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A dual-processing approach to the effects of viewing political comedy

Abstract: Stephen Colbert's announcement that he would take over *Late Night* for David Letterman signaled the end of nearly a decade long project in political satire. The evolution of political humor since Colbert began his satirical news program has been accompanied by a dramatic expansion in scholarly understanding of the effects of political comedy. This study contributes to research on the effects of political comedy by adopting a dual-processing approach to determine if exposure to political comedy can affect the political knowledge and attitudes of viewers. Two experiments were conducted to test the learning and persuasive effects of viewing a single clip from Colbert's well-documented Super PAC parody. The first demonstrated that exposure to Colbert's Super PAC programming generated modest short-term issue recognition characteristic of online learning. The second experiment demonstrated a substantial priming effect such that viewing argumentative forewarning in a Colbert segment about Super PAC attack ads significantly diminished the persuasive effect of those attacks.

Keywords: political communication, political comedy, satire, parody, political knowledge, priming

1 Introduction

On April 10, 2014, Stephen Colbert announced that he would be leaving *The Colbert Report* (CR) to replace David Letterman as the host of *Late Show*. His announcement marks the end of nearly a decade long project in political satire. Colbert's character, a conservative cable news personality, has parodied cable news punditry for almost a decade. His departure contributes to a time of transition in political comedy, though it does not necessarily indicate a decline. Late night talk shows that have long made politics a punchline now include

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Colbert and two former hosts (Jimmy Fallon and Seth Meyers) of the *Saturday Night Live* fake-news staple Weekend Update. Meanwhile, John Oliver launched his critically acclaimed HBO weekly roundup, Colbert has been replaced with Larry Wilmore's *Nightly Show,* and *The Daily Show* (*TDS*) continues its decade and a half run even as it replaces Jon Stewart. So while the programming landscape is in transition, there is opportunity for political comedy to thrive in late-night network monologues, premium cable spin-offs, and the Comedy Central hour that gave Stewart and Colbert their initial platform. Though political comedy is present across the spectrum of network, cable, and premium television, the audience for political news is dwindling as entertainment seekers opt out of political content (Prior 2007). The rise of political comedy can provide a moderate correction to this trend when entertainment seekers opt in to political comedy for the humor and encounter political information as an incidental byproduct. This study extends research on political comedy by analyzing the effects of Colbert's Super PAC programming on political learning and political persuasion.

Colbert's Super PAC is among the most well documented specific cases of political satire (Hardy et al. 2014; LaMarre 2013; Young et al. 2014). It is already known, for example, that viewers of Colbert's programing were likely to become more knowledgeable about campaign finance (Hardy et al. 2014; LaMarre 2013). Using these insights as our mooring, we seek to expand existing understanding of the effects of political comedy by applying a dual-processing approach (e.g., Lodge and Taber 2013) to brief exposures. Two experiments are presented to test whether exposure is associated with the short-term issue recall predicted by online learning and whether exposure can prime the processing of traditional campaign communication.

2 Learning from political comedy

Political learning is among the most frequently researched effects of viewing political comedy. Viewers may learn from political comedy through a gateway effect in which viewers of political comedy become more likely to view and learn from traditional news coverage (Cao 2010; Feldman and Young 2008; Feldman et al. 2011; Young and Tisinger 2006; Xenos and Becker 2009). There is also evidence that, independent of the gateway effect, viewers of political comedy may directly learn about politics and current affairs (Baek and Wojcieszak 2009; Baum 2003; Feldman 2013; Parkin 2010). In regard to learning from Colbert's Super PAC, LaMarre (2013) found that those exposed to CR learned more than

those indirectly exposed through news coverage and that any exposure to Colbert's Super PAC resulted in learning relative to those not exposed. Other studies, however, have challenged the direct learning effect of political comedy (Baumgartner and Morris 2011; Hollander 2005).

