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# The Virtual Watercooler: Influences of Political Comedy on Social Media Discussion

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# The Virtual Watercooler: Influences of Political Comedy on Social Media Discussion

## **Abstract**

With the emergence of social media activity as a daily phenomenon for most Americans, online users are becoming greater consumers of political information, and are choosing to share that information through social media outlets. A virtual "watercooler effect" is created, in the form of online political debates and arguments. This study examines the connection between viewers of political comedy programmings (television shows like *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*) and political discussion on social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter. Using a survey of EMU undergraduate students that measures political efficacy and media habits, in addition to an experiment comparing political comedy to traditional news coverage, this presentation will re-define the perception of younger voters as non-participants in the political system and generate discussion of new mediums of political participation in 21st century politics.

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THE VIRTUAL WATERCOOLER: Influences of Political Comedy on Social Media Discussion

By

Andrew Abad

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the

Eastern Michigan University

Honors College

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for Graduation

with Honors in the Department of Political Science

and the Department of Communication, Media, and Theatre Arts

Approved at Ypsilanti, Michigan on this date December 13, 2013

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baby Grace – I can only hope that my work as a student inspires you to try your best, and my work as a brother ensures that you have all the tools and encouragement to accomplish whatever you girls can dream of. I'll always be on your team, and will be there whenever you need an ear, a shoulder, a helping hand, or a bodyguard, no matter the circumstance.

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# **The Virtual Watercooler: Influences of Political Comedy on Social Media Discussion**

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With the advent of new technologies, the ways in which an individual engages, processes and shares information can change in various ways. In politics, these new technologies have become “game changers” for candidates, from the ability of a young John F. Kennedy to win a televised debate he would have otherwise lost on the radio, to most recently the ability of President Barack Obama to connect and engage voters using the Internet. But what may be even more valuable to the study of politics and communication are the ways that the Internet, and more specifically social media websites, are beginning to reframe the context through which people interact, learn about, and participate in the political system. Social media websites like

Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.com each possess millions of users that access the site multiple times per day. The popularity of these sites creates great possibilities for businesses, marketers, and interest groups across industries. Companies, sports teams, and politicians alike all have capitalized off of the social media boom, creating robust profiles that boast millions of friends, followers, or subscribers. The ability for information to be spread through these channels in real time and reach millions has had a profound effect on our political landscape, and is beginning to change the ways scholars analyze and study political communication in the 21st century.

Another topic of interest in this study is the role that political comedy programming, typically best characterized as television programs like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* or *The Colbert Report*, can play in cultivating political interest and activity, especially amongst younger populations. Research performed by Dr. Geoffrey Baym has highlighted this effect, stating that while, “comedy provides its initial appeal...humor assembles the audience...but comedy also provides the method to engage in serious political criticism” (Baym 2006). The unique characteristics that define political comedy programming, matched with an exceedingly apathetic audience in regards to traditional politics, offer a legitimate question to researchers. Is political comedy programming changing the ways in which younger people interact with politics, and what role, if any, can social media websites play in facilitating this effect? The second facet of this study seeks to find a connection between political comedy programming and content on social media sites. It is the hope that, if such a link exists, political comedy programming helps to foster political discussion and information sharing on social media sites, specifically among the youngest generations of voters.



## Literature Review

### I. Young Voters and Social Media

As the first generations of “digital natives” (Prensky 2001) are entering college, they are often characterized as among the most politically apathetic and uninvolved (Wattenberg 2012; Weaver Lariscy, et. al. 2011). But as these young adults become a part of the political system and gain the right to vote, they are entering communities of students that are increasingly connected to one another through the Internet and the use of mobile devices like cell phones and tablets. The Pew Internet and American Life Project (hereafter Pew) has tracked the influence of these technologies over time, and shown how the youngest generations of voters have been by far the quickest and most consistent adopters. Of the 18-24 age group, 78% are smartphone owners, and of the 95% of all young adults that go online regularly, 92% use a social media site (Pew 2012, 2013).

The rise of social media websites like Facebook and Twitter has had an exceptional impact on the study of political communication. Social media websites allow users to network with each other by creating an online profile that can connect to profiles of other friends or their friends’ friends (Ancu and Cozma 2009). The major popularity of social media websites dates back to around 2006, when use of social networking sites among internet users ages 18-29 exploded from 9% to 49% in only a one year period. (Pew 2011) Of the top 10 most visited websites by Internet users in the United States, four are characterized as social media sites, with Facebook.com is listed as the 2<sup>nd</sup> most visited website, the video sharing community YouTube.com listed 3<sup>rd</sup>, professional networking site LinkedIn.com listed 8<sup>th</sup>, and Twitter.com listed 9<sup>th</sup> amongst an array of websites dedicated to online shopping, news sites, and search engines (Alexa 2013).

This incredible growth of social media was not by mistake. For many, using social media websites presented the opportunity for users to reconnect with lost friends, maintain connections with their current social network, or even to become connected with prospective friends or romantic interests. The primary reason Internet users are joining social media sites is to make connections with family members and friends, both old and new. (Pew 2011) While that is the primary purpose for most users, there are many other functions that different social media websites offer their members. Connected to a network of generally hundreds, if not thousands of other users, these sites allow the creation and display of user-generated content, which can be anything from a status update or short message to an uploaded picture or video. Users are able to like, comment, and share these posts with users connected to their accounts, spreading information at an exponential rate.

These networks have also created the possibility of shared content becoming “viral” – defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as content, “quickly and widely spread or popularized especially by person-to-person electronic communication” (Merriam Webster 2013). The viral possibilities of social media sites have created a quasi-gold rush for businesses and organizations looking to gain attention and exposure through these online mediums. This has attracted a bevy of mainstream media content from nearly every major news organization, as well as raising the profile of other online news sources like *The Huffington Post* and *Yahoo! News* that are more native to the digital format. As recent as 2009, most traditional news organizations like *The New York Times* and *The Associated Press* have been taking full advantage of the opportunities to integrate with social media websites in a variety of ways. Some organizations have hired social media editors to manage content, and have also adopted ways for users to opt into alerts for news and have the ability to share news information with their network

of friends (Glynn, Huge, and Hoffman 2011; Messing and Westwood 2012). But quietly, these networks have also created the framework for political discourse that has never been before possible; a forum for individuals that may not explicitly seek political content but may find and interact with it in the form of user-generated and shared content that can be very political, especially during periods of heavy media coverage around political events.

Another phenomenon created by the emergence and popularity of social media sites is the way in which news become socialized and shared with others. The work of Messing and Westwood focused on the exposure of Internet news on social media sites, and argues that the, “socialization of internet news fundamentally alters the context in which news reading occurs, providing a venue that promotes exposure to news from political heterogeneous individuals, and which serves to emphasize social value rather than partisan affiliation” (Messing and Westwood 2012). This not only points to an aberration from that way news is traditionally viewed, but speaks to a larger point about the ways social media can change discussion. The ability of social media websites to aggregate content from virtually any online source introduces users to a diverse range of sources and once found to be reading the article on a news site, is enticed to continue reading content on the site recommended by the user’s friends (Messing and Westwood 2012).

Combined with a diverse network of social media contacts, common for the youngest generation of voters, users will become increasingly exposed to more diverse political information. If social media users are in fact reading news stories as a result of exposure on their respective sites, it could translate to a positive effect on the internal political efficacy and rate of political participation of the users. In a study of campaign advertisements and online participation, Shah et al. found that, “news use promotes increased political knowledge and

awareness of civic opportunities and objectives, often indirectly through reflection about public affairs” (Shah et al. 2009). The researchers in this study also found that the news media provides resources for discussion and will feature viewpoints that may not be available in a user’s standard social network. In this way, social media sites fit the model perfectly by providing a platform through which one can respond, debate, and learn of political information through discussion with not only connected users but also the network from the original creator of the content. Shah et al. concluded in their study that news consumption does hold a connection to participation in both civic and political life and also that there is a positive effect between news consumption and the user’s amount of political expression. While this is certainly good news for scholars of political learning, I believe that this also begins to outline the way social media is creating new possibilities for users to interact with and consume political news content regularly. If social endorsements made by liking, commenting, and sharing a friend’s post suggest some utility to reading the article, if for no other reason than to understand the discussion, then we begin to see that it matters less about how passionate one may feel about politics, news or other content, or even partisan affiliation, but rather how you are motivated socially to connect with your network of friends and choose to interact with them online.

## **II. Political Comedy Programming**

The effect of socializing content and making it more popular to normally apathetic or unmotivated readers is not limited to social media websites. Indeed, political comedy programming employs a similar mechanism, using satire and comedy as the appeal rather than the content itself. As a form of soft news, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* offer viewers a satirical take on recent political news, regularly making fun of mainstream personalities, especially politicians (Baumgartner and Morris 2009; Baym 2006).

The show is most popular amongst Americans between the ages of 18-24, who watch and enjoy the program more often than any other group (Baumgartner and Morris 2009). These “fake news” shows air nightly Monday-Thursday on Comedy Central in 30-minute time slots between 11:00 PM and midnight and are later shown as re-runs. However, as much as the programs like to claim that they are purely intended for comedic purposes, many scholars suggest that these shows are changing the way many Americans, especially younger viewers, interact with and think about politics (Becker, Xenos, and Waisanen 2010).

Much of these claims stem from the idea that these shows, while making fun of politicians and news organizations, “interrogate the content of news media, the “real” news that arguably is failing its democratic function” (Baym 2006). The satirical criticism of these events in many ways exposes the flaws of both the mainstream media today, as well as the broader issues of an ineffective government, riddled with partisan gridlock and incompetence. Some scholars have claimed that by pointing out the flaws in our system, political comedy viewers may ultimately become more cynical and disenchanted with our system of government (Baumgartner and Morris 2009), while others (Cao 2008) find no evidence to show that viewers of these programs are discouraged from political participation.

