RESEARCH NOTES

POLITICAL COMEDY SHOWS AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS

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...the ascension of [Jon] Stewart and The Daily Show into the public eye is no laughing matter...Stewart’s daily dose of political parody characterized by asinine alliteration leads to a ‘holier than thou’ attitude toward our national leaders. People who possess the wit, intelligence, and self-awareness of viewers of The Daily Show would never choose to enter the political fray full of ‘buffoons and idiots.’ (Kalin, 2006, p. A19)

A growing body of scholarly literature examines the implications of entertainment-oriented ‘soft news’ television programs for democratic politics. Much of this research suggests that exposure to such programs can, under certain conditions, influence public attention to politics (Baum, 2002), public knowledge about politics (Baum, 2003; Prior, 2003), public opinion (Baum, 2003; Young, 2004b; Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2006), and political participation (Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005). Drawing on this literature, several recent studies (Young 2004a; Hollander, 2005) have considered the potential effects of exposure to television comedy programs that focus on political humor (e.g., Saturday Night Live and The Daily Show with Jon Stewart). Most importantly for our purposes, Baumgartner and Morris (2006) have argued that exposure to political comedy programs such as The Daily Show ‘may dampen participation...by contributing to a sense of political alienation from the political process’ (pp. 362–363). In this study, we challenge the notion that political comedy programs undermine political participation by showing that exposure to such programs is positively associated with some forms of political participation.

We define a political comedy show as a television program that emphasizes humorous coverage of current issues and parodies of political figures. Judging by Nielsen ratings, the number of Americans watching such shows has grown in recent years. For instance, the audience of The Daily Show doubled to 1.3 million per night between 2001 and 2005 (Willow, 2005).

Studies have shown that people consume programs such as soft news or political comedy shows primarily to be entertained rather than to be informed (Baum, 2003; Prior, 2003). Nor are these shows produced to inform their audiences (as Jon Stewart himself has stated on numerous occasions regarding his program). Nevertheless, such programs may exert a positive impact on public knowledge about politics. Hollander (2005, p. 410), for instance, concluded that exposure to political comedy shows

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yielded ‘a modest benefit...in terms of both [campaign information] recall and recognition’ among young people. Along similar lines, Young (2004a) found that, all else being equal, Daily Show viewers were more knowledgeable about politics than were non-viewers.

Other research has examined the implications of watching political comedy programs for public opinion. In particular, an experiment by Baumgartner and Morris (2006) showed that exposure to The Daily Show led viewers to rate political candidates more negatively and to express less trust in the media as well as less faith in the electoral system. On the basis of these findings, the authors suggested that the show might undermine participation by fostering political cynicism among audience members. Still, the experiment did not directly examine the effect of exposure to the show on participation. Moreover, another finding from the study raises the possibility that exposure to political comedy programs can encourage, rather than discourage political participation: Specifically, the finding that exposure to The Daily Show enhanced audience members’ confidence in their own ability to understand political issues.1

Studies have indicated that internal political efficacy—a belief in ‘one’s own competence to understand and to participate effectively in politics’ (Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991, p. 1408)—can stimulate political participation (Finkel & Muller, 1998). Moreover, Shingles (1981) and Pollock (1983) found that internal political efficacy fostered participation in both conventional and unconventional political activities even among citizens with relatively little trust in the political system. Thus, exposure to political comedy shows could increase political participation by fostering internal political efficacy.

As Baumgartner and Morris (2006) observed, content analyses of political comedy shows have found that such programs typically make jokes at the expense of presidents and presidential candidates (Niven, Lichter, & Amundson, 2003; Young 2004a). Instead of discouraging participation, however, negative information of this sort could motivate viewers to participate in politics by triggering anxiety about the current political situation and future political outcomes (see, e.g., Martin, 2004 on how negative political campaigns stimulate political participation; but see Ansolabehere, Iyengar, Simon, & Valentino, 1994).

Exposure to political comedy shows could also foster political participation by building an imagined community among viewers and making politics more enjoyable. Mutz (1998, p. 22), among others, has found that the use of mass media can induce ‘perceptions of collective experience or collective opinion.’ Such shared experience or opinion may, in turn, facilitate collective action among the public (Pasek, Kenski, Romer, & Jamieson, 2006). Thus, political comedy shows may increase political participation by fostering common experiences and opinions among viewers. Moreover, such programs usually present politics in an entertaining manner, which may lead viewers to think that politics is enjoyable, thereby stimulating political participation.

