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House of Cards as Philosophy: Democracy on Trial

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Abstract: Over the course of its six seasons, the Netflix show the *House of Cards* (HOC) details the rise to power of Claire and Frank Underwood in a fictional United States. They achieve power not by winning free and fair elections, but by exploiting various weaknesses of the U.S. political system. Could such a thing happen to our own democracies? This chapter argues that it is a threat that should be taken seriously, as the structure of HOC's democratic institutions closely mirrors our own, and the flaws that the Underwoods exploit are precisely those that have allowed autocrats to capture democracies "from the inside." Of even greater concern, these flaws may flow from the nature of democracy itself. This possibility is explored by considering the events of the HOC in the light of the anti-democratic arguments of Plato and Hobbes. The chapter concludes by briefly considering responses to these arguments.

Key Words: House of Cards, democracy, autocracy, tyranny, oligarchy, political philosophy, political legitimacy, Plato's Republic, Thrasymachus, Thomas Hobbes, ethics, political norms, democratic decline, media, voting

Introduction

"Democracy is so overrated" – Frank Underwood

The Netflix TV series *House of Cards* (HOC, based on an earlier BBC series and Micheal Dobbs novel of the same name) tells the story of Frank Underwood and Claire Underwood (in season 6, Claire Hale) as they strike to achieve and maintain absolute political power in a fictional United States. Over the course of the show, first Frank and later Claire manage to circumvent democratic processes and safeguards to become President. Their machinations to achieve this goal range from mundane political deals to murder to the manufacturing of security threats and manipulation of elections.

The characters and events depicted in HOC are, in many respects, far removed from the realities of contemporary democratic politics. In particular, Frank and Claire's capacity to manipulate those around them at times seems to verge on the superhuman. For this reason, it can be tempting to think their path to power has little to teach us about the threats to actual democracy. This, however, would be a mistake. For it turns out that the *weaknesses* of the fictional United States that the Underwoods exploit so skillfully are precisely those that prominent philosophical critics of democracy have long argued are most likely to lead to democratic collapse.

This chapter explores how HOC can be used as a tool for explaining and evaluating some historically significant criticisms of democracy, in particular those of Plato and Hobbes. These arguments—advanced by thinkers separated thousands of years and from wildly different historical and political contexts—turn out to be surprisingly applicable not only to the fictionalized democracy of HOC but to our own democracy. Before turning to these arguments, however, it will be helpful to begin with a brief overview of the major figures and events of HOC.

Democracy in HOC: The People and their Power

When the viewer first meets the Underwoods in the beginning of season 1, Frank is a Democratic Congressman from South Carolina, and currently serves as the Majority Whip in the House of Representatives. Claire, meanwhile, runs the "Clean Water Initiative" (CWI) a nonprofit organization. The year is 2013, and the newly elected Democratic President—Garrett Walker—is about to assume office. The show's main story arc begins when Frank discovers that Walker has reneged on his earlier promise to appoint him Secretary of State. This hamstrings both Frank's political ambitions and (indirectly) Claire's nonprofit, when donors who had counted on buying influence with Frank withdraw promised funding.

The Underwoods respond to this setback by setting out to destroy Walker and to make Frank President. Over the course of the first two seasons, they succeed in doing this. Seasons 3 and 4 detail Frank's efforts to maintain power against a variety of attempts to bring him down, and in particular to win the Democratic nomination in preparation for a reelection bid in 2016. These seasons also detail Claire's own rise to power, from First Lady of the US to United Nations Ambassador to Frank's running mate for the 2016 elections. Claire also increasingly begins to see Frank as a potential obstacle to her own ambitions. Finally, in seasons 5 and 6, Claire ascends to the presidency and ruthlessly crushes a number of attempts to unseat her. Season 5 closes with the implicit promises of a show-down between Claire and Frank (which may have perhaps led to their mutual downfall). However, Frank is killed off-screen between seasons 5 and 6, when actor Kevin Spacey was removed from the show after allegations of sexual misconduct (Koblin 2018). When the series closes, it seems possible that Claire will maintain power indefinitely, even though doing so may require she launch an unnecessary nuclear strike.

While it isn't possible to concisely provide an exhaustive summary of the numerous (and more than occasionally, far-fetched) twists-and-turns that allow the Underwoods to defeat their rivals and avoid accountability, the analysis in later sections requires seeing the "big picture" of how the democracy in HOC eventually fails. This big picture is overwhelmingly one of *relationships* and *institutions*—Claire and Frank are experts at identifying *who* has the power to give them what they want and *how* these people might be convinced, tricked, or coerced into using this power on the Underwood's behalf. In the fictional democracy of the HOC, just as in real democracies, the power the Underwoods need is distributed among a number of distinct groups, including directly elected officials at a variety of levels, journalists, religious and union leaders, lobbyists, foreign leaders, members of the executive and judicial branch, and donors, as well as their own staff members, sexual partners, family, and each other. With this in mind, it's worth reviewing a few of the characters who play especially crucial roles in the Underwood's rise to power:

Peter Russo and other elected officials. The events of season 1 are driven by Frank's manipulation of Russo, a well-meaning Philadelphia congressman with a blue-collar background and ongoing problems with drug and sex addiction. Frank discovers these problems and uses them to blackmail Russo. With Russo's unwilling help, Frank manages to install his ally Catherine Durant as Secretary of State and to push an (anti-union) education bill through a Democratic-controlled House of Representatives, which gives Frank increased clout with President Walker. Finally, he supports Russo's run for Governor of Pennsylvania, which falls apart when Russo's environmental bill (itself designed by the Underwoods) fails to pass as a result of a power struggle between Frank, Claire, and Remy. This leads to the climax of season 1, where Frank convinces the sitting VP (Matthews) to resign his position and run for Governor instead. This opens the way for Walker to appoint Frank as VP. Frank kills Russo and arranges it to appear as a suicide. In later seasons, the Underwoods use threats and bribes to secure alliances with

other members of Congress—mostly notably Jackie Sharpe, who helps push Walker's impeachment in season 2. Without exception, these temporary alliances end badly for everyone but the Underwoods.

