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April 12th, 2022

Is Comedy Central Replacing CNN? Investigating the Political Influences of Late Night Comedy
in the Modern Media Environment

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
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Political Science

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Abstract

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The modern media environment provides consumers the autonomy to choose between a seemingly endless array of TV and media options. Subsequently, consumers disinterested in political affairs hold the freedom to avoid traditional hard news outlets and replace this consumption with either alternative news programs or apolitical media. Late Night Comedy, now a political, partisan genre in the modern media landscape, holds substantive news value as many Americans turn to it for viable news consumption. I pose the question: Who is consuming late night content, and how does this exposure impact their understanding and perceptions of American politics? Through a survey experiment conducted on America-based MTurk adults, this thesis descriptively and empirically investigates the type of consumers watching both traditional hard news media and late night comedy and probes the ways in which exposure to candidate interviews on both news sources impact the variables of information recall, candidate favorability, candidate likability, and specific trait associations. The findings of this study suggest that late night viewers are more politically interested, with cross tabulations also suggesting they are younger and lean Democrat. Furthermore, this study provides evidence for the benefit of using late night campaign interviews to promote political candidacy as they bolster perceptions of likability, charm, warmth, perception of strong leadership, perceived issue effectiveness, and overall information recall. Other than information recall, this study found no statically significant political understanding benefits from traditional hard news exposure.

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Acknowledgements

Foremost, I want to thank my advisor, Dr. Andra Gillespie, for her guidance, wisdom and patience during this process. Writing this thesis has been challenging and, more so, incredibly rewarding, and I thank her for continuously encouraging me to push myself. This project would not have been possible without her mentorship. I would like to thank Dr. Danielle Jung for her constant support and feedback, as well as Dr. Michele Schreiber for her contributions to the paper. I thank all the members of my committee who took the time and care to review my work and provide insightful critiques. I am deeply appreciative to my family for their unwavering and enthusiastic support, not only during this thesis process but throughout the entirety of my academic career. I would not be the writer I am today without them. I would like to thank the Emory Political Science Department for not only the foundational education on which this thesis is built, but the generous research grant that allowed this study experiment to occur. I would also like to thank the Film and Media studies department for instilling an academic background and love for TV upon which I was able to bridge these disciplines within my work. I would like to thank all my friends, peers, and professors at Emory University who have collectively inspired my love for academia and molded me into the student I am today. Finally, I would like to thank John Oliver and Stephen Colbert who, through the mechanisms core to this thesis, sparked both my love of comedy and interest in politics.

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Introduction

On the 2008 campaign trail, mere weeks before the Presidential election, Republican nominee John McCain canceled a scheduled appearance on *The Late Show with David Letterman* to interview with Katie Couric on CBS News (Lichter et al., 2015). McCain's decision seemed like a rational one; in campaigning for the nation's highest office, an interview on an accredited news channel could reassure the American public about political fitness more effectively than a comedy program. However, the move generated unexpected political backlash. Letterman, feeling denigrated by McCain's cancellation, dedicated much of his nightly program to "roasting" the Arizona senator in his absence. He emphasized McCain's mistake by declaring to his audience, "the road to the White House runs through me" (Lichter et al. 2015, 2). Letterman's berating of McCain proved to have consequences for his Oval Office pursuit, as both the unimpressive Couric interview and Letterman slander were picked up by the traditional news cycle. In an act of damage control, McCain appeared on Letterman three weeks later to apologize for the cancellation and admit that he "screwed up" ("Today Show", 2008), demonstrating the severity of McCain's media strategy oversight.

What went wrong? Common logic asserts that appearances on hard news shows, programs that traditionally focus on professional and credible journalism (e.g. *CNN*, *CBS Evening News*, *Fox News*, etc.), may promote stronger messages than appearances on soft news shows, entertainment programs that incorporate news and politics into their content without the same journalistic credibility (e.g. *The Tonight Show*, *The Late Show*, *The View*, etc). Historically, hard news shows were the gatekeepers of credible political information (Delli Carpini and Williams, 2010). Television news in the mid 20th century was predicated on limited consumer choice: the young nature of TV technology provided few programs other than the news. Television news was also inclusive as the less educated, and commonly less politically engaged, were just as likely to watch television news as their more educated counterparts (Prior, 2010). Everyone watched TV news and revered it as the primary distributor of credible information; soft news, on the other hand, was expected to amuse rather than inform. Political content incorporated on soft news programs served as a mere apparatus for entertainment and held little merit and credibility in terms of serious news dissemination.

Following this model, any sensible campaign strategist would prioritize a primetime hard news interview because of its demonstrated ability to penetrate several key voter demographics and communicate the stature and aptitude of a political candidate. However, this outdated media strategy fails to account for the rapidly shifting modern media landscape, one that continuously challenges historical TV norms. The wall that upheld the strict separation of hard news and soft news genres in preceding decades has decayed as platforms rebel against genre expectations, resulting in shifting perceptions about the criteria for valid news sources. Consumers increasingly recognize the politically substantive value of entertainment programs and no longer consider hard news outlets as the sole guardians of news information (Parkin, 2014; Delli Carpini and Williams, 2010).

The expansion of TV stations and networks, alongside the mass development of streaming services and non-traditional media avenues, exacerbates this effect by creating a new culture of autonomy in a high-choice media environment. Instead of collectively watching the same news channels, viewers can choose from a range of news program types and even opt out of news consumption altogether in preference of apolitical content (e.g. Reality TV, Sitcoms, Cooking Shows, etc.). The politically disinterested no longer need to watch the news just to engage with TV, and therefore an interview on a hard news program likely reaches only those politically engaged enough to seek political signals in spite of unlimited alternatives (Prior, 2013). On the other hand, those with less political interests may turn to soft news programs like late night comedy to learn about politics in a more accessible and entertaining manner, whether intentionally or through incidental learning (Prior, 2003; Baum, 2002; Baum, 2003b). In this fragmented media landscape, singular programs no longer hold the attention of the entire media market and successful campaigning must exhaust all media outlets to strategically connect with different audiences. Concluding that a late night comedy program is of little value to a campaign greatly misunderstands the current properties of political communication and overlooks a large market of Americans who exclusively or frequently use late night platforms as sources of political intake. As explained by political scientist Michael Parkin, "candidates could now pay a price for ditching a talk show in favor of a formal news program—something that would have been easily justified in previous campaigns" (Parkin, 2014, 45).

Narrowing down the soft news genre, late night comedy programs have become salient actors in the realm of political communication and their impact continues to grow as the media landscape expands. The genre of late night comedy (also known as late night television or late night) typically consists of a talk show format with a singular host reciting comical monologues and conducting guest interviews, generally airing after 10PM (Lichter et al., 2015). However, while dependence on late night as a tenable news source has intensified in the contemporary media environment, hard news programs still draw large audiences and remain a pack-leader for political communication. Late night comedy and hard news forums provide valuable yet varying political substance, and the diverging nature of their messages may create different political outcomes for their viewers.

This study investigates the demographic trends of news type viewership in the modern media environment and evaluates the relationship between late night comedy viewership and political understanding. In doing so, I aim to identify the types of people watching certain news programs and explore how such viewership impacts perceptions about American politics and political actors.

The impact of late night forums on American political culture is unavoidable; As stated by scholar Katarzyna Molek-Kozakowska, “the question that arises is not longer ‘if’, but ‘how’ popularity of televised talk shows has influenced American political discourse” solidifying the inevitability of these forums as persuasive structures in the political arena (Molek-Kozakowska, 2013, 321-322). As a result, the political outcomes of late night television can be theorized as a double edged sword. On one hand, the forum may expose irregular civic learners and participants to pertinent political signals they wouldn’t otherwise receive. On the other hand, it may focus less on substance, consequently only communicating information congruent with the gossipy and comical interests of the program. As such, the heart of my study is the question of whether the presentation of late night comedy as a reliable news resource benefits the American public by bolstering the accessibility of political content or damages our political culture by diverting attention from stricter, more dependable news sources.

This thesis explores these concepts through three substantive chapters. Chapter 1 explores the historical evolution of late night television and the general TV landscape that contextualizes the high-choice media environment of the modern day. In Chapter 2, I use original survey data to describe media

trends and consumption habits. In Chapter 3, I use a survey experiment to test the effect of different news formats on political knowledge and attitudes.

Existing scholarship provides overlapping and diverging suggestions for both the demographic make up of hard and soft news audiences as well as the political impacts of exposure to either genre. Through an original survey experiment, I will provide supporting or contradicting evidence to current scholarly consensus in order to clarify and progress the field of study on this topic. Through analysis of these results, I investigate the implications of news type consumption and tie these results into the larger structure of the modern media environment. Moreover, based on the findings of this study, I suggest future research that will contribute to the foundational understanding of late night comedy and its political influences in the modern media landscape.

Chapter 1

Contextualizing The Modern Media Environment: The Evolution of Late Night Comedy

The modern age adds complexity to a once simplified media environment. In order to comprehensively understand the foundations and causes of the modern high-choice, high-autonomy media landscape, this chapter unpacks the chronological history of television and the sequential evolution of late night comedy.

The Dawn of Television

News and entertainment consumption relied heavily on radio for the first half of the 20th century (Hilmes, 2014). The creation of at-home television sets during the mid century radically changed the way Americans interacted with current events and pop culture, and by 1955 over 78% of the US population owned a TV (Timberg and Erler, 2002). In television's infancy, the only consistent news show was CBS' *Evening News* program, airing every weekday at 7:30pm starting in 1948. Most homes collectively tuned into the CBS Evening News because of limited alternatives, allowing stations to standardize information intake and rapidly disseminate uniform messages to large portions of the American public (Hilmes, 2014). The restricted program options resulted in mass, singular news consumption; The politically engaged tuned in for informative purposes and the politically unengaged tuned in because not much else was on. In fact, many politically uninterested individuals did not mind watching the news; The presence of moving images in the living room, a new technological phenomenon, was exciting enough (Prior, 2010; Prior, 2013)! As a result, those uninterested or uncompeled by politics would still engage in political learning through simple exposure, regardless of intention.

Television's visual cues, conversational structure, informal tone, and easily digestible content attracted a new demographic for information consumption: less educated audiences (Timberg and Erler, 2002). The illiterate, politically disinterested, and those bored with radio or lacking the motivation to read print newspapers gravitated towards television's simplicity. As a result, less educated individuals relied on television programs more than other popular mediums liked radio or newspaper (Prior, 2010). The

accessibility of TV news applied to partisan affiliations: TV's objectivity and general bipartisan approach to current events in its early years welcomed viewers from all party affiliations and political ideologies. The Fairness Doctrine, which mandated stations to balance the partisanship of their issue coverage, exacerbated this effect by broadcasting messages appealing to both sides of the political spectrum (Hilmes, 2014). In this way, the mainstream TV news audience ranged from the politically engaged to the politically indifferent on all points of the affiliation spectrum, all receiving the same political signals (Prior, 2010).

The Birth Of Talk Shows (1950-1966)

The early 1950s were dominated by the four national broadcasting networks, CBS, NBC, ABC, and Dumont, each producing talk shows in an attempt to command the up and coming market. From the beginning, television talk programs were a hit. CBS and NBC competed as front runners, becoming arch-enemies in their quest for top ratings. Edward R. Murrow pioneered the talk show movement for CBS, followed by Arthur Godfrey who standardized tones of intimacy and one-on-one talk show structures (Timberg and Erler, 2002). On NBC, early programs were spearheaded by television executive Pat Weaver. Weaver set the model for entertainment and public affairs programs that followed, most notably *Tonight!*, hosted by comedian Steve Allen and first airing in 1954. The show held an 11:15 p.m. time slot, airing directly after the NBC late news and therefore picking up large portions of its audience (Lichter et al., 2015). The success of this show and fellow NBC programs allowed the station to overtake CBS in ratings by 1956 (Timberg and Erler, 2002).

Tonight! host Allen passed the reins to fellow former radio announcer Jack Paar, who hosted the show from 1957 to 1962 (Litcher et al., 2015). This transition initiated a common norm in late night TV: the preservation of shows despite the substitution of hosts. While the host acts as the face of the brand, late night shows typically outlive their host's tenures and pass the reins to a successor, inherently changing the tone and content of the show but ensuring the notoriety of the name lives on (Timberg and Erler, 2002). Paar was the first late night host to feature political candidates, and John F. Kennedy became the first presidential candidate to appear on an entertainment talk show when he interviewed Paar in 1960 (Parkin, 2014). Kennedy maintained a formal and stiff demeanor while interviewing on the show, clearly

accustomed to traditional interview settings and unadjusted to the loose nature of comedy programs. Nixon followed in Kennedy's footsteps on *The Tonight Show with Jack Paar* (the name changed under Paar's control) several months later. Seemingly learning from Kennedy's missteps, Nixon embraced the light-hearted format of late night TV, exchanging banter while also discussing important campaign points. Despite the revolutionary nature of these appearances, neither interview impressed the media, which deemed appearances on jovial comedy programs by serious presidential prospects cringey and inappropriate (Ibid).

Jack Parr left *The Tonight Show* in 1962 and started *The Jack Paar Program* a few months later. Johnny Carson succeeded Paar as *The Tonight Show* host. During Carson's tenure, *The Tonight Show* held a monopoly over the late night scene. Straying from Paar's established political pattern, Carson avoided discussion of political affairs. Carson's *Tonight Show* occupancy established the still-respected late night structure: short monologues, celebrity guest interviews, comedic sketches, audience interactions, and musical acts (Lichter et al., 2015). During the next presidential election cycle in 1964, Barry Goldwater continued the late night trend by visiting Jack Paar on his new program (Parkin, 2014). Paar's invitation to Goldwater marked a notable difference between Paar's and Carson's political styles.

While the expansion of electronic media gave comedians unprecedented opportunities to elevate their notoriety and celebrity, advertising their content to the entire nation came with trade-offs. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the government agency tasked with regulating television, demanded family-friendly, morally appropriate TV content during this era (Hilmes, 2014). As a result, the provocative, shock-value humor emblematic of in-person, underground comedy clubs lost its controversial flair on the TV screen (Baumgartner, 2021). In the coming years of comedy, television actors and hosts attempted to balance the moral demands of the FCC and commercial entities with the preservation of their comedy in a genre historically contingent on suggestive jokes and colorful language.

The Expansion of Talk Shows (1967-1991)

The year 1967 marked the dawn of what historians consider "the first late-night talk-show wars" (Litcher et al., 2015, 21; Timberg and Erler, 2002). For the next few decades, networks lined up shows to challenge Carson and NBC's control of the late night market. Cognizant of Carson's apolitical

manner, many hosts employed political comedy to gain an edge in competition. Dick Cavett of ABC, Merv Griffin of CBS, and David Frost at the BBC all pursued political angles, employing in-depth interviews with controversial figures in an attempt to overtake Carson's top spot. While these entries created market competition, they failed to displace Carson's late night supremacy (Litcher et al., 2015). Through the ebb and flow of late night shows, with several short lived programs and a handful of durable ones, late night maintained public popularity throughout the succeeding decades (Timberg and Erler, 2002).

In a rare split from his apolitical style, Johnny Carson interviewed Richard Nixon in 1968, who teased his presidential bid before appearing on ABC's late night program *The Joey Bishop Show* after his official announcement to talk politics and his bizarre fondness of ketchup on cottage cheese. Although his campaign strategy proved effective when he won the 1968 race, Nixon was the last presidential candidate to appear on late night TV for more than two decades. The media and public remained suspicious of late night comedy as a serious campaign stop, and presidential hopefuls avoided these platforms for fear of painting themselves as too lowbrow to be Commander-In-Chief. Many hosts continued to riff on political matters in their monologue jokes, but the overall nature of late night and the guests they invited veered towards non-partisan and apolitical matters. Late night programs continued to grow throughout the next decades, however the political guest approach pioneered by Jack Paar mostly disappeared until the early 1990s (Parkin, 2014).

The Late Night Campaign (1992-2020)

The 1992 retirement of Johnny Carson, arguably the most iconic figure on the late night scene, caused a stir as many speculated who would carry the torch. Network executives selected comedian Jay Leno as the new host of *The Tonight Show*, and fellow finalist and previous *Late Night* host David Letterman signed a lucrative deal with CBS to host *The Late Show with David Letterman* in 1993. Now direct competitors, the two became the face of late night television in the 1990s. The constant ratings war between CBS and NBC's top players created a level playing field between the two networks, ending the decade-long dominance held by NBC (Litcher et al., 2015). Building on the changing TV and political climate, both hosts integrated politics into the heart of their comedy.

The 1992 Presidential campaign is widely considered the origin of modern talk show strategy and fittingly coined the year of the “talk show campaign” (Parkin, 2014, 24). The influx of late night shows created a demand for a new type of political coverage as the public found traditional news coverage increasingly tiresome. As a result, the 1992 election cycle ended the 24 year candidate-late night appearance drought with a flood of political visitors appearing on the late night stage (Parkin, 2014). While many political prospects appeared on talk shows, candidate Bill Clinton popularized the trend. His team launched the “Manhattan Project” a strategy aimed at maximizing entertainment press while avoiding the scrutiny of traditional journalists who focused on his mounting scandals (Parkin, 2014, 26). On June 3rd, 1992, Bill and Hillary Clinton appeared on *The Arsenio Hall Show*, mixing gaiety and policy, all culminating in Clinton’s iconic serenade of “HeartBreak Hotel” on his saxophone. While criticized by some for its undignified nature, the interview was a smash hit, garnering further media exposure by alternative outlets covering the appearance (the very trickle-down media effect the Manhattan Project targeted). The candidate went on to appear on several more entertainment programs in an attempt to connect with young voters. Clinton’s media strategy differed greatly from incumbent George H.W. Bush, who opted out of entertainment program appearances altogether, preferring more traditional forums that aligned with the seriousness of his campaign. However, the trend set by Clinton and fellow candidates undoubtedly shifted the mindset around entertainment television and presidential campaigns. The scorn and skepticism that accompanied candidate late night interviews in the 1960s splintered into discourse about the viability of late night programs as serious campaign stops, and the victory of a candidate who intensely utilized the platform bolstered perception of its validity and effectiveness in reaching young audiences (Parkin, 2014).

Possibly in response to the sensational mixing of politics and late night in the 1992 cycle, the 1990s saw the creation of new comedy programs that overtly tackled political matters. Airing in 1993, Bill Maher’s *Politically Incorrect* was, as implied by its name, controversial in its address of current events and public affairs. The show, first premiering on Comedy Central and then moving to ABC in 1997, refused to shy away from blunt humor and garnered both backlash and praise for its searingly curt approach to political issues. *The Daily Show*, originally hosted by Craig Kilborn on Comedy Central in 1996, also drew upon political content in its comedy. However, it was under Jon Stewart’s leadership

starting in 1999 that the show pivoted to focus almost exclusively on political topics, distinguishing itself from other late night programs by centering wholly around political affairs (Litcher et al, 2015). Catering to a narrower, more politically inclined audience, Stewart employed more cutting political satire, becoming “one of the most incisive political shows on television” (Lichter et al., 2015, 26).

Despite the sensational revival of the talk show campaign by Clinton, the trend mostly died out during the 1996 election cycle. Clinton, now running as the incumbent, avoided the type of unconventional media exposure that set him apart in 1992. Much of the hesitation amongst candidates to utilize entertainment shows stemmed from an uncertainty about the forum. The race was dominated by older candidates like Bob Dole (who made a singular late night appearance as the only candidate using the platform) and Pat Buchanan who came from an era of traditional politics and were skeptical of these burgeoning platforms (Parkin, 2014).

The disappearance of talk show campaigning during the 1996 election cycle proved temporary. The 2000 election welcomed a profusion of candidate late night appearances, more than any prior election year (Parkin, 2014). Political hopefuls Bill Bradley, Al Gore and John McCain visited *The Tonight Show* to banter with Jay Leno while also addressing pertinent campaign issues. George W. Bush had an awkward and unimpressive interview with Letterman, but rebounded with a successful appearance on *The Tonight Show*. After securing the nominations from their respective parties, Gore and Bush continued to hit the talk show circuit to promote their candidacies (Ibid).

While Leno and Letterman still led the late night scene, the development of new stations in the 2000s created more space for late night hosts and thus more market competition. After a short-lived stint as *The Tonight Show* host, former Late Night Host Conan O’Brien signed with TBS to create *Conan* at 11:00. *Lopez Tonight*, hosted by George Lopez, followed *Conan* on TBS at midnight for two seasons. Jimmy Kimmel revived ABC’s participation in the late night market in 2003 by hosting *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* in the 11:35 time slot. Jimmy Fallon hosted *Late Night* at 12:35 after *The Tonight Show*, followed by *Last Call with Carson Daly* at 1:35am (Lichter et. al, 2015). Consumers now faced unprecedented choices and autonomy in deciding their late night entertainment preferences, not just between channels but between time brackets, allowing consumption of multiple late night shows in one night.