Conversely, many scholars have studied how political comedy encourages political participation. Cao and Brewer explain that, “political comedy shows may increase political participation by fostering common experiences and opinions among views. Moreover, such programs usually present politics in an entertaining manner, which may lead viewers to think that politics is enjoyable, thereby stimulating political participation” (Cao and Brewer 2008). A growing body of literature also suggests that political comedy programming is increasingly effective in simplifying complex political issues, raising a viewer’s self-efficacy, which in turn

increases participation (Baumgartner and Morris 2009; Baym and Shah 2011; Cao 2008). In the context of younger voters, these effects have begun to outline a greater push to redefine citizenship and civic engagement in the digital era. Baym and Shah write, “E-mailing a *Colbert* clip or embedding a *TDS* video thus can be seen as a political act or a performance of citizenship – a means of engaging with and intervening in matters of personal and public concern” (Baym and Shah 2011). Clearly, this type of action is highly conducive to the younger, more connected, generations of voters targeted in this study. According to Pew (2012), 81% of cell phone users 18-24 use their phone to distract themselves during breaks, get information, or engage with others while watching TV. Twenty eight percent of respondents admit to using their phones to see what others are saying about what they are watching, and 43% say they exchange text messages with others watching the same thing. An additional 28% say they post their own comments online about a television program, which might be on a social media website. Most importantly, the data may suggest that young adults are more critical consumers of such material, with 43% admitting to using their cell phones to check whether something they heard on television was in fact true. This speaks very well to claims that by watching political comedy, they are primed to question the things they see and hear, learn more about certain topics, and are at the very least somewhat willing to generate their own content based on their experiences. Aside from using their phones and talking about the television shows they watch, young adults are also more likely to watch, post, and share video clips online. Ninety-two percent of adults aged 18-29 watch videos on a site like YouTube or Vimeo, and 57% watch videos on a social media website (Pew 2013). Specifically in regards to comedy programming, the genre was indicated as the top type of video viewed online across age groups, but was found the most popular overall by those aged 18-29, with 82% of online video watchers saying they watch

comedy or humor videos. Video types explicitly labeled “News” or “Politics” do less well, with only 57% and 35% of online viewers admitting to watch respectively (Pew 2013). This again points to the attractiveness that humor and satire can have both on TV and on emerging media platforms, giving it a distinct advantage over traditional news sources.

Both social media websites and political comedy programming are two mechanisms by which young voters are increasingly attracted to and interacting with political content. These two complementary mediums and their abilities are yet to be fully discovered, but available literature and relevant data from the last decade show a clear, positive trend in characteristics of learning and engagement with political content that could have a tremendous effect on the way we think about political communication and young voters.

## **Methodology**

The primary goal for this study is to determine how these trends in social media use and political comedy viewing are beginning to redefine political participation, civic engagement, and political efficacy in college-age voters. Despite the literature and polling regarding both subjects, one must also wonder whether or not the data are representative of their own surroundings. To explore this question, and learn more about the ways that students at Eastern Michigan University are using social media and political comedy to foster participation, civic engagement, and self-efficacy, a study was designed in two distinct parts, each looking to answer different questions relating to the broader topic at hand.

### **I. Undergraduate Survey of Political Participation**

The first aspect of the project was the creation of an online survey that would be sent out to voting-age (over 18) college students at Eastern Michigan University. The survey in total was

30 questions, and was created in an effort to get a broad sense of the college-age population's political beliefs, efficacy, and participation. (The entire survey is reproduced in Appendix A.)

The first three questions of the survey were asked in an effort to gauge the individual's political efficacy, asking if the respondent felt qualified to participate in politics, whether or not they found politics complicated, and if they felt like they had a good understanding of the important national issues facing our country. The next series of questions looked specifically at participation, and asked if they had voted in the most recent election, whether or not their preferred candidate won, and what their most recent voting experience was. Questions 8-11 dealt specifically with political knowledge, asking the respondent to identify the President and Vice President's political affiliation, as well as to name the majority party in the House and Senate. Respondents were also asked to name the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the Senate Majority Leader. Questions 12-14 asked the respondent to rate how much they felt they participated in politics, whether or not their level of participation has changed since entering college, and how often they discussed politics with family or friends, if at all. Questions 15-16 looked to establish a link between political participation and social media, asking respondents where they communicated about politics, with social media websites listed as an answer choice. Question 16 was the only question in the survey to deal with political comedy programming, asking respondents to rate how frequently they accessed a specific list of news sources, with *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* both listed as "news sources". Questions 17-30 were explicitly listed as demographic information and were asked in an effort to analyze the population of students taking the survey.



## **II. Experimental Study on Political Comedy vs. Traditional News and Focus Groups**

The second half of the study was intended to study the relationship between political comedy programming and college students and was experimental by design. Composed of groups of 10-12 students living in residence halls on-campus, a pre-test survey was initially distributed to all students that asked for respondents to disclose their media habits, party affiliation, and personal interest in two specific political issues. (All material from experimental study is shown in Appendix B.) The first two groups were asked to rate personal interest in “the ongoing political gridlock and filibustering in the US Senate” and “the US Supreme Court and its review of civil rights legislation”. The next phase of the experiment was to show the groups of students clips from four television programs, two traditional news programs (NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams and PBS NewsHour) and two political comedy programs (The Daily Show with Jon Stewart and The Colbert Report). For the purposes of the study, the clips were controlled to discuss the same two issues, both aired during the first week of March 2013; the Rand Paul filibuster on drone strikes and the Supreme Court’s decision to hear a case challenging the Voting Rights Act. Clips were presented to each group in a random order, alternating between a traditional news clip and a political comedy clip. Each group of students saw two series of clips, totaling in eight clips from the four shows. While each clip differed slightly in terms of length, they generally lasted between 3-5 minutes each.

After the clips were shown, the students were asked to take a post-clip survey, which asked questions directly relating to the content of the clips and the experience related to watching each show, rating the programs on clarity, relevance, explanation of concepts, and bias. The survey also directly asked students to consider whether or not they would consider sharing the clips with others, either by word of mouth, e-mail, or through a social media website. Lastly, the

survey asked students to answer general knowledge questions about the content of the clips themselves. After the post-clip surveys were completed, the students were treated to the incentive of free food and were asked to gather informally to talk about the experiment and the broader topics associated with the study itself. A short 20-30 minute focus group session was informally conducted afterward. While some students may have been familiar with myself or other subjects during the session, no names or identifying information was ever collected during the course of the study.

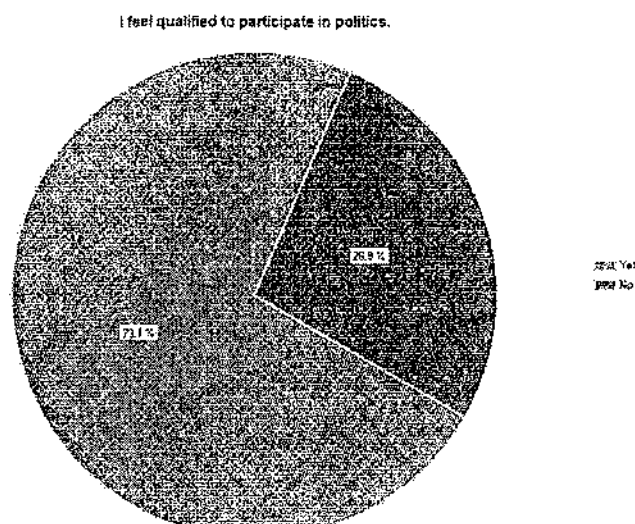
## Data and Findings

### I. Data and Findings from Undergraduate Survey of Political Participation

The survey was distributed to university students via e-mail by Mr. Geoff Larcom, Executive Director of Media Relations at EMU, on March 12, 2013. The survey was closed two days later on March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2013, and received over 500 student responses. After the survey was closed, respondents that did not indicate their consent to take the survey or left the survey before completion were removed from the dataset, leaving 452 valid responses. Of the 452 students who consented to answer the survey questions, 442 respondents answered every question of the survey. This response total, generally high for an undergraduate student's research efforts, allowed for a sizeable sample of EMU students that could yield statistically significant data.

