Does My Favourite Political Television Series Make Me Cynical?

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ABSTRACT

Background  In recent decades, scholars have become increasingly concerned about rising political cynicism. This study tests whether people exposed to political television series become more cynical.

Analysis  Three groups of participants are exposed to the first episode of two political series (House of Cards and The West Wing) and one non-political series (The Big Bang Theory). Their level of political cynicism is measured before and after exposure to the episode.

Conclusions and implications  Results indicate that not all political television series have the same impact on their audiences: series recognized for their intense negativity increase people's level of cynicism, while those portraying politics in a positive way do not have any impact. More sophisticated participants did not seem to react differently, as political knowledge does not moderate the impact upon cynicism.

Keywords  Media/mass media effects; Political cynicism; Audience reception; Political television series; Experiment

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte  Depuis quelques décennies, les chercheurs se préoccupent de l'augmentation du cynisme politique. Dans cette étude, nous testons si les gens exposés aux séries politiques télévisées deviennent plus cyniques.

Analyse  Nous avons conçu une expérience au cours de laquelle trois groupes de participants ont été exposés au premier épisode de deux séries politiques (House of Cards et The West Wing) et d'une série apolitique (The Big Bang Theory). Leur niveau de cynisme politique a été mesuré avant et après l'exposition à l'épisode.

Conclusions et implications  Les résultats indiquent que toutes les séries politiques télévisées n'ont pas le même impact sur leurs publics: les séries reconnues pour leur négativité intense augmentent le niveau de cynisme des gens, tandis que celles décrivant la politique d'une façon positive n'ont pas d'impact. Le niveau de connaissance politique n'a pas modéré l'impact des séries sur le cynisme.

Mots clés  Effets des médias/médias de masse; Cynisme politique; Réception par l'auditoire; Séries politiques télévisées; Expérience

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Introduction

Cynicism, and political cynicism in particular, has long received the attention of scholars (Agger, Goldstein, & Pearl, 1961; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Miller, 1974; Norris, 2000). News media are often seen as a powerful factor in the development of political cynicism (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), although opinions are divided, as some authors argue about the benefits of the media as a “virtuous circle” (Norris, 2000; Prior, 2007).

Political television series have large audiences and receive a lot of attention, not only from their viewers but also from politicians; President Obama declared himself a fan of House of Cards and even tweeted about it (Lombardi, 2014). But political series are raising a number of discussions about their content and their potential effects (Maloney, 2016; Melber, 2013; Murphy, 2013). How is the positive or negative fictional portrait of politicians and politics affecting people’s attitudes and opinions?

Numerous studies have been dedicated to the effects of news (television and print) as well as entertainment media (especially talk shows). Academically speaking, it is high time to extend the study of media effects outside news and nonfictional media. “Purely dramatic fictional television has been largely ignored by scholars interested in the political impact of mass media; studies of media and politics focus almost exclusively on news and public affairs programming” (Mutz & Nir, 2010, p. 197).

Research on political television series may shed light on new social and cultural practices and help us better understand whether, how, and why they affect people’s attitudes about politics.

This study addresses one crucial question: do political television series make people more (or less) cynical toward politics? This question is examined through an experiment involving two of the most popular political series: House of Cards and The West Wing.

House of Cards is a Netflix political series, focused on the life and ascension to power of Frank Underwood. American politics is depicted in various instances, along with Underwood’s advancement from congress to the presidency. Viewers quickly learn that, in order to succeed in politics, one needs to cheat, manipulate, lie, crush their enemies, and even commit murder. A unique feature of the series is the way Frank Underwood communicates directly with audience members, looking straight at the camera, addressing them directly, explaining his next move, and letting them be a part of his plans and conscience. Negativity and cynicism are omnipresent, and many of Underwood’s statements are evidence of that: “Politics is no longer theater, it’s show business. So let’s put on the best show in town.” (Season 1, episode 1) “The road to power is paved with hypocrisy, and casualties.” (Season 2, episode 9) “Democracy is so overrated.” (Season 2, episode 2). The White House is the world of “dirty politics,” political actors are self-centred characters, voters are manipulated, while viewers are given the impression of having a glimpse of behind the scenes.

On the other hand, The West Wing can be characterized as “political romance,” (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2006, p. 21), due to the high level of positivity, the depiction of White House staff as highly competent, and especially because of the main character, the fictional president of the United States, Josiah (Jed) Bartlet, who manages to some-
how save the day in each episode. *The West Wing* was seen by many as an ideal depiction of American politics, the kind of politics and politicians that people wish to have: “Jed Bartlet and his acolytes were always more progressive, more intelligent and much fairer than what Democrats at the time were experiencing in real life” (Moylan, 2016). As opposed to *House of Cards*, *The West Wing* seems a political utopia, where moral principles and democratic values guide politicians.

