table 4. Grade distribution by semester

Variable	Spring 2017 (Baseline)	Fall 2017 (WW)	Spring 2018 (HOC)	Fall 2018 (both)
Median multiple-choice percent (Standard deviation of percent)	71.1% (11.8%)	74.4% (7.6%)	76.1% (10.5%)	70% (11.2%)
Median percent of final grade (Standard deviation of final grade)	75.7% (21.1%)	83.9% (9.3%)	87.0% (20.9%)	80.4% (11.6%)
Percent getting A or B	42.3%	75%	68.9%	51.7%
Percent D or F	34.6%	8.3%	24.1%	17.2%
Total number completing all three exams	27	45	22	56

When doing a t-test to compare final grades between the baseline condition and the *House of Cards* condition, Students in the *House of Cards* only condition performed much better than students in the baseline condition ($p=.02$ one tailed). When comparing the 37 common multiple-choice questions, this effect is marginally significant as well ($p=.062$ one tailed). It is possible students in the Spring 2018 condition were “better“ students overall than students in the Spring 2017 condition, but these two groups are fairly similar overall (Table one). To check more clearly if there is a difference in the quality of students between the two conditions, I looked at the overall GPA of students enrolled in each course. The mean GPA of students in the spring 2017 class is 2.56 (SD= 0.862), and for the spring 2018 class it is 2.687 (SD= 1.032). A t-test indicates there is no statistical difference in overall GPA between the two classes. As a result, we can be fairly confident that the use of *House of Cards* had an impact on overall student performance in the class and increased perceived knowledge over the semester compared to the baseline group. Thus, we confirm hypothesis three. However, we reject hypothesis four as there is no discernable difference between the fall 2018 class and the spring 2017 class in knowledge.

Hypothesis five argues that students will believe classroom engagement is more important to one’s grade at the end of the class when film is used compared to the baseline condition. Students were asked to answer the following question, “How much would you agree with the following statement: Participation in classroom discussions is important for doing well in the course.” Table Five shows the distribution of scores for this measurement before and at the end of the semester. There is no discernible effect with this measurement of the importance of engagement. Anecdotally, students reported

enjoying the use of clips in the class and the classes with the shows were easier to teach given the discussion in the class. Many would comment on specific scenes or indicate they began watching the shows as a result of their use in class. While I do believe the use of these shows did increase student engagement in the course, one must reject the fifth hypothesis given the data that is accessible.

Table 5. Student engagement in class

Variable	Spring 2017 (Baseline)	Fall 2017 (<i>WW</i>)	Spring 2018 (<i>HOC</i>)	Fall 2018 (both)	Total
Importance of engagement beginning of semester	3.82	3.54	3.77	3.51	3.62
Total number completing form beginning of semester (standard deviation)	33 (1.05)	48 (1.07)	26 (0.99)	55 (0.84)	162 (0.98)
Importance of engagement end of semester	3.92	3.56	3.84	3.65	3.71
Total number completing form end of semester (standard deviation)	24 (0.65)	34 (0.99)	19 (0.96)	43 (0.78)	120 (0.85)
Mean difference	0.098	0.017	0.073	0.142	0.085
Standard error of difference	0.226	0.229	0.294	0.164	0.109

7 CONCLUSION

The goal of this project is to determine a way to increase student interest in politics, knowledge of politics, and be more engaged throughout the class. The typical Introduction to American Politics course has a plurality (if not majority) of students who take the course to satisfy a general education requirement rather than having a deep interest in the subject. The way I have sought to increase interest, knowledge, and engagement is through the use of two well-known dramatic shows in *The West Wing* and *House of Cards*.

The research shows that using *The West Wing* does increase student interest in politics, even if it is paired with *House of Cards*. By itself, *House of Cards* decreases student interest in politics. I believe this is primarily due to the fact that *The West Wing* presents a positive depiction of American democracy, while the one portrayed in *House of Cards* is negative. On the other hand, *House of Cards* does appear to increase student's perceived knowledge as well as performance in the class. *The West Wing* does not appear to increase student knowledge of politics. This indicates that the two shows can be used together to increase knowledge and interest in politics. However, at this point, the perfect balance regarding the use of each show has not been met and requires more testing.

Finally, given the quantitative data at hand, there is not a measurable increase in the importance of classroom engagement when using these shows. I believe further research

with different measures of classroom engagement will change this finding. Future work should look at how the use of these shows increases actual student participation in classroom discussions. It could also look at end of semester evaluations regarding active participation in class to determine if classroom engagement increases with the use of these clips.

There are a few implications of this project on teaching. First, as others have found, simply using material from popular shows is not enough to find effects of interest. Second, there appears to be a difference between perceived interest in the material and memory of the material. Students were more interested in politics because of *The West Wing*, but evidence indicates they learned more from *House of Cards*. Teaching is obviously a mix between information and engagement, but this highlights that even popular content has different effects. Finally, this shows that political science classrooms can incorporate material and have a marked effect on student performance. This suggests it is important to continue studying the effects of dramatic and popular content on the way in which students learn about the political world.

Another interesting avenue for future research is to include other television shows that can highlight different aspects of the political scene. Students have asked about shows like *Madam Secretary*, *VEEP*, *Designated Survivor*, or *Scandal*. One of the positives is that students would be able to see a broader range of issues and discussions about topics. However, it may be difficult to feel a sense of understanding about the broader themes of the show with more being used. Thus, a potential avenue for future research is to test different shows and in different amounts to determine what increases knowledge, interest, and classroom engagement.

Further, this research does not address shows outside of the United States. While the university where research took place did have roughly 10% of the student body attend from international locations, individual level data is not available to the author. From research by international relations scholars (Engert & Spencer 2009; Lobasz & Valeriano, 2015; and Young et al., 2018), one can deduce that the effects of popular culture on classroom instruction are consistent. But, whether or not these effects are consistent with televisions in another context is beyond the scope of this study. Future research should continue to disentangle the effects of popular television on political interest, knowledge, and classroom engagement in a broad array of contexts.

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