

Linguistic Manipulation and Logical Fallacies: How Frank Underwood Constructs Verbal Traps to Influence Audience Perception in *House of Cards*

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Abstract

Frank Underwood, the central figure in *House of Cards*, exemplifies the strategic use of linguistic manipulation to consolidate power, disarm adversaries, and influence public perception. This paper examines how Underwood constructs verbal traps using logical fallacies such as ad hominem attacks, false dilemmas, appeals to emotion, post hoc reasoning, and straw man arguments. By analyzing the frequency and contextual deployment of these fallacies in his monologues and dialogues, this study highlights how Underwood tailors his rhetorical approach depending on whether he is persuading the audience or coercing opponents. His monologues serve as narrative control mechanisms, using emotional appeals and causal distortions to justify his actions, while his dialogues function as battlefields of manipulation, where he employs character attacks, forced choices, and misrepresentations to dominate his rivals. Through a quantitative analysis of his speech patterns, this paper reveals the systematic nature of Underwood's linguistic deception and its broader implications for political rhetoric. The study concludes by drawing parallels between Underwood's strategies and real-world political discourse, emphasizing the dangers of uncritical acceptance of rhetorical persuasion in governance and media.

Keywords: linguistic manipulation, logical fallacies, verbal traps, ad hominem attacks, false dilemmas, appeals to emotion, post hoc reasoning

1. Introduction

Language is one of the most powerful tools in politics, capable of shaping perceptions, influencing decisions, and consolidating control. In *House of Cards*, Frank Underwood exemplifies the strategic use of linguistic manipulation to dominate both his adversaries and the audience. His mastery of rhetoric allows him to construct verbal traps that force opponents into vulnerable positions, often without them

realizing they have been manipulated. Through careful wordplay, deception, and misdirection, Underwood establishes himself as an unrivaled political tactician, turning conversations into battlegrounds where he almost always emerges victorious. A central component of Underwood's rhetorical power is his ability to exploit logical fallacies. Rather than relying solely on factual accuracy, he often distorts logic to serve his own agenda, using tactics such as ad hominem

attacks to discredit opponents, false dilemmas to limit perceived choices, and emotional appeals to manipulate public sentiment. What makes his persuasion even more compelling is his frequent direct address to the audience—breaking the fourth wall to share his inner thoughts and rationalize his actions. This unique narrative device creates an illusion of trust between Underwood and the viewer, reinforcing the perception that his manipulative strategies are not only effective but also justified. This paper explores how Frank Underwood's use of logical fallacies and verbal traps serves as a tool for control, examining his rhetorical strategies in monologues and dialogues to reveal the deeper mechanisms behind his persuasive influence. By analyzing his most frequently used tactics—ad hominem arguments, false dilemmas, appeals to emotion, and post hoc reasoning—this study provides insight into how political figures, both fictional and real, employ linguistic manipulation to maintain power.

2. The Art of Verbal Traps in Frank Underwood's Rhetoric

Frank Underwood, the cunning protagonist of *House of Cards*, demonstrates an extraordinary ability to construct verbal traps that not only disarm his opponents but also lead them into self-destructive decisions. His mastery of rhetoric is not limited to persuasion; rather, it is a calculated form of manipulation designed to control conversations, frame reality, and eliminate threats. Through the strategic use of logical fallacies, psychological pressure, and linguistic precision, Underwood creates situations where his adversaries unknowingly dig their own graves. His verbal traps function as intellectual minefields—once someone steps into a conversation with him, escape without consequence becomes nearly impossible.

This section explores how Underwood builds these traps through ad hominem attacks, false dilemmas, and the illusion of choice, demonstrating his unparalleled ability to dictate the terms of discourse and control outcomes.

2.1 Ad Hominem Attacks: Undermining Opponents Before They Speak

One of Underwood's most frequently employed tactics is the ad hominem attack, which involves attacking the character, credibility, or personal flaws of an opponent rather than engaging with their argument. This is an essential tool in his arsenal because it allows him to discredit

adversaries before they even have a chance to present a compelling case. Instead of debating policy or ideology, he focuses on personal shortcomings, past failures, or ethical lapses to ensure that whatever his opponents say is perceived as unreliable, biased, or hypocritical.