Zoe Barnes, Tom Yates, and other members of the media. In season 1, Frank establishes a sexual and professional relationship with the young reporter Zoe Barnes, which he then uses to selectively leak stories to attack his rivals and advance his own position. When Zoe begins asking questions about Russo's death, he kills her as well. Zoe's death, in turn, leads to repeated efforts by her former colleague (and boyfriend) Lucas Godwin and editor Tom Hammerschmidt to uncover the truth about the Underwoods. Tom and Lucas are eventually killed as well (in Lucas's case after a failed attempt to assassinate Frank). Tom Yates first appears in season 3, when Frank hires him to write a biography to help sell his political program--and himself—to the American people. While this relationship sours when Yates refuses to lie for Frank, he appears again in later seasons as Claire's speechwriter and lover. In keeping with Frank's treatment of Zoe, Claire kills Tom when she discovers his intent to publish a book detailing the Underwood's misdeeds.

Remy Danton and other lobbyists. When season 1 starts, Remy Danton is a partner at the lobbyist firm Glendon Hill, where he represents the interests of SanCorp, a natural gas company. Like many lobbyists, he seems to have gotten this in large part because of his political knowledge and connections, acquired in his case as a former member of the Underwood's staff. Throughout the series, the viewer sees Remy go back and forth through this "revolving" door between the private and the public realm, and between representing various clients with competing interests, including SanCorp, Raymond Tusk, and the Underwoods. In season 1, for instance, he pushes Claire to kill an environmental bill Frank is committed to passing, in return for helping her NGO out of a difficult situation. In season 2, he serves as Raymond Tusk's main attack dog versus Frank, only to betray Tusk at the last moment when the Underwoods seem likely to win. Finally, while he starts Season 3 as Frank's Chief of Staff, he eventually turns against Frank and cooperates with Hammerscmidt. Other notable lobbyists in HOC include Marty Spinella, an education lobbyist who Frank tricks into assaulting him.

Raymond Tusk, Bill and Annette Shepherd, and the superrich. If lobbyists represent an important source of power in democratic politics, so do the extremely wealthy individuals and corporations who often pay them. In HOC, the Underwoods' most dangerous opponents are plausibly of this type. In season 2, Raymond Tusk, a longtime supporter of President Walker, presents the Underwoods with both an opportunity and a threat. If they can tie Walker to Tusk's various financial misdeeds (especially as these relate to manipulating both US and Chinese politics), this could bring Walker down; however, in doing so, they have to confront Tusk's considerable power to influence political opinion against them. This includes media attacks (e.g., on Claire's previous abortions and affairs), political manipulation (e.g., by controlling members of Congress) as well as more direct attacks (e.g., by shutting off power to large parts of the US). In Season 6, Annette Shepherd plays a somewhat similar role in her attempts to dislodge Claire from office.

Catherine Durant, Heather Dunbar, and other executive branch appointees. Along with the superrich, another source of resistance to the Underwoods march to power comes from within the executive branch itself. Both Catherine Durant, who is Secretary of State for much of the show, and Heather Dunbar, who serves as both Solicitor General and Frank's main rival for the Democratic nomination in seasons 3 and 4, possess considerable institutional power belied by their status as "mere" appointees. In particular, their roles allow them both to detect evidence of the Underwood's wrongdoing, and the

ability to act on it. In both cases, unfortunately, they fail to effectively do so. Dunbar is forced to concede the race to Frank after the Underwoods manage to (inaccurately) link her to Goodwin's failed assassination attempt. When Durant attempts to move against the Underwoods at the end of season 5, she is assaulted by Frank, and eventually killed on Claire's orders in season 6.

Viktor Petrov and the wider world. In HOC, as in real life, the domestic political environment is shaped by (and itself helps to shape) the actions of other nations and foreign powers. The Underwoods' capacity to take advantage of this proves crucial in a number of instances. In season 2, for instance, Frank's campaign against Tusk (and Walker) crucially involves his intentionally sabotaging relations with China, which leads to both domestic economic problems and the risk of war. In later seasons, Claire and Frank must regularly contend with Victor Petrov (the President of Russia) in a variety of contexts, including a military confrontation in the Middle East and the imprisonment of a gay rights leader in Russia, among other things. For both the Underwoods and Petrov, however, it is clear that the motive force behind their various struggles involves their respective *domestic* standing, with only a minor role being played by any independent desire to pursue the long-run national interest. Both Claire and Frank also take advantage of various domestic terror threats (and/or help manufacture such threats) in order to justify moves that help them achieve or maintain power (such as to delay elections at the end of season 4).

Doug Stamper, Seth Grayson, LeaAnn Harvey, and other staff. A final group of crucial characters are the Underwoods's senior staff, perhaps most notably Douglas Stamper (Frank's long-time Chief of Staff), Seth Grayson (Press Secretary), and LeaAnn Harvey (a political consultant). These are, without a doubt, the characters closest to the Underwoods, and those with the most intimate knowledge of their lives and actions. These characters, unlike those in the previous categories, are considerably less "visible" to the public, but they are no less important for that. Stamper, in particular, is heavily involved in nearly every decision that Frank makes, and he commits more than a few crimes of his own (including the murder of Rachel Posner, a prostitute who could tie Frank to Russo's death). The ability to generate this sort of personal loyalty is central to the Underwood's rise to power, and the psychological mechanisms behind it are more obscure than those in the previously mentioned. In the end, though, it is Doug who kills Frank to protect his "legacy", and is Doug that Claire must finally kill (in the final episode) to finally secure her own power.

The Death of a Democracy: Some Initial Themes

As the summary in the previous section should make evident, it is unlikely that Claire's and Frank's *specific* methods of coming to power could be emulated by any would-be autocrat in the real world. In Claire's case, for example, the level of planning (and luck!) needed to ascend from CEO of mid-sized nonprofit to President of the US without ever standing for election oneself (other than as the VP candidate for her spouse, in a rigged election that he should have lost) is possible *only* for a television supervillain. However, when the plot is described at a more general level—an elected official in a democracy becoming an autocrat without the need for a military coup or an explicit revision of the Constitution that grants her these powers—this looks all too plausible. This has long been a staple of fiction. Along with HOC, prominent examples include Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), which details the rise of a uniquely American version of European fascism, and Phillip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004), in which the Nazi-sympathizer Charles Lindbergh defeats FDR in the crucial 1940 election.

