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LATE NIGHT TELEVISION TALK SHOWS AND POLITICAL COMEDY PROGRAMS: A STUDY OF YOUNG VOTERS' POLITICAL EXPERIENCES

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By

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LATE NIGHT TELEVISION TALK SHOWS AND POLITICAL COMEDY PROGRAMS: A STUDY OF YOUNG VOTERS' POLITICAL EXPERIENCES

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

The associations between exposure and attention to late night television talk shows and political comedy programs and the outcome variables general political knowledge, candidate personal knowledge, civic participation, political participation, political discussion, and political cynicism were investigated. The results indicated that late night television talk shows had a positive and significant association with candidate personal knowledge, while political comedy programs had a positive and significant association with general political knowledge and candidate personal knowledge. Neither late night television talk shows nor political comedy programs significantly contributed to civic participation or political participation. Political comedy programs had a significant and positive impact on political discussions. Political comedy programs also contributed significantly to political cynicism.

The information processing strategy active reflection was also examined to determine the mediation relationship between exposure and attention to late night television talk shows and political comedy programs and the outcome variables general political knowledge, candidate personal

knowledge, civic participation, and political participation. The results did not support that the hypothesis that active reflection mediated the relationship between late night television talk shows and political comedy programs and the outcome variables general political knowledge, candidate personal knowledge, civic participation, and political participation.

Chapter One

Introduction

A cornerstone of criticizing American political officials is a barbed wit. This is evident in the writings of Mark Twain, Ambrose Bierce, and Will Rogers who employed political satire to illuminate the mistakes and improprieties of politicians. Mark Twain offered an acerbic political critique when he charged that "it could probably be shown by facts and figures that there is no distinctively native American criminal class except Congress" (Twain, 1989). Bierce and Rogers were no happier with their country's state of affairs. Ambrose Bierce's (1906) *The Cynic's Word Book* defined politics as "strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles -- the conduct of public affairs for private advantage" (p. 154). Later Will Rogers would gibe, "With Congress, every time they make a joke it's a law; and every time they make a law, it's a joke" (Ayres, 1993, p. 45). These humorists, through satirical, humorous quips questioned the actions and legitimacy of political actors and institutions. Early political critiques rarely held politicians in high regard.

Today, television remains true to early humorists by continuing the tradition of lampooning politicians on late

night entertainment and humorous political talk shows. Steve Allen and Jack Parr introduced the American audience to the late night entertainment talk show genre. On NBC's *Tonight Show*, Jack Parr invited Hollywood celebrities and nationally known politicians such as Richard Nixon, John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and the Cuban revolutionary Fidel Castro into America's living rooms (Carter, 1994; Moore, 2000; Munson, 1993). Parr was quick with a joke or gag, but he conducted a kind and polite interview. Robert F. Kennedy, recognizing Parr's professionalism and popularity, made his first public appearance following President John F. Kennedy's assassination on the *Tonight Show*. Allen and Parr engaged in teasing, yet their humor was not malicious, and politician's rewarded them by agreeing to appear on their program.

As politics became more rancorous following the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1994; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995), humorists also availed themselves of opportunities to unkindly critique politicians. In fact, *Tonight Show* host Johnny Carson became so skilled at directing jeering remarks toward public officials that his comedic commentary "became the country's most acutely observed political barometer" (Carter, 1994, p. 16). Describing Johnny

Carson's political humor, Carter wrote, "the ones he made fools of were truly in trouble" (p. 16). From 1962 until 1992, Johnny Carson's monologues were rich with political jokes. Carson, however, explained that he should not become a social commentator; he believed that the serious business of politics and the frivolity of his monologues, skits, and interviews were mutually exclusive (Buxton, 1987; Jones, 2005).

Following Johnny Carson's 1992 retirement, a new class of late night entertainment talk show and humorous political talk show hosts emerged. Their brand of ridicule and scorn has initiated a reconsideration of the audience's interaction with the genre and has also assisted in facilitating a "fundamental change in political communication in America" (Jones, 2005, p.7).

Marshal McLuhan (1964) first considered the implications of the late night entertainment talk show following President Nixon's 1963 piano performance on Jack Parr's *Tonight Show*. Following McLuhan's analysis, only an occasional study of the genre emerged (Buxton, 1987; Timberg, 1987). After Governor Clinton's 1992 saxophone performance on the *Arsenio Hall Show*, other scholars became interested in alternative political media and their contribution to the electorate (Diamond & Silverman, 1995).

Recent research has examined political comedy programs, such as *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (Jones, 2005).

The goal of this study is to advance our understanding of late night entertainment talk shows and political comedy programs as a form of political communication. Marshall (1997) offered a useful frame for establishing the dimensions of late night entertainment talk shows. Marshall explained that late night entertainment talk show hosts historically had been comics who employed humor to critique the "transgression of public discourse," and he argued these programs intersected with other media, such that "guests are primarily performers, writers, and actors who are promoting recently released films, books, theatrical or concert productions, or recordings" (p. 125). He further explained that the programming is constructed so hosts might be invited "into the hidden world of the stars," which would transcend the parameters of "personal promotion or cultural product promotion" (p. 125). While acerbic comments about public officials abound, the primary purpose of this programming is to elevate the celebrity.

Political comedy programs, however, exceed the political content limitations of late night entertainment talk shows. Jones (2005) explained that shows like *The*

Daily Show with Jon Stewart and *Real Time with Bill Maher* employ politics as the "central compositional and discursive feature" (p. 10). He noted several unique features of this programming. The programs "eschew an insider's perspective" on political discussions, thus the host engages nonexperts, such as comedians, actors, musicians, and authors. These individuals, Jones suggested, offer an insightful and entertaining perspective on political matters and through the course of programming the host and guests engage in "direct and specific talk" about politics (p. 10). Jones also explained that host and guests regularly "speak truth to power," irrespective of political party. The primary purpose of political comedy programming is to employ humor and satire to assess politics and government.

Theory

Cultivation theory will operate as a framework for understanding the influence of late night entertainment talk shows and political comedy programs. The cultivation theory of mass communication proposes that television and the persistence of certain messages contribute to a social reality that is reflective of media content (Gerbner, 1973). The central assumption underlying cultivation analysis is that people who view more television will

internalize a social reality that is reflective of the media world.

A central criticism of cultivation theory is the assumption the world on television is uniform across programs, and scholars critical of the theory suggest the existing fragmented media environment disallows the construction of a mirrored social reality (Potter 1993; Potter & Chang, 1990). This research, however, is not concerned with all television programming; rather the research examines the "persistence" of the audience's interaction with late night television talk shows, political comedy programs and their specific contribution in cultivating an audience's social reality.

Another criticism of the cultivation theory of mass media is that hypothesized relationships are "very weak or possibly nonexistent" (Potter, 1988; 1993). This research takes Potter's (1988) advice and includes measures of formal learning to elaborate on the cultivation theory of mass media. For example, Potter (1998) described that young people who watched television news "should be expected to learn about current events; and adolescents who view more news in this manner should be expected to learn more about current events" (p. 938). Potter extended his analysis to entertainment television arguing that "when adolescents

view TV for entertainment purposes, it is much less reasonable to hold an expectation that greater exposure would lead to greater amounts of learning" (p. 938). Several arguments support investigating the relationship between late night entertainment talk shows, political comedy programs and important outcome variables.

Rationale for Study

There are several arguments justifying the study of the late night television talk shows and political comedy programs and their impact on the dependent variables: political cynicism, civic participation, political participation, political discussion, and the information processing strategy active reflection, as well as general political knowledge and candidate personal knowledge.

Medium. The first rationale is to concentrate on the impact of television. Television is the medium of choice when people seek news and information (Baum, 2003), and television news is an important source of current events information (Chaffee, Zhao, & Leshner, 1994). Benoit and Hansen (2004) reported in a longitudinal study of National Election Studies data from 1952 to 2000 on average 80% of Americans relied on television to learn about presidential campaigns, while 69% relied on newspapers, 44% relied on radio, and 35% depended on magazines.

As the Internet has proliferated, television has remained the dominant source of political information. In a Pew Center survey conducted during 2004, they explained that 76% of Americans received campaign news from television, 46% read newspapers, 22% listened to radio, and 21% surfed the Internet.

Nontraditional sources of news. The second rationale is that nontraditional television sources of political information are increasingly becoming sites where young voters say they learn about candidates and campaigns. These programs differ in purpose and the hosts emphasize elements of culture, entertainment, and politics differently. For example, the late night television talk show is at the "nexus of all sorts of 'talk' – journalism, fiction, criticism, politics, research, [and] Hollywood films" (Munson, 1993, p. 6). Political comedy programs, such as the *Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *Real Time with Bill Maher*, focus on current social and political events (Jones, 2005).

Despite the programs' emphasis, young people say they learn about candidates and campaigns. In 2004 and 2000, the Pew Center reported that 13% of respondents under age 30 say they regularly learn from late night talk shows. The 2004 Pew survey found respondents aged 18-29 more likely to

regularly learn from late-night talk shows than C-Span, NPR, Sunday political talk shows, and news magazines.

In 2000, the Pew Center described that 9% of young people age 18-29 reported regularly learning something from comedy television programs, such as the *Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. In 2004, that percentage had grown to 21% of young people regularly learning campaign news from comedy television programs. The 2004 Pew survey data shows that young people who say they learned regularly from comedy programs were only 2% below those who say they regularly learned from network news and newspapers about candidates and campaigns. In summary, survey data indicate that young people self-report political learning from late night talk shows and political comedy programs.

Candidate usage of nontraditional media. The third rationale for conducting this study is that candidates are appearing on late night entertainment television talk shows and political comedy programs with greater frequency. Politicians have contested highly packaged television news coverage with appearances on talk shows before, but beginning in 2000 candidates began to utilize these programs more frequently (Baum 2003, Jones, 2005). During the 1992 presidential election, candidates who appeared on talk shows were largely responding to the 9.2 second sound

bite that traditional news programming afforded (Adatto, 1990; Hallin, 1992). Following the 1992 presidential election cycle, candidates increasingly utilized nontraditional media as candidate sound bites on network television news continued shrinking before flattening at 7-8 seconds (Lowry & Shidler, 1995; Patterson, 2002). Talk show appearances allow candidates' time to speak with their audience and develop both the public and private persona (Just, Crigler, Alger, Cook, Kern, & West, 1996; Patterson, 1994; Van Zoonen, 2005) and to demonstrate their status as "regular guys" (Baum, 2003, p. 273). Munson (1993), perhaps, best described candidate appearances when he wrote that talk shows provide a "fuller, cheaper, more direct link to the public" (p. 3).

Audience response. A fourth argument justifying an examination of late night entertainment talk shows and political comedy programs are the tremendous audience response received when candidates appear on the programs. For example, Senator John Kerry's appearance on the *Late Show with David Letterman* was seen by 5.4 million viewers. McClintock (2004) explained that this was Letterman's strongest season premiere in 11 years, and was one rating point higher than the *Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. In 2000, Vice President Al Gore's appearance on the *Late Show* was

seen by 4.5 million viewers. Greppi (2000) wrote that this was Letterman's strongest Thursday night rating since December 31, 1998. When Governor George W. Bush appeared on the *Late Show*, the program posted the season's highest ratings with 6.56 million viewers (Bernstein, 2000). Given the large audience response, these programs deserve further scholarly attention

In summary, people choose television, above other media, when seeking news and information. In using television as a source of public affairs information, young people increasingly say they learn from television's nontraditional sources of political information. Candidates, too, are employing nontraditional sources of political information to influence audiences; appearing with greater frequency on late night entertainment talk shows. When candidates appear on these programs, the candidate interviews are seen by millions of audience members.

Cultivation Theory. The advancement of media theory is another reason for investigating late night talk shows and political comedy programs' contributions to cognitive and behavioral outcomes. Gerbner and Gross (1976) described that "entertainment is the most broadly effective

educational fare in any culture" (p. 172). They further explained that television:

> offers the unsuspecting viewer a continuous stream of 'facts' and impressions about the way of the world, about the constancies and vagaries of human nature, and about the consequences of actions (p. 178).

Plainly, the average viewer's awareness of reality is a derivative of exposure to television. Thus, a central focus of this research is to test cultivation theory to understand whether greater viewing of late night television talk shows and political comedy programs contribute to cognitive and behavioral outcomes.

Further, this research seeks to expand the cultivation theory literature by accounting for criticisms of the original proposition. The original theory stated that it matters not what a viewer watches, but how much time the viewer watches. Scholars have noted several criticisms of this proposition (Potter, 1993; Potter & Chang, 1990). This research seeks to address those concerns by investigating specific genres of television programming to understand whether the genre contributes to a cultivated mediated reality. It is believed that this consideration will add to the explanatory power of cultivation theory.

Political cynicism. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) offered that cynicism is a feeling that "human conduct is motivated wholly by self interest" (p.26). Studies point to television as the culprit responsible for increasing levels of cynicism toward government (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1994; Putnam, 2000). Horse-race coverage of campaigns and highly-packaged, slick political advertisements are suggested to shape citizen's cynical responses. These cynical responses and diminished levels of trust are said to deplete social capital, or the "trust that facilitates coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam, 2000, p. 67).

Late night entertainment television and political comedy programs offer new avenues for explaining a citizen's feelings of cynicism. Bennett (2003) explained that people may seek late night television talk shows to assist in "deconstructing" information presented to traditional news formats. Hart (2000) further described that audience members enjoy seeing politicians "woo them" on talk shows, but "decry them for being too slick, too coy, too charming, and too practiced" (p. 25). It would seem that these viewers understand that late night entertainment talk shows and political comedy programs provide counter-spin to traditional news and public

relations reporting, while at the same time presenting political candidates in much the same way they present actors, musicians, and authors; as commodities to be consumed.

The negative political humor in late night entertainment talk shows may contribute to feelings of cynicism and the program's structural constraints may also lead to political cynicism. Scholars note that typically hosts have limited knowledge of public affairs, pitch softball questions to candidates, and programs offer gimmicks to capture a larger audiences share (Depke, 1992; Hollander, 1996; Taylor 1992, cited in Pan & Kosicki, 1997). For example, David Letterman interviewed Hillary Rodham Clinton who was seeking the U.S. Senate seat from New York. Nagourney (2000) described that Letterman's interview with Hillary Rodham Clinton consisted of questions about her family, how she liked living in Chappaqua, New York, and how Buddy and Socks (the Clinton's dog and cat) were getting along. These questions were followed by Letterman's administering a pop quiz about the state of New York. Hillary Clinton matched Letterman's wit by offering her own humorous replies and Top 10 list.

Citrin and Muste (1999) explained that political trust refers "to the faith people have in their government" (p.

465). Trust is not a measure of approval or disapproval of government, rather a measure of whether citizens feel like "they truly belong to a political community" and whether "they believe that the government operates fairly and is deserving of respect and obedience" (Citrin & Muste, 1999, p. 465).

The content of television news and the structure of reporting have been offered as reasons for declining levels of political trust. Patterson (2000) explained that as negative reporting gained a foothold in the news cycle, citizen's trust of politicians and government declined. Owen (1997) noted that "media reports exacerbate, or at least reinforce, negative public attitudes by highlighting conflict and failure in government and by ignoring cooperation and success" (pp. 85-86). The news media's negativity has become a signifier for the decline in citizen's trust of government.

As late night entertainment talk shows and political comedy programming grow in popularity, an entertainment orientation toward politics may further diminish levels of political trust. Content analysis of late night comedy programs reveal a high degree of negativity in jokes and monologues directed at politicians. Nitz, et al. (2003) reported that 68% of jokes were negative in tone and "made

fun of something a candidate did or said, and an unflattering frame was usually attached to it" (p. 171). Additionally, Moy and Pfau (2000) concluded that the late night talk show category was "one of the more negative in characterizations of the presidency, Congress, the court system, and public schools" (p. 82). Entertainment talk shows and political comedy programs offer a response to current affairs that differs in tone and content from traditional news outlets. Hart (1999) declared that taking the "unseriously serious" promises to provide a fuller picture of how media contribute to the ailments of society.

Political participation. A growing body of research has focused on understanding how television contributes to a citizen's concept of political activity and civic engagement (Postman, 1985; Putnam, 2000; Tichi, 1991). These examinations have generally suggested that television is harmful to our democratic practice. For example, Hart (1999), argued that "television . . . tells us how to feel about politics, producing in us a swagger whereby we tower above politics by making it seem beneath us" (p. 5). Hart further explained that television's restructuring of feelings "has made the burden of citizenship increasingly taxing for us and it is . . . responsible for much of the alienation we now feel" (p. 5). Other research has focused

on television's positive contribution to the practice of politics (Pinkleton & Austin, 2001; Pinkleton, Austin, & Fortman, 1998). The advantage of critical studies is the ability to draw the readers' attention to the language and symbols of television, but these studies fail to empirically describe the extent to which television programming may distance the viewer from his or her feelings of empowerment.

Citizen participation is a behavioral outcome variable. A citizen's participation in public affairs may manifest itself differently for different people. For example, some may choose to participate through volunteering. Others may choose a more traditional political role, such as voting. This research seeks to explore both domains recognizing traditional forms of political participation and other forms of civic participation, such as volunteering, club membership, and social and religious activities.

Putnam (2000) described that numerous forms of citizen participation have experienced declines through the last several decades resulting in diminished levels of social capital. Others challenge whether Americans have experienced those disconnections (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Putnam (1995) explained that television is

the primary contributing factor to declining citizen participation. Uslaner (1998), however, offered a defense of general television usage arguing there is no evidence suggesting that television viewing consumes time that may be available for citizen participation. Rather than exploring the whole of television as a contributor to declining citizen participation, this research seeks to determine whether late night entertainment talk shows and political comedy programs influence citizens' political and civic participation.

Political knowledge. Another important cognitive outcome variable considered is political knowledge. Political knowledge is a concern of this study given a knowledgeable electorate's theoretical importance to the health of democratic institutions (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Further, knowledge of domestic and foreign issues and understanding the basic processes of government are said to be prerequisites for a citizen to act effectively (Beaumont, 2004; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Thompson, 1970). While political knowledge is considered important to the practice of citizenship, studies have described that political knowledge levels have remained relatively low, but stable through the decades (Bennett & Rademacher, 1997).

To add to our understanding of political knowledge, a growing number of studies have begun to explore the role of entertainment media in providing political information. For example, scholars have offered critical analytical examinations of late night television talk shows' contributions to political knowledge (Jones, 2005; Paletz, 2002; Van Zoonen, 2005). Other scholars have explored individual media's contribution to political knowledge during campaigns (Drew & Weaver, 1998; Hollander, 1995; Weaver, 1996).