The overall body of research suggests qualified and inconsistent learning effects of political comedy. Nevertheless, it is possible that short-term learning happens more commonly among viewers of political comedy. Baum (2003) (following Lodge et al. 1995), argued that viewers may use the factual information presented in political comedy to form heuristic cues, or emotional tags that act as opinion short-cuts about an attitude object, and that viewers discard the factual information after the heuristic cue has been formed, only retaining the final opinion and not the information used to generate the emotional tag. This process, referred to as online learning, suggests that the information acquired through political comedy will only be accessible in short-term memory immediately after viewing but that the effect of this knowledge may persist after the information is discarded. Baum's (2003) study was unique in that it examined survey data collected immediately after substantial coverage of an international crisis and could test the recall of factual information before it was discarded in the online learning process.

Kim and Vishak (2008) tested the online learning thesis in a randomized experiment that compared learning outcomes of people assigned to view TDS to those who viewed a similar segment from traditional news media and found that those who viewed news coverage engaged in memory based learning whereas those who viewed TDS engaged in online learning and recalled substantially less factual information. However, viewers of TDS recognized significantly more factual information relative to those who did not view any program, suggesting that there is some immediate issue learning from political comedy.

If online learning results from viewing political comedy, we would expect learning to be evident only immediately following exposure. Though information will quickly fade from short-term memory, it can still inform affective judgments of the target attitude. Because those exposed to Colbert's Super PAC were more knowledgeable about campaign finance in general (Hardy et al. 2014; LaMarre 2013), this is an ideal case to determine whether viewing Colbert's programing can increase short-term knowledge associated with online processing. To test the first element of the online learning hypothesis, that there will be immediate issue learning in short-term memory, we hypothesize (H1): Exposure to Colbert's Super PAC will increase issue recall about campaign finance. Because people tend to learn more from news coverage than comedy (Kim and Vishak 2008), we also hypothesize (H2): Exposure to information about campaign finance law on a news segment will increase issue recall more than exposure to similar information on CR.

2.1 Method

2.1.1 Procedure

In September of 2012 a link to an online experiment was distributed to 300 undergraduate students enrolled in a communication course at a major university in the Midwestern United States. In total, 214 completed the experiment. Though the use of a sample of college students poses some limitations, college-aged participants are much more likely to watch CR (Hmielowski et al. 2011; Kohut 2012; Young and Tisinger 2006) and are also less likely to be knowledge-able about politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). This makes them the ideal population to study when seeking to determine whether exposure to political comedy can increase the political information of young citizens. Furthermore, previous uses of college samples have generated robust findings in context of political comedy (e.g., Baumgartner 2013; Baumgartner and Morris 2008, 2011; LaMarre et al. 2009; Parkin 2010).

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 65 ($M = 19.5$, SD $= 3.3$). Of the participants, 84 identified as male (39.3%), 128 as female (59.8%), one as intersex, and one respondent did not indicate a sex. Sixty-four (29.9%) of the participants aligned with the Democratic Party, 91 (42.5%) with the Republican Party, and 59 (27.5%) with neither. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions in which they viewed either a segment from Colbert's Super PAC programming ($n = 71$), a segment from *The Rachel Maddow Show* in which she discussed Super PACs ($n = 72$), or an unrelated clip ($n = 71$). *The Rachel Maddow Show* was selected because of the extensive background information about campaign finance presented in the clip. The Maddow segment thus presents a high standard when evaluating the learning potential of political comedy. Furthermore, though political learning has been previously studied in comparison to traditional media (Kim and Vishak 2008), few have compared political comedy to the programs that dominate cable news. Inclusion of Maddow allows a comparison of her entertainment-oriented news with Colbert's news-oriented entertainment.