To begin the survey, we asked respondents to respond to three statements and agree by answering yes or disagree by answering no. Related to political self-efficacy, Figure 1 shows that 73.1% of respondents felt qualified to

**Figure 1**



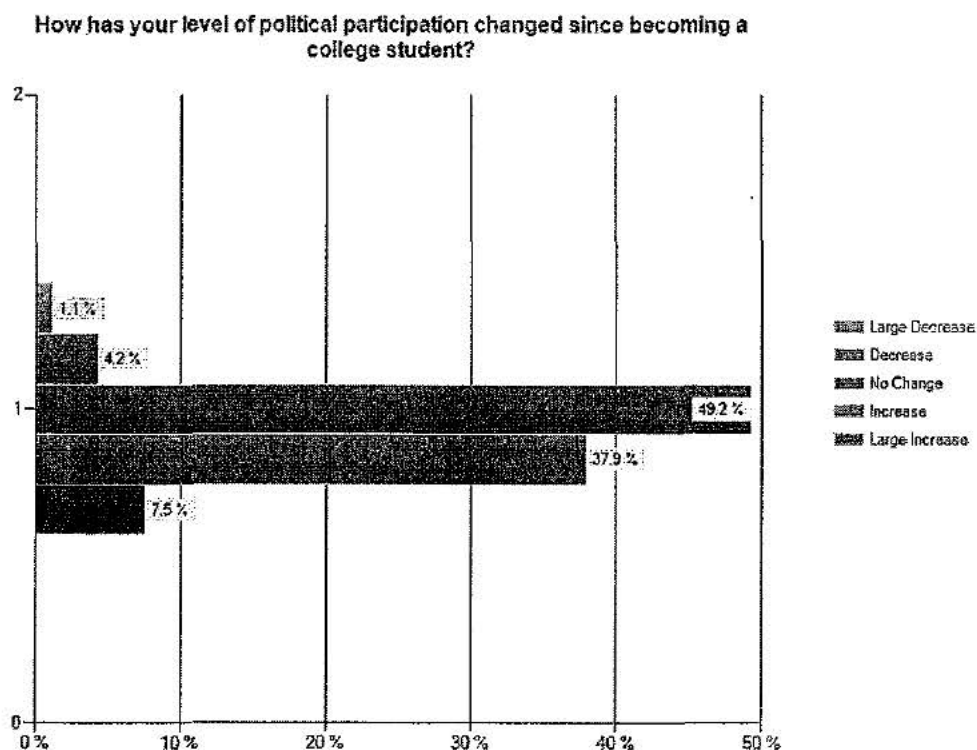
participate in politics. Typically, those with higher levels of efficacy would answer yes and feel confident in their role as voters and participants. Those with lower levels would not feel comfortable and answer no. From this question, we can assert that most feel some sense of belonging in the political world, regardless of interest. However, 61% of the same respondent pool agreed with the statement, "Sometimes politics is too complicated for me to understand". This shows that while they feel some sense of efficacy, politics remains a complicated and sometimes confusing subject of study. However, reflecting most literature performed on the subject of voting behavior, three-quarters of respondents believed that they had a good understanding of important national issues.

To effectively gauge levels of political participation, the survey asked about voting behavior and candidate preference. One statistically significant piece of data is that some 81% percent of respondents reported that they had voted in the most recent Presidential election. However, this data may be overstated by some who actually did not but reported voting to make it appear that they were fulfilling the civic duties associated with citizenship (Presser, Traugott, and Traugott 1990). Additionally, the survey's opt-in nature reflects a group of respondents that generally participate more than those who do not choose to respond. About two-thirds of respondents either supported or voted for the incumbent Democrat, President Barack Obama, while about a third preferred or voted for Republican nominee Mitt Romney. The survey also included a number of political knowledge questions that varied in difficulty. The easiest question, asking respondents to name the political party of the President and Vice President, was answered correctly by 97% of respondents. From there, the questions increased in difficulty, asking which political party had the majority of seats in the Senate (54% correctly said Democrats), who the

Senate Majority leader was (52% correctly identified Harry Reid), and who was the Speaker of the House of Representatives (62% were able to correctly name John Boehner).

One goal of this survey was to see how much of a role a college environment could have on political participation. Indeed, in a setting ripe with opportunities to learn more about the political system, introduced to a diversity of people and thought, combined with the opportunity to volunteer, protest, and rally for political change through student organizations, one could hypothesize that a college campus could spur involvement in political causes. When asked to identify how their level of participation has changed since entering college, Figure 2 shows that 45% of respondents said that their level of political participation either increased or largely increased since becoming a student. Even though half of respondents didn't sense a change, the data remains statistically significant, reaffirming a college campus as a potential accelerant for political activity.

**Figure 2**

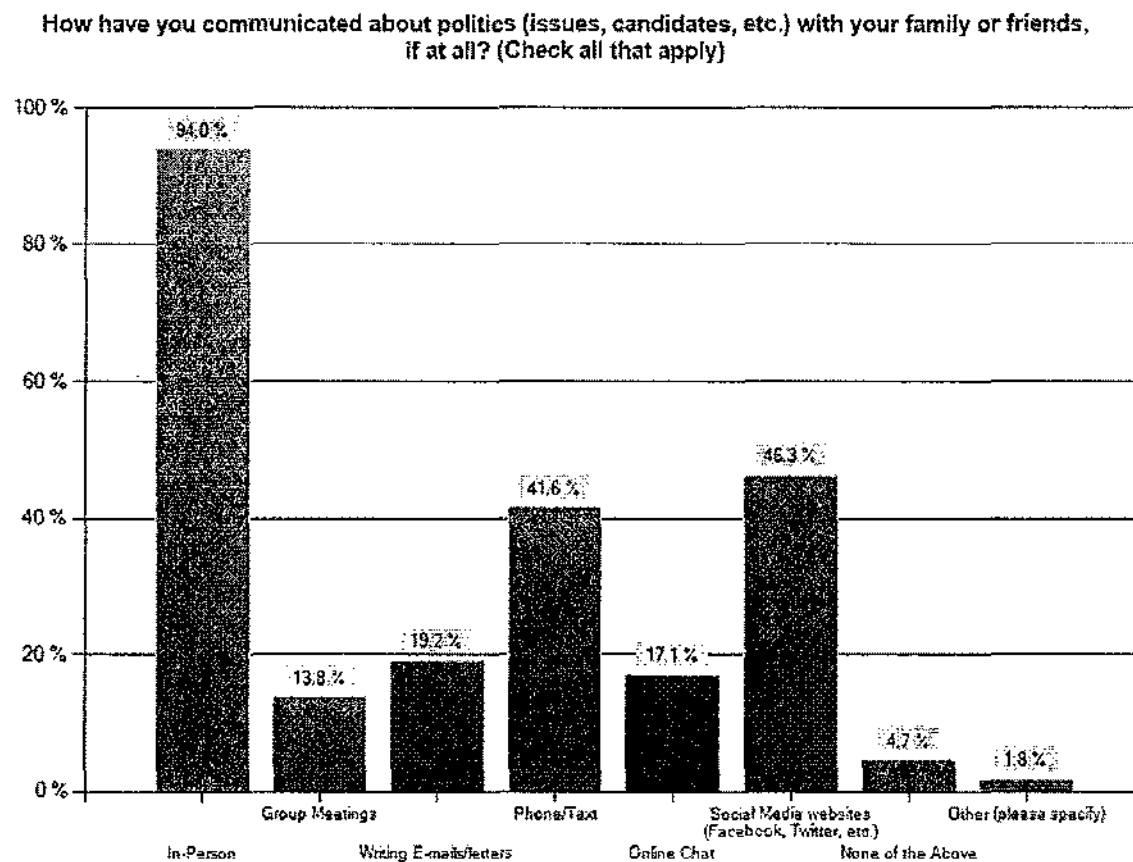


To finish the survey, we asked specific demographic questions that would give us a better idea of our pool at large. While some questions were harder to quantify because of their open-ended nature, others were easier to discern. Related to EMU's composition as a commuter school, 45% of respondents identified as transfer students, unusually high for most other college campuses. Only 28% of respondents live on-campus, and three-quarters are employed in addition to academic work, mostly part-time. A little less than half of respondents reported to come from middle class families, and a clear majority identified as Caucasian, which presents a common limitation of survey data. Also fairly common was the gender breakdown, in which 67% of respondents identified as female and 33% identified as male. Just over half of respondents are also relatively new to EMU, having started in 2011 or 2012. Reflecting our large numbers of transfer students, over 65% of respondents are of junior or senior status, meaning they have completed 61 or more credit hours towards graduation. These data also reflect the somewhat older age of the respondent pool, with the average respondent being 25 years of age.

The most relevant section of the survey was focused on how regularly respondents communicate about politics and the mechanisms they use to do so. By having users self-report their communication habits, we can gain more data on not only their habits, but also their perceptions about the influence of the political world on daily communication. While about half of respondents reported that they communicated about politics about once per month or less, almost 20% reported talking about politics with friends or family 2-3 times per week, with another 20% of respondents saying they talked about politics once per week. But what be most

emergent from this survey is the data from the next question, shown in Figure 3, which asks how respondents chose to communicate with others about politics.

**Figure 3**



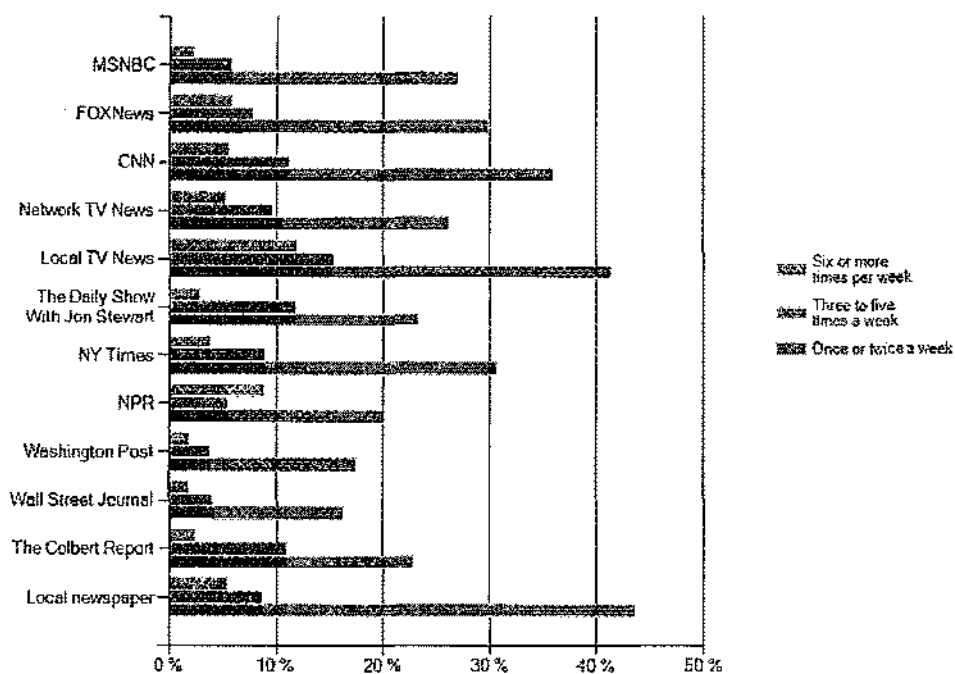
As we can see from the data, in-person communication is by far the most popular amongst respondents. However, the clear second in how respondents talk about politics is social media websites like Facebook and Twitter. This data shows that people perceive social media sites to be a place for political discourse and use it in varying amounts to participate in the political process. This perception, combined with circumstances of heavy political activity like the primary season or the year leading up to the general election, could lead to even greater participation and activity on these sites.