The 2004 late night campaign heavily featured eager Democrats as incumbent George W. Bush mostly avoided comedy interviews. Throughout the election cycle, 26 presidential hopefuls appeared on talk shows, 23 of whom were Democrats (Parkin, 2014). The expansion of entertainment talk shows meant that less mainstream shows also received campaign attention. Under Jon Stewart, *The Daily Show* cultivated a large fan base and politicians were eager to appear before its young and politically interested audience (Parkin, 2014; Baumgartner and Morris, 2006). Democratic hopefuls Al Sharpton, John Edwards, Joe Lieberman, Dick Gephardt, and Dennis Kucinich all discussed their candidacies with Stewart, and Edwards later returned to officially proclaim his intent to run as president (Parkin, 2014). On Bill Maher's new show *Real Time*, airing after the cancellation of *Politically Incorrect* (Litcher et al., 2015), candidates Bob Graham, Wesley Clark, and John Edwards made their case for the presidency. While Bush mainly stayed away from entertainment programs, his singular interview on *Dr. Phil* made history as the first time an incumbent president campaigned on an entertainment program (Parkin, 2014).

The *Colbert Report* marked another innovation in the late night TV format. Premiering in 2005, political satirist Stephen Colbert modeled his show from *The Daily Show*, posing as a political pundit delivering opinions and updates on political affairs. However, the liberal leaning host added a new element to the late night game by centering his entire show around a character; Colbert acted as a fictional conservative pundit in his show, using the character to poke fun at prominent Republican media figures (Litcher et al., 2015).

The uptick of candidate talk show appearances in 2004 seems trivial compared to the number of interviews during the 2008 election. Throughout the election season, presidential hopefuls participated in entertainment show interviews 101 times, nearly four times that of 2004 (Parkin, 2014). Republicans were more involved in the late night campaign than four years prior. Colbert held an especially vital role during this election cycle, with candidates visiting the program commonly receiving a boost in popularity (an effect coined the "Colbert bump") (Parkin, 2014, 40). Front runners Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, John McCain, and John Edwards also campaigned on talk shows, typically sticking to more popular programs like *The Tonight Show* and *The Late Show*. After securing their respective nominations, Republican McCain and Democrat Obama continued to hit the talk show circuit. Notably, McCain's September cancellation on Letterman and eventual live apology demonstrated the power and influence of these

mediums. For Obama's campaign, the slogan of hope and change resonated well with the young audiences of late night television, proving a successful avenue for communicating his message (Litcher et al., 2015; Parkin, 2014).

Barack Obama revived his late night media strategy in the 2012 election as the incumbent. Starting early in 2010, both Obama and Republican challengers made their rounds on late night (and daytime) talk shows. This trend continued until Massachusetts Senator Mitt Romney won the Republican nomination. After making five appearances during the primary season, Romney mostly avoided entertainment shows for the rest of the election and prioritized more traditional news avenues while Obama continued to utilize the popularity of the comedy forums (Parkin, 2014).

The 2010s molded the contemporary late night sphere by replacing old late night hosts with current faces. Jimmy Fallon succeeded Jay Leno as host of *The Tonight Show* in 2014, with Seth Meyers stepping in as the new host of *The Late Show*. In 2015, Stephen Colbert succeeded Letterman as host of *The Late Show*. Jon Stewart signed off as *The Daily Show* host in 2016, passing the torch to comedian Trevor Noah. Mirroring the rankings of the 1990s, *The Tonight Show* and *The Late Show* (now starring Fallon and Colbert, respectively) dominate the modern late night scene alongside the newer *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* (White, 2021).

The 2016 election was unprecedented due to the notoriety and celebrity status of the leading candidates, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Hillary Clinton's decades in the political spotlight and her husband's scandals (one of the most popular late night joke topics in the genre's history) (Litcher, 2015), and Trump's celebrity status and history of controversial comments made the election cycle a field day for comedians. However, amusing jabs turned into more intense, critical commentary as the 2016 campaign advanced and Trump's bid for office became increasingly plausible (Baumgarnter, 2021). The type of comedy aimed at Trump shifted from entertainment to personal, clearly fueled by the writers' and performers' disdain the candidate (Santora, 2016). The level of criticism levied at Trump surpassed mere entertainment and acted as a sort of negative advocacy campaign against the candidate, using their TV real estate to air personal, political, and policy grievances towards the polarizing figure.

Contemporary Late Night and Its Future

In 2021, the late night landscape would look unrecognizable to a 1960s Johnny Carson fan. While the outward appearances of late night has remained the same (sets resembling living rooms, a desk, adjacent seating for guests etc.) (Palumbo, 2021), the content and culture has transmogrified into a new type of show, one that matches the pulse of modern America. For one, while hosts incorporated political commentary into earlier late night formats, such topics are far more central to monologue content than ever before. Jimmy Fallon begins many of his shows saying “let’s get to the news and jokes”, classifying both news and comedy as equally significant components of the show’s structure and inherently combatting the older, apolitical late night formula. Modern late night sews politics into the fabric of its comedy with such constancy that they seem inseparable.

Scholars also speculate that modern late night hosts are far more partisan than ever before. Rarely do hosts criticize figures on both sides of the political spectrum, and instead target the condemnatory nature of their comedy at figures with whom they ideologically disagree. This partisanship is not lost upon viewers, as the public overwhelmingly views late night hosts as liberal leaning, resulting in a missing base of conservative viewers who are less likely to tune in to shows that attack their beliefs. The high prevalence of politically charged satire is met with mixed feelings. While public opinion data suggests that many viewers enjoy hosts’ political commentary, similar numbers prefer that hosts stick with apolitical or simplified political content (Baumgarner, 2021). However, while many hosts like Stephen Colbert, Samantha Bee, and Trevor Noah embrace the partisan approach, several contemporary hosts like Jimmy Fallon (proclaimed king of the “softball one-liners”), James Corden, and Conan O’Brien mostly replicate the apolitical tone of comedy predecessors like Johnny Carson (Zoglin, 2016, 1). Just like any genre, variations occur between programs and each host approaches their comedy with styles tailored to their agendas, audiences, and brands. While this shift in political practice may not be unanimous for all late night forums, the overall tone and direction of the genre has migrated towards a more ideologically explicit standard.

Overt partisanship is not exclusive to left leaning programs. Conservative comedy shows have emerged in recent years, sometimes dominating liberal competitors in ratings. Fox News entered the late

night marketplace with *Gutfeld!* in 2015, an 11pm comedy show starring conservative satirist Greg Gutfeld (Marx and Sienkiewicz, 2021). The show mimics that semblance of traditional late night, however Gutfeld's jokes tend to riff on liberal figures, shadowing the conservative ideology of its host and parent network. In 2021, the show overtook *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, *The 11th Hour with Brian Williams*, and *Don Lemon Tonight* in overall ratings, beating both late night and hard news competitors and solidifying itself as a worthy competitor in a media market dominated by left wing comedians (Marx and Sienkiewicz, 2021; Johnson, 2021).

Modern TV has elevated the 1960s' "late night talk show wars" to a far more advanced level of warfare, expanding in both sheer quantity and style. The development of cable television and virtual television platforms creates more media space, resulting in a flood of new entertainment talk shows (See "The Late Night Campaign"). The explosion of talk shows, in turn, saturates the late night comedy market. As a consequence, these programs' properties of uniqueness, which stemmed from simply being a late night show during the era of diluted competition, are drowned out by the sheer quantity of late night players in a modern era. Each show must adapt, creating new ploys, gimmicks, and edges to set their program apart, understanding that popularity and ratings are not promised for mere participation in the new era of competition.

Modern talk shows also have greater diversity, mostly attributable to the increasing number of late night programs. Women hold a stronger presence in the late night arena, as evidenced by the emergence of hosts like Chelsea Handler, Samantha Bee, and Nikki Glasser. Prominent late night shows also feature more hosts of color, such as Trevor Noah, the South African native who took over *The Daily Show*, and Hasan Minhaj, the son of Indian, Muslim immigrants who hosts *Patriot Act* on Netflix. However, the current leading late night comedians, including Stephen Colbert, Jimmy Fallon, Jimmy Kimmel, James Corden etc., are white men, demonstrating a general racial and gender homogeneity.

Late night comedy has also lost part of its defining characteristic: late night. While most shows maintain their late evening time slots, many viewers consume late night content on their own time. Platforms like YouTube or streaming services like Hulu and HBO Max allow subscribers to watch shows, including soft news, whenever they want. Youtube clips of *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* rack up millions of

views¹, indicating that many viewers dictate their own viewership schedule or use these platforms to rewatch and re-engage with late night content.

Modern late night hosts do not just cover politics, they participate as well. In September 2021, late night shows collaborated on a “climate night”, using their platforms to directly address climate change. Popular hosts such as Jimmy Kimmel, Stephen Colbert, Jimmy Fallon, Seth Meyers, Samantha Bee, Trevor Noah, and James Corden participated in the event, dedicating their content to a politically charged issue (Berardelli, 2021). In another instance, Jon Stewart famously appeared on *Crossfire* and chastised Tucker Carlson and Paul Begala for the political toxicity and regression perpetuated by their show. The same year, Stephen Colbert testified in front of a House subcommittee on immigration and founded the Super PAC Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow, successfully raising over a million dollars (Litcher et al., 2015). Without the ethical codes that restrict traditional journalists, late night comedians can participate in politics and promote political agendas both within and outside their shows.

In the aftermath of the Trump era, late night comedy is more curt, polemic, and unapologetically liberal (Zoglin, 2016). Overwhelmingly left-leaning hosts embrace their dismay for Republican and conservative figures as the quantity and content of partisan jokes become bigger and more harsh. Throughout the 2016 campaign, Hillary Clinton faced her fair share of one-liners and cheap shots, but they paled in comparison to the satirical intensity hosts employed against Trump. Setting a new norm, these partisan jabs aimed to the right side of the political spectrum lasted through the Trump administration (Baumgarner, 2021). While the sitting president and their administration historically bears the brunt of late night taunts (Parkin, 2014) (and the current Biden administration receives its fair share of quips), comics retain an anti-conservative approach in the Biden era that likely sets a precedent for the future of the genre.

Jordan Klepper, host of Comedy Central’s *The Opposition with Jordan Klepper*, colloquially articulates the evolution of late night: “Our parents watched Johnny Carson for jokes that gently tucked them into bed. Today people watch late night to try to digest what happened during the day and figure out how to feel about it” (Smith, 2019, 1). Late night no longer serves as pure comedic relief, but rather as a

¹*Jimmy Kimmel Asks President Obama About His Daily Life*, (2015), *YouTube*, Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmPLGt5rd_k.

viable and well-utilized source of political information and discourse. Developing media fragmentation, along with evolving and expanding late night talk shows, allows the modern TV consumer to hold complete autonomy over their media diets. The implications of this history means that, as opposed to earlier decades with limited program options and mostly apolitical entertainment shows, modern viewers can select their news consumption source from nearly anywhere. With the freedom that accompanies a “choose-your-own-adventure” media environment, are people replacing hard news consumption with soft news? And if so, who is learning from soft news, what are they learning, and how viable of a replacement is it for traditional coverage? The next chapter investigates the types of media genres different demographic groups consume to establish current trends and habits occurring in the modern media landscape.

Chapter 2

A Descriptive Exploration of Contemporary Media Consumption Trends

This chapter investigates the consumption trends of modern media viewers. The influx of media options in the 21st century indicate seemingly infinite avenues for media participation, creating more complex media diets in the high-choice environment. Political Scientist Markus Prior summarizes the challenges currently facing scholars in the field: "Empirical analysis is severely hampered by a seemingly simple problem: we do not know how many or what kind of people are exposed to which messages" (Prior, 2013, 102). The overarching question of this chapter is: What types of content are people watching in the modern media environment and how does this consumption vary between demographics? Using a survey study, this chapter presents a model that predicts the relationship between late night viewership and several explanatory variables, thus helping overcome Prior's identified challenge.

Literature Review

Who's Watching Late Night?

Late night comedy attracts millions of viewers each night, proving itself to be both a ratings titan and massively influential to a large share of the media market. In 2021, the three leading late night shows garnered massive ratings: *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* averaged 2.95 million viewers, *Jimmy Kimmel Live* averaged 1.75 million viewers, and *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* averaged 1.54 million viewers. Shows that aired in later time slots still attracted significant viewership: Seth Meyers' *Late Night* averaged 1.01 million viewers and James Corden's *The Late Late Show* averaged 971,000 viewers (White, 2021). These numbers represent averages as audience sizes often fluctuate between shows, especially when political guests are involved. Political appearances tend to boost episode viewership (Maglio, 2015), with political candidates of higher prominence attract larger audiences when appearing on late night television compared to lesser-known political peers. Additionally, during election years, late night audiences tend to grow as election day approaches (Parkin, 2014).

Scholars agree that late night audiences lean overwhelmingly young compared to average TV viewers (Young and Tsinger, 2006; Hollander, 2005; Parkin, 2014; Baumgartner and Morris, 2006). Age often predicts late night viewership: The younger an individual, the more likely they are to watch late night shows (Young and Tsinger, 2006; Baumgartner and Morris, 2006; Hollander, 2005; Litcher et al., 2015). For *The Daily Show* specifically, 18-24 year olds make up the largest audience demographic (Baumgartner and Morris, 2006). Nearly half (46%) of this age group claimed to learn at least some candidate information from comedy shows during the 2008 primaries, as compared to only 20% of people over the age of 40 (Litcher et al., 2015).

Academic research differs in its evaluation of political attentiveness and knowledge of late night viewers. Several scholars agree that late night and entertainment talk show audiences tend to be less politically engaged (Baumgartner and Morris, 2006; Baum and Jamison, 2006; Pew Research, 2004). According to a Pew Research study in 2004, those who self-report political learning from soft news forums possess the least amount of political knowledge (Pew Research, 2004). Furthermore, many of these politically disinterested individuals watch soft news programs for entertainment rather than political consumption (Baum, 2002). These findings open a pathway to the by-product learning theory, which contends that those who watch soft news shows without the intention of political exposure still subconsciously learn about public affairs (Prior, 2003; Baum, 2002; Baum, 2003b). In doing so, politically disinterested or unknowledgeable viewers unintentionally gain valuable political information, codifying these sorts of programs as inadvertent yet useful avenues for political education.

Parkin (2014) disagrees with some of these assertions and contends that late night viewers are not as apolitical as commonly perceived. Other scholars agree that late night viewers are more interested in political campaigns than the average TV viewer, indicating high levels of political curiosity (Hollander, 2005). This theoretical framework coincides with the structure of the modern media landscape: with the opportunity to ignore politically oriented programs altogether, those attracted to entertainment-news hybrid programs (often called infotainment) must be somewhat politically interested.

Scholars mostly agree that late night viewers are, on average, less educated. Those without a college degree watch soft news programs at higher frequencies than their college educated counterparts (Prior, 2003). However, this effect varies between specific shows. Young and Tsinger (2006) find that

viewers of *The Late Show with David Letterman* were slightly more educated than non-viewers. Scholarly literature further suggests that the composition of late night audiences leans more heavily male and liberal. This effect was especially pronounced for Stewart's *The Daily Show*, as the audience leaned both younger and more liberal than audiences of *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and *The Late Show with David Letterman* (Hollander, 2005; Pew Research, 2004; Young and Tsinger, 2006).

Besides age and political ideology, other variations exist in audience composition across late night talk show platforms. Viewers of Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* tended to be more politically knowledgeable than viewers of David Letterman's *The Late Show* and Jay Leno's *The Tonight Show* (Young and Tsinger, 2006). An explanation for these findings may rest on the structure of each show. *The Daily Show* intentionally resembles a newsroom with both the setting and delivery style mimicking a hard news environment (Baym, 2005), and therefore plausibly attracts more knowledgeable audiences accustomed to consuming hard news forums. Additionally, *The Daily Show* focuses more heavily on political content than *The Late Show* and *The Tonight Show* (Litcher et al., 2015). As a result, those more interested and engaged with political affairs will likely opt into *The Daily Show* whereas those more interested in general entertainment will choose programs like *The Late Show* and *The Tonight Show*.

Who's Watching Hard News?

While viewership has declined in recent years, the American public still commonly uses traditional TV news (Matsa, 2018; Jurkowitz and Mitchell, 2013). Television hard news contains three primary categories, local news, cable news, and network news, each splintering from each other in various ways. In 2021, local news seemingly leads the pack, attracting the same or more viewers than cable or network news (Pew Research, 2021). However, viewers of cable news tend to engage with the platform for longer periods of time, with even the heaviest viewers of local and network news consuming cable news for longer durations. This data supports a theory that cable viewers are more politically interested and, as a result of extended viewership, more knowledgeable than other news type viewers. However, further research is required to support this theory. Cable news tends to focus on narrower topics, thus commanding greater influence on specific issues by providing extensive and concentrated coverage on that particular agenda point (Jurkowitz and Mitchell, 2013).

More than half of American adults consume a combination of hard news types (Jurkowitz and Mitchell, 2013). This trend is especially pronounced between network and local news, with over 80% of the audience for one news type also consuming the other. While network and local news viewers don't consume cable news at the same rates, 86% and 76% of cable news consumers also consume network news and local news, respectively (Jurkowitz and Mitchell, 2013).

Among cable news networks, Fox News networks currently leads the market in viewership (Johnson, 2021; Jurkowitz and Mitchell, 2013). MSNBC held the second spot as of 2020, demonstrating the ratings dominance of two of cable's most partisan networks (MSNBC is notably liberal and Fox News is notably conservative) (Johnson, 2021). According to *Adweek*, during the 2021 news cycle Fox News averaged 2.35 million primetime viewers (Katz, 2022a), MSNBC averaged 1.53 million primetime viewers (Katz, 2022c), and CNN averaged 1.08 million primetime viewers (Katz, 2022b). Fox News consistently demonstrates high loyalty and ratings as consumers more consistently tune into their prime-time programs (Jurkowitz and Mitchell, 2013).

While data shows that hard news is a well utilized medium for information intake, Americans increasingly rely less on TV news as a current events source (Matsa, 2018, Jurkowitz and Mitchell, 2013). This downward trend applies to local TV, network TV, and cable TV at different rates. More Americans use local TV sources than cable and network news sources (with cable in second and network trailing in third) (Matsa, 2018). Despite overall downward trends, the local affiliate TV news stations of ABC, Fox, CBS, and NBC saw increasing viewership during evening and late night time slots in 2020 (Pew Research, 2020). However, the composition of this reporting is shifting as local news stations report more heavily on national topics to draw in viewers migrating to nationalized programs (Martin and McCrain, 2019).

Hard news consumption habits vary among different demographic pockets of America. In terms of age, younger generations are far less likely than older counterparts to watch TV news and the decline in local news consumption is especially pronounced among young people (Matsa, 2018; Jurkowitz and Mitchell, 2013; Young and Tsinger, 2006; Hollander, 2005; Parkin, 2014; Bumgartner and Morris, 2006). Education also plays a factor, as those with less education (ie. no more than a high school diploma) likely consume more local TV news than more educated individuals. This effect doesn't apply to cable news,

where consumption habits hold fairly consistent between education levels. Non-whites frequently consume local news more than whites, by a margin of about 7 percentage points. This effect doesn't apply to cable or network news where consumption habits between racial groups remain consistent (Matsa, 2018). White men more commonly watch late night programs, women more commonly watch local TV news (Hollander, 2005; Pew Research, 2004; Young and Tsinger, 2006, Parkin, 2014). Similar to other demographic categories, the gender disparity in news type consumption is only found in local TV viewership and not in network or cable news (Matsa, 2018).

Party affiliation correlates with hard news consumption: more Democrats and Democratic leaning independents watch network TV while Republicans and Republican leaning independents are more likely to get their news information from cable TV. However, Democrats and Republicans consume local news at similar rates (Matsa, 2018). Furthermore, while it would be understandable to assume ideological and party based echo chambers (i.e. liberals and Democrats exclusively watch ideologically congruent programs like MSNBC and conservatives and Republicans exclusively watch ideologically congruent programs like Fox News), the Pew Research Center found the large portions of both MSNBC and Fox News' base watch both programs (Jurkowitz and Mitchell, 2013). However, many Republicans who watch CNN heavily distrust the network (Jurkowitz et al., 2020).

Despite the overall decline of hard news viewership, this pattern is not necessarily steady. Local TV news follows a consistent economic pattern: revenue streams, correlated with viewership numbers, increase during election years and decrease during non-election years (Pew Research, 2021). Cable news also saw an uptick in viewership during the 2020 cycle, concurrent with that years contentious presidential election (Johnson, 2021). Logically, people may be more interested in current events and political learning during politically charged time periods like election season, and thus likely turn to TV news for political signals.

While this thesis mainly positions late night comedy in relation to hard news TV, the modern media environment expands beyond television programming and into other multimedia spheres. Approximately 86% of Americans receive news updates from digital devices, with 68% receiving this information often (Shearer, 2021). This effect is especially pronounced among younger generations, with individuals under 50 being more likely to prefer digital platforms and the internet for news intake. Within

the subset of digital devices, social media is the most popular digital news source among individuals younger than 30 (Shearer, 2021; Mitchell, 2018); Shearer, 2021). Television still leads as the first preferred news source of American adults, but the internet is gaining in popularity as a preferred source of news (Mitchell, 2018).