Political television series can be considered “politicotainment” programs, a genre that “denotes the ways in which politics and political life are interpreted, negotiated and represented by the entertainment industry” (Riegert, 2007, p. 1). The background of the plot and the evolution of the characters offer a reinterpreted, fictional depiction of politics. Diana Mutz and Lilach Nir (2010) refer to “fictional television drama” that does not pretend to closely reflect reality and “has the potential to produce tremendous emotional and empathic reactions as a result of high levels of involvement in the storyline” (p. 201). Political television series share some of the characteristics of docudramas (e.g., *The Kennedys*) without the political documentary aspect, as they do not portray real events or political characters.

This article begins with a brief review of the pertinent literature, which leads to a discussion about the psychological mechanism through which political television series may have an impact on people’s cynicism and why there might be asymmetric effects. The next section presents the experiment and the results. It concludes with a discussion of some implications of the findings and the limitations of the experiment, as well as new research directions it opens.

**Political cynicism, the media malaise, and political TV series**

Political cynicism can be defined as “a mistrust generalized from particular leaders or political groups to the political process as a whole—a process perceived to corrupt the persons who participate in it and that draws corrupt persons as participants” (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997, p. 166). It “refers to the degree of negative affect toward the government and is a statement of the belief that the government is not functioning and producing outputs in accord with individual expectations” (Miller, 1974, p. 952). Other definitions include references to lack of confidence, negativism, and the disapproval of politicians as individuals, political parties, or politics in general (Erber & Lau, 1990). One of the most “extreme” definitions comes from Peggy Schyns, Margreet Nuus, and Hank Dekker (2004), who consider cynicism as “an individual’s attitude, consisting of a deep-rooted conviction of the inherent evilness of politicians, political institutions, and/or the political system as a whole” (p. 3). This last definition of cynicism may be the one best fitting the case of some political television series that, through their dramatic and strategically framed content, emphasize this dimension of “evilness” that Schyns et al. (2004) refer to.

The news media has been pointed to as one of the most important determinants of cynicism. Some scholars suggest that the way the media present politicians, their actions, and campaigns through an emphasis on strategic frames and negative tone, has a negative impact on the perceptions people have of politics. In *A Spiral of Cynicism*, Joseph Cappella and Kathleen Jamieson (1997) focus on the way the media frame the news that reaches the public: “both the contemporary journalistic culture and a focus
on strategy, conflict and motives invite cynicism” (p. 31). They highlight the distinction between strategic frames versus issue frames, as employed by the print and broadcast media in two major political events (the healthcare reform debate and the mayoral race for Philadelphia). Their multiple experiments are rigorously constructed. They offer many different tests (including print and broadcast media and a combination of the two) of their argument, thus strengthening the validity of their findings: people exposed to strategic frames in the media (negative content) are more cynical than those who are exposed to issue frames.

The other side of the debate highlights the positive effects of the media. Pippa Norris (2000) argues about a “virtuous circle” whereby the usage of news media increases political trust and knowledge, leading to mobilization. Her findings are based on a combination of content analyses (looking at newspapers and television in 15 states of the European Union) and surveys (National Election Studies [NES] and Eurobarometer surveys). The main problem that Norris (2000) could not solve is the direction of causality: does trust lead to exposure to the media, or does media exposure generate trust?

Beyond the news media, scholars have more recently acknowledged the role of infotainment programs. They often focus on television talk shows and how politicians work to build a “human” image and advocate for their campaign in easy, simple language, allowing them to reach the less informed (Baum, 2006). When it comes to the literature about fictional politics, there have been a number of studies interested in the relationship between Hollywood and Washington, but most of them examine how cinema uses political figures as box office subjects (Coyne, 2008; Morgan, 2011; Scott, 2011). There have also been studies on one of the most popular political television series, The West Wing, but they are content analyses ascertaining the veracity of the fake White House (Challen, 2001): how the image of the president is portrayed in a positive, optimistic way (Podhoretz, 2003), how actors playing politicians may have a word to say in politics as activists (Collins, 2007).

Some authors have gone further by discussing how a series such as The West Wing has the potential to improve the image of the president in the eyes of the population: “It is significant that Sorkin debuted The West Wing during the ‘moral disappointment’ of the Clinton presidency,” providing the “perfect antidote for a nation weary of human frailty in its ultimate leader” (Ezell, 2003, p. 160).

But current political television series are much more cynical. They range from comedy (VEEP) to soap opera (Scandal) to a drama of extremely dirty politics (House of Cards). The fictional genre is diversified and studies have already been exploring the potential effects of “non-news media.”

Michael Pfau, Patricia Moy, and Erin Alison Szabo (2001) use two different fictional series to observe the effects of television on people’s perceptions about the federal government, according to genre. The results show that science fiction series had a negative effect on people, making them lose confidence in federal institutions, while crime dramas series put federal institutions in a positive light, since the characters solve the cases and rehabilitate the good name of the people and institutions involved. Similarly, Kenneth Mulligan and Phillip Habel (2013) demonstrate how after watching the movie
Wag The Dog participants in their experimental treatment were influenced by what they saw and began to consider the U.S. government as being capable of creating a fake war and hiding information from its citizens.