It is worth noting that both Lewis and Roth, unlike the writers of HOC, set their novels in the tumultuous years leading up to World War 2, in which many fledgling democracies *were* destroyed by autocrats of various stripes. However, it's not clear how much reassurance can be taken from this, since many scholars have argued that we have again entered a long period of global democratic decay and retreat. For example, Freedom House (2020) notes that, according to their measures, 2019 was the 14th straight year in which global freedom declined. In particular, they note that this score reflects negative changes in the world's two largest democracies—India and the United States—that "are increasingly willing to break down institutional safeguards and disregard the rights of critics and minorities." While a real-life autocrat would likely look different than the Underwoods, one cannot assume *a priori* that such things simply "can't" happen to modern democracies. Recent history provides plenty of case studies in which the politically improbable happens, often with terrifying speed.

Not every political scientist agrees with this pessimistic assessment of the global state of democracy. However, even among those that are (relatively) more optimistic about the general trend, there has been a recognition of the potential vulnerability of modern democracies to autocratic takeover. For example, Steven Levitisky and Daniel Ziblatt's recent *How Democracies Die* (2018) analyzes recent cases of democratic breakdown, and consider the lessons these have for contemporary politics (especially in the United States). They argue that, in the contemporary world, democracies often die silent deaths, with no violent coup to mark their end. They write that:

> Democracies may die at the hands not of generals but of elected leaders—presidents or prime ministers who subvert the very process that brought them to power. Some of these leaders dismantle democracy quickly, as Hitler did in the wake of the 1933 Reichstag fire in Germany. More often, though, democracies erode slowly, in barely visible steps. (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 3)

In this picture, would-be-autocrats follow Frank and Claire's lead and accrue power in large part by exploiting (rather than ignoring) the "rules" of the existing system, and have a strong preference for subverting (rather than outright destroying) the institutional features designed to limit their power, such as opposition political parties, the judiciary, the free press, or the regular holding of elections. In this way, even highly autocratic regimes can remain the outward appearance of democracy, long after the core has rotted away.

When he events of the HOC are considered in the light of Levitsky and Ziblatt's analysis, it becomes evident how something like the Underwoods' ascent to power might be possible. Four points are worth noting:

1. The Constitution alone cannot save us. When HOC ends, neither Frank nor Claire have made any move to amend the U.S. Constitution. Yet, for all that, Claire has become President without legitimately winning a single election, and it seems highly unlikely that she will voluntarily give up power after two terms. How is this sort of thing possible? After all, isn't the US Constitution supposed to prevent this, among other things by dividing power among various branches of government and limiting their power in various ways? As it turns out, its ability to do so depends crucially on whether democratic political leaders adhere to *political norms* that aren't in the Constitution (or in any body of law). For example, consider the Constitutional mechanism for impeachment, which Frank uses to remove Walker, or the sorts of powers granted to governors and presidents during emergencies (which both Claire and Frank rely on to sabotage elections, or to forestall their own impeachments). The reason that these powers

are not used in well-functioning democracies has less to do with the law than with a norm of *forbearance*, whereby the "losers" of democratic elections allow the "winners" to govern without hardball attempts to stop them. This closely relates to a second norm that Levitsky and Ziblatt see as especially important—that of *mutual toleration* between opposing sides. When norms of mutual toleration and forbearance break down, "extreme" measures such as impeachment or emergency orders can much more easily be exploited by aspiring autocrats.

2. Establishment powers often underestimate rising tyrants. Even in the cynical and ruthless political culture of HOC, of course, most of the characters with whom Frank and Claire interact would presumably prefer a flawed democracy to an autocracy. Moreover, many of them seem to have (or at least should have had) a general idea of the Underwood's ruthlessness and ambition, even if they don't know the gory details until it is too late. Nevertheless, it is through their action, and their failures to act, that the Underwoods gain power. Frank's initial rise to power, for example, is enabled by deals with a variety of political and business elites—SanCorp, Raymond Tusk, Catherine Durant, Jackie Sharp, the Democratic Party leadership, even President Walker—who provide him with direct or indirect support in actions that they should *know* undercut democratic norms. In each case, they can be seen as making a sort of "bet" that they can control the scope of Frank's future transgressions, but only after they have benefitted from the transaction. This, of course, turns out to a losing bet for the existing elites, and it is of a type that Levitsky and Ziblatt argue is a common event on the road to democratic decline.

3. Capture the referees, and win the game. In order to "win" the game of politics, Claire and Frank must do more than violate implicit norms, of course. They also repeatedly break a wide variety of state and federal laws meant to constrain their behavior both as private citizens and as political leaders. However, in the end, the Underwoods avoid attempts by the various "referees" to discover and punish these violations of the rules. As in real-world democracies, these referees include various law enforcement and intelligence agencies, opposition political parties, regulatory bodies, the free press, and the courts. Moreover, the ways in which the Underwoods escape accountability closely mirrors the strategies adopted by real-world enemies of democracy—they repeatedly "capture" the institutions designed to hold them accountable, and instead turn them against their enemies. Levitsky and Ziblatt describe this as follows:

> Institutions become political weapons, wielded forcefully by those who control them against those who do not. This is how elected autocrats subvert democracy—packing and "weaponizing" the courts and other neutral agencies, buying off the media and the private sector (or bullying them into silence)…democracy's assassins use the very institutions of democracy—gradually, subtly, and even legally—to kill it.(Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 8)

Claire and Frank's relationship with the media, for instance, alternates between using them for their own purposes (as when Zoe and Tom write favorable material) to the violent (killing journalists who pose a threat). Similar things might be said about their relationships with law enforcement and intelligence agencies, the powers of which (including mass surveillance) they repeatedly wield against their political rivals, and with the courts (as when they arrange to have rivals such as Raymond Tusk arrested). While Claire and Frank's methods are undoubtedly more direct than many real-world autocrats—for example, it is uncommon for autocrats to *personally* murder journalists whose work threatens to expose them—the attempt to control the media by a combination of violent threats and financial rewards is, unfortunately, an all too common one.

4. Inequality, polarization, and the dangers of populism. Subsequent sections will examine structural features of democracy that might make it vulnerable to autocratic takeover. However, before doing so, it's worth briefly noting the social backdrop against which HOC takes place—that of a contemporary United States with high levels of wealth inequality and political polarization, a long history of racial and religious divisions, and one in which there is an ongoing "culture war" over issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and immigration policies. It is a large, diverse country struggling to respond to a variety of external and internal threats, notably including many anti-democratic forces, including the autocratic governments of Russia and China, and religious fundamentalists of various stripes. It is a country in which citizens increasingly distrust political elites, and were harnessing populist anger is an important part of achieving and maintaining power. These forces present challenges to the Underwoods—for example, Claire's attempt to deceive the public about her abortions is a repeated challenge for her—but they also present opportunities. Economic inequality, for example, allows Frank to present himself as enemy of the rich, and the public's concern about the threats posed by terrorism and war (whether real or fabricated) ultimately allow Claire the cover she needs to eliminate the final attempts to dislodge her from the Oval Office.