Hard News v. Late Night

Modern consumer autonomy greatly amplifies news competition. Whereas hard news programs previously competed exclusively with other hard news programs, they now find themselves competing against soft news shows for the ability to inform the American public. Survey research suggests that viewers actively replace hard news consumption with late night comedy as their sole or primary source of information (Pew Research, 2004). Scholars theorize that the replacement of hard news with soft news democratizes the media landscape by providing more accessible learning avenues for those lacking the political literacy to approach and understand hard news texts. However, sole dependence on comedy forums as news sources may dilute the seriousness consumers attach to political affairs, equating the seriousness of the news content with the silliness of the late night forum (Molek-Kozakowska, 2013).

Other studies find a more compatible relationship between the mediums, suggesting that young late-night viewers are more likely to also consume traditional news programming than young peers who do not watch late night television (Young and Tsinger, 2006). The study implies that individuals include both soft and hard news in their information routines rather than replacing one with the other (Young and Tsinger, 2006; Feldman and Young, 2008). These findings undergird the gateway hypothesis, which suggests that engagement with infotainment forums encourages consumption of hard news content and provides a gateway for concurrent viewership (Buam, 2005; Xenos and Becker, 2009; Feldman and Young, 2008).

Scholars disagree about the size, and corresponding influence, of hard and soft news audiences. Hard news remains the leading source for campaign and political information for the general American population (Pew Research, 2004). However, while some research suggests that hard news audiences outsize soft news audiences considerably (Prior, 2003), other data shows the two program types attract similarly sized audiences, with late night sometimes outpacing their hard news counterparts (Katz, 2022a;

Katz, 2022b; Katz, 2022c; White, 2021). Baum (2003a) asserts that the value of soft news audiences does not lie in sheer numbers, but in its ability to reach specific and concentrated demographic pockets: those who are younger, those without college degrees, and those who are generally less educated. Pew Research (2004) provides further support for this assertion: young people mention comedy shows as frequently as newspapers and traditional evening news programs as regular sources of information. In this way, soft news' unique audience provides strategic opportunities to target and inform viewers that don't typically seek traditional news.

The scholarly literature dissected in this section provides insight into the current data and research on the audience composition of late night and hard news TV programs. In the next section, I use survey data to describe contemporary trends in media consumption and explore implications.

Theories and Hypotheses

Based on the existing literature, I expect to find that people watch apolitical TV content more frequently than politically charged TV. The expansion of TV options and the multitude of streaming services creates a seemingly endless supply of non-news media offered as an alternative to politically oriented content. Therefore, apolitical media logically comprises the largest portion of people's media diets. The digestion of political content in hard news and late night comedy, no matter how slight, requires active listening and cognitive awareness to process the presented information (Baum, 2003b). Entertainment programs do not require the same levels of cognitive attention, and are thus easier and, consequently, more desirable programs. This theory implies that, while the frequency of apolitical, hard news, and late night consumption may vary between demographic classifications, there exists a consistent ranking order in which these content types remain: apolitical content being the most frequently watched genre, late night comedy content being the second most frequently watched genre, and hard news content being the least frequently watched genre.

It is pertinent to recognize a counter theory in which late night comedy is, on average, consumed less than hard news. This study specifically compares late night comedy, a subset of the soft news genre, to the broad genre of hard news TV. While the late night scene has expanded exponentially in accordance with a growing media environment (see Chapter 1), the number of specific late night programs pales in

comparison to the number of hard news programs. In this way, despite the more enticing entertainment values of late night comedy, the sheer quantity of hard news programs may result in more frequent interactions. Despite this possible counter-theory, I still theorize that individuals consume late night comedy more frequently than hard news TV.

In terms of media consumption habits among traditional demographic classifications such as age and gender, I theorize that the results of this study will support the current scholarly consensus. Most scholars agree that younger individuals watch late night comedy more frequently than older individuals (Young and Tsinger, 2006; Hollander, 2005; Parkin, 2014; Baumgartner, 2006). Inversely, older Americans more likely consume hard news forums than younger Americans (Matsa, 2018). I theorize that younger individuals are more enticed by newer, more engaging information sources like late night comedy because they encapsulate an evolving media environment targeted at younger generations. On the other hand, older individuals stick to traditional news avenues which reflect media norms of their generation. Therefore, younger respondents will watch late night comedy more frequently than older respondents.

I suggest an association between levels of partisanship and the frequency of media type consumption. Polarization and negative partisanship fuels modern American politics. While some political scientists contend that the majority of the American electorate leans ideologically moderate, with only a small pocket of Americans identifying as strongly liberal or conservative (Fiorina et al., 2011), other studies show increasing polarization in America over the last few decades (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2005). This polarization is especially pronounced amongst the most politically engaged and partisan (Prior, 2013). I theorize that strong party affiliations act as a signal of political interest and involvement, and therefore those most strongly identifying with a political party watch hard news forums most frequently. I theorize that, in the hyper-polarized modern era, those leaning moderate lack interest in political affairs and therefore self-select non-political content as their media program of choice. I apply this theory to ideological extremism as well, suggesting that those of more extreme conservative or liberal ideology likely engage more with politics, thus resulting in stronger ideological beliefs and feelings. Therefore, I suggest that these individuals consume news oriented content more than those with weaker ideological identities.

Despite the recent entry and subsequent success of the conservative talk shows like *Gutfeld!* (Marx and Sienkiewicz, 2021), liberal hosts, writers, and ideologies dominate the late night scene (Baumgarner, 2021). As a result, I theorize that conservatives watch late night infrequently as the political jokes and content often criticize their political beliefs. On the contrary, liberals likely watch late night more frequently due to the tendency to self-impose echo chambers and select media content congenial to pre-existing opinions (Guess et al., 2018; Peterson et al., 2019; Prior, 2013). Affiliation and ideology are not synonymous, and individuals may have party affiliations and political ideology that do not align with traditional conceptions. However, evidence suggests that Democrats tend to hold liberal ideologies and Republicans tend to hold conservative ideologies, with increasing correlation between party identification and ideology over time (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2005; Prior, 2013). I therefore theorize that most individuals identifying as liberals also identify as Democrats and most individuals identifying as conservatives also identify as Republicans. I apply the theories for the variable of political ideology to the variable of party affiliation, asserting that more Democrats likely watch late night more than Republicans.

While I theorize that strong party and ideological affiliations indicate political interest, this study also directly investigates the variable of political interest and its association with news and media selection. I previously theorized that those with strong political affiliations and ideological extremism more frequently view politically oriented content because their strong identities demonstrate an interest and investment in politics. On the other hand, those disinterested or unengaged with politics hold no incentive to watch politically charged content, especially since the consumption and internalization of hard news endures costs (Baum, 2003b; Baum, 2002). I therefore recycle the theories behind political ideology, ideological intensity, party identification, and partisanship and apply it to the independent variable of political interest. Because this theory asserts concepts that are more than purely descriptive, I formulate testable hypotheses:

H1: There is a positive association between political interest and frequency of hard news consumption

H2: There is a negative association between political interest and frequency of apolitical media consumption

Scholarly literature indicates that late night audiences engage less with politics (Bumgartner and Morris, 2006; Baum and Jamison, 2006; Pew Research, 2004). While viewers recognize late night's political and entertainment hybridity (Edgerly and Varga, 2019), many tune in for entertainment purposes, with political information acquisition acting as an incidental outcome (Prior, 2003; Baum, 2002; Baum, 2003b). Therefore, I theorize that those with moderate interest in politics watch late night more frequently as its comedic approach satisfies moderate interests in political discourse. Furthermore, those with moderate political interest likely crave both political and entertainment content, and thus late night comedy's hybridity positions itself in a "sweet-spot" for satisfying both desires.

Following the logic presented for the variables of partisanship, ideological intensity, and political interest, those more interested and engaged in politics more likely watch politically oriented content like hard news programs or late night comedy. I theorize this higher frequency of political exposure leads to more opportunities for political learning and thus more content that can be converted to long term, factual knowledge (ie. political knowledge). Therefore, I theorize that high levels of political knowledge indicate higher exposure to political media content and, inversely, low levels of political knowledge indicate replacement of political media content with apolitical content. Following this theory, I hypothesize:

H3: There is a positive association between political knowledge and frequency of hard news consumption

H4: There is a negative association between political knowledge and frequency of apolitical media consumption

This theory echoes the logic behind the political interest hypotheses. Therefore, I replicate this logic further and theorize that frequent consumers of late night comedy contain a mix of high and low knowledgeable individuals who consume the program through different motives (political learning vs. entertainment values). Therefore, I theorize that the audience of frequent late night viewers contains more low political knowledge individuals than hard news but more high political knowledge individuals than apolitical content, therefore positioning itself at the center of the political knowledge spectrum.

Data and Methods

To test the proposed hypotheses, I conducted an online survey that includes an experimental component. In this chapter, however, I focus on observations and descriptive analysis. I designed the survey on the online platform Qualtrics and recruited respondents through the online crowdsourcing platform Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). This platform recruits users to complete tasks, such as surveys, and provides compensation for their participation. The listing on MTurk disguised the purpose of the survey under the description “a short survey about politics”, thus minimizing selection bias for individuals specifically interested in late night TV. Respondents received compensation for completing the survey. Survey respondents did not provide names or personal identifiers and information. Each respondent gave their informed consent and indicated that they were at least 18 years of age. Furthermore, since the focus of my study is American based television programs discussing American politics, the survey only accepted respondents who were American citizens or long-term US residents. While research indicates that many MTurk users lie about their identity and eligibility in order to receive the financial rewards of surveys (Wessling et al., 2017), verification of age and resident status through self-identification was necessary to preserve privacy and anonymity.

I fielded the survey between February 18th and March 5th, 2022. In all, 372 respondents completed the survey. The survey contained two attention checks to ensure participants read the questions thoroughly. These attention checks asked respondents basic questions (ie. what color is the sky), but included the answer they should choose (ie. orange) in the question to test whether or not they were paying attention. Five respondents (1.0%) answered the first attention check incorrectly and one respondent (.2%) answered the second attention check incorrectly. Despite their incorrect responses, I include these respondents in the analysis.

The survey sample is not a random sample of the public but rather a convenience sample of MTurk users, which poses limitations on the generalizability of the findings. While studies find that MTurk users adequately reflect the demographic makeup of US internet users, their demographic distribution varies from that of the greater US population (Ross et al., 2010). Therefore, the descriptive analysis presented in this chapter is generalizable to the population of MTurk users. Table 2-1 shows the

distribution of demographic characteristics of all survey participants. Studies show that females compose a majority of US MTurk workers (Difallah et al., 2018; Ross et al., 2010), thus the lower distribution of female respondents (46.4% versus 53.6%) marks a deviation from the broader MTurk population. The sample leans older with only 10.7% of respondents identifying as 30 or younger. Previous studies found that younger individuals made up the largest portion of MTurk populations, and thus this distribution of respondents skews surprisingly older (Ross et a., 2010).

Table 2-1: Survey Demographics

Description		Percentage
Gender	Male	201 (53.6%)
	Female	174 (46.4%)
Age	18-30	40 (10.7%)
	31-45	182 (48.5%)
	45-60	109 (29.1%)
	60+	44 (11.7%)
Race	White	246 (77.1%)
	Non-white	73 (22.9%)
Annual Household Income	Over \$75,000	115 (35.3%)
	Under \$75,000	211 (64.7%)
U.S. Regions	Northeast	85 (27.6%)
	Southeast	68 (22.1%)
	Midwest	54 (17.5%)
	West	101 (32.8%)
Party	Democrat	175 (52.9%)
	Republican	101 (30.5%)
	Independent	55 (16.6%)
Ideology	Liberal	165 (49.8%)
	Conservative	115 (34.7%)
	Moderate	51 (15.4%)

Independent Variable Definitions and Operationalization:

The explanatory variables measured are political interest and political knowledge. Political interest refers to the level of interest and engagement in political affairs an individual demonstrates.

Political knowledge is defined as “the range of factual information about politics that is stored in long-

term memory” (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996, 10). The term “factual information” distinguishes political knowledge from more subjective variables (such as political impressions, values, and preferences). While knowledge of historical politics may indicate one’s aptitude for political affairs, political knowledge primarily deals with facts about current political structures and figures.

The survey operationalizes the independent variable of political interest through self-identification. For political interest, respondents rate their interest in politics as either “Very interested in politics”, “somewhat interested in politics”, “Slightly interested in politics”, “Not at all interested in politics”, or “Prefer not to say”. There are a multitude of ways to engage with American politics and government systems, including voting, volunteering for campaigns, participating in voter registration drives, watching or reading the news, engaging in political discourse, etc., so respondents evaluate their personal level of political interest through the broad nature of the question. Responses are re-coded into a binary variable, where those indicating high political interest (very interested) are coded as one, while all others are coded as zero (low political interest).

I measure the independent variable of political knowledge through a multiple choice quiz function to test individuals' pre-existing knowledge. The actuality of a person’s political knowledge possession and their perception of their political knowledge possession may differ. One may perceive themselves to possess higher levels of political knowledge than they actually do, and thus self-identification would inaccurately measure this variable. To measure political knowledge, the survey asks respondents five multiple choice questions pertaining to objective political facts (ie. How many years is a US Senate term? Who is the current Attorney General in the Biden Administration?). Each question has one multiple choice option with an objectively correct answer, 4 options with incorrect yet plausible answers, and one “I don’t know” option. I then aggregate correct responses into an index, which I convert into a binary variable of high political knowledge (four or more correct responses) and low political knowledge (three or less correct responses).

Dependent Variable Definition and Operationalization:

The outcome variable is frequency and type of media genre consumption. Specifically, I ask respondents to indicate if they watch hard news, infotainment, and/or apolitical shows and to indicate how often (as in the number of times a week) they watch such programming. Hard news refers to news forums that engage in traditional journalism. This chapter focuses on cable news, network news, and local news, combining them under the umbrella of hard news. Late night comedy refers to comedy programs formatted around a singular host, typically airing after 10PM. Apolitical media content refers to the plethora of media programs untethered to political affairs, including, but not limited to, reality TV, sitcoms, cooking shows, home improvement shows, fictional dramas, etc. While fictional political dramas often involve political systems and therefore may produce political impacts on its viewers, their fictional nature and therefore exclusion of real current events and political affairs classifies the program as apolitical regardless of its multi-genre conflation.

I measure frequency of media type consumption by asking respondents how often they watch each show type² (“4 or more times a week”, “2-3 times a week”, “Once a week”, “A few times a month”, “Never”). As discussed earlier in this thesis, the modern media landscape incorporates a variety of viewing avenues, including cable, streaming platforms, etc. and thus I inform respondents that any avenue of consumption should be incorporated into their frequency evaluation. I convert the indicated frequencies into binary categorical variables, distinguishing between those who watch a program at least 2-3 times a week and those who watch a program less than 2-3 times a week. In order to establish frequency for my genres of interest (ie. late night comedy, hard news, and apolitical genres), I classify those who watch at least one program within a genre at least 2-3 times a week as frequent consumers of that genre and those who watch all programs within a genre less than 2-3 times a week as infrequent consumers of that genre. I

² Listed Late Night programs: *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*. Listed apolitical programs: *Home Improvement Shows* (ie. *House Hunters*, *Property Brothers*, *HGTV Network* etc.), *Reality TV* (ie. *Keeping Up With The Kardashians*, *Selling Sunset* etc.), *Fictional Political Dramas* (ie. *West Wing*, *House of Cards*, *Homeland* etc.), *Fictional Dramas* (ie. *Succession*, *Euphoria*, *Stranger Things* etc.), *Sitcoms* (*The Office*, *Seinfeld*, *Parks and Recreation*, etc.), *Cooking Shows* (ie. *Top Chef*, *Master Chef*, *The Great British Bake Off*). Listed hard news programs: *Newsmax*, *MSNBC*, *Fox News*, *CNN*, *Local News*, *ABC News*, *PBS*, *Bloomberg*.

create cross tabulations and regression tests between the independent variables of political interest and political knowledge with the dependent variable of frequency of genre type consumption.

Control Variable Definition and Operationalization:

The control variables are party affiliation, partisanship, ideological identity, ideological extremism, age, race, gender, and annual income. While similar, the variable of party affiliation refers to an association with a political party (ie. Democrat, Independent, Republican, etc.) whereas political ideology refers to the side of the ideological left-to-right spectrum a respondent falls on (Liberal, Moderate, Conservative). In addition, I create the new variables of partisanship intensity and ideological intensity. Here, strong Democrats and Republicans will be coded identically, as will strong liberals and conservatives. I code age as a three category interval variable: 18-45, 46-60, and 60+. I measure gender as a dummy variable for women. I operationalized race as a dummy variable for white and non-white respondents. I code income as a dummy variable of over \$75,000 and under \$75,000.

For party identification, I create a dummy variables for Democrats and Republicans. I code independent leaner as partisans, leaving pure independents as the comparison. I use a similar strategy to code ideology, coding moderate leaners as ideologues and leaving pure moderates as the comparison category. I then create separate variables for ideological and partisan intensity. Using the standard party questions, I create a binary variable of partisan intensity, where those identifying as “strong Democrats” and “strong Republicans” are coded as one, while all others are coded as zero. Similarly, my ideological intensity measure codes “strong liberals” and “strong conservatives” as one (high ideological intensity) with all other identification coded as zero. In this way, the classification for partisanship and ideological intensity is not tethered to identification with the left or right side of the party/ideological spectrum, but rather their distance from the independent/moderate center.

Results

To further explore the theories previously introduced, I report cross tabulations about the overall frequency of genre type consumption by respondents. As Table 2-2 shows, the results from the survey do not provide support for the theoretical ranking argument, which proposes that respondents overall watch

apolitical media most frequently, late night comedy second most frequently, and hard news content least frequently. Table 2-2 shows the proportions of respondents who watch each genre frequently and infrequently, demonstrating that 64.7% of respondents watch apolitical content frequently, 68.3% of respondents watch TV hard news frequently, and only 24.3% of respondents watch late night comedy frequently. Therefore, the results of this study support a new ranking order in which most individuals watch hard news TV frequently, followed closely by apolitical content, and then followed by late night comedy. This finding may be a result of the older skewing sample as scholarly literature and the subsequent findings of this chapter suggest that younger individuals watch late night comedy more frequently.

Table 2-2: Distribution of Respondents Watching Each Genre Type Frequent and Infrequently

	Frequent Consumers (at least 2-3 times a week)	Infrequent Consumers (less than 2-3 times a week)	Total Count
Frequency of Apolitical Consumption	64.7% (216)	35.3% (118)	334
Frequency of Late Night Consumption	24.3% (81)	75.7% (253)	334
Frequency of Hard News TV Consumption	68.3% (228)	31.7% (106)	334

Table 2-3 shows the descriptive cross tabulations of ideology, ideological intensity, party, partisanship, political interest, political knowledge, age, gender, and race by frequency of apolitical, late night comedy, and hard news TV consumption. Among my respondents, liberals are slightly more likely to watch all the TV genres listed. This difference is most pronounced with viewership of late night comedy (27.3% of liberals watch late night comedy frequently compared to 16.5% of conservatives). This difference is statistically significant as a chi-square analysis produces a p-value of .043. When I compare extreme and weak ideologies, the data suggests that weak ideologies watch apolitical and late night more, while strong and weak ideologies watch hard news at about the same frequencies. These findings provide no support for the idea that those more ideologically charged are more drawn to politically oriented content. However, It does support the theory that the less ideologically charged migrate to non-political media content.

Table 2-3: Cross Tabulations of Ideology, Ideological Intensity, Party, Partisanship, Political Interest, Political Knowledge, Age, Gender, and Race By Frequency of Apolitical, Late Night Comedy, and Hard News TV Consumption.

