PRIMING EFFECTS OF LATE-NIGHT COMEDY

Patricia Moy, Michael A. Xenos, and Verena K. Hess

ABSTRACT

Having become fully integrated into the contemporary political landscape, infotainment-oriented media extend Americans' traditional news (e.g. newspaper, radio, and television) to include a greater number of sources for political information, and in some cases, political mobilization. Given the increasing prominence of infotainment-oriented media in contemporary politics, this study addresses the effects of one particular type of infotainment—late-night comedy—during the 2000 presidential campaign. Specifically, we are interested in whether watching late-night comedy shows influences viewers' evaluations of the candidates who have appeared on these shows; in particular, we investigate priming as the mechanism by which such influences occur. Findings from the 2000 National Annenberg Election Survey (N=11,482) indicate that evaluations of candidates are based in part on respondents’ sociodemographics, perceptions of candidates to handle certain issues, and their character traits. There was a main effect of watching late-night comedy on evaluations of candidates; more importantly, viewers were more likely than nonviewers to base their evaluations of George W. Bush on character traits after he appeared on The Late Show with David Letterman.

A large corpus of political communication scholarship grounded in the election context has documented the effects of traditional news sources, most notably newspapers, radio, and television (e.g. Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948; McLeod et al., 1996), and election-specific media events, such as debates (e.g. Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003) and conventions (Holbrook, 1996). Of course, recent research also has focused on the Internet (e.g. Bimber & Davis, 2003; Margolis & Resnick, 2000).

Another emerging phenomenon are the entertainment-oriented media that have begun to serve as key sources of political information, and in some cases, attitude change. Beginning with Richard Nixon’s 1968 appearance on the variety show Laugh-In, American politicians increasingly have used comedy shows to emphasize their non-political persona (Kolbert, 2004) and to reach potential voters. But to what end? To what extent do politicians’ appearances on infotainment-oriented media influence citizens’ perceptions of them? After all, research has

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long indicated that citizens’ political decisions are grounded not only in candidates’ issue stances, but also their persona and credibility (Popkin, 1991).

Given the critical role of such media outlets in contemporary politics, this study seeks to examine their impact during the 2000 presidential campaign. Specifically, we address the effects of late-night comedy, a growing ‘nontraditional’ source of news (Pew Research Center, 2000; Sella, 2000), and the mechanisms by which they influence evaluations of the candidates who appear on these shows. We begin with a brief contextualization of late-night comedy in the 2000 campaign, and discuss priming as a mechanism of influence. We then present analyses from a national data set to illustrate the extent to which late-night comedy viewing may impact political attitudes.

LATE-NIGHT COMEDY IN ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

Late-night comedy’s recent rise to prominence within American political communication follows decades of political messages appearing in entertainment content media. Notable contemporary examples include then-presidential candidate Bill Clinton playing the saxophone on The Arsenio Hall Show in 1992. During the 2000 presidential campaign, contenders Al Gore and George W. Bush went on the talk-show circuit, including late-night comedy programs such as The Late Show with David Letterman and The Tonight Show with Jay Leno. Indeed, these shows reached a wide audience. Ratings reports from September 2000 indicate that David Letterman and Jay Leno respectively reached between approximately three and five million viewers each night (Greppi, 2000). More importantly, the significance of such levels of viewership extends beyond numbers: A Pew Research Center poll (2000) indicates that 47 percent of Americans under 30 years of age get some campaign news from late-night shows, suggesting the potential of popular, non-traditional media to reach and potentially sway this group of younger voters. Late-night comedy then is only one of many entertainment-based venues from which audience members can receive and process information about their political world.

Prominence notwithstanding, late-night comedy viewers are treated to 60 minutes of entertainment content, including a monologue in which the host jokes about events of the day, after which celebrities appear for an interview. Candidates’ appearances on these outlets allow them to be more personal and potentially convey messages directly to an audience, without working through journalists’ lenses of interpretation and sound-bites. Researchers interested in late-night comedy have investigated joke content (Niven, Lichter, & Amundson, 2003) and the effects of exposure to such programming on character trait evaluations (Young, 2004), third-person perceptions (Hess, 2001), and various aspects of citizenship (Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005). We add to this growing body of scholarship and examine, as our first research question, the effects of late-night comedy viewing on evaluations of political candidates.
PRIMING AS A MECHANISM OF INFLUENCE

To the extent that citizens’ views of candidates may change after their appearance on a late-night comedy, we are interested particularly in priming as the mechanism of influence. Media priming refers to how media content can influence individuals’ subsequent behaviors and/or judgments related to that content (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Carpentier, 2002). Situated as an extension of agenda-setting, which posits that heightened media coverage of an issue raises the salience of that issue among audience members (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), priming occurs when this heightened salience allows the issue to become the basis of subsequent evaluations (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973; Scheufele, 2000). However, media coverage can increase not only the salience of issues, but also the salience of certain image characteristics (Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981).

