

Taking Late Night Comedy Seriously

How Candidate Appearances on Late Night Television Can Engage Viewers

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Candidate appearances on entertainment television have become a staple of recent presidential campaigns, yet little is known about their effect on voters. Many assume that they leave viewers uninformed and focused on the candidate's personal image. In this article, the author investigates this idea with an experiment using John Kerry's 2004 appearance on the *Late Show with David Letterman*. He finds that—contrary to popular expectations—late night interviews have particular features that can, at times, engage otherwise politically disinterested viewers, causing them to process and recall substantive policy information.

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Recent presidential campaigns have found candidates flocking to entertainment television, making talk shows and late night comedy programs standard campaign venues. Ever since Bill Clinton's 1992 visit to *The Arsenio Hall Show* (see Hayden 2002; Patterson 2004), nearly every presidential hopeful—whether a second-tier primary candidate or major party nominee—has hit the talk show circuit in an attempt to connect with voters through this entertaining medium. It has become routine, if not expected, to find “presidential candidates chatting with Oprah Winfrey, Rosie O’Donnell, and Regis Philbin [and] trading one-liners with Jay Leno and David Letterman” (Baum 2005, 213; also see Patterson 2004; Moy, Xenos, and Hess 2005, 199). These appearances have gained real political relevance, as they are seen by millions and are widely covered in the mainstream press, and yet, while there are many conjectures, there is little empirical evidence as to how they affect viewers' political decisions.

The common perception is that they help candidates seem more ordinary and amiable to scores of often hard-to-reach voters.¹ Many commentators and campaign advisors claim that “it is a terrific way to humanize the product” (Sella 2000, 75) because “a relaxed, lighthearted interview can make a stiff, somewhat formal candidate . . . seem almost personable” (Mason 2004, 14), which “is crucial in an age where hopefuls are always trying to be the candidate

you'd like to grab a drink with” (Woodward 2000, 1; also see Frey 2004; Baum 2005, 214; Brewer and Cao 2006, 22; Baumgartner and Morris 2006, 342).

There is some concern, however, about the effect that these appearances might have on viewers. Critics contend that these “cozy gab sessions increasingly serve as a substitute for more substantive exchanges” (Mason 2004, 14) and “trivialize serious issues of governing by infusing politics with entertainment” (Davis and Owen 1998, 92).² Others worry that they will prime millions to focus disproportionately on the candidate's personal image rather than his or her policy positions when deciding for whom to vote (Sella 2000; Mason 2004; Colbert 2004).³ Indeed, many see these appearances as contributing to a more image-based electorate that knows less than it should about the key issues in the campaign.

In this article, I examine how appearances on late night talk shows affect what viewers know about politics and the criteria they use to evaluate the candidate—do they leave viewers uninformed and overly image conscious? I argue that conventional expectations may be incomplete. I start in the next section by discussing how these appearances might prime viewers

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to consider major policy issues when evaluating the candidate. I also discuss the related process by which people might learn factual policy information from watching. I then describe an experiment in which college students—who, more than any other group, claim to learn about politics from talk shows (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2004)—are exposed to John Kerry’s 2004 appearance on the *Late Show with David Letterman* (*Letterman*). Results show that participants are drawn in by elements of Kerry’s appearance, leading them to become cognizant and knowledgeable of key issues in the campaign. The results also demonstrate that for many, this entertaining medium may be more effective at providing substantive political information than a formal news program. I conclude by discussing how the results from this single experiment relate to other late night candidate appearances and broader questions about the role of entertainment media in American campaigns.

How Late Night Candidate Appearances Affect Viewers

Researchers are only starting to uncover the impact that late night candidate interviews have on viewers (see Moy, Xenos, and Hess 2005; Brewer and Cao 2006). Key questions remain, however, concerning when and how these appearances will affect those who watch them. In this section, I discuss some theoretical expectations as to how late night interviews might alter the criteria viewers use to evaluate candidates. I also discuss how viewers’ political knowledge might be affected by watching the interviews.

Priming

Extensive research confirms that the media can prime voters to focus on certain considerations when evaluating political figures (see Kinder 2003, 364-66). By exposing viewers to specific information, the media activate related mental constructs that become more easily accessible so that they might be given increased emphasis in a subsequent judgment task (see, e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987). For example, seeing a candidate shaking hands with locals in a diner might prime voters to emphasize the candidate’s perceived empathy when making their evaluation. It is important to note, however, that “priming [is] something like a two-stage process” in which “the priming stimuli should influence the accessibility of some knowledge constructs more than others,

but whether people use those primed constructs as evaluative criteria depends on the degree to which they are perceived as applicable to the judgment task” (Althaus and Kim 2006, 962; also see Miller and Krosnick 1996, 2000). This suggests that priming is not an automatic process based on accessibility alone but one in which the individual’s assessment of applicability plays a determinant role.