Liesbet van Zoonen (2007) examines how political movies and television series trigger different comments from audiences, through a content analysis of comments people posted on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb). Her results show that fictional politics enable people to think about politics in four different ways: descriptive (talking about the content of the movie and sometimes comparing it to reality), reflective (people raise questions about political issues), judgmental (judgments upon politicians and events), and fantasy (people dream about ideal politics and politicians).

Why and how fictional politics may affect cynicism
This study explores two factors that are expected to produce differential effects on cynicism: the contrasting tone of the series and the level of political sophistication of the viewers. These factors could be explained by two plausible psychological mechanisms behind the effects of political television series: transportation and identification. The effect of a political television series on people’s cynicism depends on the tone it “uses” to portray political events and the type of politicians it promotes as its characters. This study reconsiders political television series (the plot, the dialogues that include political references, the political speeches of the characters, scenes depicting elections, negotiations in state affairs, even the characters themselves) according to their tone regarding politics.

Traditionally, the association between media and cynicism leads directly to blaming the use of strategic framing. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) define strategic news frames as those that “draw the audience’s attention to the motivations of the people depicted. In doing so, personal traits are automatically activated. With the focus on winning and losing and the self-interest implied by this orientation, the traits activated are likely to be negative ones indicative of artifice, pandering, deceit, staging and positioning for advantage—in general, mistrustfulness” (pp. 84–85). Toril Aalberg, Jesper Stromback and Claes H. de Vreese et al (2011) specify that “framing politics as a strategic game reflects journalism’s enduring focus on drama, conflict and negativity” (p. 164). Strategic framing is almost automatically associated with the use of a negative tone. The negative tonality is obvious for House of Cards, which emphasizes the evil nature of politicians and closely follows the career and ascension to power of Frank Underwood, a scheming, selfish character who would do anything for power. The scenes draw more attention to the character, activating negative personal traits, focusing on the winning-losing dimension, using war metaphors, and thus having the potential to create cynicism. Values and moral principles are mentioned solely to be mocked and are presented as weaknesses that make people vulnerable.

On the other hand, other political television series (less numerous) are promoting fictional political characters as the “good fellows.” No matter how many challenges they face, politicians struggle to maintain their honesty, make no evil compromises, and think and act in the interest of those who elected them. This appears to be the case for The West Wing, in which the main character, the president of the United States, seems to always consider the collective well-being of the people and is fond of his staff, which he respects and works with as a team and not individually for selfish interests.
The characters are depicted in a more human light, and problems are usually solved in an honest way, for the benefit of all. As opposed to *House of Cards*, *The West Wing* uses a positive tone to present its fictional political world. While in *House of Cards* the villain is winning, the good guys have the final word in *The West Wing*. Both series focus on politicians, the difference being that the politicians in *House of Cards* are very efficient in defending their own interests (e.g., Frank releases secret information to the press; the president breaks a promise regarding a nomination to the position of secretary of state), whereas in *The West Wing* the politicians perform in a more honest manner (e.g., the president gives an idealistic speech about Cuban immigrants, saying they will find freedom in the U.S.; in the last scene, the president says “vacation is over,” and sends everyone to work).¹

The effect of a television series on the cynicism of its viewers will be different depending on the type of tone. The main hypotheses are:

H₁: People exposed to the negative tone of a political television series (*House of Cards*) will become more cynical.

H₂: People exposed to the positive tone of a political television series (*The West Wing*) will become less cynical.

Stronger effects among some types of viewers are also expected. Studies on agenda setting, priming, and framing have shown that the “victims” of these effects have lower levels of political sophistication (Iyengar, 1991; Iyengar & Kinder, 2010). The same pattern will likely apply to political television series: less sophisticated citizens should be more vulnerable, as they are less well-equipped to make the distinction between reality and fiction, and will therefore be easier to “trick” into connecting fictional situations to real-life ones. Mutz and Nir (2010) make a clear distinction between viewers of news content (partisans, well-informed, and very engaged in politics) and viewers of fictional content (non-partisans, with low involvement and information). The former should be more resistant than the latter to the messages they receive (Zaller, 1992). In their study on the impact of strategic campaign coverage on turnout and confidence in government, Nicholas Valentino, Matthew Beckmann, and Thomas Buhr (2001) adopt an idea similar to Cappella and Jamieson's (1997), arguing that some people experience a spiral of cynicism, with less sophisticated people being more vulnerable. The results show that less sophisticated (less educated) people are more negatively affected by the metaphorical war language of the strategic frames. In terms of fictional content, Baum (2002) observed how politically inattentive citizens are easily fooled by social controversies presented in a dramatic way.