Despite the frequency and novelty of politician and political candidate appearances on late night entertainment talk shows, the hosts' humorous monologues and skits remain central to the programs' political content. Content analysis research reveals that talk show programming is relatively free of issue discussion, or humor about political issues, and jokes are generally negative toward the target. Baum (2003) reported in a content analysis of soft and hard news programming that late night talk show hosts rarely mentioned the oppositional party or candidate, and seldom engaged in policy discussions while interviewing a candidate.

In an analysis of 115 random segments of late night comedy shows, Nitz, Cypher, Reichert, and Mueller (2003)

concluded similar findings reporting that 75% of the jokes were concerned with a politicians' character or personality, while only 14% of jokes were issue related. Niven, Lichter, and Amundson (2003) found that the majority of late night jokes focused on the candidate's personality and also concluded that "late-night humor is determinedly non-issue oriented" (p. 130). This study is needed to understand whether late night entertainment talk shows and political comedy programs contribute to cognitive outcomes, specifically political knowledge.

This examination of political knowledge is also warranted because people with varying levels of political interests seek news from different sources. Luskin (1990) explained that previous research demonstrated that those "with a keener interest in politics notice more of the political information they encounter and think more seriously about the political information they notice" (p. 335). Further illuminating the issue of political interest, Chaffee and Kanihan (1997) describe that people with low political interest obtain news from different sources than do those with high interest. In fact, since the Pew Center (2004) stated that a higher percentage of those ages 18-29 self-reported regularly learning from late night television talk shows and TV comedy programs scholars should determine

how political interest and late night entertainment talk shows and TV political comedy programs contribute to political knowledge.

In summary, numerous arguments exist to support this study. The first argument concerns television's predominance as a source of political information for most Americans. This study also has value because nontraditional televised sources of political information are increasingly sites where young people learn about politics. Additionally, late night entertainment talk shows and political comedy programs have become strategic platforms for candidates' to advance themselves and their candidacies. Another key reason for conducting this research is that audience viewing is significant when candidates appear on talk shows.

The main theoretical argument for conducting this research is to examine a specific subset of entertainment programming that frequently includes political content, rather than the whole of television. From the perspective of evaluating democratic outcomes, there were also a number of reasons presented to conduct this study. As late night entertainment talk shows and political comedy programs have added to the complexities of understanding political communication, it is useful to understand their

contribution to political cynicism, citizen participation, and political knowledge.

Purpose of Study

Using cultivation theory as a foundation, this research, focusing on young voters, seeks to expand the literature on cultivation theory by examining the relationship between greater viewing of late night television talk shows, political comedy programs and levels of political cynicism, political participation, and levels of political knowledge. Further, this investigation will expand the literature on media use and late night television talk shows and political comedy programs by also exploring whether interpersonal discussion and active processing and reflective integration, as information processing strategies, contribute to political knowledge and citizen participation.

This study attempts to both answer and go beyond calls that communication researchers study "young people's relationships with new media and with the public sphere of political debate" (Buckingham, 1997, p. 36), by expanding the public sphere to include nontraditional sites of political discourse. It is hoped that this investigation enriches the research examining the mass media's reporting

of political information by focusing on popular media and popular culture.

This study will proceed as follows. Chapter 2 describes cultivation theory as a foundation for this study. Additionally, the chapter will focus on previous research that has examined the relationship between newspapers, television news programs, entertainment programming and political cynicism, political participation, and political knowledge. Finally, the chapter will explore previous research findings that seek to understand the role of active processing and reflective integration in cognitive and behavioral outcomes. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology and describes the statistical procedures employed to conduct this study. Chapter 4 reports the results. Chapter 5 discusses the findings; identifies strengths and weaknesses of the study, and offers recommendations and future questions.

Chapter Two

A Review of the Literature

> If you want to reach nonpolitical people – who are, let's face it, most Americans – then you go on Letterman and Leno. Gore knew it, Hillary knew it. It's become part of the political circuit (Schneider, as quoted in Aucoin, 2000)

William Schneider's comments are a poignant reflection of our nation's democratic health and discourse. His analysis suggested a politically disengaged, information anemic, but, perhaps, an entertained citizenry. He announced to the laity what scholars, representing different intellectual camps, have suggested for years: obtaining political information from television and entertainment sources inhibits the citizen from actively and competently participating in a functioning democracy (Hart, 1999; Postman, 1985; Putnam 1995, 2000; Schudson, 1997).

In his book *Bowling Alone*, Putnam cleverly captured the essence of these critics' concern when he wrote:

> TV-based politics is to political action as watching ER is to saving someone in distress. Just as one cannot restart a heart with one's remote control, one cannot jump-start republican citizenship without

> direct, face-to-face participation. Citizenship is not a spectator sport (Putnam, 2000, p. 341).

Accordingly, to sustain a healthy and thriving democracy, citizens must know about political affairs and actively create, converse about and participate in a political community. Otherwise, we risk continuing trends of low voter turn-out (Casper & Bass, 1996; Waldman, 2001), and of those who do vote, most likely they will be uninformed when they reach the polls (Converse, 1964; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1991).

These claims, however compelling, represent only one side of the "thriving democracy" equation. In her book, *Processing Politics*, Graber (2001) took exception to the argument that television has been a major destructive force in the nation's democratic health. In fact, she explained that television has offered significant contributions to society. Television has given legitimacy to social and political movements by providing information to mass audiences, and major policy changes have occurred because television has mobilized supporters (Graber, 2001; pp. 122-124). Television may also assist in restoring normalcy following natural-disasters or man-made calamities, and television may enable the preservation of cultural values

providing information to reading and non-reading audiences (Graber, 2001, pp. 124-128).

Graber identified televisions' positive attributes, thus questioning Putnam's indictment of television's negative effect on community and democracy; Pippa Norris (1996) explained that disentangling the American viewer's program selection from civic participation is central to understanding the complex issue of "democratic health." Norris conceded that increased television viewership appears to support Putnam's thesis, but she argues that the citizen's television program choices should also be considered. Responding to critiques, Putnam (2000) offered a clarification of his earlier thesis suggesting that "selective viewers" are less susceptible to diminished civic capacity than "habitual viewers". For Norris, the ability to choose programming that discussed difficult social, economic, and political issues may lead audience members to consider issues they may otherwise avoid. Thus, it would therefore be reactive to identify television as a cancer on democracy.

Graber (2003) offered similar analysis, suggesting that the uniformity of television and newspaper media is simply a myth. Television programming is not monolithic, but fragmented. Graber explained of great differences

existing in content, framing, and presentation across the media spectrum, and it is "foolhardy to generalize about 'the media' because any generalization leads to overly broad, deceptive summary judgments" (p. 140).

Clearly, concerned scholars have undertaken a lively debate to explore television's impact on citizenship. Much of this debate has focused on the activity of watching television and how this activity may deprive citizens of knowledge and opportunities to create and expand community. In the past, scholars have examined the impact of news and politically oriented talk shows on a range of political variables. It is only recently, however, that scholars have begun to explore how entertainment media shape political knowledge and civic engagement.

Theoretical Perspective

Cultivation theory. The major theoretical underpinning of this research is cultivation theory. Scholars such as Putnam (1995, 2000), Norris (1996), and Graber (2003) have written about the implications of television on democratic health; central to their positions is the advancement or criticism of cultivation theory. Inherent in each argument are questions concerning the time spent watching television, the content of programming, and the structure or narrative frameworks presented on television. Similarly,

this research is concerned with the cultivation effects associated with late night entertainment talk shows and humorous political talk shows and political comedy programs on political cognitive and behavioral outcomes. Late night television talk shows are those programs with the primary purpose of discussing a celebrity and their latest "cultural product" (Marshall, 1997). Political comedy programs are those television shows that use celebrities to confront and critique government and politics through the use of satire and humor (Jones, 2005).

Cultivation theory postulates that the pervasiveness of television and the persistence of certain messages contribute to a social reality reflective of media content. Explaining their theory, Gerbner and Gross (1976) described that television functions as a major symbolic conveyor . . . a "chief source of repetitive and ritualized symbol systems cultivating the common consciousness of the most far-flung and heterogeneous mass publics" (p. 174). They furthered their analysis arguing:

> television viewing also makes a separate and independent contribution to the "biasing" of conceptions of social reality within most age, sex, educational, and other groupings, including those presumably most "immune" to its effects (p. 191).

The term cultivation is central to Gerbner's exploration of television's influence.

Cultivation is the consumption and internalization of key cultural components, known as cultural indicators. Cultural indicators construct a "coherent picture of what exists, what is important, what is related to what, and what is right" (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, p. 176, see also Gerbner, 1969, p. 145). Additionally, Gerbner and Gross (1976) described that a cultural indicator "legitimizes action along socially functional and conventionally acceptable lines" (p. 176).

For Gerbner, the central question became whether television worked so well in cultivating a social reality that audiences became socialized to "uniform assumptions, exploitable fears, acquiescence to power, and resistance to meaningful change" (p. 178). Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli (1980) concluded that the cultural indicators alone were not enough to cultivate a social reality, but that the "amount of exposure to television is an important indicator of the strength of its contribution to a way of thinking and acting" (p. 14). Thus, cultivation theory is composed of two primary constructs: cultural indicators and levels of television exposure. The central proposition is

that heavy viewers of television will internalize a social reality that is reflective of the media world.

Numerous scholars have advanced criticisms against cultivation theory on methodological and theoretical grounds. One criticism advanced against cultivation theory is the absence of identified cultural indicators. The most frequently employed cultural indicator is the violence index (Potter, 1990, see also O'Keefe, 1984). Researchers have also studied such divergent topics as age, race, sex, and such topics as political orientation, American stereotypes, and civil liberties (see Potter 1993; 1990). Gerbner's (1969) questions of existence, importance, relation, and message tone coupled with the "analytical measures" of attention, emphasis, tendency, and structure have, as Potter (1993) described, left scholars without a "conceptualization of what might be the complete set of cultivation indicators" (p. 567).

Further, Potter (1993) has critiqued the idea of the cultural indicator on conceptual ground. For example, Potter argued that cultural indicators must be evaluated in the larger contextual framework of the message; otherwise measures of occurrence may lead to inaccurate inferences about the message system. Potter also noted that the answer choices available to receivers constrained their

interpretation of messages, unnecessarily limiting a researcher's explanation of the respondents' understanding of media messages.

The concepts of uniform messages and non-selective viewing have also received criticism. As originally announced, cultivation theory assumed that the world on television was uniform across programs, depending on the narrative structures of programming to unify a cultivated television reality (Gerbner, 1969; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994). Potter (1993) explained that this assumption fails to allow for differences across programming and noted researchers, in particular Gerbner, have found differences in narrative structures across programming (see Tamborini & Choi, 1990, see also Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, Morgan, & Jackson-Beeck, 1978). In fact, Gerbner et al. (1978) found in a yearly comparison of content that different time periods and different networks exhibited varying levels of violence in their programming. Potter (1993) concluded that while differences may exist in programming, violence remains pervasive and high, although with the explosion of cable channels, VCR's and DVD's, it is possible to be a heavy viewer of television without being exposed to programming that is inherently violent.

Potter's conclusion raises the issue of measurement for non-selective exposure. Again, the original assumption was that audience members would watch whatever programming was available. Exposure was a function of the time available to the audience, rather than a particular program or genre of programming. Potter concluded that heavy viewers of television, because of increasingly fragmented media, may not share similar conceptions of reality. In essence, because of the explosion of available programming, when audiences watch television there is great variation in the genres available. Thus, for a shared reality to be cultivated by a message system viewers must watch the same programs. If these criticisms are accurate, cultivating a specific social reality would be difficult to accomplish.

Potter and Chang (1990) argued that critical challenges to uniformed messages required an expansion of dominance that goes beyond simply measuring overall exposure to media, but should reflect a viewer's exposure to different programs and genres of media. Potter and Chang concluded that "the dominance at the level of program type is a better predictor of cultivation than is dominance at a more general level which expresses the concept of the balance between television and real world influences" (p. 330). This expansion of dominance enables researchers to

collect data that is more representative of the viewer's media experience.

Potter (1993), Hawkins and Pingree (1990), and O'Keefe and Reid-Nash (1987) suggest that the effects announced by Gerbner and Gross (1976) have largely been discounted for a number of reasons. First, while there is sufficient content analysis of television programming to suggest high amounts of violence on television, there is little evidence to suggest any behavioral or attitudinal change among viewers, especially when researchers control for confounding variables (Doob & MacDonald, 1979; Hirsch 1980, 1981; Hughes, 1980; O'Keefe, 1984) Also, while there are limited findings associating program exposure to the cultivation of a specified social reality, some conclusions consider these findings "spuriously high" (Potter, 1988, 1993). Earlier, Potter (1986) wrote "that the relationships that are significant are only weak to moderate in strength and that many of these disappear or become curvilinear when controls are introduced" (p. 159). Potter (1988) wrote that "this model might work better under conditions of formal learning rather than incidental learning" (p. 938).

Other researchers, noting the shortcomings of Gerbner's cultivation theory as it was originally announced, also continue to employ its constructs and

proposition, if only in a modified version. For example, O'Keefe and Reid Nash (1987) and O'Keefe (1984) studied the cultivation effects of crime entertainment and crime news expanding the independent variables employed, examining exposure to specific programs versus exposure to overall viewing, and investigating whether certain psychological predispositions influenced relationships between viewing messages about crime and the viewers thinking and feeling about crime.

One final criticism of cultivation, as a cumulative effects theory, is that "viewers will be influenced by television but it offers no insight, as of yet, as to how viewers are being influenced" (Potter, 1993, p. 596). Hawkins and Pingree (1990) explain, too, that there needs to be some demonstrable linkage established between television exposure and cognitive effects. Pfau, Mullen, and Garrow (1995) and Moy and Pfau (2000) offer the ideas of primary and secondary socialization as a plausible linkage. Berger and Luckman (1967) first articulated the concepts of primary and secondary socialization when they posited that primary socialization is:

> the immediate apprehension or interpretation of an objective event expressing meaning, that is, as a manifestation of another's subjective processes which

thereby becomes subjectively meaningful to myself (p. 129).

More succinctly, primary socialization is the learning of information, as it is presented by socializing agents such as parents, schools, and the media. The person's acquisition of knowledge is made significant through the personalization of the information presented.

Berger and Luckman explained that secondary socialization occurs when an individual is fully socialized into society and is introduced to "new sectors of the objective world" (p. 130). More thoroughly, secondary socialization assumes "the internalization of semantic fields structuring routine interpretations and conduct within an institutional area" (p. 138). Moy and Pfau (2000) contend that primary and secondary socialization "enrich cultivation theory" and "explain how mass media communication influences people's perceptions of democratic institutions" (p. 46).

In sum, this research is concerned with the cumulative effects of late night entertainment talk shows and political comedy programs. A myriad of criticisms have been raised against cultivation analysis, yet the theory remains intellectually appealing and is applied in ways that address shortcomings.

Political Cynicism

Critical commentary has long suggested that media negatively contribute to political discourse, and reason, resulting in a cynical public. Some have even suggested that "television makes us feel good about feeling bad about politics" (Hart, 1999; see also Postman, 1985; Putnam, 1995). Empirical research, however, has presented mixed findings concerning newspaper and television news' contribution to cynicism. A paucity of evidence exists for late night television talk shows and political comedy programs and their contribution to political cynicism.

Traditional media performance and political cynicism.

Early findings suggested that TV news consumption resulted in distrust, inefficacy, and cynicism (Robinson, 1976), yet Miller and Reese (1982) found that reliance on media contributed to feelings of efficacy and political activity. While this finding is optimistic it failed to settle the debate about newspaper and television news' contribution to feeling negative toward politics. In evaluating media content, it is understandable why this debate persists.

Media use research provides insights into how newspapers, television news, and nontraditional media contribute to political cynicism. Researchers have

investigated media reliance and cynicism. O'Keefe (1980) found that television news reliance did not contribute to greater political cynicism than newspaper reliance. Leshner and McKean (1997) found that individuals who use newspapers and television news to acquire political information were less inclined to be politically cynical than those who employed radio or magazines. This finding is noteworthy given television news was entered as the final block in a hierarchical least-square regression. Thus, the stringent nature of the statistical control demonstrates that "at neither time did television news use play a substantial role in predicting cynicism" (p. 79).

Research findings focused on media framing are decidedly different. Weaver (1996) explained that media coverage of elections that emphasizes "campaign strategy and maneuvering can make some voters more cynical and less likely to vote" (p. 34). In a study of media framing in the Netherlands, De Vreese (2004) examined coverage of the European Union economic question. He found that strategic news coverage contributed to political cynicism, but the effect was not long-term. Additionally, he found that levels of efficacy and political knowledge contributed to political cynicism. Efficacious individuals were less likely to demonstrate cynicism, while political knowledge

contributed to cynicism. De Vreese did explain that political knowledge was a weaker contributor to cynicism, than was the strategic news coverage. These findings are significant because they exist outside a campaign context and suggest newspaper and television news' contribution to cynicism is not necessarily long term.

In a comprehensive study of distrust and cynicism toward government institutions, Moy and Pfau (2000) demonstrated the complex interrelationships between media, institutional depiction, and viewer effect. In content analysis of print news coverage, network television news coverage, and television entertainment talk shows Moy and Pfau explained that each medium contributes to institutional depictions differently. This review includes three of the five institutions examined. They described the negative nature of television news toward the presidency and Congress, yet noted that television news spared the court system a degree of negativity. They explained that the print media were "more benign" in their coverage, and "newspapers and magazines were moderately negative in coverage of the presidency and Congress . . ., but were fairly positive in their depictions of the court system" (p. 81). Additionally, Moy and Pfau explained that "television talk shows were consistently hostile toward

most institutions" (p. 81). They did detail that the research on television talk shows "focused more on daytime talk than late night talk shows" (p. 72).

Moy and Pfau described how each medium contributed to an information consumer's confidence in the presidency, Congress, and the court system. They concluded that "reading newspapers enhanced confidence levels directly and increased respondent's expertise in these institutions, which in turn enhanced evaluations" (p. 96). Expertise constituted elements of awareness, knowledge, and interest in the democratic institution. Despite the print media's propensity to include negative content about the presidency and Congress, Moy and Pfau explained that the positive evaluations of democratic institutions may be explained in overall "general patterns of media use among individuals" (p. 99).

The research also demonstrated that watching network television news did not contribute to negative evaluations of the presidency. Watching network news initially negatively contributes to global attitudes, but watching network news also enhances presidential expertise which in turn contributes positively to global attitudes. Watching network news contributes to expertise which leads to confidence and trust in the presidency. This finding runs

counter to conventional wisdom about network news' negative effects.