Learning the media habits of college students is also of great importance to this study. The survey asked respondents to indicate how frequently they accessed a variety of news sources across media. Major news networks and organization, both local and national, were listed between newspapers, radio, television, and online counterparts. For the purposes of this study, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* were also added as news sources.

Figure 4

Among news sources, local television, and to a lesser extent local newspaper, continue to remain the most popular, even amongst the student populations surveyed. When looking at national network news syndicates like *MSNBC*, *FOXNews*, and *CNN*, we

How frequently do you access the following news sources either in print, on television/radio, or online?



see that there are many casual viewers who may watch once or twice a week, but fewer than 10% who watch three or more times per week. Among news sources watched three to five times per week, political comedy programming was second only to local TV news among choices. Indeed, both *TDS* and *Colbert* had, in comparison to the rest of the field, strong followings of viewers that would allow for more nuanced analysis of their own habits and tendencies, especially in regards to social media use.

## II. Data and Findings from Experimental Study on Political Comedy vs. Traditional News

In an effort to get more specific data regarding the effects of political comedy programming on student audiences, two experimental sessions were held. The first of two sessions occurred on Monday, March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2013 in Buell Hall, a Residence Hall for upperclassman on-campus. The second and final session took place later the same week, on Wednesday March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2013 in Downing Hall, another Residence Hall on campus that required a 3.0 GPA for residency and featured mainly Honors students. These demographics mirrored the high achieving and generally older student respondent pool of the survey in Phase 1, and were recruited randomly to participate. The sessions were attended by 11 and 12 residents, respectively. This gave us a total of 23 respondents for the both surveys that were distributed, before and after participants viewed television clips. Looking at the each group individually, there were no meaningful cross-group differences across surveys. Since the groups were shown the same clips and completed the same surveys, the analysis of data will include all responses from both sessions.

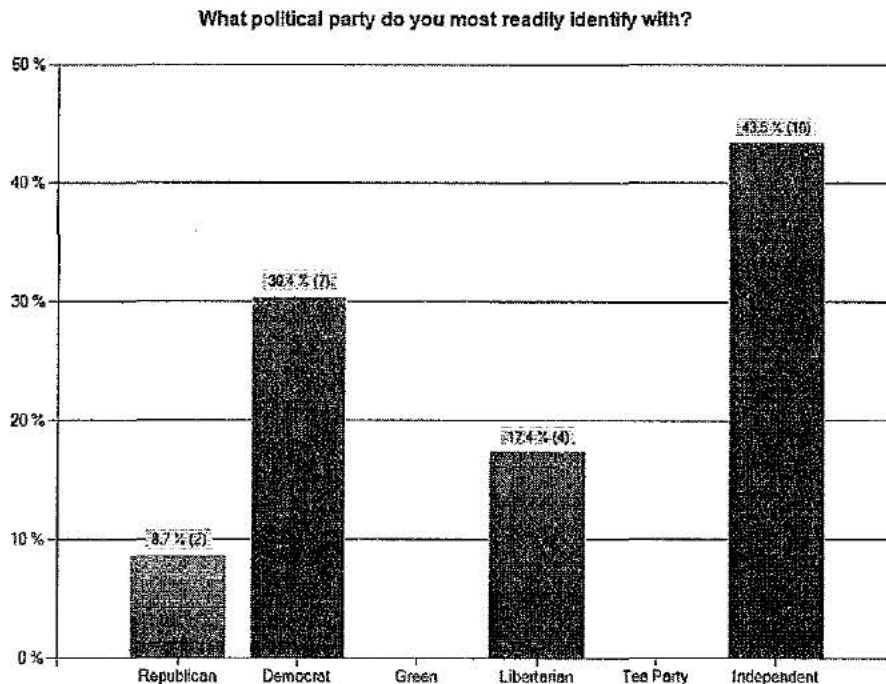
The pre-clip survey was distributed as participants were getting settled into the lounge. The group did not move on to watching the clips until all attendees finished the survey. The hyperlink to the first survey was distributed online through e-mail message and consisted of 5 short questions that aimed to gather information on the group's media habits, specifically with political comedy programming, interest in the topics that the clips pertained to, and party preference. As expected, most had some exposure to *TDS* and *Colbert* in the past, about half claiming to watch each show "rarely" or "sometimes". A modified version of the media sources question was asked, asking how often they accessed each television network for specifically political content. *Comedy Central*, the network that broadcasts *TDS* and *Colbert*, was listed as an



answer choice, and was, surprisingly, the most popular amongst respondents, with 52% of respondents claiming to access the site for political information at least sometimes. *CNN* was the second choice amongst these students, mirroring data from the larger survey with 39% claiming to watch at least sometimes for political information. The next two questions related to interest in the subjects of the clips they would be viewing. About 65% of the respondents were at least somewhat interested in the “ongoing political gridlock and filibustering in the US Senate” and over half of respondents indicated they were “interested” or “very interested” in the “US Supreme Court and its review of civil rights legislation”.

Perhaps the most confusing data from the pre-clip survey was from the final question, asking respondents to indicate the political party they most readily identify with. Figure 5 shows the breakdown of participants by party identification, with over 40% identifying as independent, the rest split between the two major parties and a popular libertarian choice amongst students. While a majority of the participants identified as independent, literature and data suggest that the concept of a truly independent voter is nothing short of myth (Keith et al. 1992), with many possessing partisan schemas (Cao 2008) on specific issues or ultimately voting the popular ticket. *CNN* exit poll data from the last four major national elections shows that in each case (the 2006 midterm elections, 2008 presidential election, 2010 midterm elections, and 2012 presidential election), independents were hardly split, in each case voting for either Democrats or Republicans by a comfortable 5% margin or more, and in 2010, riding the winds of a Republican landslide, saw a margin of over 19% in favor of the GOP (CNN 2006; 2008; 2010; 2012).

Figure 5



The groups were then shown two sets of four clips, alternating between a political comedy clip (from *TDS* and *Colbert*) and a traditional news clip (*PBS NewsHour* and *NBC Nightly News*) for each issue. After the last clip of the second set ended, a second link was e-mailed to participants to take the post-clip survey. This survey was bit longer than the previous, with 13 questions that asked respondents to rate the clips on a variety of factors, indicate preference of the shows and types of clips, and to answer basic knowledge questions that could be logically answered after learning about the stories.

The first question asked the participants to indicate which programs they found particularly interesting and engaging, and the results were unsurprisingly clear in favor of political comedy programming. *The Colbert Report* was preferred by 83% of viewers, with *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* only a few percentage points behind, preferred by 78% of viewers. For comparison, *Nightly News with Brian Williams* was only found interesting and engaging by

17% of viewers, and *PBS NewsHour* did even worse, with only 2 of the 23 participants (a mere 8.7%) finding the program of interest to them.

The next four questions, pertaining to each of the four programs viewed, asked respondents to agree or disagree (on a five point Likert scale) with the following four statements:

1. This show presented information clearly
2. This show included relevant and legitimate content (news sources, reporters, guests)
3. This show explained concepts and issues well
4. This show was not biased in its reporting of the issues and stories

These statements can be simplified to the four characteristics: clarity, content, explanation of concepts, and bias. The questions in the survey were presented to respondents to rate one show at a time on each of the four statements. Tables 1-4 were compiled from this data and present to compare responses for each statement between each of the programs.

**Table 1: Clarity (This show presented information clearly)**

Show	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Nightly News with Brian Williams	4.3% (1)	4.3 (1)	26.1% (6)	<b>43.5% (10)</b>	21.7% (5)
The Colbert Report	0	21.7% (5)	8.7% (2)	<b>56.5% (13)</b>	13% (3)
PBS NewsHour	0	8.7% (2)	13% (3)	<b>52.2% (12)</b>	26.1% (6)
The Daily Show with Jon Stewart	4.3% (1)	8.7% (2)	17.4% (4)	<b>56.5% (13)</b>	13.0 % (3)

As we can see in Table 1, most respondents believed that all four shows were relatively clear in their presentation of the information. *PBS NewsHour* rated the highest amongst viewers, but both political comedy programs and *Nightly News with Brian Williams* were believed to be similar in clarity. One surprise in this table is the 22% who felt that *The Colbert Report* was unclear. This could possibly have to do with the nature of the clips themselves, or with the way that comedy was used to present the story. In the focus groups, some respondents did note that sometimes the comedy did draw them away from the messages and content of the stories themselves and more towards the jokes the personalities were making. This concern was shared amongst more of the group, arguing that while the jokes were amusing and they laughed, they didn't get as good of a sense for the story as they did when watching the traditional news clips. Another potential point of contention arises when there is some question of whether the information expressed on political comedy programs is legitimate, both in terms of the clips shown and in the context in which they are used.