1 The authors attributed this finding to (a) the way in which The Daily Show simplifies politics, in order to present it in an entertaining manner, which may lead viewers to perceive politics as being less complicated than it actually is, and (b) the way in which the show may validate viewers’ faith in their ability to understand politics when they get the show’s jokes.
At the same time, political participation may foster the watching of political comedy shows. Studies have shown that politically active people are more attentive to political information than are non-participants (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Thus, the politically active may tune in political comedy shows to seek information and opinions about public affairs.

With all of this in mind, we propose the following hypothesis about the relationship between exposure to political comedy shows and political participation: Exposure to political comedy shows is positively related to political participation.

Our tests of this hypothesis take into account the potential effects of political knowledge, political interest, and education, given previous findings that each is positively related to political participation (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Our tests also control for a range of additional factors. Prior research suggests that exposure to traditional news sources (e.g., newspapers and television news) may be related to political participation (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Putnam, 2000; Peer, Malthouse, & Calder, 2003; Pasek et al., 2006), as may exposure to internet news (Bimber, 2001; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003). Based on the findings of Moy and her colleagues (2005), exposure to late-night talk shows (e.g., The Tonight Show with Jay Leno and The Late Show with David Letterman) may also be related to political participation. Putnam (2000), among others, has observed that self-identification with a political party is associated with greater political participation; given that we test our hypothesis in the context of the 2004 Democratic primary campaigns, we further differentiate between the effects of self-identification as a Democrat and self-identification as a Republican. Finally, we consider the potential influence of demographic factors given findings that whites, older people, and citizens with higher incomes or greater education are more likely to participate in politics than are non-whites, young people, and those with lower incomes or less education (Verba et al., 1995; Putnam, 2000).

DATA AND MEASURES

The data for this study came from a telephone survey sponsored by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press and conducted by the Princeton Survey Research Associates (Pew Research Center, 2004). The survey took place from December 19, 2003 to January 4, 2004—that is, during the early stages of the campaign for the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination. The 1,506 respondents were selected from a national population of adults through probability sampling; the response rate was 30 percent. This data set was the only one that we could identify that included measures for all of the key concepts of interest. Our measures of the key concepts under discussion were as follows.

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2 The response rate was obtained from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. Pew’s method for calculating this response rate resembled AAPOR’s RR3 in that it estimated the proportion of cases of unknown eligibility that were actually eligible.

3 A 2000 Pew Research Center survey was similar to the one used in this study but did not include measures of political interest and exposure to online news sources. The 2000 National Annenberg Election Survey that Moy et al. (2005) used to examine the relationship between watching late-night talk shows and political participation did not include questions capturing exposure to political comedy shows.
Political participation was measured by a series of four items: ‘Have you ever contacted any elected official?’ ‘Attended a campaign event?’ ‘Joined an organization in support of a particular cause?’ ‘Contributed money to a candidate running for public office?’ The response options for each item were ‘Yes, done this within last year’ (coded as 1; 17, 6, 11, and 9 percent of the respondents, respectively), ‘yes, done this not within last year’ (coded .5; 16, 16, 15, and 15 percent), and ‘no’ (0; 67, 78, 74, and 76 percent). These items did not form a reliable index; thus, we analyzed each item separately. There was also a theoretical basis for doing so in that Verba et al. (1995) found that political efficacy and education influenced participation in time-based political activities—a category that includes contacting elected officials, attending campaign events, and joining organizations—but had little impact on political contributing (in addition, they found that income had a large impact on contributing but only a small impact on time-based activities).

Exposure to political comedy shows was measured by an item that asked, ‘How often, if ever, do you learn something about the presidential campaign or the candidates from comedy shows such as Saturday Night Live and The Daily Show?’ Responses were coded as 1 (‘regularly’; 7 percent of respondents), 2/3 (‘sometimes’; 18 percent), 1/3 (‘hardly ever’; 13 percent), and 0 (‘never’; 62 percent). We used self-reports of learning from various kinds of media sources as proxies for exposure to these sources because the survey did not include direct measures of media exposure and because correlation analyses suggested that such self-reports of learning captured media exposure rather than information acquisition.4

Political interest was measured by two questions: One asking, ‘How much do you enjoy keeping up with political news about campaigns and elections—a lot, some, not much, or not at all?’ and the other asking, ‘How closely have you been following news about the race for Democratic presidential nomination—very closely, fairly closely, not too closely, or not at all closely?’ Responses were coded as 1 (‘a lot’ or ‘very closely’; 20 and 16 percent of respondents, respectively), 2/3 (37 and 34 percent), 1/3 (28 and 29 percent), or 0 (‘not at all’; 15 and 21 percent). Given that the scores on the two items were strongly correlated with one another (r = .58; p < .01), we summed them and then divided by two to create a political interest index (M = .51; SD = .29; Cronbach’s α = .73).