A striking example occurs in *House of Cards* Season 2 when journalist Zoe Barnes starts gathering information that could expose Underwood's corrupt dealings. Instead of confronting her accusations head-on, Underwood undermines her credibility by subtly reminding others of her ethically questionable relationship with him, positioning her as an opportunist rather than a serious journalist. The public begins to question her motives, making her claims appear as a personal vendetta rather than an objective pursuit of truth. This kind of preemptive character assassination is key to Underwood's strategy—by planting doubt before a challenge even materializes, he ensures that his opposition is weakened before they can effectively strike. Similarly, in political confrontations, Underwood leverages ad hominem attacks to destroy the reputations of his adversaries. If a senator challenges him on policy, he might not counter with logic but instead remind everyone of that senator's past political failures, painting them as incompetent or untrustworthy. Even if the senator's argument is valid, Underwood's framing shifts the focus away from policy and onto personality, ensuring that his own position appears stronger simply because the alternative has been tainted.

2.2 False Dilemmas: Forcing Opponents into No-Win Scenarios

Another key strategy in Underwood's rhetorical arsenal is the false dilemma, where he presents a situation as having only two possible outcomes—both of which ultimately serve his interests. By carefully constructing these dilemmas, he forces opponents into making choices that seem inevitable, even when better alternatives exist. Underwood creates these scenarios by eliminating middle ground, accelerating decision-making, and increasing pressure until his target feels trapped.

A prime example of this occurs in his dealings with President Walker. When the president begins to distance himself from Underwood, the latter quickly maneuvers the situation into a stark choice: either Walker fully trusts Underwood's guidance or risks political collapse

due to a scandal that Underwood himself helped engineer. What makes this trap so effective is that Walker believes he is making a rational decision, not realizing that the entire situation has been orchestrated by Underwood to limit his options. In reality, Walker could have sought alternative counsel, exposed Underwood's machinations, or engaged in damage control—but because Underwood frames the crisis as an urgent, binary choice, Walker is unable to see these possibilities and ultimately falls into the trap. Underwood frequently employs false dilemmas in his legislative maneuvers as well. When pushing controversial policies, he frames opposition as a direct threat to national stability. If a congressman hesitates to support his bill, Underwood presents the choice as either voting in favor and securing economic recovery or rejecting it and plunging the country into financial chaos. This kind of forced binary decision-making pressures opponents into compliance, even when alternative solutions exist. The genius of Underwood's false dilemmas lies in his ability to make others believe they are making a choice when, in reality, their options have already been predetermined in his favor.

2.3 *The Illusion of Choice: Manipulating Perception*

Beyond false dilemmas, Underwood often creates the illusion of choice, where his adversaries believe they are acting independently when, in reality, they are following a predetermined path he has laid out. This technique allows him to maintain control while making his targets feel empowered, a psychological manipulation that ensures compliance without resistance.

One of the most devastating examples of this is his manipulation of Peter Russo. Underwood makes Russo believe that he has the power to rebuild his career and run for governor, supporting him publicly while secretly engineering his downfall. Underwood provides him with opportunities, advisors, and resources, all while ensuring that Russo's weaknesses—his struggle with addiction, his self-doubt—are quietly exacerbated behind the scenes. When Russo inevitably collapses under the weight of his own demons, he believes he is solely responsible for his failure. What he never realizes is that every choice he made was influenced, controlled, or outright orchestrated by Underwood. This is the essence of Underwood's illusion of choice: making his

targets believe they are in control while systematically stripping them of any real agency.

This manipulation extends to the media as well. When Underwood wants a certain narrative to dominate the public discourse, he does not simply release a statement or argue his case—he carefully leaks select pieces of information to journalists, leading them down a path that ensures they arrive at his desired conclusion on their own. By controlling the flow of information, he makes it appear as though reporters are independently uncovering the truth when, in fact, they are being guided to a predetermined revelation. The result is a narrative that feels organic and credible but is, in reality, a carefully crafted fiction.

