1-1-2015

Laughing Our Way To Stronger Democracy: Political Comedy's Potential To Equalize Political Interest And Political Knowledge In Community College Students

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LAUGHING OUR WAY TO TRONGER DEMOCRACY: POLITICAL COMEDY'S POTENTIAL TO EQUALIZE POLITICAL INTEREST AND POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

2015

MAJOR: POLITICAL SCIENCE

Approved By:

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Advisor Date

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DEDICATION

For Chloe and Kamryn, with much love.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The journey that has led me to writing the acknowledgement section of this dissertation has been wrought with both triumphs and disappointments, trials and rewards. It is only by God's grace that I have endured both the ups and downs, and I want to give Him the glory for getting me to this point. My trust in His plan has kept me grounded through the 2-hour drive to Detroit while completing my coursework; through taking two classes each semester while teaching five; through passing comprehensive exams with honors, and now completing this dissertation.

Along the way, I have been blessed with people to support and encourage me in this journey. First and foremost, I am deeply indebted to my advisor Prof. Jeffrey Grynaviski for helping get here. His letters of recommendation have made it possible for me to secure the funding for my studies, and his feedback on revisions have immensely strengthened this work. The hours spent in his office and corresponding over e-mail conceptualizing this research are among the most memorable and enjoyable in my graduate studies. Prof. John Strate, was always remarkably generous with his time and thorough in his review of my work, and for that I am also very grateful. Prof. Elizabeth Stoycheff took a leap of faith when agreeing to be on my committee, as she never before had me as a student. Her perspective from the view of media effects has been extremely valuable in this work. I am also grateful for the support of Prof. Ewa Golebiowska and the political psychology perspective she brought to this research.

I am grateful for the generosity of my colleagues at Delta College who agreed to incorporate the Media Engagement Study as an assignment in their courses, as well as the students who participated. The Delta College OIT department was also invaluable in providing technical support for the experiment.

I also stand on the support of outstanding professors at Central Michigan University, Murray State University and North Central Michigan College, who have provided endless encouragement throughout my entire college career. Trish Wright at NCMC instilled in me a love of learning; Mark Wattier at Murray State saw the political scientist in me before I saw it in myself; and Delbert Ringquist at CMU has always believed in me and continues to be a source of inspiration even now, with more than 10 years distance from my master's program.

Another endless source of inspiration are my Delta students, who despite tremendous odds and obstacles, persist in their academics. It is my joy to make your success, both academically and politically, my life's work. I will do well if I can inspire you half as much as you inspire me.

Finally, I am grateful to my family for giving me the time and space to complete this research. Throughout the course of this project, I have both lost my precious Mumsy and gained a new member of my family, Kamryn Vicki. The final pages of this project were written during Kamryn's naptimes and with her gazing at me from her bouncy seat. I am grateful to my parents for their unconditional love and confidence, as well as the work ethic they instilled in me from a young age. The only thing that would make this moment sweeter is being able to share it with my Mumsy. My husband Jared has been an amazing partner in this journey; he has believed in me when I had trouble believing in myself. My oldest daughter Chloe is now almost nine; I embarked on this journey when she was just five. She has endured evenings with mom away at school and summer days with mom on her computer. Her creativity and zest for life have inspired me to no end. Chloe and Kamryn have been a strong motivation to complete this project. I dedicate this dissertation to them.

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction
Does political comedy have potential to reduce political inequality in the United States?

Those who have taught introductory political science courses at the college level are well familiar with the sentiment "I'm just not that into politics" expressed by freshman and sophomore students. They say this as though it happens to be coincidental and inconsequential, no different than lacking a preference for Superman ice cream, watching NASCAR or the color purple. They find the political world to be complicated, boring, and overall intimidating. At the beginning of the semester when students reveal this attitude, it's as though they expect me to be shocked or disappointed. Nothing could be further from the truth. Political science research consistently finds that young adults of today are the least politically educated and involved of all age groups, even more so than previous generations of young adults (see for example Wattenberg 2010; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Highton and Wolfinger 2001). What they don't realize is their lack of political interest is an attitude they've developed from early childhood and into their adolescent years; it is not one they have chosen, but has been chosen for them by their life experiences and environment. Perhaps it was a lack of political discussions around the dinner table at home or attending K-12 school that failed to foster positive civic attitudes. Or, maybe it was a lack of access to organized clubs, sports or church youth groups, which cultivate civic skills. Regardless of the source of their political naiveté, these young people are set on a trajectory for isolation from the political system. Where does that leave the civic mission of higher education (Checkoway 2001)? Knowing that most of my students would not set foot in an American politics class had it not been a graduation requirement, I realize that this may be the one opportunity in their lives to change the course of their political destiny. As one who has dedicated her life work to politically empowering young people, I have sought to discover interventions that have potential to reverse the political

path on which many of our students find themselves. This research explores one such promising intervention: Political comedy.

This dissertation investigates whether political comedy, relative to network news, has potential to spark political interest in politics in community college students and increase their political knowledge. I chose political comedy as an intervention because outside of the classroom, young adults are increasingly turning to political comedy as a soft news source (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2012). In this research, the population I am primarily interested in is apolitical young adults attending community college. While there may be other interventions that would serve to heighten this population's political interest and knowledge, I intentionally sought one in which apolitical young adults, on their own accord, already possess the opportunity, ability and motivation to engage.[1] While political news and information is more readily available than ever before, today's young adults lack the motivation to seek it out, preferring more entertaining options, including political comedy. Young adults under age 30 comprise 39 percent of *The Daily Show's* audience (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2012), 20 percent of which is also apolitical (Cao 2010). Political comedy shows are the one off-line news source (albeit "soft news) that young people watch in rates higher than older adults. Indeed, the primary reason viewers of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* watch the program is to be entertained (Rottinghaus et al 2008; Young 2013). Yet tuning into *The Daily Show* for purposes of entertainment and humor inevitably results in exposure to political information. The research conducted for this dissertation reveals how this coincidental exposure impacts political learning and political interest.

[1] These three prerequisites are key to stimulating any behavior (Luskin 2009), and tuning into television programs is no different. See chapter 3 for more on this theory.

Why study political interest & political knowledge?

Thomas Jefferson famously wrote to Charles Yancey in January 1816 that "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be." If Thomas Jefferson is right, then the freedom to be enjoyed by today's young adults in the future faces serious threats not from an external foe, but by their own political ignorance and disinterest. That today's generations of young adults is less politically informed and engaged than that of previous generations is well documented by a growing body of research (see for example, Wattenberg 2010; Highton and Wolfinger 2001). Without an intrinsic curiosity to be informed and engaged in the political world, young people today remain alienated from the political system and lack the power to shape public policy that impacts their lives.

Those concerned for the political empowerment of young adults should turn their attention to fostering political interest because it is the most powerful predictor of political knowledge (Luskin 1990) and political participation (Verba et al 1995). Without a basic interest in public affairs, individuals will lack the motivation to seek out political information and engage in the political system. From the simple act of voting to contributing money to political campaigns, political interest is a powerful determinant of a variety of political activities (Verba et al 1995). Even the earliest research in the field found that people who had no interest in elections were 18 times more likely to abstain from voting than those with high levels of interest (Lazarsfeld et al 1948). Although today's media environment places political information at our fingertips more than ever before, if individuals lack the motivation to seek it out, they will remain ignorant. In fact, rather than facilitating political interest and engagement, the plethora of media options available to Americans has, perhaps, had the opposite effect on acquisition of political information. With so many options, only the most interested of individuals choose to tune in, thus exacerbating political

inequalities (Schlozman, Verba and Brady 2010; Prior 2005 and 2007; Neuman 1986). As Prior (2007) argues, Americans had fewer choices during the "Broadcast era" because NBC, CBS and ABC dominated the airwaves. During this time, those with mid-levels of political interest would tune into politics since the alternative was not watching television at all. With the proliferation of choice in today's media market, there is never a time when the choice is politics or no TV at all; thus, these "switchers," as Prior (2007) calls them, will opt out of political information in a high-choice environment.

More than ever, political interest is a necessary prerequisite to becoming a politically informed, and therefore, engaged citizen. Finding sources that have the potential to spark political interest in the natural environment of today's young adults will be key to fostering democratic participation and political equality. Recent empirical research has supported V.O. Key's (1949) famous line, "The blunt truth is that politicians and officials are under no compulsion to pay much heed to classes and groups of citizens that do not vote." It is a long established truth that political participation in the United States is not equal, that those who are underprivileged in terms of education and income are less likely to vote and participate in politics in others ways. Scholars attempting to identify the effects of unequal political participation have found that roll call votes in Congress do, in fact, reflect the wishes of voters more so than nonvoters (Griffin and Newman 2005); further, members of Congress are more likely to secure federal funding for projects in the geographical areas of their district where voter turnout is highest (Martin 2004). Disparities in political interest result in disparities in political participation, which results in disparities in representation. Identifying sources of political interest in those who are predisposed to be apolitical may serve to address unequal representation of interests found in public policy today (for examples of unequal representation, see Quaile and Leighley 1992; Lijphart 1997; Campbell 2003).

Why is political comedy a promising intervention?

Recent trends identified by polling organizations such as the Pew Research Center have found that entertainment media is increasing as a source of political information, especially for young adults (2012 and 2012b). Trends indicate that young people are turning away from local, cable and network news, yet the under-30 crowd occupies the greatest share of the audience for political comedy shows such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* on Comedy Central. As host of *The Daily Show* from 1999 to 2015, Jon Stewart, focused his satirical news program on politics and the national media. His brand of political humor struck a cord with young adults. In contrast to the 39 percent they comprised of Jon Stewart's audience, the under-30 crowd made up just 13 percent of the audience for local news and just 9 percent of the audience for network evening news programs (Pew Research Center 2012, 2012b). In 2004, more than 60 percent of young voters indicated that they often learned about the campaign from entertainment programs such as *The Daily Show* and *The Tonight Show* (Pew Research Center 2004). This survey research reveals that, in their natural environment, young adults are already turning to political comedy. This is important because opportunity, ability and motivation drives any behavior (Luskin 1990); without the motivation to tune into a political source, that source will have no effect on one's political interest. Young adults are already tuning into political comedy, not to become informed, but for entertainment and humor (Young 2-13). Yet, while they are watching with the motivation of getting a good laugh, they are also exposed to politics.

Not only are young adults turning to political comedy in droves; this source for "soft news" also shows promise in altering perceptions about the political world and one's place in it. Previous research suggests that soft news, relative to hard news, may be more effective at altering attitudes

and perceptions (Baum 2003). A growing body of literature on entertainment-centered news has also found it can influence evaluations of political candidates and issues (Baumgartner and Morris 2006), political efficacy (Hoffman and Young 2011; Hoffman and Thompson 2009), political knowledge (Xenos and Becker 2009; Brewer and Cao 2006; Baum 2003; Kim and Vishak 2008) and participation (Cao and Brewer 2008).

Despite the promising findings of these studies, debate still remains as to whether political comedy contributes to the ideals of democracy. Some argue that political comedy trivializes serious matters and that its focus on personality traits of public figures reinforces negative stereotypes of those in public office (Niven and Amundson 2003; Jones 2005). The relentless poking fun at political actors and institutions may contribute to feelings of disillusionment and hopelessness that citizens can do anything to change the system.

This study seeks to enter that debate by testing whether political comedy heightens political interest and political knowledge in its viewers. Its unique contribution is a short-term longitudinal experimental design that allows for analyzing changes in attitudes and knowledge through a pre- and posttest. Rather than simply demonstrating correlations between attitudes/knowledge and watching political comedy, the experimental design allows for drawing conclusions about causality. The analysis in the pages that follow answers important questions about the impact of political comedy in facilitating desirable democratic attitudes and knowledge in young adult citizens attending community college.

Research Design

An experimental research design is ideal for isolating the effects of exposure to television programs on changes in political attitudes and knowledge. Measuring attitudes and knowledge with surveys before and after exposures allows for each participant to act as his/her own control

in the statistical analysis. Further, it allows for establishing temporal precedence in ways that a cross-sectional survey research design does not. Because political attitudes and media choice are closely related, an experimental research design circumvents the problem of endogeneity. For example, previous research indicates that those who watch *The Daily Show* are more knowledgeable than average (Young and Tisinger 2006), but it's unclear whether this knowledge leads individuals to watch the show or is a result of it. A short-term longitudinal experiment allows me to establish whether exposure to the program causes viewers to be more informed.

I designed and conducted such a study in the spring 2014 semester and called it the Media Engagement Study. For the between-subjects experimental design, participants were randomly assigned to one of three groups, each of which watched an assigned episode of a television program once a week for four weeks (four total exposures). Each week, participants watched the same program, either *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *NBC Nightly News*, or *Entertainment Tonight. TDS* and *NBC* were the treatment groups, with *ET* being the control. I thought it important to include a control group that watched non-political programming to ensure that any change cannot simply be attributed to additional exposure to any kind of news program, be it political or not.

Participants were required to watch their assigned program exposures in a computer lab on the campus of Delta College, which was open during multiple days each week for several hours, providing flexible hours for participants in the study. On the day they came into the lab, participants watched the most recent episode of their respective programs available on-line. As the principle investigator in the study, I was present in the lab for all of the exposures. The research design was a hybrid between a lab and field experiment. It was part lab experiment because the treatment took place in a setting created and controlled by the researcher, yet it was also part field experiment because students participated as a class assignment, which they completed for course

credit, with the option of allowing their responses to be used as data in the study. At the end of the four weeks, participants completed a posttest identical to the pretest, with the exception being that questions to measure knowledge of political current events were different.

The experiment took place in the months of May and June in 2014. To enhance participation, faculty who taught classes whose course outcomes could be supported by exposure to the experimental stimuli were invited to involve their students. In the end, instructors who taught political science, psychology and statistics courses involved their students in the study by incorporating the exposures to the programs into their course grading criteria. Additionally, I created a no-exposure control group with students taking English and communication courses, the instructors of which agreed to allow course time for administration of the pre and posttests.

The three exposure groups completed pre and posttest questionnaires on Survey Monkey while in the computer lab for their first and last exposures. The surveys contained measures intended to capture dependent variables of political efficacy, political engagement, political interest, knowledge of current political events, and hard and soft news consumption, as well as political and demographic characteristics. For the complete text of the survey, see Appendix 4.A. In addition to the surveys at the beginning and end of the four-week study, participants also completed a short four-item questionnaire at the end of each exposure, asking them to rate the episode for how funny, relevant, enjoyable and entertaining it was.

Internal and External Validity

With regard to external validity, the population of Delta College students from which the sample was drawn may not be an exact replica of the overall population of college freshmen and sophomores across the United States (see chapter 4 for descriptive statistics). However, I do not expect that generalizing the results to other populations of community college students will be

problematic, as there is little reason to believe that relationships among the variables will be different among Delta students than among other students at two-year colleges with open enrollment admissions policies. There are systematic differences between young adults who attend college and those who do not, and this poses problems for generalizing the results to all young adults, ages 18-29. However, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that 66.3 percent of high school graduates in 2012 were enrolled in colleges or universities (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2013). Because Delta College is a two-year school and 65 percent of its student body are freshmen, being a college student is still a very new experience for many of the students who attend. Similarly, the colleges' open door admissions policy (anyone can attend, including those who lack a high school diploma) and low tuition rates make the school available to low-income and underprivileged young adults. The main limitations of this study are the generalizability of its results to the broader adult population in the United States, as well as young people at more traditional 4-year research universities. Only multiple replications with participants drawn from more heterogeneous ethnic, socioeconomic and geographic population frames would provide conclusive evidence of generalizability, a prospect that is beyond the resources and reach of this project.

An especially attractive feature of an experimental research design is its strong internal validity. My observations of participants in the lab left little doubt as to whether the participants took their task seriously and became engaged in the viewing of exposures to *The Daily Show*, *NBC Nightly News* and *Entertainment Tonight*. Outbursts of laughter coming from viewers of *The Daily Show* were frequent, as were sentiments of concern from viewers of *NBC Nightly News* over the content of their episodes. The controlled lab setting facilitated this engagement; I monitored the participants' viewing of the videos to ensure they were tuned into the assigned exposure and tuned

out of other distractions. For purposes of the study, participants were given a vague description of the study as one investigating whether people find certain programs interesting and whether they affect their attitudes toward politics. This vague description ensured they did not become preoccupied with the purpose of the study. While in a real-world setting, individuals may be doing multiple tasks while tuning into a television program, Druckman et al (2006) note that more important than the experimental environment exactly replicating the real world is that the subject "experiences the relevant forces the investigator seeks to elicit" (44). Minimizing distractions by instructing the participants to put away cell phones and access no other websites or other stimuli during the treatment helped protect the manipulation of the cognitive response to the stimuli. By randomly assigning participants to one of two treatments or the control, the research design guarantees parallel experiences for those in each group.

Measurement

The most common way social science research measures attitudes is through survey questions that ask respondents to self-report their attitudes toward a particular object. While direct, these questions are based on the assumption that individuals can access their attitudes and are willing to honestly report them. This may or may not be true. Respondents may report the socially acceptable response so as to look good for the survey. A more indirect method of measuring attitudes is to ask individuals about their preferences, which may be influenced by attitudes. This more indirect method is arguably not as precise, but may be less prone to response bias. In addition to preference ranking, attitude-expressed behaviors is another indirect measure of attitudes (Holbrook 2006).

I

conceptualize political interest as a psychological predisposition that is favorable toward learning

about and engaging in the political world**.** This definition captures both curiosity about and a propensity to engage in politics. As discussed in more depth in chapter 5, I operationalize political interest with a 40-point index comprised of the sum of four questions on which respondents provide a 0 to 10 rating. I intend to show that this 40-point index is better able to identify subtle changes in political interest than traditional measures that are based on questions with just four or five response categories. The four 0 to 10-scale questions are also preferable because they capture both self-identified attitudes and behavioral manifestations of those attitudes. These questions asked respondents to identify their personal interest in politics, how much they enjoy discussing politics, how much they enjoy learning about politics, and the extent to which they see themselves being politically involved in the future. The general question about political interest and the more specific question of political learning both tap into curiosity, while the question about political discussions and getting involved politically tap into engagement. These four items are highly reliable, with a Cronbach's Alpha of .809.

I conceptualize political knowledge as recall and retention of information about political figures, issues and institutions featured in political comedy or network news. Existing experimental research has found that careful thought must be paid to designing measures intended to capture political knowledge. Outcomes of survey questions designed to measure political knowledge can differ based on question wording, whether respondents are encouraged to think before they answer, whether respondents feel threatened, as well as personality traits such as being unwilling to give the correct answer even when a respondent knows it (Boudreau and Lupia 2006). While the results of this research have been employed to paint a desperately ignorant picture of the American public, some scholars have questioned the ability of survey questions to provide an accurate portrait. Prior and Lupia (2008) contend that the unusual context of knowledge question

in surveys may catch respondents off guard, given that they are provided no advanced notice or incentive for responding correctly. As Boudreau and Lupia (2006) state, "this 'pop quiz' atmosphere is very different than circumstances in which having particular kinds of political knowledge matters most, such as elections" (316). Further, the knowledge items are often selected in an arbitrary manner, based on the sole discretion of the researcher. Lastly, because both interviewers and interviewees have incentive to complete interviews quickly, respondents may state they don't know the answer simply because they want to get on with the interview.

My experiment addressed these concerns by asking participants about their knowledge of current events and people in the news, to which they had been exposed for the previous four weeks. Also, the surveys were administered in the context of a college course, through which students are accustomed to taking tests and responding to questions. Thirdly, because the questions were answered on-line, with no time limit, respondents may feel less pressured than if an interviewer were waiting for the answer on the other end of the telephone line. Participants answered the posttest questionnaire containing the political learning questions while they were in the lab, under my supervisions. This ensured that they did not access Google or other websites to find answers. The content of the political knowledge questions was based on what was featured on *NBC Nightly News* and *The Daily Show* throughout the four weeks of the study.

Outline of this dissertation

Chapter 2 addresses the present state of knowledge on political interest, both as a dependent and independent variable. It frames the research questions of this dissertation within the existing literature on the formation of political interest in childhood and adolescence, then discusses the potential for political comedy to intervene in the formative years, from 18-29. The chapter

discusses debates in the literature over the role of soft news in political learning and discusses how the research for this dissertation promises to shed light on this debate.

Chapter 3 discusses the relevant theories that frame the hypothesis tested by the research of this dissertation. Rational choice theory sheds light on why young people may tune into political comedy while tuning out other hard news sources. It helps explain why, in a high-choice media environment, young people do not seek political information, but might be unintentionally exposed to it while looking to be entertained by political comedy. This theory also provides a framework for understanding how the media environment facing today's young adults is shaped by media executives seeking to maximize profits. While relaxing the assumptions of rational choice theory, I argue that it is useful for explaining how the results of my study apply in a real-world context in which individuals are not "forced" to watch political comedy, as they are in my experimental study.

Political comedy serves to break down cognitive barriers in an individual's attitude toward their involvement in the political world. Relative to network news, I theorize that political comedy will be more effective at altering impressions and changing attitudes. I further theorize that the effects of political comedy on political interest and knowledge will be greatest for younger participants in my study, as the Bayesian learning model might suggest. This model explains that information people learn first will have the greatest impact on their evaluations, and because younger participants will have less experience with the political world, the television exposures will have a greater impact on them than on the older participants. The chapter closes with a discussion of the implications of this research for democratic governance, as well as the specific hypotheses this research will test.

Chapter 4 offers an in-depth description of political interest, political participation, political knowledge and hard news consumption found in the study's sample of community college

students. The picture painted by the statistics in this chapter is one of a sample of mostly young adults that follows politics only rarely, is mostly uninterested in the political world, is largely uninformed of political happenings, and pays attention to hard news less than 15 minutes a day. With regard to political interest, the majority of participants in the survey said they "follow what's going on in government and public affairs" "only now and then" or "hardly at all." This chapter also introduces my 40-point composite political interest index and uses it to describe the political interest of the sample. This chapter then discusses the political activities in which the study's participants were most likely to engage and categorizes the reasons cited by the participants in an open-ended question asking why they do or do not pay attention to politics. The results of this analysis indicate that these students are disinterested in politics because they find it complicated and boring; further, they are not convinced that if they did take the time to figure it out, that their efforts would make a difference anyway. As indicated by their response to the open-ended question, the participants are woefully ignorant of political happenings in the news, with the median number of correct responses to questions of current political events being two, out of eight total. The chapter ends with a discussion of the implications these results have for the future of freedom and democracy in the United States.

Chapter 5 looks at the causal relationship between exposures to political comedy, relative to network news, on political interest in this sample of community college students. I use my 40-point political interest composite index to determine how many points on the index participants changed throughout the four weeks of the study. The statistical analysis compares groups of participants randomly assigned to each of the three exposures (*The Daily Show*, *NBC Nightly News* and *Entertainment Tonight*), as well as the no-exposure control group, to determine whether significant differences exist. Both a difference-in-differences estimator is used in the Analysis of

Variance, as well as a difference-in-means estimator in the Analysis of Covariance. In all of the models, *The Daily Show* consistently emerges as the treatment with the greatest effect on changes in political interest throughout the course of the study.

Chapter 6 analyzes the impact of exposure to political comedy, relative to network news, on political knowledge gained in from watching these programs. Results indicate that the posttest difference between participants exposed to *NBC Nightly News* and those exposed to *Entertainment Tonight* were significant at the .05 level, controlling for political knowledge on the pretest. These results were stronger than the differences in *The Daily Show* and *Entertainment Tonight*. In every statistical model in this chapter, *NBC Nightly News* out-performs *The Daily Show* in its impact on political knowledge when compared to the *Entertainment Tonight* and no-exposure control groups; however, the differences between *NBC* and *TDS* are consistently indistinguishable from zero. The value of *TDS* seems to lie in its ability to pique political interest, which serves as a vehicle to increase political knowledge.

This dissertation is motivated by a concern for the quality of democratic representation in the United States. It is based on a normative judgment that governments at every level will represent the interests of all, if elected representatives find that citizens across age and demographic groups are participating at more equal rates. The first step in narrowing gaps in participation is to reduce inequalities in political interest and political knowledge. The chapters that follow will investigate whether political comedy holds promise to accomplish this lofty goal, at least among the country's community college student population.

CHAPTER 2
Review of the Literature on Formation of Political Interest and Effects of Political Comedy

While political news and information is more accessible than ever to Millennials, this generation of "digital natives" (Palfrey and Gasser 2008) is avoiding it altogether in pursuit of more entertaining and socially gratifying media options. Lacking the intrinsic motivation to engage in politics, today's young people are the "least politically knowledgeable generation ever in the history of survey research" (Wattenberg 2012). Three conditions – opportunity, ability and motivation – stimulate any particular behavior (Luskin 2009) – and political engagement is no different. With near-universal access to the Internet (Cohen et al 2012) and all the political news and information found there, opportunities and the ability to take advantage of them abound for young people in the United States today. Yet, without motivation to seek them out and put them to use, these opportunities and abilities sit dormant. Understanding the source of political interest – an intrinsic curiosity about politics (van Deth 1990) – is of great concern to those attempting to solve the puzzle of why some engage while others remain spectators in the American political system. With political interest being the greatest predictor of political knowledge and participation (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995), identifying the root causes and interventions that set individuals on a path toward political interest will enhance our understanding of what cultivates these democratically desirable outcomes.

Empirical studies in the political socialization literature have established the root causes of the development of political interest in childhood and adolescence, while the political behavior literature has documented the extent to which demographic characteristics in adulthood correlate with political interest. The focus of my dissertation is whether those who have escaped political socialization experiences that cultivate political interest and lack demographic characteristics associated with such interest can, in their formative years, nonetheless be drawn into the political

realm through political entertainment media. While political interest is most often investigated as an independent variable, less research has been devoted to identifying its causes. Yet discovering these origins and what interventions may heighten political interest will be useful to political practitioners and educators alike. Acquiring political interest is a prerequisite to democratically favorable attitudes, skills and behaviors and is essential if individuals are to engage in the political process throughout life. Such engagement helps ensure that there is a government that represents their interest and values. Thus, understanding the paths by which citizens become politically interested and ultimately participate in politics lends insights into the quality and equality of representative government in the United States.

Research on the root causes of political interest in the childhood/adolescent years (Kam and Palmer 2008) has identified the following prominent effects: family (Hyman 1959, Renshon 1973), parenting style (Shani 2009), parent's education and socioeconomic status (Hess and Torney-Purta 1968; Sigel and Hoskins 1981), parent's political interest and involvement (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995), school (Hess and Torney 1968; Niemi and Junn 1998; Torney-Purta 2002), cognitive ability (Hess and Turney-Purta 1968), and peers and networks (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1993; Zaller 1992; Verba, Nie and Kim 1978). What remains to be seen is whether, beyond adolescence, changes in political interest can take place during the formative years – 18-20-something years of age – when political attitudes and opinions are less crystalized than those of older adults (Sears 1986). In surveying the possible interventions that may set young adults on a path toward political interest, politics in entertainment media figures prominently. Political comedy shows like *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart are the one "news" – albeit soft news – program young adults watch in higher rates than older adults. While they are

turning to these shows for a good laugh, young people are also exposed to political information – and in a format that is accessible and understandable.

For my dissertation, I propose to measure the effects of political comedy against traditional network news programming on political interests and political learning, primarily in young adults, ages 18-25. Three aspects of this research are noteworthy: First, with political interest widely studied as an independent variable, placing it on the other side of the equation will lend understanding to why disparities in this strong predictor exist. Second, the population I will study is young adults during the formative years, especially before age 25, when they are developing their orientations toward politics. Third, in testing the effects of political comedy and network news through a short term longitudinal experiment, I will be able to isolate the causal effects of media consumption on political interest.

Formation of political interest in childhood and adolescence

The main purpose of this research is to investigate an alternative to the traditional pathway by which young adults become politically interested. This intrinsic motivation to engage in politics is a powerful predictor of political knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996) and participation (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995; Milbrath and Goel 1977; Lazarsfeld et al 1948; Berelson et al 1954; Luskin 1990). While various adult demographic characteristics (income, education, civic duty, partisanship) correlate with political interest and sophistication, political socialization research has demonstrated that these attitudes form in childhood and adolescence, through the family's political culture, school, sex socialization and group activities (Neuman 1986). The result of these socializing experiences, Neuman argues, is a society stratified by political sophistication into three "publics": The mass public (about 75 percent of the adult population) is only marginally attentive to politics. While they accept the duty to vote, they are somewhat cynical about politicians

and their own ability to influence the political process. Another 20 percent of the population, Neuman (1986) argues does not share the norms of voting or being politically informed. They are decidedly apolitical and unabashedly possess no political opinions. The remaining 5 percent of the population is comprised of the political activists, who possess high levels of political sophistication and participation. Neuman's political sophistication variable is an index that encompasses political interest, political knowledge and conceptual sophistication (1986, 5).

Among the traditionally identified paths for fostering political interest among youths is transmission of such interest by parents who are interested in politics (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995), thus fostering a level of comfort with political matters (Shani 2009). Employing cross-sectional surveys, Verba et al (1995) found that adults who recalled parents discussing politics and engaging in political activities were more politically interested than those who did not. Similarly, in a longitudinal study, Jennings and Niemi (1974), in their analysis of the impact of parent's political interest on offspring's interest, found a weak average effect, which was strengthened by stability in the parent's interest over time.

Households that are most likely to foster political interest are those of higher socioeconomic status (Jennings and Niemi 1974), from which Verba, Schlozman and Burns (2005) identify two possible paths for correlation to political interest: exposure to politics in the home and greater educational opportunities resulting in higher SES in offspring. Of these, Verba et al (2005) find that growing up in a rich political environment is less powerful a predictor of adult political activity than is education, which impacts three main functions of participation: resources, recruitment and motivation. This resources availability approach explains disparities in political interest as a function of unequal access to resources – time, money and civic skills – that are useful in the political process (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995; see also Wolfinger and Rosenstone

1980; Nie, Junn and Stehlik-Berry 1996; and Verba and Nie 1972). Verba, Schlozman and Burns argue that education, because of its effects on political resources and recruitment, generates a "psychological orientation toward politics" (2005, 104) which heightens political activity.

Another important approach to evaluating the role of family's socioeconomic status in generating political interest is to consider the development of non-political attitudes, activities and skills that later in life translate into political efficacy and interest. Prominent among these non-political factors is parenting style. Relying heavily on Bourdieu's (1984) cultural capital theory, Shani (2009) argues that SES affects political interest only in that parents from the upper strata of society are more likely to employ a non-authoritarian approach through which warmth toward children stimulates moral aspirations and altruistic behaviors. Parents who cultivate self-autonomy, encourage critical thinking, and value and invest in their child's education are more likely to raise children who have a stronger sense of personal efficacy and trust in others, translating into distinct political orientations later in life. Shani (2009) calls this "concerted cultivation parenting," which is further characterized by linguistic ability and providing opportunities for children to participate in enrichment activities such as art, music or visiting museums. Unlike the resource availability explanation of political interest, cultural capital theory emphasizes variations in parenting style across social classes that lead to variations in cultural orientations and ultimately variations in political engagement. Shani (2009) argues and demonstrates empirically with longitudinal data from the British Cohort Study that the effect of concerted cultivation parenting on political interest in a low status family was as great as the impact of growing up in a high status family that barely practiced concerted cultivation to parenting. Thus, Shani finds that although a family's SES shapes political interest, its effects are realized because of parenting styles that develop their children's cognitive resources. Those children who are lucky

enough to be born into a privileged family tend to acquire a comfort level and sense of internal efficacy toward the political world that translates into political interest (Lareau 2003).

Whether family's socioeconomic status influences political interest through political discussions, educational opportunities or parenting style, what remains to be seen is whether individuals who reach their formative years lacking these SES-stratified resources can become politically interested through another route. Verba et al (2005) suggest possible remedies to resource-based inequalities in participation. These include greater public investments in education for lower income individuals or social movements to recruit them into the political process. Absent a major shift in public policy that results in a targeting of additional educational resources to disadvantaged students or a replication of the forces that create social movements, the authors proposed solutions have little chance, respectfully, of either being implemented or occurring. My dissertation investigates the efficacy of a more practical and promising remedy: Is exposure to politics through the entertainment media an alternative path to political interest? Just the influence of family status may generate a higher comfort level with the political world, so too could repeated encounters with politics in an entertainment context.

Absent other determinants of political interest and engagement (high family SES, parental political engagement, high levels of education), social networks are another path by which youth can become politically interested. Within those social networks, interactions with friends can expose young people to political information and invite them to join causes by signing a petition or volunteering for a campaign (Koltzer-Berkowitz 2005). While the choice of friends involves non-political considerations, such a choice has political consequences because of the social interactions occurring within friendship networks (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1993). Further, these networks become more powerful when individuals lack other characteristics that support political

behavior (Zaller 1992). As Verba, Nie and Kim (1978) argue, being involved in nonpolitical organizations is especially important for the political development of individuals of lower socioeconomic status because it serves to compensate for their lack of resources in other areas (see also Knoke 1990 and Leighley 1996). These friendship networks can be established through a host of venues; however, Shani (2009) found that involvement in neighborhood clubs and religious youth groups show the largest and most consistent effect on political interest throughout one's life. Further, Shani's research found that political discussions with peers also has a remarkable and enduring effect on political interest (2009). It's possible, of course, that youth who are already politically interested gravitate toward those who are likely to talk about politics; Shani (2009) accounts for this endogeneity problem by using other independent measures of peer's political discussions, relying on two variables: peer's political discussions with family and peer's discussions with other adults besides teachers. After addressing potential problems of endogeneity, Shani's concludes, "Being surrounded by highly engaged peers could go a long way towards narrowing or even eliminating the initial lead in political interest of adolescents from high socioeconomic backgrounds" (2009, 390).

Schools and education are another important path toward the development of one's political orientations, and scholars have attempted to uncover what's beneath the large, positive correlation between years of schooling and political interest/engagement (Campbell 1962, Almond and Verba 1963, Milbrath and Goel 1977, Bennett 1986, Delli-Carpini and Keeter 1996). The relationship between these variables is often explained in terms of the classroom equipping individuals with necessary skills and motivations to carry out their role as a citizen (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba et al 1995; Hillygus 2005). Campbell (1962) argues that education generates the knowledge necessary to both recognize the relevance of politics and to boost political

efficacy, whereas Verba et al (1995) see schools as providers of resources and skills necessary for active political engagement. Other scholars argue the most important impact of education is upon vocabulary and linguistic skills since these provide the cognitive sophistication to understand the complex political world (Nie et al 1996; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Contrarily, Shani (2009) argues that education, when measured relative to those who share the same birth-cohort and gender, is an indicator of one's status in society, which is the force driving interest levels, rather than years of schooling. When measuring the effect of absolute years of education on political interest, Shani finds a 40-point gap between the lowest and highest education; however, once a control for cohort and gender is applied, the gap drops to 12 points (2009). This latter approach takes into account those in the same age cohort faced similar opportunities, social conditions and norms when faced with the option of pursuing further education. This is evidence that the effects of education depend on more than what is taught in the classroom, dispelling the notion that increasing education levels in itself would foster greater political interest and engagement.

The findings of studies attempting to measure the effects of education on political interest are decidedly mixed. From Hess and Torney's (1968) declaration that "the school stands out a s the central, salient, dominant force in the political socialization of the young child" (250) to Langston and Jennings' (1968) surprising finding that civics courses have little impact on political attitudes and behavior of American high school students, scholars have clashed on the role of education. What is indisputable, however, is the strong relationship between levels of education and political interest and that disparities exist in the United States today between who has access to higher education and who does not. These disparities result in political inequalities and a democracy that fails to represent the interests of all.

From the perspective of college instructors teaching introductory courses in American government and politics, understanding whether or not political encounters with the entertainment media impact political interest and knowledge is useful information. Colleges and universities typically establish and often require students to take these courses with the objectives of getting them to become more knowledgeable about public affairs, more interested in, more active in politics, and more effective as citizens. College instructors, thus, have the job of molding citizens through a one-semester political science course required for graduation. My dissertation could help instructors to develop creative strategies to cultivate in young people an enduring interest in politics and engagement in the political process.

Rivaling the impact of education on political interest/engagement is that of age. When the 26th Amendment was added to the Constitution in 1971, allowing 18-20-year-olds to vote, wishful thinkers hoped that this cohort would add energy and awareness to politics. Analysis of turnout rates by age cohorts in elections have dashed those hopes. In recent midterm elections, older adults have outvoted their younger counterparts by margins of 3:1 (Wattenberg 2012). Some scholars attribute these disparities in voter turnout across age cohorts to "lifecycle effects," arguing that when today's young people assume "adult roles" that come with maintaining a permanent residence, making more money and earning a college degree, they will make voting a higher priority (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). One theory of life-span civic development is that low levels of voting participation among the young are due to weak attachments to community, weak party attachments, lack of political experience and other age-related variables that result in lower civic competence (Strate et al 1989).

Indeed, ever since 18-year-olds were granted suffrage, those under 30 have always voted in rates lower than those over 30. If one's station in life determines political participation levels,

then perhaps the lack of participation among young adults is less of a concern for the future of democratic governance and accountability in the United States. Contrary to this argument, however, there is evidence that today's young people may fail to assume the mantle of citizenship when they grow older because they lack a foundation in civic knowledge. Since 1948, the American National Election Study has measured levels of political knowledge with questions assessing factual knowledge about the American political process and political figures. From 1948 through 1972, young adults under age 30 performed better on these measures than older adults, age 65-plus (Wattenberg 2010). Since that time, however, the results flipped, with young people in 2004 only getting an average of 36 percent correct, compared to 55 percent for older adults. The young will become the leaders of tomorrow, but are today's most politically ignorant age cohort; indeed, they are the most politically ignorant generation ever in the history of survey research (Wattenberg 2012).

One important theory as to why we find significant differences in political participation among age cohorts is that external events that take place during a cohort's formative years have the power to shape political orientations with enduring consequences. The formative years are described as late teens and early adulthood (Ringala 1968; Lambert 1972; Heberle 1951; Manheim 1952). Shani (2009) finds that on a 0 to 100-point scale, the difference between an individual born in 1975 and one born in 1950 is 7 points, whereas the difference between that same individual born in 1975 and someone born in the 1920s is 9 points. The formative years hypothesis would argue that the Great Depression and World War II, which established a collective success story, also instilled a sense of civic duty that endures even today for the political involvement of those who came of age during that time (Putnam 2000). Meanwhile, the Vietnam generation cohort became more cynical and less engaged than its predecessor due to the failure of that war (Putnam 2000),

and this marked the beginning of a decline in civic involvement (Delli Carpini 1986; see also Bennett 1986, Bennett and Rademacher 1997, Miller and Shanks 1996). There is a contrary view. Shani (2009) challenges the notion that external events affect individuals in their formative years to a greater degree than the rest of the population, arguing that those scholars who found such effects did not control for age, and thus the potential for lifecycle effects. In support of this argument, Shani (2009) found that longitudinal data reveal that young adults in their formative years did not react more intensely than the remainder of the population to events such as the Vietnam War and Iraq War, which heightened political interest among the American public from 1968 to 1972 and from 2002 to 2004.

There is indeed little evidence to support the existence of substantial generation effects due to shared historical events within a cohort, with respect to their political orientations. Prior (2010) argued for only weak cohort effects; instead, as a predisposition toward politics, political interest behaves with much stability over time. This research found very little volatility in response to significant external events over a 40-year period, employing 11 different panel studies involving participants in Great Britain, Switzerland, Germany and the United States. This study found that from one year to the next, as well as in the long run, the stability of political interest is exceptionally high. Even when slight perturbations cause by political or personal events cause slight changes, people very quickly return to their stable long-term political interest levels. Prior finds that political interest begins to crystalize for people in their 20s and thus recommends researchers examine in greater detail how it develops in childhood and adolescence (2009).

While Shani (2009) and Prior (2010) found scant effects of external events such as wars and national catastrophes on political interest during the formative years, neither explores the possible effects on individuals during these years of a changing media landscape. In fact, Shani

(2009) highlights this area as a need for future research. Perhaps media consumption patterns, sparked by expanded options offered by cable television in the 1970s, may signal a general decline in political knowledge and engagement among young people. When it comes to awareness of the political world surrounding the citizen, there's a big difference between having three major broadcast TV stations to choose from – as was the case when today's older adults came of age in the 1950s and 60s – and having 300 cable or satellite stations to choose from, in addition to countless internet websites and social media outlets. In essence, with so many media options to choose from, today's young people find it much easier to entirely tune out politics than did the young people of the 1950s and 60s. When fewer media choices were available, people learned about politics on the news because they wanted to watch TV and that's what was on (Prior 2005). Thus, greater media access can serve to heighten disparities in political knowledge and subsequent engagement, as those who are already interested will seek out more news, while those who are less interested can more easily avoid it (Prior 2005 and 2007; see also Bimber 2003). Similarly, Lupia and Philpot (2005) found that although young people are the most likely to be on-line, they are the least likely to be engaged politically. In sum, today's cohort of young adults never experienced the favorable conditions for unmotivated learning characteristic of the broadcast era, when political news received little to no competition from entertainment. However, by weaving politics into leisure time, political comedy may have the potential to capture the interest of young people and heighten their political engagement. The impact of this kind of exposure to politics may be especially great during the formative years as young adults are developing their lifelong orientations toward politics.

The potential for political comedy to impact political interest and knowledge in the formative years

In surveying media outlets that meet the dual criteria of attracting young adults and offering political content, *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* stand out as promising venues to cultivate political interest. Lacking an intrinsic curiosity about the political world, young adults primarily tune into *The Daily Show* as a means of entertainment (Rottinghaus, Bird and Self 2008; Prior 2003), but while there, they also receive a healthy dose of politics. Among both hard and soft news show audiences, the *Colbert Report* commands the greatest percentage of young people. Forty-three percent of the *Colbert Report*'s audience is 18-29-years old, while that figure is 39 percent for *The Daily Show* (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2012). Nationwide, nearly half of 18-24-year-olds watch *The Daily Show* "at least occasionally"; that number declines as age increases (Pew Research Center 2004, accessed from Baumgartner and Morris 2006). Survey data from Pew Research over the last decade indicates young adults are moving away from traditional media consumption and toward on-line news and political comedy. While cable news networks remain the most cited source for young people to "regularly learn something about the (2012) campaign," late-night comedy shows are the only off-line news source 18-29-year-olds turn to in rates higher than other age groups (Pew Research Center 2012c).

While a rich body of media effects research seeks to decipher its impact on political evaluations of candidates and issues, political knowledge and participation, much less is devoted toward its enduring effects on political interest. This is largely because most studies investigating this relationship conduct correlation analysis using cross-sectional surveys (for example, see Robison and Davis 1990; Guo and Moy 1998; Weaver and Drew 2006) and cannot demonstrate causality. Among the few studies that have panel data that is appropriate for the task of establishing temporal precedence, Patterson (1980) found that those who expressed higher interest early in the

campaign were more likely to increase their daily news use. Still, Patterson (1980) acknowledges that there is a reciprocal relationship. Political interest and news exposure feed off one another in a cyclical fashion: More political interest heightens news exposure, which further promotes higher interest, which further promotes news exposure. Beyond interest, the link between media exposure and political participation is already strongly supported in the literature (Bakker and de Vreese 2011; Tolbert and McNeal 2003; Quintelier and Vissers 2008; Shah, Kwak and Holbert 2001).

Like political interest, political efficacy is an intrinsic attitude that strongly correlates with political participation such as voting and working on campaigns (for example, see Abramson 1983; Bennett 1986; Uslaner 2004). Research has found *The Daily Show* to have a positive impact on young adults' political efficacy, while at the same time leading viewers to feel more cynical about the government and the news media (Baumgartner and Morris 2006). After watching *The Daily Show*, young adults reported increased confidence in their ability to understand and navigate the complex political world. Similarly, Moy, Xenos and Semmler (2005) found a positive association between watching late night comedy and participating in politics and political discussions. Hoffman and Young (2011) explore the dynamics of this relationship and find that political efficacy is the mediating variable in the significant correlation between exposure to political satire (IV), political parody (IV), network news (IV) and political participation (DV). They argue that political comedy and informative news both have direct effects on political efficacy, which in turn, affects political participation (see also Hoffman and Thompson 2009). When viewers process political humor, it requires more effort because of the movement of information from long-term memory into working memory, resulting in greater efficacy (see also Young 2008).