The level of sophistication should thus moderate the effects of media exposure, that is, the least sophisticated should more easily accept the tone of the series (either negative or positive). Therefore:

H₃: The impact of political television series is stronger among the least sophisticated.

Fictional content has the potential to create “inaccurate beliefs” and “skewed perceptions of the real world” (Mutz & Nir, 2010). Political television series may have such effects and their twisted scenarios can alter the viewer’s perception of reality. The
West Wing, with its high level of optimism and focus on the good human nature of the characters is a “too good to be true” story (McLean, 2001). House of Cards on the other hand, is considered as exaggerating cynical and negative aspects, potentially creating a distorted reality for viewers, where they perceive real politics as much more dirty, unfair, and selfish than it actually is (Murphy, 2013). Being transported in the action and identifying with the characters of these series may make it more difficult for the audience to distinguish how real the events presented on the screen are, enabling the potential effects of fictional politics on their attitudes and opinions.

The theory of transportation into a narrative world explains how easily people reading a book or watching a movie get immersed into the story and connect it to their own experiences. Political television series can “transport” people into a parallel political reality, making them more vulnerable to believing that the plot and the characters are “realistic.” Identification theory could also explain how people are affected by these series, “to identify with a character means seeing the character’s perspective as one’s own, to share his or her existence” (Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004, p. 319). Some studies have found signs of transportation and identification in the case of The West Wing, whereby fans “linked the show to their self-narratives and often interpreted and understood the show and its characters through their own real-life experiences” (Williams, 2011, p. 266). Rebecca Williams has also found that the priming and framing used in the series affect individual-level perceptions of the U.S. presidency. Mario Klarer (2014) writes about novel narration and the important role of storytelling in House of Cards, which could facilitate the transportation of the viewer into a fictional political world. Therefore, transportation and identification theories complement each other when it comes to potential mechanisms that could explain the effects of a political television series.

Methodology
This study relies on an experiment to examine the potential effects of a political television series on the audience’s level of cynicism: some participants were exposed to one of the two most well-known series of this genre: House of Cards or The West Wing. These programs have all the characteristics mentioned above: fictional content, strong fictional characters, action revolving around controversial political subjects, large numbers of viewers, as well as the presence of negative or positive tonality. In the post-viewing survey, one of the questions asked participants about the overall image the series they watched gave of politics on a 5-point scale ranging from “very negative” to “very positive.” The group watching The West Wing believed the series offers a positive image of politics (58%) and the one watching House of Cards thought the series offers a negative one (88%), confirming that participants perceived the two political series as intended by the researchers.

Experimental design
The experiment took place at the Université de Montréal between March 18 and April 8, 2016. Participants were mostly university students, representing a wide variety of departments, the large majority being enrolled in an undergraduate program. Sixty percent were women and forty percent were men. They were recruited via university
student associations, departments, and social networking sites. Posters and flyers were spread all around the campus. Participants were asked to be part of an innovative political science experiment involving popular television series (without giving the names of the series) for which they would receive a financial reward. They were asked to contact the researcher via email. Once they sent an email expressing their interest in participating, they were asked if they had already seen the three series (only those meeting the eligibility condition of not seeing any of the three series were retained). They were then offered details about the timetable of the experiment and were randomly assigned to one of the three groups. One important aspect is that they are Francophone students, their first language being French. Despite their nationality, showing participants series about American politics should not pose a problem for the design of the experiment, since this type of series is viewed worldwide. For example, House of Cards ranks number one among the political television series viewed in Europe in 20 out of 44 markets (Hegedus, 2016).

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three groups: the first group watched the political series House of Cards as the negative tone treatment (N = 61); the second group watched The West Wing as the positive tone treatment (N = 58); the third group watched the comedy series The Big Bang as the control (N = 61).

For each series the debut episode was chosen, which is typically more suitable for people who (like the participants in the experiment) have never seen any of these programs and are not familiar with the characters. The episodes were all in English, but had French subtitles so all the participants were able to fully understand them.

Participants in the first treatment group watched the inaugural episode of House of Cards (53 minutes) in which the viewers meet Frank Underwood, a democratic congressman who proudly prepares for his nomination as secretary of state. Facing the camera and speaking directly to the viewers, Underwood explains that he was the brains behind the election of the new president, who promised him the position of secretary of state in return. He soon discovers that the president is not keeping his part of the deal. Underwood devises a vindictive plan toward him and swears to never again be taken for a fool. His wife, Claire, accompanies him in his devious plans. The viewer also meets Zoe Barnes, a reporter who quickly becomes Underwood’s secret weapon and to whom he discloses secret information about a story that will destroy his opponents. The negative tone is present in various sequences: the conversation between Underwood and his wife in which they make plans for revenge and reveal their cold-hearted temperament, scenes where he explains directly to the audience how he is going to use people in his selfish plans, and other segments in which he uses the young journalist and she becomes a pawn in his game.