Political knowledge was measured by two sets of questions. The first set tested respondents’ knowledge by asking, ‘Do you happen to know which of the presidential candidates served ... as an Army general?’ and ‘... as the Majority Leader in the House of Representatives?’ Correct answers were coded as 1 (36 and 31 percent of respondents) and other responses were coded as 0. The second pair of questions asked whether respondents had heard a lot (coded as 1; 38 and 19 percent of respondents), heard something about (.5; 35 and 27 percent), or had never heard of (0; 27 and 54 percent) ‘Al Gore’s endorsement of Howard Dean’ and ‘Howard Dean’s comment about wanting to win the votes of “guys with Confederate flags in their pickup

4Our analyses showed that self-reported learning from political comedy shows was unrelated to actual political knowledge; self-reported learning from late-night talk shows was negatively related to knowledge (r = -.07; p < .01).
The scores on the four items were strongly correlated with one another (with correlations ranging from .42 to .53; \( p < .01 \)), indicating that they measured the same underlying construct. Thus, we summed across the four items and divided by four to create a political knowledge index \((M = .39; SD = .34; \text{Cronbach's } \alpha = .78)\).

Exposure to traditional news sources was measured by a seven-item index. Respondents were asked, ‘How often, if ever, do you learn something about the presidential campaign or the candidates’ from ‘the national nightly network news on CBS, ABC, and NBC,’ ‘cable news networks such as CNN, MSNBC, and the FOX cable news channel,’ ‘C-SPAN,’ ‘public television shows such as The News Hour with Jim Lehrer and Washington Week in Review,’ ‘political talk shows on cable TV such as CNN’s Crossfire and CNBC’s Hardball,’ ‘Sunday morning network talk shows, such as ABC’s This Week, and NBC’s Meet the Press,’ and ‘your daily newspaper.’ For each item, the responses were coded as 1 (‘regularly’), 2/3 (‘sometimes’), 1/3 (‘hardly ever’), and 0 (‘never’). We summed across the items and then divided by seven to create an index \((M = .46; SD = .22; \text{Cronbach’s } \alpha = .70)\).

Exposure to online news sources was measured by three items. These were similar to the questions tapping exposure to traditional news sources except that they asked about learning from ‘the news pages of Internet service providers such as AOL News or Yahoo News,’ ‘the websites of news organizations such as CNN.com, the New York Times.com, or your local newspaper’s or TV station’s websites,’ and ‘other kinds of online news magazine and opinion sites such as Slate.com or the National Review online.’ As above, the responses were coded as 1 (‘regularly’), 2/3, 1/3, and 0 (‘never’). We summed the scores for the items and then divided by three to create an index \((M = .20; SD = .25; \text{Cronbach’s } \alpha = .65)\).

Exposure to late-night talk shows was measured by an item similar to the questions tapping exposure to political comedy shows, traditional news sources, and online news sources except that it asked about learning from ‘late night TV shows such as David Letterman and Jay Leno.’ Responses were coded as 1 (‘regularly’; 8 percent of respondents), 2/3 (18 percent), 1/3 (21 percent), and 0 (‘never’; 53 percent).

Partisanship was treated as two dichotomous variables, one for self-identification as a Democrat and the other for self-identification as a Republican.

Demographics variables included age (in years/100), sex (1 if female and 0 if male), race (1 if white and 0 if otherwise), income (measured on a nine-category scale and recoded to range from 0 to 1, with 1 indicating the maximum), and education (measured on a seven-category scale and recoded to range from 0 to 1).