		Frequency of Consuming Apolitical TV		Frequency of Consuming Late Night Comedy		Frequency of Consuming Hard News TV	
		Infrequently	Frequently	Infrequently	Frequently	Infrequently	Frequently
Ideology	Conservative	42.6% (49)	57.4% (66)	83.5% (96)	16.5% (19)	35.7% (41)	64.3% (74)
	Liberal	33.3% (55)	66.7% (110)	72.7% (120)	27.3% (45)	31.5% (52)	68.5% (113)
Ideological Intensity	Weak Ideology	31.8% (82)	68.2% (176)	72.9% (188)	27.1% (70)	32.2% (83)	67.8% (175)
	Extreme Ideology	49.3% (36)	50.7% (37)	84.9% (62)	15.1% (11)	30.1% (22)	69.9% (51)
Party	Republican	46.5% (47)	53.5% (54)	84.2% (85)	15.8% (16)	32.7% (33)	67.3% (68)
	Democrat	30.3% (53)	69.7% (122)	69.7% (122)	30.3% (53)	31.4% (65)	68.6% (120)
Partisan Intensity	Weak Partisanship	32.8% (77)	67.2% (158)	74.5% (175)	25.5% (60)	31.9% (45)	68.1% (160)
	Strong Partisanship	42.7% (41)	57.3% (55)	78.1% (75)	21.9% (21)	31.3% (30)	68.8% (66)
Political Interest	Low Interest	36.5% (72)	63.5% (125)	79.9% (157)	20.3% (40)	37.6% (74)	62.4% (123)
	High Interest	34.1% (46)	65.9% (89)	69.6% (94)	30.4% (41)	23.0% (31)	77.0% (104)
Political Knowledge	Low Knowledge	41.4% (75)	58.6% (106)	80.1% (145)	19.9% (108)	37.6% (68)	62.4% (38)
	High Knowledge	28.1% (43)	71.9% (110)	70.6% (36)	29.4% (45)	24.8% (113)	75.2% (115)
Age	18-45	30.9% (63)	69.1% (141)	68.6% (140)	31.4% (64)	35.8% (73)	64.2% (131)
	46-60	39.4% (37)	60.6% (57)	83.0% (78)	17.0% (16)	30.9% (29)	69.1% (65)
	60+	50% (18)	50% (18)	97.2% (35)	2.8% (1)	11.1% (4)	88.9% (32)
Gender	Male	37.4% (68)	62.6% (114)	70.3% (128)	29.7% (54)	30.8% (56)	69.2% (126)
	Female	32.9% (50)	67.1% (102)	82.3% (125)	17.8% (27)	32.9% (50)	67.1% (102)
Race	White	36.2% (89)	63.8% (157)	79.7% (196)	20.3% (50)	30.9% (76)	69.1% (170)
	Non-White	35.6% (26)	64.4% (47)	60.3% (44)	39.7% (29)	32.9% (24)	67.1% (49)

Nearly twice as many Democrats frequently watch late night comedy as Republicans (30.3% versus 15.8%). This trend, coupled with the findings that liberals watch late night comedy more than conservatives, aligns with my expectations that those leaning “left” tend to consume late night comedy more. I find that Democrats and Republicans are equally likely to report watching hard news frequently. However, Democrats are about 16 percentage points more likely to report frequent consumption of apolitical TV. Roughly equal proportions of those with weak and strong partisanship watch hard news frequently, contradicting the theory that more individuals with politically charged and polarized party

stances consume political TV media. This also holds true for late night viewership, as similar proportions of weak and strong partisans consume late night comedy frequently (25.5% and 21.9%, respectively). Weak partisans are more likely to frequently consume apolitical media content than strong partisans (67.2% versus 57.3% with a moderately significant p-value), providing descriptive support for the theory that less polarized and politically charged individuals opt for more non-political media content.

The cross tabulation shows an 11 point difference between the amount of liberals and conservatives who consume late night comedy, with more respondents of the former classification consuming the genre frequently. Moreover, a chi square analysis between the variables of frequency of late night consumption and ideology yields a statistically significant p-value, indicating an association between ideology and late night comedy consumption. While not as pronounced as the difference between Democrats and Republicans' late night consumption habits, it follows the trend of more conventionally left leaning individuals consuming late night more frequently than those leaning conventionally right. In this way, the data provides some descriptive support for the theory that those identifying as Democrats also identify as liberals (and those as Republicans as conservatives) as the proportion of frequent and infrequent media consumers holds fairly consistent for traditionally correlated party and ideological affiliations across all three genre types (suggesting many of the same people identifying as Democrats also identify as liberals and those identifying as Republicans also identify as conservatives). However, this data is descriptive and these interpretations are speculative, and therefore more scholarly research is required to assert this claim confidently.

The cross tabulations of media type consumption by political interest in Table 2-3 show that similar proportions of respondents with both low and high political interest watch apolitical content frequently (63.5% versus 65.9%). These findings align with the theoretical framework and previous results that indicate that apolitical content is widely watched by overall media audiences. Individuals with high political interest are more likely to watch late night comedy and hard news compared to those with low political interests by margins of approximately 10 to 15 percentage points, respectively. This data suggests that those more interested in politics actively seek politically charged programs, even in the high-choice media environment.

Respondents with high political knowledge were more likely to watch all three media types compared to individuals with lower political knowledge. Specifically, more individuals with high political knowledge frequently watch late night comedy and hard news than those with lower knowledge by margins of approximately 10 and 13 percentage points, respectively. This aligns with my prediction that those with high pre-existing political knowledge are more drawn to politically oriented content despite having the autonomy to choose apolitical media entertainment.

The cross tabulations between frequency of genre consumption and age show that young respondents consume late night comedy more than older respondents. About 31% of respondents aged 18-45 indicate they frequently watch one or more late night programs as opposed to only 17% of individuals aged 46-60 and 2.8% of individuals over 60. Similar proportions of 18-45 and 46-60 year olds consume hard news frequently (64.2% versus 69.1%, respectively). However, an overwhelmingly majority of respondents older than 60 frequently watch TV hard news (88.9%). There is a downward trend in frequency of apolitical content consumption as age increases as the oldest respondents are least likely to report watching apolitical media content frequently.

The cross tabulations between frequency of genre consumption and gender show fairly even consumption habits of apolitical and hard news content between male and female respondents. Men are about 4.5 percentage points less likely to watch apolitical TV and 2 percentage points more likely to watch hard news. However, men are about 12 percentage points more likely to watch late night TV.

Finally, similar proportions of white and non-white respondents report frequently viewing apolitical and hard news content: 63.8% of white respondents and 64.4% of non-white respondents frequently watch apolitical TV, and 69.1% of white respondents and 67.1% of non-white respondents frequently watch hard news. However, non-white respondents were more likely to watch late night than white individuals, with 20.3% of white respondents indicating frequent consumption compared to 39.7% of non-white respondents.

To further test the relationship between frequency of media type consumption and both political interest and knowledge, I run a logistic regression test on frequency of media type consumption for apolitical TV, late night comedy, and hard news. For my dependent variables, classification of frequent viewership equals 1 and classification infrequent viewership equals 0. The variables run against the

dependent variables are all dummy variables with the exception of age, which I code as an interval variable where older brackets are assigned higher values. When variables yield statically significant associations, I report their odds ratios. I present the results of these tests in Table 2-4.

Table 2-4: Logistic Regression Analysis of the Association Between Frequency of Genre Type Consumption and Political Interest, Political Knowledge, Age, and Party

	Frequency of Apolitical TV consumption		Frequency of Late Night TV consumption		Frequency of Hard News TV consumption	
	B (SE)	Odds Ratio	B (SE)	Odds Ratio	B (SE)	Odds Ratio
Constant	1.304 (.530)**	3.684	.711 (.616)		-0.007 (.544)	
Political Interest (high interest)	.059 (.281)		.869 (.322)**	2.384	.469 (.284)*	1.599
Political Knowledge (high knowledge)	.884 (.287)**	2.420	.574 (.311)*	1.776	.420 (.273)	
Age	-.479 (.213)**	0.619	-1.119 (.313)***	0.327	.496 (.226)**	1.641
Race (white)	.548 (.338)		-.475 (.340)		.089 (.320)	
Gender (female)	.757 (.295)**	2.133	-.155 (.316)		-.131 (.274)	
Income (over \$75,000)	-.961 (.297)**	0.382	-.496 (.304)		.069 (.273)	
Party (Democrat)	.721 (.484)		1.207 (.553)**	3.343	.502 (.467)	
Party (Republican)	-.556 (.503)		.254 (.581)		.630 (.495)	
Partisan Intensity	-.206 (.364)		-.043 (.418)		-.512 (.361)	
Ideology (liberal)	-.764 (.508)		-.817 (.545)		-.714 (.523)	
Ideology (conservative)	-.146 (.517)		-1.085 (.557)*	0.338	-.911 (.538)*	0.402
Ideological Intensity	-.969 (.379)**	0.379	-.953 (.477)**	0.386	0.191 (.378)	
Naglekerke R Square		0.197		0.263		0.086
N		310		310		310

For the regression test run on frequency of apolitical TV viewers, the results show statically significant associations with the variables political knowledge, age, gender, income, and ideologically intensity. Those with high political knowledge consume apolitical media about two and a half times that of low knowledge respondents. Older respondents watch apolitical content 60% as much as younger

respondents. Those making more income watch apolitical content at about one-third the rate of those making less. Those with strong ideological intensity watch apolitical content about 40% as much as less intense individuals. Female respondents watch apolitical content twice as much as male respondents.

For the regression test run on frequency of late night comedy consumption, the results show statically significant associations with the variables political interest, political knowledge, age, Democrat affiliation, conservative ideology, and ideological intensity. Those with high political interest watch late night comedy more than twice that of less interested peers. Those of high political knowledge watch late night comedy about 70% more than less knowledgeable peers. Older individuals watch late night comedy approximately 70% less than younger individuals. Democrats watch late night comedy over three times as much as non-democrat peers. Conservatives watch late night approximately one-third the rate of non-conservative peers. Those with strong ideologies watch late night about 60% less than weaker ideological peers.

The results of the regression test run on hard news consumption shows statically significant associations with the variables political interest, age, and conservative ideology. Those with high political interest watch hard news approximately 60% more than those of low interest. Older individuals watch hard news approximately 65% more than younger individuals. Conservatives watch hard news 60% less than non-conservative peers.

Due to the lack of statically significant association between political knowledge and hard news consumption, I reject the hypothesis that individuals with high political knowledge are more frequent consumers of hard news programs. However, there is a positive association between political interest and hard news consumption, therefore supporting the hypothesis and theory that those with higher levels of knowledge are more drawn to hard news forums. The odds ratio for this association, however, is lower than the association between political interest and late night comedy consumption. This indicates that more high knowledge individuals watch late night comedy than hard news comedy, thus contradicting my theory that late night is positioned as a political interest middle ground. Furthermore, there is no statically significant association between political interest and apolitical media consumption, and a positive statically significant association between political knowledge and apolitical media consumption. In order

to accept hypotheses 2 and 4, there needs to be a statically significant negative association between the independent and dependent variables. Therefore, I reject these hypotheses.

Discussion

The results of the survey provide insightful descriptive data about the media consumption trends of modern consumers. The results of the experiment contradict the foundational ranking theory that sets up the building blocks for this chapter, and instead suggested a new rank order of most consumed TV: (i) hard news content, (ii) apolitical content, and (iii) late night content. This is possibly a result of the survey sample, which is disproportionately older. As demonstrated in the results and discussed further in this section, younger individuals more frequently consume late night, and therefore the poor age distribution within the sample may account for the lower overall viewership of late night. However, while only minimal respondents are under 30, a majority of respondents are under 45, indicating an alternative explanation for these results. Another explanation rests in the counter theory previously proposed, in which the hard news genre is larger and composes more news outlets than late night comedy. Furthermore, there are other soft news genres, such as morning shows, daytime talk shows, etc., that incorporate a hybridity of politics and entertainment on which consumers can rely on for news intake. I suggest future studies research the consumption frequency trends for the entire soft news genre to further explore these possibilities. However, the descriptive data in Table 2-2 shows a considerable difference in the number of respondents frequently consuming hard news TV and those frequently consuming late night comedy, potentially suggesting that late night comedy is not as relied upon or consumed as commonly perceived.

The descriptive data demonstrates that more Democrats watch late night comedy frequently than Republicans. This assertion is bolstered by the statically significant positive relationship between Democrat affiliations and frequency of late night viewership outlined in the regression model. This trend supports scholarly suggestions that late night programs embrace and employ a more Democrat-oriented agenda (Baumgarner, 2021). Individuals likely migrate to entertainment and news programs that agree

with their political beliefs rather than criticize them (Guess et al., 2018; Peterson et al., 2019; Prior, 2013). Therefore, the larger proportion of Democratic respondents frequently consuming late night suggests a possible Democratic bias in the type of news reporting, which holds congruent with existing scholarly speculation. This descriptive data sets up potential evidence for the existence of self-imposed echo chambers within late night TV consumption.

The trend of more Democrats consuming late night content than Republicans holds further implications for the content composition of late night programs in congruence with existing scholarly literature. Studies show that late night comedy utilizes negative caricatures rather than flattering frames in their jokes and monologues (Duerst et al., 2001; Baumgartner and Morris, 2006). Therefore, if those attracted to the content of late night comedy lean Democratic, and the content of late night comedy is critical towards its subject, it may be inferred that the subjects of political jokes are mostly Republicans. However, more research should be conducted into the tone and targets of late night comedy jokes.

The descriptive data for partisanship and ideological intensity show that those of extreme party affiliation and ideological identity do not consume politically charged content more than those of weaker identities, contradicting the theory previously laid out. Those of weak and strong ideological and party identity consume the genre types at similar rates, with slightly more weak ideology and weak party affiliation respondents frequently consuming late night comedy compared to their stronger affiliation counterparts. The regression test only produces a statistically significant association between party affiliation and political interest, indicating those of more extreme party identity hold higher interests in politics. This supports my theory that those more partisan likely engage with politics more as their stronger and more committed political identity signals a higher involvement and investment in political affairs.

The cross tabulations in Table 2-3 show a descriptively negative trend between late night comedy viewership and age, suggesting that more young people frequently watch late night than older individuals. This trend is consistent with the existing scholarly consensus that late night comedy audiences lean younger (Young and Tsinger, 2006; Hollander, 2005; Parkin, 2014; Baumgartner and Morris, 2006). These results may support the gateway hypothesis (Buam, 2005; Xenos and Becker, 2009; Feldman and Young, 2008), as younger respondents frequently consume late night comedy and hard news at similar

rates, suggesting the possibility that younger Americans are incorporating both forums into their media diets. The cross tabulations also support existing literature suggesting late night audiences lean more heavily male (Hollander, 2005; Pew Research, 2004; Young and Tsinger, 2006). However, this study does not conduct a regression analysis on the relationship between frequency of genre consumption and age, and therefore these descriptive results are not conclusive or persuasive. I recommend further research directly analyzes the age composition of hard news and late night audiences.

The results of the regression analysis were surprising and did not conform to the expectations of many the proposed hypotheses. The beta values indicate the change in the outcome variables of political interest and political knowledge caused by a singular unit change of the explanatory variables (for the independent variables, a change of one unit indicates a comparison of infrequent and frequent consumption). The beta values for regression of frequency of apolitical consumption, late night comedy consumption, and hard news consumption with political interest are .059, .869, and .469, respectively. The beta values for regression of frequency of apolitical consumption, late night comedy consumption, and hard news consumption with political knowledge are .884, .574, and .420, respectively. High knowledgeable individuals did not report more frequent hard news consumption than low knowledge individuals. These findings contradict my proposed theory that the overt political nature of hard news will attract the more politically knowledgeable. However, there is a moderate association between political interest and frequent hard news consumption, indicating that those of high interest watch more hard news than low interest peers.

The results of the logistic regression show that high interest individuals watch more late night comedy than low interest individuals. These findings contradict the argument of many scholars who assert that late night audiences are less engaged (Bumgartner and Morris, 2006; Baum and Jamison, 2006; Pew Research, 2004), and support Parkin's (2014) claim that late night audiences are engaged with political affairs. Moreover, these results refute my personal theory that late night audiences are of moderate political interest, as frequent late night viewers have more than two times higher levels of political interest than those who infrequently watch late night TV. This finding implies that late night forums attract more politically oriented individuals than traditional news forums.

While this data is descriptive and therefore cannot be used to make causal claims, these results create a foundation for discourse about the cause and effect of these variables. On the one hand, late night comedy may attract politically interested individuals due to its more politically oriented properties than apolitical programs. On the other hand, those watching late night comedy may develop higher political interest as a result of exposure to political content. Or the true relationship may be a hybridity of these two theories, where late night attracts those with higher political interest and also creates higher interest in its viewers, many of whom do not watch with the intention of political internalization (Baum, 2002). The results of this chapter cannot support this causal claim, however I suggest more focused studies into the directional relationship between political interest and late night comedy viewership.

The results of this chapter also show that those frequently watching apolitical media possess more political knowledge than infrequent viewers. While this finding was unexpected and current scholarly research does not provide an explicit explanation, this result may suggest that those of high political knowledge seek out apolitical media. I suggest future research probing the reasoning behind the significant association between frequency of apolitical media consumption and levels of political knowledge.

While producing statistically significant associations and providing insight into the trends and behaviors of demographic groups in the current high-choice media environment, this survey experiment has limitations. The convenience sample of MTurk users means that the results of this study are only generalizable to the MTurk user population rather than greater American adult population. Therefore, while these findings create a strong foundation for discourse and further research, they lack external validity for the population this study targets. The regression analysis for each dependent variable had fairly low nagelkerke r-square values. The regression model for political interest and political knowledge had nagelkerke r-square values of .213 and .162, respectively. This indicates that the statistical measures utilized explain only a small amount of variation in the dependent variable, and therefore future scholarship should improve upon these models for more accurate results. Furthermore, the sample size of the study is relatively small, with only 310 subjects included in the regression analysis. Therefore, I suggest future scholars replicate this study on a larger scale with improved regression models to further validate the findings uncovered.

This chapter investigates the media consumption habits by survey respondents. The cross tabulations suggest interesting trends within late night audiences, demonstrating that those frequently consuming the genre are younger and more Democratic leaning. However, the lack of statistical evidence in cross tabulations suggests future research to verify these suggestions. More prominently, the results of the regression analysis reveal a significant association between political interest and late night comedy consumption, with those frequently watching the genre holding higher levels of political interest. The regression analysis for frequency of hard news consumption demonstrated a lack of significant association with political interest, suggesting that late night comedy viewers hold more political interest than hard news consumers. These findings set up an important question: If late night viewers are more interested in politics, are they more persuadable? How does exposure to late night comedy influence one's perceptions and impressions of politics actors and systems? The next chapter uses treatment assignments within the survey to make causal claims about the relationships between media type exposure and different variables of political understanding to probe the tangible impacts of these types of news forums.

Chapter 3

A Causal Exploration of the Political Impacts of Hard News and Late Night Comedy Viewership

The modern media environment provides participants the means and opportunity to create their own media mix from a wide ranging selection of content. In doing so, media consumers acquire information from vastly different sources, and thus no singular message, frame, or agenda reaches the entire consumer base. I propose that the way news information is packaged and communicated greatly impacts the associations, understandings, and opinions formed by its recipients. This chapter investigates the impacts of different types of political communication forums on political understanding and perceptions. I utilize a survey experiment to measure and compare the types of political understanding outcomes between those exposed to a late night comedy candidate interview, a hard news candidate interviewer, and apolitical content. The overarching research question of this chapter is: How does consumption of late night comedy's coverage of politics influence political understanding?

Literature Review

What Are Late Night Viewers Consuming?

Many scholars have studied the types of content, substance, and jokes composing late night programs. They have found that the jokes on late night comedy focus more on personal attributes rather than policy content (Duerst et al., 2001; Baumgartner and Morris, 2006), and tend to center on individual figures rather than whole institutions. Jokes regarding Congress account for less than 5% of late night jokes, and Supreme Court jokes accounts for less than 1% (Litcher et al., 2015). Jokes are often more concise and understandable when involving a single person's actions as opposed to the multi-dimensional processes of a whole institution. Additionally, the public may be more commonly predisposed to high profile figures and their behaviors as compared to the reputations of lower-profile political actors and the opaque processes of Congress and the Supreme Court. Especially since late night programs attract audiences with lower political knowledge levels (Baumgartner and Morris, 2006; Baum and Jamison,

2006; Pew Research, 2004), jokes about the nuances of political institutions may confound rather than amuse. In other words, it's easier and more entertaining to joke about Vice President Dan Quayle's inability to correctly spell the word potato than it is to create succinct and punchy dialogue about the intricacies of Congressional sausage making (Lichter et al., 2015).

The main findings of the Duerst et al. (2001) study suggest that late night monologue jokes are generally negative and personal, rarely discussing policy issues of government institutions. Comedy is rarely a platform for positive endorsement as comedians frequently "roast" their subjects, courting laughs through negative caricature (Baumgartner and Morris, 2006). The superiority theory of comedy, championed by Plato and Hobbes, asserts that humor mainly serves to derive pleasure from the ridicule and criticism of others (Libera, 2020). Therefore, jokes cast on late night would rarely compliment their subjects as doing so would fail to satisfy neither a need for superiority nor the amusement procured through mockery³. In a simpler frame, jokes are often funnier when they degrade or belittle others, as it is more amusing to laugh at misfortunes and embarrassments than achievements. As a result, any positive caricatures of political actors would occur through their intentional exclusion, with hosts opting out of scrutiny of the subject rather than crafting a flattering joke. In line with this theory, any political content joked about on late night comedy is likely negative in nature, a hypothesis supported by the Duerst et al. study (2001).