**Table 2: Content (This show included relevant and legitimate content (news sources, reporters, guests))**

Show	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Nightly News with Brian Williams	0	13% (3)	17.4% (4)	<b>52.2% (12)</b>	17.4% (4)
The Colbert Report	4.3% (1)	8.7% (2)	<b>39.1% (9)</b>	<b>39.1% (9)</b>	8.7% (2)
PBS NewsHour	0	4.3% (1)	21.7% (5)	<b>56.5% (13)</b>	17.4% (4)
The Daily Show with Jon Stewart	4.3% (1)	13% (3)	17.4% (4)	<b>56.5% (13)</b>	8.7% (2)

In regards to content, traditional news was just slightly favored over the political comedy choices, although, *The Daily Show* was rated as high as the two traditional news options. *The Colbert Report* was the lowest rated of the four choices, an indication that the specific clips shown may not have been perceived as rich in content as the others. *PBS NewsHour* again scored the highest out of all shows listed with close to three quarters of viewers either agreeing or strongly agreeing that the show was clear. Focus group discussion of the clips' content affirmed the data, with many participants making the argument in favor of political comedy that much of the content shown was taken from traditional news sources and then satirized. Indeed, Baym's research notes that "drawing on live broadcast coverage of public statements and government proceedings, the content of *The Daily Show* resembles much of the mainstream news media (Baym 2006).

**Table 3: Explanation of Concepts (This show explained concepts and issues well)**

Show	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Nightly News with Brian Williams	4.3% (1)	8.7% (2)	<b>34.8% (8)</b>	30.4 (7)	21.7% (5)
The Colbert Report	0	17.4% (4)	30.4% (7)	<b>39.1% (9)</b>	13% (3)
PBS NewsHour	4.3% (1)	4.3% (1)	30.4% (7)	<b>47.8% (11)</b>	13% (3)
The Daily Show with Jon Stewart	4.3% (1)	17.4% (4)	13% (3)	<b>52.2% (12)</b>	13.0 % (3)

Rating the clips on explanation of concepts, viewers seemed at least partially split on the question of whether or not political comedy programs fit the bill. While The Daily Show with

Jon Stewart was the top choice in this category, over 20% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. This speaks to the subjectivity of these claims, and shows that blanket appeal may not exist in regards to these programs. All shows listed continued to satisfy the respondents, with a majority affirming each show explained concepts relatively well.

**Table 4: Bias (This show was not biased in its reporting of the issues and stories)**

Show	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Nightly News with Brian Williams	8.7% (2)	4.3 (1)	<b>43.5% (10)</b>	30.4% (7)	13% (3)
The Colbert Report	17.4% (4)	34.8% (8)	<b>39.1% (9)</b>	8.7% (2)	0
PBS NewsHour	4.3% (1)	8.7% (2)	<b>52.2% (12)</b>	17.4% (4)	17.4% (4)
The Daily Show with Jon Stewart	13% (2)	<b>34.8% (8)</b>	<b>34.8% (8)</b>	17.4% (4)	0

Last in our analysis is the question of bias. The perceived bias toward left-leaning political comedy broadcasts was noted in the literature to perhaps breed cynicism during the Bush administration (Baumgartner and Morris 2009), and to reflect a liberal agenda during broadcasts (Becker, Xenos, and Waisanen 2010). The bias was affirmed by viewers, with a clear majority of respondents rating the political programs as at least neutral and in many cases, biased. While certainly there are traditional news networks that are perceived as biased themselves, the data points to one of the specific flaws political comedy programming can have when evaluated against traditional news programs, and represents one of the boundaries of such a study. While political comedy shows will discuss similar issues, provide similar explanations and feature

similar guests and material (Baym 2006), they are ultimately perceived as more biased because of their tendency to satirize the stories presented, creating a “hostile media bias” between the genre and traditional news (Becker, Xenos, and Waisanen 2010). Focus group sentiment supported these claims, especially amongst the second group of mostly Honors students, who argued that it’s hard to legitimize the content of the programs because of where it is being viewed and how it is presented. This remains a critical barrier for proponents of political comedy as a mechanism of political learning, and is the most specific and significant difference identified between the four programs analyzed.

The survey concluded with a series of five knowledge questions relating to the two sets of clips and the content featured. While varying slightly from question to question, a majority of viewers was able to answer the questions correctly (after watching four consecutive television clips pertaining to the same event or story). In comparison, some of these questions were more difficult or confusing than the knowledge questions asked in the larger survey used in Phase 1, and affirmed that viewers were engaged enough during the experiment to retain some information about the stories, albeit briefly. One particular question that arose was whether the order of the clips had any effect on the ability of participants to correctly answer the questions. However, across both groups of participants, each group receiving a different order of clips for each issue, the data showed virtually no difference between groups, with each set of participants performing reasonably well on each question, barring some confusion on a particular question that asked respondents to indicate anyone who spoke out *against* the filibuster performed by Rand Paul on the topic of drone strikes. Some respondents may not have read the question closely, as nearly 44% selected Paul as an answer. Even so, almost 74% were able to identify at least one correct answer, stating correctly that Republican Senator (and 2008 Presidential

nominee) John McCain did speak out against Paul's actions. Senator Lindsey Graham, certainly less popular and familiar on the national stage than McCain, was only identified by 22% of viewers as having spoken out against Paul.

## **Social Media and Political Comedy Implications**

### **I. Social Media and Political Engagement**

As both the literature and data have shown, social media websites are becoming established centers of political activity and communication among young voters. Through the technological capabilities of social media platforms, users are able to create and interact with seemingly endless amounts of political content posted, discussed, and shared by the millions that join them. But political activity on social media platforms is not limited to interacting with political material or liking a candidate's page. Pew (2012) outlined a list of eight different civic activities that were possible on social media platforms, and asked respondents to indicate if they used the sites in the following ways:

1. Like/promote political material
2. Encourage others to vote
3. Post thoughts on issues
4. Repost political content
5. Encourage others to act
6. Post links to political stories
7. Belong to political group on SNS (social networking sites)
8. Follow officials/candidates on social media

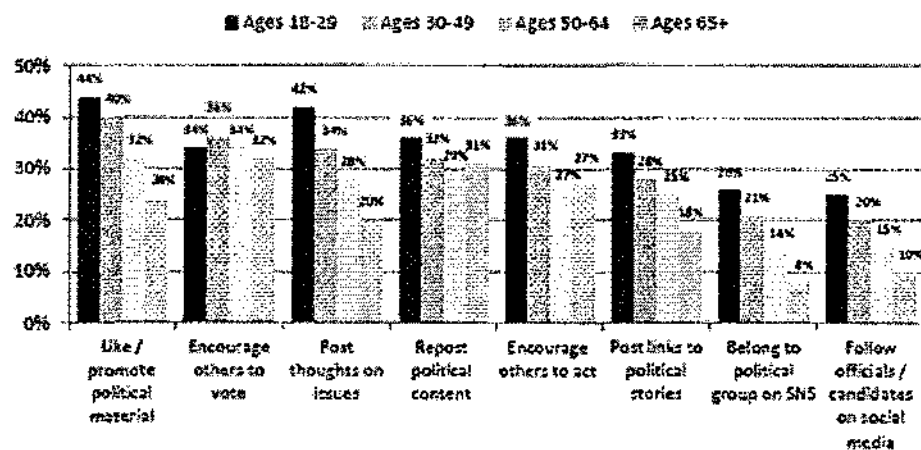


As expected, the youngest generations of voters outperformed their older counterparts in each of the eight categories, highlighted in Figure 6. While political action has yet to affect a majority of social media users in any age group, we continue to see strong data especially from young adults, with at least a quarter of users 18-24 claiming they used social media for each of the activities listed. This data marks a continued growth of social media activity since the mainstream success of these sites beginning in 2006, and sets expectations even higher for future years, especially as political operations become more and more digitally focused.

**Figure 6**

### Younger social media users are more likely to use the tools for civic activities

*% of users of social networking sites or Twitter who use social media these ways*



Source: Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project Civic Engagement Survey, conducted July 16-August 7, 2012 on landline and cell phones and in English and Spanish. N for social media users ages 18-29=323. N for social media users ages 30-49=388. N for social media users ages 50-64=323. N for social media users ages 65+=167.

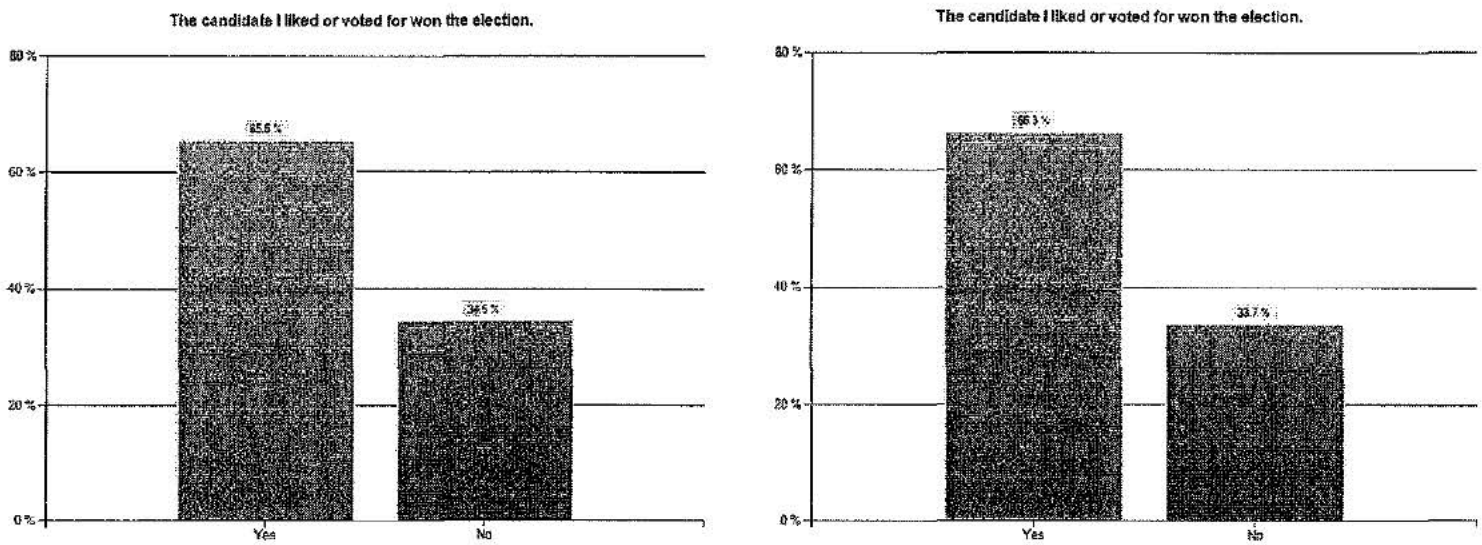
There is also an increasing amount of evidence to suggest that civic engagement on social media platforms can act as a springboard to further political interest and activity. A Pew report on Civic Engagement states that, "43% of social networking site users say they have decided to learn more about a political or social issue because of something they read about on a social networking site", with an additional 18% of users who have decided to take action involving a