RESULTS

Our analyses, shown in Table 1, examined the relationships between exposure to political comedy shows and the various political participation measures. Along with the measure of exposure to political comedy shows, the model for each political participation measure also included our measures of political interest; political knowledge; exposure to traditional news sources, online news sources, and late-night talk shows; partisanship; and the demographic variables. Given the ordinal nature of the dependent variables, we estimated the models through ordered probit.
As the table shows, the significant effects of age and race were generally consistent with findings from previous studies (Verba et al., 1995; Putnam, 2000). Education was positively, significantly, and strongly related to all three time-based political activities but not to campaign contributing, which is consistent with findings of Verba et al. (1995). Income was positively, significantly, and strongly related to contributing but was significantly related to only one of the three time-based activities—another pattern that is consistent with the findings of Verba et al. (1995). Political interest and political knowledge were positively related to all forms of political participation, following previously established patterns (Verba et al., 1995; Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996). Exposure to traditional news sources was positively associated with attending a campaign event, whereas exposure to online news sources was positively related to
joining an organization. Neither partisan variable was systematically related to political participation.

Our analyses did not produce evidence of positive relationships between exposure to late-night talk shows and political participation, a result that is seemingly inconsistent with findings of Moy et al. (2005). We offer three possible explanations for the apparent discrepancy. First, we used self-reported learning from late-night talk shows as a proxy for such exposure, whereas Moy and her colleagues used self-reported exposure. Second, the political activities included in our analyses were somewhat different from those examined by Moy and her colleagues. Third, we examined data collected during a presidential primary campaign, whereas they examined data collected over a broader time frame that included the general election campaign. It is possible that the impact of watching late-night talk shows on political participation differs from one stage of the campaign process to another.

Most importantly for our purposes, exposure to political comedy shows was positively associated with two of the three time-based activities: Attending a campaign event \( (p = .05) \) and joining an organization \( (p = .06) \). Though the relationship between exposure and contacting an elected official was positive, it was not significant. One possible explanation for this pattern builds on the premise that watching political comedy shows may induce cynicism toward the electoral system (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). If this is so, then exposure to such programs may do less to promote contact with elected officials—who are products of the electoral system—than to promote other time-based political activities. The relationship between exposure to political comedy shows and contributing money did not approach statistical significance, which is not surprising given that this is an income-driven form of participation (Verba et al., 1995).

**CONCLUSION**

During the 2004 Democratic presidential primary campaign, one in four Americans reported regularly or sometimes learning about the race from political comedy shows. Such self-reported learning—which we take as a proxy for exposure—was positively associated with two forms of political participation (attending a campaign event and joining an organization), even after controlling for a host of other relevant factors.

In drawing conclusions from the results presented here, we should be appropriately cautious. To begin with, our analyses relied on measures of self-reported learning rather than true measures of exposure (though we believe that our measures serve as reasonable proxies for such exposure). A second caveat is that our use of data collected

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5 Exposure to traditional news sources was strongly and positively related to political interest, however \( (r = .49; p < .01) \).

6 Democratic partisanship was positively related to political interest, however \( (r = .16; p < .01) \).

7 Their model predicted a political participation index that included attending political meetings, rallies, speeches, or dinners that supported a particular candidate; doing other work for one of the presidential candidates; and displaying a sign of some sort for a presidential candidate.
during the 2004 Democratic primary campaign required us to examine the relationship between exposure to political comedy shows and political participation in the context of a particular stage of a particular election. Further research might examine whether our findings extend to other electoral contexts; such research could also go beyond the context of political elections. A third caution is that we have shown that exposure to political comedy shows can be associated with certain forms of political participation. Future studies could test the relationships between exposure to political comedy shows and additional forms of participation (e.g., displaying a sign or engaging in political protest).

Finally, and most importantly, our use of cross-sectional survey data prevented us from disentangling the causal mechanisms behind the positive relationships that we found between watching political comedy shows and political participation. Such relationships may reflect an impact of political comedy shows on participation given that exposure to such programs may foster internal efficacy (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006), induce concern (Martin, 2004), and create shared experiences (Mutz, 1998) among viewers as well as make politics more enjoyable. Alternatively (or additionally), these relationships may reflect the impact of political participation on exposure to political comedy shows given that the politically active may watch such shows to seek information.

At the very least, however, our findings challenge one major criticism leveled against political comedy shows: Namely, that they discourage political participation. Previous claims to the contrary, viewers of programs such as The Daily Show are, if anything, particularly likely to ‘enter the political fray’ (Kalin, 2006, p. A19).

REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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