Plato's *Republic* and Some Puzzles About Power

If the argument of the previous two sections is correct, then the scenario depicted in HOC, in which democratically elected officials achieve autocratic power, is one with considerable real-world relevance. However, this in turn raises other, more fundamental questions about the nature of democratic government. Does the possibility of democratic collapse simply represent a remediable defect in some contemporary democracies (as Levitsky and Ziblatt suggest), or does it instead indicate a weakness of democracy as such? In other words: is it possible to design a democracy that is Underwood-proof?

A good place to begin exploring this is with the anti-democratic arguments of Plato (427 – 347 BCE). Plato was a resident of Athens, whose early experiments in democracy would prove to be an important model for both the Roman Republic and the American and French revolutions. However, democratic Athens suffered from significant problems, as events in Plato's early life would have made clear. Among other things, incompetence and disloyalty by democratic leadership contributed to Athens losing the Peloponnesian War against the vehemently non-democratic Sparta and its allies. The behavior of key Athenian figures such as Alcibiades—a clever politician and general who switched sides several times over the course of the war—resembles in many respects that of the Underwoods. Athens was, at various times during the war, hit by plague epidemics and had its democratic government briefly replaced by the "Thirty Tyrants." Finally, in the aftermath of the war, Plato saw his beloved teacher Socrates (470 – 399 BCE) tried and executed by an Athenian jury, in one of history's most famous miscarriages of justice.

Over the course of his life, Plato wrote around 30 dialogues, many of which touch on themes relevant to democratic governance. A few of the most notable include the *Apology* (Plato 1997a), in which Plato provides an account of Socrates' (ultimately unsuccessful) attempt to convince the Athenian jurors to spare him; the *Gorgias* (Plato 1997b), in which he unfavorably contrasts the rhetorical methods of the politicians with the philosophical pursuit of truth; and finally the *Republic* (Plato 1997d) and *Laws* (Plato 1997c), both of which deal explicitly with the design of a just state. For all this, though, it is almost impossible to say what exactly Plato himself thought of democracy. This stems in part because of the dialogue form in which he writes, in which Plato himself never tells us directly what he thinks. Second, even when attention is constrained to those positions to which Plato seems to be most sympathetic

(e.g., to the views he puts in the mouth of Socrates), one can find somewhat different perspectives on democracy defended in different dialogues.

Plato's most significant criticisms of democracy can be found in the *Republic.* In this book, Socrates and a group of his friends and students have a long conversation about the nature of justice, both on the political level ("the just city") and on the personal level ("the just soul"). Socrates argues that these two notions of justice are structurally akin, and thus, a full understanding of one requires an understanding of the other. Over the course of the book, he describes in detail the perfectly just city (the *kallipolis*), in which everything is ordered as it should be. Socrates' proposed kallipolis is radically different from not only Athenian democracy, but from any other existing form of government. His criticisms of democracy can best be understood against the backdrop of this alternate ideal.

The main argument of the *Republic* begins when Socrates and his friends encounter Thrasymachus, a rhetorician who would not be out of place in HOC. When they ask him "What is justice?" he famously responds that, "I say that justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger" (338c) and goes on to explain what he means by giving examples of different forms of government:

> Democracy makes democratic laws, tyranny makes tyrannical laws, and so on with the others. And they declare what they have made—what is to their own advantage—to be just for their subjects, and they punish anyone who goes against this as lawless and unjust. This, then, is what I say justice is, the same in all cities, the advantage of the established rule. (338d-e)

On Thrasymachus' view, what counts as just depends entirely on the distribution of political power within a given society. This position has several consequences that Claire and Frank would likely appreciate. First, it suggests that there is no reason for individuals or groups to obey laws that don't benefit them personally. For example, Frank's murder of Zoe and Claire's murder of Tom are acceptable on this vierw, especially since they have the power to avoid punishment. Second, this view leaves little room for any principled distinction between tyranny and democracy. Most fans of HOC, for example, would presumably agree that Claire's and Frank's use of the Presidency to harm their enemies is *unjustified*, even if it makes for good television. However, for Thrasymachus, democracy is equally objectionable. After all, the only real difference between tyranny and democracy is the *number* of rulers, and not the *nature* or *grounds* of their authority. Suppose, for example, that Claire managed to convince 51% of voters (through judicious use of the media) that her enemies ought to be hunted down and killed, and that any laws preventing this ought to be repealed. This would make the process more democratic, but would it make it any more just? The potential for democratic majorities to mistreat minorities—the *tyranny of the majority*—is one that has often been realized.

Finally, Thrasymachus's view seems to entail that *if* Claire achieves ultimate political power in the end, then it is *she* who gets to decide what counts as "just" or "unjust" from here on out. As Socrates points out, though, this actually leads to a bit of puzzle, as it is unclear whether Thrasymachus wants to claim that justice depends on *what the rulers want* (e.g., those laws that Claire likes) or *what is actually good for the rulers* (e.g., which laws would best help Claire maintain power, even if she doesn't recognize it). A parallel puzzle can be posed about democracy: should we say that democratic laws are justified if they reflect the current will of the people (even if the people are ignorant, biased, hateful toward minorities, and on the way to self-destruction) or are laws justified because they are in the genuine interest of the democratic majority, and its continued political power? Thrasymachus, perhaps unwisely, chooses the latter. Socrates will later exploit this answer—against both Thrasymachus and the defender of

democracy—to argue that the "aristocratic" kallipolis is preferable not only an Underwood-style tyranny but also to the democracy that precedes it. The next section takes up these arguments.

Plato's Critique of Democracy

The kallipolis and the rule by the best. Socrates spends much of books 2 through 7 of the *Republic* describing the structure of the kallipolis, and the training of its philosopher rulers. While many of the details can be safely ignored, three aspects of its general design are notable for their contrast with democracy.

First, Socrates repeatedly argues that a just, well-ordered city is one in which each person does what they are *best* at, and which benefits the city as a whole. This most of all applies to the *guardians,* who make up the political and military leadership of the city. Political power should not be distributed—as it is HOC and was in Ancient Athens—because of wealth, family connections, media savviness, or skill in political warfare.