Hoffman and Young's (2011) research on the mediating variable of political efficacy on political participation is an important contribution to better understanding the media's effects

(Holbert 2005; McLeod and Reeves 1980). Prior scholars have called for this approach. Holbert (2005), for example, argues that communication scholars should employ a conditional effects approach to the role of media influence. They should not simply investigate stimulus-response relationships but rather control for the orientations that individuals bring to a media exposure experience. These orientations in theory interact with media exposure variables to influence political attitudes and subsequently political participation.

There is evidence to support this from Young and Tisinger's (2006) finding that *The Daily Show* is a supplement to traditional hard news, rather than a replacement for it. These researchers argue that exposure to such "soft news" as *The Daily Show* will heighten less politically knowledgeable viewers' attentiveness to certain issues, thereby enhancing their news consumption (Young and Tisinger 2006; see also Xenos and Becker 2009 ; Baum 2003a and Baum 2003b). According to Patterson, soft news is characterized by "more sensational, more personality-centered, less time-bound, more practical, more incident-based than other news" (2000, 4). This can include news-magazine programs either on network or cable TV, entertainment tabloid newsmagazine programs, and talk shows (daytime or late-night); this category includes *The Daily Show* (Baum 2003b). In contrast, "hard news" is that which covers "breaking events involving top leaders, major issues, or significant disruptions in the routines of daily life, such as earthquake or airline disaster. Information about these events is presumably important to citizens' ability to understand and respond to the world of public affairs" (Patterson 2000, 3).

Especially prominent among the advocates for the benefits of "soft news" is Baum (2002, 2003a and 2003b). Arguing that people who consume soft news do so for entertainment purposes, he finds that an otherwise apolitical segment of the population becomes more attentive to political news, and some learning does take place (2003a). Because comedy associates and rewards

learning about complex political issues with laughter, this programming is especially appealing to those who lack the motivation to stay in tune with the political world (Baum 2003b) (see also Rottinghaus, Ridout and Self 2008). It may also increase its viewers comfort with politics to the point they engage in conversations of political happenings (Moy et al 2005).

These studies seem to argue that *The Daily Show* has a democratizing effect. Since it simplifies the complexity of public affairs, it enhances learning and raises young people's confidence in their ability to participate. Yet, this still begs the question of whether *The Daily Show*, with its purpose of attracting viewers by making them laugh, actually does provide substantive coverage of political developments. In an analysis of *The Daily Show*'s content, Fox and Sahin (2007) found its coverage of the first presidential debate in 2004, as well as the political conventions that year was just as substantive as broadcast televisions' nightly newscasts. Whereas *The Daily Show* was more humor than substance, the broadcast network's programming was more game coverage than about substance. Comparing the two sources, the researchers found they were equally substantive in terms of focusing on policy information. Similarly, Brewer and Cao (2006) found that the late-night comedy appearances by candidates in the 2004 Democratic presidential primary included, compared to other sources, a large amount of factual information about the candidates and their campaigns (see also Pfau and Semmler 2007). In their analysis of survey results, Brewer and Cao found that seeing a candidate appearance on a late-night or political comedy show positively correlated with knowledge of the primary campaign, whereas seeing a candidate on a morning show was not (2006).

Other scholars, however, are less enthusiastic about the potential for *The Daily Show* and other soft news programs to politically empower their viewers. Hollander (2005), for example, argues that the knowledge young viewers gain from *The Daily Show* is more recognition-based

than recall-based knowledge and that it artificially inflates viewers' perceptions of their own political knowledge. If this is true, then its impact for promoting democratic engagement may be less promising. Further, Niven and Amundson (2003) argue that political comedy trivializes serious matters and that its focus on personal traits of public figures reinforces negative stereotypes of those in public office (see also Jones 2005). In their content analysis of 13,301 jokes from four comedy shows (*The Daily Show* not included), they found little discussion of policy issues and a relentless targeting of humor toward the president and presidential candidates. The underlying assumption in this criticism, however, is that network TV broadcasts and other more "hard news" sources actually do provide more substantive coverage of policy issues, which is not necessarily the case (Fox and Sahin 2007). Also among the critics is Prior (2003), who finds soft news has inconsistent effects on knowledge and that its effects on knowledge are more limited than Baum (2002) argues (see also Kim and Vishak 2008). Prior (2003 and 2005) argues that compared to hard news, entertainment media has no influence on political knowledge, when measured by the long-term retention of factual political information.

Much of this debate boils down to different standards by which to evaluate political learning. Prior (2003) analyzed survey data to find that those who report preferring soft news retain less long-term knowledge of political events reported in the news than those who report consuming hard news. Because people who prefer hard news are more knowledgeable to begin with, Prior included controls for education, political interest, civic duty, etc. While he acknowledges Baum's convincing evidence that the entertainment value of soft news motivates some people to follow current events they would otherwise ignore, Prior (2003) contends that a simple awareness of political developments does not translate into knowledge gain. He concludes that "the benefits of

a well-informed electorate… are unlikely to emerge as a result of greater soft news consumption" (2003, 168).

In contrast to Prior (2003), Baum (2003a) argues that long-term factual knowledge is an overly restrictive definition of learning. Further, the survey questions in Prior's data included items that may or may not have been covered by soft news; thus, respondents may have learned something from soft news, if not the specific factual question selected for the survey. Relying on theories from cognitive and social psychology, he argues that soft news may contribute to learning, absent long-term retention of facts. Specifically, the on-line processing model (McGraw, Lodge and Stroh 1990) purports that individuals discard factual information regarding an object of their attention, but maintain a cognitive summary of how they feel about such objects. New information learned amounts to a positive or negative emotional "charge," and while the original information contributing to that charge may be lost, the affect remains.

Baum (2003a) found exposure to stories covered by soft news did, in fact, have a positive effect on learning of those items, especially for the least educated viewers. However, because of differences in coverage between hard and soft news, when political knowledge of soft news viewers is measured against hard news standards, knowledge levels fall short. Thus, Baum argues that research seeking to measure the effects of soft news on learning should select stories that are covered by soft media. For example, with regard to knowledge of foreign affairs, soft news consumers were more likely to know where Gen. Manual Noriega sought refuge than to know about changes in the status of the Panama Canal. With its emphasis on episodic rather than thematic coverage of events, as well as negative developments, the Noriega story was a primary focus of soft news coverage, whereas the Panama Canal developments were most likely ignored by soft news media.

Thus, while people may learn from what they see in soft news when asked about those items on survey questions, Baum (2003a) acknowledges that the news coverage of political issues in soft news is far less extensive than that of hard news. While entertainment media may be useful for influencing attitudes, forming impressions and learning about personality traits (Johnson et al 1999; Lee and Capella 2001; Pfau et al 2001; Young 2004; Moy et al 2005; Niven et al 2003), it is not as effective as hard news for improving issue and procedural knowledge (Chaffee et al 1994; Weaver and Drew 1995; Prior 2005; Kim and Vishak 2008).

Because soft news is more effective at forming impressions and attitudes, I expect that with regard to the object of one's place in the political system, it will have a greater effect than hard news. By portraying politics in a fun and non-threatening format, soft news may contribute positive "charges" to the on-line tally of young people regarding whether they should take an interest in political affairs. While *The Daily Show* may portray politics the American political system in a negative light, it does so in a fun and engaging manner, such that the object "interest in politics" may be enhanced. Indeed, this interest could be cultivated by either positive or negative evaluations of the political world itself. As Hoffman and Young (2011) find, although political comedy often portrays the political system in a negative light, this humanizes the process and creates the sense that anyone can be a political actor.

Research on the effects of soft news and political comedy has given scant attention to its impact on political interest generally. While some scholars have found positives effects on campaign interest (for example, McLeod et al 1996) or attention paid to a particular new story (Xenos and Becker's 2009), it is unclear whether these particularized effects translate into more enduring political interest that would strongly affect political participation. For example, in two interactive media experiments, Xenos and Becker (2009) exposed students to either a humorous

segment from *The Daily Show* covering the U.S. House resolution disapproving the Iraq troop surge or a more serious introduction from ABC or NBC covering the same development in the news. Afterward, participants were given a static information board modeled after a web browser to explore news and information on-line on a wide range of topics. Compared with those who saw the network news coverage, those who were exposed to the comedic coverage, spent more time on the Iraq War and foreign policy, although other, more entertaining – i.e. sports and celebrity – options were available. This research supports the work of Baum (2002), who found that soft news increases attentiveness to major foreign policy crises among those who would otherwise be inattentive to such developments.

Whereas the Xenos and Becker (2009) study measured attentiveness to one news story directly after viewing political comedy, the present measures a longer-term change in political interest that occurs after repeated political comedy viewings. The weakness of Xenos and Becker's (2009) design lies in its one-time exposure, which is unlikely to affect enduring changes in political attitudes. Further, it's questionable whether the increased tendency to search Iraq and foreign policy coverage can be attributed to heightened interest in the story, or because participants in this group simply wanted to understand why the punch lines of *The Daily Show* were funny.

On the question of spuriousness

Whether the dependent variable be political interest, knowledge, efficacy or participation, media effects research is particularly prone to problems of spuriousness. Without the ability to establish temporal precedence, it is unclear which came first: political interest or media exposure. Certainly the effect is reciprocal (Patterson 2000), but it remains to be seen whether or not those individuals who are drawn into a media outlet to be entertained, and not because of intrinsic political interest, nevertheless become more politically interested after repeated exposures.

Are those with little prior political interest drawn into *The Daily Show*, or are they turned off by content they consider too boring or confusing to be worth their time? The present research is unable to answer this question, since the experimental design "forces" young people to watch *The Daily Show*. Thus, it cannot answer the question of whether young people with little or no prior interest in politics watch the show of their own accord. Fortunately, this question may have already been answered by of previous research that has investigated the unique distinctive profile of *The Daily Show* audience.

First, those who watch *The Daily Show* are statistically more likely to be younger, male, liberal and regularly follow politics than those who do not watch the show (Young and Tisinger 2006). Further, Young and Tisinger (2006) found a positive, significant correlation between watching the show and with watching almost all forms of traditional news, even when controlling for political and demographic variables which include following politics. The researchers conclude that these findings are consistent with a gateway theory of soft news, which posits that its consumption can increase attention to more traditional hard news outlets (see Baum 2005). Building upon Young and Tisinger's (2006) research to decipher whether different kinds of young adult viewers seek out *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* for specific reasons, Young (2013) employed a genre-ranking method when surveying college students with an on-line questionnaire, which also included open-ended questions about why students do/do not watch the show. This method allowed for an analysis of who would be watching (or not), if given the choice. The study found that the most frequently cited reason for preferring the shows is humor and entertainment. While 80 percent of viewers cited humor/entertainment as their reason for watching, another 41 percent said they watched the show as a source of information/knowledge; 40 percent also said that they watch TDS/CR because it made news fun (Young 2013). Of those who did not watch the

show, 45 percent cited a lack of interest in the subject, while another 40 percent said that they didn't find it funny. Young (2013) interprets these findings to indicate that TDS/CR provide young adults a secondary level of enjoyment to the news. Excerpts from open-ended questions on the surveys seem to reveal that TDS/CR viewers watch the show *after* consuming hard-news sources, as a means of gleaning a funny take on the news stories of the day. In stark contrast, a focus-group approach by Rottinghaus et al (2008) revealed participant comments that supported a TDS as a gateway to other more serious news broadcasts. The excerpts they draw from the focus groups indicate that TDS introduces current issues, which respondents are then motivated to seek out greater detail in hard-news sources. Similar to the present study, the population frame for both the Young (2013) and Rottinghaus et al (2008) studies was young adults in college.

Further support for the gateway theory to soft new programs such as *The Daily Show* can also be found in Cao's (2010) study that tests the show's effects on the attention its apolitical viewers give to the issues covered in the show. The results of this study are noteworthy in several respects. First, in classifying survey respondents according to low, medium and high levels of attending to politics, then exposure to *The Daily Show* as never, hardly, sometimes/regularly, Cao (2010) finds that even though the program's typical viewers pay at least some attention to politics, 20 percent of its regular viewers are apolitical. Among survey respondents who were apolitical, those who watched *The Daily Show* were 8 percentage points more likely to follow the Afghanistan war and 13 percentage points more likely to follow news about the 2004 presidential candidates very closely than were their non-viewer counterparts (Cao 2010, 38). Interestingly, for those respondents who fell into the medium or high categories of attending to politics, *The Daily Show* had a negative effect on their attention to the news items featured prominently in the show. While the cross-sectional survey design is problematic for establishing the direction of the relationship,

this study lends evidence that incidental encounters with politics in entertainment programs can have a positive effect upon the political interest of those apolitical viewers. While certainly for some viewers, the relationship is one of interest causing exposure, ample evidence exists to support the notion that for a certain segment of viewers, exposure causes interest (Cao 2010, Patterson 1980, Xenos and Becker 2009).

That media use can be predicted by the dependent variable of interest is a methodological problem that has long been identified by media effects researchers. Slater's (2007) reinforcing spirals theory argues that media selection and effects mutually reinforce each other, a relationship that can be visualized as two paired and complementary spirals, with no clear single point. While attitudes and behavior predict attention paid to a particular show, station or genre, media exposure can reinforce those attitudes/behaviors, which then leads to greater viewing of relevant content, and the cycle continues. Whether the starting point is media use or selection, reciprocal effects pan out over time.

Conclusions

Since Berelson (1954) first identified two-thirds of the American public as having only moderate or little interest in politics, subsequent research has illustrated that low levels of political interest is a norm of American political life (Neuman 1986). Without a basic predisposition to engage in politics even at a rudimentary level, the 20 percent of the population that is apolitical (Neuman 1986) are unlikely to be intentionally exposed to politics. As long as the media environment includes entertainment options, the apolitical will choose entertainment over substantive political information (Neuman 1986; Prior 2005 and 2007). While repeated exposure to political news media has potential to generate interest, the politically disinterested today, unlike

decades ago, have a greater plethora of choices in the media environment that meet their desire for entertainment.

With less entertainment to compete with news programming prior to the 1970s, entertainment and political news were mostly exclusive categories (see Prior 2007). With the near universal diffusion of cable television; however, and the accompanying advent of political comedy and other soft news programs, this is no longer the case. It is now likely that viewers, especially the politically disinterested, acquire political information as an unintended byproduct of watching television shows that focus on political figures and politics for their entertainment value. The politically disinterested find that political stories that are presented in a humorous way are palatable and accessible (Baum 2002, 2003a, 2003b). Unlike the coverage of politics in the hard news, these shows are not a burden to watch. These effects may be most prominent for community college students, most of whom are young people whose attitudes toward politics have likely yet to be crystalized and who are disproportionately represented in the audiences of these media outlets. It remains to be seen for this population; however, whether their exposure to politics in the entertainment media leads to greater comfort with politics generally. Do community college students who are initially politically disinterested when they begin to watch political comedy later attend to politics in other media venues? Does political comedy viewing instigate a benign upward spiral in their political interest and set them on a path toward becoming a politically engaged citizen? Does exposure to political comedy result in greater acquisition of political information in apolitical community college students than exposure to network news? The aim of this research is to answer these questions.

CHAPTER 3
Theory and Hypotheses: Rational Choice, Cognitive Processing and the Impact of Political Comedy on Young Adults in their Formative Years

Todays' media environment arguably makes it easier than ever to become an engaged citizen. Yet, instant access to news and information does nothing to heighten political knowledge and participation unless individuals opt into it. As Neuman (1986) aptly states,

> "Political information is available in great richness to all in the United States who wish to pay attention. Those who blame the media for the ills of the modern American polity tend to confuse the characteristics of the medium with the characteristics of its audience. The distribution of political knowledge in American society would stay pretty much the same if the entire mass media industry agreed cooperatively to double the flow of political communications. The distribution would also probably remain the same if the flow were cut in half" (134)

While Neuman's (1986) argument predates the Internet and the rise of political comedy, more recent scholarship has built on his argument and taken it one step further: If those who draw on this readily available information are among those who are already likely to participate, the plethora of media options only serves to reinforce and perhaps accentuate existing political inequalities (Schlozman, Verba and Brady 2012; Prior 2005 and 2007). This concern notwithstanding, one must take into account that delivery of the political news and information is happening in more diverse and creative venues than ever. No longer is political news presented in a manner appealing only to the political junkie. It is also presented in formats appealing for those who want to unwind with a good laugh at the end of the day. Although *The Daily Show* audience does command higher levels of political interest and knowledge than nonviewers (Young and Tisinger 2006), the primary motivation for political comedy viewers to tune in is not to get informed, but to be entertained (Rottinghaus et al 2008; Young 2013). With young adults turning increasingly to entertainment programming with political content, it remains to be seen whether inadvertent encounters with politics in this venue have potential to pique their political interest.

While political interest is a strong predictor of news consumption, the direction of this relationship has been found to be reciprocal (Patterson 1980). Certainly for many political comedy viewers, their political interest drives their engagement with politics in these venues. However, it is also plausible that some of these viewers/participants are drawn into political dialogues "accidentally" while seeking entertainment outlets. Brushing off the notion that younger viewers gain political knowledge from his show, Jon Stewart has quipped, "If they come to our show without any knowledge, it wouldn't make any sense to them" (C-Span Newhouse School Forum, 2004). Nonetheless, survey research has found about 20 percent of regular *The Daily Show* viewers are not inclined to follow politics, with 39 percent registering "medium" level of attention to politics and 42 percent having a "high" level of attending to politics (Cao 2008). This dissertation tests whether watching *The Daily Show* has a positive effect on the political interest of its viewers, especially those who enter the experience of viewing the program with very little interest in politics.

For individuals to engage in any behavior, be it political or otherwise, three necessary prerequisites must be met: opportunity, ability and motivation (Luskin 1990; see also Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Applied to political media consumption, the first two of these criteria mean that individuals must have access to it (opportunity) and the cognitive capacity to process what they see (ability). But opportunity and ability are futile without an individually motivated decision to use media that has political content and pay attention to that content. The motivation behind why individuals engage in a particular media program, station or genre often introduces endogeneity problems in media effects research. The attitudes and behaviors affecting attention paid to media content and the effects of watching that content lead to a reciprocal, mutually influencing process which Slater (2007) calls "reinforcing spirals." Visualized as two paired and complementary

spirals, the reinforcing spirals theory is based on the assumption that a type of media use influences attitudes and behaviors, all the while those attitudes and behaviors in turn influence that type of media use. As the individual caught in this spiral continues to consume that media type, it leads to the maintenance or strengthening of the attitude/behavior, contributing to increased attention to the relevant media content, and so on. The starting point that begins the spiral may not be readily apparent, or it may be exposure for some and attitudes for others (Slater 2007). Certain conditions may compound the outcome of this spiral process of selectivity, one of which Slater identifies as individuals being "poorly integrated or socialized or dispositionally vulnerable" (Slater 2007, 289). This condition may apply to young adults' consumption of political information. Rather than consciously tuning out political information, I expect that most young people simply haven't had much exposure to the political world, meeting the criteria for being "poorly integrated" in it. Thus, they will be especially vulnerable to formation of the attitude of being disinterested in the political world. Supporting this expectation, Slater (2007) argues that selective exposure is distinct from selective avoidance. Rather than consciously avoiding political information, on principle, young adults have not yet been socialized to believe that such information may be relevant to their lives and their role as a citizen. Encountering political information in an entertaining format may be the starting point to instigate the spiral of ongoing influence between exposure and attitudes.

If exposure, rather than attitudes, has potential to be the starting point for this reinforcing spiral, as my research suggests, then we must explore the environment in which the decision is made to pay attention to particular media content. The decline of broadcast television, accompanied by a rise of cable television and other political infotainment media, has altered drastically the dynamics of opportunity, ability and motivation to follow politics through the media. What leads the initially apolitical individual to access and pay attention to political

entertainment in this new era of heightened competition and media choice? Why would tuning into political comedy for entertainment purposes serve as a gateway toward consumption of other hard news and lead individuals down a path of increasing political interest and knowledge? Why is the development of political interest by the end of the formative years critical to a lifelong pattern of political engagement? The theories supporting the answers to these questions reside in rational choice, the persuasive power of humor, the Bayesian learning model and the reinforcing spirals perspective.

An Economic Theory of Media Consumption

While it may be good for democracy's sake for individuals to be politically informed, this notion of the public good does not figure in the calculations most people make regarding their media choices (Hamilton 2003). Further, an explosion of media options since the 1970s can be understood in terms of the market. The consumption of political news and information, from this viewpoint, depends on the individual choice preferences of consumers, as this shapes demand and the responses of corporations in the media industry to respond to that demand (c.f. Prior 2007). Of particular help in understanding the preferences of individuals for political news and information is Downs' (1957) economic approach to media choice. Downs argues that for the individual, marginal costs and benefits will determine whether he/she will seek out and consume information (1957). An individual's decision about what media to attend to or not is goal-oriented: When the expected benefits of seeking political information outweighs the expected costs, the individual makes a rational calculation to tune in. Riker and Ordeshook (1968) formulate this relationship as PB-C, where B is the benefits an individual gains from carrying out an activity; P is the probability of realizing that benefit; and C is the expected costs of engaging in the activity. Consistent with Downs (1957), the costs in this model reflect both opportunity costs and transaction costs.

Opportunity costs are those activities that are given up in order to engage in the activity of choice, while the transaction costs involve the effort to engage in it. According to the Riker and Ordeshook (1968) model, if the individual anticipates a net gain from undertaking the activity, he/she will pursue it.

While there may be a monetary expense in gaining access to political information in certain platforms (paying the Internet provider, cable company, etc.), for many young people, the greater costs involve tradeoffs in time, effort and energy required to pay attention to political news. To engage in political news and information in a traditional news format, young people may have to give up leisure or social time (opportunity costs), while at the same time, the cognitive effort to process the complex political world they often find dull and uninteresting heightens the transaction costs. Therefore, for most young people, accessing political news and information in a traditional hard news format is simply irrational.

Downs (1957) argues that an individual's decision to obtain political information or not depends on whether that individual sees that information as being personally useful. Yet even for someone who is politically engaged, obtaining information of the kind that creates an informed citizen, to hold elected officials accountable in the voting booth, is of little use personally. This is because the goal of casting an informed vote to advance one's interests is unlikely to yield a commensurate expected benefit. After all, the likelihood that one voter's informed decision will decide an election outcome is miniscule. Absent a strong electoral incentive for being politically informed, individuals must find other benefits of paying attention to political information in order to compensate for their investments of time, effort and energy. Absent other incentives, Downs argues, it is rational to be ignorant. The costs of time and energy in gaining the information is

greater than the benefits derived from it. Most citizens prefer to spend their time on activities that are far more certain to yield direct and personal payoffs.

For a rational citizen, who thinks only of the tiny chance that his/her informed vote will affect the outcome of an election contest, political information amounts to annoying noise. However, a rational citizen can have other, less instrumental, but even more important goals, for consuming political information. These include abiding by the social norm to participate in politics or holding onto a sense of civic duty (Riker and Ordeshook 1968); abiding by the social norm to be informed about public affairs; taking an interest in politics; and finding the enjoyment that comes from the entertainment value of politics (Hamilton 2003). Young people tend to be less driven by a sense of civic duty (Dalton 2008) and exhibit lower levels of political interest than other age cohorts (Shani 2009). Following politics because it is presented in an entertaining format, however, is a promising venue to explore.

Uses and gratifications theory provides a plethora of goal-oriented explanations to predict media use (Rosengren,Wenner and Palmgren 1985). One finding is that people of different ages use the media to gratify different needs. Rubin (1981) found that young people were more likely than older adults to watch television to escape from reality, to pass time, out of habit or as a means of social interaction. Similarly, in a sample of college students, Bantz (1982) found that those in this group watched television for companionship, entertainment, surveillance, voyeurism and social interaction. These motivations begin to explain the enigma of young people turning to political comedy as a "news" source, as it fulfills multiple gratifications simultaneously. As Young (2013) reports, among college students who watch *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report*, those who watched these shows for humor were also more likely to say they watched them to learn about the news. Thus, political comedy first and foremost is a means of entertainment, but unlike apolitical

comedy, it also fulfills viewers' need for staying connected with what's happening in society (surveillance) and interacting in that world. Further, political comedy could fulfill a need to interact with peers by providing topics for conversations; indeed, when young people do watch the news, many report they do so because of its ability to facilitate conversations with peers, family and coworkers (Drew and Reeves 1980; Mindich 2005). As will be discussed below, media outlets conducting research on these motivations and/or looking at changes in programming content, viewership and advertising dollars have responded to the demand and profit potential of soft news political programming (Hamilton 2003).

I would argue that rational choice theory is a useful framework for understanding the calculus that individuals engage in when they make decisions on whether or not to seek out and attend to political information, including programming that is entertaining. I define rational choice, as argued above, to include multiple motivations for seeking out and attending to political information beyond the motive of casting an informed vote and affecting the outcome of an election contest. It is important to note that many well-known scholars who have investigated media choice have likewise relied on rational choice theory because of evidence of its utility in explaining how decisions to seek out and attend to political information will vary based upon the context. Like these scholars, I make no claims about the utility of rational choice in every situation in which individual decision making occurs. Like Zaller (1999) and Baum (2003b), I relax the assumptions of rational choice that often generate the greatest debate within the discipline. I do not contend that "everyone's mind works like a computer, calculating all possible contingencies at each point and making the move with the best expected return" (Zaller 1999, 7). Nor do I assume that rational choices are always intentional and conscious. Rather, individuals "try" to advance their goals through a "pattern" of behavior (Zaller 1999, 7), even if every decision does not

conform to this model. Rational choice theory is a natural fit for explaining media choices because it intersects both the external context (media environment) and internal motivations (personal goals) to explain behavior, whereas sociological and psychological theories tend to emphasis exclusively either external or internal forces, respectively (Zaller 1999). It is useful for explaining how the results of my study apply in real-world contexts in which individuals are not be "forced" to watch political comedy, as they are in my experimental design.

Like Baum (2003b), I argue that when many people – especially young people – consume the media, they have the simple primary goal of being entertained. Changes in the media environment, which now includes political comedy, alters the cost-benefit calculus for the consumer. No longer is seeking out and attending to political information arduous, as was true years ago when it was found only in newspapers, magazines, radio and the network news. Whatever the time and energy that was spent seeking out and attending to political information years ago was time and energy not available for far more rewarding activities. Opportunity costs were high. Today, the tradeoffs between political information and entertainment are not as stark. This fact diminishes and perhaps eliminates the opportunity costs of seeking out and attending to political information. It's now available from political comedy shows, which decrease the transaction costs by making the consumption of such information effortless and even enjoyable. Further, political entertainment fulfills secondary goals such as social interaction and staying connected to the broader social world. Such programming fulfills multiple goals that young adults have for using the media. Political comedy is an attractive choice, even for the apolitical young person seeking to pass time in front of the television set.

Opportunity, ability and motivation

The media choices people make are largely shaped by the opportunities they face within their environment. Today, the media environment is shaped predominantly by media executives rationally calculating how to maximize profits. Prior (2007) has characterized three different eras in American media history that provide context for individual media choice, which he argues is a function of citizens reacting to shifting media content. Both the pre-television era (prior to 1935) and the television era (prior to the 1970s) are characterized by low-choice media environments. These eras are followed by the era of expanded choice, with the introduction of an increasing number of cable channels, in addition to the traditional broadcast media and Internet media. In the pre-television era, it was primarily elites and the well-educated segments of society that had access to political information. In the television era, dominated by the major broadcast networks, news was in a format more accessible to the masses – and more "democratic." In comparison to newspapers and radio, television, with its ability to simplify messages through images, can transmit political information and heighten the political awareness of an otherwise apolitical segment of the population (Nie et al 1976; see also Neuman, Just and Crigler 1992). Prior (2007) argues that during the television era, this medium acted as an equalizer in American society by limiting choice to three channels, ABC, CBS and NBC, which meant that even people who preferred entertainment over new programming were, at certain times of the day, "forced" to pay attention to the news if they wanted to watch TV (Prior 2007). Prior predicts political learning as a function of motivation, characterizing 43.2 percent of American adults as those who will always consume news, regardless of the plethora of options; 10.3 percent who would only watch entertainment content, no matter how limited the options; and 34.1 percent who are "switchers" who would watch the news in a low choice environment, but would avoid it given other, more

entertaining options (2007). Further, Prior reports that the gulf between those who seek media for entertainment purposes and those who seek it for news is largely drawn on the basis of age, with young adults opting for entertainment and older adults choosing news (2007).

Today, the choices drawing young entertainment-driven consumers away from hard news are largely shaped by media executives rationally calculating how to maximize profits. In contrast, during the early days of television, when the networks commanded 90 percent of the television audience, both news and entertainment programming competed for the same viewers (Baum 2003b). With little competition, networks ran their news programs as a public service and did not expect them to turn a profit, making up the losses in entertainment programming (Grossman 2000). During this time, networks were not as concerned with entertaining viewers during news programming because there was less chance viewers would change the channel in search of something more leisurely gratifying. Over the past several decades, however, the expansion of cable and Internet has created an explosion in media options available to the consumer. Vying for the attention of a more fragmented news audience, executives began to look to all divisions, including news, to turn a profit. As Baum (2003b) reports, media executives in the 1980s began to realize that even though they attracted smaller audiences, profit margins for inexpensive news programming were greater than the profit margins for entertainment sitcoms. Hence, greater competition creates a bias toward more cost-effective programming that generates the largest revenue per-household of viewers, and the stage is set for the rise of soft news (Hamilton 2003, Baum 2003b). The blending of entertainment and news serves the dual purpose of reducing programming costs, while also attracting viewers.

Since the salaries, bonuses and stock options of news media executives and producers depend on profits, profits depend on advertising dollars, and advertising dollars depend on the

"right" people watching their programming, there is fierce competition for viewers. The media cater to what viewers want. In response to competition, news media executives become more concerned about ratings and less concerned with the public good. The result is that news becomes more entertainment-driven and less substantive in its content (Hamilton 2003). In rational choice terms, media executives have calculated that serious public affairs reporting, which is very costly and yet results in a better informed public, is not profitable. Less serious soft news that is entertaining and attracts a sizable number of viewers is inexpensive to produce and is more profitable (Baum 2003b). While focus group and survey data indicate that people say they want more public affairs reporting, they don't watch it when it is made available (Neuman 1991; Hamilton 2003; Graber 1998). Because consuming substantive political coverage for the purpose of casting an informed vote is not rational, even for the engaged citizen, people turn to programing that is more immediately gratifying. And producers of media content have responded accordingly.

Therefore, the "switchers" identified by Prior (2007), who once in the limited choice environment of the television era, did not have the opportunity during the news hour or half-hour to consume entertainment programming, now are able to avoid or ditch the network broadcast news for something more appealing. The overriding motivation of individuals, especially the "switchers" in deciding on what to watch in this "high choice" environment is not to become informed, but rather to be entertained. Thus, switchers especially, Prior argues (2007), will no longer be inadvertently exposed to news programming. In this way, the media today provide ample choices for viewers whose primary motivation is to use the media for entertainment. However, Prior's (2007) argument fails to consider that there is no intrinsic reason why programming that is entertaining cannot also convey political information. The two are not mutually exclusive categories. There is programming that people can find to be both entertaining and politically

informing. Soft news programming can capture the audience's interest by framing news stories in human interest terms and in formats that are easily accessible to viewers who would otherwise be turned off by traditional hard news formats (Baum 2003b). Thus, without the requisite political interest to tune into hard news, soft news audiences may become attentive to political developments as a byproduct of tuning in for the entertainment value of such programming. "When someone is exposed to an issue in her preferred programming format, her cost-benefit calculus for paying attention to additional information about the issue is altered" (Baum 2003b, 48). In this way, the intrinsic motivation to follow public affairs in the media may not be necessary. For some viewers, exposure to public affairs information will occur because they like the entertainment value of soft news. Thus, exposure to public affairs in the media occurs because of the appearance of soft news programming and motivations unrelated to political interest.

Lastly, with regard to ability, cognitive research has found that IQ scores have a positive effect on comprehension of public affairs (Hess and Torney-Purta 1968) and cognitive ability has a stronger effect on political sophistication than education (Neuman 1986). Indeed, people often avoid political news because they are confused by it and feel hopeless to change political events (Graber 1988). Conversely, people are attracted and pay attention to news that is relevant to their personal lives, that is easily accessible and that they don't have to put too much effort into processing (Graber 1988). While traditional hard-news media does little to overcome these barriers, social and entertainment media may very well change these dynamics. Political comedy shows present the news in a way that people can relate to and in terms that people can understand. Indeed, it may make some people so comfortable with the news that they believe they have more knowledge than they actually do (Prior 2003).

Political comedy, then, may have the effect of familiarizing apolitical individuals with the political world, reducing the trepidation with which they approach politics, and serving as a gateway to consuming media in hard-news formats. Viewers of such programming have potential to learn "downstream" as political entertainment may eventually generate an interest in hard news political programming. Alternatively, consuming politics in a soft news format may heighten political interest without increasing political knowledge, simply by reducing cognitive barriers to processing political news and generating a sense of familiarity with the topic. Feelings of inadequacy for dealing with political subject matter may fall by the wayside, with soft news viewers becoming more confident in their ability to process political news and information in this easily accessible format.

While traditional hard-news programming caters to an already politically knowledgeable audience, politics woven into soft news has the potential to democratize the media environment in ways that existing research fails to recognize. As media executives realize the potential for profit margins in political comedy and young people turn to this comedy to gratify their humor and entertainment impulses, it could serve to capture the imagination of an audience that would otherwise be shut out from hard news political coverage. Unlike previous research, my work tests the theory that the value of political comedy, generating a familiarity with the political world, heighten political interest, which would then serve as a mediator to political participation.

Soft media, attitude change and knowledge gain

Having addressed why young people may tune into political comedy given so many other media options, I will now theorize as to what happens cognitively while they are watching. A primary dependent variable in my study – political interest – is an attitude toward an object. That object is not the political world itself, but one's involvement in the political world. This section

will address conceptualization of political interest and theoretical reasons as to why this attitude might be influenced by comedy.

While some scholars conceptualize political interest as an intrinsic motivation to *engage* in politics (Campbell et al 1954; Luskin 1990; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Shani 2009), others (van Deth 1989) view political interest as "the degree to which politics arouses a citizen's curiosity" (278). Of these competing definitions, one seems to emphasize engagement in politics, while the other emphasizes a mindset of being curious about politics. What I am attempting to capture, however, is a mental predisposition that is favorable toward engaging in the political world, even if the attitude has yet to manifest into actions.

Whereas political efficacy is the belief that one can understand and influence political affairs, this conception of political interest identifies the extent to which an individual has a positive view of him/herself taking action. While these two concepts are closely related, political interest better captures a strong desire to be politically informed and engaged, while political efficacy stops at the belief that one can be. If a person is curious, that psychological predisposition may manifest into spectator-like actions such as talking about politics and seeking political news, or more demanding actions such as voting, donating money or campaigning on behalf of a candidate. It is entirely possible, however, that political interest will not immediately manifest in the more taxing activities. Those who are politically interested, however, should look favorably upon engaging in those more demanding activities. As such, the definition of political interest I have settled on for purposes of this research is thus: *A psychological predisposition favorable toward learning about and engaging in the political world***.** This definition most closely resembles Milbrath and Goel's (1977) description of "psychological involvement," which they state "refers to the degree to which citizens are interested in and concerned about politics and public affairs"

(46). The potential for a psychological state of being curious about politics, but not politically active, may be especially true for young people, who may be more transient and face greater obstacles to participation than middle-aged and older adults. As pointed out above, scholarly research has found political interest to be a powerful predictor of political participation; however, as van Deth (1990) aptly points out, every person who is politically interested is not engaged, and every person who is engaged is not politically interested.

With political interest conceived as a state of mind, or attitude, toward the political world, we can find empirical evidence to suggest that soft news, relative to hard news, is more successful at altering such attitudes and impressions (Holbrook and Hill 2005; Pfau et al 2001; Young 2004). Much of the research on the ability of soft news to form impressions focusses on attitudes toward candidates and political actors (Kim and Vishak 2008; Young 2004; Pfau et al 2001). In contrast, the present study assesses the ability of soft news to alter impressions of the political world among viewers who perceive it as complicated, boring, complex and intimidating. Although the network news media cover breaking developments in hard news in a serious and professional manner, consistent with the ethic of journalistic integrity, those with low cognitive ability and motivation may find the news to be inaccessible. Network news creates the façade of being insider information. It's news that's "inside the beltway." This promotes the news' credibility among audiences that are politically interested. The network news media does not present political developments in a format that those who are psychologically "outside the beltway" find interesting or relevant. In a low-choice environment, those who are turned off by this kind of reporting might nonetheless tune in and subsequently become interested; however, with more choices, they turn to something else.

Soft news, on the other hand, by luring apolitical viewers in through entertainment, can alter impressions of not just politicians, as current scholarship has demonstrated, but of the political world generally. Research from both the psychology and communication fields has resulted in important findings that suggest humor found in *The Daily Show* might have persuasive effects leading to attitude formation. In the world of advertising, humor can affect persuasion simply by increasing the attention paid to the ad for a particular brand or product (Zang and Zinkhan 2006; Maden and Weinberger 1982). Further, positive evaluations and choosing one product over another can be influenced by mere associations with humor, as long as the humor is relevant to the product (Strick et al 2011). While others (Weinberger and Gulas 1992; Gelb and Zinkhan 1986) have not found that the positive associations with humor result in behavioral consequences, Strick et al (2011) argues this non-finding resulted from a failure to disentangle explicit from implicit attitudes. Even when these attitudes are not reported explicitly by respondents in a study, they are likely to later manifest implicitly in product choice. Incongruity-resolution theory is a frequent explanation among psychologists as to how change of attitude happens when humor is involved (see Alden et al 2000; LaFave et al 1996). Contrary to what we might assume, processing humorous messages require more effort than non-humorous messages. This is because processing humor involves two phases: a cognitive phase and an affective phase. First, schema-incongruity compares the message to what the brain knows to be true – based on assumptions and expectations of appropriate behavior – and finds that it doesn't line up. This schema inconsistency must be resolved in order to "get the joke." It involves suppressing information recently stored in working memory and replacing it with an alternative narrative that must be retrieved from long-term memory. Then, the affective phase involves determining whether the joke was funny. If it was too absurd or complex for the recipient to comprehend, he/she will not get it – and may not even realize

that a joke was intended (Wanzer et al 2010). Neuroscience has found that humor first activates the part of the brain that is associated with ambiguity resolution, then activates the brain's reward network (Goel and Dolan 2001; Mobbs et al 2003). This complex process instigated by humor may cause the humorous message to leave a greater lasting impression, which will be remembered for longer periods of time than a non-humorous message.

Studying political humor specifically, research has found differing effects based on audience characteristics – and the kind of humor presented. Analyzing the effects of satire, Holbert et al (2011) found those with "low ability" in terms of background knowledge and motivation to consume political news were more likely to find Horatian satire funny and less likely to counter argue than were "high-ability" viewers, who found the Juvenalian satire more entertaining. The authors argue that in the interpretation of political satire, the level of knowledge of the object of the satire will influence the overall persuasiveness of the message. With regard to the present research, participants with low level of political interest will likely correspond with low levels of knowledge of the political system. As such, they remain especially vulnerable to messages of political comedy that subconsciously persuade them politics isn't something they should avoid or be intimidated by. While *The Daily Show* does not explicitly attempt to convince people to engage in politics, by poking fun at political actors and institutions that seem complex and out of reach to the apolitical individual, it humanizes these individuals and creates the impression that the political process is more absurd than complex. This humor may tear down barriers to political interest as apolitically predisposed viewers watch more passively and forget that they are supposed to be "hating politics". This expectation is supported by research that audience members are less likely to scrutinize claims presented with humorous messages because of their high processing demands (Young 2008). Scrutinizing an argument requires critically breaking it down to challenge the

underlying premise, a task that falls by the wayside when cognitive processes are consumed with "getting the joke" (Young 2008). Further reducing audience motivation to scrutinize arguments in a humor context is that audience members desire to remain in the good mood that resulted from the humor, while argument scrutiny might instigate a negative disposition (Young 2008). While Young (2008) found less argument scrutiny of humorous messages, the researcher did not find an enhanced persuasive effect of humor. However, the work concludes that multiple exposures to humorous messages over time could foster attitude change, a suggestion upon which the present research builds.

As previous research has already found, presenting the political world in a way that's accessible and engaging to young people generates a greater sense of political efficacy (Hoffman and Young 2011). Hoffman and Young (2011) attribute *The Daily Show's* positive effects on political efficacy to its ability to expand the individuals' understanding of the political world and generate feeling of competence. In the same way, the present research tests whether political comedy in relation to network news alters individuals' impressions of the political world in a way that heightens their curiosity to learn more. My theory is that its ability to change these impressions will be greater for individuals who are least politically interested because those who are already politically interested will already have political attitudes that are crystalized.

Further, I expect that many who are not politically interested in their formative years have not made a conscious "choice" to close the blinds on the political world, but instead have drifted into a vague notion of politics as beyond reach, a notion shaped by the little political information to which they have been exposed and have remembered. As a result, especially early on in the formative years, the politically disinterested attitude has not yet crystalized. Instead, because their life experience to date has not included encounters with politics in an accessible, relatable format,

apolitical young adults' impressions of the political world remain opaque, daunting and intimidating. The on-line processing model for assessing information processing patterns may be instructive here. This model posits that individuals keep a subconscious tally of affective evaluations to form impressions (Kim and Vishak 2008). This tally includes a series of pluses and minuses with regard to the target of the judgment; individuals need not be able to recall the bits of information that contributed to the judgment; the affective judgment remains long after the details have vanished from memory. For the current research, the target is not the political world itself, but one's place in the political world. Prior to consuming *The Daily Show*, apolitical individuals may have a negative online tally in their judgment of whether one should develop an attitude of interest toward politics. Contributing to this tally may have been personal experiences that have convinced the individual that she does not have the cognitive capacity nor ability to process the political world, that engaging in that world is for people who are very different from her. Or, perhaps very little exists in that online tally because the young person has never been made aware of the political world around him/her. By tuning into political comedy, however, otherwise apolitical individuals may find that they do have the capacity to understand the political world as presented by Jon Stewart, and they may find a gradual breakdown of the trepidation, confusion and discomfort they associate with understanding of that world.

It has thus been demonstrated that political comedy may break down psychological barriers to political interest, but the question of whether or not the apolitical viewer becomes more politically knowledgeable remains. As discussed in Chapter 2, the general consensus in the political communication literature is that while watching entertainment media may result in more political knowledge – sometimes loosely defined – this outlet is not as effective as network news with regard to facilitating political learning (Kim and Vishak 2008; Prior 2003 and 2005; Bennett

2001; Chaffee et al 1994; Brewer and Cao 2006; and Weaver and Drew 1995). However, the political awareness, if not knowledge, that the otherwise apolitical glean from political comedy might not have taken place had this venue not been available (Baum 2003a and 2003b). While research that investigates soft news' impact on political knowledge does not differentiate its impacts based on whether the citizen is lesser or more interested, Patterson (1976) provides evidence to believe the knowledge effects of hard news may be realized differently by each. Studying the 1972 election, he finds that televised evening newscasts of the campaign contributed very little to low-interested voters' information level during the campaign. However, televised political advertising, with its catchy jingles and slogans, did have a positive effect on political knowledge in the apolitical viewer. In the same way, my theory posits that more entertaining presentation of politics in *The Daily Show* will have a positive effect on political knowledge in the apolitical individual.

Content analysis of traditional network news compared to *The Daily Show* coverage of the 2004 political conventions found the amount of time devoted to substantive information was comparable (Fox and Sahin 2007). For the same election, political expertise correlated with exposure to late night comedy in the early phases of the campaign season (Pfau and Semmler 2007). Further, even in a non-national election year (2005), more than half (56 percent) of stories covered in *The Daily Show* addressed political topics (Brewer and Marquardt 2007). These research findings support that there is potential for learning to take place while viewing *The Daily Show*, especially among the least politically interested segment of the audience. While previous research argues that viewers don't learn as much from political comedy as they do network news, there is reason to believe that the effect may be different for the less-politically interested viewer. In their between-subjects experimental design, Nabi et al (2007) find that the funnier respondents

found a message by political comedian Bill Maher, the more credibly they evaluated the source, the deeper they processed it and the less they counter-argued with the content. While no attitude change was identified initially, as respondents were more likely to discount the message as a "joke," the researchers did find sleeper effects manifest after one week, when those who were exposed to the humorous message saw a significant gain in attitude change. This research supports the theory that for the present study, participants *watching The Daily Show* will view Jon Stewart as more credible than his counterpart Brian Williams on NBC Nightly News. After multiple exposures, they may also be persuaded that *The Daily Show* offers credible political coverage, which they find themselves enjoying. Thus, we might expect a change in attitudes toward one's engagement in the political world to show up as a "sleeper effect."