Network nightly news' effect on viewers' perception of Congress and the court system, however, is a different story. Network nightly news negatively contributed to global attitudes and trust in Congress and the court system, and network news failed to influence Congress and court system expertise. The expertise variable, however, did contribute to improving assessments of Congress and the court system. Local television coverage led to positive assessments of the presidency, but contributed no effect on assessments of Congress or the court system.

In sum, television news does not contribute to greater political cynicism than does newspapers. Other media such as magazines and radio, however, do contribute to greater levels of political cynicism. Researchers have also explored the content of the news and have found strategically framed content and negative and hostile reporting to contribute positively to political cynicism.

Nontraditional media performance and political cynicism. Few research studies have expressed concern for the cultivation effects of late night television talk shows and political comedy programs on political cynicism. Studies have examined the content of the *Tonight Show with*

Jay Leno and the *Late Show with David Letterman* (see Niven, Lichter, & Amundson, 2003), while another concluded that late night entertainment talk shows breed contempt, alienation, and imparts the "language of cynicism" (Hart, 1999). Another has examined candidate trait ratings following jokes, monologues, and political appearances on late night talk shows and political comedy programs (Young, 2004).

In one of the few studies that examined entertainment talk shows contribution to the democratic process, Moy and Pfau (2001) explained that entertainment talk shows were "most brutal" in their presentation of the presidency, "hostile" when presenting information about Congress, and more negative than news magazine and magazines in their coverage of the court system (pp. 75-77). Moy and Pfau reported that watching entertainment talk shows have indirect negative effects on global attitudes and trustworthiness for the Presidency and Congress, and indirect negative effects for confidence and Congress, but only indirect effects for confidence and the Presidency. They only found indirect effects for confidence and the court system. They concluded that watching entertainment talk shows "have detrimental impacts on the confidence of institutions (p. 148). It should be noted that Moy and Pfau

operationalized entertainment talk shows to include *Oprah*, *Late Night with David Letterman*, *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, *60 Minutes*, *Dateline NBC*, and *20/20*. They also explained that their focus was on daytime talk shows and not late night television talk shows and the research did not include measures for political comedy programs.

In summary, there is a paucity of research regarding the cultivation effect of late night television talk shows and political comedy programs on political cynicism. Jones (2005) reported that the host's reject the interpretation that they contribute to a cynical political environment. Yet, there is evidence to suggest that viewing entertainment talk show programs undermines the individual's assessment of the presidency, congress, and the courts. While the emphasis in previous studies has not been on late night television talk shows or political comedy programs there is little reason to believe that these programs would perform differently than daytime television talk shows. Especially, as some have argued that "fringe joking presents opportunities for various comedic orientations that simultaneously support and oppose dominant ideologies" (Buxton, 1987). Therefore:

H1: Greater viewing of late night television talk

shows is positively associated with political cynicism.

H2: Greater viewing of political comedy programs is positively associated with political cynicism.

Citizen Participation

Numerous critics have pointed to television as a factor in diminishing both civic and political participation. For example, Gerbner and colleagues (1978) explained that the television world presents a uniform message across programming and viewers come to believe in that mediated reality. This analysis holds that the viewers' reflection of reality "should be seen as [a] generalized response to the central dynamics of the world of television drama" (p. 205). Building on earlier arguments concerning viewers' responses to television, Gerbner, et al. (1980) explained that heavy exposure to television actually makes individuals disinclined to become involved in forging the bonds of community (pp. 17-19). Other critics like Putnam (1995) have derided television as a primary detractor from participating in civic organizations and suggested that television has contributed to an overall decline in social capital. Brehm and Rahn (1997) furthered this analysis explaining that television use is an opportunity cost; "a serious drain upon the civic

participation side of social capital" (p. 1015). These critics argue that either the content of television or the time lost due to viewing television inhibit people's capacity to participate. Recent research findings on newspaper reading, television news, and nontraditional media provide an interesting story of media interaction and citizen participation.

Traditional media performance and citizen participation. Previous research on traditional media performance and citizen participation provides a baseline for understanding nontraditional media and citizen participation. Research has concluded that both newspapers and television news contribute to participation. Scheufele (2002) found that both newspaper hard use and television hard news use had significant effects on political participation. In an earlier study, Pfau, Cho, and Chong (2001) also found that reading newspapers was a significant predicator of political participation. They further explained that other traditional news media such as news magazines, television news, radio news, and television talk shows also contributed to political participation, but none reached the level of significance of newspapers. Eveland and Scheufele (2000) also found newspapers to predict political participation, such as donating money and

campaigning for a candidate. Television news use, however, was not found to be a predictor of political participation. Yet, television news use was found to predict voting. They contend that political participation requires more of the individual than does voting. Shah, McLeod, and Yoon (2001) found print and broadcast media to contribute to civic participation, or "participating in community projects, volunteering, and engaging in other membership activities" (p. 468).

Higher levels of education may explain why television news and newspaper reading interact differently with political participation. Eveland and Scheufele found significant interaction between newspaper use, education, and political participation. Education, however, did not significantly interact with television news use and political participation. They explained that the "linear presentation of news on television makes political content more easily accessible for audience members with varying levels of educational attainment" (p. 231). Eveland and Scheufele's analysis is consistent with Chaffee and Kanihan's (1997) research which found television to inform politically unsophisticated audiences. Education's interaction with newspaper use is the likely result of the content newspapers make accessible to readers.

In sum, newspaper and television news use positively predicts both civic and political participation. Newspaper reading is a stronger predictor of a wider range of political participation, yet television news use also contributes to lesser demanding forms of political participation, such as voting. As scholars continue to research the effects of traditional news media on citizen participation, it is also important to expand this investigation to include nontraditional media.

Nontraditional media performance and citizen participation. The findings on nontraditional television at best demonstrate that certain programming contributes to participation, and at worst fail to significantly diminish citizen participation. These findings are counter to Gerbner, et al. (1980) and Putnam's (1995) claims that television undermines trust and social capital. For example, Moy, Xenos, and Hess (2005) found late night television talk shows to predict campaign participation, intention to vote, and political discussion. These findings were especially positive for those who were considered politically sophisticated. They noted that these findings may not reflect those less politically sophisticated because it takes knowledge of the political sphere to find the jokes and monologues humorous. Despite this caveat

concerning political knowledge, entertainment programming makes a contribution to political participation, most significantly political discussion. Previous research examining nontraditional media's contribution to citizen engagement, however, found television entertainment talk shows to make no significant contribution to engagement/participation (Pfau et al., 2001).

Other research concentrating on the broad status of entertainment television demonstrates that television program viewing does not significantly inhibit civic participation, or participation in one's community through organization membership. Uslaner (1998) explored media use and the loss of social capital. Like Putnam (1995), Uslaner employed simple exposure measures to assess the impact of viewing television on participation levels. He tested whether television acts as a time-cost for participation and whether heavy viewers of television programming reflect a mediated reality. He concluded that "decisions about joining organizations don't reflect time pressures" (p. 458). He also offered that "No matter how we slice it, there are not impacts for television viewing among any cohort or for the entire sample. People's values, social connections, and social resources shape their decisions to participate in civic groups." (p. 458). Those who watch

television continue to engage in civic participation when they have the resources to do so and when those activities are important to them. When examining the viewers' perception of the world and television content, Uslaner found little support for Gerbner's mean world hypothesis. Uslaner's examination concluded there was "no systematic media effects on either trust or civic engagement" (p. 463).

Shah, McLeod, and Yoon (2001) found that when individuals employ media for informational uses media are related to civic participation. Additionally, they found that media genres contribute to civic participation differently. For example, when accounting for demographics, social situation, and social orientation television social dramas are significant predictors of civic participation. Television situation comedies, however, are negative predictors of civic participation. Television situation comedies were also negative predictors of civic participation before accounting for controls. Shah, McLeod, and Yoon argued that the "effects are determined by exposure to specific content rather than by overall use" (p. 491).

In an earlier study, Shah (1998) found that television viewing contributed positively and negatively to civic

participation demonstrating the dynamic nature of different genres of programming. For example, social drama viewing is positively related to participation, where science fiction viewing is negatively related. Noting that time spent watching television may be an opportunity-cost for participation, Shah explained that the programming content matters much more than the total time spent watching television.

In summary, there is a paucity of research on late night television talk shows and citizen participation. Of those studies, research has presented mixed findings on late night television talk shows contribution to participation. Primarily, though, researchers have found that entertainment television fails to contribute to Gerbner's mean world hypothesis noting that entertainment genres contribute to citizen participation differently. There is limited explanation of why late night television talk shows and political comedy programs, or other entertainment programming, would independently contribute to participation. One, however, could infer that political interest and political knowledge are important factors in that contribution. Therefore:

H3: Greater viewing of late night television talk

shows is positively associated with civic participation.

H4: Greater viewing of political comedy programs is positively associated with civic participation.

H5: Greater viewing of late night television talk shows is positively associated with political participation.

H6: Greater viewing of political comedy programs is positively associated with political participation.

H7: Greater viewing of late night television talk shows is positively associated with the likelihood of voting

H8: Greater viewing of political comedy programs is positively associated with the likelihood of voting.

Political Knowledge

The cultivation theory of mass communication proposes that television and the persistence of certain messages contribute to a social reality that is reflective of media content (Gerbner, 1973). The central assumption underlying cultivation analysis is that those who view more television will internalize a social reality that is reflective of the media world. Political knowledge is an objective measure

and does not fit the traditional model of cultivation analysis; however, Potter (1988) argued that assessing formal learning may allow for further elaboration of the cultivation hypothesis. Thus, this study pushes beyond an individual's perception of mediated reality, to examine what a person learns about the political world from late night television talk shows and political comedy programs, as increasingly popular forums of political discourse.

Political Knowledge Defined. Political knowledge is thought to be a key mediating factor in producing democratic outcomes, and political knowledge presents numerous opportunities for this study. First, the operational definition has implications for what reasonably may constitute an indicator of political knowledge. Second, the definition dictates the expansiveness of what may be considered political knowledge. Finally, the definition provides for what may be considered a contributor to the acquisition of political knowledge.

Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) emphasized the overall importance of political knowledge describing that political information leads citizens to be "attentive to politics, engaged in various forms of participation, committed to democratic principles, opinionated, and . . . efficacious," and they concluded that "no other single characteristic of

an individual affords so reliable a predictor of good citizenship" (p. 6).

Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) operationally defined political knowledge "as the range of factual information about politics that is stored in long-term memory" (p. 10). Exploring Delli Carpini and Keeter's definition of political knowledge is important because it has implications for measuring what people know about the political world.

In discussing the merits of this definition, Delli Carpini and Keeter held that the construct was useful in a number of ways. Principally, the inclusion of the term *information* made it clear that political knowledge was not to be confused with other variables such as political attitudes, values, beliefs, or opinions. Focusing on information recall disentangled the respondents' answers from their subjective experiences with information that might entrench values, alter beliefs, or create opinions.

Further, the notion that information is factual, presupposed a level of correctness and verifiability concerning a political claim. While Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) noted that determining correctness was problematic, creating a factual standard, none the less, established a "basis for comparison," even though many may

operate with competing definitions of the condition or problem (p. 11). Thus, this "basis for comparison" becomes a starting point in an attempt to remove subjective responses from analysis.

To establish the basis for comparison, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1991) proposed two categories of political facts. The first category included "taught facts," or those learned in school. Jennings (1996) defined "taught facts" as information concerning the "mechanics of government and politics" and labeled these "textbook facts" (p. 229). For example "taught facts" or "textbook facts" may include information concerning governmental processes, responsibilities of the different branches of government, and consideration of civil liberties. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1991) found that since the 1950's the public's knowledge of "taught facts" has remained relatively stable. Despite increases in educational level and opportunity, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1991) explained that over time education and sex have had essentially the same effects. Thus, knowledge of "taught facts" is relatively enduring.

They called the second category of political facts "surveillance facts" (p.598). Jennings (1996) suggested that "surveillance facts" concern current event issues. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1991) concluded that respondents

of all ages were less likely to correctly answer current events questions. Jennings (1996) provided a plausible explanation for this trend explaining that "surveillance facts" were "more changeable and require monitoring, especially through the use of the mass media and personal interaction" (p. 229).

Testing for this political knowledge dichotomy is not without critic. Graber (2001) raised concern with the Delli Carpini and Keeter political knowledge test used to assess "taught" facts. She claimed several methodological shortcomings including flawed standards of knowledge, assumptions in political decision-making, test question design, and the type of information sought for decision-making. Graber argued that citizens are relatively well informed concerning information that matters to them, suggesting that most people act as "cognitive misers" (p. 46). For example, knowledge of *who* the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court is of little value in overall political understanding. Ostensibly, supporting Graber's analysis, Gilens (2001) tested for generalized "textbook" facts and "surveillance" facts. He concluded that knowing generalized "textbook" facts may not matter to overall decision-making that requires policy specific facts.

Others have also questioned the usefulness of the "ideal informed citizen" and "textbook" facts as measures of political knowledge. Schudson (1998) argued that today's citizen subscribes to a "monitorial citizen" model. Schudson (1995) described the tension between informed citizens and the informational, or "monitorial citizen" as those individuals who are:

> not defined by a consumer's familiarity with the contemporary catalog of available information but by a citizen's formed set of interests that make using the catalog something other than a random effort (p. 169).

The informed citizen gathers information, reflects on its content, and makes informed evaluations. These critical decision-makers seek to understand procedural connections within a linear policy frame, while at the same time informed citizens are sense-makers seeking to understand how policies are interconnected and the implications the policies will have for the republic.

Graber (2001) however, suggested that the ideal citizen is likely difficult to achieve in a media rich, advanced democracy. Citizens are most likely informational, consuming media narratives that construct a repertoire of limited public affairs knowledge (Schudson, 1998). Page and Shapiro (1992) argued that individuals make political

decisions employing the best information available to them at the time and that taken as a whole the mass audience is largely responsive to elite behavior. Thus, Page and Shapiro argue that the public is rational and predictable regarding political issues; irrespective of the quality and quantity of political information consumed. Popkins (1994) also offers similar criticism of the "ideal informed citizen" arguing that individuals do not need full information to make decisions that are consistent with their beliefs. Popkins writes that:

> shortcuts for obtaining information at low cost are numerous. People learn about specific government programs as a by-product of ordinary activities, such as planning for retirement . . . they obtain economic information from their activities as a consumer . . . they also obtain all sorts of information from the media. Thus they do not need to know which party controls Congress, or the names of their senators, in order to know something about the state of the economy or proposed cuts to social security or the controversies over abortion (p. 213).

To account for Schudson's (1998) "monitorial citizen" surveillance facts are offered to assess what political

information citizens may be monitoring on late night television talk shows and political comedy programs.

While some question exists about the merits of possessing knowledge of "textbook" facts, most communication research remains concerned with mass media's contribution to political knowledge. As such, researchers have employed measures of "surveillance," to determine levels of learning from media. Chaffee, Zhao, and Leshner (1994) explored three levels of knowledge including difference of party position on issues, differences of candidates on issues, and the personal, biographical data about a candidate. Price and Zaller (1993) investigated levels of current events knowledge while using a general political knowledge scale. Each of the measures required exposure to media for information. Knowing specific facts about issues, political parties, and candidates would require the "surveillance" of various media as political topics unfold, change, and fade.

Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) explained that citizen's may possess a *range* of factual information. The inclusion of a range of political information is warranted, as Iyengar (1990) concluded that individuals may acquire information for certain domains, but not others. For example, a citizen may know much about a president, but

know little about the role of the executive branch in general. Understanding a population's knowledge of a range of factual information enables scholars to make statements about levels of domain specific and general political knowledge.

Finally, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) defined *politics* as the "authoritative allocation of goods, services, and values" (p. 12). They explained that this definition of politics was originally articulated by David Easton (1965), and the definition is expansive in scope as it allows for the inclusion of popular culture as a factor in politics. For instance, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) argued that the "poststructuralist and neo-Marxists [saw] the culture industry as reproducing (and occasionally challenging) patterns of domination and subordination in society through television [and] popular music" (p. 12). In a similar vein, Shea (1999) presented a model of popular culture and politics, where each interacts to construct and reflect political reality. Thus, citizens may be acquiring political information through various traditional and nontraditional sources of communication and with different impact.

In sum, Delli Carpini and Keeter's recognition of different key elements provides researchers an opportunity

to study a range of concerns regarding what citizens know about politics. The definition allows for an assessment of previously learned political material, while accounting for the shortcomings of rote factual recall. The inclusion of surveillance facts accounts for what an individual learns from traditional news media, as well as, nontraditional media. Additionally, the definition allows for individuals who may possess general or more specific knowledge about the political landscape, while also appreciating that nontraditional political programming may be contributing to a citizen's knowledge of the political, social, and cultural world. Ostensibly, this definition of political knowledge provides a fuller view of what citizen's know about the political world.

Traditional media performance and political knowledge. Investigating the effects of late night television talk shows and political comedy programs necessitate reviewing the literature on traditional media's contribution to political knowledge. Research on traditional media's contribution to political knowledge has resulted in mixed findings. Early studies on television and newspapers attempted to explain which channel was best for political learning. Most likely, this emphasis was due to the ubiquitous nature of television, as Gerbner et al.(1994)

noted "television is the source of the most broadly shared images and messages in history . . . television is a centralized system of storytelling" (pp. 17-18). While not necessarily concerned with the cultivation effects of television, this early research on voter learning and media use employed global exposure measures to determine television news' contribution to political knowledge.

Early studies concluded that television news media were less informative than newspapers. The research explained that people who depended on television where less knowledgeable than those who read newspapers (Blumler & McQuail, 1969; Patterson & McClure, 1976; Robinson & Levy, 1986), and relying on television most likely contributed to a widening knowledge gap (Becker & Whitney, 1980), while dependence on television news might actually undercut knowledge development (Clarke & Fredin, 1978). In revisiting earlier findings, Robinson and Levy (1996) maintained that "television news continues to be a relatively weak overall predictor of long-term information gain" (p. 135).

Brians and Wattenberg (1996), however, presented findings supporting television news as a contributor to political knowledge. They found television news to be weakly associated with political knowledge of a candidate's

issue position. Clearly this finding supported previous research, yet they found little evidence to suggest that attention to newspapers improved knowledge of a candidate's issue position. Brians and Wattenberg (1996) explained that controlling for education and campaign interest may diminish newspapers significance in informing the public. This means that individual differences such as higher education levels and campaign interest account for variance with political knowledge, as does media use and attention. This finding points to the complexities in identifying a medium's contribution to knowledge gain. The research comparing newspaper use and television news media use, however, has generally concluded that newspapers are especially informative.