Second, Socrates advocates massive censorship of the media (in this case, poetry and theater) almost from the first moment he begins discussing the kallipolis (377). Among other things, he advocates wholesale revision of Greek religious texts to model appropriate behavior for both citizens and guardians, the introduction of a new "myth of the metals" to get citizens to accept the role the state assigns them, and a blanket ban on "imitative poetry", which would likely include most Greek tragedy (as well as most modern television shows, movies, and video games). This proposal, despite its unrealism, reflects a recognition of both the central role that media plays in the lives of democratic citizens, and the potential problems it brings. In HOC, for example, nearly every step of Frank and Claire's ascent to power is aided and abetted by the media, both in the specifics (as when they leak stories about political opponents) to the much more general (as when the media stokes fear about terrorist threats, or exacerbates divisions between groups of people).

The third area of difference between the kallipolis and democracy concerns that measures taken to ensure that ruling elites are both competent and properly motivated. As the HOC makes evident, there is frequently a disconnect between what political and economic elites of a democracy "want" and what would be best for the country as a whole. Some, such as Raymond Tusk, Remy Danton, and many members of Congress, are driven at least in part by a desire for money. Many others, such as Annette Shepherd or Peter Russo, also seem motivated by the desire to protect or advance family and loved ones. A third group—including Claire and Frank but including many others—are almost monomaniacally focused on gaining and exercising power. Finally, those politicians whose motivations are laudable, such as Donald Blythe, are frequently too ignorant or politically incompetent to effectively serve citizens' interests.

In a democracy, the ultimate "check" against these problems is ultimately the ballot box, though this crucially depends on the ability of voters to detect such problems. Socrates, by contrast, proposes more direct methods, including prohibiting the guardians from owning private property, the communal raising of all the guardians' children (and the concealment from everyone about whose children are whose), and the implementation of extensive educational requirements for future rulers, which won't be completed until well into middle-age. While these specific proposals have almost universally dismissed as unrealistic (including by Plato's most famous student, Aristotle), the democratic weaknesses that

motivate their introduction are ones that defenders of democracy need to take seriously. These weaknesses, after all, are ones that seem to have persisted from Ancient Athens to the present day.

The origins of democracy. The *Republic's* most famous discussion of democracy occurs in book 8, where Socrates describes the process of institutional decay, where what was once an aristocratic kallipolis becomes first a Spartan-style "timocracy", then an oligarchy ruled by the rich, then a freedom-loving democracy, and finally a tyranny. It is these last three steps that will concern us here, as they mirror in many ways the Underwood's successful bid to achieve power in a fictional United States that blends aspects of oligarchy with democracy.

On Socrates's account, each form of government contains within it a fatal flaw that inevitably undermines its long-term stability and guarantees its eventual replacement by something worse. Specifically, he suggests that the citizens raised in each sort of society will be flawed in predictable ways, which renders them incapable of maintaining the institutions they have inherited. The aristocratic kallipolis collapses, for example, when its selective breeding and training program ends up producing clever, strong, brave soldiers instead of wise and just philosopher-rulers. The timocracy ruled by these soldiers, in turn, decays into oligarchy as the timocrats' children attach ever more import to the financial rewards of military and political service, until the wealthy directly seize political power.

Socrates's description of the oligarchic society, the kind of people who it produces, and its inherent weaknesses are all evident in HOC. An oligarchy, on Socrates's definition, a society ruled by the wealthiest. This might involve, for example, some sort of explicit wealth or property qualification that granted one the right to vote or serve on juries (as was the case in many early democracies, including the United States). However, it might also plausibly include the fictional United States depicted in HOC, where wealthy individuals such as Raymond Tusk and Bill and Annette Shepherd are depicted as having *enormous* power to shape almost every area of society, from determining who will win elections (Tusk's support for Walker is crucial for his political success, as is SanCorp's support for Frank), to foreign policy (including decisions about going to war), to the particulars of which bills pass Congress. Their power appears even more substantial when one considers areas that lie outside direct political control, such as Tusk's ability to unilaterally cut off power to large parts of the US, or the Shepherds' ability to arrange assassination attempts against Claire.

Socrates notes several problems with oligarchy. First, as the examples above make clear, being wealthy hardly guarantees that one will be a competent, just ruler. Second, there is the problem of inequality. He states that oligarchy "isn't one city but two—one of the poor and one of the rich—living in the same place and always plotting against one another" (551d). This is evident early in HOC, when the interests of the poor (such as the shipbuilders that Peter Russo represents, or the people who might be served by his environmental bill) clash repeatedly against those of the rich. Finally, oligarchy leads to proliferation of what Socrates calls *drones*—citizens who are deprived of any meaningful work within the state, either because they have been exploited by the oligarchs and driven into bankruptcy or because they are the lazy children of oligarchs who contribute nothing.

Democratic man and the origins of tyranny. It is these drones that enable the slide first into a benign-seeming democracy and then, much more horribly, into tyranny. The initial transition into democracy is driven by the oligarchs' insatiable greed, and by the proliferation of drones this causes. The oligarchy eventually falls when the people (spurred on the rage of the drones against the lazy children of the oligarchs rich) rise up and demand equal power for all. The prototypical democratic leader, on this

account, might well be someone like Peter Russo, a blue-collar worker who comes to power with the promise of serving the interests of his fellow workers (mainly ship-builders whose jobs have been threatened by a changing economy) against the machinations of the rich.

Where the oligarchic society values wealth, the democratic society values personal *freedom,* and strikes out at any source of external authority—whether it be parents, tradition, the demands of morality, or the requirements of the community as a whole—that would threaten to limit this individual freedom. This, in turn, leads to a huge proliferation of the *sorts* of lives that citizens choose to lead, which even Socrates grants might initially seem quite appealing:

> Then it looks as though this is the finest or most beautiful of the constitutions, for, like a coat embroidered with every kind of ornament, this city, embroidered with every kind of character type, would seem to be the most beautiful. And many people would probably judge it to be so, as women and children do when they see something multicolored. (557c)

Peter Russo is a paradigmatic example of the "democratic man" that Socrates argues is typical of a democracy. Like the democracy he lives in (or aspires to live in), his soul is an unordered mess of wildly different desires, both necessary and unnecessary, virtuous and vicious. It is tough to tell what Peter will do from hour to hour, or even minute to minute. He uses drugs and then attends AA meetings, is a caring father and then an absent one, hires prostitutes but loves his partner Christine, is subservient to Frank and ultimately stands up to him. The following Platonic description fits him perfectly:

> And so he lives on, yielding day by day to the desire at hand. Sometimes he drinks heavily while listening to the flute; at other times, he drinks only water and is on a diet; sometimes he goes in for physical training; at other times, he's idle and neglects everything; and sometimes he even occupies himself with what he takes to be philosophy. He often engages in politics, leaping up from his seat and saying and doing whatever comes into his mind. (561b)

Peter might additionally be classified as a "drone", in that he often seems to lack any interest or aptitude for his job. Moreover, like many democratic politicians, his attitude toward the wealthy is a contradictory one, in that he identifies strongly with the poor but relies on the support of the rich to keep his position.