The second treatment consisted of the first episode of The West Wing (42 minutes), in which the viewer encounters the busy, fast-paced, and unexpected schedule of the staff at the White House. The main issue of the day is the scandal caused by the chief of staff, Josh Lyman, who got into a heated dispute on television with the head of a religious group, which may lead to his resignation. Although everyone keeps mentioning the name of the president, he appears only in the final minutes of the episode to put an end to the problem. Very calm and confident, President Josiah Bartlet’s first words are
(metaphorically very symbolic): “I am the Lord, your God, you shall worship no other God before me.” He puts an end to the conflict in a competent manner, and makes the religious representatives go away, even if it is in his interest to have them by his side in the elections. The strategic frame often presents politicians in a positive light: the president does not fire his chief of staff because he cares about him and gives him a second chance, he resists the claims of the religious group even if he would gain considerably from their support. The staff at the White House work as a true, functional team.

The control group watched the first episode of *The Big Bang Theory* (23 minutes), a popular television series that has nothing to do with politics and does not contain any references of a political nature (at least in this episode). The comedy series focuses on the life of two physicists, with outstanding knowledge of their field, but no social skills. The appearance of their cute, but not very bright, neighbour creates many hilarious situations.

All participants had to fill in questionnaires before and after viewing the programs. The participants responded to a survey before the experiment that included questions about their media exposure and preferred television genres, political cynicism, and a battery of questions on political knowledge and political interest. Participants watched the episode they were assigned to in a projection room at the university that resembled a movie theatre. After the show, they responded to another survey that included the same items on cynicism, as well as questions about the program they watched.

**Variables**

Political cynicism is the dependent variable of this study. It was captured both in the pre- and the post-experimental questionnaires in order to measure changes in the participants’ level of cynicism after viewing the programs.

The cynicism battery included eight questions, most of which were drawn from the American National Election Study and the Canadian Election Study (see Appendix A). The questions asked the participants to what extent they agree or disagree with statements regarding whether politicians are people who only think about their own interest or whether they care about ordinary people, their trust in government, their trust in politicians, promises kept by candidates in the elections, and corruption. Respondents were asked to express their opinion on three- or four-point scales, which were recoded from 0 to 1, with missing values (participants choosing the “I don’t know” option) coded in the middle of the range (0.5). A cynicism scale was created, which is the sum of seven of the eight items measured before and after, both ranging from 0 to 7. The internal consistency of the cynicism scale (before) is satisfactory, the Cronbach’s alpha is 0.68, after dropping one item that did not scale with the other questions.2

Political knowledge is hypothesized as being a mediating variable. Knowledge of Canadian politics was measured before the participants watched the program. There were questions about the party that came in second place at the last federal election held in 2015 and five items asking participants to match party leaders with their party name (see the wording of questions in Appendix B). Therefore, Canadian political knowledge is a sum of six indicators, which were then dichotomized into two categories of low and high political knowledge. The Cronbach’s alpha for the political knowledge scale indicates a score of .81.3
Results

Figure 1 shows the initial levels of cynicism on the seven items, before the participants received the treatments. Participants reacted particularly cynically when asked if a few big financial interests run the government and if politicians are trustworthy and honest. They appeared slightly less cynical when asked if politicians keep their promises or care about the opinions of ordinary citizens.

Hypotheses 1 and 2 are tested in two ways to ensure the robustness of the results: first, by performing T-tests that indicate whether pre- and post-test measures of cynicism are significantly different; and second, through regression analyses. Both approaches give similar results. T-tests were performed initially with each of the seven individual indicators to assess the change in cynicism after being exposed to the experiment.4

Similar T-tests were performed with the 7-item scale of cynicism obtained before and after the experiment. The initial level of cynicism among participants was high: 4.6 points, on average, on a scale from 0 to 7. The means are similar across the three groups: control (4.5), House of Cards (4.5), and The West Wing (4.7).

Table 1. Comparing cynicism before and after exposure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Mean cynicism Before</th>
<th>Mean cynicism After</th>
<th>Change (After-Before)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Big Bang Theory</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>-.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House of Cards</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>5.01</td>
<td>.51**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The West Wing</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>-.24*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Difference in change (mean)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>House of Cards/ The Big Bang Theory</td>
<td>.64**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The West Wing/ The Big Bang Theory</td>
<td>-.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

In Table 1, Part A indicates there was no significant change in the level of cynicism in the control group, but there was a significant change among participants in the House of Cards group, which moved from a mean of 4.50 to 5.01 points. The 0.51-point
difference is a statistically significant one. There is a slight decrease of cynicism among The West Wing viewers, from 4.69 to 4.45 points, a significant negative 0.24-point difference. Part B of Table 1 shows the change in the treatment groups when compared to the control group. In contrast with The Big Bang Theory group of viewers (control), the House of Cards group shows a substantial increase in cynicism (0.64 point, \( p < 0.01 \)), while the (small) change in The West Wing group is similar to that observed in the control group.