I expect that by cultivating greater political interest among its viewers and presenting politics in a more accessible format, comedy with political content may have a greater impact on political knowledge on the apolitical participants in my study than does network news coverage. By piggy-backing on comedy, political news presented in *The Daily Show* requires greater cognitive processing and will thus be more memorable than political news presented in the network news format. As a result, humor appeal replaces intrinsic curiosity in the less-politically interested viewer, thus facilitating the learning process. In contrast, intrinsic curiosity suffices as motivation for politically interested individuals to learn from the more sophisticated presentation of political coverage found in network news broadcasts.

Hypothesized impact on younger cohorts

There is reason to believe that the effect of exposure to political comedy will be stronger on younger participants than on older. Individuals in their late teens and early twenties have less experience by which to develop their psychological predispositions toward politics. As such, they

have accumulated less information through the socialization process upon which to base a sense of whether politics is interesting. This positions them to be particularly vulnerable to media's influence in shaping their view of the political world and their role in it (Slater 2007). Instigating the reinforcing spiral of exposure and attitudes, "forcing" young adults with little predisposition to the political world to watch entertaining political shows may cultivate an interest that leads to greater viewing that leads to more interest, and so on.

Also instructive in this analysis is the Bayesian learning model, which posits that changes in political party evaluations become less likely as people gain more familiarity with parties (Fiorina 2002, Grynaviski 2010; see also Golebiowska 2003). Thus, the information that people learn first will have the greatest impact on their evaluations of parties and subsequently party identification. Cultivation of political interest, in some ways, could act very much like formation of party identification. The earliest exposures to the political world – be they positive or negative – may have a disproportionate effect on the favor with which one views engagement in politics (Prior 2009). Indeed, in support of this theory, Prior (2009), through an analysis of 11 different panel datasets in four countries over 40 years, found that political interest is remarkably stable over time, even among people in their 20s. This was true for both short and long-term stability. While other studies (Jennings and Markus 1984) found political interest to be less stable than party identification, self-reported church attendance and political knowledge, the diversity and breadth of Prior's (2009) datasets renders his results conclusive.

If political interest is so stable over the lifecycle, as Prior (2009) concludes, and political interest is such a strong predictor of political participation, including voting (Verba, Brady and Schlozman 1995), then why are participation rates of the young so low? Further, if the level of political interest in one's 20s is remarkably similar to the level of political interest in one's 40s,

then what accounts for the decades-long disparities in political participation in these age groups? These findings suggest that political interest may be more likely to manifest into action for those who are older more so than those who are younger.

My theory is that while orientations toward the political world may be brewing in the adolescent and young adults years, life circumstances may inhibit these orientations from manifesting into political participation. Young adults are more transitive and less likely to have strong community ties than their older counterparts (Strate et al 1989); further, they may not yet have reached a position of home ownership, full-time employment and marriage and child-bearing, all of which foster an awareness of the importance and impact of the political process (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). The questions, thus remain, does political interest manifest into different political actions in young people than their older counterparts? Is there a "cut-off" age at which young people are destined to a lifetime of isolation from the political system if they are not yet politically interested? With regard to media influences, can a spiral of exposure and attitude formation begin in the young adult years and perpetuate throughout life?

Implications for Democracy

The disengagement of young adults from politics, due to low political interest, has implications for their welfare. Whatever the causes of the habits that contribute to low political interest and participation among young adults today, it leaves this age group severely disadvantaged in the American political system. They have the highest rates of unemployment and the highest percentage without health insurance; overall, they have accumulated mountains of college debt (Draut 2006). Greater political interest among young adults, providing them with the necessary motivation for voting, should result in them acquiring greater influence with elected public officials and improve the quality of the representation they get. Elected officials respond to

the interests of those who make their voices heard in the voting booth (Griffin and Newman 2005; Bartels 2009; and Martin 2004), and political interest is a necessary prerequisite to raising one's political voice (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995).

If democracy requires the representation of everyone's interests, then it's important to do what's necessary to equalize or at least reduce inequalities in political participation. We need not accept that the government represents the few at the expense of the many; young people have distinct, real interests, and their voices matter. Uncovering political interest as the root cause of young people's political engagement may illuminate strategies to draw this cohort into the political fray and provide motivation for their participation, thus equalizing representation.

Even within this generally disengaged age cohort, however, we can predict that the likely political engagement of some will be a function of their family and school socialization experiences, as well as cognitive ability and peer groups/networks. My primary concern in this research is young adults who would otherwise *not* be politically interested and engaged. I theorize that by tuning into political comedy for nonpolitical reasons – and research founds they are doing so in droves – a pattern of encounters with politics there will heighten their interest in politics generally, thus providing an alternative path toward political interest. While expecting to be entertained through these outlets, young adults may inadvertently encounter politics in ways that are difficult to avoid. If they want to be entertained by Jon Stewart, they've also got to stomach the politics. These unintentional encounters with politics may heighten young adults' political interest. These findings about young adults and their media preferences suggest the following research hypotheses:

1. Among community college students, multiple exposures to *The Daily Show* will lead to increases in political interest, compared to multiple exposures to network news broadcasts, non-political programming or no intervention at all.
    a. The impact will be greater when the viewer finds the content relevant to his/her life.
    b. The impact will be greater when the viewer finds the content funny.
    c. The impact will be greater for adults under age 30 than for those over age 30.
2. Among community college students, exposure to the network news will have a greater impact on political interest when the individual finds the political content relevant to his/her life.
3. Among community college students, exposure to *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* will result in more political conversations with friends and family than will watching a network news broadcast.
4. Among community college students, multiple exposures to *The Daily Show* will lead to greater increases in political knowledge, compared to with multiple exposures to a network news broadcast or other non-political programming.

CHAPTER 4
Political Interest, Political Participation, Political Knowledge and Hard-News Consumption of Community College Students

This chapter explores the attitudes of community college students toward politics, their levels of political knowledge and their consumption of hard news. I investigate the effects of different kinds of television program exposures on these variables in later chapters. My findings in this chapter; however, are not surprising. They support the viewpoint that these students are ill-prepared for active and informed participation in the political life of their community, state and country. It is a sample of students who follows politics only rarely, is mostly uninterested in the political world, largely uninformed of political happenings, see and pay attention to hard news less than 15 minutes daily. My investigation is largely motivated by concerns about the future of democracy in the United States. Young adults today are less well-equipped to become effective citizens than the young adults of previous generations (Wattenberg 2010). As a result of their political disengagement, young adults are severely disadvantaged in politics (Draut 2006). Unfortunately, this disengagement of students – mostly in their teens and 20s – may lead to a lifetime of alienation from the political system. Young adults who start out disengaged will continue to remain disadvantaged relative to others who form positive civic behaviors and attitudes earlier in life (Prior 2009).

As a result of previous research that has found gaps in political interest, knowledge, and participation between the young and old, many of the statistics in this chapter will compare those age 30 and under with those over age 30. This reflects the work of Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) who identify "adult rules" as the primary explanation as to why young people don't vote in higher rates (see also Abramson, Aldrich and Rhode 1998; Strate et al 1989; and Conway 2000). The rites of passage into adulthood identified by Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) include

residential stability, marriage, community ties, getting a job, and leaving school. All of these transitions are most likely to take place in the 20's; thus, much of the data I analyze will look at those age 30 and under, when these transitions are occurring or yet to occur, in comparison to those over age 30. Highton and Wolfinger (2001) test each of these transitions empirically and find that growing older increases turnout, independent of these "adult roles." One of the variables – leaving school – in fact had a negative effect on turnout. Those young adults who were in college turned out in rates higher than those that did not. While other variables certainly confound this relationship, the point as it relates to the present study is that education itself may be a leveling characteristic, regardless of age, in predicting political interest, knowledge and participation. This may mean that the adults over age 30 in the Media Engagement Study may have more in common with their fellow college students than their age cohorts. Like the young people in the study, those over 30 are likely to be working while attending school, not yet settled into a permanent job, and may be more likely to do all this while raising a family. These time constraints may make them less politically involved than others in their age group.

Many scholars conducting research on political participation in the United States have found a strong link between political interest, political knowledge and subsequent political participation, leading to greater influence in politics (c.f. Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). The idea of popular sovereignty in a democracy requires that citizens participate in politics and do so in meaningful ways – in ways where they are able to affect election outcomes, the decisions of elected public officials on public policy, and the quality of governance. Exercising political power means engaging in activities that have the effect of influencing government action, either directly by influencing the making of public policy or indirectly by influencing who makes those policies (Schlozman, Verba and Brady 2010). Lacking necessary

resources – time, money and civic skills – to engage in the political realm, young people likewise lack the motivation to acquire these resources for the purpose of political engagement (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). These resources are distributed unequally in American society and are stratified by socioeconomic status and highly influenced by family and social origin (Verba, Schlozman and Burns 2005). The population of interest in my study, community college students, are among those least likely to possess these resources.

America's community colleges serve to make higher education accessible to underprivileged and underrepresented populations. It's an ideal population to study for the reason that those who are disadvantaged socially and economically, with effective interventions promoting attention to and understanding of politics, might be empowered to raise their voices and enhance the representation of their interests in government. Subsequent chapters explore whether exposure to news programs changes motivation to engage in politics; this chapter explores the students' motivation and opportunity to engage without any intervention at all. In making their case for an informed citizenry, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) argue that varying degrees of access to information and the ability (cognitive skills), opportunity (availability of information and how it is presented) and motivation (intrinsic desire to learn) create a "stratified political system that affords different access to political power" (3) (see also Luskin 1990). This chapter demonstrates that if political power is a function of the attention paid to the political system by a particular group of people, as previous authors contend, then community college students – largely young adults in their formative years - are among the most deprived of political power. This is evidenced by the only scant attention they pay to the political world and the fleeting interest they take in it. Rather than consuming media to become informed citizens and hence gain an equal voice in government, the students in this study are primarily concerned with being entertained.

The number one reason they cite for not paying attention to politics is simply lack of interest: The students in the study find politics boring and frustrating, with little entertainment value. It is obvious from the survey results that these young people have never been convinced that politics is worth their time and attention. This chapter will describe the state of political interest, political knowledge and news consumption of this sample of community college students, finding it to be well short of the democratic ideal.

The Sample

I recruited participants for the Media Engagement Study by first asking and getting the permission of several professors teaching classes in the Spring 2014 semester at Delta College, a community college in mid-Michigan. The instructors allowed me to recruit students for the study by making it an assignment in their course. Professors teaching statistics, political science and psychology courses found that the study would support the learning goals for their courses and thus offered it as a course requirement (with an alternative assignment available, per IRB guidelines). Students from the psychology, political science and statistics courses were randomly assigned to the three treatment groups to watch exposures of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *Entertainment Tonight* and *NBC Nightly News*. Professors teaching English and communication courses allowed me to recruit students in their courses for the no-exposure control group. In these classes, I administered surveys at the beginning and end of the four-week study. In all, the study included a total of 229 participants who completed the pre and posttests, with 41 from statistics courses, 68 from political science, 85 from psychology, 26 from communication and 8 from English. Ideally, the exposure and no-exposure groups would have been randomly assigned among all classes; however, because this was a class assignment, instructors were unwilling to require some of their students to watch the shows (exposure group), while exempting others (no-exposure

group). This method of drawing the treatment and control groups from various classes will inevitably introduce some error, which will be accounted for in subsequent chapters with controls to determine whether the course itself had an effect on the posttest results. Although the entire Delta student population did not have an equal chance of being selected for the study, the demographics of the student sample who participated largely reflected the overall population of students at the college.

The following is a description of the socioeconomic, racial, partisan, ideological and age composition of the sample. For a complete listing of the questions included on the Media Engagement Study pretest to measure these items, please see Appendix 4.A.

Income. Households that are most likely to foster political interest are those of higher socioeconomic status (Jennings and Niemi 1974). The most frequently occurring household income class was $25,000-$49,999, with 24 percent of sample participants in this range. About 60 percent of the sample indicated that their household income was $75,000 or less; about 12 percent did not know.

Ideology. On ideology, 23.6 percent of the sample classified themselves as liberal (collapsing three categories: extremely liberal, liberal and slightly liberal). Moderate/middle-of-the-road comprised 16.6 percent of participants. The percent of conservative participants was very similar to the percent liberal, with 23.2 percent falling into the three collapsed conservative categories (slightly conservative, conservative and extremely conservative). Interestingly, more than any stated ideology, participants in the sample, when asked to identify their ideology, most often said they "hadn't thought about it much" or that they "didn't know." Combining these two categories, 36.7 percent of the sample could not identify their own ideology.

Reflecting previous work that has found young people less likely than other age groups to accurately identify their interests and connect them to a party/ideology (see Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, for example), this population of community college students lacks the requisite knowledge to even identify their own ideology. In comparison, in the 2012 American National Election Study (ANES), 27.8 percent of Americans identified themselves as liberal (collapsing the three categories); 34.5 percent said they were moderate/middle of the road; and 37.7 percent self-described as conservative. Meanwhile, about 10 percent did not respond or said they hadn't "thought about it much." Comparing the study sample to the ANES results, which reflect the overall U.S. population, we see that these community college students are much less likely to even be able to place themselves somewhere on the seven-point ideology scale.

The difference in my sample and the overall U.S. population supports my theory that many of these community college students who are apolitical have not "chosen" this attitude, but instead have drifted into it. The fact that they don't know their political ideology or haven't thought about it much suggests that their life experiences to date have not included conscious encounters with politics nor convinced them that it's worth their time to tune in.

Partisanship. Like the ideology variable, the most common response (17 percent) was "don't know." Of those who identified themselves as a Democrat or Republican (combining those with strong and weak attachments), about 26 percent said they were Republicans and 35 percent selected Democrat. The independents were 14 percent and those who considered themselves "something else" were 7.4 percent.

Gender. Women outnumbered men in the sample: 55 percent women and 45 percent men. These percentages mirror almost exactly the male-to-female ratio among students at college-wide

at Delta College. The question regarding gender was open-ended and simply asked, "What is your gender," with a space for respondents to specify.

Ethnicity. The sample was about 75 percent white, 11 percent African American, and 7 percent Hispanic, with participants in every other racial/ethnic category numbering less than 2 percent of the entire sample. This closely reflects the demographics of Delta College as a whole, which is comprised of 79.5 percent white students, 9.5 percent African American students and 6.2 percent Hispanic students.

Education. Respondent's education was measured based on the credit hours earned by the student. The majority of college students in the study had earned less than 36 college credits (less than sophomore status) at the time of their participation. However, about one-fifth of the sample had already earned more than 60 credit hours. Because Delta College does not award bachelor's degrees, I assume that these participants were either students visiting from another university or students returning to college for additional training.

Previous research (Hess and Torney-Purta 1968; Sigel and Hoskins 1981) has found greater parental education can lead to children's greater political interest. The majority (54 percent) of participants in the study indicated that their mother had either "some college," a high school diploma or less, but had not achieved an Associate's degree. Conversely, 62 percent of participants said their father had "some college" or less. About 20 percent indicated their mother had an associate's degree, while that figure was about 12 percent for fathers. Conversely, about 16 percent of participants said their mother had a bachelor's degree, while that number was about 11 percent for fathers. Graduate degrees were scarce among both mothers (8 percent) and fathers (5 percent).

Age. Age was measured by an open-ended question asking respondents the year in which they were born. The median age of participants in the study was 22 years, with the maximum age

being 61 and the minimum age being 17. The vast majority of participants were in their "formative years" (Sears 1986; Ringala 1968; Lambert 1972; Heberle 1951; Manheim 1952) as the 80th percentile was found at age 30.2. Further, 60 percent of the sample was between the ages of 17 and 24.

Compared with the students nationwide attending America's 1,132 community colleges, those in the study are slightly younger and disproportionately white (American Association of Community Colleges 2014). In my study of community college students, 75 percent were white, compared with 51 percent nationwide. African American students comprised 11 percent of those in my study, compared with 14 percent of community college students nationwide. Thus, there is a somewhat smaller percent of African American students in my study.[2] Further, while just 9 percent of those in my study were Hispanic, that number is 19 percent of community college students nationwide. The median age of students in my study was 22, compared to 24 for those attending community colleges nationwide. As for gender, 45 percent of the sample were men and 55 percent were women, percentages that closely mirror the national population, in which 57 percent of community college students are women and 43 percent are men.

Political interest

The surveys administered to the students included questions to assess political interest in different forms. The questions assess both curiosity about politics, as well as one's interest in taking part in political activities. The questions include both the student's self-assessment of interest, as well as the student's motivation to act on that interest by taking part in actions such as talking about politics, seeking political coverage in the media, and various forms of political

[2] The approximately 25 percentage point difference between African American students in the study and those in the community college population nationally is noteworthy; however, testing the effects of my independent variable did not yield different results when controlling for race. Thus, the difference in the sample and actual population should not diminish the generalizability of the findings.

participation such as contacting an elected official, boycotting a product, etc. In this way, the survey measures not only the students' evaluations of their own interest, but more objective measures of actual political participation. Yet, even if the student is not engaged, my measures of political interest are indicators of a psychological predisposition that is favorable toward engaging in the political world, even if the attitude has yet to translate into actions.

The survey items include more conventional measures, as well as those I have developed to be more valid measures of my conception of political interest as a *psychological predisposition favorable toward learning about and engaging in the political world.* Among the traditional measures is a question from the ANES, which has asked respondents since 1960 the following question:

> "Some people follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there's an election going on or not. Others aren't that interested. Would you say you follow what is going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?"

In my study, using this question, 56 percent of participants fell into the categories of "hardly at all" and "only now and then." Only 11 percent of the entire sample answered "most of the time." Table 4.1 shows the frequency distributions of respondents over age 30 and age 30 and under. The two responses at the bottom end of the scale demonstrate little difference in the responses of those over age 30 and those 30 and under. However, differences in the two age groups emerge at the top end of the scale, with more 30 and under-year-olds saying they follow government and public affairs "some of the time." However, those over age 30 were more than twice as likely as the younger group to report following government and public affairs "most of the time."

Table 4.1. How Often Respondents "Follow Government and Public Affairs" (ANES Question), Age 30 and Under and Over Age 30				
		Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Over Age 30	Hardly at all	10	22.7	22.7
	Only now and then	14	31.8	54.5
	Some of the time	11	25	79.5
	Most of the time	9	20.5	100
	Subtotal	44		
Age 30 and Under	Hardly at all	45	24.9	24.9
	Only now and then	57	31.5	56.4
	Some of the time	63	34.8	91.2
	Most of the time	16	8.8	100
	Subtotal	181		

A similar pattern in age disparities can be found in a measure employed in my study, but borrowed from a 2006 ANES pilot survey which asked, "How interested are you in information about what's going on in government and politics?" Table 4.2 shows the frequency distributions of responses for two age groups: those age 30 and under and those over 30. While the cumulative percents from the bottom two responses "not at all interested" and "slightly interested" are very close (53.6 for young adults and 52.3 for older adults), a large difference emerges at the top end of the scale. While 20.5 percent of those 30-plus indicate that they were either "very interested" or "extremely interested," that was true for just 12.7 percent of those under 30. For the entire sample, 53 percent fell into the bottom two categories, while 85 percent fell into the bottom three categories: not at all interested, slightly interested and moderately interested. The overall pictures is one of a mostly apolitical sample, with little curiosity about political information.

In my sample of community college students, the cumulative percent from the bottom two responses "not at all interested" and "slightly interested" is very close (53.6 for young adults and 52.3 for older adults), with stark contrasts emerging at the top end of the scale. While about 20

percent of those 30-plus indicated that they were either "very interested" or "extremely interested," that was true for just 12.7 percent of those under 30. In the entire sample, about 53 percent fell into the bottom two categories, while 85 percent fell into the bottom three categories: not at all interested, slightly interested and moderately interested. Again, this paints a picture of an overall apolitical population, with little curiosity about political information.

Table 4.2: Interest in Government and Politics (ANES Measure), for Respondents Age 30 and Under and Over 30

		Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Over 30	Not at all interested	6	13.6	13.6
	Slightly interested	17	38.6	52.3
	Moderately interested	12	27.3	79.5
	Very interested	5	11.4	90.9
	Extremely interested	4	9.1	100
	Subtotal	44		
30 and under	Not at all interested	14	7.7	7.7
	Slightly interested	83	45.9	53.6
	Moderately interested	61	33.7	87.3
	Very interested	19	10.5	97.8
	Extremely interested	4	2.2	100
	Subtotal	181		

Source of Data: Media Engagement Study at Delta College

Both of these ANES questions rely on the individual's self-assessment of his or her political interest. This has been standard in the literature since Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1948) argued that individuals' can accurately, though subjectively, identify what interests them. I argue, however, that there are two conceptually distinct dimensions of political interest – both general curiosity about the political world and a propensity to become engaged. To capture both dimensions, my measures rely on self-evaluation of political curiosity, as well as a recall of past activities and likelihood of future activities to measures engagement.

Thus, I construct a new measure of political interest, a 40-point scale, which is the sum of responses to four questions. Scale values for each of these four questions vary from 0 to 10; added

together, the combined scale ranges from 0 to 40. As argued above, the four questions measure four conceptually distinct domains of political interest. These four measures are highly reliable, with a Cronbach's Alpha of .809. Measuring political interest on a continuous 0 to 40 scale is ideal for identifying more subtle, incremental changes in political interest through media effects. Since Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet's (1948) finding that the media has "minimal effects," research has found the media has only a small impact; thus, a 40-point scale allows for measurement of smaller, subtle changes. The 40 point scale allows respondents to evaluate their own political interest in four different domains, each with an ample (0 to 10=11) number of scale point options to give an answer that's as precise as they want and are able to do. They are not limited to four or five response options.

The questions on my four scales ask respondents to identify their personal interest in politics, how much they enjoy discussing politics, how much they enjoy learning about politics, and the extent to which they see themselves being politically involved in the future. The general question of political interest and the more specific question of political learning both tap into curiosity, while the question of political discussions and getting involved politically tap into engagement. Specifically, the scale is comprised of these four measures:

"On a scale of 0 to 10 (0 being no interest and 10 being high interest), how interested would you say you personally are in politics?"
"On a scale of 0 to 10 (0 being no enjoyment and 10 being high enjoyment), how much would you say you enjoy learning about politics?"
"On a scale of 0 to 10 (0 being no enjoyment and 10 being high enjoyment), how much would you say you enjoy discussing politics?"
"On a scale of 0 to 10 (0 being strong disagreement and 10 being high agreement), indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: I see myself as someone who could be involved politically."

For the pretest, the mean interest index for the entire sample on this 40-point scale was 17.4, with the median at 17. The minimum was zero, and the maximum was 40.Table 4.3 shows

descriptive statistics for this scale for those 30 and under and over 30. Interestingly, there was only a small a difference between the 30 and under and over age 30 groups. This small difference between age groups may reflect that the political interest of the sample is driven more by education – the fact that they are all community college students – than the age cycle. Those adults over age 30 in the study may share more in common with their fellow students than their own age cohorts.

Table 4.3: Results of Pretest Political Interest Index, Divided by Age 30 and Under and Over Age 30

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Over Age 30	40	17	11.88
Age 30 and Under	174	17.5	10.34

Source of Data: Media Engagement Study at Delta College

While the gap in political interest – using the 40-point political interest index – is minimal between the younger and older participants in the study, it emerges between the male and female students. The mean political interest score at the beginning of the study was 19.5 for men and 15.6 for women. This finding reflects an overall gender gap in political engagement and knowledge, identified by previous research (for example, see Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 2000; Verba, Burns and Schlozman 1997; Kenski and Jamieson 2000; and Dolan 2011).

The data also reveals differences in political interest by race/ethnicity. However, because many of the ethnic groups are small in number in the sample, these differences could easily be skewed by outliers. The two largest racial/ethnic groups in the study are whites (167 participants) and African Americans (19 participants) show a mean of 17.1 and 17.6, respectively, indicating little difference. The mean political interest score for Hispanic students is 20.4; however, there are

only 12 in this ethnic group. Native Americans, Asians and "other" each have less than 10 participants.[3]

Looking at each of the items in the political interest index individually, the mean is 4.4 on the 0 to 10 scale for the discuss politics, 4.8 for learning about politics; 4.6 for interest in politics and 3.6 for the politically involved scale. The larger means on the items measuring the curiosity dimension of political interest than the engagement dimension suggest that for participants in this sample, curiosity is a larger component of political interest than engagement. While interest is a necessary requisite to action, there may be particular barriers in participation that prevent community college students from getting involved – and this may reflect their lower interest with respect to engagement.

Table 4.4 shows the means on the four separate scales of the 30 and under and over 30 groups. Interestingly, when the 40-point scale is decomposed, the only item in which the mean for older adults is higher than the mean for younger adults is the 0 to 10 scale asking respondents to rate their personal interest in politics. Otherwise, the under-30 group scores higher on the 0 to 10 scales measuring enjoyment of discussing politics, learning about politics and likelihood of being involved in politics (although not significantly so). The similar measures of central tendency of the two age groups, as argued above, may be due to their similar levels of education, rather than age.[4]

[3] With regard to political interest based on income level, only miniscule differences were found between those whose household incomes were 75,000 and over and those under 75,000.

[4] With regard to gender differences, female participants scored about one point lower on each of the four 0 to 10 scales comprising the pre-political interest index.

Table 4.4: Comparing the Means and Standard Deviations on the Four Pretest Political Interest Scales of Students Age 30 and Older with Students Less than Age 30

Over Age 30		N	Mean	Standard Deviation
	Discussing Scale	44	4.0	3.26
	Learning Scale	44	4.66	3.10
	Interest Scale	41	4.78	3.07
	Involved Scale	40	3.22	3.17
Age 30 and Under		N	Mean	Standard Deviation
	Discussing Scale	183	4.46	2.83
	Learning Scale	182	4.79	2.85
	Interest Scale	175	4.55	2.61
	Involved Scale	174	3.72	3.15

Source of Data: Media Engagement Study at Delta College

A more specific pretest question about frequency of political discussions reveals how that mean of 4.5 on the 0 to 10 scale translates into weekly activity. About 37 percent of the sample said they "never" engaged in political discussions (outside of class) in "this week", with about 47 percent saying they did so only one or two times. Thus, a full 84 percent of the sample discussed politics only two times or less in the past week.

To get a glimpse of how the 0 to 10 scale measuring likelihood of political involvement translates into action, we can look at the number of political activities respondents said they expected to engage in "sometime in the future." The list of nine activities that included items such as "wearing a button, putting a sticker on my car or placing a sign in front of my house in support of an issue or candidate;" "signing a petition about a political or social issue;" "voting in an election;" etc. Nearly 80 percent of the sample selected five or fewer activities they expected to engage in sometime in the future. Here is the complete list, along with the question wording:

- "In the future, do you see yourself participating in any of the following activities? Please **mark the box** beside any activities, if any, you see yourself participating in ***sometime in the future***. (A separate question asked about activities over the past two years.)
    - Wore a button, put a sticker on my car or placed a sign in front of my house in front of my house in support of an issue or candidate.
    - Contributed money to a candidate, political party or any organization that supported candidates.
    - Signed a petition about a political or social issue.
    - Not bought something because of the conditions under which the product is made
    - Bought a certain product or service because I liked the social or political values of the company that produced it.
    - Contacted an elected official to express an opinion about an issue
    - Volunteered for the campaign of a candidate running for public office.
    - Been a member of an organization that takes a stand on political issues.
    - Voted in an election.

These questions are intended to measures a predisposition to be involved in politics in a variety of ways. I wanted to observe the political activities in which the participants in my study saw themselves as most likely to see themselves engaging. After all, due to life circumstances, some participants may not have had the opportunity to participate, but they may intend to participate when their circumstances become more conducive for doing so. Measuring future intentions in this manner is common in the political participation literature on political participation as a dependent variable (see for example, Beaumont et al 2006). Nonetheless, it is possible that respondents to this question will provide the socially acceptable response, rather than an honest, candid one. Participants may want to appear to be "good citizens" and thus indicate that they intend to engage in these civic behaviors in the future, when they really have no intention of doing so. As such, the measures of past participation may be more accurate than measures of future participation.

The mean number of future activities selected by participants was 3, which was greater than the number of activities participants had actually engaged in over the last two years. The mean number of past activities was 2.2. The difference between past activities and expected future

activities could indicate that participants are more predisposed to political engagement than their past activities reveal. On the question of past activities, the 80th percentile was found at three activities (compared with five "future" activities). This difference in past and projected future activities provides more support for the theory that political interest may not fully manifest into action for these young people until later in life. For some, this may simply be a function of their age, as 17 percent of respondents indicated that they were not old enough to vote at the time of the most recent national election in 2012.

Among those who were old enough to vote in the 2012 election, the mean number of past activities was 2.3, while the mean number of future activities was 3.4. On the specific question of voting in the past two years, about 52 percent of those who were of voting age in 2012 indicate that they had, in fact, voted.

Similar to the findings of Dalton (2008), the young adults in this study are more likely to engage in "active citizen" political participation such as boycotting and buycotting (buying a product because it is made by a company using practices that align with one's values and interests) and less likely to engage in duty-motivated participation such as voting. In the pretest survey, about 38 percent of respondents indicated that in the past two years, they had not bought a product because of the conditions under which it was made, while 33 percent said had bought such a product. Conversely, 43 percent had signed a petition, while about 45 percent said they had voted in the past two years; 26 percent said they wore a button in support of a party or candidate; and 11 percent said they contacted an elected official. Participation in the following activities was distinctly uncommon, cited by less than 10 percent of respondents as something they had done in the last two years. Listed in order from most to least popular, they are: Being a member of a political organization; volunteering for a political campaign; and contributing money to a

candidate, political party or organization. In a separate question, 62 percent of respondents said they were registered to vote and 45 percent said they actually voted, with 17 percent indicating that they were not old enough to vote at the time of the last election.

Table 4.5 compares the political participation in different activities of those age 30 and under with those over age 30. A few differences emerge in the past political activities of the two age groups. Similar to Dalton's (2008) research findings, in this sample of community college students, those over 30 were more likely to engage in traditional forms of political action such as voting and contacting elected officials. With regard to voting, 60 percent of those over 30 and 42 percent of those under 30 claimed to have voted. Meanwhile, 16 percent of those over 30 said they had contacted an elected official in the past two years, while only 10 percent of those under 30 claimed to have done this.

In three political activities, young adults actually out-performed those over 30 (by at least four percentage points): signing a petition, demonstrating support for an issue or candidate by wearing a button, putting a sticker on one's car or sign in one's yard; and volunteering for a candidate's campaign. 45 percent those under 30 said they signed a petition in the past two years, while 38 percent of those over 30 said so. Also, 27 percent of participants under 30 and 22 percent of those over 30 said they had worn a button, put a bumper sticker on their car or placed a sign in front of their house in support of a candidate or issue. Further, young adults were more slightly likely to say they had volunteered for a campaign: Just 2 percent of those over 30 had done so, while that figure was 7 percent for those 30 and under.

Past activities in which there was no more than three percentage points difference in age groups included contributing money to a party, candidate or organization; boycotting or boycotting; and being a member of an organization that takes a stand on a political issue.

Table 4.5: Political Activities of Respondents over the Past Two Years, By Age Group

	Percentage of those Saying that They Had Participated in an Activity in the Past Two Years		
	Age 30 and under	***Over Age 30***	**Over Age 30 Less Age 30 and Under**
Wore a button, put a sticker on my car or placed a sign in front of my house in support of an issue or candidate	26.8%	22.2%	-4.6%
Contributed money to a candidate, political party or any organization that supported candidates	4.4	6.7	2.3
Signed a petition about a political or social issue	44.8	37.8	-7.0
Not bought something because of the conditions under which the product was made	38.3	40	1.7
Bought a certain product or service because of the social or political values of the company that produced it	32.8	35.6	2.8
Contacted an elected official to express an opinion about an issue	9.8	15.6	5.8
Volunteered for the campaign of a candidate running for office	6.6	2.2	-4.4
Been a member of an organization that takes a stand on political issues	9.8	6.7	-3.1
Voted in an election	41.5	60	18.5

Source: Media Engagement Study at Delta College

In addition to measuring respondents' political participation, the survey instrument asked an open-ended question "Do you pay attention to politics? Why or why not?" These responses provide valuable insights into the motivation behind these community college students' political attentiveness – or lack thereof. First, in the aggregate, the participants cited 122 reasons why they *do not* pay attention to politics; 75 reasons why they *do*; and 26 reasons why they *only occasionally* keep up with politics. Reasons for *not* paying attention to politics were categorized into the following areas, listed in order of how frequently they were mentioned. Some responses received two codes because more than one reason was cited.

1. **No, politics doesn't interest me; it's boring (N=35).** This category was cited 35 times, comprising 29 percent of all the reasons for not following politics. Those that fell into this category simply indicated that they don't like politics, that it has no interest for them. Some said flatly that they found it boring. Representative responses include those such as "No, [I don't pay attention] because I don't really have an interest in it," "I'm just not that into it" and "Politics is boring to me." One respondent acknowledged that politics affects his/her life, but still found it too boring to be worthwhile, saying "I don't typically pay attention to politics. I understand that they have an effect on my life, but they're boring and I have other things to be concerned about." Other reasons cited for lack of interest were finding it too confusing and contentious; one respondent said it wasn't worth the time because it lacked entertainment value. These responses paint a picture of young adults (only four in this category were over age 30) in this category proclaiming politics is not worth their time because is boring, lacking entertainment value, frustrating and overall not worth making a priority.
2. **No, politics is too confusing and information from the media can't be trusted to provide reliable information (N=24).** The 24 responses in this category exhibited a general distrust of the political information available to them, concluding that paying attention wasn't worth their time because they didn't know who to believe anyway. They don't understand what's going on in the political world and have little appetite and time to figure it out. Without an interest to motivate political learning, this group attempts to avoid the topic altogether, especially if it involves others sharing strong opinions that make them feel inept in their understanding. These comments were typical of those falling into this category: "Not really that much, because I'm not a big

political individual, and most of the time I don't understand what they are explaining;" "It's complicated and people are very opinionated. I am not one to argue with someone over something that I am not a direct participant of;" and "No, simply because I feel all the words said are lies or non-truths." In one case, a participant stated that he/she found politics interesting, but overwhelming and hard to understand, stating "I don't really pay attention to politics. I do find them interesting but have a hard time understanding why government does certain things. I feel overwhelmed when I think of how much the country has to do to get to a stable place and I feel it's better to not know then to get stressed out about things I can't control."

3. **No, I'm too busy (N=16).** Many of the 16 responses that fell into this category overlap with other categories in the theme that paying attention to politics isn't worth the time *because* they're too contentious, too boring, too complicated, etc. Interestingly, all but one of those who cited time as a factor were under age 30, providing evidence that for young people, who must work, attend college, and tend to other responsibilities, politics taking a backseat could be a life cycle effect. For those individuals specifically citing time as a factor, learning about the political world just doesn't make the cut in prioritizing how they spend their time. Several respondents also mentioned generally being busy with school and work, a life cycle effect typical of this age group. This under-30 crowd is trying to earn their education, all the while paying their bills in the process. After weighing the costs and benefits of following politics against spending time gathering information, given the expected small or nil benefits of doing so, those in this category simply conclude that it's not worth the cost. "I feel like my one vote is not going to impact a difference," said one participant, "and I am too busy trying to

survive to have time to listen to two people who don't care about me as an individual argue about what they think is best for me."

4. **No, politics is too corrupt/messy (N=14)**. The 14 respondents citing this reason expressed disillusionment at the political process. They feel that the political process too inept to address any real problems, either because of partisan strife or politicians serving their own selfish interest, rather than the public good. They have the sense that all politicians are the same in that they all make promises they don't keep, all are prone to advancing their own selfish goals and blaming others for inaction. Said one respondent, "I would pay more attention if there was less drama and finger-pointing and more active steps toward solutions to the country's problems." Others expressed that keeping up with politics is too depressing and frustrating.
5. **No, I'm not informed enough (N=11).** Those in this category seemed content to allow others with more expertise to handle political decision making. Rather than making the effort to get informed, the 11 responses in this category indicate a desire of individuals to tend to their own interests, all the while letting the elected officials and others with a greater interest in politics to pay attention. After all, as one respondent said, "I do sometimes but at times it feels like what is the point? There is always some big deal and honestly what can I really do? We hire the people to work in Washington to handle everything so we don't have to."
6. **No, my voice doesn't matter (N=7).** Though cited less often than the above stated reasons, those with this perspective were particularly adamant that their attentiveness to the political system would change nothing. Absent a sense of democratic

responsibility, this group tunes out politics altogether. Interestingly, this reason was not cited by anyone over age 30.

7. **No, politics is too contentious (N=6).** Those who cited reasons that fell into this category were generally turned off by what they perceive as the argumentative nature of politics. They expressed little appetite for political debate, either in private conversations or in the public sphere. They feel uncomfortable and "stressed" when political topics arise in which people are expressing differences of opinion; as such, they strive to avoid those situations altogether. This reason was not cited by any participants over age 30.
8. **No, politics does not affect me (N=6).** The small N for this reason indicates that the sample, comprised mostly of young people, recognizes the impact of politics on their lives and the lives of those around them. One respondent in this category offered more insight into his/her response, saying that because of living at home and having only a part-time job, "I don't see how politics has a big impact on my life." This reason was also not cited by any participants over age 30.
9. **No, don't care (N=2).** The small N of just two indicates that the notion that young people are apathetic and don't care about politics is a misnomer. These two respondents simply expressed that they "don't care" and that it "doesn't really matter" whether one is informed or not.

The reasons cited for paying attention to politics were much less numerous than those cited for being apolitical. Cited by 40 respondents, the most common reason cited for being politically aware was that politics has a direct impact on one's life and the world in which we live. They have a sophisticated understanding that their lives are not isolated from the political system in which

they live, but that decisions made by elected officials shape their lives every day. Said one respondent, "Yes (I pay attention), it ultimately impacts and influences practically every part of my life...." This suggests that this sample of community college students is more motivated by a sense that "politics matters" than an internal sense of duty to engage in the political system.

Duty was not completely lost on these students, however. Also cited by respondents who were politically aware was simply that "it's important" to be informed so, as a citizen, you can cast a responsible vote on Election Day. This reason was cited by 24 respondents. Another 10 respondents said they pay attention to politics simply because they find it interesting, while just three said they did so because it was their civic duty. Two of the three who cited civic duty as a reason for following politics were over age 30. Additionally, one respondent said he/she followed politics because of his/her parent's interest and that it was on TV at home.

Further, an even smaller number of respondents said they only occasionally pay attention to politics, primarily when a topic in the news has personal importance to them. Several also cited elections as a time when they pay attention to what's going on in the political realm. Two respondents said they follow politics occasionally, only when they happen to come across a post on a social media cite or coverage on another media outlet. This only happens accidentally, however, and they don't seek political information as an end in itself.

The findings in this part of my research support Dalton's (2008) finding that today's young people are not motivated by a sense of civic duty, but by knowing that their actions matter and will make a difference. Overall, the young adults in the study felt incompetent to participate in the political system and didn't believe it would be worth their time to gain competency because doing so wouldn't make a difference anyway. If they took the effort to be informed and involved, they believed that elected officials are not driven by the voices of the people, but by their own personal

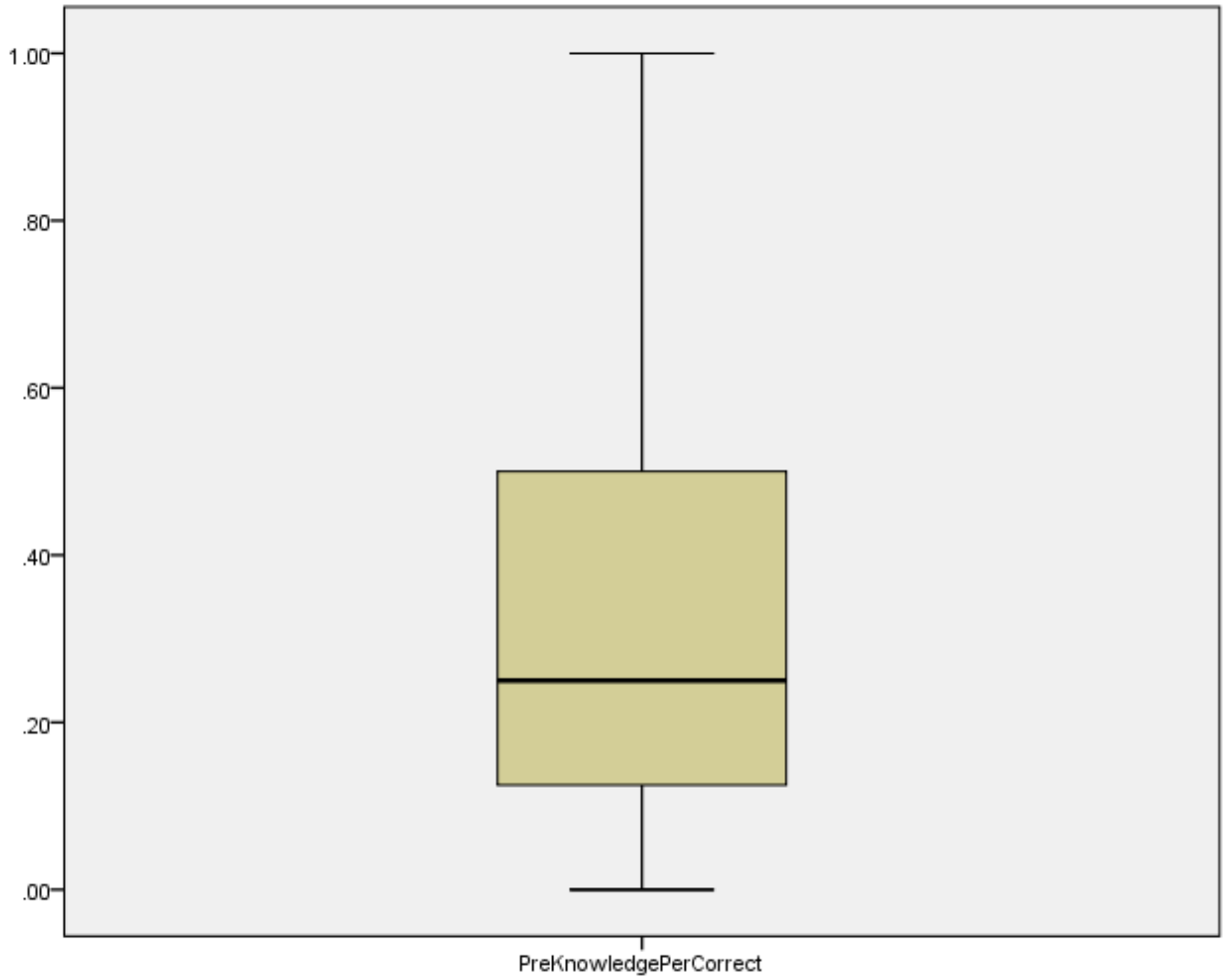
agendas. When asked whether they agree or disagree with the statement that "Public officials don't care about what people like me think," 54 percent either strongly or somewhat agree. Further, when asked how much trust they have in the government in Washington when it comes to handling the problems facing this country, nearly 54 percent said "none at all" or "not very much." These numbers indicate that this sample of young people may care about what happens and know that it impacts their lives, yet they have never been convinced that the actions they take will change a thing. And because they're not that interested to begin with, they avoid becoming politically aware, the first step to down the path of becoming a politically engaged citizen.

Political Knowledge

The findings of my study mirror those of Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) who found that vast majorities of Americans possess very little knowledge of rules (what government is), substance (what government does) and people of government (who government is). Prior to watching any episodes of *The Daily Show*, *NBC Nightly News* or *Entertainment Tonight*, participants completed a pretest questionnaire, which included eight questions about current political events that had been in the news in the two weeks leading up to the study. After watching their last episode at the end of the four-week study, participants completed a posttest, which included 19 questions of current political events that had been covered in either *The Daily Show*, *NBC Nightly News* or both. Because the aim of this chapter is to describe the sample prior to any interventions, I discuss only pretest results. There's an extensive description of the posttest questions in chapter 6 on political knowledge. See Appendix 4.A for questions in the pretest measuring knowledge of current political events.

In the survey administered at the beginning of the four-week study, those in the 75th percentile of respondents chose correct responses for four of the eight current events knowledge questions. The 50th percentile got only two responses (25 percent) correct. The mean number of correct responses was 2.7 (34 percent), while the median was 2 (25 percent). Standard deviation was .26.