Priming effects have emerged from content appearing in news (e.g. Valentino, 1999), rock videos (e.g. Hansen & Hansen, 1988), newsletters (e.g. Power, Murphy, & Coover, 1996), and—particularly germane to our study—television entertainment programming (e.g. Holbert et al., 2003). Against this backdrop, we pose our second research question: To what extent can exposure to late-night comedy prime evaluations of the candidates?

METHODS

Data for this study come from the 2000 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES), a rolling cross-sectional study based on surveys administered to a random sample of Americans, from November 1999 through mid-January 2001. Overall, 58,373 telephone interviews were completed (overall response rate, 25–31 percent; Waldman, 2004). Given our focus on late-night comedy, we utilize the rolling cross-sectional data from September 29, 2000, through the night before Election Day, the period of time in which the candidates appeared on the Late Show with David Letterman and the Tonight Show with Jay Leno. (Bush appeared with Letterman on October 19, and followed up this appearance with Jay Leno on October 30. The next night, October 31, Gore was Jay Leno’s guest.) This subset of the data, on which our analyses are based, consists of the 11,482 respondents interviewed during this time period.

VARIABLES

Evaluations of candidates. Our criterion variable was a 0–100 point favorability/thermometer scale on which respondents were asked to rate both Bush and Gore.

1 The overall response rate reported by NAES is most similar to AAPOR’s RR3; the range reflects an adjustment based on $e$, an estimate of the percentage of numbers of indeterminate status that do not represent eligible households.
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(see Appendix for exact wording). Means across the respondents analyzed differed significantly between the two candidates ($t = 5.81, p < .001$), with Bush scoring higher at 57.39 (S.D. = 32.22) than Gore, at 54.26 (S.D. = 33.32).

Candidates and the issues. Several items in the dataset tapped respondents’ assessments of whether Gore or Bush would do a better job at handling certain issues: strengthening Social Security and protecting Medicare (26.1 percent Gore, 20.5 percent Bush); keeping the economy strong (25.1 percent Gore, 22.3 percent Bush); providing a strong military defense (15.8 percent Gore, 31.5 percent Bush); and doing a better job of improving education (24.5 percent Gore, 22.4 percent Bush).

Candidates’ character traits. In addition, respondents were provided a battery of phrases used to describe each candidate, and asked the extent to which they thought each phrase described the candidate. Original responses ranged from 1 (‘extremely well’) to 4 (‘not well’) and were reverse-coded for analyses. Phrases included references to character: ‘really cares about people like me’, ‘honest’, ‘inspiring’, ‘knowledgeable’, and ‘provides strong leadership’.

Late-night comedy viewing. Respondents were asked the number of nights in the past week they watched a late-night comedy show such as David Letterman or Jay Leno ($M = .63$, S.D. = 1.43). Because this measure does not directly tap respondents’ exposure to the actual candidate appearances, and because this study focuses on the effect of the appearances for members of the late-night comedy audience, this item was transformed into a measure that simply reflects whether someone watched late night comedy or not. Responses thus were recoded into a binary variable, with 22.4 percent having watched at least once in the past week.

Demographics. Traditional demographic variables were included in the analyses as control variables: gender (55 percent female); age ($M = 46.27$, S.D. = 16.62); education (with a mean level of some college); income (mean between $35,000 and $50,000); race (16 percent nonwhite); and affiliation with either the Republican or Democratic party (28.7 percent and 31.7 percent, respectively). The latter was recoded into a dummy variable (Republicans high).

Analytic Procedures

To test for priming effects, we divided the rolling cross-sectional data into six week-long increments. These seven-day increments derived from the exposure to a late-night comedy item, which asked respondents about their viewing of such content in the last week. More importantly, collapsing the data in this manner allowed us to compare late-night comedy viewers and non-viewers, both in the weeks prior to a given candidate’s appearance on a particular show, and in the week following his appearance.

Ultimately, the analyses comprised ordinary least squares regressions run on the data. According to these equations, summary evaluations of a given candidate
were a function of demographics, issue and trait evaluations, exposure to late-night comedy, and interaction terms capturing the differences in evaluation strategies between viewers and non-viewers, both before and after the candidate’s appearance. A significant difference in the interaction terms from one time period to another—barring coincidental events—suggests evidence of a priming effect.

RESULTS

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

With respect to character evaluations of Bush and Gore, statistically significant differences in respondent assessments emerged. In particular, respondents perceived Bush to be more honest, inspiring, and a leader, and rated him slightly warmer on the thermometer scale. Gore, on the other hand, was perceived to be more knowledgeable and caring (Table 1).