While the general priming literature is well developed, it is not entirely clear how the priming process might work when candidates show up on late night television. As mentioned above, there is a conventional wisdom—shared by many political operatives and commentators—that suggests that watching a late night appearance will highlight the candidate’s personal side, leading viewers to emphasize image criteria in their assessment (see Sella 2000; Mason 2004; Colbert 2004).

This assumption makes sense insofar as late night interviews feature an abundance of lighthearted and personal content that should conceivably bring personality considerations to mind (Niven, Lichter, and Amundson 2003; Baum 2005, 215). These interviews also occur in an informal environment with a laughing studio audience and a comedian host that allow the candidate to “act natural,” thereby emphasizing his or her personal side, particularly his or her warmth, good nature, and ability to relate to others (Graber 2001, 100-1; Moy, Xenos, and Hess 2005, 199). These appearances also inherently provide viewers with visual cues that have long been associated with the use of image in candidate evaluations (e.g., Keeter 1987; Graber 1990; 2001; Druckman 2003). Thus, it is easy to see why many believe that watching a candidate address friendly topics in a casual atmosphere might make thoughts of his or her personality prominent in viewers’ minds.

Empirical support for this conventional wisdom is, however, somewhat limited and conditional. Using national survey data from 2000, Moy, Xenos, and Hess (2005) find that late night viewers were more likely than nonviewers to base their evaluations of George W. Bush on his perceived disposition for “caring” after he appeared on *Letterman*. However, no other personal characteristics (i.e., honesty, leadership, knowledge, inspiring) received greater emphasis after Bush’s appearance. Moreover, the authors do not report any image priming effects after Bush or Gore appeared on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*.⁴ These mixed results leave open the possibility that conventional expectations may be somewhat incomplete.

In fact, there is reason to believe that these appearances could have a different effect on the criteria viewers use to evaluate the candidate. Specifically, they could prime viewers to place more emphasis on key issues. This somewhat unconventional hypothesis is based on a reinterpretation of how late night's television visuals, entertaining context, and interview content might affect viewers. The idea is that viewers will be drawn into the appearance by its visual stimuli and amusing atmosphere, engaging them in whatever issue discussion takes place, such that they will then incorporate these salient policy considerations into their subsequent evaluation of the candidate.

This hypothesis is predicated, first of all, on the fact that while television visuals have been associated with priming image in past studies (e.g., Graber 2001), they have also been found to enhance cognitive engagement and issue consideration. The idea is that "pictures arouse viewers' interest and attention . . . because they give the viewer a sense of participating in an event or, at least, witnessing it personally" (Graber 1996, 87; also see Druckman 2003, 561-62; Graber 1990). Therefore, the visual imagery found on late night television ought to stimulate psychological involvement so that viewers become more receptive to the dialogue taking place.

The upbeat and comedic atmosphere surrounding these interviews is also particularly well suited for drawing people in and gaining their attention (Graber 2001, 127-28). The music, laughter, and often uncomfortable attempts at humor allow these appearances to present politics in an intriguing package—one that ought to encourage even the most apolitical and disinterested viewers to pay attention (see Moy, Xenos, and Hess 2005, 199). In fact, recent studies confirm that people often find politics on entertainment television quite alluring and thus politically useful (Baum and Jamison 2006). In this way, late night's amusing atmosphere ought to engage viewers, making them more inclined to process the issues being discussed when a candidate appears. This, somewhat ironically, suggests that late night interviews might be particularly effective at priming serious issues precisely because they are lighthearted and entertaining rather than intellectual.

Once viewers are attentive, they must then encounter some policy information if they are to give issues greater weight in their evaluation. While candidate interviews on entertainment television are undeniably filled with personal references and jocular banter, research shows that they also typically contain dialogue concerning pertinent issues. Bill Clinton's

visit to *The Arsenio Hall Show* was, for example, "more . . . than high fives and small jokes. After the first several minutes . . . the two men settled into a discussion of racism and democracy, focusing on the then recent Los Angeles riot" (Hayden 2002, 19). In addition, Baum's (2005, 220) content analysis of candidate appearances on talk shows more generally finds that issues were mentioned about once a minute (also see Baum and Jamison 2006, 949). This is not a lot in comparison to traditional news interviews, but it may be enough to trigger thinking about issues among those who are watching. Furthermore, given the entertainment objectives of late night shows, the policy discussion is likely to focus on the most central issues of the day (Zaller 2003; Baum 2005), increasing the probability that viewers will see them as relevant to the evaluation of a presidential candidate.