The results of Table 1 are confirmed by those in Table 2, which are based on an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression where the dependent variable is the difference in cynicism before and after the treatment. The independent variables are the two treatments as well as a control for the initial level of cynicism. It is clear that participants in the House of Cards group became, on average, more cynical than those who watched The Big Bang Theory. Everything else being equal, the level of cynicism in the House of Cards group is 0.64 points higher than in the control group, which corresponds to an increase of almost 14 percent compared to the initial level. In contrast, watching The West Wing had no significant impact.

**Table 2. The impact of the treatments on cynicism: OLS Regression**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Political cynicism (change After-Before)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political cynicism (Before)</td>
<td>-0.12 (0.05)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House of Cards group</td>
<td>0.64 (0.13)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The West Wing group</td>
<td>-0.09 (0.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_cons</td>
<td>0.43 (0.25)+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( R^2 )</td>
<td>0.194</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; \(+p < 0.10, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001\)*

Hypothesis 1 is confirmed. In other words, the episode of House of Cards had the expected effect and it significantly increased people’s cynicism. But Hypothesis 2 is not confirmed: participants in The West Wing treatment group did not become less cynical when compared to those in the control group. Although there is a small decrease in cynicism for The West Wing group, the change does not differ from that observed in the control group. Therefore, it must be concluded that watching The West Wing does not contribute to lowering an individual’s level of cynicism.

Hypothesis 3 predicts that change of cynicism will become more important among the least knowledgeable, both among those who watched House of Cards (an increase of cynicism) or The West Wing (a decrease). In order to test this hypothesis, participants’ level of political knowledge is taken into consideration.

The political knowledge variable is a mean of six dichotomous indicators testing respondents’ knowledge of the last Canadian federal election as well as of political parties and their leaders. Each respondent’s knowledge score corresponds to the proportion of correct answers (from 0 to 1) (mean = 0.46, std.dev = .32, min = 0, max = 1). That score was subsequently dichotomized in order to have low and high categories
of participants in each group. Knowledge was split into low and high categories at the 0.5 point, for an even distribution: low (49%), high (51%).

Table 3 shows the differences in change between the control group and each of the treatment groups, among the least and most politically knowledgeable. The results point out that, for the House of Cards group, there are similar effects among the two groups: both the least and the most knowledgeable respondents are significantly affected by the treatment. More specifically, the level of cynicism increases significantly more in the House of Cards group than in The Big Bang Theory group, among both the least and the most informed participants. In the case of The West Wing there is no effect in either group: neither the least nor the most sophisticated became significantly less cynical after seeing the episode. Both categories of House of Cards participants were affected, while neither group of The West Wing participants was. To take the analysis even further, a test was also conducted to explore whether an interest in politics determines how strongly participants were influenced by the treatments. As in the case of political knowledge, interest does not moderate the impact of the episodes.

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<th>Table 3. Cynicism and political knowledge</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political cynicism (difference in After-Before change)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House of Cards / The Big Bang Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The West Wing / The Big Bang Theory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; +p<0.10, *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

These results are also confirmed in Table 4, which presents an OLS regression analysis where the dependent variable is the change in cynicism after the experiment. The main independent variables are interactions between political knowledge and each treatment. This model controls for the initial level of cynicism, as well as the main effects of the treatments and political knowledge. As Table 4 shows, there is no significant interaction effect. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 is not confirmed: political knowledge does not moderate the impact of the program on cynicism.5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4. Cynicism and political knowledge (interaction effects)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political cynicism (change After-Before)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political cynicism (Before)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House of Cards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The West Wing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political knowledge</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political knowledge*House of Cards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political knowledge*The West Wing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; *p<0.10, *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001
Discussion and conclusion
Do fictional political television series influence people’s levels of cynicism? Results indicate that they do, or at least some of them. The findings of this experiment suggest asymmetric effects, depending on the program's content. The first hypothesis was empirically confirmed: participants exposed to the inaugural episode of *House of Cards* raised their level of cynicism after seeing Frank Underwood and the plots he created. The negative tone that characterizes the series had the expected outcome.