2.1.2 Dependent variable

A five-item quiz was developed to assess the amount of issue recall related to campaign finance law. The five-item quiz included questions that were directly discussed on both the Colbert and Maddow segments as well as questions about information that was more peripheral to the coverage and would require viewers to access long term memory to answer correctly. It was our belief that knowledge

of the peripheral issues in long-term memory would be triggered by a stimulus that activates thinking about campaign finance. A majority of respondents (56%) failed to correctly answer any questions and only three respondents correctly answered four questions, whereas 22 (10.3%) correctly answered three questions, 31 (14.5%) correctly answered two questions, and 38 (17.8%) answered only one question correctly. The difficulty of each question was assessed by calculating a correct-to-incorrect ratio: Q1 = 0.21, Q2 = 0.53, Q3 = 0.29, Q4 = 0.23, Q5 = 0.18. Though respondents were encouraged to guess if they were unsure, a majority selected "don't know" for each question.

The reliability of the quiz was measured with a Kuder-Richardson analysis. The analysis revealed that Q3 and Q4 appeared to measure the same construct ($r = 0.49$) but that Q1, Q2, and Q5 did not ($r < 0.30$). To assess the predictive validity of the items, five binary logistic regression analyses were conducted in which political interest was entered as a covariate and exposure to both CR and Maddow were entered as predictors. Exposure to CR or Maddow did not significantly increase the odds of correctly answering Q1, Q2, or Q5. However, exposure to the segment from CR increased a respondent's odds of correctly answering Q3 by 3.2x ($B = 1.16$, $p < 0.05$), as did exposure to the Maddow segment ($B = 1.16$, $p < 0.05$, $Exp(B) = 3.19$). Similarly, viewing the CR segment significantly increased the odds of correctly answering Q4, ($B = 1.90$, $p < 0.01$, $Exp(B) = 6.7$) as did viewing the Maddow segment, ($B = 1.73$, $p < 0.01$, $Exp(B) = 5.7$). Based on these results, we concluded that Q1, Q2, and Q5 were not valid or reliable measures of political learning. A two-item version of the quiz was utilized for the analysis.[1] The two questions were: *Since legal limits on Super PACs have been lifted, what has been the effect on 'outside expenditures' in campaigns?*[2] and *Which of the following restrictions apply to Super PACs?*[3] Quiz scores ranged from zero to two correct ($M = 0.41$, $SD = 0.70$).

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[1] The three questions that were discarded from the analysis were: In 2010 the Supreme Court ruled on the Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission case (commonly referred to as Citizens United). What was the key finding of this decision?; Which of the following best describes a Super PAC?; How much do experts think super PACs will spend?

[2] The response options to Q3 were: 1 – They have actually gone down a bit; 2 – They have stayed the same so far; 3 – They have increased, but only a bit; 4 – They have dramatically increased, more than doubling the amount previously spent; 5 – Don't know.

[3] The response options to Q4 were: 1 – They can only collect a few thousand dollars from any single source; 2 – They can only spend as much money on a campaign as the candidates do; 3 – They cannot coordinate with candidates; 4 – They cannot explicitly advocate for the election of a Candidate; 5 – Don't know.

2.1.3 Stimulus

Respondents in the first experimental condition viewed a segment from an episode of CR originally aired January 12, 2012. In this segment Colbert transferred control of his Super PAC to Jon Stewart so he could run for "president of the United States of South Carolina." The segment featured Stewart and Trevor Potter, who provided legal advice to Stewart and Colbert about laws concerning the non-coordination of Super PACs with campaigns. The segment is 7:36 in length. The segment from *The Rachel Maddow Show* used in the second condition originally aired August 18, 2011. She discussed connections between Rick Perry's campaign manager and the person who was operating the pro-Perry Super PAC. In the segment she explained regulations that apply donations to political Super PACs. The segment is 8:57 in length – 1:21 longer than the Colbert segment and thus potentially more informative. Participants in the control condition viewed a 5:40 long segment from CR that originally aired April 26, 2007 and featured Colbert interviewing Guam Rep. Madeleine Bordallo.