Television makes a particular contribution to political learning for those less likely to seek political information. In a study of how news media contribute to the political understanding for the politically unsophisticated, such as young people, Chaffee and Kanihan (1997) explained that uninformed voters employ television as a "bridge" to become knowledgeable about public affairs. These findings demonstrate the difficult relationships that exist between television news, newspapers, and political knowledge and suggest that television may function as a

gateway to different types of political information and media.

It could be argued that claiming a medium's superiority in advancing political learning is misplaced; that medium superiority is a function of the measurements employed to determine political knowledge. Previous research found that exposure to television news was negatively associated with political knowledge (Robinson & Levy, 1986). Other studies that included levels of attention paid to media, however, found television news to be positively associated with political knowledge (Chaffee & Schleuder 1986; McLeod & McDonald 1985; Weaver & Drew, 1995, 2001; Zhao & Chaffee, 1995). Early studies simply examined levels of exposure to media, rather than considering the information processing that individuals engage in to understand information. For example, a person's television may be on and tuned to a news channel, but the person may pay very little attention to the programming because of other demands. Attention, however, necessitates engagement with the programming. Exposure to newspapers necessarily involves attention because of the cognitive processes operating while reading news stories. This clarification of measures also recognized fundamental

differences in how each medium presents information and the diverse requirements needed for information processing.

Each medium presents unique communicative and cognitive demands. Miller and Reese (1982) suggested that television and newspapers require different information processing skills because "television is better suited to presentation of the dramatic and concrete, and newspapers better suited to detail and abstraction" (p. 228). Identifying differences in a medium's strengths suggest variations in an audiences' learning. In a review of media use and political knowledge research, Chaffee and Frank (1996) argued that television is informative; the medium, however, completes its task differently than newspapers. They crystallized the distinctions between television news and newspapers succinctly; "television provides voters a close look at candidates, while newspapers tell more about policy differences between the major parties" (p. 58). Newspapers contribute to information about political issues and parties, while television news contributes to candidate personal knowledge and an understanding of how candidates differ on issues (Leshner & McKeen, 1997; Weaver & Drew, 1995).

Recognizing nontraditional media as a growing arena for political news and commentary, this research seeks to

move beyond traditional news and examine the effects of late night television talk shows and political comedy programs on political knowledge. Previous studies of traditional media found that newspapers inform especially well, and television informs those least likely to seek political information. The purpose of this research is not to declare which medium is best at information gain, but to determine the cumulative effect of heavy interaction with a particular programming genre on knowledge gain.

New media performance and political knowledge. In drawing distinctions between traditional and "new media," Davis and Owen (1998) explained that "new media," is "old media technologies" and "mass communication forms with primarily nonpolitical origins that have acquired political roles" (p. 7). New media allow for inventive coverage of political campaigning. For example, the rise of cable interview programs provides an opportunity for a candidate to speak with an interviewer about their childhood, personality, leadership experience, and issue stance. While the primary purpose of late night entertainment talk shows is to highlight those in the entertainment industry, they frequently offer comedic critiques of candidates, the presidential campaign, and proposed issues through jokes and monologues. Political comedy programs also offer

comedic critiques of government and politics, and hosts frequently interact with actors, authors, and musicians as allies in the humorous political commentary. It is the possibility of learning political information through viewing these new media that is of interest.

Early studies on voter learning and new media, however, demonstrate that new media are not significant predictors of political knowledge. Generally, these findings on new media and voter learning have been consistent. In a study of the 1992 presidential campaign, McLeod and colleagues (1996) found nontraditional media use negatively related to knowledge of a candidate's issue position. These researchers defined nontraditional media use as presidential debates, political advertising, polls, and talk shows. They did not include late night television talk shows or political comedy programs in their analysis. They explained that while nontraditional media made no direct contribution to political knowledge, it was "strongest when considered as part of a general pattern of attentive use where citizens become interested in the campaign and use traditional media forms" (p. 413). They speculated that this media use pattern emerged because nontraditional media followed the discourse of average citizens (see also, Jones 2005, pp. 141-157).

In another study of the 1992 presidential campaign, Weaver and Drew (1995) found that neither exposure nor attention to nontraditional media (television talk shows, such as *Larry King* and morning television network shows) influenced political knowledge. They speculated that controlling for campaign interest prior to looking for media effects may explain why attention to nontraditional media was not associated with political knowledge. This study, too, included no measure for late night television talk shows or political comedy programs.

Other researchers investigating new media during the 1992 presidential campaign did find new media to contribute to voter learning. In this study of new media and the 1992 presidential campaign, Chaffee, Zhao, and Leshner (1994), found that candidate appearances on talk shows contributed to learning about candidates and their differences on issues. Like McLeod, et al. (1996), Chaffee and colleagues did not speculate as to why talk shows contributed to political learning other than to note that talk shows encourage candidate interaction with the host and global discussion of the issues and the candidate's position on the issues.

Yet, during the 1996 presidential election, research concluded that nontraditional media were not significant

predictors of political knowledge. Drew and Weaver (1998) explained that television talk show attention was not a significant predictor of campaign issue knowledge. They defined nontraditional forms of political media as television talk show attention and radio talk show attention. Interestingly, when respondents were asked how much attention they paid to programming, television talk show attention increased over 1992 levels. They made no specific claim about why this increase in television talk show attention occurred, however, it may be attributed to the growth in talk show availability on cable television.

In the 2000 election, Weaver and Drew (2001) again found that television talk shows were not predictors of campaign issue knowledge. Consistent with their 1996 and 1992 findings, Weaver and Drew found no association between exposure and attention to television talk shows and political knowledge, campaign interest, or likelihood of voting. To this point, most studies investigated television talk shows to determine their contribution to political knowledge. Few studies examined the role of late night entertainment television talk shows or cable comedy programs in contributing to political knowledge.

Early studies that did include late night television talk shows in their analysis of new media and voter

learning found mixed findings. Chaffee and colleagues (1994) found these programs to negatively predict candidate issue knowledge. In a different study of the 1992 presidential campaign, Hollander (1995) found that attention to late night entertainment talk shows and daytime talk shows were positively associated with perceived knowledge, but not actual knowledge.

This early research all but dismisses new media as contributors to political knowledge; however, it is important to note these early studies, with the exception of only a few, did not include late night television talk shows or political comedy programs in their analysis. Additionally, these studies that did include late night television talk shows did so before candidates began to utilize the *Late Show with David Letterman* and the *Tonight Show with Jay Leno* as regular campaign stops. The Center for Media and Public Affairs (2006) offers yet another reason to reconsider earlier findings, as they explain that the number of political jokes increased steadily from 1992 until 1998, and in 2005, President George W. Bush was a target of political humor on late night television talk shows 553 times compared to 22 jokes targeted at the former presidential candidate, John Kerry. These conditions warrant a reexamination of whether late night television

talk shows and political comedy programs contribute to political knowledge.

Earlier studies have shown that new media may not make an independent contribution to voter learning, but may contribute to voter learning if viewers tune into new media, develop interest in a campaign, and then seek additional information from traditional news media. McLeod and colleagues (1996) suggested the elevated strength of new media's contribution to voter learning in general media use patterns is noteworthy. Exploring new media as an independent contributor and as a media variable that works with traditional media to inform voters necessitates new media's inclusion in further studies. Also, as their popularity among viewers and political candidates increases, late night television talk shows and political comedy programs should be more readily included in the scope of new media and voter learning research.

Recent survey research shows that political comedy program viewers are knowledgeable about presidential campaign. The National Annenberg Election Survey (2004) found those who watched Comedy Central's *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* were more politically knowledgeable than those who do not watch. In particular, the NAES found those who watch Comedy Central's *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*,

possessed more personal information about candidates and knew the issue positions of the candidates. The NAES reported that those who watched Comedy Central's *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*:

> have higher candidate personal knowledge than national news viewers and newspaper readers – even when education, party identification, following politics, watching cable news, receiving campaign information online, age, and gender are taken into consideration (p. 1).

The NAES does not claim a causal relationship between *The Daily Show* and political knowledge, and noted that political interest is likely a factor coupled with general news media consumption in contributing to political knowledge.

In sum, the previous research on new media generally concluded that daytime and cable television talk shows contribute little to general political knowledge (textbook facts) or candidate personal knowledge (surveillance facts). Most early studies did not include measures examining late night talk shows, and it is only recent that studies have included political comedy programs. New conditions such as political candidate's utilizing late night television talk shows as campaign stops, sometimes

multiple times during a campaign cycle, and the increasing number of political jokes warrant further examination of late night television talk shows. Additionally, political comedy programs have demonstrated strong performance in predicting political knowledge. Therefore:

H9: Greater viewing of late night television talk shows is positively associated with general political knowledge.

H10: Greater viewing of political comedy programs is positively associated with general political knowledge.

H11: Greater viewing of late night television talk shows is positively associated with candidate personal knowledge.

H12: Greater viewing of political comedy programs is positively associated with candidate personal knowledge.

Media Use and Political Talk

Conversation has long been hailed a factor in contributing to the health of democracy (Barber, 1984; Dewey, 1927; Habermas, 1996; Page, 1996), although specific types of talk may be more beneficial to the health of democracy (Schudson, 1997). Researchers and theorists have explained that conversations focusing on political content

contribute to people's understanding of mediated messages and politicians' public utterances, and also contributes to an individual's working through the complexity of one's own thinking as it relates to public affairs issues (Eliasoph, 1998; Habermas, 1996; Zaller, 1992). Thus, engaging in political discussion can enhance one's understanding of the political world.

News media exposure is associated with political conversation frequency. In an examination of political conversations' impact on political knowledge and political participation, Scheufele (2000) explained that newspaper hard news and television hard news were both positively related to political talk. Newspaper hard news, however, was more strongly related to political talk, than was television hard news. Newspaper hard use and television hard news were also found to contribute directly to current-events knowledge. Scheufele also found newspaper hard news and television hard news to predict political talk which led to factual political knowledge. Media use contributes directly to political knowledge and through political discussion.

In a study comparing political talk in the United States and England, Bennett, Flickinger, and Rhine (2000) found in various datasets a consistent thirty year pattern

demonstrating that the more American and British citizens talked about politics the more knowledgeable they were about politics. Like Scheufele's earlier findings, Bennett and colleagues (2000) found that exposure to newspapers and television news predicted political discussion and that political discussion predicted political knowledge.

Political conversation also leads to political participation (Bennett et al., 2000; Scheufele, 2000, 2002). In fact, it can be argued that talking with others about politics in one's immediate or extended community is a form of citizen participation (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). Political talk thus has implications for the production of social capital.

In their study of conversation and political participation, Kim, Wyatt, and Katz (1999) found news media exposure to be associated with political conversation frequency. They noted, however, due to the "single wave of cross sectional survey data" that causality is difficult to determine (p. 379). Yet, they infer that mediated messages precede political conversation. They continued that media use and political conversation were closely associated with political participation.

Scheufele (2000) found that political talk is directly and positively related to political participation.

Political talk is also indirectly related to political participation through political knowledge. Other research has been concerned with media use and interpersonal discussion's contribution to political participation. Scheufele (2002) supported earlier findings explaining that reading "hard news" content in newspaper and interpersonal discussion are predictors of political participation. Scheufele noted that "hard news" television news interacted with interpersonal discussion positively, thus, contributing to participation. Scheufele also found that newspaper readership contributed to political knowledge for those who discussed politics more than those not involved in discussions. This finding did not hold for television "hard news" viewers, political knowledge, and political discussion; as this group did not differ significantly from those who did not discuss politics.

In a study of traditional and nontraditional participation, McLeod, Scheufele, and Moy (1999) found interpersonal communication to have a "modest" impact on traditional forms of participation like voting and contacting a public official, yet functions as a strong predictor of nontraditional participation like "participating in a local political process, such as

attending a civic forum on issues of special interest and making oneself heard at this forum" (p. 316).

Examining conversation's effects offers a unique way of understanding political knowledge and political participation. Do the mass media contribute to conversations about politics? Do conversations contribute to political understanding and political participation? Researchers in mass communication and interpersonal communication have explored these questions and describe how news media and conversation interact with important political outcome variables. Central to understanding the relationship between political talk, political knowledge and political participation is the information processing strategy involved in making sense of public affairs.

Political Talk and Information Processing Strategies

Describing the interrelationship between mass media and interpersonal communication, Gumpert and Cathcart (1982) called this connection *intermedia*. They explained that people employ mass channels and face to face communication in complex ways to facilitate understanding. Since the idea of intermedia was introduced, communication scholars have advanced an agenda of research that examines whether interpersonal discussion mediates the relationship

between mass media use and political knowledge and political participation.

One such item on the agenda in exploring the role of interpersonal communication and advancing political understanding has been an information processing strategy called reflective integration. Kosicki and McLeod (1990) offered three information-processing strategies for coping with various mediated messages. They explained that individuals generally hold a set of "tactics" to manage the information richness of mediated communication (p. 73). These information-processing strategies include selective scanning, active processing, and reflective integration. Kosicki and McLeod (1990) offered active processing as an individual's attempt to understand the message, and attending to different media to make sense of the mediated message. Reflective integration is also an explanation of how active-consumers and processors of information make sense of news media. They described the relationship between media use and political understanding explaining that:

> people who find certain information highly salient or attention-holding should be, through increased mental effort and integration, more successful at integrating

> the new information into what they already know about the world (p. 75).

Kosicki and McLeod explained that through active processing and reflective integration, individuals acquire information and develop sophistication. Reflective integration "represents the postexposure salience of information such that it occupies the mind and is the subject of interpersonal discussion" (p. 75). In more direct terms, important political information remains persistent in a persons' mind and that information becomes the focus of public affairs conversations.

McLeod, et al. (1999) found that "reflection" is an important finding in explaining forum participation. They offered that reflection may "help to consolidate the fragmentary information learned from the news media" (p. 765). They found that those who reflected on public affairs information in a local context were more likely to attend a public forum and speak about issues.

Sotirovic and McLeod (2001) also examined media's contribution to political participation. In assessing the effects of mass media and interpersonal communication they found that "people learn from newspaper public affairs content and that they elaborate and argue about what they learned in interpersonal discussion" (p. 287). The process

of reflective integration positively and directly led to political participation, more so than did newspaper use alone.

Sotirovic and McLeod also concluded that entertainment television discouraged participation, a finding that is noteworthy, as they described the "blurring" of entertainment and hard news (p. 287). This conclusion relates to the softer elements of news programming (see also Patterson, 2000), and does not include prime time entertainment programming or late night television talk shows.

Primarily concerned with political participation, Sotirovic and McLeod also conclude that political knowledge and media use "may not be [of] sufficient condition for taking part in politics" (p. 288). They suggested that "reflective integration" acts as the moderating variable that assists individuals in making sense of fragmented political information. Not surprisingly, newspaper reading encourages reflective integration, yet Sotirovic and McLeod also found television entertainment viewing to support reflective integration. Sotirovic and McLeod concluded that this information processing strategy has the ability to counteract the negative effects of television entertainment on political participation. Despite the popular conclusion

that the media offers little, Sotirovic and McLeod concluded that "when the media provoke individuals to put some effort into finding and processing information, they offer plenty of politically useful content" (p. 288).

In summary, media use variables contribute to political conversations and to political knowledge and participation differently. It has been found that political conversations positively contribute to political knowledge. Additionally, political conversations directly contribute to political participation. Reflecting on the content of media, and then discussing the content with others, also has important implications for political knowledge and participation. Primarily, active reflection and reflective integration, the acts of thinking about the content and then discussing the content, has the ability to counteract the negative effects of entertainment television on citizen participation. Therefore it is hypothesized that:

H13: Greater viewing of late night television talk shows is positively associated with political discussion.

H14: Greater viewing of political comedy programs is positively associated with political discussion.

The next several hypotheses are concerned with the ability of active processing and reflective integration to mediate

the relationship between late night television talk shows and various forms of political knowledge and citizen participation.

H15: Active reflection mediates the relationship between:

a) late night talk shows and general political knowledge.

b) late night talk shows and candidate personal knowledge.

c) late night talk shows and civic participation.

d) late night talk shows and political participation.

These final hypotheses are concerned with the ability of active processing and reflective integration to mediate the relationship between political comedy programs and categories of political knowledge and political participation.

H16: Active reflection mediates the relationship between:

a) political comedy programs and general political knowledge.

b) political comedy programs and candidate personal knowledge.

c) political comedy programs and civic participation.

d) political comedy programs and political participation.

Chapter Three

Methodology

This chapter describes the methods employed to address the hypothesis in chapter two. First, this chapter will describe the sample for this research and then explain the criterion measures and predictor variables. Finally, this section will detail the statistical analysis performed to determine how well late night television talk shows and political comedy programs predict political knowledge, citizen participation, and political cynicism. Additionally, this section will describe the statistical procedures undertaken to determine the mediation effect of active reflection.

Procedure and Sample

The sample for this research is a single-cross sectional sampling of 18-24 year old students enrolled in freshman and sophomore level general education courses. These courses are open to all students at the university. The surveys were administered at the beginning of each course section, and administration took approximately 25 minutes. The data collection occurred during the week of October 18 – 22, 2004 at a small, regional, public university in Oklahoma with an enrollment of 3,985 students. The sampling occurred approximately two weeks

prior to the 2004 presidential election, and yielded a sample size of 412 respondents which represents 10.3% of the enrolled students at this university.

Criterion Measures

Political cynicism. To assess political cynicism respondents were asked to respond to six items concerning their beliefs about politicians and the process of governing. Agger, Goldstein, and Pearl (1961) offered this scale which includes topics concerning politicians' decision making to get elected, politicians spending time getting elected or re-elected, money's ability to influence public policy, politicians manipulating people, and politicians representing general or special interests. A mean index was created with response categories ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree) (M = 6.37, SD = 1.26, Cronbach's alpha = .671). Due to low internal consistency in the measure of political cynicism one item (politician's in Congress try to do what is best for most of the people) was removed from the six item index. This removal increased the internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .724).

Civic participation. To assess a respondent's involvement in membership oriented, community activities, respondents were asked if they participated in sports

(80.1% yes), religious activities (74.4% yes), drama organizations (51.9% yes), and group volunteering (71.4% yes). These items are similar to items used to assess the contribution of media use to civic engagement (Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Shah, 1998). When a respondent indicated participation in a civic activity a "1" was assigned; however, if the respondent did not participate in the listed civic activity a "0" was assigned. An additive index was constructed with respondents ranging from a 0 – 4.00 (M = 2.81, SD = 1.13, KR-20 = .537). The reliability of the original four item scale was assessed (KR-20 = .518), and it was determined that the drama item should be removed to improve the overall reliability of the scale.