The second hypothesis stated that exposure to *The West Wing* should decrease cynicism, as the positive tone of the series should have the opposite effect than the negative series. This hypothesis is not confirmed, as no effect on cynicism was found in the treatment group exposed to *The West Wing*. A potential explanation is that people pay more attention to negative than to positive information. Positive information is easier to disregard, to take for granted. As Stuart Soroka (2014) argues, people have the tendency to focus more on the negative than the positive: they punish politicians for bad outcomes, but they do not reward them as much for positive results. This might stand true for the content of political series—the negative tone attracts more attention and responses, while the positive tone does not raise the same interest. The post-survey included two open-ended questions asking participants to write down the scene they liked the most and the least. For *House of Cards*, what attracted the most attention was a scene in a museum where Underwood and reporter Zoe Barnes make an agreement to help each other in their mischievous plans. The reporter becomes an instrument of Underwood's, and he leaks stories about his enemies to her. The other scene that was among the viewers’ favourites is the final one, where Frank has his revenge (with the publication of an article that destroys the image of his adversary in the secretary of state position) and he celebrates his victory by eating ribs and declaring himself, “hungry as a wolf.” What did participants dislike? The ways in which the politician interacts with the opportunistic journalist, because it “contributes to showing a corrupt image of the medias,” and “disturbs the independence and neutrality principles” of the media. As for *The West Wing*, people liked the final scene, when the president made his first appearance, “it was a nice figure of authority, that we do not see frequently in our politicians, nowadays,” solving the conflict between the White House's staff and a religious group. Some participants disliked that same scene, as some say that the arrival and the speech of the president are “very cliché,” with his speech about Cuban immigrants and the American dream (Manoliu, 2017).

The third hypothesis was that political sophistication should act as a moderating variable. The expectation was that the least sophisticated (with a low level of political knowledge) are significantly more affected than those with higher levels of political knowledge. This hypothesis was not confirmed. There is no significant difference between those two categories in their response to the treatments: they are either both affected (as in the case of *House of Cards*) or both not affected (as for those watching *The West Wing*).

Some might not agree with exposing Francophone Canadians to a series about American politics. But as previously stated, this does not pose a problem for the experiment. The audience of political television series is not exclusively American, and *House of Cards* is the number one series viewed in 20 European countries (Hegedus,
The effects of a political series are not restricted to their country of origin, since they are products designed for international consumption, and their viewers are spread worldwide. Not only are the American series penetrating other markets, but the reverse is also true. A clear example is the political Danish series *Borgen*, which gained an international success and has even been named “a cult in Canada” (Kirby, 2012).

Participants were asked if the characters and events they watched in the program were more reflective of an American reality, a Canadian reality, both, or neither. Unsurprisingly, a great majority believed both series are a portrait of the American reality (62% for *House of Cards* and 63% for *The West Wing*), but a smaller segment believed that the events/characters are appropriate for both Canadian and American reality (24% for *House of Cards* and 15% for *The West Wing*). This is a sign that the Canadian sample reflected on the ways American politics applies to their national reality. The fact that significant results were discovered with this experiment indicates its strength and validity (the nationality of the sample should have normally been a problem, lowering the chances of discovering an impact).

It is possible that the results would be different with an American sample. Some studies show that the effects of fiction are stronger when the context is not familiar, because familiarity leads to more information (Prentice, Gerrig, & Bailis, 1997), while others suggest that fiction is influential no matter whether people know the context very well or not (Wheeler, Green, & Brock, 1999). In the experiment, the Canadian sample was exposed to American politics, with which they are probably not quite as familiar. An American sample could be either more influenced because the plot of the series may appear more plausible or realistic, or less influenced since they may be more capable of differentiating facts from fiction. More research is needed to determine which is the case (or if the overall impact is the same).

The experiment has its limitations. One might be the sophistication measure used. Political knowledge was captured with six items tapping two dimensions of Canadian politics, either the results of the previous election or the party leaders. These items fall in the “knowing the players” category (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996, p. 73), which focuses on political figures or parties. Political knowledge can also be measured with items about the “rules of the game” (knowledge of institutions and processes), the “substance” (domestic and foreign issues), but also “relevant knowledge” (geography and history of the country). It is possible that a measure combining more dimensions and dealing with American politics, would have produced different results.

Another limitation is the time elapsed between the airing of *The West Wing* and *House of Cards*. The choice of the two series for the positive versus negative content raises questions about the time lag between them. There is a 14-year difference between the airing of the first episode of *The West Wing* in 1999 and the release of *House of Cards* in 2013. The two series talk about two very different political contexts, with different types of politicians and different challenges. The fact that participants live in the age of Obama and Trump might influence their perceptions of *The West Wing*. But the fact that their overall cynicism decreased (though it did not reach statistical significance) shows that despite the time lag, the series managed to have some influence on people’s perceptions of politicians.
The strength of this study lies in the confirmation of the first hypothesis, proving that a negative political series influences people’s cynicism. Also important is the magnitude of the effect: even if the participants were already cynical before viewing the first episode of House of Cards, the overall level of cynicism increased by 14 percent after watching just the first episode. This suggests that the impact on those who watch the whole series may be very substantial.

The asymmetric effect should encourage further analyses, beyond the two political television series used for this experiment, in order to assess people’s perception of other series and their effects on citizens’ attitudes about politics.