2.2 Results

The first two hypotheses were tested with a one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) in which quiz scores on the three experimental groups were compared with political interest specified as a covariate. Political interest was included because past research has shown it to influence learning outcomes from viewing political comedy (Baum 2003). Interest was measured with three 5-point agreement items: *I am interested in politics*; *I follow politics closely*; and *politics are important to me personally* ($M = 2.69$, SD $= 1.17$, $\alpha = 93$). The omnibus test revealed significant differences in issue recall among the conditions, $F(2, 210) = 7.75$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.049$, and that political interest was a significant source of variance, $F(1, 210) = 10.14$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.032$. Follow-up analyses revealed that participants in the Colbert condition scored significantly higher (est. $M = 0.54$, SE $= 0.08$) than those in the control condition (est. $M = 0.19$, SE $= 0.08$, $p < 0.001$). This result supported H1, viewing a segment on CR improved issue recall. There was no significant difference between the quiz score of those in the Colbert condition and those in the Maddow condition (est. $M = 0.50$, SD $= 0.08$). H2 was not supported.

Because political knowledge is dependent on a variety of factors and random assignment is an imperfect tool, this analysis was replicated in multivariate regression with dummy variables for political partisanship,

sex, race, age, political interest, and previous exposure to programing about Colbert's Super PAC entered as control variables. To assess previous exposure, participants were asked, on a 1–7 scale, how frequently they watched TDS, how frequently they watched CR, how much they had heard of Colbert's Super PAC, how much attention they had paid to Colbert's Super PAC, and how much they knew about Colbert's Super PAC ($M = 1.83$, $SD = 1.05$, $\alpha = 88$).

As can be seen in Table 1, both Democrats and Republicans were marginally less likely to provide correct responses, and those who were more attentive to previous coverage of Colbert's Super PAC were more likely to provide a correct response. Those exposed to either the Maddow clip or the Colbert clip were significantly more likely to correctly answer questions. The control model predicted 15% of variance in quiz score and the addition of the experimental dummy variables significantly improved prediction, $\Delta F(2, 203) = 6.57$, $p < 0.01$, $\Delta r^2 = 0.05$. This finding is consistent with the ANCOVA results, viewing both Colbert and Maddow improved quiz scores. However, in each case the improvement was minor.

Table 1: Regression coefficients for predictors of quiz score.

Variable	Model 1		Model 2	
	B (S.E.)	β	B (S.E.)	β
Intercept	−0.466 (0.298)		−0.666 (0.295)	
Age	0.026 (0.014)	0.126	0.025 (0.013)	0.118
Female	0.054 (0.101)	0.038	0.045 (0.099)	0.032
Nonwhite	0.096 (0.125)	0.055	0.094 (0.122)	0.053
Democrat	−0.270 (0.126)	−0.178*	−0.243 (0.123)	−0.160*
Republican	−0.217 (0.113)	−0.154*	−0.220 (0.110)	−0.156*
Political interest	0.053 (0.043)	0.090	0.066 (0.042)	0.112
Views CR/TDS	0.187 (0.053)	0.280***	0.168 (0.052)	0.253***
Colbert condition			0.364 (0.108)	0.246***
Maddow condition			0.312 (0.108)	0.211**
R^2	0.153		0.205	
F change	5.31 (7, 205)***		6.57 (2, 203)**	

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

2.3 Discussion

The results suggest that viewing coverage of Colbert's Super PAC increased short-term issue recall of information regarding campaign finance. Furthermore, whereas

political comedy has underperformed relative to traditional media in the past (Kim and Vishak 2008), CR was as effective at educating viewers as *The Rachel Maddow Show*, suggesting that information-rich entertainment may be as educational as entertainment-oriented information. However, the learning was modest overall. Exposure to either clip was only associated with an average quiz score of 0.5 out of 2 – a significant but mild improvement over those who did not view relevant information. This is consistent with only marginal short-term learning.

The results may be a function of motivation (e.g., Feldman 2013) – the entertaining format of both of these programs may trigger an online learning process whereas information-seeking behavior more commonly associated with viewing traditional news may lead to more robust memory-based learning. The results also echo Baum's (2003) finding that soft news only increased awareness of information that was extensively covered. This experiment supports the online learning hypothesis in that it suggests some information is available in short-term memory. However, a second component of the online learning hypothesis is that the information acquired, though quickly forgotten, will continue to influence the processing of future messages through affective priming. A second experiment was conducted to test this possibility.