While many believe that late night interviews will do little more than prime the candidate's personal image, there is good reason to believe that they may, in fact, have a more policy-oriented relevance. By drawing viewers in and presenting them with some nontrivial amount of issue dialogue, late night interviews have the potential to increase the accessibility of key issues. Once activated, it ought to be relatively easy for viewers to base their candidate evaluation on these issues, especially given that they are likely to be key concerns in the campaign and thus highly applicable to the task at hand (see Althaus and Kim 2006). In fact, many late night viewers will likely see these issue considerations as providing a sound and appealing basis for judging the candidate, particularly if they have little other policy information to go on.

This does not mean, however, that all late night candidate interviews will invariably prime issues. Indeed, viewers must be drawn in by the visuals and/or the entertaining context, and there must be some amount of policy discussion for them to consider. Moreover, this theory cannot exclude the possibility that a late night interview might prime both image and issue considerations simultaneously. However, past research suggests that a "hydraulic effect" could occur, in which the increased weight given to issues diminishes the weight given to other considerations, namely, image (Miller and Krosnick 1996). In any case, the potential that late night appearances could prime viewers to focus on issues is intriguing, in that it confounds the candidate's objective to promote his or her personal side (e.g., Mason 2004) and widely expressed concerns that these appearances will only lead viewers to place greater emphasis on personality and style (e.g., Kolbert 2004).

Learning

Critics have also suggested that viewers learn little, if anything, about politics from watching late night interviews (e.g., Sella 2000; Mason 2004). They point to the fact that these shows generally “seek to entertain their audiences by offering ‘fun,’ human interest-oriented interviews . . . [rather than] tough issue-oriented questions or partisan debate” (Baum 2005, 215; also see Moy 2008). They also note that late night audiences are not typically watching to be informed (Brewer and Cao 2006, 20), which could hamper their capacity to retain knowledge of critical issues in the campaign.

Recent research, however, favors the idea that viewers can gain useful political information from entertainment television. While Prior (2003, 149) generally argues that “there is only very limited evidence that viewers learn from soft news,” he does find that late night and daytime talk show viewing, in particular, is positively associated with knowledge of some key political issues. Others (e.g., Baum 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2005; Young 2004; Brewer and Cao 2006) have also found that viewers can learn about politics as an “incidental byproduct” (Baum 2002, 2003a) of watching talk shows and comedy programs. In other words, “audience members may [be] accidentally informed . . . through their efforts to seek amusement” (Brewer and Cao 2006, 31). This suggests that, compared to traditional newscasts, these shows can “render political information cost-effective to even apolitical individuals. . . . Since the soft news media make information accessible and entertaining, . . . the net effect is that low-awareness individuals who typically ignore most political information are less likely to do so in a soft news context” (Baum and Jamison 2006, 948).

Late night candidate interviews are particularly well suited for enabling viewers to consume political information in a relatively costless manner as a byproduct of being entertained. As mentioned above, not only is there usually sufficient issue dialogue to consider, but late night appearances also have engaging aspects (i.e., visuals and context) that ought to encourage viewers to notice and process the policy information so that it can be recalled at a later time. The possibility that viewers might learn from these appearances highlights the potential of an entertainment medium to be an important source of tangible political information by presenting politics in a stimulating way (see, e.g., Baum and Jamison 2006)—especially for viewers who may be typically

disinterested in politics (see Prior 2005). Evidence of learning about policies would also substantiate the issue-priming theory posited above. It would confirm that viewers were, indeed, drawn into and thus cognizant of the policy discussion before deciding to give issue considerations more weight in their evaluations.

An Experimental Test

To test these priming and learning predictions, I conducted an experiment using John Kerry’s September 20, 2004, appearance on *Letterman*. Despite its limitations (i.e., lack of generalizable findings), an experimental design is particularly advantageous for a study such as this. To begin with, it provides an unambiguous and direct measure of exposure to the appearance unlike many media-related studies that rely on national survey data (see Price and Zaller 1993), including those in this particular area of research that loosely categorize the audience as anyone who has watched a late night talk show at least once in the past week (e.g., Moy, Xenos, and Hess 2005; Baum 2005). An experiment also focuses attention on a single point in time, which controls the potential influence that external campaign factors can have on voters. In addition, an experimental design allows for the creation of multiple and specific conditions to test the independent effect that factors such as visuals, context, and content have on late night viewers. As such, an experiment is the best way to provide insight into the process by which priming and learning might occur during a late night candidate appearance.

John Kerry’s interview on *Letterman* is particularly ideal for this study because it was seen by many during the heat of the campaign, garnered significant mainstream media attention, and was typical of late night candidate appearances. Nielsen ratings indicate that 5.85 million households, or approximately 7.6 million viewers, tuned in to make it *Letterman*’s highest rated season opener since 1993 (Reuters 2004; Vasquez 2004).⁵ Moreover, Kerry was clearly there to promote his image as is customary of appearances on entertainment television (Baum 2005; Brewer and Cao 2006). According to Mike McCurry, former Clinton press secretary and senior Kerry advisor, John Kerry appeared on *Letterman* because he “needs to have more fun on the campaign trail. If people see him in a variety of settings having a good time, laughing and smiling, that will be helpful”

(*Billings Gazette* 2004). The atmosphere and content of the interview were also typical of past appearances. Viewers saw the Democratic candidate sitting casually beside a comedic host, creating an interview that mixed a conventional amount of humor with some discussion of key campaign issues (Baum 2005, 220; also see content analysis below).