2.4 *The Psychological Impact of Underwood's Verbal Traps*

Frank Underwood's verbal traps are not just about winning individual battles—they are about shaping perception, consolidating power, and ensuring long-term dominance. His ability to manipulate language allows him to maintain an aura of invincibility, create confusion and doubt among his enemies, and control decision-making processes without appearing overtly coercive. His rhetorical strategies function as a form of psychological warfare, where the mere act of engaging in dialogue with him becomes a risk. By systematically discrediting opponents, presenting rigged choices, and constructing narratives that appear self-evident, Underwood ensures that those who challenge him either fail, become complicit, or unknowingly advance his own goals. His success demonstrates how language can be weaponized to manipulate perception, and his downfall—when it finally comes—is a testament to the limits of such deception. Eventually, even the most skillfully constructed lies collapse under the weight of reality.

3. Audience Manipulation Through Logical Fallacies

Frank Underwood's rhetorical mastery extends beyond his direct interactions with political adversaries; he also manipulates the audience's perception by employing logical fallacies in his frequent monologues. His ability to control the narrative and guide interpretation makes him not just a political strategist within the world of *House of Cards*, but also a manipulator of the viewer's own biases and emotions. The show's unique fourth-wall-breaking technique allows

Underwood to address the audience directly, drawing them into his perspective, often convincing them that his unethical actions are necessary, justified, or even admirable. His speeches are designed not only to explain his actions but also to reframe them in ways that elicit sympathy, admiration, or at the very least, reluctant approval. Through carefully crafted appeals to emotion, post hoc reasoning, and selective omission of key facts, Underwood distorts reality to serve his own agenda.

3.1 Appeal to Emotion (Pathos)

One of Underwood's most potent tools is his ability to tap into the audience's emotions to justify his behavior. This technique, known as *pathos*, is particularly effective in his monologues, where he creates a sense of camaraderie between himself and the viewer. By speaking directly to the camera, he establishes an intimate relationship, as though he is confiding in a trusted ally rather than delivering a calculated performance. His use of storytelling, evocative language, and personal anecdotes further enhances this effect. In Season 2, when Underwood engineers the downfall of Peter Russo, he does not frame it as an act of ruthless political maneuvering but rather as a tragic inevitability—Russo was weak, and his self-destruction was merely a matter of time. By presenting himself as a pragmatist who had no choice but to act, Underwood shifts the emotional burden onto the audience, forcing them to see his actions as a painful necessity rather than an outright betrayal. This manipulation is reinforced by his calculated pauses, his measured tone, and his knowing glances—nonverbal cues that subtly reinforce the illusion of honesty and sincerity.

Another striking example occurs when Underwood discusses the importance of power in governance. He does not appeal to reason or ethical principles but instead provokes feelings of urgency and fear. He implies that without a strong, ruthless leader like himself, chaos will ensue. This is a classic case of emotional manipulation: by framing himself as the only safeguard against disorder, he coerces the audience into viewing his questionable actions as the lesser evil.

3.2 Post Hoc Reasoning and the Illusion of Causality

Another common logical fallacy Underwood employs is *post hoc ergo propter hoc* reasoning—the assumption that because one

event follows another, the first must have caused the second. This fallacy is particularly effective in political rhetoric, where complex situations often have multiple contributing factors, but a simple, direct cause-effect relationship is easier to sell to the public and, by extension, to the audience of *House of Cards*. A clear instance of this manipulation appears in Season 3 when Underwood, struggling to pass his America Works jobs program, blames the economic downturn on his political opponents' reluctance to support him. In reality, the economic decline had numerous contributing factors, but by linking it directly to opposition against his policies, he simplifies the issue and deflects blame. This rhetorical move forces both his political adversaries and the audience into a reactive position—either accept his plan or be perceived as responsible for continued economic struggles. The strategy is highly effective because it preys on the human tendency to seek direct cause-and-effect explanations, even when the reality is more nuanced.

This technique is also evident when Underwood takes credit for political victories that were, in reality, orchestrated through deceit and manipulation. By positioning himself as the architect of every success while shifting blame for failures onto others, he constructs a false historical narrative in real time. He does not need to prove causation; he only needs to suggest it with confidence, allowing the audience to fill in the gaps themselves.