3 The priming effect of political comedy

Numerous studies have demonstrated a message-consistent persuasive effect of political comedy. Evaluations of politicians often suffer when they are singled out for ridicule, as when Tina Fey's impression of Sarah Palin went viral (Baumgartner et al. 2012). Similarly, Baumgartner and Morris (2006) found that mockery from TDS reduced evaluations of both the Republican and Democratic candidate. TDS reduced evaluations of Republicans during coverage of the 2004 party conventions but not Democrats (Morris 2009) – though because this resulted from imbalanced coverage on TDS (Democrats escaped heavy ridicule) it is further evidence of message-consistent persuasion. Regarding image evaluations, Moy et al. (2005) found that Bush's appearance on Letterman prompted voters to weight character more heavily in subsequent evaluations. Beyond direct effects, Xenos et al. (2011) demonstrated that political comedy triggered partisan cuing similar to traditional campaign communication and Young (2008) found that the cognitive effort required to get the joke disrupted argument scrutiny thereby increasing message consistent persuasion.

Though many of these findings suggest that the target of humor is perceived less favorably after the fact, research on Colbert suggests that his satirical skewering may boomerang. Baumgartner and Morris (2008) found that individuals exposed to a clip of Colbert satirizing President Bush and the GOP evaluated the targets more favorably than those not exposed. However, Baumgartner and Morris (2008) argue that regular viewers of CR are likely in on the joke and that this message-consistent persuasion is likely to be found primarily among those who rarely watch the program and fail to decode the satire.

There is thus evidence that political comedy can and does influence political attitudes. According to the online learning hypothesis, these effects would result from viewers updating their online tally of affective evaluations of the candidates. We are interested in whether this online learning can interrupt more traditional and direct campaign persuasion. Clues about this effect can be found in the primacy research conducted by Holbert et al. (2007), who found that viewing TDS prior to CNN primed more negative evaluations of the news. If this finding is any guide, we should expect Colbert's Super PAC to prime how viewers experience Super PAC ads. In other words, the online learning that results from viewing CR could prime the effects of third party attack ads and produce something similar to an inoculation effect (Compton and Ivanov 2013; Pfau et al. 2001) in which initial exposure to argumentative forewarning reduces persuasion. Our third hypothesis is (H3): Prior exposure to argumentative forewarning on CR will reduce the persuasive effects of Super PAC attack ads.

Though initial exposure to political comedy may prime responses to attack ads, this effect should depend on the partisanship of the viewer. This is because biased processes guide the acquisition of new information. Republicans are less likely to internalize positive responses to a Democrat's appearance if their initial attitude toward her is negative. Conversely, Democrats should already have positive attitudes about Democratic candidates and may therefore ignore negative messages. Because partisanship biases the processing of political information (Taber and Lodge 2006) we would expect Republicans to embrace ads attacking Democratic candidates and Democrats to resist the attacks. Our fourth hypothesis is (H4): The effects of exposure to negative ads will be stronger for out-party viewers. Finally, because partisan processing is influenced by initial affect (Lodge and Taber 2013), exposure to CR should prime positive feelings toward the candidate by making her appear likable. However, if Republicans have a strong predisposition against the candidate, they may be immune to this prime. Our fifth and final hypothesis is (H5): The effect of a candidate's appearance on CR will be stronger among in-party viewers.