Late night comedy also distinctly frames its content, employing episodic frames over the thematic frames (Baum, 2003b). Episodic frames focus on specific events whereas thematic frames focus on the larger picture and contextualize the issue into broader (often political) trends and themes. In this way, episodic framing presents events in a more narrow and easily understandable format that appeals to less knowledgeable audiences (Iyengar, 1991). Moreover, contextualized and investigative frames are harder to turn into succinct jokes, draining the entertainment properties that often attract viewers in the first place. Focusing on the sensational drama of individual actors, episodic frames communicate political information by highlighting scandals that capture the public's imagination. This soap-opera narrative

³Other theoretical approaches to the psychology and philosophy of humor, such as tension and release theory and incongruity theory, are commonly recognized by experts, however neither theory supports the use of positive depictions as a successful comedic practice (Libera, 2020).

recounts news like gossip, which in turn positions itself as alluring to the inattentive and apolitical public (Baum, 2003b; Baum and Jansion, 2006). As explained by Dagnes, “political satire is only funny when it hits a mark, and that mark is only funny when it is foremost in an audience’s consciousness... That is why many political jokes go untold: not because it has a slant to it, but because the average audience wouldn’t get it” (Dagnes, 2012, 47-48). This diluted approach, also known as “cheap framing,” packages potent political issues through human drama frames, creating more simple and, in turn, understandable content than hard news coverage (Baum, 2002).

Scholars disagree about the substantive content of late night comedy’s political coverage. There is a general understanding that late night’s comedy content outweighs its substantive content (Fox et al., 2007). There is scholarly speculation that jokes on shows like *The Daily Show* infrequently discuss policy issues in substantial or tangible measures, instead using surreal humor and hypotheticals to land jokes (Baym, 2005). However, other scholars assert that the political content explored on late night is as substantive as hard news coverage (Parkin, 2014). Specifically studying *The Daily Show* during the 2004 election cycle, Fox et al. (2007) the soft news program contained equal amounts of political substance as compared to hard news programs. The composition of late night content also varies between shows. Many shows, such as *The Late Show*, *The Tonight Show*, *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, etc., employ an array of jokes, moving quickly from one political topic to the next. Shows like *The Daily Show* or *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, on the other hand, offer longer, in-depth segments on singular topics (Baym, 2005).

The content of late night comedy jokes composes a hybrid of news and entertainment, creating mediated dialogue that negotiates between comical and traditional conventions (Molek-Kozakowska, 2013). While comedy is the primary appeal of late night, most recognize that significant political discourse occurs (Baum, 2002) and thus view the medium as an avenue for both news and entertainment elements. However, the evaluated credibility of the shows are also associated with this perception and the benefits of each show’s hybridity incurs trade-offs due to its overlapping classification as both entertainment and news (Edgerly and Varga, 2019). Because late night’s news elements contain comedy, it is not viewed with the same credibility as hard news forums. On the other hand, because its entertainment is compounded with political information, it is not viewed as an entirely leisurely and apolitical program. In this way, late-night comedy and other soft news forums can be seen as a middle ground, sacrificing its

totality under one genre (and thus the credibility that comes with embracing the total expectations of that genre) to become a multi-elemental program (Molek-Kozakowska, 2013).

Political Influences of Late Night Comedy

Consumption of late night comedy can lead to both political learning and political knowledge acquisition. Scholarly research reports that young viewers, the main audience base, receive modest political recognition and recall benefits from late night exposure (Hollander, 2005). Furthermore, a 2004 Pew Research study found that half of surveyed young people who watch late night reported learning something new from the programs (Pew Research, 2004). However, one study claims that political knowledge gains are only sporadic (Prior, 2003). Baum (2003a) addresses these findings directly, asserting that the consumption of soft news influences the attitudes of the politically inattentive, which as a result enhances factual political knowledge acquisition .

Scholars suggest several theoretical models for information processing and acquisition. One prominent theory is the memory based model, which asserts that individuals acquire and store information over a duration of exposure and then scan their long-term memories for relevant information to inform decisions (Holbrook, 1999). In this way, the memory-based model accumulates information over time, only processing it into decision making functions when they need to make decisions. Another prominent model is the on-line model, which assumes that individuals integrate acquired information into their understanding in real time, thus eliminating the need for long-term storage. This theory undertakes a “running tally”, in which each nugget of information continually updates evaluations upon reception (Holbrook, 1999, 68). The running tally model applies the Bayesian Learning model, a statistical inference theorem where probability rates continually incorporate new information. Bayes' rule asserts that “when confronted with new information, citizens should evaluate the information and update their beliefs by a weighted combination of prior beliefs and the meaning of that information” (Hill, 2017, 1405). Other scholars such as Zaller (1992) propose models that blend memory-base and on-line theories, asserting that short term information integration is not exclusive to long-term information storage. Zaller proposes the bounded on-line model, which accepts the running tally theory for some political comprehensions but suggests that many evaluations and decisions still require cumulative information

storage (Zaller, 1992). These models not only inform the ways in which information is stored and therefore recalled, but how this learning process informs evaluations of political systems and actors.

Political information learning is circumstantial to context and environment. The weight assigned to a piece of information, and therefore the consequential likelihood that such information will be remembered and valued, depends on the general frequency of information intake. Individuals with low information exposure about a topic commonly place more relevance on presented facts because they compose a larger proportion of acquired topical information. Inversely, those with high information exposure or high levels of political sophistication place less weight on presented facts as singular blocks of information contribute marginally to overall acquired information (Holbrook, 1999; Prior, 2013). This supports the existing consensus that political knowledge gains and political influences are strongest among the less politically knowledgeable (Baum, 2005). However, some studies found little support for the hypothesis that exposure to a specific issue through late night programs is associated with political knowledge gains among the less politically aware (Xenos and Baker, 2009).

It is notable to distinguish that political knowledge and political learning are not interchangeable concepts, and possession of one does not assume the other. Learning commonly refers to short term information retention and recall as a result of exposure. Knowledge commonly refers to long term retention and comprehensive understanding of political information (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). Following this logic, individuals can consume ample political information but never internalize and convert this information into tangible knowledge (Baum, 2003b). People also have capacities for information intake: when the cognitive capacity is reached, no further exposure will impact knowledge levels and the subsequent behavior resulting from this knowledge. For those with lower cognitive thresholds, exposure to an abundance of political information can be inconsequential to political knowledge acquisition despite continual learning (Baum, 2003b). The implications of this theory suggest that an uptick in political information consumption does not assume an increase in political knowledge.

Late night uses comedy as an apparatus for political consumption (Baym, 2005). Because most individuals watch late night for entertainment purposes (Baum, 2002), much of the learning happens through a by-product effect (Prior, 2003; Baum, 2002; Baum, 2003b). By-product learning occurs from incidental exposure, where one does not watch with the intention of political exposure but instead

receives it as a “free bonus” (Baum, 2003b). This collateral learning is often subconscious, as the entertainment aspects of the program veil the transpiring education. This information piggybacking, where news information attaches itself to more appealing content (Prior, 2003), succeeds only for highly accessible stories (ie. salacious, simple or scandalous content) (Baum, 2002). However, despite the benefits of an atmosphere that produces subconscious learning, cheap framing may have unintended negative consequences. Markus Prior (2003) found that watching soft news increases the likelihood of knowing about political drama (i.e. talk show viewers are more likely to know that Jenna Bush was arrested for underage drinking), but resulted in no or weak learning for substantive topics like war and foreign policy.

Incidental learning can only occur when entertainment benefits outweigh the costs of political digestion (Baum, 2003b). If the mental strain of consuming political content outweighs the enjoyment aspects of the program, audiences will forgo their viewership and switch to programs that provide a net gain in entertainment value. Therefore, by using episodic frames and human interest topics over in-depth policy analysis, late night lowers the cost of political learning and raises the levels of enjoyment, satisfying the entertainment needs of viewers while still incorporating political content (Baum, 2003b). This trade-off ensures that viewers continue to consume the late night content, but diminishes the level of substantive, in-depth political discourse.

Exposure to late night content can influence the policy positions of those with low political attentiveness and knowledge. Baum found that exposure to soft news coverage of foreign policy enhances support for isolationism among the politically inactive and uneducated. On the contrary, those who are politically attentive or educated rejected any pro-isolationist arguments in soft news, and this exposure only further solidified their pre-existing positions (Baum, 2003b). Less politically knowledgeable individuals have the weakest knowledge baseline to inform personal opinions. This demographic is therefore most likely to position their opinions based on the information fed and framed, allowing late night to potentially shape the policy stances and partisanship of politically inattentive viewers.

Consumption of late night television may also result in increased political engagement. Viewers of *The Late Show with David Letterman*, *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* were all more likely to pay attention to campaign information on TV than peers who do not watch

these shows (Feldman and Young, 2008). Furthermore, there is moderate support that exposure to an issue on a comedy show is associated with increased attentiveness to that issue on other media outlets (Xenos and Becker, 2009). This finding supports the priming effect theory, in which the order and attention allocated to policy issues in news reporting impacts the importance recipients associate with that issue (Iyengar et al., 1982).

Hard News vs. Soft News

When making decisions about news sources and content preferences, hard and soft news incur different transactional costs. As discussed in the previous section, individuals only watch late night comedy if the entertainment elements are compelling enough to outweigh the costs of political information exposure. While incidental learning is often passive (Capelos and Graber, 2009), soft news programs intentionally keep the labor of political comprehension to a minimum in order to retain viewership (ie. cheap framing and human drama frames) (Baum, 2002). However, these transactional costs do not apply the same way to hard news. Because viewers choosing to watch hard news do so with the intent of political learning, the viewer enters into consumption already agreeing to endure the cost (Baum, 2002). These programs exist to provide in-depth and complex political discussions and need not worry as much about sacrificing entertainment for substantive content. However, the blatant high level of effort demanded to digest hard news may deter some viewers from watching these programs in the first place.

Hard and soft news exposure results in varying levels of political learning and knowledge. Late night learning is often passive (Capelos and Graber, 2009) whereas hard news learning requires more active cognitive participation. However, respondents watching late night television reported higher gains on a political knowledge quiz than those watching hard news (Parkin, 2010). These results may be magnified by the viewership of each medium. Hard news forums attract those with pre-existing political knowledge and higher capacities for learning, requiring higher levels of information intake to substantially raise their knowledge levels (Holbrook, 1999; Prior, 2013). Soft news viewers are on average less educated and less politically attentive (Prior, 2003; Bumgartner and Morris, 2006; Baum and Jamison, 2006; Pew Research, 2004), and therefore require less news exposure and information to raise

levels of knowledge (Holbrook, 1999; Prior, 2013). By this theory, soft news programs may raise political knowledge for viewers more effectively than hard news despite its shallower reporting of politics.

Despite their differences and competition, soft and hard news media are becoming increasingly congruent. News often entertains and entertainment often informs. The positioning of these two as opposite entities fails to understand the modern media environment. Mainstream culture distinguishes public affairs media (ie. hard news) from popular media (ie. soft news, like late night TV) as separate genres, thus creating a news-entertainment distinction without addressing their shared attributes (Delli Carpini and Williams, 2010). Both forums veer outside of their socially conditioned “lanes”: late night comedy and soft news shows engage in political discourse and hard news forums discuss cultural and celebrity news (Delli Carpini and Williams, 2010; Timberg and Erler, 2002). By strictly compartmentalizing each genre, the pivotal overlaps and intersections that define the contemporary media landscape go overlooked.

The Monica Lewinsky scandal is a salient case study for the blurring of news genres. Late night comedy shows covered President Clinton’s affair intensely as it fused politics with high drama and scandal. Attentiveness to the Monica Lewinsky scandal was strongly correlated with exposure to soft news programs (Baum, 2002). In 1998, at the peak of the sex scandal, 27% of political late night jokes targeted Bill Clinton, with an overwhelming proportion of these jokes referencing his involvement with Lewinsky (Litcher et al., 2015). While this type of coverage was expected from late night forums due to its elements of sex, power and scandal (Baum, 2002), hard news forums also partook in the media frenzy about the affair, reporting it alongside traditional political matters. While the impeachment element helped affirm the political merits of the scandal and many hard news shows also addressed the questionable news stature of the story, they nevertheless continued to cover the provocative scandal (Delli Carpini and Williams, 2010). In doing so, hard news outlets pushed against the rigid news-entertainment distinction while simultaneously validating the accusations by attaching their reputable credibility to the story.

While anecdotal evidence suggests the erosion of the news-entertainment distinction, there are few accessible methods for examining genre composition empirically as genres are traditionally categorized through descriptive analysis, social context, and stylistic congruences (Molek-Kozakowska, 2013). Thus

the evaluation of hard and soft news as either unconnected or interconnected genres is inherently theoretical. While both forums share common communicative missions, other elements such as entertainment value, journalistic integrity, candidate relationship building, and viewer expectations vary between text types. The study of genre definition and genre blurring in the contemporary age is ongoing, and analysis does not provide any definitive declarations of genre status but instead an understanding of the ways in which the core properties of each program are congruent. Hard and soft news genres overlap and diverge in many sectors, but their political orientation, desire to inform, and borrowing from each other suggest a trajectory in which the rigid criteria that separate the two genres erodes.

The Late Night Campaign Stop

As detailed in the first chapter, late night television is an increasingly appealing location for political hopefuls to campaign. Presidential candidates conducted 195 talk show interviews throughout four election cycles between 2000 and 2012 (combining both daytime and late night talk shows) (Parkin, 2014). Candidates also capitalize on the popularity of the forum to tease or announce their candidacy, solidifying the importance of talk shows as a campaign stop (Collins, 2014). The market for late night interviews is mutually beneficial to both candidate and show: candidates want soft news exposure, and shows featuring prominent candidates receive high ratings (Parkin, 2014). Furthermore, particularly notable or entertaining late night interviews with high profile figures attract subsequent media attention from alternative sources (including hard news), both maximizing candidate exposure and advertising for late night shows (Parkin, 2014). Candidates gain recognition by occupying “celebrity places”, interview spots typically reserved for A-list celebrities, therefore associating themselves with certain levels of social prominence while accessing the same platforms as Hollywood elites (Collins, 2014).

At odds with hard news forums, late night often offers candidates less threatening environments to promote their candidacy. Whereas hard news anchors often grill their guests, people commonly conceive soft news interviews as friendlier. This conception holds some validity as soft news interviews have more positive tones than hard news interviews. When appearing on *The Tonight Show* to promote his campaign in 2016, polarizing Republican candidate and future president Donald Trump got his hair tousled by host Jimmy Fallon (Andrews, 2021). Similar actions by hard news journalists would be

considered breaches of journalistic conduct and inappropriate for the context of the program, demonstrating the diverging expectations of both forums despite their increasing similarity in the era of genre blurring. Despite these common perceptions of late night forums, late night interviews are typically neutral in tone (Parkin, 2014). Only when positioned against hard news programs, which typically utilize more negative and critical tones, do late night programs appear friendly and positive (Parkin, 2014).

Candidates often strategically lean into late night's affability as a means of showcasing personality, even if the show's warmth is only relative. Collins describes this phenomenon as "performing ordinary", in which politicians' appropriate the environment of late night shows to strategically portray themselves as authentic and relatable (Collins, 2014, 111). The casual set masks the strategically curated environment through a familiar and inviting semblance that diminishes the perceived distance between the viewer and the guest, thus conveying candidates' relatability. While seemingly incongruent concepts, late night platforms allow candidates to mediate portrayals of celebrity and ordinary, reaping the campaign benefits of both celebrity status recognition and the *I'm just like you* message (Collins, 2014). Political candidates sell themselves in the constructed environment of late night stages by capitalizing on the pinnacle components of the program: The performance of sociability through seemingly authentic yet artificial rapport; Prioritizing discussion of personal affairs and tethering conceptual ideals to central campaign points; Manufacturing authenticity through mediated intimacy; Image management through personal story and joke telling; portrayal of self as public servant and advocate for public interest; and identifying connection with the socio-economic status of targeted viewers (performing ordinary) (Molek-Kozakowska, 2013; Collins, 2014). Each distinguished component of the late night genre offers visiting candidates opportunities to control their message and image in a way that hard news' combativeness does not allow. The crafted informality and rapport of late night also works to disarm the skepticism of viewers, too distracted by the entertainment properties of politician interviews to employ critical approaches to the interview subjects (Molek-Kozakowska, 2013). Whereas hard news interviews encourage critical analysis of candidates and their positioning, political figures use entertainment talk shows to manufacture portrayals of likeability.

The showcase of curated authenticity and personality on late night interviews does not negate the discussion of substantial policy topics. The average distribution of talk show interview content over the

last 20 years allocates 40% of time to personal discussion, 35% to policy discussion, and 25% to campaign discussion, indicating that political matters makeup, on average, 60% of soft news candidate interviews (Parkin, 2014). A study of John Kerry's 2004 interview with David Letterman found that the interview primed his policy over his personality, with viewers placing more weight on issue stances than personal charm in their evaluation of Kerry's candidacy (Parkin, 2010). However, entertainment talk show interviews, including day time shows, tend to reference fewer partisan cues than hard news interviews (Baum, 2005). The level of personal and policy substance varies given the context of the candidate; prominent and front-runner candidates focus more on personal appeal, whereas lower tier candidates focus more on policy positions (Parkin, 2014). As less relevant candidates may have limited earned media exposure, late night interviews provide an opportunity to sell their policy proposals (Parkin, 2010). On the other hand, more visible candidates already receive ample policy coverage and therefore late night appearances present a unique opportunity to sell their personality.

Late night programs can also be argumentative and potentially unflattering towards their political guests. While the subdued intensity allows guests to control their message more easily, late night hosts still command the environment. As question bearers, late night hosts control the conversation by forcing politicians to either address their selected question topics or expose themselves to public criticism for question evasion or weak conviction (Reijven, 2021). Most of the criticism or doubt produced by late night hosts echoes discussions or scandals already facing the candidate's campaign and thus acts as either an amplifier for pre-existing skepticism or an opportunity for the candidate to extinguish public doubt (Reijven, 2021). Furthermore, audiences take interest when comedians make political statements or declarations on late night programs (Baumgartner, 2021), acting as incentives for hosts to integrate more blunt, polemic topics into their candidate interviews.

While scholars suggest the presence of serious discourse and a balance of the personal and political in late night candidate interviews, others speculate that the programs are leaning further and further into comedic elements to court attention (Andrews, 2021). The elevated competition of a modern media environment increases the need for attention-grabbing soundbites and click-bait worthy segments in order to attract and maintain viewers. Competing not only with other late night programs but with every TV program, streaming service, and YouTube clip available at the touch of a button, the potential virality of

an interview often outweighs its substantive merit and thus dictates the ways late night hosts navigate political interviews.

What does this mean for viewers of political comedy? Do the comedic elements of a late night interview, even with a serious political candidate, impact political perceptions? Are viewers more or less likely to perceive the government and its actors as effective, favorable, or likable after watching these interviews? While these questions are relevant due to the salience of late night comedy as a viable political outlet in the modern media landscape, they remain largely unanswered. In this chapter, I hope to answer these questions using a novel experimental design.

Theories and Hypotheses

While scholars suggest that hard and soft news programs contain similar levels of political substance (Parkin, 2014; Fox et al., 2007), the ways in which this substance is packaged and presented vary greatly between program types. Late night employs an informal tone that creates a more pleasurable, seemingly less laborious viewing experience; whereas hard news forums employ thematic frames that require sustained attention (Baum, 2003b; Baum and Jamsion, 2006). Therefore, I theorize that the more accessible and comprehensible nature of late night leads to higher levels of political information recall. Even if the consumer is not actively pursuing information learning, they subconsciously retain presented information (especially if packaged in a comprehensive manner) through by-product learning (Prior, 2003; Baum, 2002; Baum, 2003b). While those watching hard news may retain political information, the nature of the program's discourse requires higher levels of attention to digest the content at hand. In the modern media environment, those opting in to hard news consumption may willingly exert more effort in acquiring information due to higher levels of political interest (Baum, 2002). However, when presented to a group of individuals with average levels of political interest (achieved through randomization), I theorize that they retain less information from hard news because they are less willing to exert the mandated effort. Therefore, my first hypothesis is as follows:

H1: Individuals exposed to a late night comedy candidate interview will have higher information recall than those exposed to a hard news candidate interview.

I assume the on-line model of political learning, in which, following Bayes rule, new information is integrated into perceptions and evaluations as it is received (Holbrook, 1999). Following this theory, the information received during treatment exposure will immediately update a respondent's political evaluations and perceptions. Therefore, I theorize that, beyond simple recall, information discussed in the interview treatments will immediately affect respondents' political beliefs, perceptions and evaluations.

Late night political hosts, while still instigating political discourse, typically pursue less aggressive lines of questioning. While confrontational and argumentative interviews may attract high ratings, ultimately late night shows hold an interest in generating entertaining segments and maintaining enjoyable banter. While this atmosphere may create an ostensibly high perception of favorability, viewers, when deciding political preferences, refer to policy-focused content more heavily (Parkin, 2014). Hard news forums lean into their role as watchdog journalists, prioritizing hard questions over a warm rapport. The structure of hard news interviews also follow a more confrontational format, allowing candidates to demonstrate fast-thinking, an ability to command a dialogue, and confidence under pressure, all while talking about substantive issues. I theorize that the seriousness of hard news coverage, especially in interview settings, and their inclination to focus on policy issues can project a more policy oriented, politically favorable impression of candidates. I further apply this logic by theorizing that the complex, hyper-political nature of hard news shows are more flattering to an individual's perceptions of leadership oriented traits. While scholars suggest that late night and hard news discuss politics at similar rates (Fox et al., 2007; Parkin, 2014), I theorize that the opportunity for substantive debates about complicated policy issues leads to better perceptions of traits like fitness for office and strong leadership than those who have comedic conversations on late night shows. Historically, many viewed the late night campaign stop with skepticism, criticizing the forum as too inane for those campaigning for the nation's highest office (Parkin, 2014). I theorize many of these ideologies remain, even in the modern media environment, and viewers therefore perceive candidates on hard news forums with more able leadership and qualifications for office.