Plato would not be surprised, then, it is by exploiting the weaknesses of Russo and people like him that the Underwoods manage to achieve power. Just as the seeds of oligarchies destruction were sown by the oligarchs' incessant pursuit of wealth (and the inequality and animosity that ensues), a democracy's decay into a tyranny results from its citizen overwhelming desires to lead their lives *however they see fit,* regardless of the larger social consequences of this. In this sort of society, drones such as Peter Russo (and other politicians) play an important role in mediating between the desires of the poor masses (who want the wealthy's money to pursue their various ends) and the wealthy themselves (who want to keep their money). The drones, in turn, benefit heavily from this arrangement.

Aspiring tyrants such as the Underwoods can now use this tension between the poor and rich to their advantage. In fact, the *Republic's* description of how this might come about closely mirrors the events of HOC. First, the poor people in a democracy (the vast majority) will increasingly come to see the power and wealth of the rich as being the main obstacle to their desire to live their lives as they wish, especially when they are spurred on by the various drones, who thrive on such conflicts. For example, in HOC,

people like Remy Danton, Peter Russo, or even the Underwoods themselves literally *wouldn't have their jobs* if their various constituencies (whether this be SanCorp, the dockworkers' union, or other rich donors) didn't see such conflicts as representing existential threats. Second, the rich people within a democracy—the Raymond Tusks and Shepherd siblings of the world—respond to this conflict by attempting to become "oligarchs in fact," even though they no longer possess the power to fully do so. For example, Tusk has considerable power to wreck things and make peoples' lives worse, but he can't literally force President Walker to do his bidding. Finally, the aspiring tyrants respond by presenting themselves champions of the people against the rich, perhaps by prosecuting the oligarchs and their servants on trumped-up charges (which is precisely what the Underwoods do to Tusk and Walker). Finally, to secure their own power, the tyrants will "stir up a war" (566e), before systematically eliminating all of those who might pose a threat, in particular former allies.

In the end, "the tyrant will have to do away with all of them if he intends to rule, until he's left with neither friend nor enemy of any worth" (567e). On this account, then, the eventual conflicts between the central plotters—in particular, Claire, Frank, and Doug—follow inevitably from the nature of tyranny, which can only ever admit a single ruler. For Claire to win, everyone else must lose. In book 9, Socrates goes on to argue that the tyrant who has achieved absolute power will, in fact, live a miserable life of loneliness and fear (and for this reason, he argues it would be irrational to *want* to be tyrant). However, while it is true that Claire's many enemies might (if they had lived) take some comfort in the prospect of her future suffering, this by itself won't restore the democracy she helped destroy. This, then, is the *Republic's* bleak prognosis for democracy—a brief flowering of freedom choked off quickly by despotism.

Hobbes on Monarchy and Democracy

In Plato's *Republic,* tyranny is described as the worst of all possible governments. Tyrants such as the Underwoods are held up as an image for how *not* to live, and their souls are described as being sort of tyrannies in miniature, with a single bottomless desire for power dominating and destroying anything that was once good and noble. If democracy is bad, it is at least in part because the uncontrollable freedom and variety can be exploited by the rising tyrant. In other words, one main reason to avoid democracy is that it will enable people such as Claire or Frank to come to power.

Our second critic of democracy, Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) disagrees with both Plato's distinction between monarchy (i.e., the legitimate rule by a wise ruler that Plato favors) and tyranny and with the importance Plato attaches to the psychological character and training of the ruler. For Hobbes, "monarchy" and "tyranny" are simply two different words for the same government structure, with "tyrant" simply being a word used by those who don't like the monarch. In his famous book, the *Leviathan* (Hobbes 1994) Hobbes argues that a monarchy with absolute power is the best possible form of government, even if this ruler happens to be a ruthless one motivated only by a selfish desire for power. For Hobbes, then, Claire's crushing victory over her opponents at the end of HOC would represent a desirable outcome, as her coming authoritarian rule is preferable to the democracy that preceded it.

Why we need the state. Like Plato, Hobbes lived in a time of violent political upheaval. He wrote the *Leviathan* during the English Civil War, a bloody, protracted conflict between supporters of Parliament (such as Oliver Cromwell) and the Royalist supporters of the king Chares I. Hobbes's political philosophy, begins with the proposition that this sort of civil strife (resulting from the lack of a single, agreed-upon

government) is really, really bad, and that rational people can and should do just about anything to avoid it. How bad is it? In a famous passage, Hobbes writes as follows:

> Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of Warre, where every man is Enemy to every man; the same is consequent to the time, wherein men live without other security, than what their own strength, and their own invention shall furnish them withall. In such condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain; and consequently no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short. (Hobbes 1994, chap. 13)

It is for *this* reason—to make their lives better—that Hobbes thinks individuals should consent to live under the rule of a monarch, even a bad one. His reasoning can be sketched as follows:

1. Humans are basically self-interested creatures who naturally care about preserving their own lives. While they do have moral duties to help others, these duties don't hold in a state of "war," where others continually threaten their lives. So, for example, it's generally wrong to hit people with rocks, but it's perfectly OK for Rachel to hit Doug (her eventual murderer) with a rock in her attempt to escape him, or for Claire to kill Doug in self-defense.
2. Humans are similar to one another in terms of their power, with the result that they are always a threat to one another. So, for example, it is true that Frank and Claire are somewhat smarter and more vicious than most people, but they aren't *so* capable that other people don't pose real threats to then.
3. Because of this relative equality among humans, where each has reason to fear what the other could do, humans in a *state of nature* (i.e., whenever there does not exist a government capable of exerting authority) will quickly descend into a war of "all against all" described above. In this situation, even the people who might otherwise behave ethically must devote themselves to an aggressive, violent attempt to dominate others. In HOC, one might think of the way Claire and Frank *force* their opponents to come "down to their level."
4. The only way out of this, according to Hobbes, is for the citizens to *consent* to give up nearly all of their rights (in particular, their right to use violence against others) to a single sovereign. This sovereign, in return, need promise merely not to kill them. The sovereign's tyrannical power comes neither from God nor from a Platonic societal collapse—instead, it is given freely by rational citizens pursuing their own self-interest.