3.1 Method

3.1.1 Procedure

In July of 2012 a link to an online survey was distributed to 140 undergraduate students enrolled in a communication course at a major university in the Midwestern United States. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 43 ($M = 21.5$, SD $= 3.3$). Fifty-eight (41%) of the participants identified as male and 81 (57.9%) identified as female. Of the respondents, 53 (37.9%) aligned with the Democratic Party, 40 (28.6%) with the Republican Party, and 47 (33.6%) neither. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: a condition in which respondents viewed Super PAC ads being run against Missouri Senator Claire McCaskill ($n = 63$), and a condition in which respondents viewed Claire McCaskill's appearance on CR followed by the same Super PAC ads ($n = 63$). Each respondent was asked to evaluate McCaskill both before and after viewing the stimulus. Evaluation of McCaskill was measured by asking respondents to indicate how much they tended to like (100) or dislike (0) Missouri Senator Claire McCaskill. On average, McCaskill was rated somewhat unfavorably both in the pretest rating ($M = 44.03$, SD $= 19.87$) and in the posttest rating ($M = 41.67$, SD $= 20.92$). The experiment was conducted prior to the August 7th Republican Senate primary that selected Todd Akin as McCaskill's opponent.

3.1.2 Stimulus

Respondents in both conditions were shown four Super PAC ads run against McCaskill in the 2012 election. The first ad was sponsored by the *U.S. Chamber of Commerce* and attacked McCaskill for supporting President Obama's healthcare reform legislation. The second ad was sponsored by *Crossroads GPS* and argued that McCaskill acted against Missouri interests by voting to cut Medicare through her support for Obama's health care bill and by voting against the elimination of the "death tax" and "marriage penalty." The third ad was also sponsored by *Crossroads GPS* and focused on job losses and home foreclosures in Missouri. The ad attacked Obama and McCaskill together for the "failed stimulus" and for Obama's health care reform. The final ad was a radio ad sponsored by *American Crossroads* and argued that McCaskill's voting record suggested she was a "big spending liberal."

Participants in the second condition viewed these ads only after viewing McCaskill's appearance on *The Colbert Report* on May 8, 2012. In the interview McCaskill criticized Super PACs for their lack of transparency and suggested

that the people of Missouri would appreciate "the enemies [McCaskill] has made" if they knew who was providing the money to pay for the attack ads. The interview was selected because it directly addressed the ads and thus created an explicit test of argumentative forewarning and because, as Compton (2011) has argued, interview segments are understudied in political comedy research.
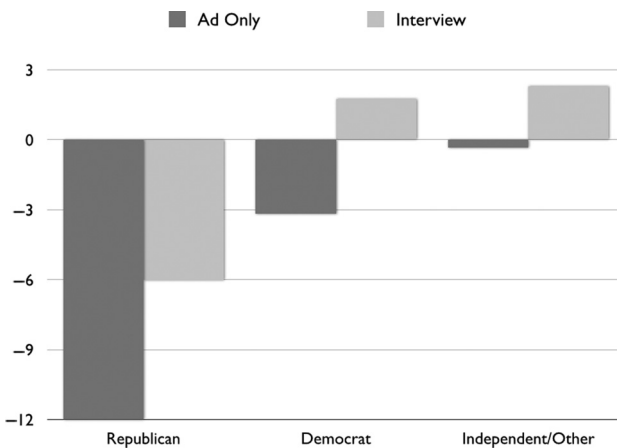
3.2 Results

To determine whether exposure to McCaskill's interview segment on CR primed processing of Super PAC ads, a repeated-measure ANOVA was conducted to compare pre-test evaluations of McCaskill to post-test evaluations. The within-subjects factor was evaluation of McCaskill and the between subjects factor was the experimental condition. There was a significant interaction between condition and the main effect of ad exposure, $F(1, 124) = 4.33$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.033$. As can be seen in Table 2, those who viewed only attack ads significantly reduced evaluations of McCaskill while those who viewed the ads after first viewing her appearance on CR did not change their evaluations. This suggests that her appearance on CR primed the way viewers processed the attack ads.

Table 2: Effect of Colbert interview on attack ad persuasion.