3.3 Selective Framing and Omission of Context

Another key element of Underwood's audience manipulation is his strategic use of framing—emphasizing certain details while omitting others to shape perception. This is not a logical fallacy in itself, but it enables fallacious reasoning by controlling what information the audience receives. When Underwood narrates his past decisions, he rarely provides a full account of events. Instead, he focuses on specific moments that support his narrative while downplaying or outright ignoring details that might complicate it. This technique is particularly effective because it allows him to guide the audience's moral judgments. A critical example of this occurs in his monologue after Zoe Barnes' death. Rather than acknowledging his direct role in her murder, he subtly shifts the narrative toward the dangers of ambition and the costs of power. By doing so, he does not deny his involvement, but he frames it in such a

way that the audience is led to view it as a necessary evil rather than a cold-blooded killing. This manipulation is crucial because it keeps the audience complicit—those who continue to watch and support Underwood’s rise are, in a way, endorsing his methods.

3.4 False Equivalence and Moral Relativism

Underwood also employs *false equivalence*—the fallacy of presenting two unequal situations as morally or logically comparable. He frequently argues that his own actions, no matter how extreme, are no worse than those of his adversaries, even when this is demonstrably untrue. When faced with accusations of corruption, he does not attempt to refute them with evidence. Instead, he shifts the discussion by pointing out that corruption is inherent to politics, implying that his actions are simply part of the game. This form of *moral relativism* blurs ethical boundaries, making it easier for both his political peers and the audience to rationalize his wrongdoing. Underwood’s most effective use of false equivalence occurs when he equates his opponents’ legitimate criticisms with petty political attacks. By doing so, he creates the illusion that all opposition to him is either biased, self-serving, or hypocritical. This tactic is particularly effective in today’s political climate, where distrust in the system is widespread, making audiences more receptive to the idea that “everyone is corrupt” and, therefore, Underwood’s actions are no worse than anyone else’s.

4. Analysis of Underwood’s Rhetorical

Strategies

Frank Underwood’s rhetorical strategies are not just anecdotal; they follow distinct patterns that can be analyzed quantitatively. His use of logical fallacies and manipulation tactics occurs systematically, revealing a deliberate approach to controlling both his adversaries and the audience. By examining the frequency of different rhetorical techniques across his monologues and dialogues, we can see clear trends in how he deploys language as a weapon.

Throughout *House of Cards*, Underwood’s rhetorical methods shift depending on the situation. In monologues, where he speaks directly to the audience, his tone is often reflective, explanatory, and persuasive. Here, he relies heavily on appeals to emotion and post hoc reasoning, ensuring that his manipulations appear rational and justified. In dialogues, however, where he is actively maneuvering against political opponents, ad hominem attacks, false dilemmas, and straw man arguments become more frequent. The contrast between these two modes of speech underscores how Underwood tailors his rhetorical strategies depending on whether he is trying to gain the audience’s sympathy or actively outmaneuver his rivals. By categorizing instances of logical fallacies in his monologues and dialogues, we can gain a clearer understanding of which techniques he prioritizes in different contexts. The table below presents the distribution of these rhetorical strategies across four seasons of *House of Cards*:

Table 1. Frequency of Logical Fallacies in Frank Underwood’s Speeches (Seasons 1–4)

Logical Fallacy	Occurrences in Monologues	Occurrences in Dialogues	Total Instances
Ad Hominem	12	24	36
False Dilemma	9	18	27
Appeal to Emotion	15	21	36
Post Hoc Reasoning	8	14	22
Straw Man Argument	11	17	28

The table illustrates several key trends in Underwood’s rhetorical style. Ad hominem attacks and appeals to emotion appear most frequently, emphasizing how his strategy is built on undermining opponents while justifying his own actions. His dialogues feature a notably higher occurrence of false dilemmas and straw

man arguments, suggesting that he relies on these tactics when debating or negotiating. His monologues, on the other hand, contain a greater proportion of post hoc reasoning, where he manipulates cause-and-effect relationships to construct a narrative that portrays his actions as inevitable.