This study observes the effects of two series with contrasting tonalities (negative versus positive). Research may also expand to other genres of television programs. Are people less affected by a political comedy (VEEP) or a dramatic soap opera (Scandal)? Or are they impacted only by the more realistic series such as those used in the experiment (House of Cards, The West Wing)?

The results of the study should encourage new lines of research in the field of “non-news” content. The findings suggest that types of programs other than the news are worthy of attention. The fact that fictional politics have the potential to impact citizens’ attitudes should not go unnoticed. This type of series may have a wide range of effects for its viewers, both negative and positive. Political television series directly and indirectly provide viewers with all kinds of information about how politics works, and that information may unconsciously help the entertainment-seeking viewers to better understand the politicians’ world, in the same way that “soft news” programs make viewers at least slightly better informed about politics (Baum & Jamieson, 2006).

It is important to understand the psychological mechanism by which political television series exert their influence on their audiences, and exploring this path might lead to new information and discoveries in the area of transportation and identification theories. The fact that it was possible to detect an effect on people’s cynicism after viewing these series is only the first step. It remains to be determined if these effects can be explained by audiences being transported to a fictional world and by identifying with the characters. There are studies showing that people usually identify with the positive characters (Sestir & Green, 2010; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010) in a narrative, which makes the study of an opposite political television series (with a positive versus a negative tone) even more interesting for future research. Are people more impacted in their political attitudes after identifying with a positive or a negative fictional character?

Notes
1. All these examples/scenes are featured in the debut episodes of House of Cards and The West Wing. They were presented to treatment groups in the experiment, which is described in the following section.

2. Of the eight initial items used to measure political cynicism, the question asking about the degree of corruption of the government scaled the least with the other seven. This might be understandable since the question asked participants to compare the government with private companies. By not taking into account the corruption item, the consistency score passed from 0.63 to 0.68, which is the reason for its exclusion.

3. Respondents’ level of political knowledge was measured through a series of questions about Canadian politics. In the post-questionnaire there were also two questions tapping participants’ knowl-
edge of American politics. The first one asked who was the president of the United States at the time, and the second one asked the names of the two candidates for the democratic presidential primaries of 2016. The first question was dropped because of the lack of variance. In the second question, 70 percent of respondents identified correctly the names of the two politicians, while 21 percent made an error, and 8 percent did not know or refused to answer. Regressions were performed with the American knowledge variable, and the results indicated that there was no effect. The Canadian measure is more appropriate. It can generally be assumed that someone who has a good level of knowledge about Canadian politics is also likely to be knowledgeable about American politics. Results provided by another variable, political interest, were pointing in this direction. There were two separate questions in the survey about participants’ interest in American and Canadian politics. Results show that the two types of interest are correlated ($r = 0.57$), with people declaring they are even (slightly) more interested in American than in Canadian politics.

4. Results in Appendix C.

5. The same stands true for political interest.

### Television series

- **The Big Bang Theory.** ((2007–ongoing). Lorre, Chuck, & Prady, Bill, creators and producers with Molaro, Steven.

### Movie

- **Wag the Dog.** (1997). Producer and Director, Barry Levinson.

### References


Appendix A: Political cynicism measurements

*Political cynicism measure in the pre- and post-questionnaire (the first 6 questions measured on a 4-point scale from strongly disagree to totally agree and the last two questions measured on a 3-point scale)

1. Politicians only think of their own interest.
2. We can trust the government to do what it is right.
3. The government is run by a few big financial interests.
4. The majority of politicians are trustworthy.
5. Candidates in the elections make promises they do not intend to keep.
6. The majority of politicians care about the problems of ordinary people.
7. Do you think that in general politicians are more honest, less honest, or neither less nor more honest than the ordinary citizen?
8. Do you think there is more, less, or neither more nor less corruption in the government than in the private enterprise?

Appendix B: Measure for political knowledge

1. Which party came in second in the election on 19 October, 2015?
   - Bloc Québécois
   - Nouveau Parti Démocratique du Canada
   - Parti Conservateur du Canada
   - Parti Libéral du Canada
   - Parti Vert du Canada
   - I do not know

2. Write on the line next to each name of the leader the name of the party associated with him/her
   - Thomas Mulcair ........
   - Rona Ambrose ........
   - Justin Trudeau ........
   - Rhéal Fortin ...........
   - Elizabeth May ........
Appendix C: Results of T-tests performed individually on each of the eight questions measuring political cynicism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Before</th>
<th>After</th>
<th>The Big Bang Theory group</th>
<th>Before</th>
<th>After</th>
<th>House of Cards group</th>
<th>Before</th>
<th>After</th>
<th>The West Wing group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Own interest</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.74***</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in government</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>0.57*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial interest</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.73***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politicians trustworthy</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.63***</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.66*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unkept promises</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.68***</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politicians care</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.66**</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politicians are honest</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.82**</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001