Political participation. To assess the level of political activity, respondents were asked if they participated in political activities such as political rallies (14.8% yes), writing a letter to the editor (6.3% yes), participating in a human rights organization (7.3% yes), an environmental organization (10.4% yes), collected money for a social cause (48.1% yes), and student government (44.4% yes). The first two items are similar to those items used to assess the contribution of news, talk, and opinion formation on political participation (Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999). The next four items represent

opportunities for political participation at the respondent's university. When a respondent indicated participation in a political activity a "1" was assigned, however, if the respondent did not participate in the listed political activity a "0" was assigned. An additive index was constructed with respondents ranging from a 0 – 6.00 (*M* = 1.31, *SD* = 1.22, KR-20 = .523). The reliability of a five item scale was assessed, however, the removal of an item (involvement in student government) failed to improve reliability (KR-20 = .517).

Voter likelihood. A single question assessed the likelihood of the respondent voting in the 2004 presidential election. The voter likelihood item was measured with response categories ranging from 0 (not voting), and 1 (not likely) to 10 (highly likely) (*M* = 7.60, *SD* = 3.80).

General political knowledge. To assess general political knowledge, respondents were asked a series of five open-ended questions concerning government and politics. The questions were representative of Delli Carpini and Keeter's (1993) five item political knowledge instrument. The one deviation from the Delli Carpini and Keeter's five-item index was replacing the question about the vice-president with a question about the U.S. Senate

race in Oklahoma. The questions concerned the 2004 Oklahoma U.S. senate candidate (46.8% correctly identified either Brad Carson or Tom Coburn), whose responsibility it is for interpreting the U.S. Constitution (59.5% correctly identified the U.S. Supreme Court), the majority needed to override a presidential veto (41% correctly identified a two-thirds majority), the controlling political party in the U.S. House of Representatives (41% correctly identified the Republican Party), and identifying the most conservative political party (51.7% correctly identified the Republican Party). Correct answers were assigned "1" and incorrect answers were assigned "0". An additive index was constructed that ranges from a 0 (no correct answers) to a 5 (M = 2.40, SD = 1.54, KR-20 = .611). The reliability of all four item scales was assessed, however, the best four item reliability was (KR-20 = .606).

Candidate personal knowledge. To evaluate candidate personal knowledge, respondents were asked seven open-ended questions concerning the 2004 presidential and vice-presidential candidates and their families. The items were selected to represent personal knowledge about the candidates and their families. The topics included identifying the candidate who "flip-flopped" on the Iraq War resolution (70.1% correctly identified Senator John

Kerry), the candidate who served in the National Guard during the Vietnam War (45.9% correctly identified President George W. Bush), the candidate known for misspoken words and sentences (76.9% correctly identified President George W. Bush), and the candidate who received multiple purple hearts during his Vietnam War service (74% correctly identified Senator John Kerry). The topics also included two questions that addressed which vice-presidential candidate was the former C.E.O. of Halliburton (55.6% correctly identified Dick Cheney) and a former trial lawyer (56.8% correctly identified Senator John Edwards). The final question asked which presidential candidate's wife is the heiress to the Heinz ketchup fortune (67.7% correctly identified Teresa Kerry). Correct answers were assigned "1" and incorrect answers were assigned "0". An additive index was constructed with respondents ranging from a 0 (no correct answers) to a 7 (M = 4.47, SD = 2.13, KR-20 = .773). The reliability of a six item scale was assessed, however, the removal of an item (misstatements by President George Bush) failed to improve reliability (KR-20 = .770).

Political discussion. To assess political discussion, respondents were asked the number of days they talked about politics. A single item was created with response

categories ranging from 0 (never), 1 day to 7 days (*M* = 2.6, *SD* = 1.97).

Information processing strategies. To assess the respondent's information processing strategies of late night television talk shows and political comedy programs, respondents were asked seven items measuring their selective scanning, active processing, and reflective integration.

Selective scanning measures the frequency of a respondent's "flipping" either the television channel or the newspaper's page seeking content that is appealing. Two items were used to assess selective scanning: Do late night television talk shows/political comedy programs give me to much useless information? When watching late night television talk shows/political comedy programs, I only pay attention if there is something that catches my interest. These items had response categories ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree). A mean index was created for selective scanning (*M* = 3.01, *SD* = .324, Cronbach's alpha = .55).

Three items assessed active processing and two items assessed reflective integration. Respondent's were asked whether they sought additional information following interaction with late night television talk shows and

political comedy programs, whether respondent's recalled and thought about information learned on late night talk shows and political comedy programs later, and whether respondents share the information with other individuals. These items replace traditional media with late night television talk shows and political comedy programs (Kosicki & McLeod, 1990; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001).

A mean index was created for active processing with response categories ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree) (*M* = 4.31, *SD* = 1.87 , Cronbach's alpha = .780). A mean index was created for reflective integration with response categories ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree) (*M* = 3.94, *SD* = .386, Cronbach's alpha = .796). A mean index was then created for active reflection, a combination of active processing and reflective integration, to tap into the active information processing strategies, as well as the interpersonal conversations that one has about the programs' content. A mean index was created combining active processing and reflective integration. This index, active reflection, was constructed which varied from 0 – 100 (*M* = 4.16, *SD* = 1.87, Cronbach's alpha = .877).

Predictor Variables

Media exposure and attention items were employed to assess respondents' global use of media and to assess the degree of attention paid to the programming. Media effects scholars argue that "exposure items alone clearly understate the case for television's effect" (Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986; p. 103; see also McLeod & McDonald, 1985). Chaffee and Schleuder further argued that assessing media attention "can reduce the spurious influence of third variables on tests of cognitive effects" (p. 103). Thus, the combination of media exposure and attention measures more fully capture a respondents use and cognitive application of the media employed for informational or entertainment purposes.

Broadcast news. Eveland & Scheufele (2000) noted in their study of news media use and political knowledge that no agreed upon standardized measure of media use exist. In this study, to assess broadcast news use, respondents were asked a series of media exposure and attention questions. Respondents were asked about their exposure and attention levels to national network news, national cable news (*CNN*, *FOX*, or *MSNBC*, morning news programs (*Today, Good Morning America*), news magazine shows (*60 Minutes, Dateline, 20/20, Prime Time Live, 48 Hours, Now with Bill Moyers*), and the

Sunday morning talk shows. A mean index was created for broadcast media exposure with response categories ranging from 0 (never watch), and 1 (not very often) to 10 (very often) (*M* =2.78, *SD* = 1.95, Cronbach's alpha = .716). A mean index was also created for broadcast media attention with response categories ranging from 0 (never pay attention), and 1 (pay attention a little) to 10 (pay attention a lot) (*M* = 3.33, *SD* = 2.24, Cronbach's alpha = .756). Then a multiplicative index was created combining broadcast media exposure and broadcast media attention measures; categories ranged from 0 - 100.00 (*M* = 17.15, *SD* = 16.21, Cronbach's alpha = .858).

Newspapers. To assess newspaper use, respondents were asked a series of exposure and attention questions. Respondents were asked about their exposure and attention level to international and world news, terrorism and the war in Iraq, national government, and politics and the presidential election. A mean index was created for newspaper media exposure with response categories ranging from 0 (never read), and 1 (not very often) to 10 (very often) (*M* =3.51, *SD* = 3.09, Cronbach's alpha = .954). A mean index was also created for newspaper media attention with response categories ranging from 0 (never pays attention), and 1 (pay attention a little) to 10 (pay

attention a lot) (*M* = 3.90, *SD* = 3.32, Cronbach's alpha = .959). Then a multiplicative index was created combining newspaper media exposure and newspaper media attention measures; categories ranged from 0 - 100.00 (*M* = 24.26, *SD* = 27.30, Cronbach's alpha = .977).

Late night television talk shows. To assess late night television talk show programming use, respondents were asked an exposure and attention question regarding viewing the *Late Show with David Letterman* and the *Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. A mean index was created for late night television talk show exposure with response categories ranging from 0 (never watch), and 1 (not very often) to 10 (very often) (*M*=4.02, *SD*= 3.08). A mean index was also created for late night talk show attention with response categories ranging from 0 (pay attention a little), and 1 (never pay attention) to 10 (pay attention a lot) (*M* = 4.56, *SD* = 3.21). Table 1 presents a frequency distribution of late night talk show exposure and attention data. A multiplicative index was then created combining late night talk show media exposure and late night talk show attention measures; categories ranged from 0 - 100.00 (*M* = 26.52, *SD* = 27.52, Cronbach's alpha = .904).

Political comedy programs. To assess political comedy show programming use, respondents were asked an exposure

and attention question regarding the *Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *Real Time with Bill Maher*. A mean index was created for political comedy show exposure with response categories ranging from 0 (never watch), and 1 (not very often) to 10 (very often) (*M* = 1.24, *SD* = 1.96). A mean index was also created for political comedy show attention with response categories ranging from 0 (never pay attention), and 1 (pay attention a little) to 10 (pay attention a lot) (*M* = 1.41, *SD* = 2.33). Table 2 presents a frequency distribution of political comedy program exposure and attention data. A multiplicative index was then created combining political comedy show media exposure and political comedy show attention measures; categories ranged from 0 - 100.00 (*M* = 7.83, *SD* = 16.52, Cronbach's alpha = .825).

Control variables. A number of exogenous control variables were introduced in the analysis. Similar controls were introduced for studies concerning media use and voter learning (Leshner & McKean, 1997; Weaver & Drew, 2001). The control measures included age (*M* = 23.06, *SD* = 7.68) and sex (60.7% - female), and the respondent's university classification as a proxy measure for education level. University classification was created with response

categories ranging from 1 (freshman) to 5 (5th year senior) and 6(graduate student) (*M* = 2.55, *SD* = 1.56).

This study also used demographic information about the respondent's family. Parental education level was a single-item measure created with response categories ranging from 1 (less than high school), 2 (high school graduate), 3 (some college), 4 (college graduate) to 5 (Graduate/ Professional School) (*M* = 2.85, *SD* = .983). Respondent's also identified the number of books in their parent's household. The number of books item represents household material possessions and is a proxy measure for family wealth. A mean index was created with response categories ranging from 1 (none), 2 (1 - 10 books), 3 (11 - 50 books), 4 (51 - 100 books), 5 (101 – 200 books), 6 (More than 200 books) (M = 3.89, SD = 1.38). In health literature these controls have been utilized to capture an individual or family's prestige (educational attainment) and financial resources (material goods) (Krieger, Williams, & Moss, 1997).

To measure political interest, respondents were asked about national issues and politics, the 2004 presidential campaign, the war in Iraq, and the Oklahoma U.S. Senate and U.S. House elections. These political interest items were measured with response categories ranging from 1 (I am not

at all interested) to 10 (I am very interested). A mean index was created for political interest (M = 6.83, SD = 2.16, Cronbach's alpha = .808).

To measure strength of political ideology, respondents were asked to specify their ideological leanings. Ideology items were measured with response categories ranging from 0 (don't know), 1 (moderate), 2 (slightly liberal, slightly conservative), 3 (liberal, conservative), 4 (ultra-liberal, ultra-conservative) (M = 1.74, SD = 1.28).

Analysis

After indices were constructed and alpha reliabilities determined, data analysis was conducted in stages. The analysis was conducted by employing multiple regression. Before the multiple regression analysis, the data were analyzed to determine if they fulfilled the assumptions of multiple regression. The assumptions include the absence of outliers, multicollinearity, normality, linearity, and heteroscedascity of residuals (Cohen & Cohen, 1983; Pedhazur, 1997; Tabachnick & Fidell, 1989). No major violations of the assumptions were discovered, thus no action was taken.

Predictors of media use and political interest were examined. Multiple regression equations were then employed to examine the relationship between late night television

talk shows and political comedy programs and the outcome variables: general political knowledge, candidate personal knowledge, civic participation, political participation, likelihood of voting political discussion, and political cynicism. Following regression computation, *B* and beta weights were examined to assess how each predictor variable contributed to explaining the criterion variable.

Predictors of information processing strategies were also examined. Regression was then employed to measure the mediation, or indirect effect of active reflection on selected criterion variables: general political knowledge, candidate personal knowledge, civic participation and political participation. Baron and Kenny (1986) suggest that there are three steps for establishing mediation. In each step the coefficients were estimated and tested for significance. First, the late night television talk shows and political comedy programs were examined to determine their relationship with the outcome variables: general political knowledge, candidate personal knowledge, civic participation, and political participation. This is the direct effect. If there was a direct effect, this relationship suggested that mediation was possible. Next, the mediator variable was established as the criterion variable. The significance of the effect was estimated

between the predictor variable and the mediator variable. This is signified by path a (See Figure 1). When path a was significant, the third step was conducted to test whether the mediator variable was a significant predictor of the outcome or criterion variable. This is specified by path b (see Figure 1). The control variables were included in the analysis of part a and b. Baron and Kenny specify that the path must be significant in each of the three steps for mediation to occur.

Chapter Four

Results

This chapter consists of five parts. First, the chapter offers an analysis of the antecedents of media use. The chapter then offers an exploration of the antecedents of political interest. Regression equations are then analyzed to determine late night television talk shows and political comedy programs' contribution to the following cognitive outcomes: political cynicism, general political knowledge, and candidate personal knowledge. Also, regression equations are analyzed to determine whether late night television talk shows and political comedy programs significantly contribute to the following behavioral outcomes: civic participation, political participation, and likelihood of voting. Finally, the analysis of active reflection are conducted to determine the mediation role of these information processing strategies in predicting general political knowledge, candidate personal knowledge, civic participation, and political participation.

Antecedents of Media Use

Before testing the hypothesis, an analysis of the antecedents of media use was conducted to describe the respondents' media exposure and attention to late night television talk shows, political comedy programs, broadcast

news, and newspapers. This was done to better understand this sample of young voters' exposure and attention to the various media. Viewing late night television talk shows, political comedy programs, and broadcast news exposure and attention were significantly associated with age (Table 3 and 4). Younger respondents watched significantly more late night television talk shows (β = -.282, p < .001) and political comedy programs (β = -.124, p < .05). Older respondents watched significantly more broadcast news (β = .210, p < .001). Sex differences revealed that men read newspapers (β = .094, p < .01), watched political comedy programs (β = .222, p < .001) and late night television talk shows (β = .096, p < .05) significantly more than women. Women watched significantly more broadcast news (β = -.178, p < .001) than men.

A respondent's student classification contributed significantly to watching broadcast news (β = .134, p < .01). Family wealth did not significantly contribute to any form of media use.

A person's interest in politics also contributed to media use. Political interest contributed significantly to newspaper reading (β = .391, p < .001), broadcast news (β = .116, p < .05), and approached significance in predicting exposure and attention of late night television talk shows

(β = .116, p < .10). A weaker orientation to one's political ideology also approached significance with regard to exposure and attention to broadcast news (β = -.074, p < .10). Political discussions also contributed significantly to media consumption. People who engaged in political discussions were more inclined to read newspapers (β = .131, p < .01), watch broadcast news (β = .093, p < .10), and watch political comedy programs (β = .292, p < .001).

Reading the newspaper significantly contributed to watching broadcast news (β = .212, p < .001), although watching broadcast news also significantly contributed to reading newspapers (β = .206, p < .001). Watching late night television talk shows also significantly contributed to watching broadcast news (β = .292, p < .001). Watching late night television talk shows significantly contributed to watching political comedy programs (β = .105, p < .05), and watching political comedy programs significantly contributed to watching late night television talk shows (β = .105, p < .05).

Antecedents of Political Interest

An analysis of the antecedents was conducted to determine what factors contributed to political interest. This analysis is important as political interest was a consistent predictor of outcomes, including general

political knowledge, candidate personal knowledge, likelihood of voting, and political discussion. As indicated in Table 5, older students have significantly more political interest than younger students ($\beta = .089$, $p < .05$). Sex and student classification had no significant impact on political interest. Having parents with higher educations also approached significance in contributing to levels of political interest ($\beta = .073$, $p < .10$), yet family wealth did not contribute in any significant way.

Engaging in political discussion was found to be a significant contributor to interest in politics ($\beta = .418$, $p < .001$). Strength of ideology also approached significance in contributing to political interest ($\beta = .065$, $p < .10$).

Traditional media exposure and attention also contributed significantly to political interest. Watching broadcast news significantly contributed to political interest ($\beta = .094$, $p < .05$). People who read newspapers were also more politically interested than those who did not ($\beta = .325$, $p < .001$). Finally, exposure and attention to late night television talk shows contributed significantly to political interest ($\beta = .072$, $p < .10$), but political comedy programs made no significant contribution.

Political Cynicism

Hypothesis 1 and 2 examine the relationship between late night television talk shows, political comedy programs and political cynicism. Table 6 indicates that this model achieved a level of significance $F(12, 388) = 1.58$, $p < .10$. The percentage of variance accounted for between late night television talk shows and political comedy programs and the criterion variable political cynicism approached significance $R^2 = .047$, $p < .10$.

Political cynicism was significantly higher among older respondents ($\beta = .134$, $p < .05$). Table 6 also shows that sex, student classification, and parental effects all failed to significantly influence political cynicism. Political interest and strength of ideology also made no significant contribution to political cynicism.

Heavy exposure and attention to television news and newspapers did not have a significant impact on political cynicism. In examining Table 6, the coefficient estimate shows that late night television talk shows also failed to significantly predict political cynicism ($\beta = .019$, $p < .738$). Therefore, H1 is not supported. In examining the impact of political comedy programs it was found that heavy exposure and attention contributed significantly to

political cynicism (β = .131, $p < .05$). Therefore, H2 is supported.

Civic Participation

The civic participation measure explored a respondent's involvement in membership oriented, community activities, such as sports, religious activities, drama organizations, and group volunteering. For the criterion variable civic participation, Table 7 displays the control and the predictor variables. The model showed a level of significance $F(12, 388) = 2.57$, $p < .01$. The percentage of variance accounted for between late night television talk shows and political comedy programs and the criterion variable civic participation was $R^2 = .074$, $p < .01$.

Younger college students were significantly more likely to engage in civic participation (β = -.152, $p < .05$). Females were significantly more inclined to engage in civic participation than were men (β = -.123, $p < .05$). A respondent's educational classification did not significantly contribute to civic participation. Also, political interest and the strength of a person's political ideology did not significantly affect civic participation. In controlling for parental effects, neither the parent's education level nor the family's wealth significantly contributed to levels of civic participation.