LATE-NIGHT COMEDY VIEWING AND CANDIDATE FAVORABILITY

The first research question asked about the effects of exposure to late-night comedy shows on evaluations of political candidates. As Figure 1 indicates, at the beginning of the relevant survey period, nonviewers’ favorability rating of Bush was significantly higher than that of viewers ($t=-2.31, p<.02$). In the second and third weeks of the survey period, which ended October 19 (the night of Bush’s appearance with David Letterman), there was no significant difference between the two groups. However, in the week immediately following Bush’s Late Show appearance, viewers’ favorability rating was significantly higher than nonviewers’ ($t=2.10, p<.04$). Ratings among both groups were equal in Weeks 5 and 6, even after Bush’s appearance on the Tonight Show.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bush</th>
<th>Gore</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Therometer rating</td>
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<td>54.26 (33.32)</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>2.69 (0.80)</td>
<td>2.58 (0.91)</td>
<td>7.54</td>
<td>10,881</td>
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</table>

*Note:* Entries are means with standard deviations in parentheses. For all measures other than 0–100 thermometer rating, scales: 4 = phrase describes candidate extremely well, 3 = quite well, 2 = not too well, 1 = not well at all. All comparisons are statistically significant at $p<.001$.  

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Though not shown, the favorability ratings for Gore were markedly different. Throughout the entire relevant survey period, late-night comedy viewers’ assessments of the Vice President were significantly higher than those held by nonviewers. These differences were consistently significant at $p < .05$ for all six weeks.

**Explaining the Favorability Ratings**

Our second research question concerned potential priming effects of viewing late-night comedy on favorability ratings. As Roskos-Ewoldsen et al. (2002) recommended, direct tests of media priming must include a control condition in the study design. The nature of the NAES data allows us to treat the candidates’ appearances with Letterman and Leno as a natural field experiment. Consequently, we compare the antecedents of candidates’ favorability ratings before and after their appearance (Weeks 1–3 vs. Week 4, for Bush, the candidate on whom we focus given the results reflected in Figure 1).

As shown in Table 2, favorability ratings of Bush, both before and after his appearance, were a function of respondents’ sociodemographic location (being male and white), their political affiliation (being Republican), their beliefs that he would do a better job than Gore on various issues, and their perceptions of his character. These antecedents accounted for nearly two-thirds of the variance in Bush’s overall evaluation.

In the weeks prior to Bush’s appearance with Letterman, respondents’ late-night comedy viewing was only a marginal predictor of their favorability rating, but was significant after he appeared on the show. Of note is the significance of the coefficient representing the interaction between late-night comedy viewing
and beliefs that Bush really cared about citizens like the respondents. To test the statistical significance of the difference between the late-night comedy exposure × caring coefficient during the weeks prior to Bush’s appearance on *Late Show*, and in the week following his appearance, we specified a model that includes a series of three-way interaction terms (trait × late-night comedy exposure × time variable). The results confirm that the weight assigned to the three-way interaction term (‘cares’ × late-night comedy exposure × time) was statistically significant between pre- and post-appearance data (6.61, S.E. = 2.75, $p = .016$).
In other words, in the week immediately following Bush’s appearance on the *Late Show with David Letterman*, perceptions of a caring Bush were more likely to influence overall favorability ratings among viewers of late-night comedy than among nonviewers, as illustrated in Figure 2. Indeed, among those who did not watch late-night comedy, perceiving Bush as caring was associated with approximately a four-point increase in favorability, compared to a 24-point increase among viewers, controlling for all other covariates.

**CONCLUSION**

Against the backdrop of increasingly blurring boundaries between news and entertainment, this study is concerned with the influence of late-night comedy shows on assessments of political candidates. Analysis of data collected from the 2000 presidential election campaign illustrates some potential for late-night comedy to sway audience members’ perceptions of the candidates, particularly in terms of the weight given to character traits in overall evaluations. An examination of campaign–related newspaper coverage (based on the front page of the *New York Times*) during the week for which we find a priming effect for evaluation of Bush suggests no other significant events that could drive the findings that emerged from our data. That we did not find any such priming effects in the aftermath of Al Gore’s appearance suggests that the potential influence of late-night circuit appearances may be stronger for lesser-known candidates than for those who have been in the public eye for a longer period of time. Such a finding is not surprising given similar patterns revealed in the agenda-setting domain, where effects are stronger for those issues with which the public has less experience.
These findings foreground the potential for late-night comedy shows to aid candidates in highlighting certain facets of their persona. It is worth noting that the interaction between Bush and Letterman on the October 19 broadcast was highly issue-laden, covering such somber topics as the death penalty, terrorism, and the environment. And yet, it is only with respect to the character traits that we find evidence of priming. This effect, however, is not of great duration, a finding that echoes previous research (see Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., 2002). Nevertheless, that a significant interaction effect emerged for late-night viewing and perceptions of candidates as caring may be heartening to politicians who are increasingly turning to non-traditional media outlets to generate more personalized images and messages largely unfiltered by journalists.