Theories about hard news forums portraying a greater sense of leadership and fitness for office inform my subsequent theory about viewer confidence in a candidate's issue effectiveness. Hard news forums center around complex political debate and often entail detailed discussions of policy stances and

proposed solutions. Late night interviews contain a more diluted discussion of politics in order to maintain a digestible and entertainment oriented approach to politics. I theorize that candidates are less likely to talk about the nuanced details of their policy approaches in late night interviews, and instead use the opportunity to showcase their relatability. As a result, consumers of hard news interviews likely perceive the candidate as more effective and prepared to address specific issues. Using these outlined theories, I hypothesize:

H2: Those exposed to hard news interviews will have higher perceptions of the candidate's political favorability, fitness for office, leadership strength, and effectiveness in addressing issues than those exposed to late night interviews.

While I hypothesize respondents possess higher levels of favorability, leadership trait association, and issue effectiveness for a candidate after exposure to their hard news interview, I also suggest that the nature of late night programs bolsters perceptions of candidate likability and personal-oriented trait associations. The playful, conversational manner of late night comedy allows candidates to showcase their personality and highlight more attractive personal qualities. These shows give candidates a chance to showcase that they are humans, not just politicians. On the other hand, hard news interviews are often stiff and unfriendly as the interviewer poses difficult questions and confronts uncomfortable topics. I theorize that late night comedy often chooses less tense avenues of discussion, providing candidates the opportunity to exude personal traits like warmth and charm in a way that is not opportune in hard news interviews. As a result, I hypothesize:

H3: Those exposed to a late night interview will have higher ratings of the candidate's personal likability, warmth, and charm than those exposed to hard news interviews.

I group these hypotheses together because of a theorized relationship: leadership traits, issue effectiveness, and favorability relate to feelings of political approval whereas personal traits and likeability relate to personal evaluations. Therefore, I theorize a positive relationship between the variables grouped in each hypothesis (ie. if one has high perceptions of political favorability they will have high perceptions of issue effectiveness, etc.). I theorize that these relationships are correlated rather than causal: the nature of the newstype creates high (or low) evaluations of these variables rather than one variable influencing the others.

Data and Methods

The empirical core of this thesis utilizes the survey experiment described in the preceding chapter. Unlike the instruments of the descriptive chapter, this chapter utilizes treatment exposures to analyze the outcomes of dependent variables. This experiment aims to analyze how media type exposure impacts political recall, trait association, candidate likeability, candidate favorability, and perceived effectiveness. I use the experimental findings to make a causal argument between the independent and dependent variables outlined. I define these variables more thoroughly in later sub-sections.

The on-line model of political learning helps strengthen the internal validity of the survey experiment. Because the “running tally” theory assumes that individuals immediately integrate information into opinion formation upon reception (Holbrook, 1999), a post-treatment survey conducted directly after exposure would sufficiently capture the effects of the treatment on the variables of understanding. Therefore, the short term design of this study, which has subjects completing a pre-treatment survey, treatment exposure, and post-treatment survey all in one approximately 20 minute sitting, can validly measure differences in political understanding as a result of varying treatment exposure.

Independent Variable and Experimental Treatments

The independent variable of this study is news type exposure. I operationalize this variable by randomly exposing respondents to treatments of different news media content, including a hard news interview, a late night comedy interview, and an apolitical TV segment that acts as a control. In doing so, the survey replicates a small sample of the range of programs available to modern media consumers and the types of selection choices offered. I measure their subsequent answers to the survey questions regarding political understanding in accordance with the type of media content they viewed. Randomizing treatment assignment minimizes the chance of bias or uneven characteristic distribution within treatment groups, therefore increasing the likelihood that the outcome of the dependent variables are only impacted by the treatment itself. Furthermore, the experimental nature of the survey allows me to control and account for mediating and confounding variables, thus allowing for claims of causality.

Table 3-1 shows the distribution of respondents between treatment groups. 338 respondents received treatment exposure, with 121 (35.8%) included in the control group, 91 (26.9%) included in the late night treatment group, and 126 (37.3%) included in the hard news treatment group. I run Chi-square tests between each treatment group and the variables of race, gender, age, income, party affiliation, partisanship, political ideology, ideological intensity, political knowledge, and political interest to determine if the observed frequencies match the expected frequencies and thus establish independence. Each chi-square test yielded statistically insignificant results with the exception of party affiliation yielding a moderately statistically significant p-value of $<.1$. These results indicate a relatively normal demographic distribution between treatment groups, thus affirming successful randomization.

Table 3-1. Demographic Distribution Between Treatment Assignment.

	Description	Control Group	Late Night Treatment	Hard News Treatment
Age	18-45	65.3% (79)	61.5% (56)	56.3% (71)
	45-60	21.5% (26)	26.4% (24)	36.5% (46)
	60+	13.2% (16)	12.1% (11)	7.1% (9)
Race	White	76.1% (89)	79.5% (66)	76.5% (91)
	Non-white	23.9% (28)	20.5% (17)	23.5% (28)
Annual Household Income	Over \$75,000	34.2% (40)	37.1% (33)	35.0% (42)
	Under \$75,000	65.8% (77)	62.9% (56)	65.0% (78)
Gender	Male	55.4% (67)	54.9% (50)	54.0% (68)
	Female	44.6% (54)	45.1% (41)	46.0% (58)
U.S. Regions	Northeast	30.1% (34)	26.3% (21)	26.1% (30)
	Southeast	20.4% (23)	22.5% (18)	23.5% (27)
	West	16.8% (19)	18.8% (15)	17.4% (20)
	Midwest	32.7% (37)	32.5% (26)	33.0% (38)
Party Affiliation	Democrat	58% (69)	55.1% (57)	46.3% (57)
	Republican	28.6% (34)	29.2% (41)	33.3% (41)
	Independent	13.4% (16)	15.7% (25)	20.3% (25)
Political Ideology	Liberal	52.9% (63)	48.3% (43)	48.0% (59)
	Conservative	32.8% (39)	36.0% (32)	35.8% (44)
	Moderate	14.3% (17)	15.7% (14)	16.3% (20)
Political Interest	High Interest	41.2% (49)	37.1% (33)	42.7% (53)
	Low Interest	58.8% (70)	62.9% (56)	57.3% (71)
Political Knowledge	High Knowledge	43.0% (52)	45.1% (41)	48.4% (61)
	Low Knowledge	57.0% (69)%	54.9% (50)	51.6% (65)
Total		121	91	126

The control clip is a 9 minute and 24 second excerpt of the HGTV show *Good Bones*. The clip details the renovation of a new home. The duration of the clip replicates the length and content of a singular section of a show segmented between commercial breaks. The show does not depict any political discourse, opinions, or implications, and instead represents many of the reality, non-news related programs available to TV consumers in the modern media landscape. In this way, the *Good Bones* clip acts as a control to measure the effects of the two treatment clips included in the study as its apolitical status should not produce any changes in political understanding or outcomes.

The treatment videos are different interviews with New Jersey Senator Cory Booker, one a hard news interview and one a late night comedy interview. I selected Cory Booker as the consistent subject of the interviews because of his unique recognition status: He is well known enough, mostly due to his 2020 candidacy for President, to interview on both soft and hard news forums, but not politically mainstream enough to have universal name recognition and for the majority of respondents to possess pre-formulated opinions (such as popular political figures Donald Trump, Joe Biden, Mike Pence, etc.).

The hard news clip is from a 2017 Cory Booker interview on CNN's *State of the Union* with interviewer Jake Tapper. I took the 9 minute and 54 second clip from CNN's verified Youtube account. Among other topics, the clip features Tapper and Booker discussing Booker's stances on drug prices, specific education policies, views on figures within the Trump administration, foreign policy, and urban politics.

The soft news clip is from a 2019 Cory Booker interview on ABC's *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* with late night host Jimmy Kimmel as interviewer. I took the clip from the verified Jimmy Kimmel Live Youtube account. The 9 minutes and 34 second video shows Kimmel and Booker discussing Booker's family and childhood, football, outtakes from the Presidential debate, his ties to Newark as a lifelong resident and former mayor, racism and housing discrimination, and education initiatives in Newark. The interview ends with a segment in which Kimmel comically suggests new campaign slogans for Booker.

While differing in tone and content, both treatment interviews directly discuss Booker's political and personal involvement with Newark, New Jersey as a lifelong resident and former mayor. Both interviews also directly address the issue of education, and Newark's "beat the odds" schools, referencing charter schools with high poverty students demonstrating high academic performance. Additionally, while the interviews are two years apart and the Kimmel interview discusses Booker's direct role as a Presidential contender for the 2020 election, both interviews took place during the same Presidential administration (under Donald Trump) and therefore attitudes towards the current President and political climate were markedly similar.

Dependent Variables Operationalization and Testing:

I test eight dependent variables. The first variable is demonstrated issue effectiveness. As education is the only policy issue addressed in both the hard news and late night comedy interviews, issue effectiveness is operationalized by asking respondents their perception of Booker's ability to address educational issues. Respondents are asked: "In your opinion, how effective would Cory Booker be in addressing these issues?", listing education as an issue and giving a rating choice of "extremely effective", "very effective", "moderately effective", "slightly effective", "not effective at all", and "I don't know who this is". The latter choice of "I don't know who this is" is intended for members of the control group who watched an apolitical reality TV segment that does not discuss any of the presented policy issues or Cory Booker. I code responses into categorical variables indicating Booker would have high effectiveness ("extremely effective" and "very effective"), low effectiveness ("moderately effective" and "slightly effective") and no effectiveness ("not effective at all").

Favorability refers to an individual's political preference of a candidate. For example, favorability may increase when a candidate demonstrates a strong political fitness that overshadows that of other candidates, positioning their favorability higher than other contenders in the eyes of the spectator. In other words, candidate favorability refers to how much an individual prefers or favors a candidate, either in comparison to other candidates or on a general scale. The dependent variable of favorability is measured on a 0-100 feeling thermometer, asking respondents "on a scale from 0 to 100, how favorable is your impression of Cory Booker (0 being extremely unfavorable, 100 being extremely favorable?)". The second question uses the same scale. This question asks respondents "on a scale from 0 to 100, how likely are you to vote for Cory Booker if he were to run for office in your community? (0 being extremely unlikely, 100 being extremely unlikely?)". Since favorability refers to political preference, and vote choice is the most explicit indication of preference for a political candidate, probing an individuals' likelihood to vote for a candidate reflects their favorability of said candidate.

Likeability refers to the appeal and attractiveness of a candidate's personality and personal demeanor. For example, likeability may increase when a candidate demonstrates personal or relatable qualities that reinforces the spectators' feelings that they would *get along with* the candidate. Likeability

deals with an adoration or enjoyment of a candidate's personality and personal attributes rather than their political favorability. Therefore, while candidate favorability and likeability can go hand in hand (one may favor a candidate politically because they have high likeability), they are not inherently tied together: One could like a candidate's personality and find them unfavorable for a political position, or find a candidate favorable for a political position but dislikeable. The dependent variable of likeability is measured through a scale function. Because a measure of one's likelihood to spend personal time with an individual accurately reflects their personal feelings and perceptions towards that individual, the slider asks respondents "On a scale from 0 to 100, how likely are you to want to hang out with Cory Booker if given the opportunity (0 being no chance at all, 100 being absolutely likely)?" Respondents rate their likelihood from 0 to 100.

Information recall refers to the level of information presented in news exposure. I measure information recall as the level of information retention regarding facts presented in both the hard news and soft news treatments. While the hard and soft news segments contain varying topics of discussion, the respective segments were chosen intentionally because they overlap in their discussions of Newark and specific education initiatives. The survey contains three questions asking about specific information covered in both treatment interviews. Each question contains six multiple choice answers, five being plausible but incorrect answer options and one being "I don't know/remember". I code each question to indicate whether the respondent answer correctly to incorrectly, and then convert these values into a score demonstrating the overall number of questions answered correctly. I re code these scores a new variable classifying different levels of recall: those answering all recall questions correctly are categorized as "high recall", those answering 1 or 2 recall questions correctly are categorized as "mid recall", and those answering no recall questions correctly are classified as "low recall".

Trait association refers to an inference of characteristics that a candidate possesses based on exposure to that candidate. This paper analyzes four traits: warmth, charm, fitness for office, and strength of leadership. The first two traits are often associated with perceptions of personality while the latter two are often associated with leadership competency and adeptness for governance. Trait association is measured through a post-treatment matrix question probing how well respondents think certain character attributes fit Cory Booker. The survey presents respondents with several traits, including the ones

analyzed (warm, charming, fit for office, and a strong leader), and asks them to indicate whether each describes Cory Booker “extremely well”, “very well”, “slightly well”, or “not well at all”. All the traits are displayed in a randomized order to minimize priming effects. The question also lists a “I don’t know this person” option intended for members of the control group who were not exposed to content pertaining to Cory Booker. Responses are categorized into binary values indicating whether the traits describe Booker well (“extremely well” and “very well”) or not well (“slightly well” “not well at all”)

I run cross tabulations between the independent variable of treatment assignment and each dependent variable to analyze the descriptive data and trends. Then, I run regression models of each dependent variable to analyze the statistical significance of the relationship between the dependent variables and the treatment assignment. These results are displayed in the next section.

Results

Table 3-2 shows the cross tabulations of treatment assignment by the dependent variables perceptions of fitness for office, perceptions of strength of leadership, perceptions of issue effectiveness, perceptions of warmth, perceptions of charm, and information recall. The cross tabulations for recall, which are classified into values of low recall, moderate recall, and high recall, show that a majority of respondents in all three treatment assignments showcase moderate recall. This effect is especially pronounced for those assigned to hard news, with nearly 75% of respondents receiving moderate recall scores. The late night treatment has the highest proportion of respondents demonstrating high information recall (34.1%), with more than twice the proportion of hard news respondents (13.5%) and over four times the proportion of control group respondents (7.4%). A significant proportion of control group respondents receive low recall scores (40.5%), whereas very few late night (8.8%) and hard news (7.4%) treatment respondents receive low recall scores. Clustering moderate and high recall together, about 91% of late night respondents and 87% of hard news respondents answered at least one recall question correctly as opposed to approximately 59% of control group respondents. While respondents in the control group are expected to demonstrate low recall as they were not presented with information pertaining to Booker, the data shows that late night and hard news respondents retain more presented

information than the control group. These findings provide descriptive support for the influence of political news and late night comedy exposure on levels of information recall.

Table 3-2. Cross Tabulations of Treatment Assignment by Information Recall, Perceptions of Fitness for Office, Perceptions of Strong Leadership, Perceptions of Issue Effectiveness, Perceptions of Warmth, and Perceptions of Charm.

		Treatment Assignment		
		Control Group	Late Night Comedy Treatment	Hard News Treatment
Information Recall	Low recall	40.5% (49)	8.8% (8)	7.4% (16)
	Moderate recall	52.1% (63)	57.1% (52)	73.8% (93)
	High recall	7.4% (9)	34.1% (31)	13.5% (17)
Perceptions of Fitness for Office	Does not fit well	27.8% (27)	26.7% (23)	29.7% (35)
	Fits well	72.8% (70)	73.3% (63)	70.3% (83)
Perceptions of Strength of Leadership	Does not fit well	40.4% (40)	28.6% (24)	37% (44)
	Fits well	59.6% (59)	71.4% (60)	63% (75)
Perceptions of Issue Effectiveness	Not Effective	14.3% (14)	17.2% (15)	13.1% (16)
	Low Effectiveness	39.8% (39)	31.0% (27)	37.7% (46)
	High Effectiveness	45.9% (45)	51.7% (45)	49.2% (60)
Perceptions of Warmth	Does not fit well	35.7% (35)	17.6% (15)	43.2% (51)
	Fits well	64.3% (63)	82.4% (70)	56.8% (67)
Perceptions of Cham	Does not fit well	32.7% (32)	16.5% (14)	35% (41)
	Fits well	67.3% (66)	83.5% (71)	65% (76)

The cross tabulation in Table 3-2 shows consistent proportions of respondents perceiving Booker as fit and unfit for office across treatment groups, with 72.8% of control respondents, 73.3% of late night respondents, and 70.3% of hard news respondents rating Booker as fit for office. While this descriptive data provides little evidence for varying impacts of media type exposure on perceptions of political fitness, it shows that a majority of respondents view the politician as fit for office (even those with no exposure to Cory Booker content). Larger proportions of those assigned to the late night (71.4%) and hard news (63.0%) groups evaluate Booker as a strong leader compared to the control group (59.6%). While the proportional difference between the hard news group and the control group is slight (approximately a 3 point difference), the gap between those assigned to the late night treatment and the four group is about

12 points. Respondents of all treatment assignments perceive Booker's effectiveness in addressing education issues at similar rates, with 45.9% of the control group, 51.7% of the late night treatment group, and 49.2% of the hard news treatment group rating Booker as highly effective. This trend holds true for other tiers of evaluation, with similar proportions of respondents in each treatment assignment rating Booker with low effectiveness and no effectiveness.

There appears to be a treatment effect on perceptions of warmth. Compared to the control group, respondents exposed to the late night treatment were 18 points more likely to describe Booker as warm, while those assigned to the hard news group were 7 points less likely to rate Booker as warm. These cross tabulations provide descriptive support for the theory that late comedy bolsters perception of candidate warmth whereas hard news programs lower perceptions of candidate warmth. This trend is slightly echoed for the variable of perceptions of charm, with respondents exposed to the late night treatment 18 points more likely to perceive Booker as charming compared to the control group. Respondents in the hard news treatment evaluate Booker as charming only 2 points less than the control group, suggesting that hard news viewership has little to no impact on impressions of a candidate's charm.

Table 3-3 presents the mean scores for the variables of favorability, vote preference, and likeability by each treatment assignment. As explained in the methods section, respondents answered these questions on a scale from 0 to 100.

Table 3-3. Mean Scores for Favorability Thermometer, Likelihood to Vote for Booker, and Likelihood to Hang Out with Booker Between Treatment Assignment

	Treatment Assignment		
	Control Group	Late Night Comedy Treatment	Hard News Treatment
Favorability Thermometer	53.96	62.34	57.55
Likelihood to Vote for Booker	57.64	57.58	52.39
Likelihood to Hang Out with Booker	50.82	58.56	51.20

For the favorability thermometer, the mean score for favorability towards Booker remains within a 10 point margin across treatment assignments. However, both the late night treatment (62.34) and the hard news treatment (57.55) have higher mean scores than the control group (53.96). For likelihood to vote for Booker, the mean score of respondents in the late night treatment is the same as the control treatment (57.58 versus 57.64). The mean score for hard news respondents is lower than the control group

(52.39 versus 57.64), but only by a margin of approximately 5 points. The likeability variable, measured by probing the likelihood that respondents want to hang out with Booker, produces similar results in which the control group (50.82), the late night treatment (58.56), and the hard news treatment (51.20) yielded similar mean scores. However, the mean score for late night treatment is marginally higher than the control group by approximately 7 points.

In order to test the hypotheses proposed, I run regression tests on each dependent variable to understand the statistical associations between the relevant dependent variables and the independent variable of treatment assignment. Table 3-4 displays the results of the linear regression analysis for the dependent variables of favorability thermometer, likelihood to vote for Booker, and likelihood to hang out with Booker.

Table 3-4. Linear Regression of the Relationship between Treatment Assignment and Variables of Favorability, Likelihood to Vote for Booker, Likelihood to Hangout with Booker, Information Recall, and Perceived Issue Effectiveness

	Favorability Thermometer	Likelihood to Vote for Booker	Likelihood to Hangout with Booker
	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)
Constant	53.793 (9.092)***	65.290 (9.696)***	47.824 (11.075)***
Late Night Treatment	10.373 (4.159)**	3.532 (4.448)	12.293 (5.078)**
Hard News Treatment	6.589 (3.815)*	-1.096 (4.046)	2.438 (4.648)
Age	.484 (2.548)	-.970 (2.711)	.372 (3.108)
Race (White)	-13.263 (3.915)***	-17.569 (4.202)***	-13.494 (4.790)**
Gender (Female)	9.825 (3.418)**	8.659 (3.690)**	7.847 (4.193)*
Annual Household Income (Over \$75,000)	-8.225 (3.342)**	-7.759 (3.613)**	-7.801 (4.086)*
Party (Democrat)	29.574 (5.802)***	32.811 (6.219)***	25.445 (7.102)***
Party (Republican)	5.332 (5.951)	4.158 (6.301)	2.803 (7.202)
Ideology (Liberal)	-1.308 (6.352)	-.391 (6.754)	4.867 (7.723)
Ideology (Conservative)	-13.663 (6.324)**	-18.389 (6.640)**	-6.502 (7.588)
Political Interest (High Interest)	-3.601 (3.495)	-2.608 (3.735)	.809 (4.271)
Political Knowledge (High Knowledge)	-2.766 (3.335)	-3.734 (3.581)	-2.338 (4.089)
R Square	0.409	0.457	0.283
N	250	249	251
*p<.1, **p<.05, ***p<.001, two tailed test			

The regression results for the dependent variable of favorability show statistical evidence of a positive relationship between both late night and hard news exposure and ratings of favorability. Those exposed to the hard news treatment allocated a favorability score 6.589 points higher than control group respondents with a p-value smaller than .1. While this data supports the theory that hard news exposure bolsters perceptions of favorability rather than weakening them, the data does not suggest that exposure to hard news creates more favorable impressions than exposure to late night. Those exposed to the late night treatment rate their favorability towards Booker as 10.373 points higher than control respondents (with a p-value smaller than .05), and approximately 4 points higher than hard news respondents. This indicates

that, while exposure to both treatments create positive impressions of favorability towards Booker, late night viewership is more beneficial to ratings of favorability than hard news.