Figure 4.1: Boxplot Showing Distribution of Pretest Scores by Percent Correct on Knowledge of Political Current Events



In the pretest survey, participants were most likely to correctly identify that the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls was intended to raise awareness about the kidnapping of school girls in Nigeria by a terrorist group. The percentage who got this question correct was 67.7. On just one other question did the correct responses outnumber the incorrect responses; that question asked respondents to identify Ukraine as the country that had erupted in violence over the controversy of stronger ties with Russia. On every other question, however, the number of incorrect responses far surpassed the number of correct responses. Just 42 percent correctly identified Hillary Clinton as the Secretary of State when the attack on the American embassy in Benghazi, Libya took place

in 2012. Just 20 percent could identify Kathleen Sebelius as the one in a list of politicians NOT intending to run for the Republican presidential nomination in 2016. Just 27 percent correctly identified the controversy involving Cliven Bundy and his cattle grazing on federal lands; 15 percent could correctly identify the Senate Majority Leader and 24 percent correctly selected John Kerry as the current Secretary of State.

When dividing the sample into demographic groups, differences emerge in political knowledge levels. First, with regard to gender, scholars have long-identified a gender gap in politics; although explanations for this gap are varied (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 2000; Verba, Burns and Schlozman 1997; Kenski and Jamieson 2000). While most researchers agree the root cause of the gender gap lies in differences in socialization, some question the validity of political knowledge measures, finding that women are more likely to select the "don't know" response, whereas men are more likely to guess if they don't know the correct answer (Mondak and Anderson 2004). While my data are not up to the task up settling this controversy, I do find a statistically significant difference (at the .05 level) from an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) when comparing knowledge levels of men and women in the pretest, controlling for political interest at the start of the study (see Table 4.6). Women scored a mean of 31 percent correct on the political knowledge questions, while men scored a mean of 40 percent, controlling for pre-political interest. Each question has four possible responses, plus a "don't know" response. For purposes of data analysis, correct responses were coded as 1, while any incorrect response (including "Don't know") was coded as 0. (See chapter 6 for an analysis of "Don't know" responses.)

Table 4.6: Analysis of Covariance of Pretest Differences in Political Knowledge Levels of Men and Women

	Mean difference	Std. Error	Significance (Bonferroni adjusted)
Male	.092	.037	.015
Female	-.092	.037	.015

Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College

Among other personal characteristics, namely, income and strength of partisanship, differences in political knowledge also emerged on the pretest. As Table 4.7 demonstrates, at the beginning of the study, the difference in political knowledge levels between those participants who identified themselves as "strong Republican" or "strong Democrat" and everyone else (self-identified as weak partisans, leaning partisans, independents, don't know or something else) was 9.4 percent (significant at the .05 level, controlling for pre-political interest in ANCOVA). The mean score of those who identified themselves as strong partisans was 42 percent, while the mean score of everyone else was about 33 percent.

Table 4.7: Analysis of Covariance: Pretest Differences in Political Knowledge Between Strong and Weak Partisans (Pretest Political Interest as Covariate)

	Mean difference	Std. Error	Significance (Bonferroni adjusted)
Strong Partisan, when compared to Weak partisan, Independent or Something else	.094	.045	.038

Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College

The findings on how income impacts political knowledge mirror that of party ID strength and gender. First, I recoded income into two categories: $75,000 and under and those making than $75,000. The mean score of those making less than $75,000 was 32 percent, while the mean score of those making $75,000 or more was 39 percent. As shown in Table 4.8, the Analysis of Covariance, when controlling for pretest political interest, shows a mean difference of .075 (p=.056, 2-tail; .023, 1-tail) in political knowledge between the two income groups.

Table 4.8: Analysis of Covariance of Pretest Differences in Political Knowledge, Comparisons by Income (Pretest Political Interest as Covariate)

	Mean difference	Std. Error	Significance (Bonferroni adjusted)
$75,000 and over	.075	.039	.056
Under $75,000	-.075	.039	.056

Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College

In summary, based on evidence from eight pretest questions, this is a community college student population that is woefully inattentive to political news. This is not surprising given the findings of the large-scale study by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), who analyzed 3,500 survey questions over 50 years to find that three-fourths of respondents could answer only 10-14 percent correctly. My questions were designed to measure knowledge of current political developments in the news; those in the Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) study measure a much greater breadth of political knowledge. My posttest survey questions on political knowledge better match the categories of knowledge studied by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), and I'll look at those in chapter 6.

In this sample of community college students, gender was the strongest predictor of political knowledge, controlling for pretest levels of political interest. The men were more knowledgeable than the women. I also found differences in knowledge based on income and party attachment. In general, these community college students possess many of the characteristics that research has found predict low levels of political knowledge. These include low income levels ($25,000-$49,000 was the most frequent income bracket); weak party attachments (17 percent of respondents didn't even know the party to which they belonged); and low levels of education (the majority had less than two years of college).

These findings have troubling implications because democracy relies on its citizens to address domestic and international issues through their representatives. If such citizens lack enough interest to even become informed about their political system and its challenges, it is difficult to imagine a vibrant democratic system in our collective future. This dissertation is based on the notion that informed political involvement improves the ability of the political system to solve problems. Granted, the view that democracy requires an informed citizenry is challenged by

scholars who believe that the will of the people can be transmitted through attentive publics (Miller 1983); collective public opinion can be rational when individual opinion is not (Page and Shapiro 1992); and that people can make reasonably informed decisions with little information using heuristics (Popkin 1994). As Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) demonstrate, however, informed citizens are better able to identify their interests and then connect them to a political party or candidate; are more likely to participate in politics; are more politically tolerant; and are less likely to be duped by political propaganda. Further, because political knowledge is not evenly distributed across the American populace and is found disproportionately among those who already hold power and influence, lack of political knowledge threatens political equality, a basic tenet of democracy. Subsequent chapters will consider whether political comedy, with its attraction for young adults, can serve as a political equalizer for those who otherwise would remain alienated from the political system.

News Consumption

News consumption statistics from my study provide support for the theory that high-choice media environments only serve to reinforce and perhaps accentuate political inequalities (Schlozman, Verba and Brady 2012; Prior 2005 and 2007). Although political news and information has never before been more readily accessible, this easy-access accentuates the information gap if those who take advantage of it are those who are already likely to participate. Although pretest participants in my study reported consuming about 4.5 hours of media (all types) each day (see Table 4.9), about 18 percent consumed no hard news and another 36 percent reported consuming less than 15 minutes.

I measured news consumption using the following questions:

"In an average day, how many hours do you spend with media of all types (television, radio, websites, social media, video games, apps, etc)? Specify the number of hours."
"How much time, if any, do you spend paying attention to hard news from any media source in a typical day in the past week? a. None, b. Less than 15 minutes, c. 15 to 29 minutes, d. 30-59 minutes, e. 1 hour or more" (A previous question had defined hard news as that which covers "breaking events involving leaders, major issues, or significant disruptions to daily life such as wars, natural disasters, etc.")
"In general, how much attention do you pay to *hard news about politics*? a. None at all, b. Very little, c. Some, d. Quite a bit, or e. A great deal" (Again, hard news was defined in a previous question.)

In all, more than half of respondents in the pretest devoted less than 15 minutes daily to paying attention to hard news (see Table 4.10). When asked specifically about the time they pay attention to hard news about politics, 16 percent said "none at all," while 39 percent said, "very little." Combining these two categories, we see than over a majority of community college students in the study reported paying no or very little attention to political news (see Table 4.11).

Table 4.9: Hours a Day Spent Consuming All Types of Media (Pretest)

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Hours a day	221	0	20	4.49

Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College

Table 4.10: Daily Time Spent Consuming Hard News (Pretest)			
	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
None	40	17.5%	17.5%
Less than 15 minutes	82	36%	53.5%
15 to 29 minutes	56	24.6%	78.1%
30-59 minutes	24	10.5%	88.6%
1 hour or more	26	11.4%	100%
N	228		
Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College			

Table 4.11: Daily Time Spent Consuming Hard News About Politics (Pretest)			
	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
None at all	36	15.9%	15.9%
Very little	88	38.9%	54.9%
Some	75	33.2%	88.1%
Quite a bit	19	8.4%	96.5%
A great deal	8	3.5%	100%
Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College			

Of those community college students in the study who consume hard news, the first-choice medium was television, followed closely by social networking sites and websites. This finding is based on the following question:

"'Hard news' covers breaking events involving leaders, major issues, or significant disruptions in daily life (such as wars, natural disasters, etc.). How many days a week do you pay attention to hard news coverage on any of the types of media listed below? Please indicate the number of days per week on average in the box next to the type of media. Then list the specific sources for each type of media.

- Newspapers or news magazines (print versions). Which one(s)? Please specify the number of days/week and list sources.
- Websites. Which one(s)? Please specify the number of days/week and list sources.
- Mobile apps. Which one(s)? Please specify the number of days/week and list sources.
- Television programs (on air). Which one(s)? Please specify the number of days/week and list sources.
- Radio programs (on air). Which one(s)? Please specify the number of days/week and list sources.

As Table 4.12 illustrates, 97 respondents reported getting news from television sources, making it the top-cited news sources. Websites and social networking sites were a very close second; interestingly, those citing the latter sources accessed them more frequently than television.

I speculate that this is because news on social networking and other websites is more accessible (available 24 hours/day, 7 days/week) than it is on television news programs, which air at a scheduled time each day. It is also interesting to note that news-based mobile apps seem to have caught on slowly with this community college sample, cited only slightly more frequently as a source than newspapers and radio.

Table 4.12: Hard News Sources Cited by Participants on the Pretest, with Average Number of Days/Week Accessed

	News-papers	Web-sites	Mobile Apps	Social Network Sites	TV	Radio
Number of respondents indicating this is a hard news source	51	95	56	95	97	56
Average number of days a week source is accessed	2.1	3.3	4.5	4.4	3.7	3.5

Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College

When analyzing differences in news media use by age, I found that young adults in the study were more likely to report getting their news from radio, mobile apps and social networking sites than were the over-30 respondents. The older respondents; however, were more likely to get their news from television and newspapers.[5] Accessing news from websites was relatively equal for both the 30 and under participants and those over 30.[6]

A separate survey question listed specific television news sources, asking respondents to indicate the number of days each week they watch them. Here are the question details:

"How many days a week do you watch news on any of the stations or programs listed below, either on-line or on air? Please indicate the number of days each week you watch the following show(s) in the box next to its name.

[5]None of the differences in news sources by age was statistically significant in an ANOVA test.

[6] I would caution against generalizing these differences on the basis of age to the general population, as the adults over age 30 in this study may have unique characteristics that shape their news consumption. Many of them are very time-strapped, with going back to school, caring for families and in many cases, working for a living. These life circumstances may be very different from other adults over age 30 who are not in community college.

- *CNN*
- *CBS Evening News*
- *NBC Nightly News*
- *ABC World News*
- *MSNBC*
- *Fox News*
- *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*
- *The Colbert Report*
- Other (please specify)

Results of this question are displayed in Table 4.13 below. As the table illustrates, the TV source cited most frequently was CNN (cited by 67), followed by Fox News (cited by 59 participants) and CBS Evening News (cited by 54 participants). Both *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* were viewed by 47 participants each. These results mostly reflect Pew Research studies that have found cable news networks remain the most cited source for young people to "regularly learn something about the (2012) campaign;" however, late-night comedy shows are the only off-line news source 18-29-year-olds turn to in rates higher than other age groups (Pew Research Center 2012c).

In the present study, about 18 percent of those over 30 and about 21 percent of those 30 and under reported watching *The Daily Show*, while that figure was for both age groups was relatively equal (about 20 percent)[7] for *The Colbert Report*. Unlike the Pew Research Study cited above, young people (age 30 and under) in the present study reported watching Fox News at slightly higher rates than those 30 and over did. While about 27 percent of the 30-and-under respondents reported watching Fox News, about 22 percent of those over 30 did. Similarly, the 30-and-under respondents reported watching MSNBC in rates slightly higher than those over 30. While about 13 percent of the 30-and-under respondents said they watched MSNBC, that figure was 11 percent

[7] These percentages are taken from the "Percent" column on the SPSS output, which includes missing cases in the calculation. I thought it necessary to include missing cases, as respondents very likely left the response blank because they did not access that source on a weekly basis.

for those over 30. While none of these consumption differences by age are statistically significant, it is interesting that young people in this study are more likely to watch the more overtly ideologically-tilted sources on both ends of the conservative-liberal spectrum. On all other news sources – CNN, CBS, NBC, ABC and other – those over age 30 reported watching in higher rates.

Of the 34 participants who cited "other" programs or stations as a news source, the most often cited source was local television news stations (cited by 15 respondents); in the "other" category, no other source was cited by more than two respondents.

Table 4.13: Number of Participants on *Pretest* who Reported Watching Each Television Program, with the Mean Number of Days Per Week

	CNN	*CBS*	*NBC*	*ABC*	*MSNBC*	*Fox News*	*The Daily Show*	*The Colbert Report*	*Other*
Number of participants who watched	67	54	39	48	29	59	47	47	34
Mean number of days each week	1.9	2.3	2.4	2.1	2.1	2.1	2.2	2.3	1.5

Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College

By far the most frequently cited social networking sites on which participants accessed news were Facebook (61 mentions) and Twitter (21 mentions), with all others cited by only one or two students. Yahoo was the top-cited news website source (22 mentions), followed by local news websites (14 mentions), CNN (12 mentions), then MSNBC (9 mentions).

When the community college students in the study consume media (of any form), they first and foremost are seeking to be entertained. The survey asked respondents to rate their top three personal priorities for what they want to get out of the time they spend with media. Here's how the question was worded:

"When do you want to get out of your time spent on media? Please rank the following items according to your top personal priorities when you engage with the media of any form, with 1 being the most important and 7 being the least. *When I use media (any form), I want to"*

- be entertained.
- relax/de-stress.
- gain information to know what is happening in political affairs.
- gain information about the things I am interested in.
- connect with friends.
- do my homework.
- other.

For participants in the exposure groups, the survey was administered on-line, providing a drop-down arrow next to each option so that respondents could choose a number and give it a rank. Participants in the no-exposure control group who took the paper-and-pencil version of the survey simply wrote their rankings in the space provided.

Table 4.14 (below) represents the number and percentage of respondents who rated each priority as their first choice on the pretest. While about 34 percent of respondents said they wanted to be entertained during their time with media, another approximately 19 percent said they sought to "gain information about the things I am interested in." This was the second most-cited category by respondents, followed by the desire to "relax/de-stress." Very few participants indicated that they used media to gain information to know what is happening in political affairs, connect with friends or do homework; each of these categories comprised 10 percent or less of respondents.

Table 4.14: Top Priorities of Participants When Consuming Media (Pretest)

	Frequency	Percent
Be entertained	77	34.8
Relax/de-stress	32	14.5
Gain information to know what is happening in political affairs	23	10.4
Gain information about the things I'm interested in	43	19.5
Connect with friends	15	6.8
Do my homework	21	9.5
Other	10	4.5
N	221	

Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College

These results indicate that in a high-choice media environment, to attract a younger audience, news programs need to be entertaining. Today's cohort of young adults never experienced the favorable conditions for unmotivated learning characteristic of the low-choice television era (Prior 2007). Years ago, when TV shows were broadcast, there was little or nothing else to watch, especially entertainment shows. There's little to attract younger viewers to the evening news. The rapid changes occurring in the media today, however, are creating new opportunities to weave politics into leisure time. Political comedy has the potential to capture the interest of young people and heighten their political engagement. The sample of mostly young adults in the present study demonstrates a low tolerance for media sources that do not keep them amused. Young adults, however, are attracted to political comedy. It's entertaining. Very likely, based on evidence from the pretest survey, young adults don't watch political comedy with the intention of gaining political information. Nevertheless, inadvertently, they almost certainly do. Thus, with its focus on entertainment, with political information as a byproduct, political comedy may fit the bill as a source for which young people won't lose interest while inadvertently gaining political information.

Conclusions

This chapter has painted a bleak picture of the state of political interest, knowledge and news consumption of this sample of community college students. It is clear that most of the participants in the study have escaped influences in their childhood and adolescent years that would set them on a path toward becoming a politically engaged citizen whose interests are heard in government. As a result, if young people continue down this path as they grow older, they are destined to lead lives that are distanced and even alienated from the political system. It's a system, nonetheless, where decisions are made that impact lives every day.

Is there something that can be done about a generation of politically disinterested, uninformed and mostly disengaged young adults? A promising intervention is one that motivates young adults, on their own initiative, because of their own preferences, to become engaged. It will need to be something that does not rely on a mostly absent intrinsic motivation to learn about and engage in politics. As stated by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), "Citizens do need to be more engaged in politics, but the reasons for paying attention need to be more clearer to them, the benefits of stronger citizenship must be more evident, and the opportunities to learn about politics more frequent, timely and equitable" (21). Political comedy stands as a promising leveler in American politics today, connecting young people, driven by a desire to be entertained, to the political world. By making politics more accessible and delivering it in a format equal to their motivations, political comedy has potential to capture the attention of an otherwise disengaged population.

APPENDIX 4.A
Complete Media Engagement Study Pretest, as administered to exposure group participants on Survey Monkey and no-exposure participants in hard-copy

To the participant: Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions regarding your media habits, political attitudes and activities. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions; please be candid in your responses, which will remain confidential. Your name will be used only to match your pre- and post-surveys; this part of the survey and will be removed and shredded before any results are released.

RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE

Media Engagement Study
Pre-Survey Questionnaire

Section 1. Political attitudes & activities

1. Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with this statement: Public officials don't care about what people like me think.
    1) Strongly agree
    2) Somewhat agree
    3) Neither agree nor disagree
    4) Somewhat disagree
    5) Strongly disagree
    6) I haven't thought about it much.

2. Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with this statement: People like me don't have any say about what the government does.
    1) Strongly agree
    2) Somewhat agree
    3) Neither agree nor disagree
    4) Somewhat disagree
    5) Strongly disagree
    6) I haven't thought about it much.

3. How much trust do you have in the government in Washington when it comes to handling the problems facing this country?
    1) None at all
    2) Not very much
    3) A fair amount
    4) A great deal
    5) I haven't thought about it much.

4. Some people seem to follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there's an election going on or not. Others aren't that interested. How often would you say you follow what's going on in government and public affairs?

    1) Hardly at all
    2) Only now and then
    3) Some of the time
    4) Most of the time

5. How many days this week did you engage in discussions about politics or political issues with others (outside of class)?
    1) Never
    2) One or two
    3) Three or four
    4) Nearly every day

6. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with this statement*: Politics is relevant to my life.*
    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree somewhat
    3) Neither agree nor disagree
    4) Somewhat disagree
    5) Strongly disagree
    6) Don't know.

7. When you pay attention to the media (Internet, TV, radio, newspaper, magazines), how often do you look for coverage of politics?
    1) Never
    2) Seldom
    3) Sometimes
    4) Often
    5) Almost always

8. On a scale of 0 to 10 (0 being no interest and 10 being high interest), how interested would you say you personally are in politics? Please circle the number.

    0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

9. How interested are you in information about what's going on in government and politics?
    1) Not at all interested
    2) Slightly interested
    3) Moderately interested
    4) Very interested

5) Extremely interested

10. In talking to people about elections, we find that a lot of people aren't able to vote because they weren't registered, they were sick, or they just didn't have time. How about you? Did you vote in the last national election in 2012?
    1) No
    2) Yes
    3) I was not old enough to vote (18 years old) at the time of the election.

11. Are you registered to vote?
    1) Yes, I am registered to vote at my current address.
    2) Yes, I am registered to vote, but not at my current address.
    3) No, I am not currently registered to vote.
    4) Not sure

12. I DO / DO NOT (select one) pay attention to politics because:

13. On a scale of 0 to 10 (0 being no enjoyment and 10 being high enjoyment), how much would you say you enjoy ***learning about politics***? Please circle the number.

    0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

14. On a scale of 0 to 10 (0 being no enjoyment and 10 being high enjoyment), how much would you say you enjoy ***discussing politics***? Please circle the number.

    0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

15. On a scale of 0 to 10 (0 being strong disagreement and 10 being high agreement), indicate your level of agreement with the following statement**: *I see myself as someone who could be involved politically.*** Please circle the number.

    0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

16. Have you ever participated in any of the following activities? Please **mark the box** of the following activities, if any, you have engaged in over the ***past two years***.

    ☐ Wore a button, put a sticker on my car or placed a sign in front of my house in front of my house in support of an issue or candidate.

    ☐ Contributed money to a candidate, political party or any organization that supported candidates.

☐ Signed a petition about a political or social issue.

☐ Not bought something because of the conditions under which the product is made

☐ Bought a certain product or service because I liked the social or political values of the company that produced it.

☐ Contacted an elected official to express an opinion about an issue

☐ Volunteered for the campaign of a candidate running for public office.

☐ Been a member of an organization that takes a stand on political issues.

☐ Voted in an election.

17. In the future, do you see yourself participating in any of the following activities? Please **mark the box** beside any activities, if any, you see yourself participating in ***sometime in the future***.

☐ Wearing a button, put a sticker on my car or placed a sign in front of my house in front of my house in support of an issue or candidate.

☐ Contributing money to a candidate, political party or any organization that supported candidates.

☐ Signing a petition about a political or social issue.

☐ Not buying something because of the conditions under which the product is made

☐ Buying a certain product or service because I liked the social or political values of the company that produced it.

☐ Contacting an elected official to express an opinion about an issue

☐ Volunteering for the campaign of a candidate running for public office.

☐ Being a member of an organization that takes a stand on political issues.

☐ Voting in an election.

Section 2: Media habits

Media habits in the United States are changing. The Pew Research Center in 2012 found that about 30 percent of 18 to 24-year-olds "got no new yesterday," while that was true for about 20 percent of 25 to 39-year-olds and about 15 percent for 40 to 64-year-olds. For many people, news consumption takes a back seat to visiting family/friends, texting, using social networking sites and other doing other activities. How about you?

18. In an average day, how many hours do you spend with media of all types (television, radio, web sites, social media, video games, apps, etc.)?

_____ (specify number of hours)

19. How many **days a week** do you watch news on any of the stations or programs listed below, either on-line or on air? Please **indicate the number of days each week** you watch the following show in the box next to its name.

☐ CNN

☐ CBS Evening News

☐ NBC Nightly News

☐ ABC World News

☐ MSNBC

☐ Fox News

☐ The Daily Show with Jon Stewart

☐ The Colbert Report

☐ Other _____ (please specify)

20. "Hard news" covers breaking events involving leaders, major issues, or significant disruptions in daily life (such as wars, natural disasters, etc.). How many ***days a week*** do you pay attention to ***hard news coverage*** on any of the types of media listed below? Please indicate the **number of days per week** on average in the box next to the type of media. Then, **list the specific sources** for each type of media.

☐ Newspapers or news magazines (print version).
Which one(s)? Please list _____

☐ Websites
Which one(s)? Please list _____

☐ Mobile apps
Which one(s)? Please list _____

☐ Social networking sites
Which one(s)? Please list _____

☐ Television programs (on air)
Which one(s)? Please list _____

☐ Radio programs (on air)
Which one(s)? Please list_____

21. How much time, if any, did you spend paying attention to ***hard news*** from any media source on *a* ***typical day*** in the past week?
    1) None
    2) Less than 15 minutes
    3) 15 to 29 minutes
    4) 30-59 minutes
    5) 1 hour or more

22. In general, how much attention do you pay to ***hard news about politics***?
    1) Not at all
    2) Very little
    3) Some
    4) Quite a bit
    5) A great deal

23. "Soft news" is more entertainment-driven, covers less serious topics and events and is often centered on personalities and celebrities. How many ***days a week*** do you pay attention to ***soft news coverage*** on any of the sources listed below? Please indicate the **number of days/week** you access soft news on each type of media in the box next to its name. Then, **list the specific sources** for each type of media.

☐ Newspapers or news magazines (print version).
Which one(s)? Please list _____

☐ Websites
Which one(s)? Please list _____

☐ Mobile apps
Which one(s)? Please list _____

☐ Social networking sites
Which one(s)? Please list _____

☐ Television programs (on air)
Which one(s)? Please list _____

☐ Radio programs (on air)
Which one(s)? Please list_____

24. What do you want to get out of your time spent on media? Please rank the following items according to your top 3 personal priorities when you engage with media of any form, with 1 being the most important and 7 being the least. *When I use media (any form), I want to*

_____Be entertained
_____Relax/de-stress
_____Gain information to know what is happening in political affairs
_____Gain information about the things I am interested in
_____Connect with friends
_____Do my homework
_____Other (please specify)_____

Section 3. Current Events

Next, we would like to ask you about some things that have been in the news. We understand that not everyone will have heard about them, so just answer to the best of your ability.

25. Who was Secretary of State in 2012 when an attack on the American embassy in Benghazi, Libya, killed the U.S. ambassador and three others?
    a. John Kerry
    b. John McCain
    c. Hillary Clinton
    d. Condoleezza Rice
    e. Don't know.

26. Which of the following countries has erupted in violence in recent months over the controversy of whether to seek stronger ties to Russia?
    a. Ireland
    b. Bulgaria
    c. Ukraine
    d. Turkey
    e. Don't know

27. Which of the following does the news media NOT mention as a possible 2016 Republican presidential candidate?
    a. Kathleen Sebelius
    b. Rand Paul
    c. Marco Rubio
    d. Jeb Bush
    e. Don't know

28. The hash tag #BringBackOurGirls is intended to raise awareness about
    a. The lack of political representation for young girls in India.
    b. The failure of the Egyptian government to protect young girls from sexual assault
    c. A movement in Russia to bring education attainment of school girls to the same levels as boys.
    d. The kidnapping of school girls in Nigeria by a terrorist group.
    e. Don't know.

29. Earlier this year, Cliven Budy of Nevada and his supporters were engaged in a standoff with federal officials over
    a. Illegally grazing his cattle on federal lands
    b. Violating federal laws banning guns in U.S. government buildings
    c. Illegally fishing on federal waterways
    d. Illegally hunting antelope and deer in national parks.
    e. Don't know.

30. Who is the Majority Leader in the U.S. Senate?
    a. Republican John Boehner
    b. Democrat Harry Reid
    c. Republican Mitch McConnell
    d. Democrat Al Franken
    e. Don't know

31. What public office does John Kerry currently hold?
    a. Secretary of State
    b. U.S. Senator
    c. Representative in the U.S. House
    d. Attorney General
    e. Don't know.

32. Which of the following is leading the charge to investigate what happened in the aftermath of the attack on the U.S. embassy in Benghazi in 2012?
    a. Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives
    b. Republicans in the U.S. Senate
    c. Democrats in the U.S. House of Representatives
    d. Democrats in the U.S. Senate
    e. Don't know

Section 4. Background

You are almost done completing the survey. Thank you for your candid response so far! Lastly, we would like to ask just a few questions about your background.

33. What is your gender? _____

34. What ethnicity do you consider yourself?
    1) Black
    2) Asian
    3) Native American
    4) Hispanic
    5) White
    6) Other (please specify)_____
    7) Don't know

35. In what year were you born? (please specify) _____

36. Generally speaking, do you usually consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else?
    1) Strong Republican
    2) Weak Republican
    3) Independent, leaning Republican
    4) Independent
    5) Independent, leaning Democrat
    6) Weak Democrat
    7) Strong Democrat
    8) Don't know.
    9) Something else _____ (please explain)

37. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?
    1) Extremely liberal
    2) Liberal
    3) Slightly liberal
    4) Moderate; middle of the road
    5) Slightly conservative
    6) Conservative
    7) Extremely conservative
    8) Haven't thought much about it
    9) Don't know

38. If you added together the yearly incomes, before taxes, of all the members of your household for last year, including wages and salaries, Social Security, AFDC, disability, SSI, or interest, which of the following categories is closest to your total household income?
    1) None or less than $4,999
    2) $5,000-$24,999
    3) $25,000-$49,999
    4) $50,000-$74,999

5) $75,000-$99,999
6) $100,000-$124,999
7) $125,000-$149,999
8) $150,000-$174,999
9) $175,000-$200,000
10) $200,001 and over
11) Don't know

39. In what year did you earn (or will you earn) a high school diploma or GED equivalent?
_____

40. What is your current employment status?
1) Employed less than 40 hours/week
2) Employed 40 hours/week or more
3) Temporarily laid off
4) Unemployed
5) Homemaker

41. What was the highest level of education achieved by your mother?
1) Less than high school diploma
2) High school diploma or equivalent
3) Some college
4) Associate's degree
5) Bachelor's degree
6) Graduate or Advanced degree
7) Don't know

42. What was the highest level of education achieved by your father?
1) Less than high school diploma
2) High school diploma or equivalent
3) Some college
4) Associate's degree
5) Bachelor's degree
6) Graduate or Advanced degree
7) Don't know

43. How many credit hours have you successfully earned in college (not including this semester)?
1) 12 or fewer
2) 13 to 24
3) 25 to 36
4) 37 to 48

5) 49 to 60
6) More than 60

CHAPTER 5
Does *The Daily Show* Make Community College Students More Politically Interested?
Effects of Political Comedy, Compared to Network News, on Viewers' Political Interest

This chapter seeks to explain whether the trend of young adults turning increasingly to political comedy as a source of "news" has the potential to pique their political interest. Political comedy presents political developments in a manner that is entertaining and more accessible to apolitical and less knowledgeable viewers. Although young people may not be tuning into political comedy with the intent of becoming a more interested, informed and engaged citizen, simply watching politics in this format might have that effect. My research involved an experiment conducted as a part of courses taken by students at a community college. The mean age of this sample is 25.7, while 80 percent is age 30 and under.[8] I assigned the students to three different treatments: One consumed political comedy, a second network news, and a third purely entertainment news. There was also a no exposure control group. The participants started out the study with different levels of political interest, but due to random assignment, these differences were unrelated to the control or treatment groups to which I assigned them. After four exposures to their assigned program, however, there are clear differences in mean levels of political interest between the groups, specifically when comparing those who watched political comedy (*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*) and the no-exposure control group. These differences are demonstrated not only in the post-political interest scores, controlling for the pretest measure of political interest, but also when comparing the difference in the group means of the pre and post political interest index. The results of this analysis shed light on the impact of political entertainment programming

[8] The data provide evidence that including those over 30 in the sample does not change the results, as the pre-political interest score for the over-30 participants is 17.5, while that of the under-30 participants is 17. This difference of .5 on a 40-point scale has a significance level of .789, demonstrating that the difference in these two groups is indistinguishable from zero.

on political interest, a desirable outcome from the perspective of democratic theory. Political comedy reduces the opportunity costs of consuming political information by making it more accessible and fun for apolitical viewers. In doing so, it may appeal to a less politically interested younger audience and community college students who avoid hard news political coverage.

In this chapter, I will introduce my new measure of political interest, a 40-point composite index comprised of four 10-point scales. I follow this by an analysis of whether exposure to *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart, *NBC Nightly News*, or *Entertainment Tonight* raised or lowered participants' position on this scale, relative to the other exposure and non-exposure groups. I show that, compared to the non-exposure control group, political comedy has a statistically significant positive impact on political interest; these results withstand a variety of tests using analysis of variance, analysis of covariance, t-tests and regression analysis. Further, I will offer a mechanism by which *The Daily Show* heightened political interest, specifically, because viewers were more likely to find it entertaining, it increased their enjoyment of discussing and learning about politics. Lastly, I will address and offer an explanation for the fact that overall, political interest scores declined slightly throughout the four weeks of study. Regardless of the explanation, however, *The Daily Show* group best withstood the influences that drained political interest over these four weeks.

Measuring Political Interest

The most common way social science research measures attitudes is through survey questions that ask respondents to self-report their attitudes toward a particular object. While this method is direct, the validity of these responses assumes that individuals can access their attitudes and are willing to honestly report them. This may or may not be true. Respondents may report the socially acceptable response so as to look good for the survey (for example, see Silver et al 1986).

An indirect method of measuring attitudes is to ask individuals to rank their preferences, with the assumption that attitudes influence these preferences. With this method, there's less propensity for respondents to worry about and try to give socially acceptable responses to a direct question about their attitudes. Another indirect method of measuring attitudes is to observe what people actually do, with the assumption that behavior is the result of an underlying attitude (Holbrook 2006).

Existing measures of political interest vary in that some simply capture attitudes, while others measure behavioral manifestations of those attitudes. Fortunately, the validity of these measures has already been tested in existing research, upon which I build in this dissertation. Since the 1960s, the American National Election Study and Youth-Parent Socialization Panel measure political interest with the following question,

> "Some people seem to follow/think about what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there's an election going on or not. Others aren't that interested. Would you say that you follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?"

This question associates interest in "government and public affairs" with following/thinking about this topic. Conversely, the British Cohort Panel study, which follows a cohort born in 1970, measures political interest with this question,

> "How interested would you say you are in politics? Very interested, fairly interested, not very interested, or not interested at all?"

This question relies on people's measurement of their attitude towards politics, absent any accompanying action, even a subtle one like "following politics." Measuring political interest through such personal assessments has been a conventional practice since Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1948), and subsequent studies using self-reported measures find strong effects of political interest on political knowledge, voter turnout and political participation. Most have used one of the above two measures (for example, Luskin 1990 and Verba et al 1995). Further, Shani

(2009) observes that the consistency over time in these two questions' measurement of political interest offers evidence that the items are reliable.

To further test for the internal validity of the above two political interest measures, Shani (1990) compares them to an item introduced in a 2006 American National Election Study (ANES) pilot study in which half of the respondents were randomly selected to receive this question:

> "How interested are you in information about what's going on in government and politics? Extremely interested, very interested, moderately interested, slightly interested, or not interested at all?"

This item associates interest with information and adds clarity by substituting the vague "public affairs" wording with "politics." In construct validity tests for both the pilot and traditional items, Shani (2009) finds that measures that are purely motivational and those that include a behavioral component show moderate to high correlations with construct variables including exposure and attention to news in the media, political learning, and political participation.

While no other published studies have sought to capture *The Daily Show's* effect on an individual's general political interest, others have employed political interest as a moderator and control variable. For example, Cao and Brewer (2008), in their study of the effects of political comedy on political participation, measured political interest by asking "How much do you enjoy keeping up with political news about campaigns and elections – a lot, some, not much, or not at all?" They also asked, "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?" (93) In a separate study that tests the effects of exposure to *The Daily Show* on attentiveness to political events covered on the program, Cao (2010) measures "attentiveness to politics" as a moderating variable by asking survey respondents how closely they followed "news about political figures and events in Washington" and "international affairs" (35).

The survey administered to subjects in my study includes the above conventional and time-tested measures from ANES and the YPSS, as well as those I have developed to be a more precise and fluid measure of my definition of political interest as *a psychological predisposition favorable toward learning about and engaging in the political world.* This definition encompasses both a general curiosity about the political world – and a propensity toward engaging in it. I sought to capture both because a general interest in politics may not immediately manifest into action, especially in community college students who lead very busy lives, often encompassing both school and work. Further, to address any variation in interpretation of what "interest in politics" might mean to the individual reading the question, I sought to include not only self-assessments, but tangible ways in which that interest manifested in weekly activities.

My measure of political interest is a 40-point scale, the sum of four questions on which respondents answer based on 0 to 10 scales. These questions ask respondents to identify their personal interest in politics, how much they enjoy discussing politics, how much they enjoy learning about politics, and the extent to which they see themselves being politically involved in the future. The general question about political interest and the more specific question of political learning both tap into curiosity, while the question about political discussions and getting involved politically tap into engagement.

Measuring political interest on a continuous 0 to 40 scale also is preferable to the shorter scales used by past researchers for identifying what may be small, incremental changes in political interest due to media effects. Research starting with that conducted by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1948) has found that media has "minimal effects," but using a 40-point scale allows for the measurement of smaller changes that would go unnoticed using a scale with only four or five levels. Most importantly, this scale provides for greater accuracy, allowing the determination of

how many points up or down the scale a person shifted in response to the treatment. These four items are highly reliable, with a Cronbach's Alpha of .809. Further, the 0 to 40 composite index strongly correlates with the more conventional measures of political interest. Its correlation of .602 with the ANES question regarding following government and public affairs (described above) is significant at the .01 level, as is its correlation of .734 with the 2006 pilot question regarding interest in information about government and politics (described above).

Results of the pretest questionnaire reveal a pre-interest index mean of 17.41 on the 40-point scale in the aggregate data. The mean, minimum, maximum and standard deviation of the four items composing the index follows:

Table 5.1: Min, Max, Mean and Standard Deviation of *Pretest* Political Interest Index and Composite Measures

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Political Interest Index	215	0	40	17.42	10.60
Enjoy Discussing Politics Scale	228	0	10	4.38	2.92
Enjoy Learning About Politics Scale	227	0	10	4.76	2.89
Likely to Get Involved in Politics Scale	228	0	10	3.61	3.15
Interest in Politics Scale	217	0	10	4.61	2.7

Source: Author's interpretation of data in the Media Engagement Study.

As will be addressed below, aggregate political interest, measured by the 40-point interest index, declined slightly throughout the four weeks of the study. The post-interest index aggregate results is as follows:

Table 5.2: Min, Max, Mean and Standard Deviation of *Posttest* Political Interest Index and Composite Measures

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Political Interest Index	214	0	40	15.92	10.54
Enjoy Discussing Politics Scale	222	0	10	4.07	2.95
Enjoy Learning About Politics Scale	222	0	10	4.60	2.86
Likely to Get Involved in Politics Scale	223	0	10	3.18	2.98
Interest in Politics Scale	216	0	10	4.37	2.67

Source: Author's interpretation of data in the Media Engagement Study.

These aggregate numbers, of course, mask important differences between those who watched *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, NBC Nightly News* and *Entertainment Tonight,* as well as those who saw no change in their viewing habits throughout the course of the study (the no-exposure control group). It is to these important differences that I now turn in the statistical analysis.

Statistical Analysis

There are several methods that are appropriate for the analysis of change between the pre and posttests. One is simple, such as the independent samples t-test. It is able to demonstrate whether a statistically significant difference exists between two groups. A second method, analysis of variance, uses as a dependent variable the difference in scores between the posttest and the pretest, and the treatment group as the grouping variable. My analysis of variance employs only one fixed factor, defined by the treatment or control to which participants were assigned (television program or no exposure). A third method, analysis of covariance, uses pretest scores as an independent variable, allowing for the analysis and comparison of the effects of different media on political interest while controlling for initial political interest. An important and possibly confounding variable is the participants' enrollment in a political science course during the study. Random assignment to treatment groups would ideally equate the groups on all possibly confounding variables, and especially in pretest scores; however, imperfect randomization, a matter of chance, may result in slight differences between groups. Even if differences between treatment and control groups on the pretest are not significant, accounting for them in the statistical analysis will improve the precision of the estimates of treatment effects. Using covariates can "eliminate observed differences in the treatment and control groups and reduce the variability in outcomes" (Green and Gerber 2012). Ignoring pretest scores altogether will significantly reduce the power of statistical analysis, decreasing the probability of detecting a significant difference

between treatment and control groups when, in fact, one exists (Bonate 2000). This method allows for the comparison of treatment effects within a participant in the study, as opposed to among all participants. In this way, each subject acts as his/her own control, facilitating detection of significant effects (Bonate 2000).

The analysis of variance approach and the analysis of covariance approaches are illustrated in the following models.

Analysis of variance using difference scores:

$y_1-y_0=b_0+b_1*\text{Treatment} + e$

Analysis of covariance using pretest scores as covariate:

$y_1=b_o+b_1*\text{Treatment}+b_2*y_0+e$

These two tests will differ in the size of the F ratio; however, the one-factor ANOVA F-test on the difference scores is algebraically equivalent to the interaction F-test in the covariate analysis (Huitema 2011). The ANOVA on the difference scores will be the most efficient when the slope of the regression of posttest scores on pretest scores is equal to 1.0 (Huitema 2011). When the regression slope equals 1, ANCOVA and ANOVA on the difference scores produce the same F ratio; however, the difference scores will be slightly more powerful because ANCOVA loses degrees of freedom (Dimitrov and Rumrell 2003). In my dataset, the coefficient of the regression of posttest on pretest scores is .89 in the overall sample; .88 in the no-exposure control group; .84 in *The Daily Show* group; .78 in the *NBC Nightly News* group; and .69 in the *Entertainment* Tonight group. These coefficients indicate that the ANOVA of the difference scores will be less powerful than the ANCOVA, using the pre-interest index as a covariate. I expect that this will yield a smaller standard error than will the ANOVA on the differences.

Thus, ANCOVA will best account for some "unexplained" variance, allowing for a more precise assessment of the effects of the experimental treatment. However, I will demonstrate that regardless of which statistical test is employed, *The Daily Show* treatment has the largest positive impact on changes in political interest and is consistently significant in comparison to the no-exposure control group.

Essentially, the choice between ANOVA on the difference scores and ANCOVA on the posttest scores mirrors the distinction between the difference-in-means estimator and the differences-in-differences estimator. As Green and Gerber (2012) state, both generate unbiased estimates of the average treatment effect; however, the sum of the slope coefficients would have to exceed 1 in order for the difference scores to produce more accurate estimates of the average treatment effect (98). Covariate adjustment, or adding covariates to the right-hand-side of the equation, can reduce standard errors when the covariate(s) predict the outcome. Green and Gerber (2012) suggest this as long as the N for covariates is >20. When covariates are included in statistical analysis, they advise presenting results with and without them, so as to allow the reader to determine whether their inclusion strengthens or weakens the model.

Difference-in-differences

As stated above, the difference-in-differences estimator accounts for the variation in pre-political interest found in the treatment and control groups by employing the difference in pre and posttest scores as the dependent variable. Calculating the average treatment effects this way will provide greater insight into the "two potential states of the world, one in which the individual receives the treatment, and another in which the individual does not" (Druckman 2006, 33). This average treatment effect is calculated from the difference between the sample means of each group,

then subtracting the average outcome in the control group from the average outcome in the treatment group.

In this analysis of data collected from the experiment, the average treatment effect is defined as:

$T_i = Y_{i1} - Y_{i0}$

where Y_0 is the outcome if *i* is not exposed to the treatment or is exposed to a different treatment and Y_1 is the outcome if *i* is exposed to the treatment. The outcome is calculated not based solely on the post-interest index scores, but on the post-interest index scores, minus the pre-interest index scores. In my analysis, this is termed the political interest difference index and it allows us to observe the change in political interest between groups.

Because the political interest difference index already accounts for the pre-interest scores, there is no need to control for them. As such, I will employ an independent samples T-test to demonstrate the differences in difference of means (pre and post) between the treatment and control groups. This test is ideally suited for the difference-in-differences estimator because it does not allow for control of covariates, as does the ANCOVA analysis below. Nonetheless, it provides a good summary of the relationship between TV program and change in political interest.

Table 5.3: Independent Samples Difference In Differences (Posttest-Pretest)

	No-exposure Control N=29	*Entertainment Tonight* N=57	*NBC Nightly News* N=60	*The Daily Show* N=55
No-exposure Control	Row-Column T-stat (p value)			
Entertainment Tonight	2.41 t=-2.56 (p=.012) (equal variance not assumed)			
NBC Nightly News	2.51 t=-2.55 (p=.012)	.10 t=.107 (.915)		
The Daily Show	3.40 t=-3.34 (p=.001)	.95 t=.98 (p=.329)	.85 t=.94 (p=.347)	

In these results, *The Daily Show* outshines *NBC Nightly News* and *Entertainment Tonight* as a predictor of change in political interest throughout the course of the study. While change in *The Daily Show* group was not significant compared to the other treatment groups, it is very strong (significant at the .01 level) compared to the no-exposure control group. The effects of the *NBC Nightly News* and *Entertainment Tonight* treatments also produce results significant at the .05 level.

Next, I wanted to be sure that the significant relationship was not driven by the presence of students taking political science courses in the treatment groups, but not the control group. While participants in the treatment groups were randomly assigned to a TV program, the sample itself was drawn of convenience, as political science, statistics and psychology professors were willing to incorporate the treatments as an assignment in their course, while English and communication faculty were willing to allow their students to participate only as the no-exposure control group. In a bivariate analysis, none of the course dummy variables yielded a significant relationship between course and pre or posttest political interest scores. Nonetheless, the political science course dummy is close to significance (p=.133) on the post-interest index; further, it is the only course we could theoretically believe to have an impact on political interest (see below). However, because I want to be certain that any observable difference in the treatment and control groups is not attributable to the presence of political science students in the treatment groups, I also conducted the analysis with these participants excluded. See (Appendix 5.A) for a table illustrating the bivariate correlations between each course and the pre/post political interest index.)