Exploring media use variables; Table 7 displays that broadcast news and newspaper news failed to achieve significance in predicting civic participation.

In assessing the contribution of late night television talk shows on civic participation, it was hypothesized that heavy viewers of late night television talk shows would positively predict civic participation. H3 was not supported. The regression coefficients in Table 7 specify that no significant relationship exists between late night television shows and civic participation ($\beta = .040$, $p = .466$). The fourth hypothesis specified that more viewing of political comedy programs would positively predict civic participation. This hypothesis, too, failed to reach significance. Table 7 reveals that political comedy programs made no significant contribution to civic participation ($\beta = -.026$, $p = .641$).

Political Participation

The political participation measure explored levels of political activity such as attendance at political rallies, letter writing to the editor, participating in human rights and environmental organizations, collecting money for a social cause, and participating in student government. The multiple regression model for political participation showed a level of significance $F(12, 388) = 5.10$, $p < .001$.

The percentage of variance accounted for between late night television talk shows and political comedy programs and the criterion variable political participation was $R^2 = .136$, $p < .001$.

As can be seen in Table 8, three control variables predicted political participation. Younger respondents were significantly more likely to engage in political participation ($\beta = -.154$, $p < .01$). Sex made no significant contribution to political participation, however, a respondent's student classification strongly predicted participation in political activities ($\beta = .145$, $p < .01$). Those who engaged in political discussions were significantly more inclined to participate in political activities ($\beta = .236$, $p < .001$).

This model also shows how media use variables contributed to political participation. As indicated in Table 8, broadcast news and newspaper news failed to achieve significance in predicting political participation.

The fifth hypothesis stated that greater viewing of late night television talk shows would positively predict political participation. The model shows no significant relationship between late night television talk shows and political participation ($\beta = .047$, $p = .376$). Thus, H5 was not supported. The sixth hypothesis concerned the greater

viewing of political comedy programs and the prediction of political participation. H6, too, failed to reach significance. As Table 8 shows, political comedy programs indicate a negative, although non-significant, relationship (β = -.023, p = .665).

Likelihood of Voting

The seventh and eighth hypotheses are concerned with late night television talk shows and political comedy programs contribution to likelihood of voting. Overall, the model did show a level of significance $F(12, 388) = 6.47$, $p < .001$ and the squared multiple correlations (R^2) indicate that the model accounts for 16% of the variance in voter likelihood. Table 9 reveals that age, sex, and student classification all fail to significantly impact voter likelihood. Parental effects also failed to significantly influence voter likelihood.

Those individuals who are interested in politics, however, are also significantly more inclined to vote (β = .378, $p < .001$). Political ideology and political discussion did not significantly affect voter likelihood.

Table 9 also shows that broadcast news and newspaper news failed to achieve significance in predicting likelihood of voting. Additionally, there were no significant relationships between late night television

talk shows (β = -.010, p = .845) or political comedy programs (β = -.021, p = .692) and voter likelihood. Both H7 and H8 failed to reach significance.

In summary, age was a recurring variable accounting for younger respondents engaging in civic and political participation. Late night television talk shows and political comedy programs failed to significantly predict civic participation, political participation, or the likelihood of voting.

General Political Knowledge

To provide a full understanding of the relationship between late night television talk shows and political comedy programs on general political knowledge, an examination of control variables is instructive. Table 10 displays the control and predictor variables for general political knowledge. Overall, the model was significant $F(12, 388) = 10.64$, $p < .001$ and the model accounts for a considerable amount of the variance of general political knowledge ($R^2 = .245$, $p < .001$).

The model showed that the respondent's age and sex did not have a significant impact on general political knowledge. The respondent's educational classification also failed to significantly contribute to general political knowledge. The model does show, however, that the strength

of a person's political ideology significantly predicted general political knowledge (β = .227, p < .001).

In controlling for parental effects, it was determined that a parent's education level did not significantly contribute to general political knowledge, but family wealth does (β = .098, p < .05). Political interest, too, contributed significantly to general political knowledge (β = .140, p < .05), yet political discussion failed to contribute significantly to general political knowledge.

Media use was also examined to determine the contributing relationship between broadcast news and newspaper exposure and attention and general political knowledge. The model showed that neither broadcast news nor newspaper exposure and attention contributed significantly to general political knowledge.

The ninth hypothesis specified that greater viewing of late night television talk shows would positively predict general political knowledge. An examination of the regression coefficient indicates no significant relationship between late night talk shows and general political knowledge (β = .003, p = .948). The tenth hypothesis suggested that greater viewing of political comedy programs would positively predict general political knowledge. This hypothesis was strongly supported. As

indicated in Table 10, political comedy programs are significant predictors of general political knowledge (β = .185, $p < .001$).

Candidate Personal Knowledge

As indicated in Table 11, the control and predictor variables for candidate personal knowledge. The model was significant $F(12, 388) = 17.79$, $p < .001$ and the squared multiple correlations (R^2) indicate that the model accounts for 35% of the variance in candidate personal knowledge.

A number of control variables strongly predicted candidate personal knowledge. Candidate personal knowledge is significantly higher among older respondents (β = .190, $p < .001$). Men were significantly more knowledgeable about candidate personal knowledge than were women (β = .158, $p < .001$). A respondent's student classification did not contribute significantly to candidate personal knowledge. The strength of the individual's political ideology also failed to achieve levels of significance in predicting candidate personal knowledge. In controlling for parental effects on candidate personal knowledge, neither a parent's educational level nor their family wealth contributed significantly to candidate personal knowledge.

Interest in politics was a significant predictor of candidate personal knowledge (β = .220, $p < .001$). Having

political discussions also significantly predicted candidate personal knowledge (β = .194, p < .001).

Traditional media use was not a significant contributor to candidate personal knowledge, as both broadcast news and newspaper news both failed to significantly predict candidate personal knowledge.

The eleventh hypothesis stated that heavy viewers of late night television talk shows would positively predict candidate personal knowledge. This hypothesis was supported. As indicated in Table 11, late night television talk shows significantly predicted candidate personal knowledge (β = .106, p < .05). Additionally, the twelfth hypothesis suggested that greater viewing of political comedy programs would positively predict candidate personal knowledge. This hypothesis, too, was supported. Exposure and attention to political comedy programs enhanced candidate personal knowledge (β = .117, p < .05).

In summary, while numerous control variables made contributions to general political knowledge and candidate personal knowledge, political interest was as a significant predictor of both criterion variables. Late night television talk shows made no significant contribution to general political knowledge, but were a predictor of candidate personal knowledge during the 2004 presidential

election. Political comedy programs were found to enhance both general political knowledge and candidate personal knowledge.

Political Discussion

This study is also concerned with late night television talk shows and political comedy programs' contribution to political discussion. This model showed a level of significance $F(11, 389) = 29.60$, $p < .001$ and the model accounts for a considerable amount of the variance of political discussion ($R^2 = .456$, $p < .001$).

Age and sex had no significant impact on engaging in political discussion (Table 12). Student classification also had no significant impact on the frequency of political discussion. A parent's education level failed to significantly influence political discussion, but a family's wealth significantly influenced the frequency of political discussion ($\beta = .089$, $p < .05$).

Persons with a stronger orientation toward their political ideology were also more inclined to engage in political discussion ($\beta = .097$, $p < .05$). Political interest was also a significant predictor of political discussion ($\beta = 459$, $p < .001$).

In exploring media use variables, it was determined that heavy exposure and attention to television news was

not a predictor of frequency of political discussion. However, reading a newspaper was a significant predictor (β = .120, $p < .05$).

Hypothesis 13 stated that greater viewing of late night television talk shows would positively predict political discussion. As indicated in Table 12, the regression coefficient for late night television talk shows failed to reach significance (β = -.054, $p < .203$). Thus, H13 was rejected. Hypothesis 14 stated that viewing political comedy programs would positively predict political discussion. This hypothesis was strongly supported by the regression coefficients. As Table 12 shows, political comedy programs were significant predictors of political discussion (β = .200, $p < .001$).

Test of Mediation

In addition to examining direct effects, this study also explored whether the information processing strategy active reflection mediated the relationships between the predictor variables late night television talk shows and political comedy programs and the criterion variables general political knowledge, candidate personal knowledge, civic participation and political participation.

As a reminder, Baron and Kenny (1986) explained that three different steps are necessary for mediation to occur

(see Figure 1). The first procedure is to establish the direct effect. Once it is determined that the predictor variables (X) significantly predicts the criterion variable (Y), mediation is possible. The second step is to establish the mediator variable as an outcome variable. For mediation to occur, it must be shown that X significantly predicts the mediator variable (M). The final step is to determine whether the mediator variable (M) significantly predicts the criterion variable (Y), while controlling for the predictor variables (X). Baron and Kenny specify that their must be a significant effect in each of the three steps for mediation to occur.

No significant relationship was found between late night television talk shows and general political knowledge, therefore the hypothesis concerning whether active reflection would mediate the relationship was not confirmed (H15a). No significant relationships were found between late night television talk shows and political comedy programs and the criterion variables civic participation or political participation, so the hypotheses concerning whether active reflection would mediate these relationships were also not confirmed (H 15c, H 15d, H 16c, and H 16d).

The remaining mediation hypotheses (H 15b, H 16a, and H16b) are explored using the three steps outlined by Baron and Kenny. Hypothesis 15b stated that active reflection would mediate the relationship between late night television talk shows and candidate personal knowledge. In hypothesis 15b, an assessment of the first regression equation (hypothesis eleven, see Figure 2) shows that late night television talk shows predicted candidate personal knowledge (ß = .106, $p < .05$). In Figure 2, the second equation shows that late night television talk shows were significant predictors of active reflection (ß = .296, $p < .001$). Table 13 shows the beta weights for the final step of mediation. The final regression equation in Figure 2 depicts that engaging in active reflection did not significantly contribute to candidate personal knowledge (ß = .022, $p < .654$). As such hypothesis 15b fails to be confirmed. Active reflection fails to achieve significance in mediating the relationship between late night television talk shows and candidate personal knowledge.

Hypothesis 16a stated that active reflection would mediate the relationship between political comedy programs and general political knowledge. The regression coefficients for the first equation (hypothesis ten, see Figure 3) show that political comedy programs were

significantly predictive of general political knowledge (ß = .185, $p < .001$). In Figure 3, the second equation shows political comedy programs were strongly predictive of active reflection (ß = .234, $p < .001$). Yet, the final equation fails to achieve significance (see Figure 3). Table 13 shows that active reflection is not a significant predictor of general political knowledge (ß = -.044, $p <$ .412). Hypothesis 16a is rejected.

Hypothesis 16b stated that active reflection will mediate the relationship between political comedy programs and candidate personal knowledge. The first regression equation (hypothesis twelve, see Figure 4) shows that exposure and attention to political comedy programs significantly contributed to candidate personal knowledge (ß = .117, $p < .05$). In Figure 4, people who watch political comedy programs also engage in late night television talk show and political comedy program active reflection (ß = .234, $p < .001$). The final equation, however, failed to reach significance (See Figure 4). Table 13 shows that active reflection failed to significantly predict candidate personal knowledge (ß = .022, $p < .654$). Thus, active reflection failed to mediate the relationship between political comedy programs and candidate personal knowledge.

In summary, it was hypothesized that active reflection would mediate the relationship between the predictor variables late night television talk shows and political comedy programs and the criterion variables general political knowledge and candidate personal knowledge. In each hypothesis, active reflection failed to mediate the relationship between the predictor and criterion variables.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Over 20 years ago, Neil Postman (1985) urged that "Entertainment is the supraideology of all discourse on television. No matter what is depicted or from what point of view, the overarching presumption is that it is there for our amusement and pleasure" (p. 87). Perhaps Postman foresaw the entertainment politics of today's late night television talk shows and political comedy programs. Steve Allen, Jack Parr, and Johnny Carson certainly set the stage for today's late night television talk show and political comedy program hosts to make fun of politician's imperfections. Richard Nixon, John Kennedy, and Robert Kennedy did there share to establish the genre as a political outlet and enabled later presidential, senatorial, and gubernatorial candidates to appear on the *Late Show with David Letterman*, the *Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, and the *Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.

As young people have increasingly self-reported learning about political candidates and campaigns from nontraditional news sources, such as late night television talk shows and political comedy programs (Pew Center, 2004, 2000), this "blurring" of entertainment and politics has also caused much concern. Postman argued that television

programming disallows the audience from posing critical questions about the programming; to "reveal the act of thinking" is to undermine the content of the programming. In concerns over the cultivation effects of mass media, Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli (1980) argued that the exposure to television contributed to ways of thinking and acting. Putnam (2000, 1995) agreed, arguing that television diminished the social bonds of community.

This investigation assesses the cultivation effects of late night television talk show and political comedy programs on political knowledge, citizen participation, and political cynicism. Few research studies prior to 2003 were concerned with late night television talk shows or political comedy programs' contribution to political knowledge, these early studies examined daytime television talk shows and cable news talk programs such as CNN's *Larry King Live* (Weaver & Drew, 1995, 2001; Drew & Weaver, 1998), an exception was a study of soft media and foreign policy and a 1992 study of traditional and nontraditional campaign media and political knowledge (Baum, 2003; Chaffee, et al., 1994). Research on citizen participation had examined the contribution of various entertainment media, yet only recently examined the contribution of late night television talk shows (Moy, et al., 2005). There is a paucity of

research on political comedy programs such as the *Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *Real Time with Bill Maher* and citizen participation.

The premise of this research was that exposure and attention to late night television talk shows and political comedy programs contribute positively to general political knowledge, candidate personal knowledge, citizen participation, political discussion and political cynicism. The objective of this research was to determine if late night television talk shows and political comedy programs were sufficient media to stir the audience so that they might learn political information and engage in various forms of participation. This research was also concerned with whether the programs contributed to political cynicism. Finally, this research was concerned with whether active reflection, as an information processing strategy, might mediate the relationship between the programs and political knowledge and citizen participation.

The following is a discussion of the results and their implications. This discussion is organized around the following cognitive outcomes: general political knowledge, candidate personal knowledge, and political cynicism. Additionally, the discussion is organized around the following behavioral outcomes: civic participation,

political participation, and likelihood of voting. This chapter will end with a discussion of the limitations to the study and offer direction for future research.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this research. First, late night television talk shows and political comedy programs should not be taken as a single unit of entertainment television. Each contributes to cognitive outcomes differently. For example, the findings show that watching political comedy programs contributed to general political knowledge and candidate personal knowledge, but watching late night television talk shows contributed only to candidate personal knowledge. Second, the findings show that watching political comedy programs contributed to levels of political cynicism. Watching late night television talk shows did not have this impact. In exploring behavioral outcomes, it was found that neither late night television talk shows nor political comedy programs were sufficient in information or appeal to contribute to civic participation, political participation, or voter likelihood. Third, the findings show that watching political comedy programs contributed to political discussion. Finally, active processing, the information processing strategy where one critically assesses information and then discusses the information with others,

was neither a significant mediator of the relationship between late night television talk shows and candidate personal knowledge, nor a significant mediator of the relationship between political comedy programs and general political knowledge and candidate personal knowledge. Late night television talk shows and political comedy programs, however, contributed significantly to active reflection

Cognitive Outcomes

Political cynicism. This research shows that watching political comedy programs contribute to political cynicism. Previous research, however, only indicate that late night television talk shows contribute to political cynicism (Moy & Pfau, 1999; Pfau, et al., 2001), because there is a paucity of research that examines the relationship between political comedy programs and political cynicism. Other research has examined the relationship between television hard news use, newspaper hard news use, and nontraditional media like radio talk shows and political advertisements. In previous research, it has been found that television hard news use and newspaper hard news use do not significantly contribute to political cynicism (Leshner & McKean, 1997; O'Keefe, 1980). So, this research seems rather consistent in finding that watching broadcast news and reading newspapers does not significantly contribute to

political cynicism. Recent research on traditional news media has focused on media content and how campaign coverage, policies, and so forth are framed; this research only examines the exposure and attention to various forms of media. Thus, any study of political cynicism may benefit from an examination of media exposure and attention coupled with a content analysis of the program in order to fully understand late night television talk shows and political comedy programs. Overall, the R^2 shows that only 4.7% of the variance is accounted for in political cynicism. If the model for predicting political cynicism were improved by adding other demographic controls or communication variables, political comedy programs may fail to contribute significantly to political cynicism. Additionally, different political cynicism questions might allow for accounting for more variance, although the alpha level was relatively high at .724. Nonetheless, this finding remains interesting because it further adds to our understanding of how political comedy programs contribute to the democratic process.

Political knowledge. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) operationally defined political knowledge "as the range of factual information about politics that is stored in long-term memory" (p. 10). To this study, this definition is

important because it allows for an assessment of a wide range of political information. Media use and individual differences contributed to the political knowledge landscape in interesting ways.

Those who watched political comedy programs possessed different types of political information than those who watched late night television talk shows. Young voters' media exposure and attention to political comedy programs contributed to general political knowledge. This finding was consistent with previous research conducted by the National Annenberg Election Survey (2004) and was highly expected as the purpose of political comedy programs is to offer humorous critiques of the government, political issues, and politicians (Jones, 2005). That political comedy programs contribute to general political knowledge is impressive given this study's reliance on Delli Carpini and Keeter's (1991) five-item general political systems measure to assess voter learning. Other studies have used surveillance measures in different knowledge domains such as party issue knowledge (Chaffee, et al., 1994) and candidate issue knowledge (Drew & Weaver, 1998; Weaver & Drew, 1995, 2001; McLeod, et al., 1996).

Previous studies on voter learning generally concluded that late night television talk shows contributed little to

political knowledge. This research, however, reasoned that because of the program genres increased attention during presidential election cycles individuals may learn political information from the programs. Late night television talk shows, however, did not contribute significantly to general political knowledge.

Late night television talk shows inability to contribute to general political knowledge is likely for several reasons, despite the increased attention that these programs receive as new and innovative forms of political communication. First, late night television talk shows have as their primary obligation the advancement of celebrity and their "cultural product" (Marshall, 1997). Despite the increasing frequency of political jokes and appearances by political candidates, politics remains an incidental component of the programs. Second, as Niven, Lichter, and Amundson (2003) explained the humor presented in these programs is primarily image and personality based. Thus, there is little opportunity to learn about anything other than the character or personality of the candidate or politician who is included in the joke. Third, when candidates appear on the programs their primary goal is to assert themselves as "regular guys," thus further precluding substantive discussions between hosts and

candidates (Baum, 2003). Finally, Graber's (2001) assertion that measures of general political systems knowledge are too hard and detached from the average person's political knowledge needs may be especially relevant given a "new media" context where the primary discourse about politics is a humorous quip or monologue. This is especially relevant given Schudson's (1998) critique of the "ideal informed citizen". Again, despite the attention that political humor in late night television talk shows has received by journalist and scholars there continue to be few reasons to believe that the content is sufficient to influence general political systems knowledge.