The variables of race, annual income, and conservative ideology have statically significant negative associations with ratings of favorability. White respondents rated Booker's favorability as 13.263 points below non-white respondents, respondents making more than \$75,000 rated Booker's favorability as 8.225 points below those making less than \$75,000, and conservative respondents rated Booker's favorability as 13.663 points below non-conservative respondents. The variables of gender and Democratic party affiliation have statically significant positive associations with ratings of favorability, with female respondents rating Booker's favorability at 9.825 points higher than male respondents, and Democrats rating Booker's favorability as 29.574 points higher than non-Democrat identifying respondents.

Due to the evidence supporting that late night exposure raises perceptions of favorability and that there is no treatment effect of hard news exposure on favorability, I reject the component of H2 stating that those exposed to hard news interviews will have higher perceptions of the candidate's political favorability than those exposed to late night interviews. This rejection is further supported by the regression analysis run on the variable of likelihood to vote for Booker. The results of the regression analysis indicate that treatment assignment had no effect on a respondent's likelihood to vote for Booker. Additionally, other variables included in the regression analysis hold statistically significant relationships with likelihood to vote for Booker. White respondents, respondents making more than \$75,000, and conservative respondents are less likely to vote for Booker by 17.569, 7.759, and 18.389 points, respectively. On the other hand, female respondents and those identifying as Democrats are more likely to vote for Booker by 8.659 and 32.811 points, respectively. These trends echo that of the favorability scale, with both variables of favorability and vote choice having statistically significant negative relationships with race, income, and conservative ideology and positive relationships with gender and Democratic affiliation.

The results in Table 3-4 show statistical support for the likeability component of H3, stating that those exposed to a late night interview will have higher ratings of the candidate's personal likability than those exposed to hard news interviews. The regression analysis of likelihood to hang out with Booker

shows a statistically significant positive relationship with late night comedy exposure. Those in the late night treatment assignment are more likely to hang out with Booker by 12.293 points. Meanwhile, there is no statistically significant association between hard news treatment exposure and ratings of Booker's likeability, suggesting only late night exposure has an impact on this variable. The variables of race and household income have statistically significant negative relationships with likelihood to hang out with Booker, with white respondents less likely to hang out with Booker by 13.494 points and those making more than \$75,000 less likely by 7.801. Similar to the variables of favorability and vote choice, those identifying as Democrats are more likely to hang out with Booker by 25.445 points.

Table 3-5 shows the logistic regression analysis run on the dependent variables of information recall and perceived effectiveness. For the sake of the logistic regression test, I re-coded both variables into dummy variables. For high recall, I reclassify both high and mid recall as high recall, valued as one, and revalue low recall as 0. For perceived issue effectiveness, I reclassify both low effective and not effective as low perceived effectiveness, valued at 0, and revalue high effectiveness as 1. Furthermore, with the exception of age which acts an interval variable with older age respondents allocated higher values, the variables run against the dependent variables are coded as dummy variables. The categories in parentheses indicate the categories allocated the value 1, with the omitted category provided the dummy value of 0. When variables yield statistically significant associations, I report their odds ratios.

Table 3-5. Logistic Regression of the Relationship between Treatment Assignment and Information Recall and Perceived Effectiveness

	Information Recall		Perceived Issue Effectiveness	
	B (SE)	Odds Ratio	B (SE)	Odds Ratio
Constant	-1.714 (.929)*	0.180	-1.031 (.827)	
Late Night Treatment	1.682 (.452)***	5.378	.725 (.392)*	2.065
Hard News Treatment	1.480 (.389)***	4.394	.403 (.354)	
Age	.349 (.246)		.212 (.231)	
Race (White)	.020 (.408)		-.671 (.358)*	0.511
Gender (Female)	-.335 (.348)		.476 (.312)	
Annual Household Income (Over \$75,000)	-.348 (.358)		-.537 (.319)*	0.585
Party (Democrat)	.495 (.612)		1.442 (.519)**	4.228
Party (Republican)	.222 (.606)		-.369 (.547)	
Ideology (Liberal)	1.041 (.624)*	2.833	.260 (.558)	
Ideology (Conservative)	.599 (.621)		-.410 (.565)	
Political Interest (High Interest)	.756 (.380)**	2.131	.211 (.322)	
Political Knowledge (High Knowledge)	.808 (.362)**	2.243	-.088 (.310)	
Nagelkerke R Square	0.246		0.318	
N	275		252	
*p<.1, **p<.05, ***p<.001, two tailed test				

There is a statistically significant effect of both late night and hard news viewership on political recall. Those exposed to the hard news treatment were nearly 4.5 times as likely as those in the control group to remember facts about Booker. Those exposed to the late night treatment were over 5 times as likely to remember facts about Booker. Congruent with the cross tabulations, this evidence suggests that exposure to either news source has positive impacts on the level of information recall, but that those exposed to late night comedy have higher information retention than hard news viewers. Therefore, I accept the hypothesis that individuals exposed to a late night comedy candidate interview will have higher information recall than those exposed to a hard news candidate interview (H1). The regression results also produce statistically significant associations between information recall and other variables included in the analysis. Liberal respondents retain more presented information, demonstrating high recall 2.833

times more than non-liberals at a p-value of less than .1. Additionally, those with high political interest and high political knowledge were more than twice as likely as those less interested and knowledge to recall information about Booker.

The regression analysis for the dependent variable of perceived issue effectiveness produces a statically insignificant association with hard news exposure. However, the regression analysis produces a moderately statistically significant association with the late night comedy treatment exposure, as those assigned to that treatment group evaluate Booker with high effectiveness 2.065 times that of the control group. This evidence contradicts the issue effectiveness component of H2, stating that those exposed to hard news interviews will have higher perceptions of the candidate's effectiveness in addressing issues than those exposed to late night interviews. In fact, these results support that those exposed to late night comedy will have higher perceptions of a candidate's issue effectiveness. Additionally, the regression results show a statistically significant relationship between perceived issue effectiveness and affiliation with the Democratic party, with Democrats rating Booker as highly effective 4.228 times more than non-Democrats.

Table 3-6 shows the results of the logistic regression analysis run on the variables of perception of fitness for office, perceptions of strong leadership, perceptions of warmth, and perceptions of charm. These variables are coded as dummy variables, with the value of 1 indicating the trait Describes Booker and the value of 0 indicating the trait does describe Booker. When variables yield statistically significant associations, I report their odds ratios.

Table 3-6. Logistic Regression of the Relationship between Treatment Assignment and Perceptions of Fitness for Office, Strong Leadership, Warmth, and Charm

	Perceptions of Fitness for Office		Perceptions of Strong Leadership		Perceptions of Warmth		Perceptions of Charm	
	B (SE)	Odds Ratio	B (SE)	Odds Ratio	B (SE)	Odds Ratio	B (SE)	Odds Ratio
Constant	2.602 (1.033)**	13.487	.057 (.869)		-.290 (.837)		.572 (.849)	
Late Night Treatment	.327 (.462)		.742 (.422)*	2.100	1.122 (.422)**	3.073	1.043 (.427)**	2.838
Hard News Treatment	-.086 (.407)		.345 (.367)		-.231 (.339)		-.045 (.340)	
Age	-.058 (.279)		.133 (.245)		.280 (.236)		.049 (.241)	
Race (White)	-.854 (.450)*	0.426	-1.035 (.415)**	0.355	-.701 (.381)*	0.496	-.268 (.378)	
Gender (Female)	.730 (.375)*	2.075	.685 (.334)**	1.984	.768 (.326)**	2.156	.509 (.331)	
Annual Household Income (Over \$75,000)	-.791 (.376)**	0.453	-.773 (.337)**		-.232 (.318)		-.699 (.330)**	0.497
Party (Democrat)	1.794 (.636)**	6.010	1.997 (.573)***	7.368	.833 (.557)		.954 (.569)*	2.59
Party (Republican)	.548 (.624)		-.049 (.546)		-.230 (.525)		.379 (.557)	
Ideology (Liberal)	-.502 (.734)		.250 (.626)		.160 (.614)		-.121 (.626)	
Ideology (Conservative)	-2.016 (.706)**	0.133	.038 (.588)		-.330 (.556)		-.837 (.599)	
Political Interest (High Interest)	-.650 (.377)*	0.522	-.073 (.345)		.108 (.330)		.287 (.337)	
Political Knowledge (High Knowledge)	-.302 (.361)		-.312 (.331)		.165 (.316)		.371 (.318)	
Nagelkerke R Square								
Nagelkerke R Square	0.398		0.35		0.251		0.205	
N								
N	250		251		250		249	
*p<.1, **p<.05, ***p<.001, two tailed test								

Treatment assignment has no effect on respondent's assessment of Booker's fitness for office. Thus, I reject this component of H2 (those exposed to hard news interviews will have higher perceptions of the candidate's fitness for office than those exposed to late night interviews). However, other variables in the model are statistically significant. White respondents, high income respondents, high interest

respondents, and conservative responses are less likely to perceive Booker as fit for office. On the other hand, female respondents and Democrats are more likely to evaluate Booker as fit for office.

Respondents in the late night treatment were more likely to rate Booker as a strong leader (p-value $< .1$). Compared to the control group, respondents in this treatment were approximately 2 times more likely to evaluate Booker as a strong leader. However, there is no statistical relationship between hard news exposure and perceptions of strong leadership, and thus I reject this aspect of H2 (those exposed to hard news interviews will have higher perceptions of the candidate's leadership strength, than those exposed to late night interviews). Mirroring the trends of other dependent variables, the variables of race, gender, and party affiliation have statically significant relationships with perceptions of strong leadership. White respondents were a third as likely to rate Booker as a strong leader than non-white respondents. Female respondents were twice as likely to rate Booker as a strong leader than male respondents and Democratic respondents were 7 times as likely to rate Booker as a strong leader than non-democrats.

The results show a statistically significant and positive effect of treatment assignment on perceptions of warmth. Respondents in the late night treatment group were three times as likely to describe Booker as warm as those in the control group. Those in the hard news group were not statically more likely to rate Booker as warm. Therefore, I accept H3 in part (Those exposed to a late night interview will have higher ratings of the candidate's warmth than those exposed to hard news interviews). Race and gender also have statistically significant relationships with perceptions of warmth, with white respondents rating Booker as warm at approximately half the rate of non-white respondents and female respondents more than twice as likely to rate Booker as warm than male respondents.

Similarly, respondents assigned to the late night comedy treatment group were significant more likely to rate Booker as charming. Those exposed to the Jimmy Kimmel interview were nearly three times as likely as those assigned to the the control group to describe Booker as charming. There was no statistically significant effect on perceptions of charm by assignment to the Jake Tapper interview treatment, suggesting evidence for late night comedy's positive impact on perceptions of charm over hard news. Therefore, I accept the component of H3 which states that those exposed to a late night interview will have higher ratings of the candidate's charm than those exposed to hard news interviews. Beyond my

primary independent variables, the variables of annual household income and Democratic party affiliation have statistically significant relationships with perceptions of charm. Those identifying as Democrats were twice as likely to evaluate Booker as charming and those with high annual income were half as likely to evaluate Booker as charming.

Discussion

Overall, my experiment found no support for the idea that hard news exposure strengthened perceptions of political favorability, fitness for office, leadership strength, and effectiveness in addressing education issues. In fact, the regression analysis found that late night comedy exposure positively affected respondent's impressions of strong leadership and issue effectiveness, which directly contradicts the proposed hypothesis. Therefore, I reject H2. On the other hand, the regression model provides statistically significant evidence that exposure to the late night treatment has a positive relationship with perceptions of favorability, warmth, and charm, all more so than hard news exposure, therefore holding consistent with H3. The regression test shows that hard news exposure and late night exposure have positive treatment effects on information recall, with late night comedy respondents scoring statistically highest. Therefore, I accept H1.

As previously detailed, there is a statistically significant relationship between each treatment group and levels of political recall. Logically, exposure to the control group had a negative association with recall as respondents in that group were never introduced to the information being measured for retention. While exposure to the hard news treatment produces higher levels of political recall than the control, respondents exposed to late night comedy demonstrated the highest political retention. The causal mechanism for this theory rests in the by-product learning theory introduced by Baum and Prior (Prior, 2003; Baum, 2002; Baum, 2003b). The entertainment values of late night comedy veil the informative aspects of the program, and thus viewers are not as cognitively aware of their information acquisition. While the survey doesn't exactly replicate the intricacies of the modern media environment, the disguised nature of the survey indicates that individuals were not watching the program with the explicit intention of political learning. Therefore, the information acquisition, storage, and retention occurring at the hands

of late night viewership is done incidentally, providing strong evidence for the by-product learning theory. This effect is compounded by the digestible, accessible, and typically personal nature of late night jokes and interviews, which aim foremost to retain viewership and court laughs (Ibid). The less intensive essence of these programs mean that viewers can employ less active learning and attention and still retain presented information as it is “cheap-framed” in a more palatable manner (Baum, 2002). Those exposed to the hard news interview, although presented the same information, must employ active learning in order to store the messages communicated as the nature of those programs are faster, more complex, and more policy oriented. Therefore, the results of this study provide plausibility to the by-product learning theory and suggest the informative values and benefits of late night comedy as a viable political communication forum.

The regression test also found a statistically significant positive relationship between information recall and both political interest and political knowledge, indicating that those with more interest in politics and more pre-existing knowledge retain more presented information. These findings potentially contradict the scholarly theory of more pronounced political knowledge gains among the less knowledgeable late night viewers (Baum, 2005). While recall levels are not synonymous with knowledge levels, an ability to retain information is a key step in converting this information into tangible knowledge, and thus these findings provide skepticism for this theory.

While I initially hypothesized that hard news exposure would have a treatment effect on perceptions of strong leadership and education issues effectiveness, these variables were in fact positively effected by the late night treatment exposure. As unpacked in the literature review, late night appearances provide candidates less threatening avenues to advertise themselves (Molek-Kozakowska, 2013; Collins, 2014), allowing them to cast positive impressions of their leadership abilities and capacity to tackle issues. This effect is balanced by the content of political interviews, which allocates large proportions of its discussion to political and policy matters (Parkin, 2014). Thought this discussion, candidates can come off as both personable and competent in their leadership and policy effectiveness. Despite the statistically significant association between perceived effectiveness and late night comedy exposure, the descriptive cross tabulations show similar rates of perceived effectiveness between all treatment groups. Therefore, I only cautiously accept this outcome.

This survey experiment has limitations that restrict the generalizability of the study. Foremost, while the randomization and control within an experiment allows for the utilization of convenience sample, the sample leaned older with only 10-15 respondents under 30 in each treatment group. These results may look different with a younger sample. Additionally, the r-square values for the regression tests are fairly low, indicating only a small portion of the tests account for explained differences. I suggest scholars recreate this study and the regression models to include variables that better explain variations and statistical significance. Finally, this survey design measures short-term recall and immediate information retention after exposure, and therefore the results do not hold implications for long-term recall. I recommend future scholarship focuses on the long-term impacts of media type exposure, especially in relation to recall and consequential political knowledge.

The main takeaway of this chapter is that candidate appearances on late night comedy forums produce more valuable political outcomes than candidate appearances on hard news forums. These findings hold tangible implications for both candidate campaign strategy as well as strategic political communication. Candidates trying to sell their personal side to the American public may have a higher likelihood of success on late night forums than on hard news forums. While, historically, many have viewed late night as an inappropriate campaign stop, the data suggests positive benefits of such appearances that can plausibly change perceptions of candidates and, ergo, campaign success. On the other hand, while hard news was hypothesized to improve perceptions of political favorability and leadership impressions, the data suggests no statically significant changes in these perceptions. Therefore, in choosing between an interview on either forum, this study suggests that candidates will benefit more substantially from going on a show like *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* than a show like *State of the Union*. These results also demonstrate the effectiveness of late night comedy as an information distribution channel. Those consuming late night comedy retain more information than hard news views, thus creating more potential for political learning and consequently political knowledge questions. These results may be useful for nonprofits, campaigns, and government institutions looking to disseminate information to the American public, as utilizing a late night program may be more memorable than a hard news forum.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

The critics berating Kennedy and Nixon's 1960 late night interview would abhor the late night gimmicks now native to the campaign scene. However, this public apprehension towards the "late night campaign stop", emblematic of an earlier media environment, has been replaced with vast acceptance and enjoyment of late night political appearances. In conjunction, late night has shifted from the apolitical model championed by hosts like Johnny Carson to an overall more politically direct, partisan program make-up. Late night's evolution into a more political entity, compounded by the autonomous and high-choice nature of the modern television landscape, indicates that media consumers can rely on late night comedy for news consumption. Chapter one anecdotally demonstrates the evolution of late night comedy and the modern nature of both late night and general media consumption. Users of the digital sphere create unique media diets from a seemingly unlimited array of program options. Those disinterested in politics can avoid political programs altogether, thus creating an information and knowledge gap between media consumers depending on their TV preferences. In tandem with the changing culture of the media landscape, late night comedy evolved from its original apolitical, limited competition format to a hyper-political, multi-program genre. Those who steer clear of traditional political affairs communication have the option of watching late night comedy in its place, utilizing the platform as a practical source of political and current event information. This context establishes the importance of research into the impacts of late night comedy consumption and the investigation of the types of people frequently consuming these programs. If people perceive late night's address of political affairs as a genuine news outlet, who is consuming these political messages and how does this exposure influence their political understanding?

Chapter 2 explores the demographic composition of late night, hard news, and apolitical audiences in an attempt to answer the former half of the proposed question. The results of Chapter 2 demonstrate that, overall, respondents in my survey, who lean younger and more liberal/Democrat, watch late night comedy least frequently. However, despite the suggested smaller audience compared to hard

news and apolitical programs, late night comedy successfully penetrate specific demographic audiences that make up key voter bases for political candidates. Younger respondents, Democrats, and those with high political interest and knowledge have statistically significant, positive associations with frequent late night comedy consumption. Contradicting current scholarship, more individuals with political interest watch late night frequently as compared to hard news forums, suggesting a more politically engaged late night comedy audience than commonly perceived (Bumgartner and Morris, 2006; Baum and Jamison, 2006; Pew Research, 2004).

Chapter 3 demonstrates the effects of viewing different types of television programs on political attitudes. Here, I find that those exposed to a late night comedy interview hold higher evaluations of likeability, perceptions of warmth, perceptions of charm, perceptions of issue effectiveness, and perceptions of strong leadership of the candidate in the interview, and were more likely to remember details of the discussion. In contrast, those exposed to the hard news treatment did not hold higher evaluations of political perceptions such as favorability and perceptions of strong leadership, issue effectiveness, and fitness for office. These findings imply that those looking to court voters and cultivate positive impressions for their candidacy will have higher success through late night comedy appearances than hard news appearances. Furthermore, the results of this study suggest that viewers will remember more of the policy stances and political history introduced on a late night comedy interview than a hard news interview, demonstrating the communication effectiveness of this forum.

This analysis may also hold disappointing implications for some campaigns and contradict the assumed benefits of political appearances on late night forums. The theorized gains from interview appearances on late night comedy is to access a niche audience of less politically engaged individuals (Bumgartner and Morris, 2006; Baum and Jamison, 2006; Pew Research, 2004). These individuals are unlikely to consume hard news media or other political signals, thus positioning late night comedy exposure as their principal source of political and news information. Politicians interviewing on *The Tonight Show* or *The Late Show*, for example, are therefore able to reach these viewers and, through the positive and causal atmosphere, construct positive impressions of their campaign. While the findings of Chapter 3 demonstrates that any viewer exposed to late night likely formulates higher candidate impressions, this effect is far more influential for those unengaged with hard news programs, as their only

opinions about the campaign are likely constructed from soft news exposure. However, the results of Chapter 2 show no statistical or significant descriptive evidence that late night audiences lean less politically knowledgeable or interested. In fact, the regression analysis in Table 2-4 shows a positive association between political interest with late night consumption, suggesting that those of higher interest watch late night more frequently. Therefore, while late night appearances can produce beneficial outcomes for political figures, they don't penetrate the often theorized demographic pockets of those out of touch with political affairs (Bumgartner and Morris, 2006; Baum and Jamison, 2006; Pew Research, 2004).