It is worth noting that, on Hobbes's characterization, the world of HOC bears more than a passing resemblance to a "state of nature". This is because, until the final moments of season 6 (and perhaps beyond it), when Claire finally eliminates the last significant threat to her power, power is shared between a number of different people and institutions who must compete (often violently!) with one another. In the early seasons, for example, the Underwoods must compete not only with the Walker government, but with their partisan opponents, Raymond Tusk, and many others. Even after Frank and Claire have ascended to the Presidency, their various enemies still have considerable power to harm them (among other things, by having law enforcement punish them for their previous crimes). Neither

Claire nor the United States that she rules have truly exited the state of nature until she is secure in power.

The dangers of democracy. This brings us naturally to Hobbes's main reasons for favoring monarchy over democracy. In general, he argues that the diffusion of power within a democracy makes it unstable, and thus more likely to dissolve into the sort of civil war that he fears. The ordinary citizens of HOC, for instance, suffer a great deal in the Underwood's rise to power, specifically from the fallout of the many decisions—on international trade, education, military policy, domestic security, emergency preparedness, and other areas--that were made without any concern for their well-being at all, but instead served merely as moves by powerful agents in a game for power.

Hobbes describes several specific ways in which the structure of democracies can lead to problems. First, he argues that, in a democracy, there is often a considerable mismatch between what is good for individual politicians and what would be good for their constituents. So, for example, nearly all of the politicians on the HOC are seen voting for bills they don't believe in for reasons such as personal financial benefit (e.g., to secure a campaign contribution, or post-congressional lobbying job) or because they think it will play well in the media in the run up to the next election. When and if these decisions end up harming the public, the division of democratic power across hundreds of politicians makes it difficult for the public to ascertain *who* was responsible, a fact the politicians are well aware of. In an absolute monarchy, by contrast, Hobbes thinks the incentive structure is much clearer. He writes:

> Now in Monarchy, the private interest is the same with the publique. The riches, power, and honour of a Monarch arise onely from the riches, strength and reputation of his Subjects. For no King can be rich, nor glorious, nor secure; whose Subjects are either poore, or contemptible, or too weak through want, or dissention, to maintain a war against their enemies: Whereas in a Democracy, or Aristocracy, the publique prosperity conferres not so much to the private fortune of one that is corrupt, or ambitious, as doth many times a perfidious advice, a treacherous action, or a Civill warre. (Hobbes 1994, ch. 19)

On Hobbes's account the monarch, unlike the democratic politician, has a clear reason to care about the public good, especially since monarchs deposed by the public tend to meet bad fates. The idea here is a simple one: for all Claire's ruthlessness and selfishness in obtaining power, she has a clear reason for caring about the public good once she has succeeded in getting it. After all, there will be no one left for her to blame if things go wrong, and the public will know this.

A second, related argument against democracy concerns the potential for corruption, and its negative effects on the public good. Hobbes takes it for granted that any form of government—monarchy, aristocracy, or democracy—will be open to corruption, as those in power seek to benefit their friends and harm their enemies. However, he argues that it is worse in a democracy, on the simple grounds that there are more politicians, and thus more friends and enemies of politicians to be rewarded and punished. In HOC, this sort of corruption is obviously endemic, with both the Underwoods and their various opponents repeatedly misusing public resources (including the military and police) for private benefit. While it is true that individual democratic politicians can't engage in corruption at the same scale as an absolute monarch—for example, they can't simply execute those they dislike, or directly appoint their friends to powerful positions, as some monarchs have done—Hobbes thinks this in itself is a problem. He argues that, in a democracy, the small-scale corruption results in a system where lots of individual people to harm the public in various ways (e.g., there are a LOT of people who have just

enough power to stop a new bridge from being built) but almost no individuals have the ability to correspondingly benefit the public.

A final Hobbesian criticism of democracy concerns the harmful fallout that results from the democratic competition for power. Hobbes argues that the regular change in leadership in a democracy (as majority opinion shifts first one way, and then another) makes it difficult for citizens to effectively make plans. By contrast, in a monarchy they must deal only with inconsistencies and equivocations of a single person. That is, Hobbes contends that when and if Claire has achieved absolute power, areas such as tax policy and international relations are likely to become *predictable* in a way they weren't in the democratic period that preceded this. Given the huge disruptions that these uncertainties can cause for citizens—e.g., shifting economic relations with China in season 2 have severe effects on businesses, workers, and consumers—this can be of real benefit. Moreover, even when the current leadership of a democratic government *wants* to make the best long-run decision, Hobbes argues that they will find it more difficult than would a similarly motivated absolute monarch. This is because, in a democracy, the most obvious sources of institutional expertise (such as other politicians, military leaders, cabinet-level appointees) will generally have political power and ambitions of their own, often opposed to those of the leaders. This is something the Underwoods must deal with repeatedly, as their "subordinates" attempt to weaken or replace them. By contrast, to the extent that Claire has secured absolute power at the end of the series, she will be free to appoint genuine experts to top positions, and to rely on their good-faith effort to serve her ends.

A power without limits. Perhaps the most radical feature of Hobbes's defense of monarchy is his contention that the power of the monarch must be *absolute*. This means, for example, that the monarch should literally be "above the law," and there is no "right to revolt" for citizens no matter how bad the monarch treats them. After all, it is her saying so that that makes something a law in the first place. Hobbes argues that doing otherwise would undercut the reason that citizens should consent to a government in the first place—they wanted to ensure they stayed out of the state of nature, and the war of all against all that this entailed. Any attempt to set up institutional checks and balances to limit the sovereign's war would necessarily bring with it the possibility of a renewed conflict.