Watching late night television talk shows and political comedy programs also contribute to higher levels of candidate personal knowledge. Late night television talk shows' contribution to candidate personal knowledge is contrary to previous studies that examined candidate issue knowledge (Chaffee, et al., 1994). There are several possible explanations for this finding. First, Niven, Lichter, and Amundson (2003) explain that "late night comedy is predominantly directed at the executive branch, encompassing the president, major presidential candidates, [and] the first family . . . ." (p. 130). This concentration and repetition may provide heavy viewers of

late night television talk shows a repository of ready "facts" about executive level politicians and presidential contenders. Additionally, Niven, Lichter, and Amundson, quoting Jon Stewart of the *Daily Show,* note that the key to comedy "is reducing these guys [politicians] to monosyllabic stereotypes" (p. 130). While for Jon Stewart the key to comedy maybe a stereotype, the key to the young voter's candidate personal knowledge base may also be the reduction of the politician to a singular word or phrase that is associated with the individuals' character, personality, previous work experience, war service, marital relationship, or public speaking ability.

Findings concerning late night television talk shows and political comedy programs' contribution to general political knowledge and candidate personal knowledge are important for several reasons. First, the findings demonstrate that a blanket negative appraisal of nontraditional media's contribution to political knowledge is unwarranted. Political comedy programs make a significant contribution to general political knowledge and candidate personal knowledge. Watching late night television talk shows strongly impact candidate personal knowledge.

Additionally, this research notes the Pew Center (2000, 2004) studies that explain that young people self-report learning about candidates. This study, like the Pew Center surveys, taps into respondents' knowledge about candidate personal knowledge for both late night television talk shows and political comedy programs. While the Pew surveys indicate that people self-report learning, this study shows that both late night television talk shows and political comedy programs strongly contribute to candidate personal knowledge.

Finally, in considering late night television talk show and political comedy programs contributions to political knowledge it is important to keep in mind that there are differences in program structure and purpose. This may necessarily favor one program in contributing to either general political knowledge or candidate personal knowledge. As has been reported, the purpose of political comedy programming is markedly different from that of late night television talk shows.

This research also hypothesized that active reflection, an information processing strategy, would mediate the relationship between late night television talk shows and campaign knowledge. Additionally, it was hypothesized that active reflection would mediate the

relationship between political comedy shows and general political knowledge and candidate personal knowledge. Active reflection is an indicator of how the individual uses media to understand political information, "downplaying the effects of what media do in comparison with what individuals do to construct meaning" (Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001). Younger respondents who watch broadcast news, late night television talk shows, political comedy programs, and read newspapers actively reflect on the content of late night television talk shows and political comedy programs (See Table 14). Active reflection, however, did not contribute to general political knowledge or candidate issue knowledge. This finding is surprising considering Sotirovic and McLeod (2001) found that active reflection contributed to public affairs knowledge. One possible explanation for active reflections inability to significantly contribute to general political knowledge and candidate issue knowledge is the measures for late night television talk show/political comedy program active reflection. These measures ask respondents if they consider late night television talk shows and political comedy programs in there thinking or discussions with others, yet the measure items do not prompt the respondent to consider political humor. Perhaps, prompting the respondent to

consider the political humor, in addition to the program, would present greater significance. The current measures for late night television talk show and political comedy program active processing closely resemble those used for news and information processing (Kosicki & McLeod, 1990; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001).

Demographics, too, influenced general political knowledge and candidate personal knowledge in ways that were consistent with previous studies, but also in ways that were unexpected. Like previous studies, age did not predict general political knowledge (Bennett & Rademacher, 1997). The finding that age is a predictor of candidate personal knowledge is consistent with previous research on voter learning (Chaffee, et al., 1994), but other research concentrating on campaign issue knowledge found that age was not a significant predictor (Drew & Weaver, 1998; Weaver & Drew, 1995, 2001).

In this study, sex failed to significantly predict general political knowledge. While Chaffee, Zhao, and Leshner (1994) found that females possessed more candidate personal knowledge, this study notes that males knew more candidate personal knowledge than did females. The goal of this research was not to determine which sex was more knowledgeable, but to control for sex as a predictor of

general political knowledge and candidate personal knowledge. Nevertheless, it is surprising that sex makes no significant contribution given the historic relationship between sex and general knowledge (Bennett, 1994; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1991; Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 1997).

It is particularly interesting that student classification also failed to predict general political knowledge and candidate personal knowledge. While previous studies have found that young adults are not as knowledgeable as older adults, it is the younger adults that have most recently completed their high school educations. In this study, the measure of student classification recognizes that the respondents' are matriculating through the higher education system. Further, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) noted that attending college provides opportunity for increased public affairs knowledge. This is of particular interest because general political knowledge was assessed using "textbook" information and it is reasonable to expect that those who have most recently graduated from high school and who are actively pursuing advanced degrees would be particularly knowledgeable of "textbook" facts about politics.

Ostensibly, Jennings (1996) accounts for this phenomena explaining that a respondent's knowledge of

"textbook" facts is "at its height . . . near graduation. Without the stimulation of continued tuition and testing, the ability to retrieve such facts at a moment's notice diminishes considerably" (p. 234-235). One might surmise that these respondents are sufficiently removed from their high school civics classes and have not enrolled in collegiate level political science courses, or they have completed their political science courses and are now exhibiting declining levels of general political knowledge. The latter is what Jennings calls "forgetting curves in young adulthood" (p. 235). This study does not provide a testable explanation for this phenomenon, but notes that a student's educational classification fails to significantly predict general political knowledge.

Socio-economic status predicted general political knowledge in ways that were mixed. Socio-economic status was included as a method to control for family influences as the sample was composed of young adult college students. Family wealth was a significant predictor of general political knowledge, but a parent's educational level was not a significant predictor. Family wealth did not influence candidate issue knowledge; this is consistent with previous findings (Chaffee, et al., 1994). Previous research that combined measures of a person's educational

attainment and income found that socio-economic status was a predictor of public affairs knowledge (McLeod & Perse, 1994). This study's findings differ, but only in the sense that socio-economic status was measured as individual items.

Political dispositions also influenced general political knowledge in ways that are consistent with previous studies. This study shows that individuals who are politically interested also possess more general political knowledge. This was expected as political interest has been a predictor of various political knowledge measures in studies of media use and voter learning since at least the 1988 election cycle, with the exception of the 1996 presidential election (Drew & Weaver, 1991, 1998; Weaver & Drew, 1995, 2001). Strength of ideology was also strongly associated with general political knowledge. Hollander (1995), too, found that strength of ideology was a predictor of political knowledge, although that study predicted campaign issue knowledge. Other studies, rather than utilizing ideology strength as a control, examined party label and their ability to predict campaign issue knowledge (Drew & Weaver, 1991, 1998; Weaver & Drew, 1995, 2001).

Behavioral Outcomes

Citizen participation. Gerbner and colleagues (1980) and Putnam (1995, 2000) have derided television for undermining people's ability to create social bonds. This study focused on young voters who are more likely to have participated in some form of community service (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), yet engage in political activities and voted less often than previous generational cohorts (Project Vote Smart, 1999; Putnam, 1995, 2000; Vanishing Voter, 2000).

The findings in this study show that watching late night television talk shows and political comedy programs make no significant contribution to civic participation, political participation, or voter likelihood. Recent research by Moy and colleagues (2005) found that late night television talk shows contributed to campaign participation, but did not significantly contribute to voter likelihood. Previous studies, however, have indicated that entertainment television, such as situation comedies; contribute little to participation (Shah, et al., 2001). Other studies have concentrated on television hard news and newspaper hard news use and citizen participation (Moy, et al., 1999; Scheufele, 2000, 2002). It has been explained that a key reason for situation comedies poor performance

in contributing to civic participation is the portrayal of a world "free of social controversy and value conflicts" (Shah, et al., 2001) .

Ostensibly, recognizing a problem's existence, or conflict, is necessary for individuals to develop sufficient interest to engage in some form of participation. Shah, McLeod, and Yoon's analysis effectively holds true for late night television talk shows that offer humorous ridicule of individual politicians, but offer little substantive policy content. The content is insufficient to encourage participation, unless the individual is already predisposed to participate in various civic and political activities. Moy, Xenos, and Hess (2005) offer this explanation "with respect to political activity, politically oriented content on late-night shows appears to be preaching to the choir" (p. 125).

Caution should be employed in interpreting the findings of political participation, civic participation, and voter likelihood. Several reasons justify this caution in interpretation. First, the R^2 shows that only 7.4% of the variance is accounted for in civic participation, 13.6% in political participation, and 16.7% in voter likelihood. These low R^2 values are indicators of a poor fitting model that only explains a small amount of variance. Second, the

reliability level for both political participation (KR-20 = .523) and civic participation (KR-20 = .537) were low. As such, better questions to capture a broader range of civic and political participation may have improved the ability to account for greater variance in both forms of participation. Additionally, including a broader set of control variables, such as including church attendance, may have improved the ability to account for more variance in each of the participation variables (Putnam, 2000).

This research shows that people who watch political comedy programs are more inclined to participate in political discussions. This finding is noteworthy for several reasons. First, it is argued that political discussions are a form of political participation, thus it can be argued that political comedy programs make a contribution to participatory democracy (Delli Carpini, et al., 2004). Second, given political comedy programs contribution to general political knowledge, candidate personal knowledge, and political discussion researchers have further reason to study the *Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *Real Time with Bill Maher*.

Theoretical Contribution

Cultivation theory established the theoretical framework for this research. Gerbner (1969, 1976) argued

that due to the ubiquitous nature of television, individuals internalize programming and that an audiences' social reality becomes reflective of that mediated reality. Recognizing the inherent limitations of cultivation theory (Potter & Chang, 1990), this research examined specific programming to determine their contributions to cognitive and behavioral outcomes.

If Gerbner's "mean world" hypothesis is taken to mean that television's effects are negative toward various outcomes, then this research presents decidedly mixed findings. As predictor variables, late night television talk shows and political comedy programs contribute to knowledge differently. It has been shown that political comedy programs contribute to a fuller range of political knowledge than do late night television talk shows. Ostensibly, it might be argued that both political comedy programs and late night television talk shows contribute positively to the "thriving democracy" debate. The programs, however, contribute to textbook and surveillance oriented political knowledge differently. Little in this research is suggestive that exposure and attention to late night television talk shows and political comedy programs suppress political knowledge.

In her examination of civic participation, Norris (1996) argued that the viewers' program selection should be disentangled from more pervasive viewing patterns. This research acts on that advice by examining two nontraditional forms of political information. This research does not demonstrate that late night television talk shows or political comedy programs contribute significantly to civic participation, political participation, or voter likelihood. Yet, political programs contribute significantly to political discussion. With respect to cultivation theory, researchers should use caution in applying the "mean world" analogy to political comedy programs. While engaging in political discussion may require less effort than other forms of participation, political discussion is recognized as a contributor to the health of democracy (Barber, 1984; Dewey 1927; Habermas, 1996; Page, 1996). As explained earlier, it remains important to recognize the content presented in late night television talk shows and political comedy programs may be insufficient to generate participation that requires great effort.

Limitations

This research is subject to several limitations. Regression analyses reveal significant relationships

between predictor and outcome variables, however the statistical tests in no way allow for statements about causation. Tabachnick and Fidell (1989) explain that causation is a "logical and experimental, rather than a statistical, problem" (p. 127). In a causal relationship the two variables (X) and (Y) must be correlated. Additionally, Tabachnick and Fidell explained that the predictor variable (X) identified in the research must precede (Y) in that exposure and attention to media precede the outcomes. Finally, X must contribute to the strength of relationships with outcome variable (Y), and no other unknown variable should be able to explain the relationship between X and Y (nonspuriousness). This research explains the significance of the relationships between various media exposure and attention and the outcome variables: general political knowledge, candidate personal knowledge, civic participation, political participation, and political cynicism. Yet, this research is limited because of an inability to explain the time order relationship between X and Y. Additionally, while a set of control variables were introduced to this analysis, not all possible controls variables were accounted for in the multiple regression analysis. So, this research is unable to account for all rival explanations on the outcome variable (Y).

This research would have also benefited from a random sample of young voters. As such, the second limitation concerns the sample composition. This research was conducted with a non random single-cross sectional sampling of students enrolled in freshman and sophomore level general education courses at a small, regional Oklahoma university. As the sample was not randomly derived, the findings are not generalizable to the larger population. This research concerned young voters and isolating a sample at a university allows for a concentration on youth, but the non random sample does not account for all individuals in a population and afford equal chance of being included. Also, the population from which this sample was drawn has a poverty level 8% higher than the national average and is predominantly Caucasian and American Indian yet is only 1.9% below the national average for holding a Bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). Additionally, because those participating in the research were students, the findings are further limited to individuals who have achieved a specific level of education.

Another limitation of this study concerns the measure of political knowledge. This study measures general political knowledge and candidate personal knowledge as a form of candidate personal knowledge. The selection of

knowledge measures was initially preferred because content analysis studies indicate that 75% of the humor on late night television talk shows is directed at the politician's character or personality and only 14% of the host's wit is directed at political issues (Nitz, Cypher, Reichert, & Mueller, 2003; Niven, Lichter, & Amundson, 2003). The inclusion of campaign issue knowledge, however, would have provided a fuller understanding of the respondent's political knowledge ranging from the processes of government, candidate biographical information, and campaign issue knowledge. The inclusion of campaign issue knowledge would also have allowed for greater ease in comparing the effects in studies that have focused on media exposure and attentions' contribution to democratic outcomes.

Limitations should be noted for the reliability estimates of the citizen participation criterion measures. KR-20, or the coefficient alpha, was employed as a test of item reliability. KR-20 is utilized when respondents respond to a dichotomous measure, such as indicating that they did or did not participate in an activity. The reliability of the civic participation KR-20 value was .537. The reliability of the political participation KR-20 was .523. While these reliability coefficients indicate

that the measures are of doubtful reliability, Jerard (1995) argues that instruments containing less than 15 items a value as low as .5 is satisfactory. However, researchers should use caution in interpreting the results for both civic participation and political participation, as low reliability is likely to lead to type II error.

Future Research

There are several opportunities for future research. Studies concerning late night television talk shows, and especially political comedy programs would benefit greatly from content analysis of the programs. Few have studied the content of late night television talk shows (Moy & Pfau, 2000; Niven, et al., 2003; Nitz, et al., 2003) and no systematic analysis of the content in political comedy programs. This would allow researchers to better understand the differences in the two program genres. Also, the analysis should occur in campaign and campaign free contexts to understand how the content differs across time.

Additionally, if this line of research is to continue, consideration should be paid to late night television talk shows and political comedy programs' contribution to democratic outcomes in a campaign free context. Previous studies, especially the work of Drew and Weaver, have focused on various media during presidential elections and

mid-term elections. There research, and others, has contributed much information about how particular media perform during election cycles. Avoiding election cycles would allow researchers to assess whether respondent's experience an acute sense of awareness about political items, and to determine the ability of the programs to contribute to political learning in the absence of a political campaign.

Of particular interest, is the opportunity to utilize political comedy programs as an educational tool to generate political discussions, and interest in politics. A fundamental question becomes how to balance the comedic commentary and at the same time say this is important without also developing cynicism.

Conclusion

For nearly fifty years, politicians have traded barbs with late night television talk show hosts, but it was the 1992 presidential election that intensified scholarly attention on this television genre as a form of political communication. As comedians' recognized new opportunities to humorously critique presidents and government, political comedy programs emerged satirizing traditional news media while also offering humorous critiques of presidential leadership and their policy objectives. As these genres

have gained prominence in presidential election cycles, there has been concern about the cognitive and behavioral implications of such programming.

This research found that political comedy programs appear to be an especially informative genre of political communication. The *Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *Real Time with Bill Maher* contribute to a wider range of political knowledge than did the *Late Show with David Letterman* or the *Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. Thus, concern may only be warranted if a person's political information diet consists exclusively of late night television talk shows. While no mediation effect was found with the variable active reflection, this research did find that young voters actively reflect on the content of late night television talk shows and political comedy programs. Reflecting on political content remains an important aspect of making sense of the political world.

Additionally, this research found that late night television talk shows and political comedy programs did not significantly contribute to political participation, civic participation, or voter likelihood. Much in the same way that situation comedies fail to contribute significantly to forms of participation, perhaps, civic participation, political participation, and voter likelihood are too much

to ask of the *Late Show*, the *Tonight Show*, the *Daily Show* and *Real Time*. Political comedy programs do significantly contribute to political discussions, and this has been argued to be an important form of participation.

While late night television talk shows receive much attention from political candidates, perhaps politicians should more freely consider political comedy programs as a communication outlet given their ability to significantly contribute to knowledge and discussion. Certainly, communication scholars should continue looking toward political comedy programs and their contributions to political knowledge and the democratic process.

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Table 1

Frequency Distribution for Late Night Television Talk Show Exposure and Attention

Interval	*Exposure Frequency*	*Cumulative Percent*	*Attention Frequency*	*Cumulative Percent*
0	76	18.4	74	18.0
1	44	29.1	30	25.2
2	26	35.4	26	31.6
3	40	45.1	32	39.3
4	54	58.3	31	46.8
5	38	67.5	43	57.3
6	30	74.8	31	64.8
7	32	82.5	55	78.2
8	34	90.8	37	87.1
9	19	95.4	34	95.4
10	19	100	19	100
	412		412	

Table 2

Frequency Distribution for Political Comedy Program Exposure and Attention

Interval	*Exposure Frequency*	*Cumulative Percent*	*Attention Frequency*	*Cumulative Percent*
0	246	59.7	253	61.4
1	43	70.1	38	70.6
2	17	74.3	16	74.5
3	17	78.4	11	77.2
4	15	82.0	6	78.6
5	14	85.4	13	81.8
6	15	89.1	13	85.0
7	11	91.7	13	88.1
8	12	94.7	13	91.3
9	9	96.8	16	95.1
10	13	100	20	100
	412		412	

Table 3

Predictors of Attention and Exposure to Nontraditional Media

Variable	*B* SE *B*	β	*B* SE *B*	β
	Late Night		*Political Comedy*	
Age	-1.001 (0.193)	-.282***	-.267 (0.121)	-.124*
Sex (Male)	5.409 (2.701)	.096*	7.594 (1.609)	.222***
Student Classification	0.387 (0.925)	.022	-.305 (0.564)	-.028
Parent's Education	-.662 (1.380)	-.024	0.335 (0.841)	.020
Family Wealth	-.236 (0.953)	-.012	-.157 (0.581)	-.013
Political Interest	1.465 (0.809)	.116	-.594 (0.494)	-.077
Strength of Ideology	1.404 (1.025)	.065	0.453 (0.625)	.035
Political Discussion	-1.080 (0.847)	-.078	2.464 (0.502)	.292***
Broadcast News	0.653 (0.094)	.377***	0.092 0.061)	.087
Newspaper News	-.037 (0.060)	-.036	0.039 (0.036)	.062
Late Night Television			0.064 (0.031)	.105*
Political Comedy Programs	0.172 (0.083)	.105*		

Note. n=401. Model for Late Night $F(11, 389) = 9.33$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.209$. Model for Political Comedy Programs $F(11, 389) = 9.205$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.207$. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$ – two-tailed test. A separate analysis found that unfolded ideology was also insignificant.

