

# LAUGHING MATTERS: LATE-NIGHT POLITICAL COMEDY TELEVISION & INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

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## WHAT EFFECT, IF ANY, DOES CONSUMING LATE-NIGHT POLITICAL COMEDY TELEVISION HAVE ON AUDIENCE MEMBERS' INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL POLITICAL POLARIZATION?

H1: Consumption of late-night political comedy television, such as *The Daily Show*, heightens or exacerbates audiences' individual-level affective political polarization.

H0: There is absolutely no relationship between consumption of late-night political comedy television, such as *TDS*, and audience members' individual-level late-night affective political polarization.

## I DESIGNED AN EXPERIMENTAL SURVEY TO TEST FOR A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WATCHING TDS AND INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION.

I created two treatments. I first selected a three-minute clip from *TDS*, in which Trevor Noah critiques President Trump's border wall construction. I then replicated the clip transcript for my second treatment, but attributed it to CNN's Anderson Cooper.

I also constructed a survey, designed to gather demographic information and measure respondents' individual-level affective polarization after exposure to their treatment. I further segmented affective polarization into its two sub-elements (favorability and social distance) and created question sets designed to measure those attributes. Finally, I included a single content check question to ensure participants paid attention.

I surveyed 707 Amazon MTurk users, and compensated each participant \$0.25 for their time.

## LITERATURE SUGGESTS THAT MANY LATE-NIGHT COMEDY PROGRAMS ALREADY INFLUENCE AUDIENCES' POLITICAL BEHAVIOR, INCLUDING VOTING LIKELIHOOD AND POLITICAL TALK FREQUENCY.

Programming like *TDS* employs satiric critique within broader parodic framework to engage audience members' political identities.

These identities are intensely emotional and, combined with comedic capacity to provoke anger, exert significant influence over individual behavioral tendencies.

Social or affective polarization describes mutual dislike between Republicans and Democrats, inextricably employing social identity theory. Affective polarization is often deconstructed into two base elements: favorability, or ingroup confidence, and social distance, or hostility toward counter-partisan peers.

## ONCE I'D ELIMINATED EXTRANEOUS RESPONSES (INDEPENDENTS, ANYONE WHO FAILED THE CONTENT CHECK, ETC.), I RAN SEVERAL BIVARIATE AND MULTIVARIATE REGRESSIONS.

Initial bivariate models testing for a relationship between treatment exposure and each of my two elemental dependent variables suggested a relationship between watching *TDS* and favorability (p-value: 0.03) but not social distance (p-value: 0.1723).

Further multivariate models failed to show any significant relationships concerning treatment, but did indicate that every other independent variable mattered (i.e. age, average media consumption, partisanship).

It makes sense that lifelong identity would matter more than a single three-minute treatment, so these findings aren't entirely surprising (and point to a flaw with my study).

## IF CRITIQUING OR ATTACKING EMOTIONAL IDENTITIES PRODUCES EMOTIONAL (OR AFFECTIVE) RESPONSE, AND SATIRIC CRITIQUE SPECIFICALLY PRODUCES ANGER, IT MAKES SENSE TO CONSIDER HOW WE INDIVIDUALLY RESPOND TO A TELEVISION PROGRAM DESIGNED TO CHALLENGE US: TDS.

When we perceive harm, losses, threats, or uncertainty about the outcome of a specific situation, we often adjust our behavior defensively to reduce anxiety and increase personal control. Usually, this means retreating to an ingroup's system of norms and expectations at the expense of an outgroup.

Juvenalian satire (in which other-directed targets are humiliated and/or insulted) promotes aggression. Concordantly, voters who identify strongly with a distinct political party experience anger more readily while watching these shows.

I proposed a positive, direct relationship between consumption of *TDS* and audience members' individual-level affective polarization. Political identity's elemental emotional quality interrelates directly with affective behavior, especially when coupled with Juvenalian satiric capacity to elicit further anger, and so relevant programming should have strong political consequences for its audiences. My distinct proposition is that these consequences amalgamate in affective political polarization; the anger generated by parodic 'culture jamming' messages reinforces affective behavioral tendencies and facilitates affective polarization.

## SO, WHAT DOES THIS MEAN? IT MEANS THAT SHOWS LIKE TDS DO IMPACT AUDIENCE MEMBERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRESENTED CONTENT AND FIGURES, BUT DON'T SEEM TO IMPACT THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF COUNTER-PARTISAN PEERS.

Multivariate regressions showed that several independent variables can predict individual-level affective polarization. Older participants felt less favorable about anything presented in their assigned treatment, but reported lower social distance (suggesting that younger individuals are moderately less comfortable interacting with members of opposing political parties). Moreover, both consistent consumption of late-night comedy television and Republican partisanship bolstered feelings of favorability and social distance.

Though I found significance for only one isolated component of affective polarization, it seems clear that late-night political comedy television does have capacity to affect political behavior. Given a better-designed study—one involving repeated exposure, especially—it is likely these effects would become more evident.