political or social issue because of something they read on social media platforms (Pew 2012). These data becomes the basis of an argument by many scholars to redefine civic engagement and the meaning of citizenship in the political landscape. Dr. Russell Dalton of the University of California, Irvine writes in his book, *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation is Reshaping American Politics* (2009), "Educational and generational patterns show how social change is reshaping political action. The engaged citizen (of today) is more likely to participate in boycotts, "buycotts", demonstrations, and other forms of contentious action" (p. 72). Dalton's work explains how the definitions that were used to define and predict political activity may no longer be relevant to a new generation of voters who are getting involved in new ways and in different places, including the Internet.

Using the data in the Undergraduate Survey of Political Participation, I was able to cross-tabulate and further analyze the data, specifically in regards to the group of respondents that had indicated they had used social media websites to communicate with others about politics. These "social media politicos" outperformed the field in each of the political knowledge questions asked during the survey by a consistent 5% margin, except for an insignificant one percent difference on the easiest question asked (96% of the social media politicos answered correctly, compared to 97% of the field). The social media group also was shown to have higher levels of internal political efficacy, with 8% more of the social media group indicating they felt qualified to participate in politics. Only 53.6% felt that politics was too complicated to understand (compared to 61% of the entire sample) and 80% believed they had a good understanding of the important national issues facing the country, up from 75% of the pool. Voter turnout was also higher, with 5% more of the social media group reporting voting in the last election.

One may hypothesize that the social media group may be exceedingly liberal by ideology, reflecting the common perception that those who communicate about politics online are considered to be more liberal than those who do not. However, the data from the survey provided no evidence to support this claim, as shown in Figure 7 below.

**Figure 7**



Left Graph: Original Survey Data

Right Graph: Social Media politicians

The difference, less than a percent (65.5% to 66.3%) between the average respondent and the social media politico, suggests that social media use has little to no effect on partisan leanings or voter behavior. While there is evidence to suggest that utilizing social media websites can raise an individual's self-efficacy and political knowledge, there is no evidence to show any effect on a user's ideological belief. One prominent theory among scholars is that because of the diverse range of friends (and by extension, diverse content on one's page) a user generally has, they are exposed to a wider range of content and opinion from a variety of sources rather than a more limited selection (Messing and Westwood 2012), although it is unclear how significant of an effect that can be.

Political participation was also a large portion of the survey, and those who utilized social media proved to be the most engaged group in terms of higher levels of participation. In total, 41 out of the 65 respondents that indicated a high level of participation used social media for politics, and 18 out of the 19 respondents who indicated very high levels of participation used social media. In addition, those who utilized social media were almost 5% more likely to have increased their level of political activity since entering college. Lastly, the social media politicians proved to be the clear majority of the survey's respondents that communicated most frequently. While the dataset was fairly split across levels of participation, the social media group proved much more engaged than the others, with upwards of two-thirds of the group indicating they participated once per week or more. More importantly, the social media group comprised nearly half of the entire survey's higher activity respondents; of the 240 respondents who participated more than once per week, 135 used social media to do so. Especially significant, this included over half (58%) of those who had communicated the most often, at least two or three times per week.

## **II. The Virtual Watercooler: Political Comedy Viewers and Social Media Use**

Political Comedy programs, using a masterful blend of pop culture references, quick witted comebacks, and a fair share of mockery, generate mass appeal to younger audiences while also allowing for at some level, political discourse to occur. Indeed, Baym (2006) writes, "Often, however, the silly is interwoven with the serious, resulting in an innovative and potentially powerful form of public information. The blending of news and satire confronts a system of political communication that largely has degenerated into sound bites and spin with critical inquiry" (Baym 273). The serious moments of the show, more typical of content from *The Daily Show* and others than *Colbert*, offers viewers an opportunity to think about these complex and

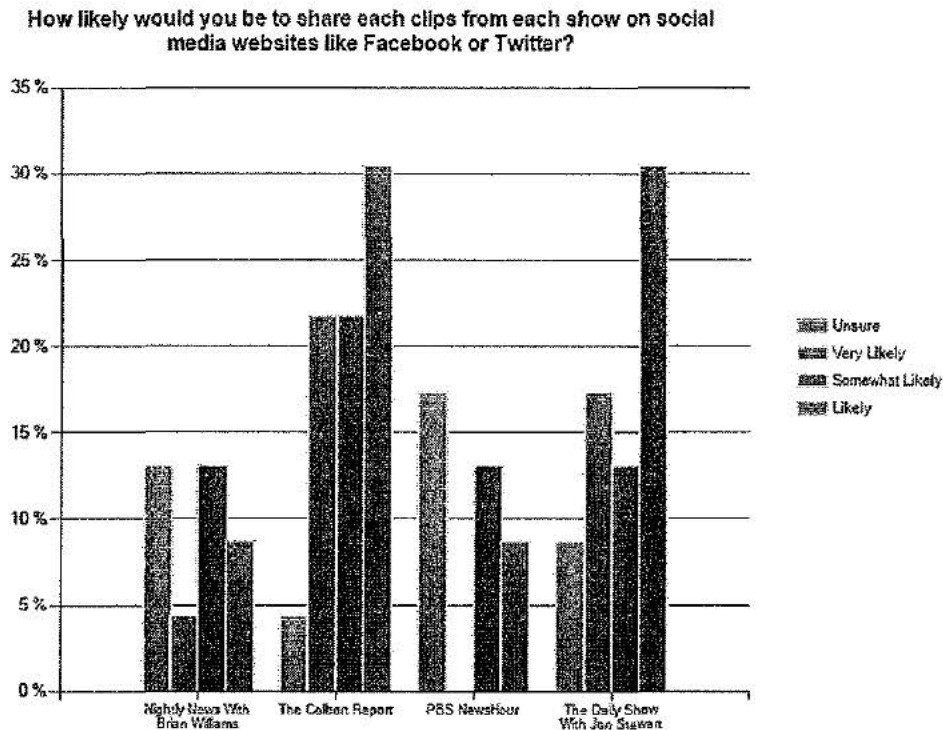
often confusing issues, a distinct aberration from typical media coverage. By not characterizing the programs as “real news”, these programs are able to go beyond the constraints of news media, offering viewers a different way to interact with and follow political news and information on a regular basis. This may also point to a critical argument in political communication – scholars are quick to recognize that young adults are abandoning the traditional mechanisms of citizenship and may assume that the advent of the Internet has eliminated the need or desire for young adults to become information seekers. While some cite the decline of the newspaper and television news among younger adults, many fail to realize that the popularity of political comedy programs and other outlets through which to learn and interact with politics are because these mediums have understood that this generation is less driven by the contents of the package, but rather by the delivery and packaging, in these cases the comedy (Pew 2013). In the focus group sessions, comedy was by far the most common response from participants when asked what stood out amongst the political comedy clips. One specific student said that watching the traditional news clips seemed like work in comparison to TDS and Colbert, saying that the comedy made the news palatable. Indeed, many students noted that watching political comedy didn’t seem like any civic duty or political activity and almost no different to watching other comedy programs on television. This revelation helps to frame the context by which young people interact with political comedy, and show that the political aspect of these programs could perhaps be nothing more than an afterthought.

However, survey data collected during the undergraduate survey of political participation and the experimental sessions offers other insights. Despite their rationales for watching political comedy programs, data and literature have shown that they are in fact learning more about politics and getting more political involved in some way regardless of their motivations for

watching the shows. As with the group of social media politicians, those who had accessed political comedy programming as a news source at least three times per week were found to possess high levels of both self-efficacy and political knowledge. Over 95% of daily TDS viewers felt qualified to participate in the political world, and only 40% found that sometimes politics can be complicated. Over 90% again felt they had a good understanding of national issues, and nearly 88% reported voting in the last election. Unlike the social media politicians, the groups of political comedy viewers were primarily liberal, with 85% indicating that the candidate they liked or voted for had won the election. Almost 55% felt that they had increased the level of political participation since college.

The most promising data received from the surveys were in regards to political comedy users and social media. Among those who had reported watching *TDS* at least three times per week, 55% reported communicating about politics on a social media site, including 92% of those who watched the show six or more times per week. Viewers from the experimental groups also showed a strong preference for the political comedy clips. Mirroring the data from the undergraduate survey's question on media habits, respondents were mostly willing to discuss, recommend, or share clips with others. Sharing via word of mouth was again the top choice of viewers, with 60% of viewers saying they would be "likely" or "very likely" to share clips from *The Colbert Report*, 57% willing to share content from *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Just over 25% of viewers said they would share clips via e-mail. But when asked about social media, viewers responded positively, as shown in Figure 8 below.