Table 4

Predictors of Attention and Exposure to Traditional News Media

Variable	*B* SE *B*	β	*B* SE *B*	β
	Broadcast News		*Newspapers*	
Age	0.431 (0.099)	.210***	-.100 (0.169)	-.029
Sex (Male)	-5.769 (1.349)	-.178***	5.169 (2.289)	.094**
Student Classification	1.360 (0.465)	.134**	1.360 (0.782)	.079
Parent's Education	0.288 (0.702)	.018	-2.505 (1.165)	-.092**
Family Wealth	0.469 (0.484)	.041	0.154 (0.809)	.008
Political Interest	0.851 (0.411)	.116*	4.849 (0.644)	.391***
Strength of Ideology	-.919 (0.520)	-.074	0.950 (0.870)	.045
Political Discussion	0.746 (0.430)	.093	1.782 (0.714)	.131**
Broadcast News			0.349 (0.083)	.206***
Newspaper News	0.125 (0.030)	.212***		
Late Night Television	0.169 (0.024)	.292***	-.027 (0.043)	-.027
Political Comedy Programs	0.064 (0.042)	.067	0.075 (0.071)	.047

Note. n=401. Model for Broadcast News $F(11, 389) = 22.22$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.386$. Model for Newspaper Reading $F(11,389) = 24.10$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.405$. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$ – two-tailed test. A separate analysis found that unfolded ideology was also insignificant.

Table 5

Predictors of Political Interest

Variable	*B*	SE *B*	β
Age	0.025	(0.012)	.089
Sex (Male)	-.213	(0.169)	-.048*
Student Classification	-.072	(0.058)	-.052
Parent's Education	0.161	(0.086)	.073
Family Wealth	-.033	(0.059)	-.021
Strength of Ideology	0.111	(0.064)	.065
Political Discussion	0.457	(0.048)	.418***
Broadcast News	0.013	(0.006)	.094*
Newspaper News	0.026	(0.003)	.325***
Late Night Television	0.006	(0.003)	.072
Political Comedy Shows	-.006	(0.005)	-.048

Notes. n=401. $F(11, 389) = 36.10$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.505$

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$ – two-tailed test.

Table 6

Predictors of Political Cynicism

Variable	*B*	SE *B*	β
Age	0.022	(0.010)	.134*
Sex (Male)	-.153	(0.137)	-.059
Student Classification	-.068	(0.047)	-.083
Parent's Education	-.059	(0.070)	-.046
Family Wealth	-.010	(0.048)	-.011
Political Interest	0.054	(0.041)	.092
Strength of Ideology	0.019	(0.052)	.019
Political Discussion	-.055	(0.043)	-.086
Broadcast News	-.003	(0.005)	-.042
Newspaper News	0.003	(0.003)	.072
Late Night Television	0.001	(0.003)	.019
Political Comedy Shows	0.010	(0.004)	.131*

Notes. n=401. $F(12, 388) = 1.58$, $p < .093$, $R^2 = 0.047$

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$ – two-tailed test.

Table 7

Predictors of Civic Participation

Variable	*B*	SE *B*	β
Age	-.022	(0.009)	-.152*
Sex (Male)	-0.279	(0.119)	-.123*
Student Classification	0.033	(0.041)	.046
Parent's Education	0.076	(0.060)	.067
Family Wealth	0.056	(0.042)	.071
Political Interest	0.031	(0.036)	.061
Strength of Ideology	0.051	(0.045)	.058
Political Discussion	0.065	(0.037)	.115
Broadcast News	-.005	(0.004)	-.068
Newspaper News	-.001	(.003)	-.018
Late Night Television	0.002	(0.002)	.040
Political Comedy Shows	-.002	(.004)	-.026

Notes. n=401. $F(12, 388) = 2.57$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = 0.074$

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$ – two-tailed test.

Table 8

Predictors of Political Participation

Variable	*B*	SE *B*	β
Age	-.024	(0.009)	-.154**
Sex (Male)	-.143	(0.126)	-.057
Student Classification	0.113	(0.043)	.145**
Parent's Education	-.018	(0.064)	-.014
Family Wealth	0.074	(0.044)	.085
Political Interest	0.051	(0.038)	.091
Strength of Ideology	-.005	(0.048)	-.005
Political Discussion	0.145	(0.039)	.236***
Broadcast News	-.001	(0.005)	-.015
Newspaper News	0.001	(0.003)	.026
Late Night Television	0.002	(0.002)	.047
Political Comedy Shows	-.002	(0.004)	-.023

Notes. n=401. $F(12, 388) = 5.10$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.136$

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$ – two-tailed test.

Table 9

Predictors of Likelihood of Voting

Variable	*B*	SE *B*	β
Age	0.017	(0.028)	.035
Sex (Male)	-.033	(0.386)	-.004
Student Classification	0.146	(0.131)	.060
Parent's Education	0.278	(0.196)	.072
Family Wealth	-.078	(0.135)	-.029
Political Interest	0.662	(0.155)	.378***
Strength of Ideology	0.176	(0.146)	.059
Political Discussion	0.032	(0.121)	.017
Broadcast News	0.014	(0.014)	.057
Newspaper News	-.012	(0.008)	-.083
Late Night Television	-.001	(0.007)	-.010
Political Comedy Shows	-.005	(0.012)	-.021

Notes. n=401. $F(12, 388) = 6.47$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.167$

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$ – two-tailed test.

Table 10

Predictors of General Political Knowledge

Variable	*B*	SE *B*	β
Age	0.005	(0.011)	.024
Sex (Male)	-.037	(0.149)	-.012
Student Classification	0.046	(0.051)	.046
Parent's Education	0.113	(0.076)	.072
Family Wealth	0.109	(0.052)	.098*
Political Interest	0.100	(0.045)	.140*
Strength of Ideology	0.275	(0.056)	.227***
Political Discussion	0.083	(0.047)	.107
Broadcast News	-.008	(0.005)	.085
Newspaper News	0.004	(0.003)	.078
Late Night Television	0.000	(0.003)	.003
Political Comedy Shows	0.017	(0.005)	.185***

Notes. n=401. $F(12, 388) = 10.64$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.248$

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$ – two-tailed test.

Table 11

Predictors of Candidate Personal Knowledge

Variable	*B*	SE *B*	β
Age	0.053	(0.014)	.190***
Sex (Male)	0.695	(0.192)	.158***
Student Classification	0.029	(0.066)	.021
Parent's Education	-.056	(0.098)	-.026
Family Wealth	0.042	(0.068)	.027
Political Interest	0.219	(0.058)	.220***
Strength of Ideology	0.098	(0.073)	.058
Political Discussion	0.211	(0.060)	.194***
Broadcast News	0.009	(0.007)	.069
Newspaper News	0.001	(0.004)	.018
Late Night Television	0.008	(0.004)	.106*
Political Comedy Shows	0.015	(0.006)	.117*

Notes. n=401. $F(12, 388) = 17.79$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.355$

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$ – two-tailed test.

Table 12

Predictors of Political Discussion

Variable	*B*	SE *B*	β
Age	-.013	(0.012)	-.050
Sex (Male)	0.039	(0.162)	.010
Student Classification	-.023	(0.055)	-.018
Parent's Education	-.110	(0.082)	-.055
Family Wealth	0.126	(0.057)	.089*
Political Interest	0.419	(0.044)	.459***
Strength of Ideology	0.150	(0.061)	.097*
Broadcast News	0.010	(0.006)	.083
Newspaper News	0.009	(0.004)	.120*
Late Night Television	-.004	(0.003)	-.054
Political Comedy Shows	0.024	(0.005)	.200***

Notes. n=401. $F(11, 389) = 29.60$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.456$

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$ – two-tailed test.

Table 13

Late Night Television Talk Show/Political Comedy Program Active Reflection Predicting General Political Knowledge and Campaign Knowledge

Variable	*B* SE *B*	β	*B* SE *B*	β
	General Political Knowledge		*Campaign Knowledge*	
Age	0.003 (0.011)	.016	0.049 (0.014)	.175**
Sex (Male)	-0.039 (0.149)	-.012	0.693 (0.195)	.157***
Student Classification	0.038 (0.051)	.038	0.031 (0.067)	.022
Parent's Education	0.104 (0.075)	.067	-0.095 (0.098)	-.044
Family Wealth	0.117 (0.052)	.106*	0.075 (0.068)	.048
Political Interest	0.135 (0.040)	.190**	0.303 (0.052)	.306***
Strength of Ideology	0.296 (0.056)	.245***	0.131 (0.073)	.078
Broadcast News	-0.007 (0.005)	-.068	0.011 (0.007)	.081
Newspaper News	0.006 (0.003)	.099	0.003 (0.004)	.042
Late Night Television	0.001 (0.003)	.006	0.007 (0.004)	.086
Political Comedy Programs	0.020 (0.005)	.218***	0.019 (0.006)	.150**
LNTS/PCP Active Reflection	-0.031 (0.038)	-.044	0.023 (0.050)	.022

Note. n=401. Model for General Political Knowledge $F(11, 389) = 10.63$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .246$. Model for Campaign Knowledge $F(11, 389) = 16.36$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.334$***. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$ – two-tailed test.

Table 14

Predictors of Late Night Television Talk Show/Political Comedy Active Reflection

Variable	*B* SE *B*	β
	Program Active Reflection	
Age	-0.007 (0.014)	-.026**
Sex (Male)	0.057 (0.196)	.013
Student Classification	-0.138 (0.067)	-.100*
Parent's Education	-0.001 (0.099)	-.001
Family Wealth	-0.086 (0.069)	-.055
Political Interest	0.031 (0.053)	.031
Political Ideology	0.131 (0.074)	.078
Broadcast News	0.016 (0.007)	.122*
Newspaper News	0.012 (0.004)	.144**
Late Night Television	0.023 (0.004)	.296***
Political Comedy Programs	0.030 (0.006)	.234***

Note. n=401. Model for LNTS/PCP Active Reflection $F(11, 389) = 16.58$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.317$***. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$ – two-tailed test.

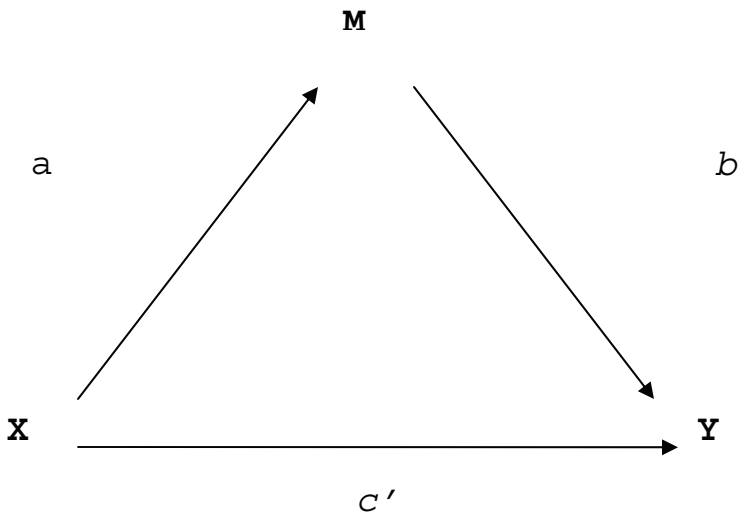

Figure 1. Path *a* establishes that the predictor variable X Contributes to the mediator variable M. Path *b* indicates the ability of M, the mediator variable, to predict outcome Y.

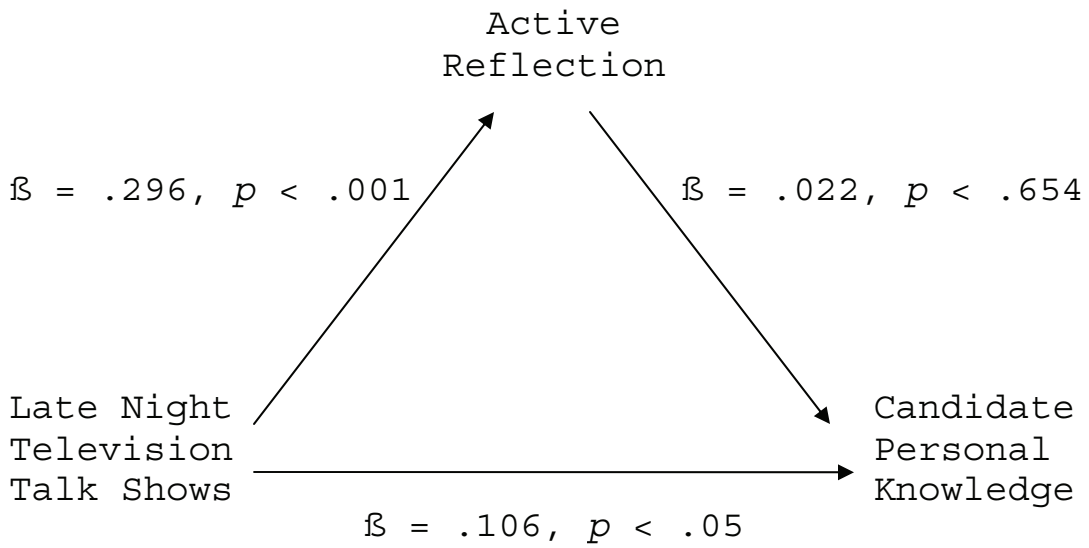

Figure 2. This model demonstrates the ability of active reflection to mediate the relationship between late night television talk shows and candidate personal knowledge.

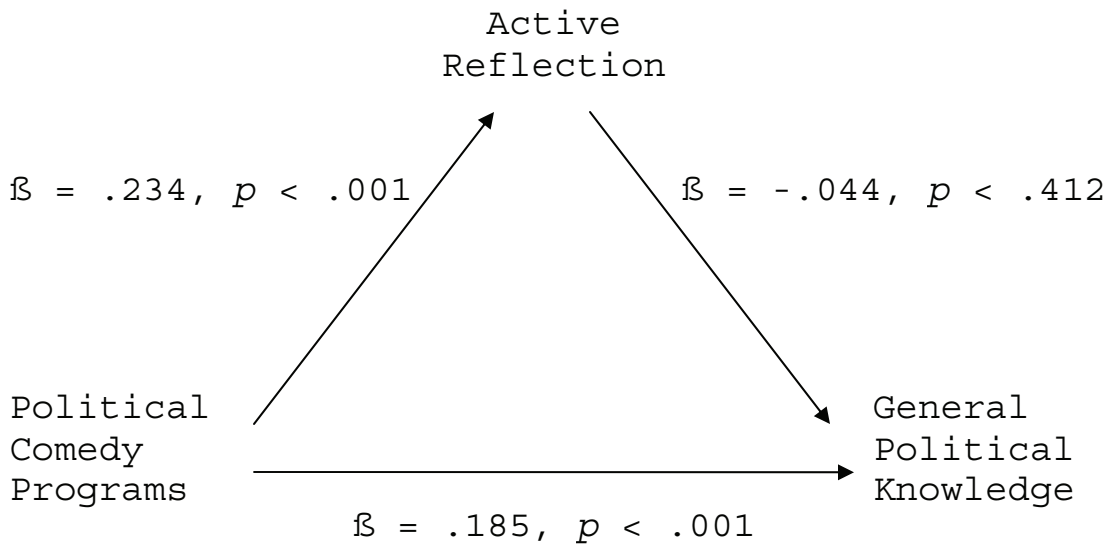

Figure 3. This model demonstrates the ability of active reflection to mediate the relationship between political comedy programs and general political knowledge.

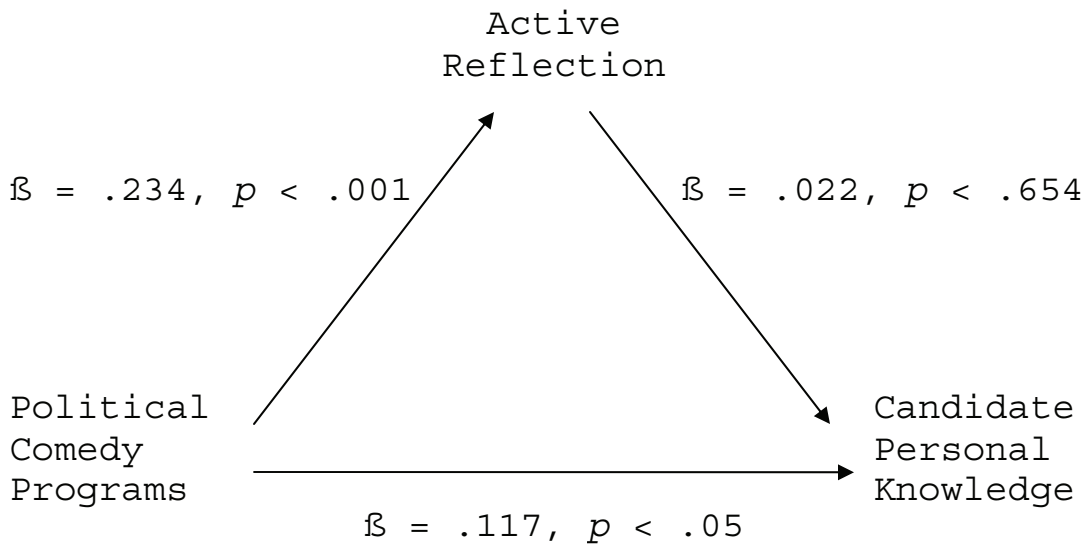

Figure 4. This model demonstrates the ability of active reflection to mediate the relationship between political comedy programs and candidate personal knowledge.