On Hobbes's view, then, the citizens of HOC should breathe a sigh of relief when Claire finally triumphs over her many enemies and puts an end to "democratic" attempts to limit her power. They will no longer have to deal with the corruption of democratic politicians, the unpredictable seesaw of control between rival political factions, or the worry that their leaders are more concerned about reelection or monetary benefit than their well-being. In fact, they can give up politics altogether, and enjoy all the benefits this brings: no more hating and fearing those of opposing political parties, or wasting time attempting to impress others with their useless political knowledge, or voting. And, in return for all these benefits, they need merely accept that they need to be *very* careful not to do anything that might upset Claire, as her power over their lives (and deaths) is all-but-unlimited.

This, then, is the Hobbesian bargain: security in return all of one's rights. It is one that, like Socrates' described tyranny, holds little appeal for most citizens. The question for defenders of democracy is then: Can we do better?

Underwoods Everywhere: Democracy in the Present

The contemporary world in which HOC is set is, of course, a vastly different one than those in which Plato and Hobbes wrote. For one thing, the complex political and legal structures of a modern Republican government like the United States bear only a passing resemblance to Plato's Athens or the Roman Republic. Among other things, contemporary democracies have a much wider definition of citizenship, a vastly more extensive body of written law, and a clearer articulation of the power and limits of different institutions. The design of these structures reflects, at least in part, a recognition of the failures of classical democracy. Contemporary democracies also benefit from wealthier, better-educated citizenries, and from significantly reduced problems related to pandemic illness or military invasion. It seems undeniable that the characters such as the Underwoods would have likely had an *easier* time seizing control in Athens or Rome than in the modern United States.

We also have vastly more experience with democratic government and with its potential advantages than did Plato and Hobbes. Writers such as John Locke (1764), John Stuart Mill (1865), Jurgen Habermas (1994), and John Rawls (2005) have all provided intricate defenses of democracy from a variety of theoretical perspectives. More recently, Amartya Sen (1999), Elizabeth Andersen (2003), and others have argued that democratic governments do much better than rival forms of governments in utilizing the knowledge of individual citizens. So, for example, Sen argues that in contrast to authoritarian governments no democratic regime has ever suffered from mass famine. The idea here is that, for all the Underwoods viciousness early in their political careers, they at least had to *pay regular attention* to what was happening to their constituents. If and when democratic accountability ends, however, all bets are off.

Despite these reasons for preferring democracy, however, Platonic and Hobbesian criticisms of democracy have not lost their force. For example, Plato's contention that the voters in a democracy lack the expertise necessary to make complex political issues has remained a consistent theme of critics of democracy. The ordinary citizens of HOC, for example, are all too easily be swayed by the media, and the Underwood's manipulation of it. Many scholars have argued that real voters are much the same. Joseph Schumpeter (1976) and Jason Brennan (2017), among other recent critics of democracy, have argued that modern social science shows us that typical voter lacks anything like the rationality, knowledge, or stable preferences assumed by many defenses of democracy. Instead, voters are, as Plato might have predicted, some combination of ignorant, partisan, and apathetic. In keeping with this Platonic picture, Schumpeter and Brennan both argue for a significant rethinking of democratic institutions, in which knowledgeable elites are granted significantly more power than ordinary voters.

Rosenberg (2020) argues from a similarly pessimistic starting point to an even darker conclusion: modern liberal democracies are likely to soon to be replaced by right-wing, authoritarian governments. On Rosenberg's, the growth of alternative media—think of Zoe's move to the web-based *Slugline* from the traditional *Washington Herald*—is one of a number of factors that will make it difficult for liberal democracies to sustain themselves against the allure of populist and nationalist alternatives.

One can also find contemporary worries of a more Hobbesian sort. For example, Juan Linz (1990) argues that there are both empirical and conceptual reasons for doubting the long-run stability of presidential systems such as the United States, in which power is divided between the legislature and the executive. As Hobbes might well have predicted, such systems have frequently collapsed into autocracy as the result of internal conflict between their various branches. At various points, the Underwoods find themselves on different sides of this divide, and the tools they use against their opponents in rival

branches—impeachment, law enforcement, cancellation of elections—give a realistic picture of how such collapse often precedes.

Finally, Levitsky and Ziblatt, whose ideas were discussed earlier in this chapter, draw on themes that would be familiar to both Plato and Hobbes. Like Plato, they worry about the effects of partisan media and the polarization it causes. And, like Hobbes, they recognize that the "division of powers" with a democracy can sometimes lead to institutional warfare, where different actors aim for (and sometimes achieve) ultimate supremacy. They are, however, comparatively optimistic on the prospects for global democracy, and suggest that even democracies in danger can be saved if elites are willing to make the necessary sacrifices to stop rising autocrats and to reduce inequality and polarization.

Conclusion: HOC as Warning and Opportunity

If the argument of this chapter is correct, then the events depicted in the HOC serve as both a warning that democratic collapse is possible and provide an opportunity to think about how to strengthen our democracy, and avert such collapse. What lessons might be learned from this?

First, while the specific methods that Claire and Frank use to defeat their opponents are at times highly unrealistic, their general strategy for undermining democracy is a cogent one. The Underwoods rely heavily on their ability to turn the institutional structures underlying modern democracy—such as a free press, the holding of regular elections, and even the division of power —into attacks first on their rivals and then against the system itself. Despite the myriad differences between the HOC and our own, recent scholarship suggests that this sort of "attack from within" remains a real threat to contemporary democracy.

Second, the arguments of Plato and Hobbes suggest that many of the weaknesses of democracy that the Underwoods exploit are inherent in the nature of democratic government, and not simply artefacts of the contemporary United States. They are, in fact, inseparable from its strengths. Insofar as democracy aims for mass participation, for example, it needs a vibrant media that can inform its citizens, and insofar as it aims to protect the people against tyranny, it must distribute power among many different people and institutions. The fact that democracies can have citizens (and politicians) with wildly different conceptions of the good life and how to pursue it is something to be embraced, even if it does lead to political factions. Given that it precisely these features of democracy that the Underwoods target, then, they represent a type of threat to which democracy has always been vulnerable.

Third, as a consequence of the first two points, the battle to preserve and promote democracy is one that must be fought repeatedly, as underlying cultural and technological changes throw up new opportunities for would-be autocrats to weaken or destroy democratic institutions. As the Underwoods recognize, the world of HOC—a world uncomfortably similar to own—is one where existing democratic institutions struggle to deal with a rapidly changing electorate, media culture, and economy. However, the Underwoods' success in using these changes to undermine democracy does not represent some inevitable law of nature. Instead, advocates of democracy can (and should) use the example they provide to consider what might be done not only to strengthen our democracies against this sort of threat, but to make them better serve their citizens.

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