When eliminating political science students from the t-test analysis, the relationship holds for the *NBC Nightly News* and *The Daily Show* groups, but drops below statistical significance (at

the .05 level) for the *Entertainment Tonight* group. Eliminating political science students results in a significant difference between the no-exposure control group and *TDS* treatment group, with a p value at .015. The *NBC Nightly News* group compared to the no-exposure control also remains significant at the .05 level, but slightly less so, with a p value of .028 (equal variances not assumed).

Table 5.4: Difference in Differences (Posttest-Pretest) T-Test Results (excluding political science students)

	Control N=29	*Entertainment Tonight* N=39	*NBC Nightly News* N=39	*The Daily Show* N=32
Control	Row-Column t-stat (p value)			
Entertainment Tonight	2.21 t=-2.00 (p=.053) (equal variances not assumed)			
NBC Nightly News	2.29 t=-2.25 (p=.028) (equal variances not assumed)	.08 t=.062 (p=.950)		
The Daily Show	2.57 t=-2.51 (p=.015)	.36 t=.287 (p=.775)	.28 t=.249 (p=.804)	

The results excluding political science students in the analysis of differences in pre and post scores are consistent with those of the entire sample. Although the significance levels compared with the control group increase slightly, they remain nonetheless significant at the .05 level when comparing *The Daily Show* group with the no-exposure control group.

Having demonstrated a relationship between *The Daily Show* and a change in political interest compared to the no-exposure control group through an independent samples T-test, I will now determine whether the relationship holds in ANOVA and ANCOVA.

First, I conducted tests to determine that the requisite assumptions for ANOVA/ANCOVA are met. These include assumptions of randomization, linear relationship between pretest and posttest and homogeneity of regression slopes. With regard to randomization, the pre-interest

index means for each of the exposure groups indicates that those in *The Daily Show* group had a pre-interest mean of 18.95, with a median of 16. While the mean of this group is slightly higher than that of the three other groups (no exposure, *NBC* and Entertainment Tonight), the median is higher than Entertainment Tonight but lower than no exposure and *NBC*. This demonstrates that despite random assignment of participants to exposure groups, *The Daily Show* group had a slight positive skew, but not significantly so. The differences in the groups at the start may be large enough, however, that controlling for pre-interest scores will reduce standard errors. (For this and more descriptive statistics on each treatment and control group, as well as histograms of the pre-interest distribution for each group, see Appendix 5.B.) An ANOVA test of the pretest scores with television program/no exposure as the fixed factor revealed no statistically significant difference in means based on treatment/control group; thus, we can assume that there was no significant bias in the way the subjects were assigned to their respective television programs. There are no statistically significant differences between the political interest of the groups at the start of the experiment. See Appendix 5.C for a table displaying these results.

The data for each group also meets the ANOVA/ANCOVA assumption for linearity of regression slopes in the relationship between pre and posttest scores. A scatterplot with a line of best fit does demonstrate that such a linear relationship does exist. As stated above, the coefficient between these variables is .89; because the regression slope does not equal 1, ANCOVA on the posttest scores, using the pre-interest index scores as a covariate, will be the most powerful statistical test. Nonetheless, with a R^2 of 0.78, a clear relationship exists between the pre and posttest political interest scores. This linear relationship holds when the data is split according to the TV program exposure and non-exposure groups. (For a scatterplot of these linear relationships, see Appendix 5.C.)

Analysis of Covariance: Difference in Means

In determining whether participants in the political comedy treatment had significantly different levels of political interest at the end of the study, ANCOVA allows for control of confounding variables to determine whether they account for any unexplained variance. In approaching this analysis, there are two variables that I suspect could confound the results and therefore should be controlled for. First, as discussed above, I created a dummy variable for students taking a political science class. If there is a significant difference in the posttest political interest index scores between the exposure and control groups, the analysis must ensure that the difference cannot be attributed to the students taking political science courses in the exposure groups.[9] The exposure groups were comprised of students in political science, statistics and psychology courses, while the non-exposure control groups included students in English and Communication courses. ANOVA of courses predicting pre and post interest index scores turned up no significant relationships. Second, as stated above, although I've already established through ANOVA that the pre-political interest scores do not significantly vary by treatment or control group, I will include the pre-political interest score as a covariate to ensure the results are valid and are not tainted by any slight abnormal distribution of the pre-interest index scores in any of my treatment or control groups.

The results of the ANCOVA with the post-interest index as the dependent variables, TV program and the political science dummy as fixed factors and the pre-interest index as a covariate are below in Table 5.5. I selected Bonferroni for the confidence interval adjustment, to set a high bar to determine significance of results. A conservative correction, Bonferonni ensures that the

[9] Although none of the courses in the study significantly predicted pre or post-political interest scores in a one-factor ANOVA, ANCOVA on posttest scores with the pre-interest index as a covariate found that taking a political science course did have a significant effect (.068). Thus, if any course would confound the results, it would be the political sciences courses. As such, my analysis includes controls for its effect.

probability of rejecting the null hypothesis is no greater than alpha. Levene's statistic is not significant, so we can assume equal variance across all groups.

Table 5.5: Analysis of Covariance: The Effects of TV Program Exposure on Posttest Political Interest Index, Controlling for Pretest Political Interest Index and Political Science Course Dummy

	Type III Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	17744.01[a]	5	3548.80	146.49	.000
Intercept	39.25	1	39.25	1.62	.205
TV Program Fixed Factor	154.78	3	51.59	2.13	.098*
Pretest Political Interest Index	17171.18	1	17171.88	708.80	.000***
Political Science Course Dummy	58.69	1	58.69	2.42	.121
Error	4723.99	195	24.226		
Total	73924.00	201			
Corrected Total	22468.00	200			

[a] R squared = .790 (Adjusted R Squared = .784)
* Denotes significance at the .10 level
***Denotes significance at the .01 level.

From Table 5.5, we can see that the fixed factor for TV program exposure is significant at the .10 level, when controlling for political interest at the start of the study. We also find that it remains significant when including the political science course dummy variable in the model; thus, we can be confident that the significance of the TV program is not being driven by interest gained in political science classes. The political science dummy itself, while being close to significant, does not meet either the .05 or .10 threshold. Not surprisingly, political interest at the start of the study is the strongest predictor of political interest four weeks later, at the end of the study. Nonetheless, TV program does seem to have a small but significant effect (at the .10 level). And from the pairwise comparisons in Table 5.6 below, it is evident that the significant effect is mostly be attributed to the post-political interest in *The Daily Show* group.

Table 5.6: Analysis of Covariance: Comparing Difference in Means for the Fixed Effects of TV Program Exposure on Posttest Political Interest Index, Controlling for Pretest Political Interest and Political Science Course Dummy

TV Program (I)	*TV Program (J)*	*Mean Difference (I-J)*	*Std. Error*	*Sig.*[b]
No Exposure (mean=14.11)	The Daily Show (mean=14.04)	-2.93	1.18	.08*
	NBC Nightly News (mean=16.16)	-2.05	1.15	.45
	Entertainment Tonight (mean=15.79)	-1.68	1.15	.88
The Daily Show (mean=17.04)	NBC Nightly News (mean=16.16)	.88	.92	1.0
	Entertainment Tonight (mean=15.79)	1.26	.93	1.0
NBC Nightly News (mean=16.16)	Entertainment Tonight (mean=15.79)	.378	.91	1.0

Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College

b. Adjusted for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni

* Denotes significance at the .10 level

While there appears to be no significant difference in *The Daily Show* and other treatment groups, the difference between *The Daily Show* and the no-exposure control group is significant at the .10 level (see Table 5.6). Of the six unique match-ups, only the difference between *The Daily Show* and no exposure is significant. *The Daily Show*, with its combination of humor and politics, did in fact pique the political interest of subjects in the study, participants of which were mostly young adults. *NBC Nightly News*, with its more straight-forward approach to news coverage following journalistic standards of integrity, did not produce a significant effect in the ANCOVA, although it was stronger than the effect of *Entertainment Tonight*, compared to the no-exposure control group.

Having established in ANCOVA that *The Daily Show* treatment has a significant effect compared to the no-exposure control group, controlling for theoretically possible confounding variables, I will now test variations of the model without those covariates. The results of this analysis are displayed in Table 5.7 below. Removing the political science class dummy variable from the model actually strengthens the impact of the TV Program variable on the post interest index. The ANCOVA with TV program as the fixed factor and pre-interest index as the covariate

results in a significance level of .026 for TV Program, with *The Daily Show* significance compared to the no-exposure control group .016, significant at the .05 level (see Table 5.8). Further, the standard error on the *TDS* variable is slightly lower when removing the political science course dummy; thus, the findings are stronger without it. None of the other pairwise comparisons emerge as significant in this analysis.

Table 5.7: Analysis of Covariance: The Effects of TV Program Exposure on Posttest Political Interest Index, Controlling for Pretest Political Interest

	Type III Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	17685.32[a]	4	4421.33	181.19	.00
Intercept	19.01	1	19.01	.78	.379
TV Program Fixed Factor	230.29	3	76.76	3.15	.026**
Pretest Political Interest	17210.28	1	17210.28	705.30	.00***
Error	4782.68	196	24.40		
Total	73924.00	201			
Corrected Total	22468.00	200			

Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College

**Denotes significance at the .05 level.
*** Denotes significance at the .01 level.

Table 5.8: Analysis of Covariance: Comparing Difference in Means for the Fixed Effects of TV Program Exposure on Posttest Political Interest Index, Controlling for Pretest Political Interest

TV Program (I)	***TV Program (J)***	***Mean Difference (I-J)***	***Std. Error***	***Sig.***[b]
No Exposure (mean=13.73)	The Daily Show (mean=17.18) NBC Nightly News (mean=16.21) Entertainment Tonight (mean=15.79)	-3.44 -2.48 -2.06	1.13 1.12 1.13	.02** .17 .41
The Daily Show (mean=17.18)	NBC Nightly News (mean=16.21) Entertainment Tonight (mean=15.79)	.96 1.38	.924 .937	1.0 .85
NBC Nightly News (mean=16.21)	Entertainment Tonight (mean=15.79)	.42	.914	1

Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College

b. Adjusted for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni
**Denotes significance at the .05 level.

On the other hand, as Table 5.9 (below) reveals, removing the pre-political interest scores from the model lessens the significance of the TV Program variable. Further, none of the pairwise

comparisons are significant in this analysis (see Table 5.10). The standard error levels reveal that where participants started in political interest is important to the overall performance of the model. Excluding the pre-political interest scores weakens the model, raising the standard error. The pre-political interest scores are clearly accounting for some of the variance in the post-political interest measure. Taking these scores into consideration is important for understanding the variance in political interest at the end of the four weeklong study.

In explaining why significance levels fall when removing the pre-political interest covariate, it will be helpful to refer to the discussion above regarding the distribution of political interest in each group at the start of the study. Although the relationship was not statistically significant, it appears that, due to chance, participants assigned to *The Daily Show* group had slightly higher political interest at the start of the study than did the other treatment and control groups (see Appendix 5.B for a more detailed description of the distribution of pre-political interest data by treatment and control group). *The Daily Show* group demonstrates a slight positive skew, although the skewness statistic is not significant. Thus, taking into account the political interest participants bring into the study improves the precision of the estimated treatment effects. Ultimately, the best measure of each show's effects is the change from political interest at the start of the study to that measured at the end of the study. Looking only at the post interest scores ignores an important confounding variable that must be taken into account, as it is the best predictor for variance in post-interest. That variable is, of course, pre-political interest.

Table 5.9: Analysis of Variance: The Effects of TV Program Exposure on Posttest Political Interest Index (no covariates)					
	Type III Sum of Squares	***Degrees of Freedom***	***Mean Square***	***F***	***Sig.***
Corrected Model	418.62	3	139.54	1.26	.29
Intercept	47481.59	1	47481.59	428.63	.00
TV Program Fixed Factor	418.62	3	139.54	1.26	.29
Error	23263.03	210	110.78		
Total	77923.00	214			
Corrected Total	23681.65	213			
Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College					

Table 5.10: Analysis of Variance: Comparing Difference in Means for the Fixed Effects of TV Program Exposure on Posttest Political Interest Index (no covariates)				
TV Program (I)	***TV Program (J)***	***Mean Difference (I-J)***	***Std. Error***	***Sig.***[b]
No Exposure (mean=14.24)	The Daily Show (mean=18.07) NBC Nightly News (mean=15.87) Entertainment Tonight (mean=14.78)	-3.83 -1.63 -0.54	2.41 2.33 2.38	0.68 1.00 1.00
The Daily Show (mean=18.07)	NBC Nightly News (mean=15.87) Entertainment Tonight (mean=14.78)	2.20 3.29	1.89 1.96	1.00 0.57
NBC Nightly News (mean=15.87)	Entertainment Tonight (mean=14.78)	1.1	1.86	1.00
Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College				

b. Adjusted for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni

Chapter 3 theorized that exposure to political comedy would have greater effects on the political interest of young adults in their teens and 20s, compared to those over age 30. The Bayesian learning model leads us to believe that first exposures to politics will have greater potential to impact political evaluations, including the attitude of political interest. When conducting the ANCOVA (controlling for pre-political interest scores) on those participants age 29 and under, I find a greater effect of the TV program fixed factor on political interest than for those participants age 30 and over. Running the analysis on those participants under age 30, the post political interest mean of *The Daily Show* participants is 3.13 greater than the participants in the no-exposure group. This is the greatest difference in the pairwise comparisons and is significant

at the .10 level (2-tailed test), with a p-value of .069. No other comparisons are significant at the .10 level, 2-tail test. In contrast, when selecting those participants over age 30, the TV Program fixed factor is insignificant in the overall model (p=.39), and none of the paired comparisons are statistically significant. This demonstrates that the effect of political comedy on political interest was greater for the young adults in the study than for those over age 30.

ANOVA on the Difference Scores

The ANCOVA results thus far look at the difference in the post-interest index scores of participants in each treatment and control group, controlling for the pre-political index scores. We've seen that taking into account the political interest participants brought into the study strengthens the estimates.

Employing the difference-in-differences approach in ANOVA likewise yields strong results when comparing *The Daily Show* to the no-exposure control group. As stated above, this approach places the pre-interest index scores on the left-hand-side of the equation, with the average treatment effect being the posttest scores minus the pretest scores. The dependent variable is then controlled among those receiving the treatment and those in the control group. The TV program fixed factor yields a significance of .025 in this overall ANOVA model. As in the previous statistical analyses, *The Daily Show* group emerges as the strongest predictor of change in pre and posttest political interest scores. Without controlling for any covariates, the pairwise comparison between *The Daily Show* and no-exposure control group relationship has a significance level of .05. The results of this analysis are displayed in Table 5.11.

Table 5.11: Analysis of Variance: Comparing Difference in Differences for the Fixed Effects of TV Program Exposure on 0 to 40 Political Interest Index (Difference in Pretest Minus Posttest)				
TV Program (I)	***TV Program (J)***	***Mean Difference (I-J)***	***Std. Error***	***Sig.[b]***
No Exposure (mean= -3.4)	The Daily Show (mean= -0.06) NBC Nightly News (mean= -0.90) Entertainment Tonight (mean= -1.0)	-3.36 -2.51 -2.41	1.10 1.10 1.10	.02** .13 .17
The Daily Show (mean= -0.06)	NBC Nightly News (mean= -0.90) Entertainment Tonight (mean= -1.0)	.85 .95	.89 .90	1.0 1.0
NBC Nightly News (mean= -0.90)	Entertainment Tonight (mean= -1.0)	.10	.89	1.0
Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College				

b. Adjusted for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni

** Denotes significance at the .05 level

As demonstrated in Table 5.12, when the political science dummy is added to the model as a covariate, TV program variable has a slightly weaker impact (significance of .091) on the change in political interest from the pre to the posttest four weeks later. However, because the standard errors also increase, the political science dummy variable does not improve the performance of the ANOVA model. The significance level comparing *TDS* to the no-exposure control group becomes .07 when including the political science dummy in the variable (see Table 5.13). The political science dummy itself remains insignificant even at the .10 level.

Table 5.12: Analysis of Variance: The Effects of TV Program Exposure on Posttest the Difference in Pretest and Posttest Political Interest 0 to 40 Index, Controlling for Political Science Course Dummy					
	Type III Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	263.17	4	65.79	2.88	.024
Intercept	365.23	1	365.23	16.01	.00
TV Program Fixed Factor	149.86	3	49.95	2.19	.09**
Political Science Course Dummy	45.16	1	45.16	1.98	.16
Error	4472.11	196	22.82		
Total	4961.00	201			
Corrected Total	4735.28	200			
Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College					

R^2 = .056 (Adjusted R^2 = .036)

**Denotes significance at the .05 level.

Table 5.13: Analysis of Variance: Comparing Difference in Differences for the Fixed Effects of TV Program Exposure on 0 to 40 Political Interest Index (Difference in Pretest Minus Posttest), Controlling for Political Science Course Dummy				
TV Program (I)	***TV Program (J)***	***Mean Difference (I-J)***	***Std. Error***	***Sig.[b]***
No Exposure (mean= -3.10)	The Daily Show (mean= -0.17) NBC Nightly News (mean= -0.95) Entertainment Tonight (mean= -1.01)	-2.91 -2.14 -2.08	1.14 1.11 1.12	.07* .34 .39
The Daily Show (mean= -0.17)	NBC Nightly News (mean= -0.95) Entertainment Tonight (mean= -1.01)	0.77 0.84	0.89 0.90	1.00 1.00
NBC Nightly News (mean= -0.95)	Entertainment Tonight (mean= -1.01)	0.06	0.88	1.00
Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College				

b. Adjusted for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni

* Denotes significance at the .10 level

ANOVA on Four Dimensions of Political Interest Index

Decomposing the 40-point political interest index into its four 10-point scales reveals which of these measures experiences the greatest change, as a result of the treatment effects. Two of the scales measure curiosity about politics: the questions regarding enjoyment of learning about politics and assessment of one's personal interest in politics. Likewise, two of the scales measure how that curiosity might manifest into political engagement: the questions regarding enjoyment of discussing politics and likelihood of being politically involved.

To measure the change in each of these scales throughout the four weeks of the study, I calculated the difference in the posttest and pretest measures of each. Then, I ran ANOVA with each of the unique difference scores (post-minus-pre) as the DV and TV Program as the fixed factor. The results are displayed in Tables 5.14, 5.15, 5.16 and 5.17 below.

Table 5.14: Analysis of Variance: Comparing Difference in Differences for the Fixed Effects of TV Program Exposure on 0 to 10 Political Interest Scale (Difference in Posttest Minus Pretest)

TV Program (I)	*TV Program (J)*	*Mean Difference (I-J)*	*Std. Error*	*Sig.*[b]
No Exposure (mean= -0.10)	The Daily Show (mean= 0.09)	-0.19	0.34	1.0
	NBC Nightly News (mean= -0.37)	-0.27	0.34	1.0
	Entertainment Tonight (mean= -0.37)	-0.27	0.34	1.0
The Daily Show (mean= 0.09)	NBC Nightly News (mean= -0.37))	0.46	0.27	.57
	Entertainment Tonight (mean= -0.37)	0.46	0.28	.62
NBC Nightly News (mean= -0.37)	Entertainment Tonight (mean= -0.37)	-0.00	0.27	1.0

Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College

Table 5.15: Analysis of Variance: Comparing Difference in Differences for the Fixed Effects of TV Program Exposure on 0 to 10 Enjoyment of Political Learning Scale (Difference in Posttest Minus Pretest)

TV Program (I)	*TV Program (J)*	*Mean Difference (I-J)*	*Std. Error*	*Sig.*[b]
No Exposure (mean= -1.45)	The Daily Show (mean= 0.33)	-1.78	0.39	.00***
	NBC Nightly News (mean= -0.06)	-1.39	0.38	.00***
	Entertainment Tonight (mean= 0.00)	-1.45	0.39	.00***
The Daily Show (mean= 0.33)	NBC Nightly News (mean= -0.06)	0.38	0.30	1.00
	Entertainment Tonight (mean= 0.00)	0.33	0.32	1.00
NBC Nightly News (mean= -0.06)	Entertainment Tonight (mean= 0.00)	-0.06	0.30	1.00

Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College

b. Adjusted for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni

*** Denotes difference that is significant at the .01 level.

Table 5.16: Analysis of Variance: Comparing Difference in Differences for the Fixed Effects of TV Program Exposure on 0 to 10 Enjoyment Discussing Politics Scale (Difference in Posttest Minus Pretest)

TV Program (I)	*TV Program (J)*	*Mean Difference (I-J)*	*Std. Error*	*Sig.*[b]
No Exposure (mean= -1.14)	The Daily Show (mean= -0.14)	-1.00	0.39	.06*
	NBC Nightly News (mean= -0.06)	-1.08	0.37	.03**
	Entertainment Tonight (mean= -0.31)	-0.83	0.38	.19
The Daily Show (mean= -0.14)	NBC Nightly News (mean= -0.06)	-0.83	0.30	1.0
	Entertainment Tonight (mean= -0.31)	0.17	0.31	1.0
NBC Nightly News (mean= -0.06)	Entertainment Tonight (mean= -0.31)	0.26	0.30	1.0

Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College

b. Adjusted for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni

* Denotes difference that is significant at the .10 level.

** Denotes difference that is significant at the .05 level.

Table 5.17: Analysis of Variance: Comparing Difference in Differences for the Fixed Effects of TV Program Exposure on 0 to 10 Likelihood of Being Involved in Politics Scale (Difference in Posttest Minus Pretest)

TV Program (I)	***TV Program (J)***	***Mean Difference (I-J)***	***Std. Error***	***Sig.***[b]
No Exposure (mean= -0.72)	The Daily Show (mean= -0.47)	-0.26	0.47	1.0
	NBC Nightly News (mean= -0.43)	-0.29	0.45	1.0
	Entertainment Tonight (mean= -0.39)	-0.33	0.46	1.0
The Daily Show (mean= -0.47)	NBC Nightly News (mean= -0.43)	-0.03	0.36	1.0
	Entertainment Tonight (mean= -0.39)	-0.07	0.38	1.0
NBC Nightly News (mean= -0.43)	Entertainment Tonight (mean= -0.39)	-0.04	0.36	1.0

Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College

b. Adjusted for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni

As demonstrated in Tables 5.14 through 5.17, two of the four measures in the 40-point political interest index stand out as being most influential on the differences observed in the treatment and control group. The 0 to 10 scale measuring enjoyment of discussing politics and learning about politics emerge with statistically significant differences between the treatment groups and the no-exposure control group, while the other two items do not (see Table 5.16). While the discussing politics variable measures political engagement, the learning about politics scale measures curiosity. Interestingly, both of these measures are more specific manifestations of the broader dimensions of engagement and curiosity. The more general questions asking respondents to assess their personal interest in politics and their likelihood of being politically involved yield no differences in the treatment and no-exposure control groups.

The change in the pre and posttest scores on the enjoyment of learning about politics scale revealed a statistically significant difference between every exposure group and the no-exposure control group (see Table 5.15). This is unexpected, considering the *Entertainment Tonight* group

saw no exposure to politics in its programming during the four weeks of the study. This group, in addition to *TDS* and *NBC News*, saw a statistically significant positive change in their enjoyment of learning about politics. I speculate that this growth was seen across all television programs because simply being exposed to the outside world may pique one's curiosity about what's going on in current events, political or otherwise. Meanwhile, the *Entertainment Tonight* group did not see a statistically significant change in pre and post scores on the enjoyment of discussing politics measure; however, *The Daily Show* and *NBC Nightly News* did (see Table 5.16). In fact, the difference between the treatment and no-exposure control group was actually greater for *NBC Nightly News* (significant at .05 level) than for *The Daily Show* (significant at the .10 level) on the measure of enjoyment of discussing politics. As we will see below, participants rated NBC Nightly News as more "relevant" than *The Daily Show*, but TDS was more "entertaining." And, rating a show as relevant resulted in the greatest change in enjoyment of discussing politics, from the pre to posttest. Thus, by exposing participants to political current events they otherwise would not see, I can speculate that these programs had the effect of making viewers more comfortable with political topics, leading to enjoyment of engaging in political discussions throughout the week.

Why the 40-point scale is preferable to traditional measures

Although my 40-point political interest index has a large, positive correlation with these traditional measures of political interest, in my experiment, it is not surprising – given the greater sensitivity of my measure – that exposure to *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* consistently demonstrates significant effects on my political interest index, but not on the traditional ANES measures. For example, as Table 5.18 demonstrates, analysis of covariance on the following question yields no significant relationship between TV program exposure and political interest on the posttest:

"Some people seem to follow/think about what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there's an election going on or not. Others aren't that interested. Would you say that you follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?"

Table 5.18: Analysis of Covariance: The Effects of TV Program Exposure on Following Government and Public Affairs (ANES Measure), Controlling for Pretest Measure

	Type III Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	70.99	4	17.75	28.53	.00
Intercept	28.79	1	28.79	46.27	.00
TV Program Fixed Factor	1.72	3	.57	.92	.43
Pretest Measure of Follow Government	67.32	1	67.32	108.21	.00
Error	132.50	213	.62		
Total	1332.00	218			
Corrected Total	203.49	217			

Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College

R^2 = .35 (Adjusted R^2 = .34)

In addition, as Table 5.19 shows, none of the comparisons pairing exposure and non-exposure groups are significant in the analysis of covariance on this more traditional measure.

Table 5.19: Analysis of Covariance: Comparing Difference in Means for the Fixed Effects of TV Program Exposure on Following Government and Public Affairs (ANES Measure), Controlling for Pretest Measure

TV Program (I)	***TV Program (J)***	***Mean Difference (I-J)***	***Std. Error***	***Sig.***[b]
No Exposure	The Daily Show	.08	.18	1.0
	NBC Nightly News	.21	.17	1.0
	Entertainment Tonight	.25	.18	1.0
The Daily Show	NBC Nightly News	.18	.14	1.0
	Entertainment Tonight	.16	.15	1.0
NBC Nightly News	Entertainment Tonight	.04	.14	1.0

Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College

b. Adjusted for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni

As has been demonstrated throughout this chapter in statistical analyses using the difference in means, as well as difference in differences estimators, *The Daily Show* consistently

emerges as a statistically significant predictor of political interest at the end of my four-week study. Yet, this finding holds for the 40-point political interest index; not traditional measures. How is this discrepancy explained, and is one measure more valid than the other?

As discussed in the measurement section of this chapter, both the traditional measure and my 40-point index pass construct validity tests, yet the continuous scale is better suited for detecting changes in attitudes due to media effects. Since the beginning of media effects research, observed effects have been minimal (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1948). In the statistical analysis below, we will see that the analysis of covariance of post-political interest scores found that the statistically significant difference (p=.016) in means between *The Daily Show* and the no-exposure control group was -3.444. With just four options on the traditional "Follow Government" measure of political interest, it is likely that the "minimal effects" from media exposure would not register as a change on the pre and posttest. After all, a change of one point up the response scale on the traditional measure (which has four response options) would be equivalent to a 10-point jump in my 40-point scale. Thus, the strength of the 40-point scale lies in its ability to detect smaller changes in attitudes that might realistically be found in a four-weeklong study. If a longer-term longitudinal study were feasible, such as over the course of a year or two of exposures, greater changes might be detected by the traditional scales. But the 40-point scale is better suited for the kind of short-term study conducted for the purposes of this dissertation.

The Value of Entertainment and Relevancy

My initial theory was that the political comedy treatment would have a greater effect on political interest in young adults than would *NBC Nightly News*, and certainly more so than *Entertainment Tonight*. The data support a strong effect for *The Daily Show*; however, it is not significant when compared to the other treatment groups, which also seemed to have a positive

effect – though mostly insignificant – on political interest. Despite the fact that on average, participants in *The Daily Show* group saw 2.8 political stories per episode, while those in the *NBC Nightly News* group saw an average of 4.2 political stories per episode, the data do not reveal a significant difference in political interest at the end of the study when comparing these treatment groups to the *Entertainment Tonight* group, which covered no political stories throughout the course of the 4-week study.[10] Yet, in the independent samples difference of means T-test, the *Entertainment Tonight* variable actually turned up a significant P value. Although this diminished when excluding political science students from the study, it is puzzling that the p value itself was not closer to 1.

The failure to produce a significant difference between these groups indicates that perhaps there was something about watching a current events program itself – regardless of content – that generated a greater propensity toward answering political interest questions favorably. This could be attributed to a sense of being "in the know" about current events, regardless of whether the knowledge gained was political or not. Perhaps an increase in any current events viewing – regardless of content – generates an interest in knowing more about what's going on in the world, an interest that translates into a greater likelihood to pique one's curiosity about politics and increase one's predisposition toward engagement. Indeed, in the pretest, more than half (53 percent) of the sample indicated that they spent less than 15 minutes per day consuming hard news; 78 percent said they spent less than a half hour. Thus, in watching a half hour news broadcast – whether it was political comedy, network news or purely developments in the entertainment world – most participants, when they were in the study, doubled the time they spend watching news that

[10] Stories were counted as "political" if they involved government leaders, political institutions, wars (historic or current), world events and events with political implications (for example, shooting deaths).

day. This greater exposure to the world around them, regardless of content, seems to have had an effect on political interest, if not a statistically significant one in the case of *ET* and *NBC*.

Nonetheless, something about *The Daily Show* caused its viewers to soar above those of other programs in the change observed in their political interest. I speculate that exposure to current events, paired with political comedy, is the unique combination driving this change. In every statistical analysis employed, the participants exposed to *The Daily Show* experienced the greatest positive change in their political interest throughout the four weeks of the study. These results allow for rejection of the null hypothesis that there is no significant difference in change in political interest from being exposed to political comedy and experiencing no change in viewing habits. Of all the exposure groups, *The Daily Show* exposure consistently remains the strongest predictor not only of political interest at the end of the study, but also of change in political interest when comparing the mean difference in the TV program groups with the mean difference in the no exposure groups.

What did participants experience in *The Daily Show* to boost their political interest that they didn't experience in the other exposure groups? While all participants in all treatment groups were exposed to current events, something extra in *The Daily Show* pushed these viewers further toward political interest, to the point where their political interest at the end of the study was significantly greater than those who saw no change in their viewing patterns. Identifying the source of that extra boost will help us understand the mechanism by which exposure to *The Daily Show* spurred a significant difference and why *NBC Nightly News* and *Entertainment Tonight* did not.

The post-exposure questionnaires that participants filled out after watching their episodes each week provide valuable insights into the mechanism by which *The Daily Show* may have had a positive effect on political interest. This questionnaire asked participants to evaluate the content

they viewed.[11] For treatment groups, participants were asked in the post-exposure questionnaire whether they found the episode entertaining and relevant (yes or no), funny (10-point scale) and enjoyable (4-point agree/disagree scale). While data from these surveys are not up to the task of demonstrating that evaluations of *The Daily Show caused* the change in political interest (after all, there could be something about participants whose political interest has increased that caused them to answer the questions differently), it can demonstrate *correlations*. As seen in Table 5.20, the bivariate correlation between *The Daily Show* and these measures was positive and significant at the .05 level for enjoyable and significant at the .01 level for entertaining and funny. In contrast, the *Entertainment Tonight* group had a significant negative correlation with the measures for relevancy (at the .01 level) and enjoyment (at the .05 level). The *NBC Nightly News* group demonstrated a positive significant correlation with the measure for relevancy (.01 level), but a significant negative correlation with the measures for entertaining (.05 level) and funny (.01 level). Table 5.20 also illustrates that the bivariate analysis found participants watching *The Daily Show* were much more likely to evaluate it as entertaining and funny and were more likely to say they enjoyed it than were those who watched *NBC* or *Entertainment Tonight*.

[11] Ideally, a similar measure of current events evaluation would be available for the control group, as it would allow us to assess the difference in *The Daily Show* group and the non-exposure control group. Because this pairwise comparison has emerged as consistently significant, it would be helpful to compare the groups along this measure. However, given that the objective of my experiment was, in part, to compare those with the additional current events exposure to those who had no change in viewing, developing this measure would have been impractical. This is especially true considering the very little time participants spent watching current events outside of the study.

Table 5.20: Correlations Between Television Program Exposure and Evaluations of Program Being Relevant, Entertaining, Enjoyable and Funny

		Average Relevant Score	Average Entertaining Score	Average Enjoyable Score	Average Funny Score
The Daily Show	Pearson Correlation	.035	.197***	.162**	.696***
	Significance (2-tailed)	.629	.006	.028	.000
Entertainment Tonight	Pearson Correlation	-.430***	-.021	-.171**	-.063
	Significance (2-tailed)	.000	.766	.020	.382
NBC Nightly News	Pearson Correlation	.378***	-.167**	.014	-.602***
	Significance (2-tailed)	.000	.020	.851	.000

***Denotes correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed test).
**Denotes correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed test).

Having demonstrated the positive correlation between *The Daily Show* and evaluations of participants being entertained, finding the program funny and enjoyable, the data can also show whether these attributes are positively correlated with changes in political interest throughout the course of the study. Comparing the average relevant, entertaining, enjoyable and funny scores to the change in political interest (measured by the political interest difference index), we find that both the entertainment (coefficient of .188) and relevant (coefficient of .194) scores have a positive relationship, significant at the .05 level (see Table 5.21). The higher participants rated their program as entertaining and/or relevant, the greater the increase in their political interest throughout the course of the study.

Table 5.21: Bivariate Correlations Between Post-Exposure Evaluations of Programs as Entertaining/Enjoyable/Funny/Relevant and Difference in Pre and Posttest 40-point Political Interest Index Scores					
		Average Entertaining Score	Average Enjoyment Score	Average Funny Score	Average Relevant Score
Difference Between Pre and Posttest on Political Interest 40-Point Index	Pearson Correlation	.188***	.057	.194*	.131***
	Significance (2-tailed)	.014	.470	.086	.011

*Denotes correlation is significant at the .10 level (2-tailed test).
**Denotes correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed test).

When decomposing the political interest difference index into its four separate measures of enjoyment of learning and discussing politics, as well as interest in politics and likelihood of being politically involved, we see that rating the show as entertaining or relevant had a significant correlation with changes in enjoyment of discussing politics and self-identified political interest. In this analysis, the post-minus-pre scores were used to account for participants' pre-study attitudes. In this bivariate analysis, we find that evaluating shows as entertaining and relevant correlates both with one's own self-assessment of political interest (on the 0 to 10 scale), as well as how that political interest manifests into political conversations. See Table 5.22 below.

Table 5.22: Bivariate Correlations Between Post-exposure Evaluations of Programs as Entertaining/Relevant and Self-Assessment of Political Interest and Enjoyment of Discussing Politics			
		Average Relevant Score	Average Entertaining Score
Difference in Pre and Posttest on Enjoyment of Discussing Politics (0 to 10 scale)	Pearson Correlation	.194***	.172**
	Significance (2-tailed)	.007	.017
Difference in Pre and Posttest on Political Interest (0 to 10 scale)	Pearson Correlation	.183**	.165**
	Significance (2-tailed)	.015	.029

** Denotes correlation is significant at the .05 level.
*** Denotes correlation is significant at the .01 level.

While *NBC* News was rated as the most relevant, *The Daily Show* was rated as the most entertaining. Not surprisingly, these are the two shows that demonstrated a positive significant impact on the change in political interest throughout the course of the study. While statistical analysis most consistently finds a positive significant relationship between *The Daily Show* and change in political interest, the *NBC Nightly News* is also significant in the independent samples T-test. While rating NBC as relevant had potential to pull participants in that exposure group toward higher political interest, the significant negative correlation between NBC and the entertainment evaluation had potential to pull down this group's political interest throughout the course of the study. Conversely, although TDS was not significantly correlated with being rated as relevant, the relationship was not negative, either. Further, the strong rating of TDS as being entertaining could be the mechanism by which the show piqued the political interest of its viewers. Again, this data demonstrates correlation, not causation. That participants did not find NBC News entertaining could have had a draining effect on their political interest.

This aggregate analysis masks some interesting variations between subgroups of the sample, however. For the lowest 30th percentile in political interest, scoring the program as entertaining had a positive significant (at the .05 level) correlation with their change in political interest, while their evaluation of the program being relevant did not. However, when isolating the top two-thirds of the sample in terms of their political interest at the beginning, we find that the change in their political interest is unrelated to evaluations of their program being entertaining, but are positively and significantly correlated to evaluations of their program being relevant. It is likely that those who were already politically interested at the start of the study were more likely to find political news relevant, as they could make connections between what they are watching and their own personal lives and interests.

Explaining the decline in political interest

In the context of this discussion, it is noteworthy that political interest overall declined throughout the course of the study. The mean pre-interest index for all participants was 17.4, while the mean post-interest index was 15.9. The mean political interest declined in the no exposure control group by -2.792; in the *NBC Nightly News* group by -.780; and in the *Entertainment Tonight* group by -.917. *The Daily Show* treatment group, however, was the only one in which the mean political interest index increased, even if only by a slight .182.

There are a few possible explanations for the decline in political interest throughout the course of the study. Something could have been artificially bumping the pre-interest index scores; experimental maturation effects could have deflated the post-interest index scores; or an environmental influence could have contributed to a decline in interest throughout the course of the study. Before hashing out each of these possibilities, it is important to note that regardless of the cause of decline, *The Daily Show* group seems to have best withstood the influences that drained political interest over these four weeks.

First, is there a possible culprit that could have artificially inflated the pre-political interest index scores? As a community college instructor for nearly 9 years, I have observed that students at the beginning of the semester are much more eager to please and enthusiastic about the course than they are in the weeks toward the end of the semester. It is plausible that at the beginning students felt good about the course they were taking and their ability to succeed in it. Because the study was part of the course, it's likely they also felt good about the study. This overall good feeling could have translated into artificially high political interest scores, as students' interest in the course influenced their self-reported interest in politics. Because the study – both the survey and the exposures – was part of the course, their feelings toward each were likely intertwined.

Toward the end of the semester, however, as students become weary from assignments, studying for exams, attending lectures, etc., they likely lost enthusiasm for the course – and maybe for the study itself. As this artificial enthusiasm falls by the wayside, the posttest sifts the real political interest, unencumbered by any goodwill toward the course and participating in the study. Thus, the posttest scores are probably a better measure of political interest. At the end of the study, no longer do participants feel the need to impress and can more freely to give their candid responses.

Environmental influence is another possible explanation for the drop in political interest indices between the pre and posttestss. This explanation speculates that perhaps the nature of political coverage during the time of the study was especially degrading, so much so that it wore on the participants' self-reported interest, their enjoyment of learning about politics, their enjoyment of discussing politics and their self-assessed likelihood of being involved in politics in the future. For this to be true, we would expect that news coverage during the four weeks of the study to be more negative than usual, and we would expect to see a decline in measures of trust and efficacy as a result. As we saw in the analysis of respondents' stated reasons for not paying attention to politics (chapter 4), some are turned off by the "messiness" of politics and the contentious nature of the subject. The political events covered by *The Daily Show* and *NBC Nightly News* are listed in the table below, with those that involve negativity, cynicism or scandal highlighted.

Table 5.23: Listing of Stories Covered in NBC Nightly News and The Daily Show, Highlighting those Categorized as "Political"

Political Stories Covered by *NBC Nightly News* from mid-May through mid-June 2014	**Political Stories Covered by *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* from mid-May through mid-June 2014**
1. Scandal at the Department of Veteran's Affairs over falsifying wait times. 2. Civil war in Syria	1. Presidential election in India 2. Re-election rates in the U.S. House 3. Candidate debate in U.S. House race in New York; incumbent talks on cell phone

3. New York Times dismisses executive editor 4. Allegations of China spying on American businesses; U.S. files criminal charges 5. Nigerian girls abducted 6. Republican primaries: establishment wins; Tea Party loses 7. Obama outrage at VA misconduct 8. Ukrainian presidential election 9. Vladimir Putin talks tough against U.S., president Obama 10. Shooting in Santa Barbara, Calif. 11. Crisis in Ukraine 12. Abortion legislation in Louisiana 13. Exclusive interview with Edward Snowden 14. Bipartisan demands for Dept. of Veterans Affairs secretary to resign 15. Obama talks about ending U.S. involvement in future wars, winding down war in Afghanistan, at West Point Graduation 16. Ralph Hall, oldest ever member of GOP in the U.S. House, falls to Tea Party challenger in primary 17. Deal with Taliban that freed American POW Bowe Bergdahl 18. Obama plan to reduce emissions from coal-powered plants 19. Edward Snowden applies for asylum in Brazil 20. King of Spain gives up throne 21. Seattle passes highest minimum wage in the nation 22. Uproar over prisoner exchange with Taliban; Congress says it wasn't informed 23. Curfew in Baltimore 24. Hometown of POW Bowe Bergdahl cancels celebration 25. President Obama and President Putin exchange war of words 26. Hillary Clinton's memoir 27. White House changes its story on Bergdahl	4. John Conyers disqualified from re-election due to invalid signatures 5. Department of Veteran's Affairs scandal over falsifying waitlists 6. Indian democracy compared to U.S. democracy; American democracy falls short 7. Absurdity of open carry laws for assault rifles 8. Absurdity of NRA stand against smart guns 9. Republican establishment wins primaries 10. Interview with Timothy Geithner 11. Scandal at VA Hospitals: treating veterans unfairly is nothing new 12. Indian election: Holding the new president accountable 13. Egyptian defense minister wins presidential election with 96 percent of vote (portrayed as scandal) 14. Shooting in Santa Barbara, Calif.; no gun legislation after Newtown shootings 15. American POW exchanged for 5 Gitmo prisoners 16. Will Herman Cain run for president in 2016? 17. Iowa Senate race campaign ad 18. Syrian presidential election 19. Republican positions in 2014 midterm elections 20. Oliver North on hostage negotiations 21. Interview with Egyptian activist Gigi Ibrahim 22. Open carry gun laws in Texas 23. Media's coverage of Bowe Bergdahl 24. Couple involved in police shooting were in standoff at Cloven Bundy's ranch 25. Politicians commenting on how they would have brought POW Bergdahl home 26. Reports on wait times at VA average 2 per year since 2005 27. Absurdity of breaking news cycle

28. Obama trip to Europe 29. Public appearance of Nancy Reagan 30. Video of Obama working out at hotel 31. D-Day anniversary with Tom Brokaw 32. Shooting of police officers in Los Vegas pizza restaurant 33. Bowe Bergdahl talks to U.S. military officials in Germany 34. Scandal at the VA: internal audit reveals long, intolerable waits 35. School shooting in Oregon; Obama expresses frustration on inaction 36. Americans killed by friendly fire in Afghanistan 37. Hillary Clinton interview 38. House Majority Leader Eric Cantor defeated 39. Iraq falling to militants 40. House hearing on prisoner exchange over Bowe Bergdahl 41. Politics of immigration 42. OJ Simpson trial 20 years later 43. Order of new Air Force One 44. Islamic State of Iraq and Syria captures big cities; Obama weighing military options 45. Bergdahl on his way back to the U.S. 46. President George H.W. Bush celebrates 90th birthday with skydive 47. Obama in excellent shape at 52 48. ISIS captures oil refinery in Iraq 49. President Obama meets with Congressional leaders to discuss crisis in Iraq; Dick Cheney criticizes Obama 50. Capture of suspected ring leader of attack on U.S. consulate in Benghazi	28. Eric Cantor's loss in VA's 7th district race 29. Campaign spending in VA's 7th district race 30. Media coverage of school shootings 31. Interview with Chuck Schumer on veteran's hospitals. 32. Iraq falling to militants 33. Intolerance should never be tolerated 34. U.S. captures Abu Khatallah terrorist suspect in Libya 35. Media coverage of interviews with Hillary Clinton 36. Louisiana outlawed cock fighting; lawmaker wants to make chicken boxing legal

In the above table, we see that about half of both *NBC Nightly News* and *The Daily Show* stories involving politics are framed negatively, involving crisis, corruption or contentious debate of some kind. During the four weeks of the study, news reports involving government corruption and incompetence highlighted the scandal in which VA Hospital personnel falsified wait times; the

controversy over the prisoner exchange involving U.S. Army Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, and the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq. With regard to the scandal at the Veteran's Affairs, coverage focused on the intentional falsification of records by VA hospital directors so they would get bonuses and the VA Secretary's Congressional testimony. *NBC News* interviewed family members of veterans who died while waiting for treatment. One particular Jon Stewart episode revealed a history of the government's mistreatment of veterans, showing that the current scandal is nothing new. In the Bergdahl controversy, coverage emphasize conflicting sentiments that the U.S. "does not negotiate with terrorists" and the White House's contention that "we don't leave anyone behind." Both *The Daily Show* and *NBC Nightly News* discussed the danger posed to American national security by releasing five Taliban prisoners. Both hashed out the controversy over Bergdahl's whereabouts in Afghanistan, whether he deserted his platoon and why the White House engaged in secret negotiations to release him. In the extensive coverage of the resurgence of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, media reports American weaponry had fallen into enemy hands were especially disturbing. Coverage centered on Iraqi soldiers, trained and equipped by the American military, abandoning their posts and weapons as the Islamic State seized territories. In each of these negative political developments, coverage highlighted Republican criticism of President Obama's handling of the controversy.