Figure 8



Further highlighting the dominance of *TDS* and *Colbert* over traditional news, the data clearly shows over half of viewers not only preferred political comedy, but would be likely to share it on a social media platform. These data further solidify claims regarding younger viewers and their media habits watching, reading, and creating political content, and speaks to a greater trend of young adults beginning to utilize all of these mediums collectively in a broader effort to understand, participate, and affect the political world. By interacting and sharing a variety of attractive political content (like *TDS* or *Colbert* clips) on social media sites, a forum for political discourse, a “Virtual Watercooler” where young adults can think critically, debate, and understand politics is created no matter the original intention of the poster. The data have shown that the Watercooler effect is already beginning to take root in social media sites, and is fueled by the humor and satire that Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and others provide. While we may not

currently be able to measure the end results of such interactions, research thus far has considered online political discussion to be ultimately positive and beneficial to our society.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

As with most work, a project of this size and magnitude carried its own weight worth of limitations and difficulties. The undergraduate survey of political participation did not ask specifically about voter identification, party affiliation, or about voter preferences toward major issues. In the demographic section, some questions (major and minor) yielded little results and could have been eliminated, while the structure of some others (age and GPA) was also detrimental to the study. Methodically, I feel that while using multiple methods of data collection was beneficial to the depth of the study, it became more of a challenge to treat the data with equal weight. Unfortunately, additional experimental sections did not occur (as planned) due to a variety of reasons. Without similar numbers in terms of respondents, it was hard to apply the same analysis and extrapolate similar results. Specifically in regards to the methodological section, separating the two surveys (before and after the clips) was a critical mistake. Creating one survey with multiple pages would have allowed for respondents to stop the survey after page one, watch the clips and then finish the survey afterward. With the surveys separate, there was no ability to correlate responses from one survey to the next, creating challenges for analysis. Additionally, I found the focus group process to be too informal, struggling to guide discussion and take any meaningful sentiment beyond student preferences and a little bit on the biases associated with political comedy programming.

Future research should continue to explore the role of social media platforms in terms of stimulating political information seeking, knowledge, and activity amongst young adults.



Particular emphasis could be especially significant in regards to emerging platforms like Twitter and Instagram as they continue to grow in popularity and users. With the next few years becoming increasingly politicized with the 2014 midterm elections and 2016 Presidential election, it will soon be a great time to observe and discover new ways that young adults are becoming more political on social media sites. Attention should be given specifically to the way that social media has continued to incorporate political advertising onto user's news feeds during election season and what effect, if any, it has on stimulating political activity or online donations to campaigns. Also subject-specific but not mentioned in this project is the potential role that political fan pages such as "Being Liberal", "Being Conservative", and "The Other 98%" can play in stimulating political discourse and activity moving forward. Each of these topics presents a different direction that social media technologies have allowed for, and scholarship with these emerging technologies has yet to stray too far beyond young voters and usage statistics. Lastly, research specifically targeting political action that originates on social media websites, such as rallies, protests, or other boycotts of products would be a particular benefit to the subject of civic engagement and citizenship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **Conclusion**

In closing, social media websites and political comedy programming play a critical role in attracting young adults to the otherwise unattractive political world. Through the use of sites like Facebook and Twitter, online political activity can occur in real time between massive amounts of connected users, stimulating political discourse and debate. While the initial attraction may serve some other purpose than political means, young adults are becoming increasingly consistent media users, which in turn increases political self-efficacy, knowledge, and civic engagement. A slew of user-generated and shared content on social media websites

flood the average user's news feed, exposing many to a diverse array of articles and posts of political nature. Political comedy programming also has the ability to appear on these social media platforms, with many sharing the content for its comedic appeal. Personalities like Jon Stewart and Steven Colbert combine the silly and serious in a way that both engages young viewers but also leads them to think critically about the American political system, synthesizing otherwise complex and confusing political content into concepts the average viewer can process and respond to. Dalton may have best characterized the state of young voters in the political world today, writing that "American youth thus have a different image of government and a different relationship to politics. It is not that they are apathetic and unconcerned about politics – they are often involved and they show their concern in different ways than their elders" (p. 171). It is the understanding of these differences that must ultimately drive the thinking and scholarship of this field, meeting younger populations at their level to discover and understand the operations of a technologically driven generation.

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## Appendix A: Undergraduate Survey of Political Participation

1. This survey aims to assess your political sentiments, opinions, and tendencies towards the use of media in regards to political information. By consenting to take this survey, you allow us to use your information for this academic study. No identifiable information will be collected or used in the study.

Do you consent to participate in this study?

Yes

No

2. I feel qualified to participate in politics.

Yes

No

3. Sometimes politics is too complicated for me to understand.

Yes

No

4. I have a good understanding of the important national issues facing our country.

Yes

No

5. I voted in the most recent Presidential election.

Yes

No

Not Eligible

6. The candidate I liked or voted for won the election.

The candidate I liked or voted for won the election. Yes

No

7. The most recent election I voted in was:

2012 Presidential Election

2010 Midterm/Gubernatorial Election

2008 Presidential Election

Presidential Election before 2008

Midterm Election before 2008

Other (please specify)

---

8. The President and Vice President are members of which political party?

Republican

Democrat

Libertarian

Green

Tea Party

Socialist

9. Which political party has the majority of seats in the Senate?



- Republican
- Democrat
- Libertarian
- Green
- Tea Party
- Socialist

10. The Senate Majority Leader is:

- Harry Reid
- Nancy Pelosi
- John Boehner
- Mitch McConnell

11. The Speaker of the House of Representatives is:

- Harry Reid
- Nancy Pelosi
- John Boehner
- Mitch McConnell

12. How would you rate your overall level of political participation?

- Very Low     Low     Average     High     Very High

13. How has your level of political participation changed since becoming a college student?

- Large Decrease     Decrease     No Change     Increase     Large Increase

14. How often do you communicate about politics (issues, candidates, etc.) with your family or

friends, if at all?

- Less than once per month
- About once per month
- 2-3 times per week
- About once per week
- More than once per week

15. How have you communicated about politics (issues, candidates, etc.) with your family or friends, if at all? (Check all that apply)

- In-Person
- Group Meetings
- Writing E-mails/letters
- Phone/Text
- Online Chat
- Social Media websites (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
- None of the Above
- Other (please specify)

16. How frequently do you access the following news sources either in print, on television/radio, or online?

MSNBC

- Never
- Once or twice a week
- Three to five times a week
- More than five times a week

**FOXNews**

Never     Once or twice a week     Three to five times a week     Six or more times per week

**CNN**

Never     Once or twice a week     Three to five times a week     Six or more times per week

**Network TV News**

Never     Once or twice a week     Three to five times a week     Six or more times per week

**Local TV News**

Never     Once or twice a week     Three to five times a week     Six or more times per week

**The Daily Show With Jon Stewart**

Never     Once or twice a week     Three to five times a week     Six or more times per week

**NY Times**

Never     Once or twice a week     Three to five times a week     Six or more times per week

**NPR**

Never     Once or twice a week     Three to five times a week     Six or more times per week

**Washington Post**

Never     Once or twice a week     Three to five times a week     Six or more times per week

**Wall Street Journal**

Never     Once or twice a week     Three to five times a week     Six or more times per week

**The Colbert Report**

Never     Once or twice a week     Three to five times a week     Six or more times per week

**Local newspaper**

Never   
  Once or twice a week   
  Three to five times a week   
  Six or more times per week

17. Age:

---

18. Gender:

- Male  
 Female  
 Other (please specify)

---

19. Race/Ethnicity: (Check all that apply)

- American  
 Asian/Pacific Islander  
 Caucasian  
 Latino/a  
 Middle Eastern  
 Native American

20. How would you best describe your family's current socio-economic status?

- Upper Class  
 Upper-Middle Class  
 Middle Class  
 Lower-Middle Class  
 Lower Class

21. Do you have employment in addition to your academic work?

- Yes  
 No

22. If yes, how many hours a week do you work at your job?  
 (Skip if you answered "No")

- Less than 10 hours
- 11-20 hours
- 21-30 hours
- 30 or more hours

23. Cumulative EMU Grade Point Average: (if applicable)

|

24. Academic Major(s):

|

25. Minor(s): (if applicable)

|

26. In what calendar year was your first semester at EMU?

- 2013
- 2012
- 2011
- 2010
- 2009
- Prior to 2009

27. In what semester of that year did you begin?

- Fall
- Winter
- Summer

28. How many college credit hours have you completed (either at EMU or another institution that transferred credits):

- 1-30 Credit Hours (Freshman level)
- 31-60 Credit Hours (Sophomore level)
- 61-89 Credit Hours (Junior level)
- 90 or more Credit Hours (Senior level)

29. Are you a transfer student?

Yes

No

30. Are you an on-campus resident?

Yes

No

## Appendix B: Initial Survey for Experimental Session/Post-Clip Survey

### Initial Survey for Experiment

1. Prior to today, please indicate how frequently you watch the following television programs:

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Frequently
<b>The Colbert Report</b>	<input type="radio"/> Never	<input type="radio"/> Rarely	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes	<input type="radio"/> Often	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Frequently
<b>PBS Newsroom with Jim Lehrer</b>	<input type="radio"/> Never	<input type="radio"/> Rarely	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes	<input type="radio"/> Often	<input type="radio"/> Frequently
<b>The Daily Show With Jon Stewart</b>	<input type="radio"/> Never	<input type="radio"/> Rarely	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes	<input type="radio"/> Often	<input type="radio"/> Frequently