The aggregate analysis of Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 also suggests that audiences of late night comedy may possess higher information recall. While the sample skews younger, the regression analysis suggests that late night audiences are young, Democratically affiliated, and more politically interested individuals and knowledgeable, possible indicating that these individuals may possess higher recall than peers. For political institutions or figures trying to disseminate information, this study shows that late night appearances are a more effective avenue for information retention than hard news forums. Young voters are an especially vital pocket of the American electorate and ensuring political messages reach them is increasingly difficult as they rely less on hard news information sources (Matsa, 2018). Those trying to promote agendas and ensure individuals remember their messages may yield higher success rates on a *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* interview than a *State of the Union* interview. Perhaps this logic fueled Obama's promotion of the Affordable Care Act on the comedy show *Between Two Ferns* in 2014 and motivated Pete Buttigieg to advertise his campaign as a lesser-known candidate through an appearance on *The Late Show* in 2019.⁴ By appearing on late night forums, candidates can buttress their perceptions of personality while simultaneously maximizing the amount of information viewers remember about their political history, policy stances, and campaign promises.

While late night exposure may increase retention, the type of information retained may pose problems. Earlier presented literature suggests that late night cheap frames their content, and that the

⁴President Barack Obama: *Between Two Ferns*, (2014), *YouTube*, Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UnW3xkHxIEQ>; Pete Buttigieg: *The Case For A Younger President*, (2019), Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u7SHQSGesyM&t=192s>.

discussions on late night comedy, while substantive, often focus on more diluted content (Baum, 2002). If information recall is higher as a result of late night exposure, and young, Democratic, high interest individuals consume this content the most, one can infer that these demographic groups only retain the shallow, less salient political messages communicated on this forum. This holds implications for the overall information arsenal of certain Americans, lacking possession of pressing current events information like foreign policy and war but storing more content about the salacious affairs of political figures. While the literature and discussions in this thesis address these concerns, I did not test for this effect and therefore suggest a more empirical approach to the tone and content of information retention resulting from late night exposure by future scholars.

While the results of the survey experiment identify answers to the overarching research question commanding this thesis, they also formulate more questions still unanswered about the impacts of late night comedy as a political communication forum. Foremost, the experimental design of the survey study only exposed respondents to one instance of treatment exposure for a duration of approximately 10 minutes. While sufficient in evaluating immediate effects on the dependent variables measured, this design inadequately reflects the structure of the media environment in which consistent and continued exposure helps form political perceptions and impressions. How does continued exposure to late night impact political understanding? Does the higher recall demonstrated through single exposure translate into higher political knowledge through extended exposure? This thesis provides an insightful foundation for the tangible impacts of late night comedy exposure, but more research is required to understand the long term impacts of these unconventional political communication forums.

The survey inquires about respondent's vote choice as a product of treatment exposure, but does not analyze the impact of hard news and late night comedy consumption on voter turnout. Does exposure to late night comedy increase one's likelihood to vote in an election? How does late night comedy viewership impact perceptions of civic duty and personal responsibility to engage with political processes? Because voter turnout can be understood as a component of political understanding, I suggest the replication and enhancement of this study to directly probe the political impacts of late night comedy viewership on voter turnout. The findings of this research can provide valuable insight into the tangible benefits and potential strategic utilization of late night comedy as a political communication forum.

Moreover, interviews only compose a portion of a late night comedy episode, as monologue jokes and comical segments are equal parts of the late night equation. Scholarship suggests that late night jokes tend to lean negative (Duerst et al., 2001), whereas political interviews tend to remain neutral in tone (Parkin, 2014). Therefore, those watching late night monologues may form more negative evaluations of the subjects as a result of joke exposure. Therefore, I recommend scholars inquire about the political impacts of late night monologue exposure on the variables of political understanding to comprehend the holistic influences of entire late night episodes rather than the segmented components of interviews.

The findings of Chapter 3 compared different interview program types, using the subject of the interviews, Cory Booker, as a constant. How do political impressions and attitudes shift between different candidates? The high ratings of likability, charm, and warmth produced from late night exposure can only exist if the candidate successfully portrays those traits in that setting. In this way, late night only works as a catalyst for this image curation, and candidates must successfully deliver on the opportunity in order to bolster perceptions of personality. What are the political outcomes of exposure to a non-personable candidate on a late night interview? Moreover, Booker is a Democrat, which aligns with both the Democratic audience of late night comedy as well as the partisan affiliation of most late night shows. What are the political outcomes of exposure to a Republican candidate on a late night interview? Would evaluations by Democratic audiences differ? Would the easy and casual line of questioning by liberal hosts turn more polemic and critical? Future scholars should investigate the differences in political perception outcomes as a result of these variations within late night comedy interview contexts.

While unexplored in the body of this thesis, the established rising trend of the late night campaign stop and demonstrated impacts of those appearances present important ethical conundrums. Much like Hollywood celebrities appear on late night programs to promote album debuts and movie premieres, political elites interview to sell their campaigns, messages, and, mostly, themselves. Politicians occupying these “celebrity places” (Collins, 2014), accessing the same stages, audiences, and strategic tactics of society’s most idolized figures, can create associations of celebrity stature. What happens when we equate political leaders, intended to be criticized and held accountable as constituent surrogates, with the social standing of Hollywood elites? Will these continuing interviews create a culture where those exposed to late night are too distracted by the entertainment antics and prejudices in favor of the now “celebritized ”

political guests to criticize their political proposals? Arguably, one may be reluctant to condemn President Obama's political agenda after growing an affinity for him from watching his "slow jam the news" bit with Jimmy Fallon.⁵ Allocating the same platforms and lovable gimmicks provided to celebrities like Ariana Grande and Kim Kardashian to civic servants may project an expectation of idolization onto those in a role inherently meant to be criticized (Nabeshima, 2021). While the results of the survey experiment suggest late night's viability as an effective campaign stop and potential to augment information recall, these benefits may be accompanied by a "celebritization" of politicians incongruent with their intended purpose as public servants. I recommend more scholarly research and discourse around the ethical implications and cultural outcomes of the late night campaign stop and how this modern campaign strategy shifts social norms around political identities.

The crux of this thesis is its support for the effectiveness of late night comedy programs as political campaign tools. Persuasive, far-reaching, and strategic political communication lies at the heart of a successful bid for political office. Voters take cues from the media, and the way in which a candidate is packaged and advertised greatly influences the impressions made. Modern campaigns must adapt to the media habits of modern voters, and failing to do so can lead to missed opportunities for specific voter demographic outreach and projections of personal likeability. In other words, this thesis suggests that political campaigns learn from the mistakes of the 2008 McCain campaign and evaluate late night forums as equally or more important media real estate than hard news forums.

The conceptual importance of this thesis extends past the boundaries of standard late night television programs and implicates the power of unconventional political communication in all forms. Communication forums like social media, independent blogs, and online discussion threads, to name a few, are increasing as prominent sources for news information intake and discourse. In March 2022, Popular TikTok creators received a briefing from White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki and representatives from the National Security Council on information about the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Klein and Janfaza, 2022). With millions of people, especially young people, relying on social media for

⁵*Slow Jam the News with President Obama*, (2016), *YouTube*, Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ziwYbVx_-qg.

substantive news updates, the Biden administration enlisted these prominent influencers to help with information communication and ensure misinformation is not spread on the site. A contemporary and relevant example of political entities adapting to the habits and demands of modern media consumers, this example indicates the future of political communication and the employment of unconventional yet highly utilized media forums to effectively access target audiences. The coming years will likely see a larger reliance on non-traditional media forums as avenues for serious political discourse and reporting. This thesis helps contextualize the audience and political outcomes of these burgeoning forums, hoping to inspire future scholars to investigate this field further.

Appendix

Survey Experiment Questions

Pre-treatment questions:

1. Do you agree to take part in the study? By agreeing to partake in the study, you are also certifying that you are at least 18 years old.
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
2. What is 3 times 3 (3x3)? Please select the correct answer below.
 - A. 3
 - B. 6
 - C. 9
 - D. 12
 - E. 15
3. Are you a citizen or long term resident of the United States?
 - A. Yes, I am either an American citizen or a long term resident of the United States
 - B. No, I am neither an American citizen or a long term resident of the United States
4. How old are you?
 - A. <18
 - B. 22-18
 - C. 23-30
 - D. 31-45
 - E. 46-60
 - F. 60+
5. What gender do you identify as?
 - A. Male
 - B. Female
 - C. Non-binary/third gender
 - D. Prefer not to say
6. Below is a list of public figures. Please indicate whether you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable or very unfavorable impression of each person. If you have never heard of this person, please indicate that as well:

	Very favorable	Somewhat favorable	Somewhat unfavorable	Very unfavorable	Never heard of this person
Nancy Pelosi					
Cory Booker					

Chuck Schumer					
Raphael Warnock					
Jake Tapper					
Jimmy Kimmel					
Tucker Carlson					
Stephen Colbert					
Jimmy Fallon					
Taylor Swift					
Zendaya					
Lil Nas X					

7. Below is a list of policy issues. Use the cursor to drag and rank the issues in order of importance for you personally (1 being most important, 5 being least important).

1. Foreign Policy
2. Education
3. Criminal Justice
4. Economy
5. Gun Control

8. What color is the sky? Regardless of the actual answer to this question, please select orange as your answer.

- A. Blue
- B. Green
- C. Orange

Below are some questions you may have encountered from classes, news information, everyday life etc. Please answer these questions to the best of your knowledge. If you do not know the answer, please select the "I don't know" option. Please answer honestly and without help from outside sources.

9. How many years is a U.S. senate term?
- A. 1 year
 - B. 2 years
 - C. 4 years
 - D. 6 years
 - E. 8 years
 - F. I don't know
10. Who is the Current Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States?
- A. Stephen G. Breyer
 - B. Clarence Thomas
 - C. Sonia Sotomayor
 - D. John G. Roberts
 - E. Samuel A. Alito
 - F. I don't know
11. Who is serving as the current Attorney General in the Biden administration?
- A. William Barr
 - B. Merrick Garland
 - C. Robert Mueller
 - D. Sally Yates
 - E. James Comey
 - F. I don't know
12. How many Representatives are in the U.S House of Representatives?
- A. 100
 - B. 215
 - C. 351
 - D. 435
 - E. 485
 - F. I don't know
13. What proportion of Senators and Representatives are required to override a Presidential veto?
- A. $\frac{1}{2}$
 - B. $\frac{2}{3}$
 - C. $\frac{3}{5}$
 - D. $\frac{3}{4}$
 - E. $\frac{4}{5}$
 - F. I don't know

Post-Treatment Questions

14. What's the name of the show you just watched?
- A. Jimmy Kimmel Live! on ABC

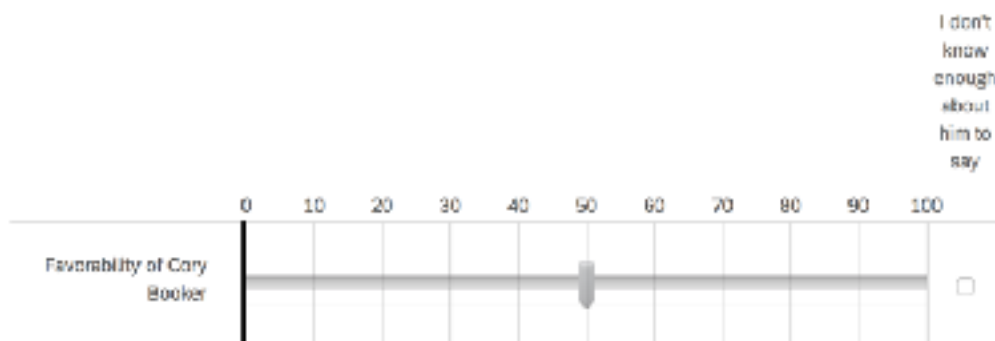
- B. State of the Union with Jake Tapper on CNN
- C. Tucker Carlson Tonight on Fox News
- D. The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon on NBC
- E. Good Bones on HGTV
- F. The Bachelor on ABC

15. Below is a list of policy issues. Use the cursor to drag and rank the issues in order of importance for you personally (1 being most important, 5 being least important).

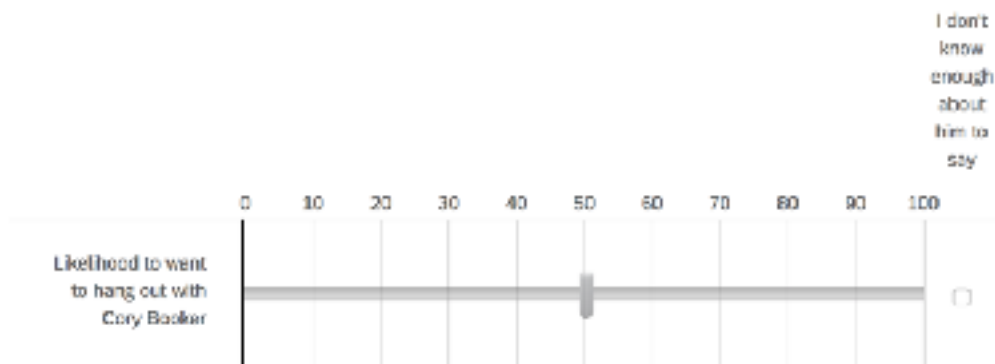
- 1. Foreign Policy
- 2. Education
- 3. Criminal Justice
- 4. Economy
- 5. Gun Control

This section will ask you questions regarding New Jersey Senator Cory Booker. If you do not know who Cory Booker is, feel free check the box at the end of the questions that indicates that you don't know enough to answer the question.

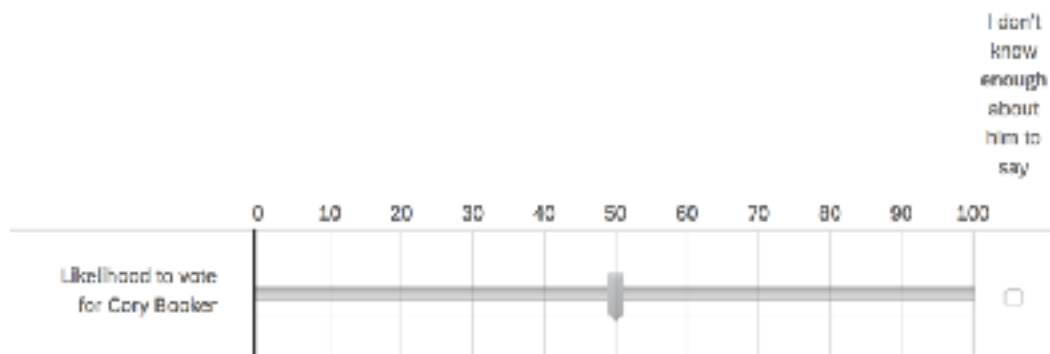
16. On a scale from 0 to 100, how favorable is your impression of Cory Booker (0 being extremely unfavorable, 100 being extremely favorable)?



17. On a scale from 0 to 100, how likely are you to want to hang out with Cory Booker if given the opportunity (0 being no chance at all, 100 being absolutely likely)?



18. On a scale from 0 to 100, how likely are you to vote for Cory Booker if he were to run for office in your community (0 being no chance at all, 100 being absolutely likely)?



19. In your opinion, how effective would Cory Booker be in addressing these issues:

	Extremely effective	Very effective	Moderately effective	Slightly effective	Not effective at all	I don't know who Booker is
Drug Prices						
Climate and Environment						
Women's Rights						
Public Housing						
Education						

20. Which listed color do you like the most? Regardless of which listed color you like the most, please select purple as your answer.

- A. Blue
- B. Green
- C. Red
- D. Purple
- E. Yellow

The following are questions about information discussed in the clip you watched. Please answer to the best of your ability. If you don't remember the answer or didn't hear about this topic, please indicate "I don't know/remember"

21. What city was Booker mayor of?

- A. Hoboken
- B. Newark
- C. Trenton
- D. Livingston
- E. Jersey City
- F. I don't know/remember

22. What do people mean when they refer to "beat the odds" schools?

- A. High poverty, high prosperity
- B. High poverty, high potential
- C. High poverty, high proficiency
- D. High poverty, high performance
- E. High poverty, high possibilities
- F. I don't know/remember

23. What ranking is Newark for "beat the odds" schools?

- A. 1st
- B. 2nd
- C. 3rd
- D. 5th
- E. Last
- F. I don't know/remember

24. Below is a list of characteristics commonly used to describe politicians. Consider these traits and indicate whether they describe CORY BOOKER extremely well, very well, slightly well, or not well at all. If you don't know who CORY BOOKER is, please select "I don't know this person".

	Not well at all	Slightly well	Very well	Extremely well	I don't know this person
Warm					
Honest					
Fit for office					
A strong leader					
Ethical					
Charming					
Serious					
Intelligent					

25. This section includes a number of statements. Please indicate whether you strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree with each statement:

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Politics are too hard for someone like me to understand					
I feel like I can make a difference in politics					
I am as well informed about politics as most people					
I understand the political issues currently facing the country					
Politicians are corrupt					
Politics frequently manipulate people					

Politicians care more about corporations and lobbyists than normal people					
Government can make a positive difference in people's lives					
Politicians are self serving					
Politicians care about people like me					
Civic duty and attentiveness (ie. voting, watching the news, etc.) are important					

You're now entering the last section of the survey (you're almost done!). These questions are for classification purposes only and do not involve the video you watched.

26. With which of these racial or ethnic backgrounds do you identify yourself most (check all that apply)?

- A. White or Caucasian
- B. Black or African American
- C. Latino or Hispanic
- D. Asian American
- E. Native American
- F. Other
- G. Prefer not to say

27. What is your party affiliation?

- A. Strong Democrat
- B. Democrat

- C. Independent, leans Democrat
- D. Independent
- E. Independent, leans Republican
- F. Republican
- G. Strong Republican

28. What is your political ideology?

- A. Strong liberal
- B. Liberal
- C. Moderate, leans liberal
- D. Moderate
- E. Moderate, leans conservative
- F. Conservative
- G. Strong conservative

29. In what state do you currently live?

30. What is your annual household income?

- A. Less than \$20,000
- B. \$20,000-\$49,999
- C. \$50,000-\$74,999
- D. \$75,000-\$99,999
- E. \$100,000-199,999
- F. More than \$200,00

31. How interested are you in politics?

- A. Very interested in politics
- B. Somewhat interested in politics
- C. Slightly interested in politics
- D. Not at all interested in politics
- E. Prefer not to say

32. How often do you do the following activities?

	4 or more times a week	2-3 times a week	Once a week	A few times a month	Never
--	------------------------------	---------------------	----------------	------------------------	-------

Watch the news on TV (including Youtube, streaming, etc.)					
Read a newspaper					
Read the news online from hard news sites (ie. CNN, New York Times, Fox News).					

33. What types of sources do you most regularly use for news consumption (check all that apply)?

- A. Print Newspapers
- B. Local TV news
- C. Cable News
- D. Network News
- E. Late Night Talk Shows
- F. Daytime Talk Shows
- G. Youtube
- H. Digital/online Newspapers
- I. Digital blogs or independent papers
- J. Phone alerts
- K. Social media (Facebook, TikTok etc.)
- L. Other sources
- M. I don't consume news information

34. Listed below are a number of TV news networks and programs. Please indicate which statement best reflects how often you watch news in each outlet. It doesn't matter if you watch these programs on TV, streaming services, phone or computer apps, Youtube etc., please still include this in your evaluation.

	4 or more times a week	2-3 times a week	Once a week	A few times a month	Never
--	------------------------	------------------	-------------	---------------------	-------

Newsmax					
MSNBC					
Fox News					
CNN					
Local news					
ABC News					
PBS					
Bloomberg					

35. Listed below are a number of TV programs. Please indicate which statement best reflects how often you watch each program. It doesn't matter if you watch these programs on TV, streaming services, phone or computer apps, Youtube etc., please still include this in your evaluation.

	4 or more times a week	2-3 times a week	Once a week	A few times a month	Never
The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon					
Jimmy Kimmel Live!					
The Late Show with Stephen Colbert					
Last Week Tonight with John Oliver					
The Daily Show with Trevor Noah					

Morning talk shows (ie. Good Morning America)					
Home Improvement shows (ie. Property Brothers, House Hunters, HGTV network etc.)					
Reality TV (ie. Keeping up with the Kardashians, Selling Sunset etc.)					
Fictional Political Dramas (ie. West Wing, House of Cards, Homeland etc.)					
Fictional dramas (ie. Succession, Euphoria, Stranger Things etc.)					

Sitcoms (The Office, Seinfeld, Parks and Recreation, etc.)					
Cooking Shows (ie. Top Chef, Master Chef, The Great British Bake Off)					
Daytime talk shows (ie. The View, The Talk, etc.)					

You have reached the end of the survey. Thank you for participating. Please use the code listed below to indicate that you have finished the task in MTurk. You must supply this code to be compensated. You will not be compensated without the following code.

Code: YELLOW

Please press the arrow once you've copied the code.

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