Condition	N	Pretest M (SD)	Posttest M (SD)	Change
Attack ad only	63	44.43 (19.71)	39.57 (20.93)	−4.86*
Colbert interview	63	43.67 (18.49)	44.02 (19.22)	0.35
Democrat	49	50.96 (17.02)	50.49 (18.22)	−0.47
Republican	32	40.72 (15.72)	31.13 (19.10)	−9.24**
Other	45	38.89 (17.83)	39.91 (19.04)	1.02
Attack ad only				
Democrat	22	52.0 (14.59)	48.82 (17.9)	−3.18
Republican	19	44.0 (22.07)	31.95 (20.05)	−12.05
Other	22	37.23 (20.04)	36.91 (21.88)	−0.32
Colbert inoculation				
Democrat	27	50.11 (19.01)	51.85 (18.7)	1.74
Republican	13	35.92 (18.75)	29.92 (18.34)	−6.0
Other	23	40.48 (15.72)	42.78 (15.81)	2.3

Notes: *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

To test H4, whether the effect of the attack ads depended on the political party of the respondent, a second RM-ANOVA was conducted to investigate the moderating role of political party on the effect of the ads. Evaluation of McCaskill was the within-subjects factor and political party affiliation was the between subjects factor. There was a significant interaction between political party and the main effect of ad viewing on evaluations of McCaskill, $F(2, 120) = 5.39$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.077$. As shown in Table 1, Republican evaluations of McCaskill declined significantly after viewing attack ads though evaluations from Democrats and independents did not change. To determine whether the effects of McCaskill's appearance on CR were also influenced by political party (H5), a final RM-ANOVA was conducted to evaluate a possible three-way interaction between party, experimental condition, and the main effect of ad viewing on evaluations of McCaskill. There was no significant three-way interaction. In other words, the priming effect operated essentially the same for Republicans, Democrats, and those not affiliated with either major party. As can be seen in Figure 1, though the effect of ad viewing varied a great deal by party affiliation, forewarning reduced the magnitude of the effect for all three groups. Republicans who were not exposed to the interview segment reduced their evaluations of McCaskill substantially more than those exposed to her appearance on CR and Democrats/independents who were exposed to forewarning messages actually saw their evaluations of McCaskill increase despite the attack ads.

Figure 1: Change in evaluation of McCaskill by condition and political party.

3.3 Discussion

The results of the second study provide mixed support for a dual-processing (Lodge and Taber 2013) explanation of the effects of political comedy. First, those exposed to the McCaskill interview were significantly less affected by the Super PAC attack ads. This suggests that the interview primed the way viewers processed the attacks. Viewers were forewarned about (and thus forearmed against) the Super PAC ads. This is consistent with previous research that finds a priming effect of political satire (Holbert et al. 2007) and extends the effect to campaign contexts. This ability of comedy to forewarn audiences is similar to the inoculation effects against parody observed by Lim and Ki (2007) and suggests that, as Compton and Ivanov (2013) argued, political humor may be an appropriate medium to test inoculation. It also suggests, in addition to reducing candidate evaluations by mocking them (Baumgartner et al. 2012; Morris 2009), political comedy can benefit candidates by protecting them from the effects of political attacks. This echoes Bippus (2007), who found that candidates benefit most when using self-deprecating humor and suggested that candidates who are willing to play along with (and be the object of) the joke will be perceived more favorably.

Consistent with the dual-processing perspective, this study also found differential effects of ads on partisans. Republican evaluations of McCaskill were much more strongly affected by the attacks than were Democrats. This is likely a result of the ads cuing other salient attitudes (such as dislike for Obama and anger about health care reform) and transferring affect from these attitudes to McCaskill.

Though the influence of the attack ads was moderated by partisanship, the effect of political comedy was not. The Lodge and Taber (2013) framework would predict that, because Republicans are more prone to accept messages that are critical of McCaskill and should be distrusting of Colbert, the forewarning would not be as effective on them. However, we found that political party did not moderate the effect of comedic forewarning. This could be, in part, a function of power. Table 1 shows small sub-samples of party within each condition ($n \sim 20$). However, Figure 1 illustrates a similar pattern for all three parties. Though the ads affected Republicans more, the interview had a similar effect on all three groups. This may be because humor disables critical scrutiny of messages (Young 2008) or because, without appropriate context, conservatives do not know to mistrust Colbert (Baumgartner and Morris 2011). Regardless, our findings only provide partial support for biased processing. The effect of attack ads depends on partisanship, and there is evidence that online learning can prime the processing of future messages, but the effect of a comedic prime was not biased by partisanship.