2. How often do you watch the following news networks to receive political information?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Frequently
<b>ABC</b>	<input type="radio"/> Never	<input type="radio"/> Rarely	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes	<input type="radio"/> Often	<input type="radio"/> Frequently
<b>CBS</b>	<input type="radio"/> Never	<input type="radio"/> Rarely	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes	<input type="radio"/> Often	<input type="radio"/> Frequently
<b>NBC</b>	<input type="radio"/> Never	<input type="radio"/> Rarely	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes	<input type="radio"/> Often	<input type="radio"/> Frequently
<b>CNN</b>	<input type="radio"/> Never	<input type="radio"/> Rarely	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes	<input type="radio"/> Often	<input type="radio"/> Frequently
<b>Fox News</b>	<input type="radio"/> Never	<input type="radio"/> Rarely	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes	<input type="radio"/> Often	<input type="radio"/> Frequently
<b>MSNBC</b>	<input type="radio"/> Never	<input type="radio"/> Rarely	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes	<input type="radio"/> Often	<input type="radio"/> Frequently
<b>Comedy Central</b>	<input type="radio"/> Never	<input type="radio"/> Rarely	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes	<input type="radio"/> Often	<input type="radio"/> Frequently
<b>PBS</b>	<input type="radio"/> Never	<input type="radio"/> Rarely	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes	<input type="radio"/> Often	<input type="radio"/> Frequently

3. Please indicate your level of personal interest in the ongoing political gridlock and filibustering in the US Senate:

- Not interested
- Somewhat Interested
- Interested
- Very Interested

4. Please indicate your level of personal interest in the US Supreme Court and it's review of civil rights legislation:

- Not interested

- Somewhat Interested
- Interested
- Very Interested

5. What political party do you most readily identify with?

- Republican
- Democrat
- Green
- Libertarian
- Tea Party
- Independent

## Post-Clip Survey

1. After viewing clips from each of these shows, which programs did you find particularly interesting and engaging? (Check all that apply)

- Nightly News With Brian Williams (NBC)
- The Colbert Report (Comedy Central)
- PBS NewsHour (PBS)
- The Daily Show With Jon Stewart (Comedy Central)
- None of the above

2. For clips from "Nightly News With Brian Williams", please respond to the following statements:

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
<b>This show presented information clearly</b>	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Neutral	<input type="radio"/> Agree	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree
<b>This show included relevant and legitimate content (news sources, reporters, guests)</b>	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Neutral	<input type="radio"/> Agree	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree



	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
<b>This show explained concepts and issues well</b>	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Neutral	<input type="radio"/> Agree	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree
<b>This show was not biased in its reporting of the issues and stories</b>	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Neutral	<input type="radio"/> Agree	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree

3. For clips from "The Colbert Report", please respond to the following statements:

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
<b>This show presented information clearly</b>	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Neutral	<input type="radio"/> Agree	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree
<b>This show included relevant and legitimate content (news sources, reporters, guests)</b>	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Neutral	<input type="radio"/> Agree	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree
<b>This show explained concepts and issues well</b>	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Neutral	<input type="radio"/> Agree	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree
<b>This show was not biased in its reporting of the issues and stories</b>	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Neutral	<input type="radio"/> Agree	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree

4. For clips from "PBS NewsHour", please respond to the following statements:

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
<b>This show presented information clearly</b>	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Neutral	<input type="radio"/> Agree	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree
<b>This show included relevant and legitimate content (news sources, reporters, guests)</b>	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Neutral	<input type="radio"/> Agree	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
<b>This show explained concepts and issues well</b>	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Neutral	<input type="radio"/> Agree	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree
<b>This show was not biased in its reporting of the issues and stories</b>	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Neutral	<input type="radio"/> Agree	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree

5. For clips from "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart", please respond to the following statements:

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
<b>This show presented information clearly</b>	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Neutral	<input type="radio"/> Agree	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree
<b>This show included relevant and legitimate content (news sources, reporters, guests)</b>	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Neutral	<input type="radio"/> Agree	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree
<b>This show explained concepts and issues well</b>	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Neutral	<input type="radio"/> Agree	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree
<b>This show was not biased in its reporting of the issues and stories</b>	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Neutral	<input type="radio"/> Agree	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree

6. How likely would you be to share each clips from each show on social media websites like Facebook or Twitter?

	<b>Not Likely</b>	<b>Somewhat Likely</b>	<b>Unsure</b>	<b>Likely</b>	<b>Very Likely</b>
<b>Nightly News With Brian Williams</b>	<input type="radio"/> Not Likely	<input type="radio"/> Somewhat Likely	<input type="radio"/> Unsure	<input type="radio"/> Likely	<input type="radio"/> Very Likely
<b>The Colbert Report</b>	<input type="radio"/> Not Likely	<input type="radio"/> Somewhat Likely	<input type="radio"/> Unsure	<input type="radio"/> Likely	<input type="radio"/> Very Likely
<b>PBS NewsHour</b>	<input type="radio"/> Not Likely	<input type="radio"/> Somewhat	<input type="radio"/> Unsure	<input type="radio"/> Likely	<input type="radio"/> Very

	<b>Not Likely</b>	<b>Somewhat Likely</b>	<b>Unsure</b>	<b>Likely</b>	<b>Very Likely</b>
<b>The Daily Show With Jon Stewart</b>	<input type="radio"/> Not Likely	<input type="radio"/> Somewhat Likely	<input type="radio"/> Unsure	<input type="radio"/> Likely	<input type="radio"/> Very Likely

7. How likely would you be to share clips from each show via e-mail?

	<b>Not Likely</b>	<b>Somewhat Likely</b>	<b>Unsure</b>	<b>Likely</b>	<b>Very Likely</b>
<b>Nightly News With Brian Williams</b>	<input type="radio"/> Not Likely	<input type="radio"/> Somewhat Likely	<input type="radio"/> Unsure	<input type="radio"/> Likely	<input type="radio"/> Very Likely
<b>The Colbert Report</b>	<input type="radio"/> Not Likely	<input type="radio"/> Somewhat Likely	<input type="radio"/> Unsure	<input type="radio"/> Likely	<input type="radio"/> Very Likely
<b>PBS NewsHour</b>	<input type="radio"/> Not Likely	<input type="radio"/> Somewhat Likely	<input type="radio"/> Unsure	<input type="radio"/> Likely	<input type="radio"/> Very Likely
<b>The Daily Show With Jon Stewart</b>	<input type="radio"/> Not Likely	<input type="radio"/> Somewhat Likely	<input type="radio"/> Unsure	<input type="radio"/> Likely	<input type="radio"/> Very Likely

8. How likely would you be to discuss, reference, or recommend clips from each show by word of mouth?

	<b>Not Likely</b>	<b>Somewhat Likely</b>	<b>Unsure</b>	<b>Likely</b>	<b>Very Likely</b>
<b>Nightly News With Brian Williams</b>	<input type="radio"/> Not Likely	<input type="radio"/> Somewhat Likely	<input type="radio"/> Unsure	<input type="radio"/> Likely	<input type="radio"/> Very Likely
<b>The Colbert Report</b>	<input type="radio"/> Not Likely	<input type="radio"/> Somewhat Likely	<input type="radio"/> Unsure	<input type="radio"/> Likely	<input type="radio"/> Very Likely
<b>PBS NewsHour</b>	<input type="radio"/> Not Likely	<input type="radio"/> Somewhat Likely	<input type="radio"/> Unsure	<input type="radio"/> Likely	<input type="radio"/> Very Likely
<b>The Daily Show With Jon Stewart</b>	<input type="radio"/> Not Likely	<input type="radio"/> Somewhat Likely	<input type="radio"/> Unsure	<input type="radio"/> Likely	<input type="radio"/> Very Likely

9. According to the clips, which Republican Senators spoke out against the filibuster? (Check all that apply)

Rand Paul

- John McCain
- Lindsey Graham
- Ted Cruz
- Mitch McConnell

10. What issue was the filibuster used to draw attention to?

- Amending the Voting Rights Act
- A bill to end the sequester
- A discussion of Drone strikes on American soil
- The nomination of John Brennan as CIA head
- None of the Above

11. What Senate action did the filibuster delay?

- Amending the Voting Rights Act
- A bill to end the sequester
- A discussion of drone strikes on American soil
- The nomination of John Brennan as CIA head
- None of the Above

12. Who is challenging the provision of the Voting Rights act?

- Who is challenging the provision of the Voting Rights act? The State of Mississippi
- The United States Government
- Atlanta, Georgia
- Shelby County, Alabama

13. On what grounds is the provision of the Voter Rights Act being challenged?

- Because the states affected by the provision have minimized voter discrimination
- Because the act became law at a time of high racial tensions that no longer pose a threat to voters
- Because the provision discriminates against by the South by requiring that they get all changes to elections approved
- None of the above
- All of the above

## **Appendix C: Video Clips used in Experimental Session**

### **Issue #1: Rand Paul Filibuster**

#### **Traditional News**

<http://www.nbcnews.com/id/3032619/#51091613> (NNBW)

<http://video.pbs.org/video/2341406647> (PBS) end at 3:19

#### **Political Comedy**

<http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/424486/march-07-2013/rand-paul-s-filibuster> (TCR)

<http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/wed-march-6-2013/rand-paul-s-filibuster> (TDS)

### **Issue #2: Voting Rights Act**

#### **Political Comedy**

<http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/tue-march-5-2013/ballots-of-the-southern-wild> (TDS)

<http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/424438/march-06-2013/voting-rights-act> (TCR)

#### **Traditional News**

[www.video.pbs.org/video/2339336639](http://www.video.pbs.org/video/2339336639) (PBS)

<http://www.nbcnews.com/id/3032619/#50402739> (NNBW)