From my earlier analysis of why participants said they did not pay attention to politics, we know that when a major reason why young people become turned off is that they are convinced politics are too messy, too contentious and that their voice doesn't matter. This response by respondents is supported by research. For example, Capella and Jamieson (1997) argue that by framing politics with conflict and strategy, underlined by a negative tone, the media contribute to a "spiral of cynicism," leading people to feel alienated and discouraged about the political process

generally. Robinson (1976) was one of the first to identify a link between negative press coverage of politics and increased public cynicism, resulting in disconnection from the political process. Researchers after Capella and Jamieson (1997) have identified nuances to their original finding. For example, Valentino et al (2001) found that nonpartisans and those whose education was less than a college degree were more significantly negatively impacted by strategy-based coverage.

If the political environment during the course of the study was particularly negative, then the decline in political interest during this time frame could be attributed to these developments. However, this emphasis on the negative is no new development in the media's coverage of politics. For example, Capella and Jamieson (1996) found that about half of the coverage of the health care debate of the 1990s was negative, while about 42 percent of the presidential campaign coverage that year was negative. They contend that the media has become "more negative, more adversarial," and "more conflict-centered" (1998, 82-83); thus, we should not be surprised at the number of negative stories during the period of the study, nor should we conclude that it is atypical.

While the tone of coverage could be a likely culprit for the slight decline in political interest throughout the course of the study, the data do not support this theory. The pre and posttest questionnaires included questions measuring trust in government and whether it was responsive to the average citizen. Three questions measured levels of trust and cynicism, asking respondents whether they "agree or disagree with the statement 'public officials don't care about what people like me think;'" "agree or disagree with the statement, 'people like me don't have any say about what the government does;'" and "How much trust do you have in the government in Washington when it comes to handling the problems facing this country?" Remarkably, aggregate responses to these questions were stable in the pre and posttests. Results are in Table 5.24 and 5.25:

Table 5.24: Pretest Measures of Political Efficacy and Trust					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pretest: People have a say in government	227	1	5	2.98	1.32
Pretest: Trust in government to handle problems	226	1	5	2.43	0.88
Pretest: Officials care about people like me	226	1	6	2.69	1.23

Table 5.25: Posttest Measures of Political Efficacy and Trust					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Posttest: People have a say in government	223	1	6	3.04	1.30
Posttest: Trust in government to handle problems	222	1	5	2.36	.83
Posttest: Officials care about people like me	223	1	6	2.82	1.20

It is implausible, then, to conclude that the decline in political interest during the course of the study can be attributed to particularly negative, boring or contentious news coverage participants faced during the time period of the study. What is more plausible, in my view, is that the pretest scores were sugar-coated by enthusiasm about the start of the semester and the study itself, while the posttest scores reflect the true attitudes of respondents. Either way, what is noteworthy is that the participants watching *The Daily Show* were the only group in the study to experience a slight increase in political interest, which was significant compared to the no-exposure control group. Whatever was weighing down political interest in the posttest, relative to the pretest, did not have as a great an effect on *The Daily Show* group.

Conclusions

In every statistical analysis conducted, *The Daily Show* emerges with the strongest impact on political interest, whether the dependent variable is the post-political interest index (controlling for prior interest) or the change in political interest from the beginning to the end of the study. Because the model is stronger when including measures that account for political interest at the beginning, it appears that random assignment to treatment and control groups was not perfect; however, this variation is easily taken into account through introducing controls in regression, covariates in ANOVA and using the difference scores as the dependent variable. While the *NBC*

Nightly News exposure appears to have a positive significant effect on political interest in regression and independent samples T-test, when subjected to the more stringent Bonferroni confidence interval adjustment in ANOVA, its significance level dissipates, while *The Daily Show* remains significant at the .05 level.

Piggy-backing politics on humor, *The Daily Show* does appear to have a positive significant effect on those who tune in with the motivation for being entertained. If just four weekly exposures of *The Daily Show* demonstrates such a positive significant effect, we can project that more frequent exposures over a longer period of time would only strengthen the effect. Thus, rather than hindering democracy by dumbing down the news, *The Daily Show* has potential to capture an audience who otherwise might not tune into politics at all, and set them on a course toward becoming a politically interested and engaged citizen. Further, as audience analysis research of *The Daily Show* reveals, this effect could be greatest for young adults in the United States.

APPENDIX 5.A
Bivariate Correlations Between Course and Pre/Post Political Interest index

Table 5.A1: Bivariate Correlations Between Course and Pre/Post Political Interest Index

		Statistics	Political Science	Psychology	Communication	English
Pretest Political Interest Index Score	Pearson Correlation	.02	.02	-.03	-.01	.00
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.72	.80	.69	.86	.96
Posttest Political Interest Index Score	Pearson Correlation	-.06	.10	.00	-.05	-.04
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.38	.13	.99	.47	.601

APPENDIX 5.B
Descriptive Statistics on Pretest Political Interest for Treatment and Control Groups

Table 5.B1: Descriptive Statistics for Pretest Political Interest Index Scores for Each Treatment and Control Group

	Pretest Political Interest Index Score
No exposure	
N	34
Mean	17
Median	17.5
Skewness	.26
The Daily Show	
N	59
Mean	18.95
Median	16.00
Skewness	.06
NBC Nightly News	
N	64
Mean	17.40
Median	17.50
Skewness	.31
Entertainment Tonight	
N	58
Mean	16.05
Median	15.00
Skewness	.291

Source: Media Engagement Study, Delta College

Although the relationship is not statistically significant, it does appear that the participants assigned to *The Daily Show* group had slightly higher political interest at the start of the study than did the other treatment and control groups. With the mean to the right of the median, *The Daily Show* group has a slight positive skew, although the skewness statistic is not significant. While *The Daily Show* group's pre-interest score mean is higher than the other groups, its median is lower than all except the *Entertainment Tonight* group. *The Daily Show* group has several cases pulling

the mean in a higher direction; two cases are more than two standard deviations from the mean, while four cases are 1.7 standard deviations from the mean. The *NBC Nightly News* group also has two cases that are more than two standard deviations from the mean, but the other cases are much closer to the mean than those in *TDS*. The below histograms are a visualization of the distribution of pre-political interest scores in each of the exposure and non-exposure groups. The variation in distributions identified will necessitate a statistical analysis that takes into consideration the starting point of political interest when determining TV program effects.

Figure 5.B1: Distribution of Pretest Political Interest Index Scores for The Daily Show Group

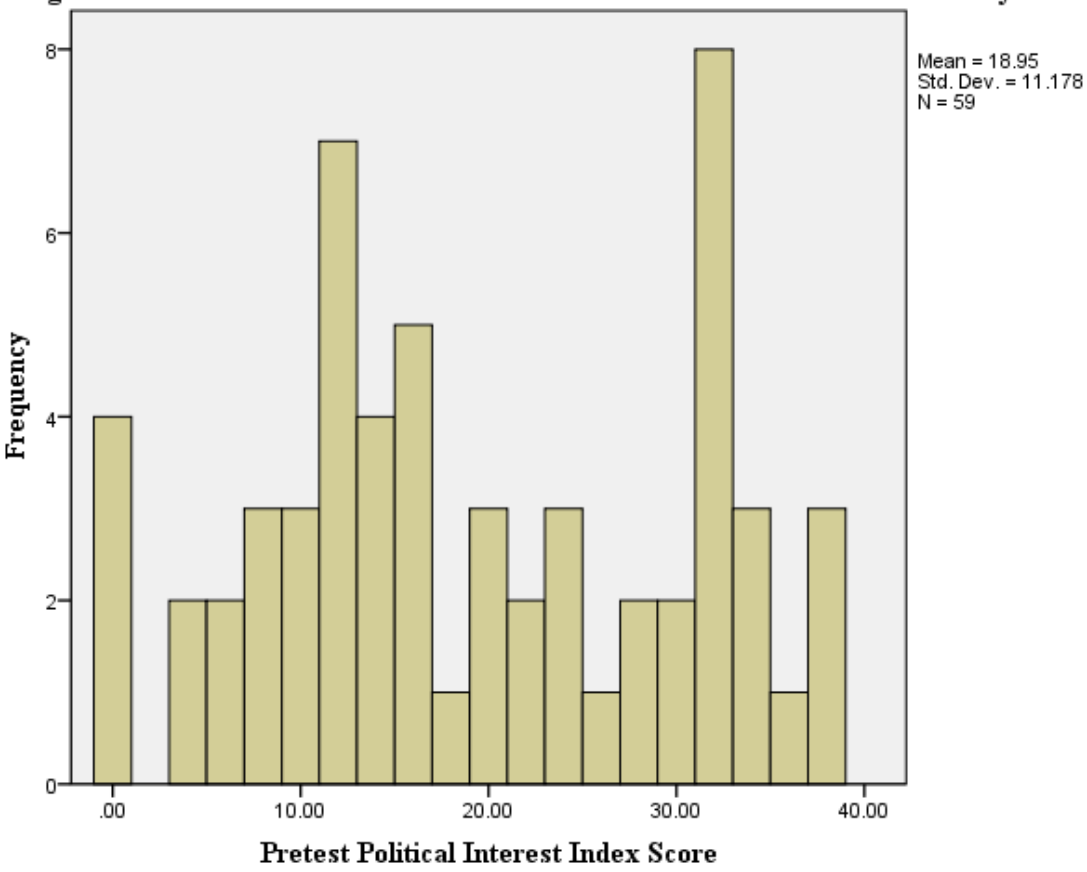


Figure 5.B2: Distribution of Pretest Political Interest Scores in the Entertainment Tonight Group

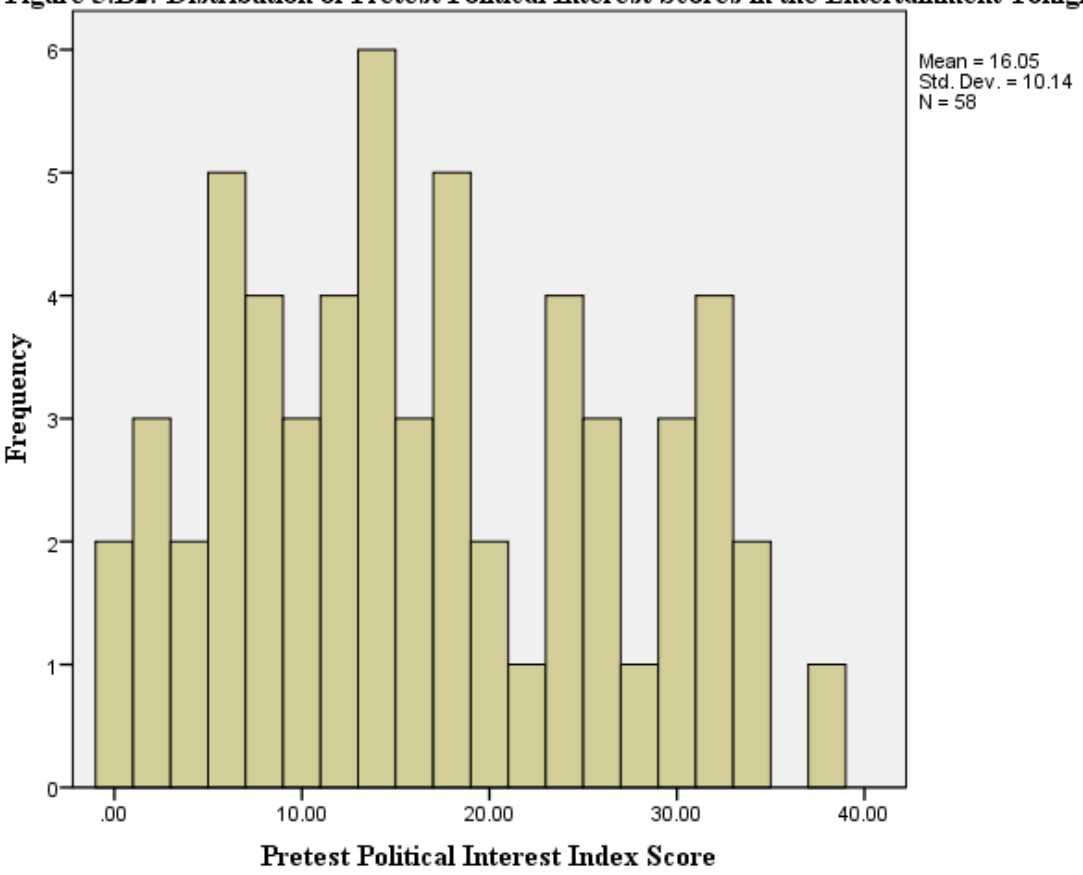


Figure 5.B3: Distribution of Pretest Political Interest Index Scores for NBC Nightly News Group

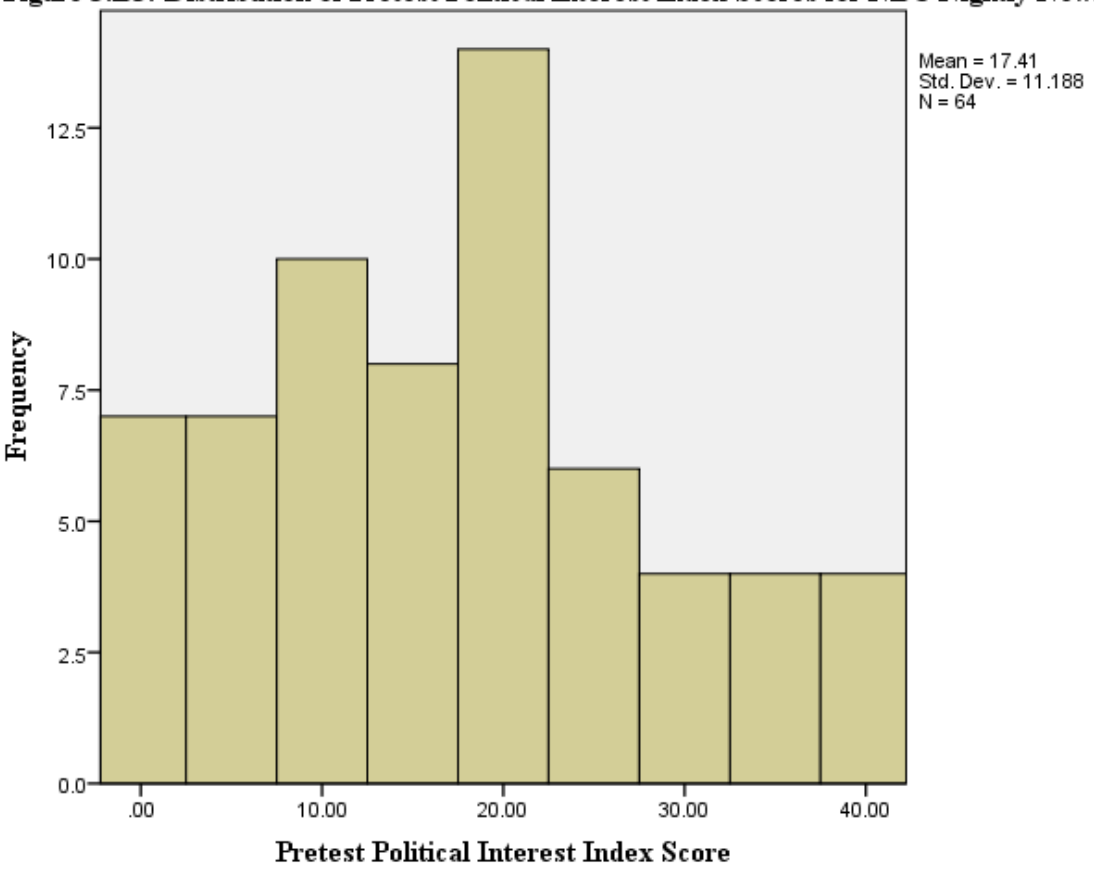
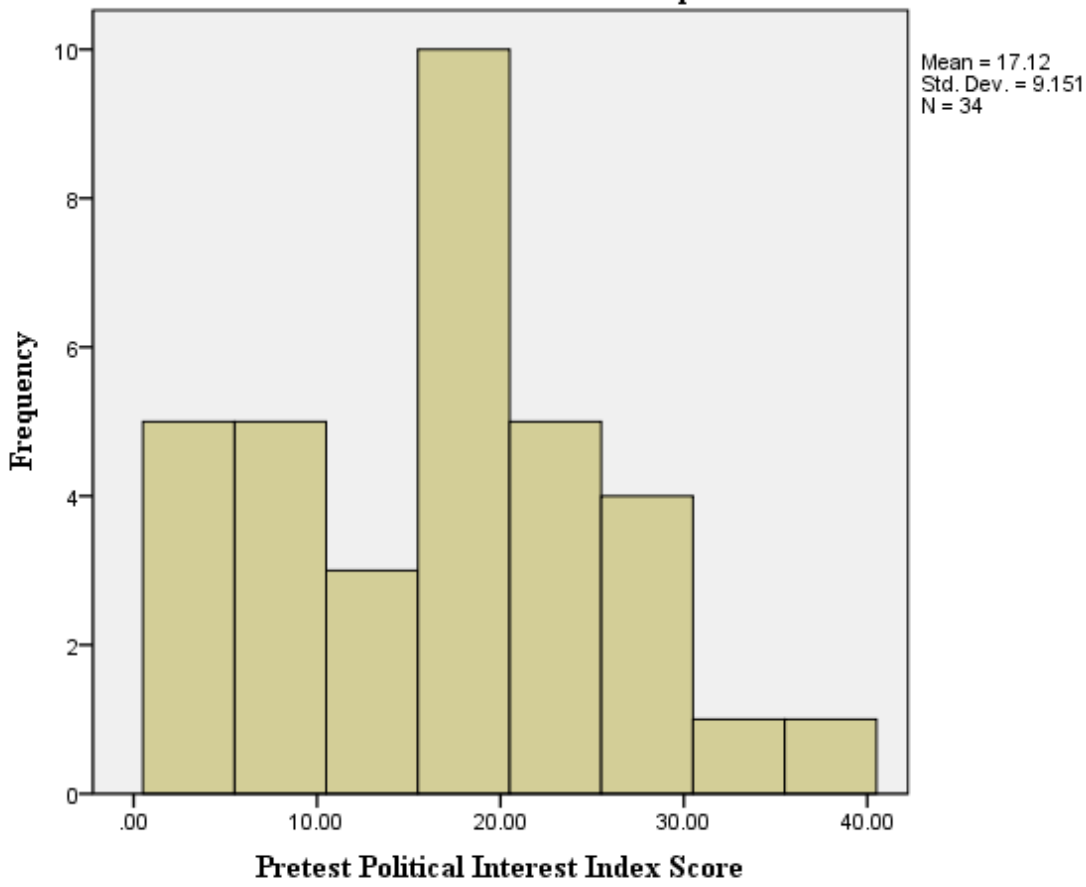


Figure 5.B4: Distribution of Pretest Political Interest Index Scores for the No-Exposure Control Group



These histograms show that random assignment of participants to treatment groups did not result in perfectly symmetrical dispersion of pre-political interest in each group. When comparing the means to determine impact of the independent variables, then, it will be necessary to take into account the place from which participants started. This will be accomplished both by controlling for pre-interest index scores when using the post-interest index as the dependent variable and also by conducting an analysis with the difference in pre and post interest scores as the dependent variable. Employing post interest scores alone will not be the most powerful method to analyze the data.

APPENDIX 5.C
Testing Assumptions of ANOVA/ANCOVA

I conducted tests to determine that the requisite assumptions for ANOVA/ANCOVA are met. These include assumptions of randomization, linear relationship between pretest and posttest and homogeneity of regression slopes. A glance at the pre-interest index means for each of the exposure groups indicates that those in *The Daily Show* group had a pre-interest mean of 18.95, with a median of 16. While the mean of this group is slightly higher than that of the three other groups (no exposure, *NBC* and Entertainment Tonight), the median is higher than Entertainment Tonight but lower than no exposure and *NBC*. This demonstrates that despite random assignment of participants to exposure groups, *The Daily Show* group had a slight positive skew, but not significantly so; however, the differences in the groups at the start may be large enough that controlling for pre-interest scores will reduce standard errors. An ANOVA test of the pretest scores with television program/no exposure as the fixed factor revealed no statistically significant difference in means based on treatment/control group; thus, we can assume that there was no significant bias in the way the subjects were assigned to their respective television programs. There are no statistically significant differences between the political interest of the groups at the start of the experiment.

Table 5.C1: Analysis of Covariance: The Effects of TV Program on Pretest Political Interest Index

	Type III Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	249.67	3	83.22	.74	.53
Intercept	61010.46	1	61010.46	541.88	.00
TV Program Fixed Factor	249.67	3	83.22	.74	.53
Error	23756.66	211	112.59		
Total	89239.00	215			
Corrected Total	24006.33	214			

Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College

ANOVA/ANCOVA also rely on the assumption of a linear relationship between pre and posttest scores. A scatterplot with a line of best fit does demonstrate that such a linear relationship does exist. As stated above, the coefficient between these variables is .89; because the regression slope does not equal 1, ANCOVA on the posttest scores, using the pre-interest index scores as a covariate, will be the most powerful statistical test. Nonetheless, with a R^2 of 0.78, a clear relationship exists between the pre and posttest political interest scores. This linear relationship holds when the data is split according to the TV program exposure and non-exposure groups.

Figure 5.C1: Scatterplot of Pretest Political Interest Index and Posttest Political Interest Index for Entire Sample

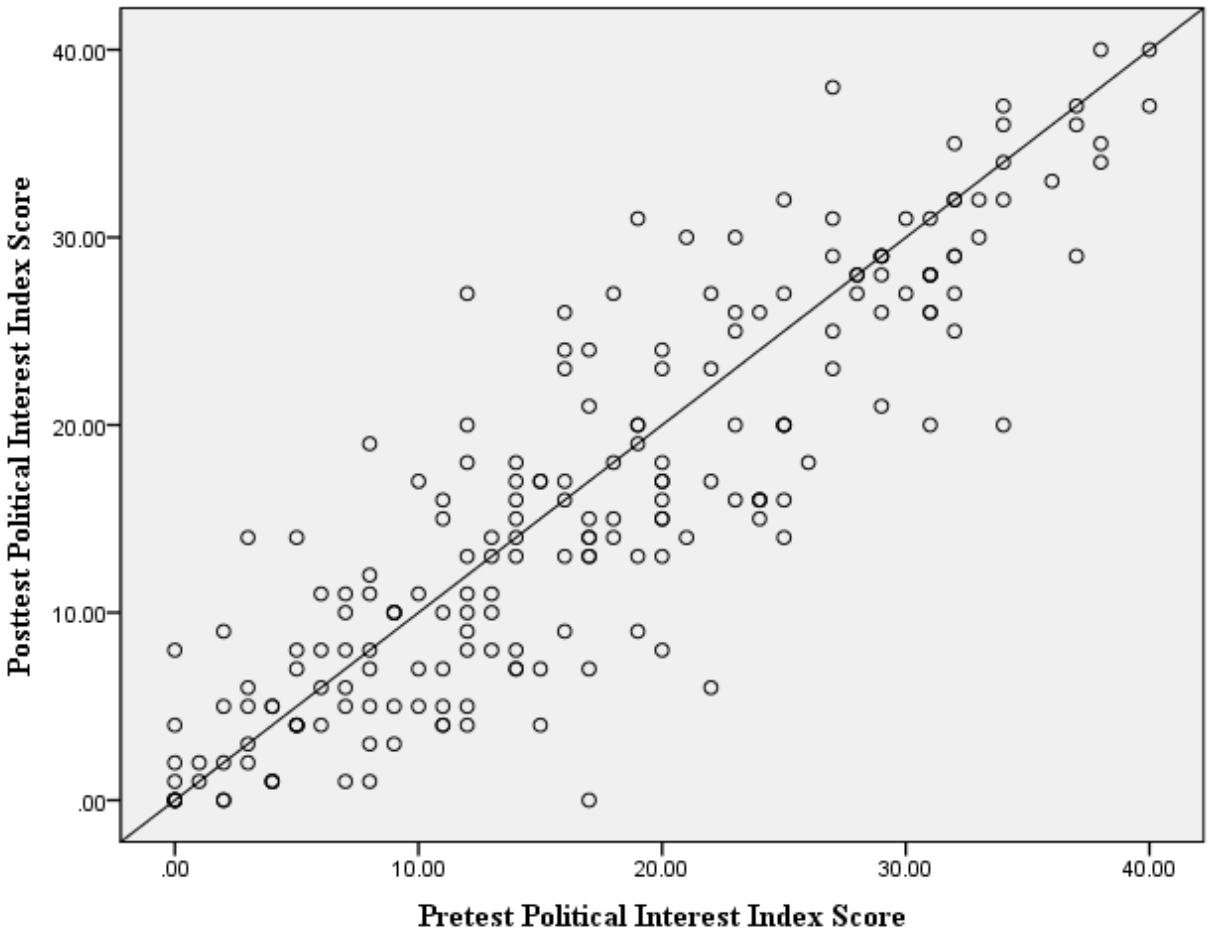


Figure 5.C2: Scatterplot of Pretest Political Interest Index and Posttest Political Interest Index for No-Exposure Control Group

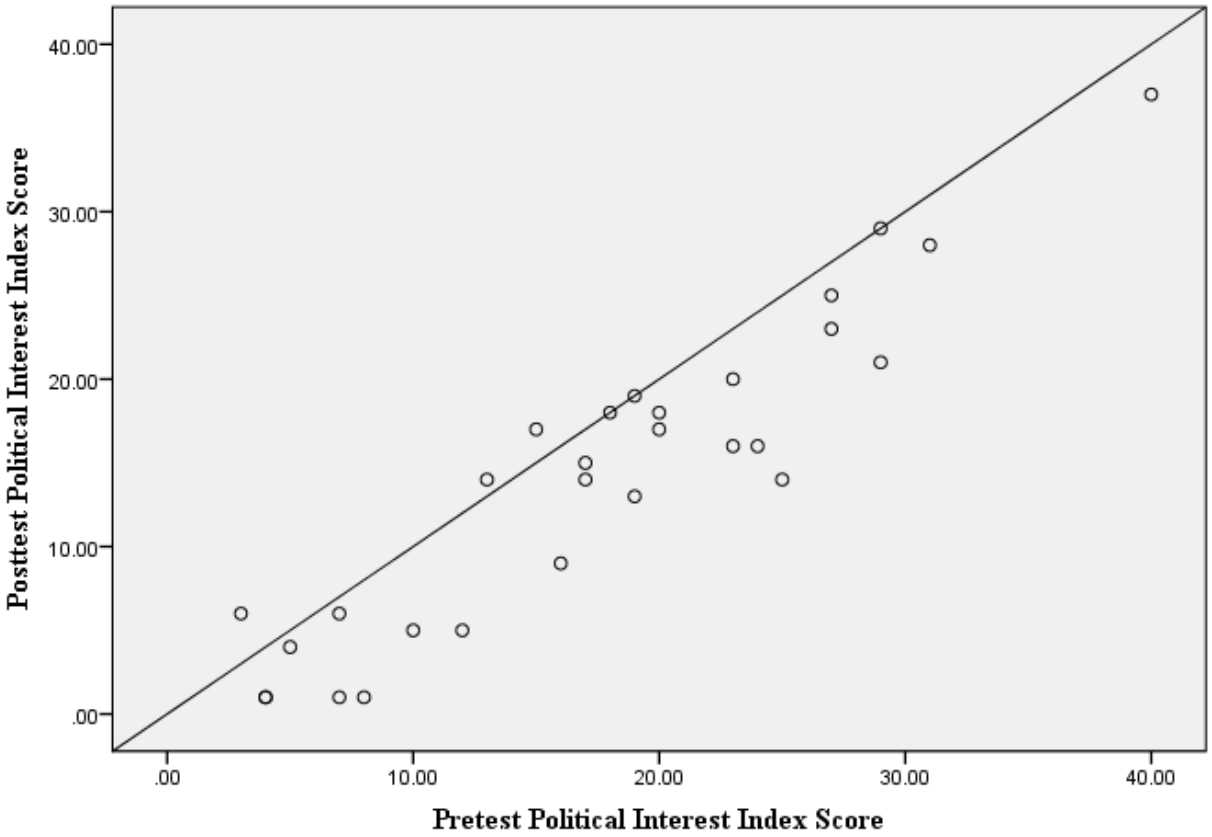


Figure 5.C3: Scatterplot of Pretest Political Interest Index and Posttest Political Interest Index for The Daily Show Group

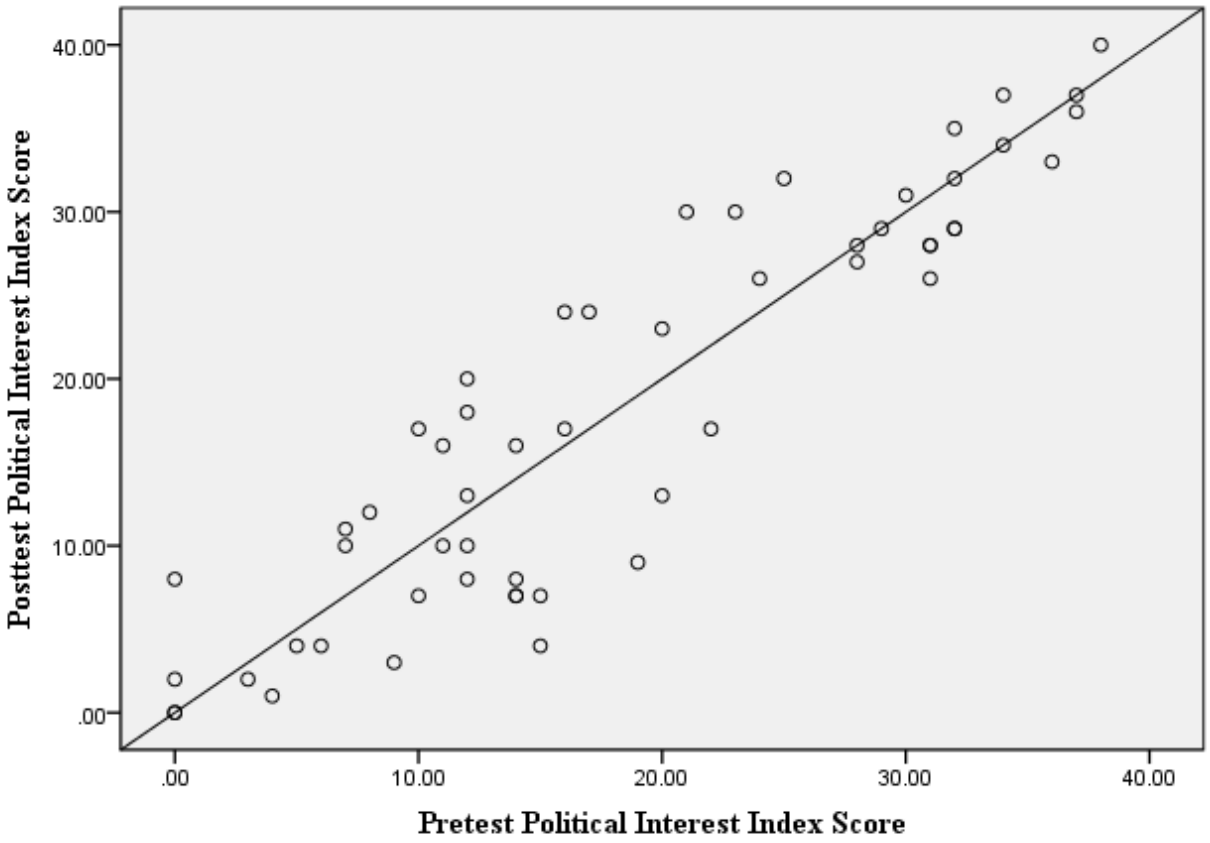


Figure 5.C4: Scatterplot of Pretest Political Interest Index and Posttest Political Interest Index for NBC Nightly News Group

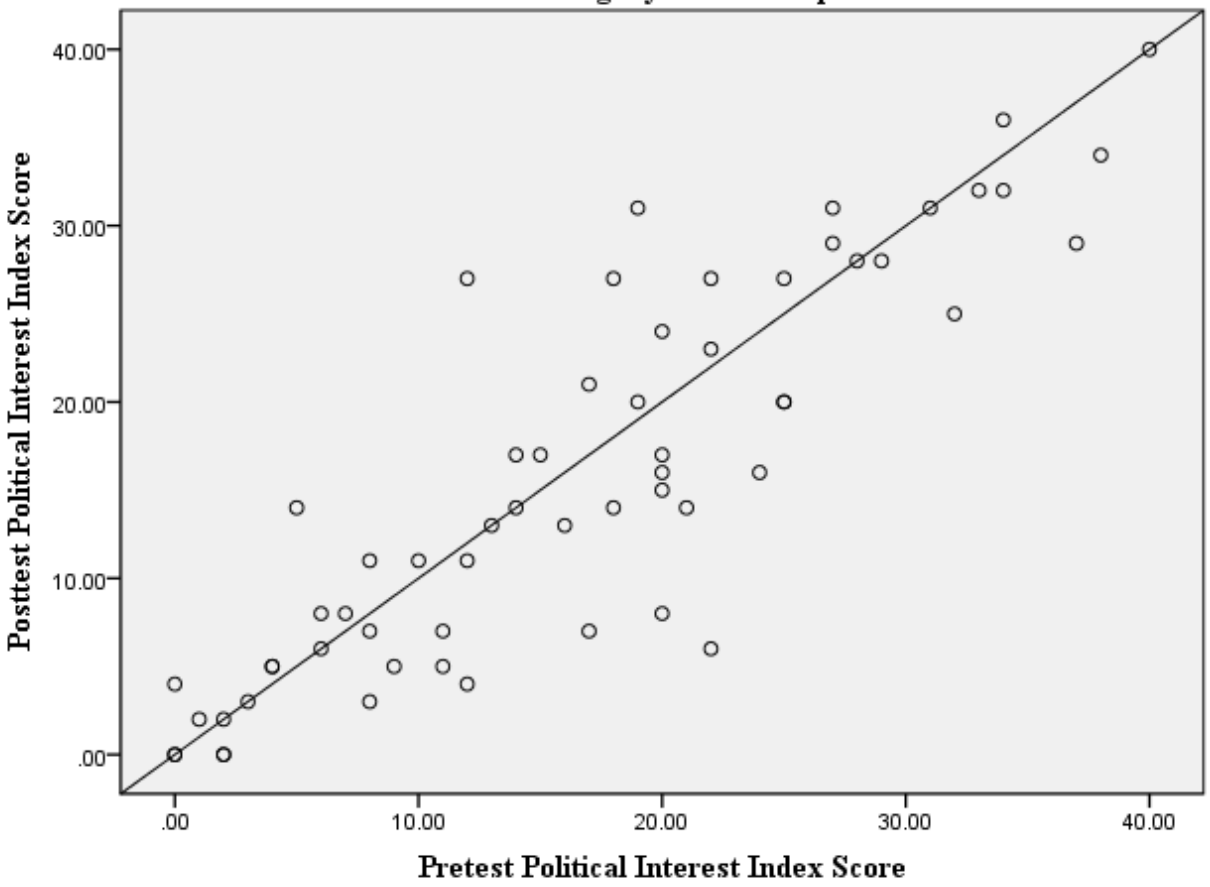
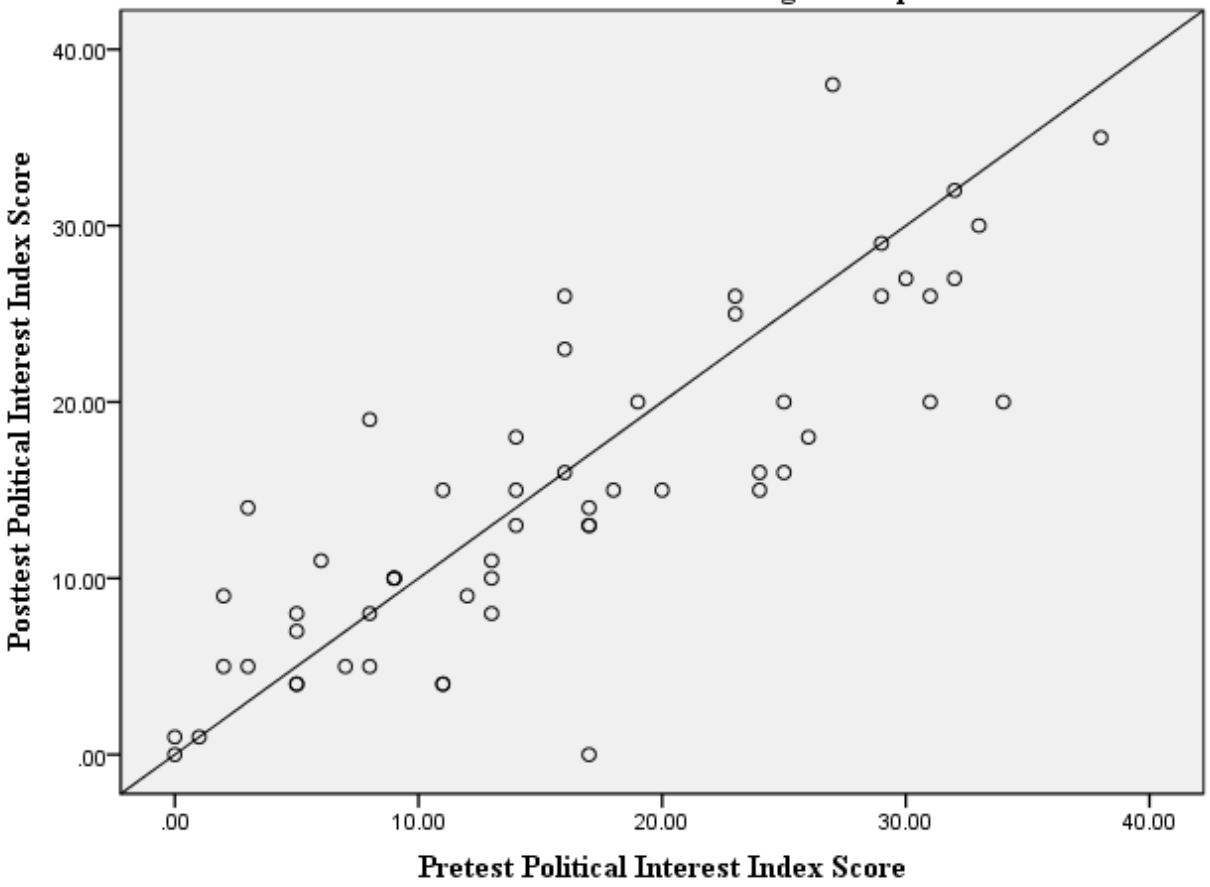


Figure 5.C5: Scatterplot of Pretest Political Interest Index Index and Posttest Political Interest Index for Entertainment Tonight Group



CHAPTER 6
Does *The Daily Show* Make Viewers More Politically Knowledgeable? Effects of Political Comedy, Compared to Network News, on Knowledge of Current Political Events

Thus far, I have established that *The Daily Show* has a significant positive effect on the political interest of its viewers. As previous research has demonstrated (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), political interest strongly correlates with political knowledge. This chapter will explore whether viewing *The Daily Show* also resulted in greater political knowledge gain, compared with viewing *NBC Nightly News* and *Entertainment Tonight*, or no change in viewing habits at all. If those who consume political comedy for entertainment purposes can also gain knowledge while viewing, then this kind of soft news may serve as an equalizer in American politics. Certainly some in American democracy who draw on readily accessible political information are already likely to participate. But as has been demonstrated by previous research, *The Daily Show* viewers watch primarily to be entertained (Rottinghaus et al 2008; Young 2013), with about 20 percent of its audience being apolitical (Cao 2008). When those apolitical viewers watch the show, do they gain political knowledge that could translate into political participation?

The debate over whether soft news – such as *The Daily Show* – enhances political knowledge is longstanding in the media effects literature. This approach to news is "more sensational, more personality-centered, less time-bound, more practical, more incident-based than hard news" (Patterson 2000, 4). Conversely, hard news – such as the *NBC Nightly News* – is that which covers "breaking events involving top leaders, major issues, or significant disruptions in the routines of daily life" (Patterson 2000, 3). Baum (2002, 2003a, 2003b) argues that soft news attracts the apolitical segment of the population who would otherwise not consume news at all. He argues that those who consume soft news do learn about political events (Baum 2003a). Further, content analysis of the 2004 presidential debates and national party conventions found that *The*

Daily Show coverage was just as substantive as that of network news (Fox and Sahin 2007). Likewise, Brewer and Cao (2006) found that late-night comedy appearances by candidates contained much factual information about the candidates and their campaigns. They found that viewing a candidate in this format positively correlated with knowledge of the primary campaign, whereas seeing a candidate appearance on a morning news program did not (Brewer and Cao 2006).

The critics of soft news, however, argue that any knowledge gain is recognition-based, rather than actual substantive knowledge gain. In their content analysis of jokes from four comedy shows (*The Daily Show* not included), Niven and Amundson (2003) found very little discussion of policy issues. Prior (2003 and 2005) is among the most vocal critics of soft news and its ability to educate the public. He argues that, compared to hard news, entertainment media has no influence on political knowledge, when measured by the long-term retention of factual political information. While Prior (2003) agrees with Baum (2002, 2003) that the entertainment value of soft news motivates some people to follow current events they would otherwise ignore, he contends that simple awareness of political developments does not translate into knowledge gain.

The bottom line in this debate is that scholars differ in their assessments of what kind of knowledge is advantageous for democracy. Baum (2003a) argues that long-term retention of information is an overly restrictive measure of political knowledge. On the other hand, Prior (2003) would disagree, arguing that the surface-level, recognition-based learning that takes place in soft news does not contribute to a well-informed electorate. Helping to clarify different kinds of knowledge, Barabas et al (2014) develop a typology of facts with a temporal dimension and a topical dimension. The temporal dimension refers to the time frame with which the fact was acquired. While some researchers (e.g. Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993) measure political

knowledge of civic facts that seldom change, what Barabas et al (2014) call "static facts;" other researchers (e.g. Barabas and Jerit 2009; Schudson 1998) employ questions about recent events, what Barabas et al (2014) call "surveillance facts." The latter argue that individuals who learn about political events as they happen can participate effectively in political affairs. For example, Schudson (1998) theorizes that by periodically scanning the political environment, individuals can take action when necessary. On the other hand, it would seem that an individual's long-term knowledge of facts about how the political system operates is necessary for understanding his/her place and role in it.

The present study seeks to measure the effects of both political comedy and network news upon both static and surveillance knowledge. Knowledge questions in the pre and posttests measure both long-term facts such as the branch of government in which the Department of Veteran's Affairs is located, and political developments "in real time" such as the controversy involving the prisoner exchange of Army Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl. Although watching content from the programs throughout the course of four weeks might lead to learning of both of these items; it seems likely, based upon Barabas et al (2014) finding that watching the news media will be more effective at transmitting surveillance-type information, as opposed to static facts, which might be better taught in a political science/government classroom.

Studies that have found a correlation between political knowledge/information and political participation have employed a combination of static and surveillance items to measure this independent variable. For example, in finding political information levels as one factor that compels people to be civically engaged, Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) employ eight mostly static measures (i.e. name of Congressman, purpose of the 5th amendment, what are civil liberties); however, the battery of questions includes one surveillance item asking individuals whether the

federal government spent more on NASA or Social Security over the past five years. Similarly, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) employed a set of 3,500 questions spanning 50 years of survey research in their landmark study to conclude that knowledge levels are dangerously lower than ideal for sustaining American democracy. Their measures included a vast array of both static and surveillance measures to find a strong correlation between political knowledge and effective participation.