4 Conclusion

This study sought to test the effects of exposure to political comedy in a dual-processing framework. We presented two experiments on a well-documented instance of political satire, Colbert's Super PAC (Hardy et al. 2014; LaMarre 2013; Young et al. 2014). Our results suggest that exposure has marginal benefit to political knowledge. However, the most noteworthy effect of exposure to political comedy was to prime the processing of future information. Though viewers learn little and quickly discard what little they do learn, the affective tags updated through online learning are retained and influence future political encounters. The results of our experiments suggest that political comedy can influence implicit attitudes that affect subsequent information processing even if information acquisition is minimal.

Though the above findings contribute to the growing literature documenting the effects of political comedy, there are limitations to these findings. First, there were no direct measures of the implicit attitudes that are assumed to prime the effects of cognitive processing. Affective primes exert influence in the preconscious milliseconds prior to conscious cognition. Our measure of affect toward McCaskill was self-reported and, though likely a result of felt affect, biased by cognitive processing. Furthermore, while short-term issue recognition is a product of online learning (Baum 2003; Lodge and Taber 2013), we did not ask respondents to recall bits of information and tag them with positive and negative evaluations – a strategy often associated with studies of online learning. Though the report-and-tag procedure is also retrospective and subject to self-report bias, it provides stronger evidence of online learning than issue recognition alone.

Furthermore, though we found compelling evidence of a priming effect of viewing political comedy on subsequent campaign persuasion, we cannot specifically attribute the effect to the order of presentation. In our experiment, all participants in the experimental condition were primed because the McCaskill interview was presented first. However, the positive affect that resulted from viewing the interview may have been reduced if the interview had been preceded by the attack ads and the viewers had been primed to dislike McCaskill. Lodge and Taber (2013) argue that first impressions are critical because they set the mood for subsequent processing. Our study confirms that the effect of ads are reduced when this mood is primed to be positive through political comedy but did not test the corollary, that the benefits of political comedy can be reduced by negative priming.

Similarly, we were unable to test the effect of humorous forewarning against similar forewarning in a non-humorous context. Though there are theoretical reasons

to believe that humor increases the effectiveness of inoculation (humor increases likability and comedy disables argumentative scrutiny), without a third non-humorous condition we cannot know whether the element of comedy is a necessary or enhancing condition to the inoculation effect. Regardless, humor can still serve as the bait to lure entertainment seekers into informative and inoculating messages. We were also unable to account for the partisanship of the object of comedy by adding a Republican politician to the experiment. This is, in part, due to the paucity of conservative humorists with national media platforms. However, it may be that conservatives can use conservative talk radio (perhaps Dennis Miller) or even TDS/CR to achieve similar effects.

Finally, our decision to use real-world stimulus introduces various confounds to the findings. The clips for the first experiment were selected and paired based on similarity of content. However, though the Colbert clip featured three people interacting, the Maddow clip was monologue and was 1:21 longer. Though the content of the clips were as similar as is possible using real world stimulus, there were certainly other differences in content, style, and presentation. There were no differences in learning between those who viewed the Maddow and Colbert clips but it is possible that differences would have emerged had all things been equal other than the presence of satire.

These limitations all suggest fertile ground for future research. The dual-processing approach offers important insights into the effects of political comedy. Though knowledge acquisition may be brief and limited, the information viewers are exposed to can influence future processing after the details are discarded. This study suggests that even limited exposure can increase the recognition of some factual information and can strongly prime responses to subsequent campaign communication. We encourage scholars of political comedy to continue to explore the role of humor in online learning particularly as a prime for future processing.

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