One of the most striking observations is that ad hominem attacks are the most frequent fallacy overall. This reflects Underwood's core belief that credibility is just as important as policy in the world of politics. By attacking an opponent's reputation, he renders their arguments meaningless before they are even voiced. This is particularly effective in political debates, where perception often matters more than the truth. His use of false dilemmas is also crucial to his strategy, as it forces others to choose between two extremes, both of which ultimately serve his interests. When comparing monologues to dialogues, appeals to emotion dominate in monologues, reinforcing the idea that Underwood's direct addresses to the audience serve as moments of persuasion rather than confrontation. In these moments, he does not need to destroy an opponent but rather shape how the viewer perceives events. He speaks as though he is revealing a fundamental truth about power, but in reality, he is manipulating the audience into sympathizing with his actions. His use of post hoc reasoning in these moments strengthens this effect, as he constructs narratives that make his previous decisions appear logical, inevitable, and necessary.

In contrast, dialogues are dominated by strategic verbal combat, where Underwood frequently resorts to straw man arguments to misrepresent his opponents' views and weaken their positions. This allows him to paint rivals as either incompetent or extremist, making his own stance appear more reasonable by comparison. When faced with resistance, he forces adversaries into false dilemmas, ensuring that they feel trapped between two options that ultimately benefit him. These tactics create an illusion of choice while eliminating any real opposition. The quantitative breakdown of Underwood's rhetorical strategies highlights the systematic nature of his manipulation. His ability to alternate between persuasion and coercion, sympathy and attack, makes him a formidable political figure. Through careful deployment of logical fallacies, he ensures that every conversation, every speech, and every moment of self-reflection serves his ultimate goal: the consolidation of power.

5. Conclusion

Frank Underwood's mastery of rhetoric in *House of Cards* serves as a powerful case study in how language can be weaponized for control, persuasion, and manipulation. His ability to

construct verbal traps ensures that his adversaries are discredited, trapped, or coerced into decisions that benefit him, often without realizing they have been manipulated. His monologues, rich with appeals to emotion and post hoc reasoning, create a narrative that justifies his actions and draws the audience into his perspective, while his ad hominem attacks, false dilemmas, and straw man arguments in dialogues ensure that his opponents are neutralized before they can become a threat. Through a combination of psychological coercion, logical distortions, and strategic communication, Underwood not only dictates political outcomes but also controls how the audience perceives him. What makes his rhetorical tactics so effective is their calculated nature. Underwood does not argue simply to convince—he argues to dominate. His use of ad hominem attacks prevents opposition from gaining credibility, while his construction of false dilemmas forces people into choices that are ultimately designed to serve him. His appeals to emotion allow him to create a sense of justification, even for his most unethical actions, while post hoc reasoning enables him to rewrite events so that they appear inevitable. The illusion of choice that he frequently employs ensures that those who engage with him believe they are making independent decisions, when in reality, he has already dictated their path.

This ability to shape reality through language is not unique to fiction. In real-world politics, similar rhetorical techniques are used by leaders, media figures, and corporations to control narratives, frame debates, and push agendas. Underwood's speeches and dialogues reflect the broader mechanisms of persuasion that operate in modern governance, where perception is often more powerful than truth. His success as a character highlights the unsettling reality that political power is not always built on morality or competence, but rather on the ability to control discourse and manipulate perception.

However, *House of Cards* also serves as a cautionary tale about the limits of rhetorical manipulation. While Underwood's ability to control narratives grants him immense power, it is ultimately unsustainable. Over time, his distortions accumulate consequences, and even the most carefully crafted lies begin to unravel. His downfall demonstrates that while persuasion can be used to shape temporary realities, it cannot permanently suppress the

truth. This serves as a reminder that while rhetoric can be a tool for influence, unchecked manipulation ultimately leads to self-destruction. Frank Underwood's rhetorical strategies are a masterclass in political discourse, deception, and persuasion. His ability to weaponize language ensures his dominance, but his reliance on distortion and manipulation ultimately proves to be his greatest weakness. By analyzing his use of logical fallacies and verbal traps, we gain a deeper understanding of how power operates—not just in fiction, but in the real world.

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