Barabas et al's (2014) typology of political knowledge questions also distinguishes between whether the measured knowledge deals with policy concerns (what they call policy-specific) or institutions/people/players of government (what they call general). Once again, scholars have differed as to the value they placed on each of these kinds of questions. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993) are among those who argue for the importance of general political knowledge as a tool for effective democratic citizenship. This view emphasizes that in order to play the political game, one must know the rules. The five knowledge items that Delli Capini and Keeter (1993) recommend to measure overall political knowledge are 1) which party controls the U.S. House, 2) who has the power of judicial review, 3) who is the vice president, 4) what proportion of Congress is required to override a presidential veto, and 5) where the parties stand ideologically. The researchers found that these measures of general political knowledge demonstrated strong, positive correlations to political participation, as well as political efficacy and formation of political opinions.

Gilens (2001) can be found among those who conclude that general knowledge is useful, yet inadequate for citizenship. This view argues that although policy-specific knowledge is more difficult to acquire than general knowledge, it is nevertheless important for political decision-making. Just as Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) find that those who are more politically

knowledgeable are better able to connect their interests to political preferences, Gilens (2001) finds that policy-specific knowledge has a significant influence on political judgments. General political information – for example, knowledge of what branch of government exercises judicial review – Gilens argues, if of little use in forming political preferences. Even individuals who have high levels of general knowledge may be ignorant of the policy-specific knowledge required to make political judgments.

Previous research analyzing the effects of soft news, relative to hard news, on political knowledge has failed to hold both forms of news to the same standard. As Baum (2003a) argues, hard and soft news cover political developments differently, emphasizing different aspects of people and events. Further, survey research that attempts to answer this question also falls short of demonstrating causal effects because of the reciprocal relationship between political knowledge and news consumption. It is true that hard news viewers are more politically knowledgeable – but it's also true that those who are already knowledgeable are more likely to watch hard news.

The present study differs importantly from other studies in how it measures political knowledge. I wrote questions to measure the learning of specific content covered in both hard and soft news programs. Whereas most studies select questions to measure variations in political knowledge generally (based roughly on evaluations of what kind of knowledge is a prerequisite for good citizenship) the questions developed for this study were written not to assess general knowledge of facts, but how well particular programs teach facts to viewers and how well viewers learn about politics from watching political comedy, relative to network news.

My experimental research design provides an excellent opportunity to assess how well viewers learn from programs, rather than what knowledge they bring to the viewing experience. The participants in my study completed a pretest at the beginning of the four week-long study,

measuring their political knowledge at the start. These political knowledge items were selected from stories covered in both *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *NBC Nightly News* in the two weeks leading up to the study. At the end of the study, participants again answered political knowledge questions, different from those on the pretest and based on the content of the episodes viewed throughout the four weeks. Five questions reflected content that was covered in *The Daily Show* only; five questions covered content that was shown in *NBC Nightly News only*; and nine questions covered content that was shown in both television programs. The dataset provides the unique opportunity to test knowledge of factual items featured on each individual show among the viewers who watched that show. It also allows for establishment of temporal precedence, as I can employ the percent correct on the pretest as a covariate in my analysis of covariance looking at the effects of the TV program on posttest political knowledge.

Participants watched just one episode each week as part of the study, so there was no guarantee that the current events questions on the posttest were selected from the specific episodes they viewed. However, it is possible that viewing their episode in the lab (either *TDS* or *NBC*) could have inspired participants to catch other episodes – or other hard-news sources – on their own time. This hypothesis is consistent with research findings that *The Daily Show* can serve as a gateway to consumption of hard news in other formats (Rottinghaus et al 2008; Cao 2008).

Measuring Political Knowledge

To measure political knowledge, I wrote questions that assess knowledge of the political actors, events, institutions and public policies featured in the episodes. The questions were written to reflect what Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) call the rules of politics (*what* government *is*), the substance of politics (*what* government *does*) and people and parties (*who* government is). The items in the survey, however, depart from those most commonly used by scholars and the five

general knowledge questions recommended by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), in that they are not written to assess general political knowledge, but learning of specific developments covered in the programs. Here is a sampling of questions taken from each category used in Delli Carpini and Keeter's (1996) influential work:

What government is:

> "The U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs is located in what branch of government? a. Legislative, b. Executive, c. Judicial, d. Congress, e. Don't know"
>
> "When is the next election for members of the United States Congress? a. November 2014, b. November 2015, c. November 2016, d. November 2018, e. Don't know"

What government does:

> "Which of the following would be MOST likely to support environmental regulations intended to cut greenhouse gasses and combat climate change? a. Democrats, b. Republicans Tea Party members, c. Conservatives, d. Don't know"
>
> "With regard to the War in Afghanistan, President Obama… a. Wants to wind down the war and bring the troops home; b. wants to send more American troops to stabilize the country; c. wants to take troops out of Afghanistan and transfer them to Iraq; d. wants to keep troops in Afghanistan and also send them to Syria; e. Don't know"

Who government is:

> "Who is the president of Russia? a. Bashar al-Assad, b. Vladimir Putin, c. Hugo Chavez, d. David Cameron, e. Don't know"
>
> "Which of the following is expected to run for the Democratic Presidential Nomination in 2016? a. Paul Ryan, b. Hillary Clinton, c. Marco Rubio, d. Jeb Bush, e. Don't know"

Applying a more recent approach, the Barabas et al (2014) typology dimension of general vs. policy questions effectively encompasses the wide range of knowledge that can be gained from watching both the political comedy and network news programs during the four weeks of the study. In most cases, the questions assess either the players/rules/institutions of the political game (general knowledge) or knowledge of public policy. In the Barabas et al (2014) study, any question related to a public policy was coded separately from those relating to government institutions or people/players.

Applying this typology, here is a sampling of the general knowledge questions in the Media Engagement Study posttest. For a complete list of the political knowledge questions in the posttest, see Appendix 6.A.

1) The U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs is located in what branch of government? a. Legislative, b. Executive, c. Judicial, d. Congress, e. Don't know. Correct answer: b
2) When is the next election for members of the United States Congress? a. November 2014, b. November 2015, c. November 2016, d. November 2018, e. Don't know. Correct answer: a
3) Who is the president of Russia? a. Bashar al-Assad, b. Vladimir Putin, c. Hugo Chavez, d. David Cameron, e. Don't know. Correct answer: b

Policy-oriented questions in the Media Engagement Study posttest include:

1) With regard to the War in Afghanistan, President Obama: a. Wants to wind down the war and bring the troops home; b. Wants to send more American troops to stabilize the country; c. Wants to take troops out of Afghanistan and transfer them to Iraq; d. Wants to keep troops in Afghanistan and also send them to Syria; e. Don't know. Correct answer: a
2) Which of the following is NOT a Republican Party issue position? a. Pro-life (in favor of laws to restrict abortion), b. Pro-gun rights (against gun control laws), c. Anti-Obamacare (want to repeal the 2010 Affordable Care Act), d. Pro-Immigration reform that allows illegal immigrants already in the United States to stay here without penalty, e. Don't know. Correct answer: d
3) Which of the following would be MOST likely to support environmental regulations intended to cut greenhouses gases and combat climate change? a. Democrats, b. Republicans, c. Tea Party members, d. Conservatives, e. Don't know

A total of 19 knowledge questions were included in my posttest, with five covering unique stories from each program, *The Daily Show* and *NBC Nightly News* (See Appendix 6.A for a complete listing of posttest knowledge questions). The remaining nine questions were covered in both programs. *Entertainment Tonight* did not contain any political stories during the time of the study. While some of the posttest questions ask directly about political developments, (such as knowledge of the controversy over Army Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl's prisoner exchange), others ask institutional questions not directly covered in the episode, but of which one might gain knowledge from watching (for example, knowledge that the Department of Veteran's Affairs is located in the Executive Branch). Each question contains four possible responses, plus a "don't know" response.

While including "don't know" as an option has been found to threaten question validity (Mondak 2001), the survey instrument did not encourage these responses, but instead asked respondents to answer to the best of their ability. By encouraging respondents to give it their best

shot, while also including "don't know" as an option, I am maximizing the likelihood that they select "don't know" only when they sincerely don't know. I thought it more ethical to give respondents the "don't know" option rather than forcing them to guess. Further, I believe it is possible to get accurate measures of political knowledge despite Mondak's concerns by relying on the findings of Sturgis et al (2008) that when respondents selecting "don't know" are pressed to select a "best guess," they fare no better than chance. Nonetheless, in my study, even guessing yields a one in four chance of selecting the correct response, whereas defaulting to "don't know" guarantees an incorrect response. So as to account for participants who selected "don't know" rather than guess, I have developed a knowledge index that adjusts each participant's score to reduce the penalty for selecting "don't know". This is necessary to ensure that any gains in knowledge observed from the experiment's treatments are not due to a greater likelihood of guessing as a result of watching the program(s). This adjusted knowledge index is discussed in more depth in the results section of the chapter.

In addition to the posttest knowledge questions, participants' political knowledge was also assessed at the beginning of the study on the pretest questionnaire. This allows me to include prior political knowledge as a covariate in my analysis of covariance model. The pretest included eight questions relating to political people, events, and institutions prominent in the news during the two weeks *preceding* the study. Because my goal was to measure learning of content featured on the programs *during* the four weeks of the study, these pretest knowledge questions are different from the posttest knowledge questions. The posttest knowledge questions were written to reflect the content viewed by study participants on *The Daily Show* and *NBC Nightly News*. Comparing the posttest knowledge results in each condition, controlling for pretest knowledge scores, however,

allows me to test the exposure's effects on political knowledge. See Appendix 6.B for a complete listing of pretest knowledge questions.

Are the measures of political knowledge correlated with the measures of political interest? Measures of political knowledge, if they are valid, should correlate highly with measures of political interest. For the posttest, the correlation between the post-knowledge scores (measured by percent correct) and the 40-point post-political interest index (described in previous chapter) is .53, which is significant at the .01 level. For the pretest, the correlation between the pre-knowledge score and pre-interest index is .379, also significant at .01. Further evidence of the validity of the knowledge measures is that they are also highly correlated with the more traditional measures of political interest. These bivariate correlations demonstrate that the measures of political knowledge correlate with measures of political interest, supporting that they are valid. This strong correlation between political interest and political knowledge will necessitate controlling for political interest in the ANCOVA regressions, to determine the influence of the TV program exposures alone.

The boxplots in Figure 6.1 indicate that the distribution of knowledge in the pretest is fairly uniform, with the 25th percentile and median nearly identical in all four groups. The 75th percentile is a bit higher in the network news and political comedy groups, while both the *Entertainment Tonight* and no-exposure control groups contain outliers. These outliers disappear in the posttest (Figure 6.2), in which we also see an increase in the median and 75th percentiles of the network news and political comedy groups.

Figure 6.1: Boxplot Showing Distribution of Percent Correct on Pretest for Exposure and No-Exposure Groups

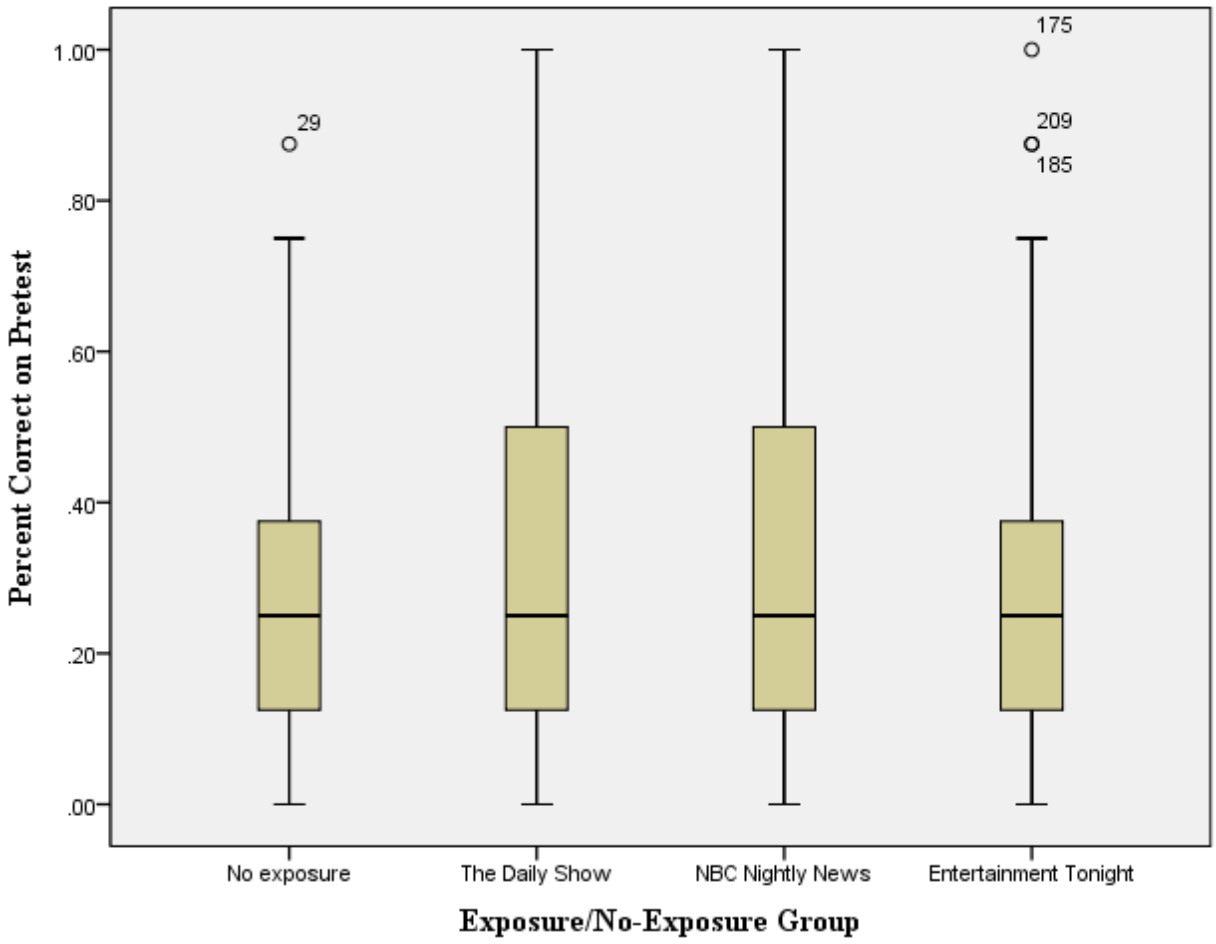


Figure 6.2: Boxplot Showing Distribution of Percent Correct on Posttest for Exposure and No-Exposure Groups

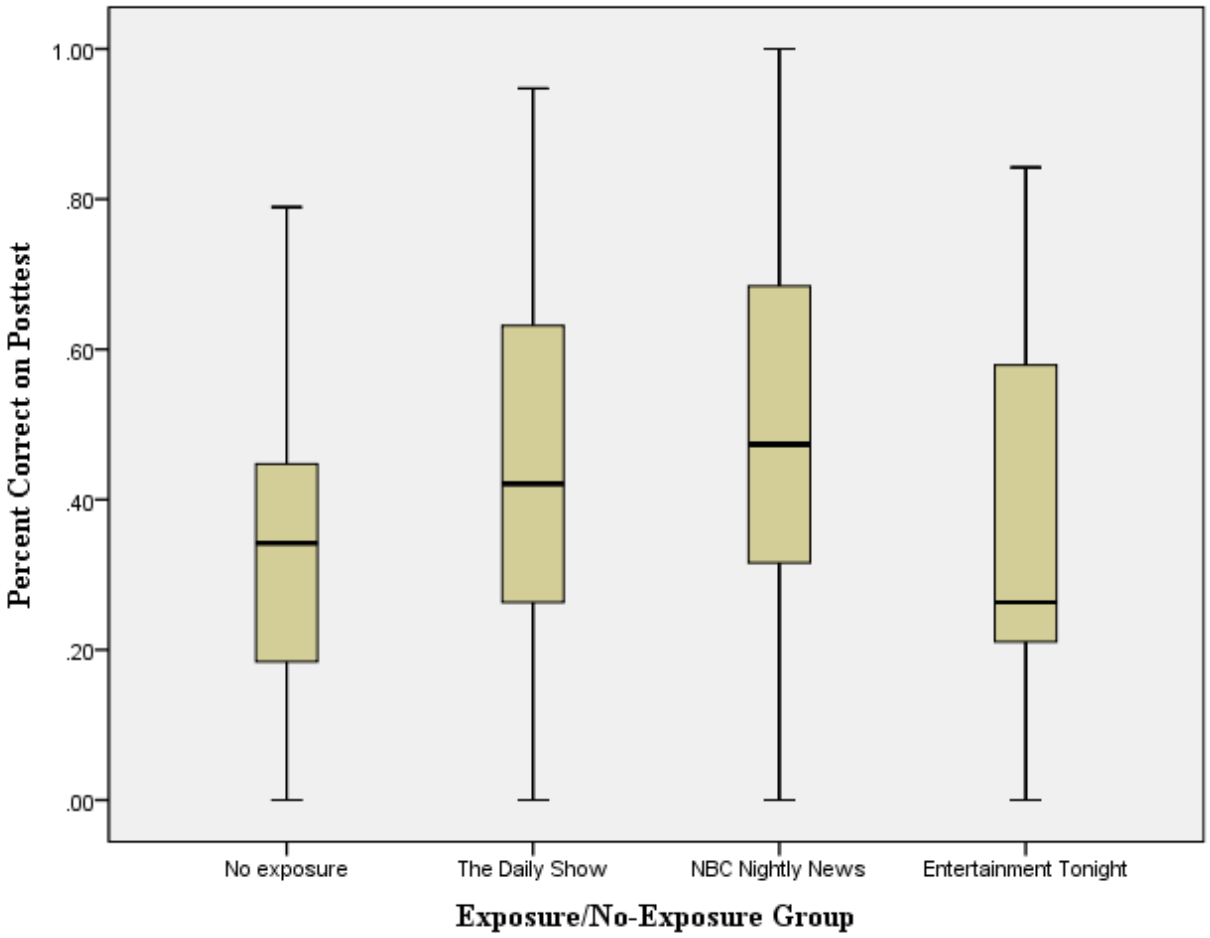


Table 6.1 shows descriptive statistics for the pre and posttest knowledge questions. They reveal that 34 percent was the mean for correct responses on the pretest, while the 42 percent correct was the mean for the posttest. Looking at the distributions, the percent correct for those at the median in the pretest was 25; in the posttest, it was 42.

Table 6.1: Descriptive Statistics for Pre and Posttest Knowledge Scores						
	Mean	Median	Std. Deviation	25th Percentile	50th Percentile	75th Percentile
Percent Correct on Pretest	34%	25%	26%	13%	25%	50%
Percent Correct on Posttest	42%	42%	24%	21%	42%	58%
Source: Author's interpretation of data from the Media Engagement Study at Delta College.						

As seen in Table 6.2, when comparing the pre and post knowledge scores for all of the media exposure groups, in every case, mean knowledge scores at the end of the four-week study were greater than at the beginning. This is true even for the no-exposure group. In fact, the mean gain for the no-exposure control group (.0408) was slightly higher than for the *Entertainment Tonight* group (gain of .0269). As expected, post-survey means are highest for *The Daily Show* and *NBC Nightly News*, with those watching the hard-news format of NBC exhibiting slightly higher knowledge levels in the posttest. None of the groups demonstrate particularly impressive political knowledge at the end of the study, with the *NBC Nightly News* group showing the highest percent correct at just 47 percent. The difference between the mean number of correct questions in the *NBC Nightly News* group and that of the no-exposure control group is 2.4 questions.

Table 6.2: Mean and Median on Pre and Post Knowledge Scores for Exposure and Non-Exposure Groups		
	Pretest Percent Correct (Number correct in parentheses)	Posttest Percent Correct (Number correct in parentheses)
No exposure		
N	34	28
Mean	31% (2.4)	35% (6.6)
Median	25% (2.0)	34% (6.5)
The Daily Show		
N	60	58
Mean	35% (2.8)	46% (8.7)
Median	25% (2.0)	42% (8.0)
NBC Nightly News		
N	74	73
Mean	35% (2.8)	47% (9.0)
Median	25% (2.0)	47% (9.0)
Entertainment Tonight		
N	61	61
Mean	33% (2.6)	36% (6.8)
Median	25% (2.0)	26% (5.0)
Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College		

Looking at individual questions reveals the questions on which each group performed the strongest. The questions on which participants in *The Daily Show* group performed statistically better than those in other groups include the following topics: the scandal at the Department of Veteran's Affairs and who was responsible for negotiating the prisoner exchange involving Bowe Bergdahl. Both of these developments were also covered on *NBC Nightly News*; they were not specific to *The Daily Show*. The questions on which *NBC Nightly News* participants performed statistically better than those in the other programs included when the next Congressional election was taking place; the controversy involving the Bowe Bergdahl prisoner exchange; which candidate is most likely to run for the Democratic presidential nomination; the controversy involving the firing of Jill Abramson from the New York Times; and President

Obama's position on Afghanistan. Of the four questions that the *NBC Nightly News* group demonstrated greater competence, two were covered only on *NBC* (not *TDS*): the story involving Jill Abramson and President Obama's position on Afghanistan.

Statistical Analysis

I conducted statistical analysis of the impact that TV program exposures have on post political knowledge scores with similar methodology to that of political interest scores (see chapter 5). The statistical analysis in this chapter, however, will depart from that of political interest in that ANOVA with the difference-in-differences estimator is not an appropriate test here because the political knowledge measures on the pre and posttest are not identical. The method for ANCOVA, however, will remain the same. I will use percent correct on the posttest as the dependent variable, controlling for percent correct on the pretest. Some of the models will also control for taking a political science class, as well as political interest at the beginning of the study. In controlling for political knowledge at the start, each individual acts as his/her own control, an added advantage of the pre and posttest experimental research design. The analysis of co-variance is illustrated in the following model:

Analysis of covariance using pretest scores as covariate:

$y_1=b_o+b_1*\text{Treatment}+b_2*y_0+e$

In contrast to the political interest dependent variable, the relationship between pre and post scores on political knowledge appears to be much weaker. This is to be expected because, unlike the political interest questions, those measuring political knowledge are different on the pre and posttests. The questions reflect political events covered in the news in the weeks prior to participants taking the survey. A scatterplot of these posttest scores (vertical axis) versus pretest scores (horizontal axis) reveals a linear relationship, satisfying one of the assumptions for

ANCOVA. In my regression analysis, the coefficient for b2 is .5 in the overall sample; .57 in the no-exposure control group; .60 in *The Daily Show* group; .34 in the *NBC Nightly News* group; and .55 in the *Entertainment Tonight* group.

To demonstrate the effectiveness of random assignment to treatment and control groups, the histograms of the distribution of pre-knowledge scores by TV program (the fixed factor) are shown below (Figures 6.3 through 6.6), with the actual statistics in Table 6.3. The data in each group exhibit a right skew. This skewness reflects that levels of political knowledge are low in the population from which the samples was drawn. It is evident that pre-political knowledge levels did not vary among the treatment/control groups. In ANOVA, the significance level on the relationship between the pretest knowledge scores and TV program is .819, demonstrating little variation in knowledge levels based on the TV program to which participants were assigned. Thus, as long as my models take into account pre-knowledge scores (and they do), any skewness of the values on the pre-interest scores will not taint the analysis. Further, the mean political knowledge scores for each of the groups are very close in their range, with the difference between the largest and smallest values in each group being 1.0. The no-exposure control group – the range of which is .88 – is the only exception. These statistics demonstrate very similar distribution of pre-knowledge scores in all four treatment and control groups.

Table 6.3: Descriptive Statistics for Pre-Political Knowledge Scores, by Treatment/Control Group		
Group	***Statistic***	***Percent Correct on Pretest***
No exposure	Mean	31%
	Median	25%
	Std. Deviation	22%
	Skewness Statistic	.796
The Daily Show	Mean	35%
	Median	25%
	Std. Deviation	29%
	Skewness Statistic	.741
NBC Nightly News	Mean	35%
	Median	25%
	Std. Deviation	28%
	Skewness Statistic	.904
Entertainment Tonight	Mean	33%
	Median	25%
	Std. Deviation	24%
	Skewness Statistic	.925

Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College

Again, the distribution of pre-political knowledge scores appears to have a slight right skew, with the median to the right of the mean for every control/treatment group. See figure 6.3.

Figure 6.3: Distribution of Pretest Knowledge Scores for the No-Exposure Control Group

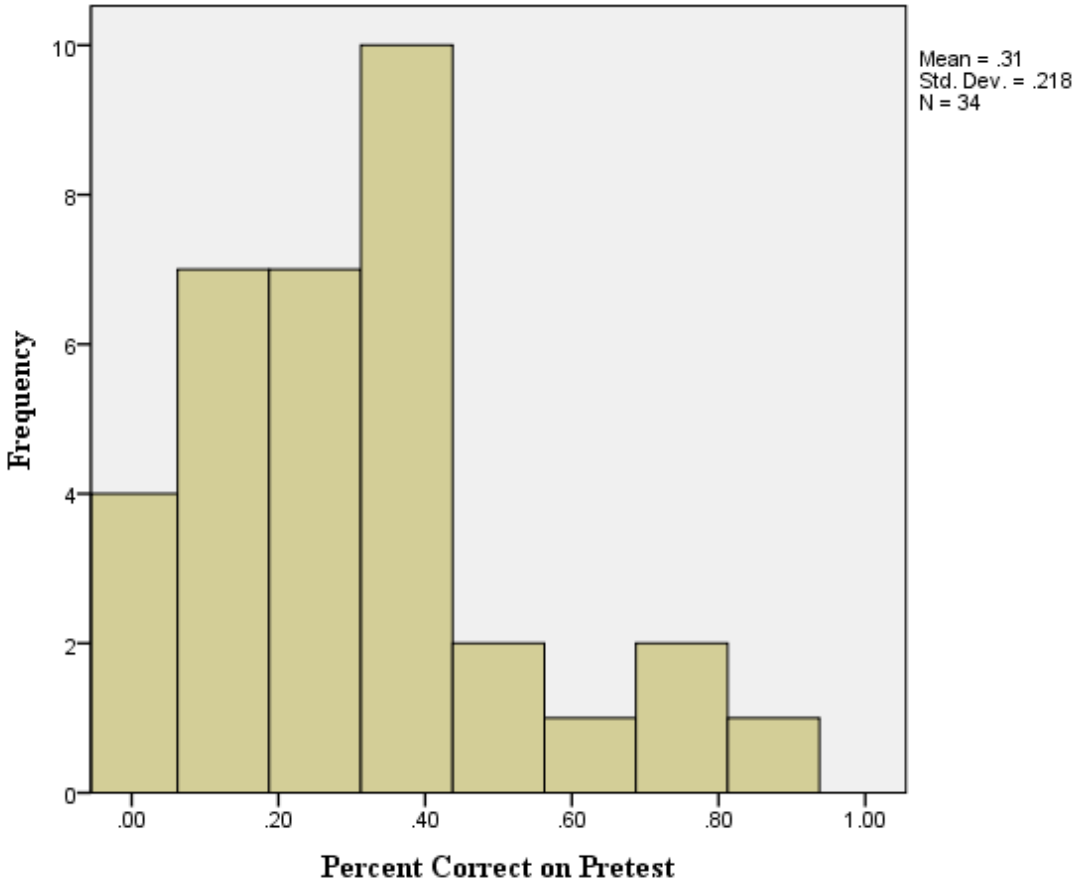


Figure 6.4: Distribution of Pretest Knowledge Scores for The NBC Nightly News Group

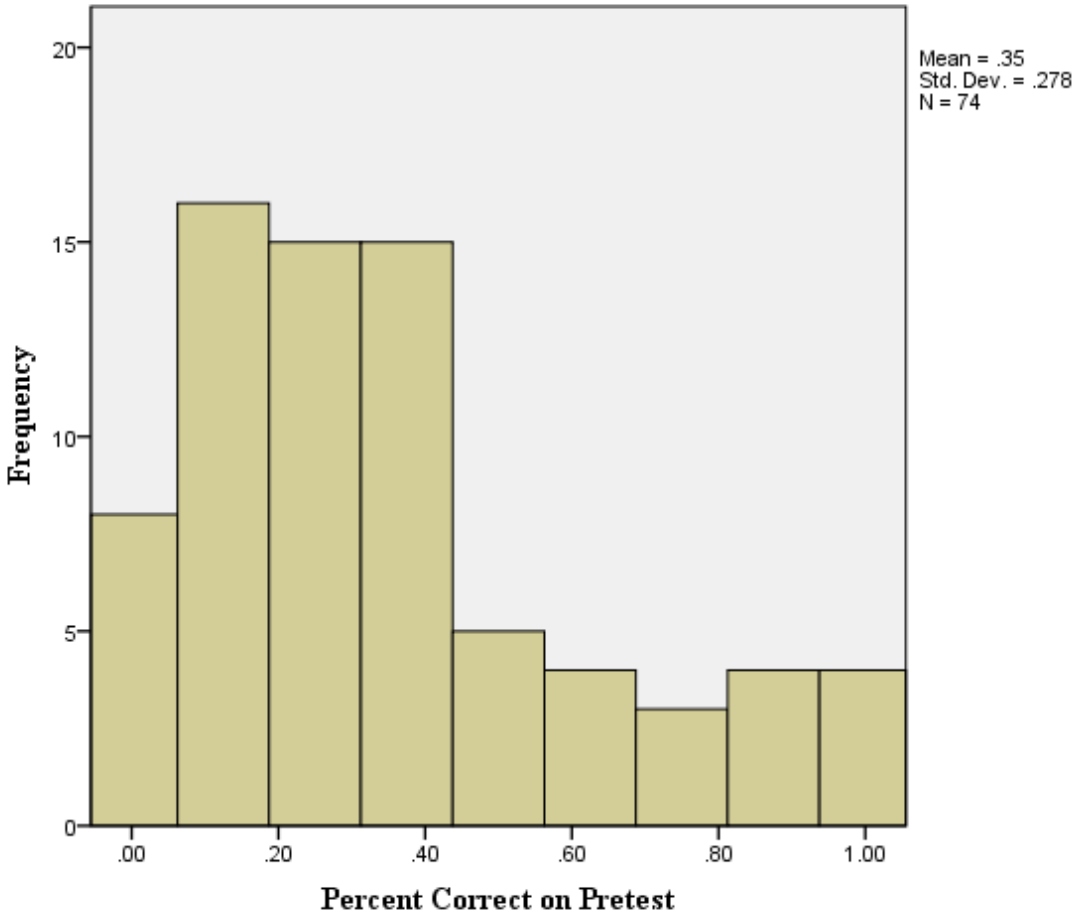


Figure 6.5: Distribution of Pretest Knowledge Scores for The Daily Show Group

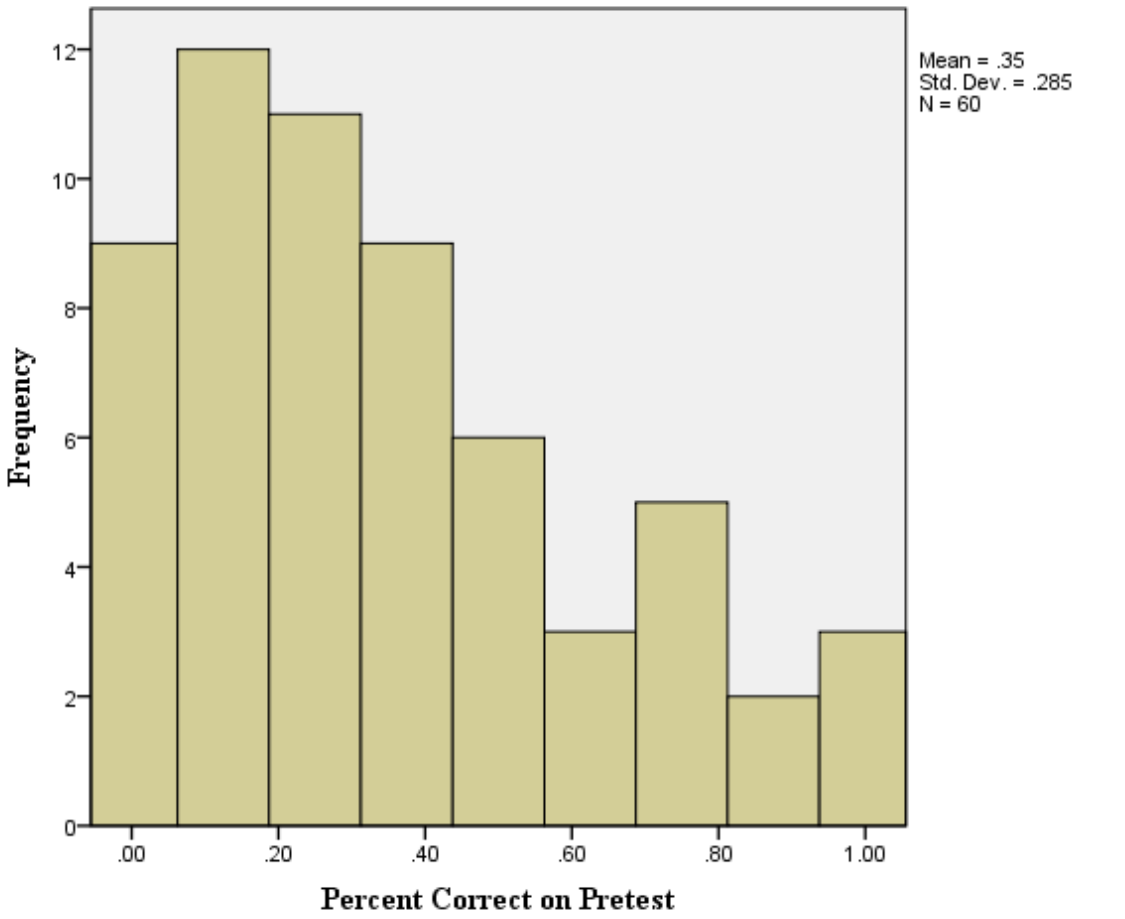
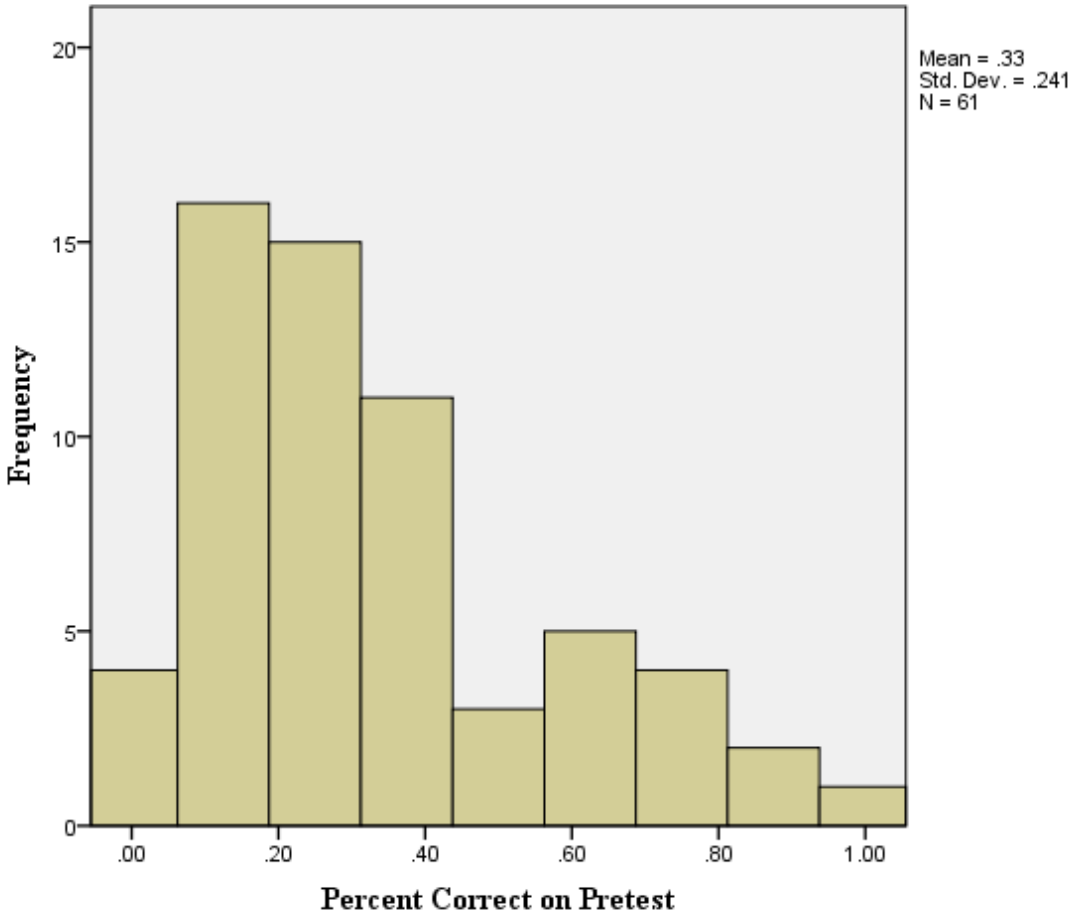


Figure 6.6: Distribution of Pretest Knowledge Scores for Entertainment Tonight Group



More important than the distribution of the pre-knowledge values to testing ANCOVA's assumptions is the distribution of the residuals to determine whether the pre and posttest values are uniform about the regression line. The distribution of residuals generally follows the normal curve, both for the entire sample, as well as the treatment and control groups. Plotting the unstandardized residuals against the post-knowledge scores (both predicted and actual scores) shows no heteroscedasticity, either in the entire sample or in the treatment/control groups. I examined the residuals and found them to be normally distributed; a scattergram of residuals against y appear to be homoscedastic.

Analysis of Covariance: Difference-In-Means

Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) is well suited for determining how participants in each treatment/control group compare to the others in the post-political knowledge scores. Through this analysis, I will be testing the effects of each treatment/control on the post-knowledge scores, with pre-knowledge scores as a covariate. Similar to the political interest analysis, it will be important to control for students taking a political science course, as this is a confounding variable that has potential to impact the results. I will also control for posttest political interest to determine the effects of the TV program exposures on political knowledge, independent of any political interest students gained throughout the four weeks of the study. The results for ANCOVA with the post-knowledge scores as the dependent variable and pre-knowledge scores as the covariate are below in Table 6.4. I selected the Bonferroni confidence interval adjustment, to set a high bar for finding significant results. Levene's statistic is not significant, indicating equal variance across groups.

Table 6.4: Analysis of Covariance: The Effects of TV Program Exposure on Posttest Knowledge (percent correct), Controlling for Pretest Knowledge

	Type III Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	4.397	4	1.099	28.37	.000
Intercept	4.560	1	4.560	117.72	.000
TV Program Fixed Factor	.504	3	.168	4.34	.005
Percent Correct on Pretest	3.741	1	3.741	96.56	.000
Error	8.329	215	.039		
Total	51.640	220			
Corrected Total	12.726	219			

Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College

As Table 6.4 shows, the TV Program fixed factor exhibits a strong relationship with the dependent variable, the percentage of correct responses on the political knowledge questions on the posttest. It is significant at the .01 level (p=.005, 2-tail test). From the pairwise comparisons below in Table 6.5, this significant difference is the strongest when comparing *NBC Nightly News*

to *Entertainment Tonight*. The difference in means between these two groups (.101) is significant at the .05 level (p=.021, 2-tail; .01+, 1-tail), with *NBC* outperforming *Entertainment Tonight*. Likewise, the difference in means comparing *The Daily Show* to *Entertainment Tonight* is significant at the .10 level (p=.088, 2-tail; .044, 1-tail), with those in *The Daily Show* group scoring about nine percentage points higher than those who watched *Entertainment Tonight*.

The pairwise comparisons in the mean difference in knowledge scores also show that the largest difference is between the no exposure group and *NBC Nightly News* (.106), with NBC outperforming the no exposure group (see Table 6.5). This difference is statistically significant in a one-tail test (p=.096, 2-tail; p=.048, 1-tail), when controlling for pretest scores. In sum, the analysis of covariance found significant differences in the expected direction in knowledge gain on current political events when comparing those who watched *NBC Nightly News* and both the exposure and non-exposure control groups, as well as between *The Daily Show* and the *Entertainment Tonight* control group. Importantly, the difference between the political comedy and network news groups was indistinguishable from zero.

Table 6.5: Analysis of Covariance: Comparing Difference in Means for the Fixed Effects of TV Program Exposure on Posttest Knowledge (Percent Correct), Controlling for Pretest Knowledge

TV Program (I)	***TV Program (J)***	***Mean Difference (I-J)***	***Std. Error***	***Sig.[b]***
No Exposure (mean=.359)	The Daily Show (mean=.453) NBC Nightly News (mean=.465) Entertainment Tonight (mean=.364)	-.095 -.106* -.006	.045 .044 .045	.229 .096 1.00
The Daily Show (mean=.453)	NBC Nightly News (mean=.465) Entertainment Tonight (mean=.364)	-.012 .089*	.035 .036	1.00 .088
NBC Nightly News (mean=.465)	Entertainment Tonight (mean=.364)	.101**	.034	.021

Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College

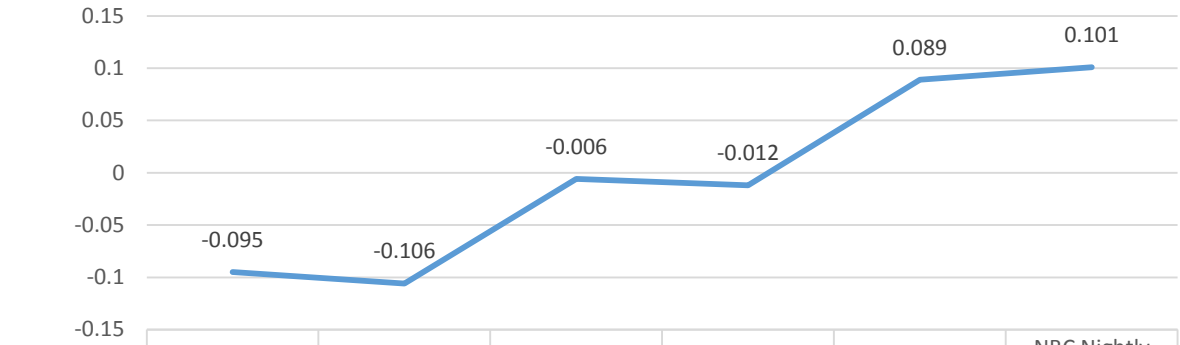
b. Adjusted for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni

* Denotes significance at the .10 level

**Denotes significance at the .05 level.

The difference in mean percent correct on the posttest knowledge questions is further illustrated in Figure 6.7 below. At a glance, the figure demonstrates that the greatest differences are between *NBC Nightly News* and the control groups (both *Entertainment Tonight* and the no-exposure group). However, the .089 difference between *The Daily Show* and *Entertainment Tonight* is also significant at the .10 level (2-tail test).

Figure 6.7: Analysis of the Covariance of Fixed Effects of TV Program Exposure on Posttest Knowledge, Controlling for Pretest Knowledge



	No Exposure-The Daily Show	No Exposure-NBC Nightly News*	No Exposure-Entertainment Tonight	The Daily Show-NBC Nightly News	The Daily Show-Entertainment Tonight*	NBC Nightly News-Entertainment Tonight**
Series1	-0.095	-0.106	-0.006	-0.012	0.089	0.101

Difference of Means

Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College
*Denotes statistical significance at the .10 level (2-tail test)
**Denotes statistical significance at the .05 level (2-tail test)

Interestingly, when selecting participants in the dataset that are under age 30, I find the effects of TV exposures are greater for this group than for those 30 and over. When controlling for political knowledge scores in the pretest, the TV Program Fixed Factor in the overall model has a p value of .002. Among those under age 30, those who watched *NBC Nightly News* scored nearly 12 percentage points higher on political knowledge on the posttest than the no exposure control group and 11 percentage points higher than the *Entertainment Tonight* group. These differences were both significant at the .05 level (2-tailed test). When looking at this age group alone, the differences between *The Daily Show* and control groups were not as great as that of *NBC Nightly*

News (after controlling for prior political knowledge); however, they were significant at the .10 level. Those who watched *The Daily Show* scored about 12 percentage points higher than the no exposure group and 10 percentage points higher than the *Entertainment Tonight* group.

Repeating this analysis for those age 30 and over, I find that the TV program fixed factor is insignificant in the overall model (p=.840), and none of the differences in the paired comparisons are significant. Of course, this could be explainable by the smaller number of observations in the 30 and over age group. Nevertheless, it appears that the exposures generally had a greater impact on younger participants' political knowledge, but even among this age group, *NBC Nightly News* had a somewhat stronger impact than *The Daily Show*.