Such conclusions, however, need to be tempered given how our measure of late-night comedy viewing was one of frequency of exposure to this particular genre, not to a particular show. Despite this caveat, our findings emphasize the increasing complexity of understanding the formation of citizens’ political evaluations in an increasingly diverse media environment. Simply put, appearances did matter, especially for challenger George W. Bush. Our key finding, of course, raises additional questions for research. How did Bush’s appearance sway viewers to base their assessment of him on the basis of perceived caring? We speculate that viewers interpreted Bush’s effort to appear on their program of choice as a clear signal that he cared about reaching out to them—an audience that tends to be younger, male, and liberal (Moy et al., 2005). Part of the strategy of appearing on such programs is for candidates to promote an image of themselves that is humanizing. In doing so, they appear to have an attitude that invites casual chat, good humor, and likeability, and may potentially sway voters for whom personality is a relevant issue.

Indeed, in his Late Show appearance, Bush mentioned to Letterman that he loved meeting people and that he was ‘a people person’, referencing the fact that he once owned a baseball team. When Letterman alluded to Bush using an expletive to refer to a New York Times reporter, the candidate explained that the reporter had said something unkind about his friend (and running mate) Dick Cheney, so Bush ‘expressed himself’. Even in discussions of serious issues such as drilling for oil in Alaska, Bush noted how his goal was to keep prices low for working people. Similarly, when Letterman raised the issue of the recent bombing of an American Navy destroyer refueling in Yemen, Bush stated that people needed to know that the U.S. is a peaceful nation and one cannot go around blowing up ships and killing soldiers. This latter remark was met with applause. So although one cannot rule out variables and events that may have led late-night comedy viewers to perceive Bush as more caring than did nonviewers, an examination of the content of that particular episode indicates that Bush did attempt to portray himself as a caring individual—someone who cared about his friends, the working class, and Americans at large.
The larger question raised by this study on late-night comedy viewing concerns the effects of such media outlets on young adults, a segment of the population deemed to be highly disengaged from political life (Graber, 2001). The issue–image divide in political campaigns is a longstanding one, and it is further confounded by the increasing reliance on personality-based media content, content consumed much by younger voters. As such, it is important for political communication research to continue examining the role of entertainment media to understand the popular sense of politics. In preparing ourselves to research and understand forthcoming campaigns, we would do well to attend to the growing presence of political messages in entertainment-based media.

APPENDIX: QUESTION WORDING

DEPENDENT VARIABLE

Thermometer rating: On a scale of zero to 100, how would you rate George W. Bush? Zero means very unfavorable, and 100 means very favorable. Fifty means you do not feel favorable or unfavorable. If you don’t know enough about the person to rate him or her, just tell me. (Same item asked of Gore.)

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

Character traits (same items asked of Gore.). Caring: Does the phrase ‘really cares about people like me’ describe George W. Bush extremely well, quite well, not too or not well at all? Honest: Does the phrase ‘honest’ describe George W. Bush extremely well, quite well, not too or not well at all? Inspiring: Does the phrase ‘inspiring’ describe George W. Bush extremely well, quite well, not too or not well at all? Knowledgeable: Does the phrase ‘knowledgeable’ describe George W. Bush extremely well, quite well, not too or not well at all? Leader-like: Does the phrase ‘provides strong leadership’ describe George W. Bush extremely well, quite well, not too or not well at all?

Candidates and the issues. Economy: Regardless of your choice for president, who do you think would do a better job of keeping the economy strong, George W. Bush or Al Gore? Social Security: Regardless of your choice for president, who do you think would do a better job of strengthening Social Security and protecting Medicare, George W. Bush or Al Gore? Education: Regardless of your choice for president, who do you think would do a better job of improving education, George W. Bush or Al Gore? Defense: Regardless of your choice for president, who do you think would do a better job of providing a strong military defense, George W. Bush or Al Gore?

Late-night comedy: During the past week, how many nights did you watch late-night comedy shows such as David Letterman or Jay Leno?
Demographics. Sex. Age: What is your age? Education: What is the last grade or class you completed in school? (Responses: Grade eight or lower; some high school, no diploma; high school diploma or equivalent; technical or vocational school after high school; some college, no degree; Associate’s or two-year college degree; four-year college degree; graduate or professional school after college, no degree; graduate or professional degree). Income: Last year, what was your total household income before taxes? Just stop me when I get to the right category. Less than $10,000; $10,000 to less than $15,000; $15,000 to less than 25,000; $25,000 to less than $35,000; $35,000 to less than $50,000; $50,000 to less than $75,000; 75,000 to less than $100,000; $100,000 to less than $150,000; or $150,000 or more? Race: What is your race? White, black, Asian or some other race? Party identification: Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an independent or something else?

REFERENCES


**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES**

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