Knowledge Gain or More Guessing?

As discussed above, there may be some trade-offs in question validity when including "don't know" as an option in questions measuring political knowledge. Some participants may be more likely than others to guess, thus increasing their odds of selecting a correct response. The correct responses resulting from such guessing may measure not political knowledge, but the propensity to guess on political knowledge questions (Mondak 2001). Others scholars (Sturgis et al 2008); however, have found that when respondents are pressed to give their "best guess," they fare no better than chance. Either way, if respondents guess, rather than default to the "don't know" response, they have a 1 in 4 chance of selecting the correct answer, whereas if they default to "don't know," they have a 0 in 4 chance of selecting the correct answer. For example, a professor administering an exam might encourage students to give their "best guess" as opposed to skipping a question entirely if they don't know the answer. This, of course, increases their likelihood of getting the question correct, as opposed to skipping it entirely. With regard to the present study, I have tested whether participants in any of the treatment/control groups, as a result of their

treatment, were more likely to guess on the posttest knowledge questions. If so, this could influence the mean percentage correct on the posttest, not because participants learned more from watching the show, but because watching the show made them more likely to guess.

To answer this question, I conducted an Analysis of Covariance to determine whether the percent of "don't know" responses is correlated with the treatment, when controlling for the percent of "don't knows" on the pretest. As Table 6.6 demonstrates, the TV program fixed factor is significant at the .01 level (p=.006, 2-tailed test). This is not a surprise, considering we would expect that those exposed to content featured on the knowledge questions would give fewer "don't know" responses than those who were not exposed to such content.

Table 6.6: Analysis of Covariance: The Effects of TV Program Exposure on Percentage of Don't Knows on Posttest Knowledge Questions, Controlling for Pretest Don't Knows

	Type III Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	7.480	4	1.870	40.436	.000
Intercept	.889	1	.889	19.222	.000
TV Program Fixed Factor	.591	3	.197	4.259	.006
Percent Don't Knows on Pretest	6.812	1	6.812	147.298	.000
Error	9.573	207	.046		
Total	48.526	212			
Corrected Total	17.053	211			

Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College

In the pairwise comparisons in Table 6.7, the data show a mean difference of .10 in the percentage of "don't knows" given by *The Daily Show* viewers and *Entertainment Tonight* viewers. This difference is significant at the .05 level (p=.021, 2-tailed; p=.01, 1-tail). Likewise, the .10 difference between the *NBC Nightly News* and *Entertainment Tonight* groups was significant at the .05 level (p=.062, 2-tail; p=.031, 1-tail). A thorough analysis of the data must rule out the possibility that exposure to these programs increased respondent's propensity to guess,

rather than select the "don't know" response. That *The Daily Show* viewers could be slightly more likely to guess when they really don't know would support Hollander's (2005) finding that exposure to entertainment-based news programs artificially inflates viewers' self-assessments of their own political knowledge. Watching political comedy may make people think they're smarter than they really are, leading them to guess on questions in which they really have no clue.

Table 6.7: Analysis of Covariance: Difference in Means Comparisons of the Fixed Effects of TV Program Exposure on Percentage of Don't Knows on Posttest Knowledge Questions, Controlling for Pretest Don't Knows

TV Program (I)	*TV Program (J)*	*Mean Difference (I-J)*	*Std. Error*	*Sig.*[b]
No Exposure (mean=.45)	The Daily Show (mean=.33) NBC Nightly News (mean=.35) Entertainment Tonight (mean=.45)	.116 .096 -.003	.050 .049 .050	.134 .300 1.00
The Daily Show (mean=.33)	NBC Nightly News (mean=.35) Entertainment Tonight (mean=.45)	-.020 -.099**	.038 .040	1.00 .021
NBC Nightly News (mean=.35)	Entertainment Tonight (mean=.45)	-.099*	.038	.062

Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College

b. Adjusted for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni

* Denotes significance at the .10 level

**Denotes significance at the .05 level

To fully understand the impact of "don't know" responses on changes in knowledge from the pre to posttest, I developed a modified, corrected political knowledge index that uses as the dependent variable the expected number of correct answers if respondents had guessed, rather than selecting "don't know." This corrected index will show whether the change in the number of "don't knows" is what's driving the differences identified above between *The Daily Show*/*NBC Nightly News* viewers and exposure/no-exposure control groups. Although others researching political knowledge have found that when participants guess, they fair no better than chance (Sturgis et al 2008), in my study, they still have a one in four chance of getting the right answer. Instead of treating don't knows as incorrect answers, the corrected index reduces the "penalty" for not

guessing. The corrected index calculates the expected value of the mean if participants in each exposure and control group guessed randomly (rather than selecting "don't know"). The expected values variable is calculated as

# of correct answers + .25(# of don't knows), where .25 is the probability of guessing the correct response by chance

After computing this variable and re-running the Analysis of Covariance with the new index as the dependent variable (with the percent of don't knows on the pretest as a covariate), I find that it strengthens the significance of the TV Program fixed factor (p=.002) in the overall model (compared with p=.005 in the uncorrected model; see Table 6.5). Table 6.8 shows the results of the model using the corrected post-knowledge index.

Table 6.8 Analysis of Covariance: The Effects of TV Program Exposure on Posttest Corrected Knowledge Index, Controlling for Percent Don't Knows on Pretest

	Type III Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	756.800	4	189.200	19.832	.000
Intercept	8816.191	1	8816.191	924.109	.000
TV Program Fixed Factor	148.538	3	49.513	5.190	.002
Percent Don't Knows on Pretest	595.729	1	595.729	62.444	.000
Error	1965.282	206	9.540		
Total	22838.813	211			
Corrected Total	2722.082	210			

Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College

[a] R Squared = .278 (Adjusted R Squared = ..264)

Correcting for the "don't know" responses, I find that knowledge scores on the posttest remain greatest for *The Daily Show* and *NBC Nightly News* groups, with just .28 difference in the means between those who watched these programs (see table 6.9). Likewise, both the exposure and non-exposure control groups are nearly identical in their means.

Table 6.9: Expected Mean Values on Posttest Knowledge Scores, Corrected for "Don't Know" Responses		
	Mean	Std. Error
No Exposure	8.460	.606
The Daily Show	10.271	.409
NBC Nightly News	10.553	.367
Entertainment Tonight	8.870	.409
Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College		

Comparing difference in means with the adjusted posttest knowledge index in Table 6.10 (below) to the uncorrected posttest percent correct in Table 6.5 (above) reveals that the difference between *The Daily Show* and *Entertainment Tonight* (1.4 with the adjusted index; p=.098, 2-tail; .049, 1-tail) is greater than the difference found in the non-adjusted index (.089; p=.088, 2-tail; .044, 1-tail). A greater difference can also be found in comparing *The Daily Show* to the non-exposure control group. Whereas this difference was not significant in the original uncorrected measure, at 1.81 using the adjusted index, it is significant at the .10 level in the two-tailed test (p=.042, 1-tail test). This finding is promising for the potential of soft news to boost viewers' political knowledge. Strengthening the posttest political knowledge measure by reducing the penalty for defaulting to the "don't know" response bodes well for *The Daily Show* viewers. It appears that the posttest knowledge scores of those who watched the show reflect actual learning that took place, rather than mere guessing. Although TDS viewers had a lower percentage of posttest "don't knows", the corrected model reveals the significant differences in knowledge scores between *TDS* and *ET* and *TDS* and the no-exposure group are not attributable to a greater chance of selecting the correct response due to guessing.

Similar to *The Daily Show* results, the adjusted posttest knowledge index reveals that the differences between NBC and the control groups are not a matter of chance guessing. Table 6.10 shows that the adjusted posttest knowledge index results in a difference of 2.093 between *NBC*

Nightly News and the no-exposure group and a difference of 1.683 between *NBC Nightly News* and the *Entertainment Tonight* group. Comparing the adjusted posttest knowledge index of the *NBC Nightly News* group with both of these control groups results in a .05 significance level (2-tail test) and a slightly stronger relationship than found in the original uncorrected model.

Table 6.10: Analysis of Covariance: Difference in Means Comparisons of the Fixed Effects of TV Program Exposure on Posttest Adjusted Knowledge Index, Controlling for Percent Don't Knows on Pretest

TV Program (I)	***TV Program (J)***	***Mean Difference (I-J)***	***Std. Error***	***Sig.[b]***
No Exposure (mean=8.460)	The Daily Show (mean=10.271) NBC Nightly News (mean=10.553) Entertainment Tonight (mean=9.870)	-1.811* -2.093** -.410	.731 .708 .731	.084 .021 1.00
The Daily Show (mean= 10.271)	NBC Nightly News (mean=10.553) Entertainment Tonight (mean=9.870)	-.282 1.401*	.549 .579	1.00 .098
NBC Nightly News (mean= 10.553)	Entertainment Tonight (mean=9.870)	1.683**	.549	.015

Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College

b. Adjusted for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni

* Denotes significance at the .10 level

**Denotes significance at the .05 level

Similar to the results in the uncorrected model, the analysis of the index adjusted for don't know responses demonstrated that viewers of *NBC Nightly News* performed best out of all four groups, and significantly so compared to the control groups who saw no change in their political news consumption. However, viewers of *The Daily Show's* brand of political comedy also gained knowledge of current political events, suggesting that exposure to this kind of soft news may generate a comfort level with the political world. The political interest (found in the previous chapter), combined with the knowledge gained from watching political comedy suggests that for some young people who watch these shows consistently and for long periods of time, the experience may result in greater participation in democracy.

Knowledge Gain through Piqued Interest

With political interest being a strong predictor of political knowledge (see for example, Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995), I thought it necessary to include political interest as a covariate in the model. This will allow me to determine what effect the TV program factor has on the posttest political knowledge scores, beyond political interest confounding the results. It also allows me to analyze whether political interest is the mediating variable in the relationship between TV program exposure and political knowledge gain (see Baron and Kenny's 1986 article on mediation analysis). As theorized in chapter 3 and then empirically confirmed in chapter 5, the political comedy treatment had a greater effect on attitudes, while the evidence in this chapter suggests that network news had a greater effect on retention of hard facts. What remains to be seen is whether political comedy and network news affect political learning through the same or different channels. In other words, is there a mechanism by which a political comedy intervention works to heighten knowledge? Is that mechanism the same for network news? A theoretically promising mechanism, political interest may facilitate retention of information in that if participants are interested, they may pay closer attention and bring political news to mind more frequently after the exposures, thus contributing to greater information retention.

The political interest variable I included in the following model is the posttest 40-point political interest index described in chapter 5. I will employ the posttest political interest index, rather than the pretest index because interest generated after the treatment would seemingly effect on knowledge gain during the four weeks of the study. Because interest at the end of the study could be affected by not only viewing the television programs but also some other outside influences, the posttest measure controls for such influences. The posttest measure is also better suited for mediation analysis: If political interest accounts for some of the relationship between

viewing a news program and political knowledge, then I would expect that the relationship between TV program and knowledge might lessen when including the mechanism by which this relationship is facilitated. In other words, if including political interest in the model results in interest predicting knowledge gain, while diminishing the relationship between TV program and knowledge gain, then this would suggest that television exposure is transmitting its influence through political interest. For these reasons, the posttest political interest index scores are a more valid measure to use in the model than the pretest. Further as the dependent variable, I will include the posttest knowledge score adjusted for "don't know" responses. As discussed above, it is the more accurate measure, as it statistically reduces the penalty for not guessing (defaulting to the "don't know" option).

With the adjusted knowledge index as the dependent variable and controlling for pretest knowledge and posttest political interest, the model results in significant differences between the network news treatment and both the control groups (at the .05 level), while the significance between the political comedy treatment and control groups disappears. This provides strong evidence that political comedy and network news are affecting political knowledge gain in different ways. This model is illustrated in Table 6.11 below.

Table 6.11: Analysis of Covariance: Comparing Difference in Means for the Fixed Effects of TV Program Exposure on Posttest Knowledge (Adjusted Index), Controlling for Pretest Knowledge and Posttest Political Interest

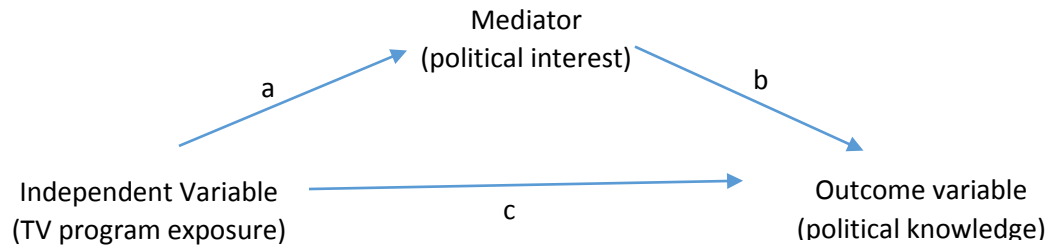
TV Program (I)	*TV Program (J)*	*Mean Difference (I-J)*	*Std. Error*	*Sig.*[b]
No Exposure (mean=8.72)	The Daily Show (mean=9.95) NBC Nightly News (mean=10.56) Entertainment Tonight (mean=9.04)	-1.225 -1.839** -.322	.694 .670 .689	.474 .039 1.00
The Daily Show (mean=9.45)	NBC Nightly News (mean=10.56) Entertainment Tonight (mean=9.04)	-.614 .904	.528 .555	1.00 .630
NBC Nightly News (mean=10.56)	Entertainment Tonight (mean=9.04)	1.518**	.524	.025

Source: Author's calculations based on Media Engagement Study at Delta College

[b.] Adjusted for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni

**Denotes significance at the .05 level.

The Daily Show treatment has been shown to cause an increase in political interest. This correlation results in multicollinearity when the effects of the independent variable (TV program) and mediator (political interest) on the dependent variable (political knowledge) are estimated (Baron and Kenny 1986). As a result, there is a reduction in power of the coeffiecients in measuring the relationship between TV program and political knowledge. The model perfectly fits the conditions posed by Baron and Kenny (1986) for political interest as a mediating variable. According to the authors, a variable functions as a mediator when "a) variations in levels of the independent variable significantly account for variations in the presumed mediator (i.e. Path *a* below) b) variations in the mediator significantly account for variations in the dependent variable (i.e. path *b*) and c) when paths *a* and *b* are controlled, a previously significant relation between the independent and dependent variables is no longer significant, with the strongest demonstration occurring when path *c* is zero" (1176). This relationship is illustrated by the following diagram:



The ANCOVA models in the present chapter, as well as chapter 5, provide evidence for the mediating relationship between political interest and political knowledge. Chapter 5 demonstrated that in every model, *The Daily Show* emerged as the strongest predictor of gains in political interest (path a). Meanwhile, exposure to the political comedy program also resulted in political knowledge gains, compared to the *Entertainment Tonight* control group (path *c*). Yet, as illustrated in Table 6.11, these gains lessened when introducing posttest political interest as a

covariate. With a significance of .00 between posttest political interest and the adjusted political knowledge index, path b also holds in the statistical analysis. That *The Daily Show* would influence political learning through the vehicle of political interest confirms previous research that has found soft news is more effective at forming impressions and attitudes (Johnson et al 1999; Lee and Capella 2001; Pfau et al 2001; Young 2004; Moy et al 2005; Niven et al 2003). Yet, the results of the present analysis departs from previous work in that it holds hard and soft news to the same standard, and in doing so, finds that political comedy and network news were equally effective in improving knowledge of current political events. Yet the path to gaining knowledge from political comedy also includes heightening political interest, a more long-lasting attitude than recall of facts. As established in chapter 5, watching political comedy resulted in greater enjoyment of conversations involving politics. Talking about political developments could reinforce learning and interest. Further drawing on previous research, humorous messages require greater effort to process than non-humorous messages (Wanzer et al 2010), thus it is likely that watching *The Daily Show* made a greater impression on viewers than watching *NBC News*. The cognitive process required to "get the joke" could facilitate retaining information.

Conclusions

If political comedy were on trial to determine whether it has a positive effect on requisite knowledge for being a politically engaged citizen, this chapter provides mixed evidence as to whether it is as effective at informing citizens as is a network news broadcasts. Importantly, the ANCOVA with the difference in means estimator consistently resulted in a difference indistinguishable from zero between post-knowledge levels of those watching *The Daily Show* and *NBC Nightly News*. This sheds light on the dispute over whether viewers can gain political knowledge from watching political comedy shows – at least among populations of community

college students. Perhaps the difference between hard and soft news isn't as great as we might think. Although hard new programs at least appear to follow standards of journalistic integrity, when it comes to political coverage, they do cover many of the same stories as soft news. In fact, in *The Daily Show*, which covered fewer stories in an average broadcast than *NBC* in its broadcast, more time was spent on each political story. One half-hour episode of *TDS* featured between three and five stories, while one half-hour episode of *NBC* featured between seven and 13 stories. While *The Daily Show* covered serious topics with a humorous twist, *NBC* included more personal interest stories. The amount of time devoted to political content on each show was very comparable.

While the differences between the network news treatment and both control groups was consistently statistically significant, the difference between *The Daily Show* and *Entertainment Tonight* evaporated when controlling for posttest political interest. This strongly suggests that the most important impact political comedy may have on one's political learning is to pique political interest, which in turn, stimulates learning. This may have more enduring effects than a direct impact on knowledge, as attitudes remain long after they discard factual information (McGraw, Lodge and Stroh 1990).

Interestingly, in most of the models, the difference between exposures that featured political content (*NBC* and *TDS*) and the *Entertainment Tonight* group were greater than the differences between these two conditions and the no-exposure control group. This is especially surprising considering that the *Entertainment Tonight* group contained some students who were taking a political science class, while the no exposure control group did not. Thus, we would expect that even if watching *ET* had no effect on their political knowledge that perhaps discussions in class would. However, the effect of the political science dummy on political knowledge on the

post-survey knowledge scores is insignificant. This may suggest, as Prior (2005 and 2007) demonstrates, that consuming purely entertainment media has a negative effect on political knowledge. Entertainment draws its viewers away from more substantive political news programming that would positively affect their political knowledge. My speculation is that in their news consumption outside the study, the students in the *Entertainment Tonight* group opted to learn more about the content featured on their program, as opposed to seeking out more politically related content. In this way, watching ET had a net negative draw on their political knowledge; indeed, it may have been better for them to experience no change in their viewing habits.

It is clear from the statistical analysis that participants in *The Daily Show* group did learn something from watching political comedy. Although those who watched *NBC Nightly News* fared better in most of the models, relative to the control groups, the results indicate that watching *The Daily Show* facilitated political learning through political interest. In analyzing political comedy's effects on favorable democratic outcomes, it's important to remember that a prerequisite to experiencing any gain in knowledge is the motivation to tune in. As chapter 4 demonstrates, in their natural environment, this sample of mostly young adults lacks such motivation. In this light, perhaps the greatest utility of political comedy is that it will spur political interest and thus cultivate the motivation to consume political news. As chapter 5 demonstrates, viewing political comedy is associated with a significant change in political interest, which over time, could provide the necessary motivation to consume political news in other formats that have a greater effect on political knowledge. This political knowledge could lead to greater political participation and thus greater influence and representation in the political system. This finding supports of Baum (2003a), who concludes that the strength of soft news lies in altering the attitudes of politically inattentive viewers. Soft news contributes to the "on-line processing" of information (McGraw, Lodge and

Stroh 1990), altering how people feel about the political world in such a way that facilitates political learning.

APPENDIX 6.A
Complete Listing of Political Knowledge Questions on the Media Engagement Study Posttest

1) The U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs is located in what branch of government? a. Legislative, b. Executive, c. Judicial, d. Congress, e. Don't know. Correct answer: b
2) When is the next election for members of the United States Congress? a. November 2014, b. November 2015, c. November 2016, d. November 2018, e. Don't know. Correct answer: a
3) Compared with other countries around the world, voter turnout in the United States: a. Is about the same; b. Is higher than most; c. Is lower than most; d. Is lower in national elections but higher in state and local elections; e. Don't know. Correct answer: c
4) Who was responsible for negotiating the deal that exchanged U.S. Army Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl who was held in captivity in Afghanistan for 5 Taliban commanders held in U.S. custody? a. President Obama and his national security advisors; b. The Intelligence Committee in the U.S. House of Representatives; c. The Federal Bureau of Investigation; d. Chief Justice of the United States John Roberts; e. Don't know. Correct answer: a
5) In which of the following countries did an uprising of the people lead to the ouster of the president, only to be replaced by a military leader who won a recent election while restricting civil liberties such as freedom of speech and dissent? a. India; b. Pakistan; c. Egypt; d. Russia; e. Don't know. Correct answer: c
6) Which of the following is expected to run for the Democratic Presidential Nomination in 2016? a.Paul Ryan, b. Hillary Clinton, c. Marco Rubio, d. Jeb Bush, e. Don't know. Correct answer: b
7) When current public officials are running for re-election, they are: a. More likely to win than someone running for office for the first time, b. Less likely to win than someone running for office for the first time, c. Neither more nor less likely to win than someone running for office for the first time, d. More likely to win in state and local elections but less likely to win in national elections, e. Don't know. Correct answer: a
8) When the New York Times fired its executive editor Jill Abramson earlier this year, a firestorm of controversy erupted over: a. Whether women editors are held to the same standards as men editors; b. Whether the move was motivated by anti-gay sentiment; c. Whether she was fired because of her conservative political views; d. Whether she was fired because of her criticism of the Obama administration; e. Don't know. Correct answer: a
9) In which of the following countries has the president used chemical weapons to attack his opponents in a civil war, which erupted in 2011? a. Venezuela, b. Yugoslavia, c. Syria, d. South Africa, e. Don't know. Correct answer: c
10) Who is the president of Russia? a. Bashar al-Assad, b. Vladimir Putin, c. Hugo Chavez, d. David Cameron, e. Don't know. Correct answer: b
11) Edward Snowden: a. Was awarded the Purple Heart for courageously rescuing a military dog in Afghanistan; b. Is accused of killing innocent civilians at a village in Afghanistan; c. Is accused of illegally spying and stealing secrets from the U.S. government; d. Is a CIA agent responsible for identifying the whereabouts of Osama bin Laden; e. Don't know. Correct answer: c

12) The U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs has recently come under fire due to allegations that: a. It used taxpayer dollars to give hefty bonuses to doctors at VA hospitals, b. It employed doctors at VA hospitals who are not U.S. citizens, c. It falsified the number of days veterans have to wait before seeing a doctor at VA hospitals, d. It spent excessive sums of money on renovating VA hospitals while veterans received substandard health care, e. Don't know. Correct answer: c
13) True or false. In some states, including Texas, it is legal to carry long guns out in the open in public places like restaurants and convenience stores. a. True, b. False, c. Don't know. Correct answer: a
14) With regard to the War in Afghanistan, President Obama: a. Wants to wind down the war and bring the troops home; b. Wants to send more American troops to stabilize the country; c. Wants to take troops out of Afghanistan and transfer them to Iraq; d. Wants to keep troops in Afghanistan and also send them to Syria; e. Don't know. Correct answer: a
15) What effect has the Tea Party had on the Republican Party? a. The Tea Party has pulled the Republican Party in a more conservative direction, b. The Tea Party has pulled the Republican Party in a more liberal direction, c. The Tea Party has pulled the Republican Party in a more moderate direction, d. The Tea Party hasn't had any effect on the Republican Party, e. Don't know. Correct answer: a
16) The U.S. Justice Department filed criminal charges against which of the following countries, alleging it spied illegally on American businesses? a. China, b. Mexico, c. Nigeria, d. Russia, e. Don't know. Correct answer: a
17) Which of the following is NOT a controversy over the prisoner exchange agreement that freed U.S. Amy Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl? a. Officials at the White House did not consult with Congress over the deal; b. Allegations that Sgt. Bergdahl deserted his army platoon; c. Criticism over negotiating with the Taliban, which the U.S. considers a terrorist organization; d. Criticism that members of Sgt. Bergdahl's platoon never searched for him when he went missing; e. Don't know. Correct answer: d
18) Which of the following is NOT a Republican Party issue position? a. Pro-life (in favor of laws to restrict abortion), b. Pro-gun rights (against gun control laws), c. Anti-Obamacare (want to repeal the 2010 Affordable Care Act), d. Pro-Immigration reform that allows illegal immigrants already in the United States to stay here without penalty, e. Don't know. Correct answer: d
19) Which of the following would be MOST likely to support environmental regulations intended to cut greenhouses gases and combat climate change? a. Democrats, b. Republicans, c. Tea Party members, d. Conservatives, e. Don't know

APPENDIX 6.B
Complete Listing of Media Engagement Study Pretest Knowledge Questions

1) Who was the Secretary of State in 2012 when an attack on the American embassy in Benghazi, Libya, killed the U.S. ambassador and three others? a.John Kerry, b. John McCain, c. Hillary Clinton, d. Condoleezza Rice, e. Don't know
2) Which of the following countries has erupted in violence in recent months over the controversy of whether to seek stronger ties to Russia? a. Ireland, b. Bulgaria, c. Ukraine, d. Turkey, e. Don't know
3) Which of the following does the news media NOT mention as a possible 2016 Republican presidential candidate? a. Kathleen Sebelius, b. Rand Paul, c. Marco Rubio, d. Jeb Bush, e. Don't know
4) The hashtag #BringBackOurGirls is intended to raise awareness about a. the lack of political representation for young girls in India, b. the failure of the Egyptian government to protect young girls from sexual assault, c. a movement in Russia to bring education attainment of school girls to the same level as boys, d. the kidnapping of school girls in Nigeria by a terrorist group, e. Don't know
5) Earlier this year, Cliven Bundy of Nevada and his supporters were engaged in a standoff with federal officials over a. illegally grazing his cattle on federal lands, b. violating federal laws banning guns in U.S. government buildings, c. illegally fishing on federal waterways, d. illegally hunting antelope and deer in national parks, e. Don't know
6) Who is the Majority Leader in the U.S. Senate? a. Republican John Boehner, b. Democrat Harry Reid, c. Republican Mitch McConnell, d. Democrat Al Franken, e. Don't know
7) What public office does John Kerry currently hold? a. Secretary of State, b. U.S. Senator, c. Representative in the U.S. House, d. Attorney General, e. Don't know
8) Which of the following is leading the charge to investigate what happened in the aftermath of the attack on the U.S. embassy in Benghazi in 2012? a. Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives, b. Republicans in the U.S. Senate, c. Democrats in the U.S. House of Representatives, d. Democrats in the U.S. Senate, e. Don't know

CHAPTER 7
Conclusion: On the Role of Political Comedy in Fostering Political Interest and Knowledge

For the people to govern themselves through representative institutions would seem to require a certain amount of political competence on the part of the voter. Without attentive, knowledgeable citizens, how can democratic government work? This question has captivated political scientists since the mid-20th century when research began to unveil the failure of most American citizens to live up to the democratic ideal. Now more than ever, political information must compete with other more entertaining and immediately gratifying pursuits (Prior 2007). Without a basic interest in this information, citizens will remain politically ignorant, with dire consequences for the future of democracy. After all, as John Stuart Mill (1862) contends, citizens have unique interests, and they alone can protect those interests through representative institutions. As previous research has demonstrated, representatives cater to those who make their voices heard through voting and other forms of political participation (Griffin and Newman 2005; Martin 2004). A root cause of the political inequalities evident in the United States today is simply that some people are politically interested and some are not. But the simplicities end there. What makes some citizens more interested than others?

This dissertation has confirmed what Milbrath and Goel (1977) concluded, that any efforts to increase political information among the populace must begin with gaining and maintaining the interest of citizens. With the advent of the Internet, cable television and the explosion of media outlets, their conclusion is truer now than ever. In this high-choice environment, citizens face the decision of whether to seek out political information or ignore it altogether. This dissertation has explored the effects of one source that is already gaining and maintaining the interest of young adults: Political comedy. My research suggests that over all, political comedy's role in generating outcomes favorable to democracy is positive. In this closing chapter, my aim is to discuss the

implications of the results of my study, how it fits into the broader body of literature and to address its limitations, as well as exciting possibilities for future research.

Findings: Community college students' interest in politics; and political comedy's effect on political interest and knowledge

My empirical investigation began in chapter 4 with a description of the state of political interest of community college students, mostly in their formative years. This research confirmed what a growing body of literature on youth political participation (see for example Wattenberg 2012) has found, namely, that the community college students in this study (most of whom are young adults) are largely apolitical and have no desire to be engaged politically. This research contributes to existing literature by categorizing responses to an open-ended question regarding whether respondents pay attention to politics and why. Asking community college students why, in their own words, they do/do not participate, provides a glimpse of their impressions of the political world not measured by aggregate data in closed-ended questions. This method has found that the sample of students for this study believes politics to be boring, intimidating and complex, not worth their time to figure out. Any effort to become informed and engage, they believed, would be fruitless. This is an important insight for those who educate community college students to assume the role democracy demands of them. These students must be convinced that their attention to and participation in politics matters. Unless they believe that being informed and involved will result in greater representation of their interests, they will not find this endeavor worthy of the investment of their time. Reinforcing this message in college classrooms will work to remedy political inequality in the United States, as community college students are among the nation's most disadvantaged and disempowered populations.

Analyzing the students' open-ended comments also suggests that an intervention that brings politics to the level of community college students and makes it more entertaining holds

promise to heighten their interest and convince them that the political world is within their grasp. Such an intervention has potential to change their psychological predisposition toward engaging in the political world. An effective intervention would be one that changes not only how they think about the political world, but how they feel toward it. This is not to say any potential intervention must fit this criteria, yet it is clear that without first cultivating interest, efforts on the part of educators will lack long-term impact. Chapter 4 demonstrated that many community college students do not "choose" to be politically inattentive; this condition is not voluntary. As evidenced by the 37 percent of the sample who could not even identify their ideology, these students' life experiences have set them on a course to be disengaged from the political system. Prior (2009) demonstrates that political interest is remarkably stable over the course of one's lifetime, thus, without a shift of course, these students may be lost to the political system for the rest of their lives.

That shift of course will only take place through an intervention young adults are already experiencing out of their own motivation. Because most young people are not intrinsically motivated to seek out political information for the sake of becoming a knowledgeable citizen, any exposure to political information must piggy-back on their existing motivations. As chapter 4 demonstrated, the number one motivation the community college students in this study bring to their media experience is to be entertained. Chapter 5, then, explored whether Jon Stewart's brand of political comedy makes its viewers, who largely tune in for entertainment purposes, more politically interested.

To measure political interest, this research developed a unique composite index that captures both individuals' attitudes, as well as how those attitudes have manifest into the most basic of actions. By providing a greater range of options for individuals to position themselves on

the four 0 to 10-point scales, it more precisely identifies an individual's political interest. Measuring the difference in index scores before and after the assigned exposures provides evidence as to political comedy's impact on political interest, relative to network news, entertainment news and no change in viewing habits. Chapter 5 demonstrated that in every AN(C)OVA model, the difference between *The Daily Show* and the no-exposure control group emerged as statistically significant, even when controlling for pretest political interest and students taking a political science class. In every ANCOVA and ANOVA model, *The Daily Show* showed the greatest impact on change in political interest from the pretest to posttest. In most cases, the difference in mean change from pre to posttest was about 3 points greater for *The Daily Show* than the no-exposure control group.

Deconstructing the political interest index, I found that the political comedy treatment was most effective at instigating a change in respondent's enjoyment of learning about politics and discussing politics. Participants watching *The Daily Show* were significantly more likely to rate it as enjoyable, entertaining and funny, compared to the viewers in the other treatment groups. Meanwhile, *NBC Nightly News* viewers were more likely to rate that program as relevant. In bivariate correlations, I found that rating the programs as relevant and entertaining was correlated with a positive change in political interest throughout the course of the study. The higher participants rated their program as entertaining or relevant, the greater the increase in their political interest. For those participants who were among the least politically interested at the start, rating their program as entertaining had the greatest effect on their change in political interest. Meanwhile, for those who were already politically interested at the beginning, rating their program as relevant had the greatest positive impact on their change in political interest.

Once again, these results have implications for those interested in preparing community college students to become engaged citizens. Graduation requirements of many colleges and universities include political science courses, with the hope that they will foster skills and values necessary for active citizenship. For political science professors with this goal, understanding interventions with potential to heighten political interest is worthwhile. For those students who start out very apolitical, making politics entertaining will pique their interest. Showing episodes of *The Daily Show* has potential to draw students into the subject matter in a way that might engage them in a subsequent lecture. For the most politically interested students at the start, continuing to demonstrate the relevance of politics to their daily lives and the world around them will have the greatest impact on their political interest throughout the semester. A combination of humor and current events might reach across the spectrum and engage both the most politically engaged and disengaged students.

With regard to political knowledge, political comedy had a stronger indirect effect by piquing viewers' interest, which subsequently enhances learning. Political comedy may contribute more to its viewers' tally of emotions toward political subjects than to the facts stored away for future use. Scholars of this on-line processing model have found the affect remains long after the individual discards the information (for example, see McCraw, Lodge and Stroh 1990). This model is useful for explaining the findings of this study. In every AN(C)OVA model employed, a significant difference (at the .05 level) was identified in posttest political knowledge scores between participants who viewed *NBC Nightly News* and those who viewed *Entertainment Tonight*. While this was also true of the difference between *TDS* and *ET* when employing the posttest knowledge index corrected for don't know responses, the difference between the political comedy treatment and control group disappeared when controlling for political interest.

Meanwhile, the significant difference between NBC and ET remained when introducing the political interest covariate. This suggests that network news and political comedy affect learning in different ways, an important finding of this research. The combined analysis from chapters 5 and 6 suggests that viewers of *TDS* learned through the vehicles of political interest, while the viewers of *NBC* gained information more directly simply watching the program. While political comedy was more effective at altering political interest, network news was more effective at imparting facts to be recalled at a later date. That the significant effect of political comedy on political knowledge disappears when introducing political interest as a covariate is strong evidence of political interest as a mediator in the relationship between political comedy and political knowledge (See Barron and Kenney 1986 for a discussion of mediating variables). Perhaps the greatest lesson learned by viewers of *TDS* was not the factual knowledge stored into memory, but the perception of politics being something that they could, in fact, take an interest in. Because feelings linger longer than facts, political comedy may have a more substantial effect on long-term political engagement of its viewers. Previous research would further explain this finding in that because humorous messages involve more complex cognitive processes, viewers may have brought them to mind more frequently, thus facilitating the learning process (Young 2008; Wanzer et al 2010; Alden et al 2000). Because comedy associates and rewards learning about complex political issues with laughter, this programming is especially appealing to those who lack the motivation to stay tuned into the political world (Goel and Dolan 2001; Baum 2003b).

Media Engagement Study in broader literature context

Previous research has demonstrated that today's young adults are more politically disinterested and ignorant than any other age group in the United States today, and perhaps more so than any other generation in the history of survey research (Wattenberg 2012). This apolitical

attitude is concerning because previous research has found interest in politics to be the strongest predictor of political knowledge and participation (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). Lacking experiences in their childhood and adolescence to cultivate political interest, many of the community college students in my study have entered their formative years destined to a lifetime of alienation from the political system. These findings are concerning to those who believe that democracy works best when its citizens are informed and involved in their political system. While political news and information is more accessible than ever, the present study has found that the millennial generation is passing it up for more entertaining media options. The decline of broadcast television, accompanied by a rise of cable television and other political infotainment media, has altered the environment of media choice in which today's young consumers live (Prior 2007). With the advent of political comedy, however, gaining political information and being entertained are not mutually exclusive goals. The rationally calculating citizen, thinking of expected pay-offs for engaging with political information (Downs 1957), lacks a concern for being informed for democracy's sake, but may be willing to stomach political information if it fulfills an alternative goal of providing a good laugh. Without the requisite political interest to tune into hard news, soft news audiences may become attentive to political developments as a byproduct of tuning in for the entertainment value of such programming (Baum 2003b). Data has shown that young people are already accessing this promising intervention of their own accord, as *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* were the one off-line "news" source that young adults viewed in rates higher than older adults (Pew Research Center 2012). Further, embarking on this project I was informed by previous research that found soft news is more effective at influencing attitudes and impressions than improving issue and procedural knowledge (Johnson et al 1999; Lee and Capella 2001; Pfau et al 2001; Young 2004; Moy et al 2005; Niven

et al 2003). The on-line processing model was particularly instructive, purporting that individuals keep a subconscious tally of affective evaluations to form impressions (Kim and Vishak 2008). For my study, the target of impressions is one's place in the political world, and the tally involves judgments of whether one should develop an attitude of interest toward politics. By tuning into political comedy, otherwise apolitical individuals may find that they have the capacity to understand the political world as it is presented by Jon Stewart.

While previous studies have already established that young adults, in their natural environment, are already watching political comedy, the effects of this medium on political interest and political knowledge were largely unexplored prior to the present research. While previous work had found a correlation between viewing political comedy and greater levels of political interest and knowledge (see, for example Young and Tisinger 2006; Brewer and Cau 2006; Pfau and Semmler 2007; McLeod et al 1996), much of this work demonstrates correlation, rather than causation. Cao (2010) found that among the 20 percent of *TDS* viewers who are apolitical, exposure to the show heightened their likelihood of following news about the war in Afghanistan and the 2004 presidential election. However, the cross-sectional survey design of this research is problematic for establishing the direction of the relationship. One noteworthy experimental study found *The Daily Show* heightened attention paid to one particular news story, but stopped short of measuring its impact on political interest generally (Xenos and Becker 2009).

That media use can be predicted by the dependent variable of interest is a methodological problem that has long been identified by media effects researchers. Slater (2007) describes the relationship as one of reinforcing spirals, which is based on the assumption that a type of media use influences attitudes and behaviors, all the while those attitudes and behaviors in turn influence that type of media use. Circumventing this problem to identify causality can be best accomplished

through an experimental study with pre and posttests. This methodological approach allows for measuring a change in political interest and knowledge from the beginning to the end of the study, isolating the effects of the independent variable by allowing each participant to act as his/her own control. Taking into account the political interest and knowledge participants brought into the experiments strengthens the explanatory power of my models and allows me to predict with greater certainty the impact of exposure to political comedy on political interest and knowledge.

This research has conceptualized political interest as a *psychological predisposition to engage in the political world.* This definition attempts to capture two dimensions of political interest: an intrinsic curiosity, as well as a propensity to engage. It most closely resembles Milbrath and Goel's (1977) description of "psychological involvement," which they state "refers to the degree to which citizens are interested and concerned about politics and public affairs" (46). A unique contribution of this study lies in its measurement of political interest with a 40-point scale designed to capture both intrinsic curiosity and political engagement. The 40-point political interest scale is a composite of four 0 to 10-point scales measuring both self-assessed political interest and likelihood of being involved, as well as how these attitudes may manifest into enjoyment of learning about and discussing politics. The scale is ideal for identifying subtle changes, whereas the conventional measures did not. My 40-point scale strongly correlates with the conventional political interest measures used by the ANES since the 1960s, which have been found in previous studies to predict political knowledge and participation (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Verba et al 1995). The 40-point index, however, provides a more accurate and precise measurement of this attitude, as it can detect how many points up or down the scale an intervention changed a subject's political interest.

Further, my measurement of political knowledge, comprised of questions relating to content featured in the programs viewed by participants, levels the playing field for soft and hard news in determining the effects of each political learning. This addresses Baum's (2003) concern that in comparing effects on political knowledge, soft news is unfairly held to hard-news standards. Also, by accounting for "don't know" responses through a corrected index that reducing the penalty for not guessing, my research introduces an innovative measure that addresses concerns over including "don't know" as a response in knowledge-based questions. Using the knowledge measure adjusted for "don't know" responses strengthened the results, demonstrating that changes in political knowledge in the treatment and control groups could not be attributed to a greater likelihood of guessing. The simple calculation of the knowledge index adjusted for don't know responses holds promise for being duplicated in future studies measuring effects on political knowledge.

Limitations and promises for future research

The limitations of this study are that it measures change in political interest and knowledge gain over a short span of just four weeks. Whether these gains would persist over a longer term is outside the scope and resources of this study. An exciting path for future research would be to replicate this experimental design and measure the impact of political comedy exposures on voter turnout in the next election. Because the sample of young adults was drawn from a community college, the results of this study may be of greatest benefit to those who seek to educate this population with the goal of preparing them for active citizenship. However, the results may not be generalizable to the entire population of young people.

This research suggests that promising avenues for future studies will be to explore political knowledge, as both a dependent and independent variable, using a measure that adjusts scores to

reduce penalties for not guessing. In my study, using this corrected knowledge index strengthened the results and demonstrated that the significant differences could not be explained away by a greater likelihood of guessing by participants exposed to certain treatments. Also with regard to measurement, subsequent studies on political interest may find that employing the 40-point political interest index will allow for more precise and accurate measurement of this variable on both sides of the equation.

This study has been motivated by a concern for political equality in the United States and the effects of changing news consumption patterns on representative government. The disengagement of young adults from politics leaves this group severely disadvantaged in the American political system. They have the highest rates of unemployment and the highest percentage without health insurance; overall, they have accumulated mountains of college debt (Draut 2006). The statistical analysis in the preceding pages demonstrates that over all, political comedy programs such as *The Daily Show* have potential to positively impact the political engagement of their young adult viewers by drawing them into the political system, when they would otherwise tune out altogether. Although the direct effects on political knowledge are not as strong as those of political interest, the latter may be a more enduring attitude that could generate a propensity to seek out more serious political news coverage. Over all, there is more to celebrate than disparage in the advent of political comedy in today's high choice media environment.

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ABSTRACT

**LAUGHING OUR WAY TO STRONGER DEMOCRACY:
POLITICAL COMEDY'S POTENTIAL TO EQUALIZE POLITICAL INTEREST
AND POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS**

by

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Political comedy is the one off-line news source – albeit soft news – that young adults access in higher rates than older adults. They are tuning into political comedy to be entertained, but while watching, they also get a healthy dose of politics. For otherwise apolitical young people, does exposure to politics in this format heighten their political interest? Does it make them more politically knowledgeable citizens? Through a 4-weeklong experiment, this study tests the effects of exposure to *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* on political interest and political knowledge in a sample of community college students in mid-Michigan. Changes in attitudes and knowledge levels are analyzed through a pre and posttest, comparing the group who watched *The Daily Show* to groups who watched *NBC Nightly News*, *Entertainment Tonight*, and a no-exposure control group. Measuring political interest with a 40-point composite index, results from ANOVA and ANCOVA models find a statistically significant difference in change in political interest between the political comedy treatment group and the no-exposure control group. Results testing political comedy's effects on political knowledge indicate that network news has a more direct effect on learning of current political events, while political interest impacts learning through the mediating

variable of political interest. The difference in political knowledge change between the political comedy and network news treatments was indistinguishable from zero. Overall, the results of the study indicate that political comedy has potential to enhance democracy by drawing in otherwise apolitical viewers by heightening their political interest and exposure to politics.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Lisa Lawrason is an associate professor of political science at Delta College, where she has taught American politics and Constitutional Issues courses for nearly 10 years. Both inside and outside the classroom, she devotes her efforts to politically empowering community college students, inviting them to engage in the civic lives of their community and providing opportunities to do so. Through her efforts, Delta College has become a national leader in civic engagement. The college is one of the original 23 signatory institutions to The Democracy Commitment – a national association of community colleges dedicated to preparing students for active citizenship – and Lawrason is a co-campus coordinator of this initiative. In this role, she has spearheaded projects such as Public Achievement, in which college students mentor K-12 students through a process of identifying and addressing issues in their school/community. She has also written a political action manual for college students, guiding them through a process of organizing others to effect positive change. Her work on this and other initiatives has been highlighted in several presentations at The Democracy Commitment/American Democracy Project annual meetings. Most recently, her work on assessing the impact of civic engagement projects on political attitudes and future participation has garnered interest not only at The Democracy Commitment meeting, but also by the League for Innovation. She is also the advisor for the Citizens In Action student club, chair for Delta's Civic Engagement General Education Resource Group and serves on the national steering committee for The Democracy Commitment. Lawrason is a past president of the Michigan Political Science Association and has presented numerous times at its annual meeting, where she won the best paper award in 2014. Lawrason is a two-time recipient of the King-Chavez-Parks fellowship and a three-time recipient of the Graduate Professional Scholarship at Wayne State. She is a recipient of the Don and Betty Carlyon Endowed Teaching Chair and Michigan Campus Compact's Community Service Learning award. Lawrason, her husband and two beautiful daughters live in the Gladwin, Mich. area, where she is active in her church and community.