The first step in the experiment was to create a seamless presentation of Kerry's appearance by removing commercials and selected excerpts from the video.⁶ Then, to test the independent effects of television visuals, late night context, and interview content, I transcribed the appearance verbatim and placed the text within mock Web sites for *Letterman* and *Face the Nation*.⁷

The experiment thus had four conditions. The control group would complete a standard survey without exposure to Kerry's interview, thereby providing a baseline to use in comparing the effect that occurs on the other groups. In the second condition—the video condition—viewers would watch the appearance before completing the survey. A comparison between the control and video conditions serves to demonstrate the general impact that Kerry's appearance had on viewers. In the third condition—the *Letterman* text condition—participants would read the appearance as though it came from the *Letterman* Web site. Participants in this condition would have the content of the interview (i.e., text) and the context of the appearance (i.e., they knew it was from late night television), although they would not receive any televised visuals. Comparing this group to the video group isolates the independent effect that visual cues have on viewers. Those in the final condition—the *Face the Nation* text condition—would read a transcript of the appearance as though it came from the *Face the Nation* Web site. This group would receive the content of the interview (i.e., text) but not the televised visuals or the late night atmosphere. Comparing this condition with the *Letterman* text readers demonstrates the role played by context in the priming and learning processes.

Before conducting the primary experiment, a pretest was administered to determine the believability of assigning the late night appearance to a formal news source such as *Face the Nation*. All identifying information (e.g., interviewer name) was blacked out before thirty-nine undergraduates read the transcript and answered questions about how likely it was that it came from various sources. Participants responded on a scale from 1 (*not very likely*) to 7 (*very likely*). The average score for *Face the Nation*

was 4.08 (standard deviation [*SD*] 1.66), suggesting that most thought it was at least conceivable that the appearance could have taken place on a formal news program.⁸

Having established the believability of the transcript coming from a formal news show, I then conducted the primary experiment during three consecutive days near the end of the 2004 campaign (October 25, 26, and 27). Two-hundred fifty participants were recruited from four undergraduate political science classes at the University of Minnesota. College samples such as this often pose certain limitations on researchers (Sears 1986; however, see, e.g., Funk 1997, 683), although this sample is ideal for the purposes here because it focuses on the segment of the population that is most likely to watch late night comedy talk shows (Davis and Owen 1998; Baum 2005, 215) and say they learn about campaigns and candidates from them (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2004).

The sample has many characteristics that, indeed, mirror the typical late night viewing audience. To begin with, party identification was skewed toward Democrats (48 percent), with 27 percent independents/others and a quarter of the sample calling themselves either weak or strong Republicans (see Baum 2005, 215; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2004; Davis and Owen 1998, 170). The gender distribution was nearly evenly split, with 53 percent male, and there was little variation in age or race; 80 percent of respondents were white, and 94.8 percent were under thirty years old (see Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2004).

The sample also matches the general level of political interest expressed by many late night viewers. Although students were recruited from political science classes, only 11 percent of the sample declared political science to be their major. The level of political activity was also fairly low, with only 17.6 percent of participants claiming to participate in political activities more than a few times a year (see Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2004; Davis and Owen 1998, 181). Furthermore, only 31.2 percent read the newspaper more than occasionally, only 32.4 percent watched national television news more than a few times a week, and only 40.8 percent got news online more than a few times a week.⁹ All of these sample characteristics are consistent across the four conditions.¹⁰

In each undergraduate class, participants were randomly divided into four groups.¹¹ Those in the video condition were taken to a separate room to watch the

interview and then complete the survey. Participants in the other three conditions stayed behind, and while control group participants completed the survey without any exposure to the appearance, those in the *Letterman* and *Face the Nation* conditions read the transcript before completing the survey.¹²

Participants in each group answered the same survey, although the order of some questions and responses were randomized to eliminate contamination effects.¹³ Following convention (e.g., Moy, Xenos, and Hess 2005), key elements of the survey measured opinions on which candidate (Kerry or Bush) would do a better job with the critical issues of the day, how well certain personality traits described them, and how participants felt toward each major party contender. The survey also measured political knowledge, general media use, and demographic information. Participants were paid five dollars for their completed surveys.

Results

By all accounts, John Kerry's appearance on *Letterman* was typical of late night candidate interviews, in that it mixed moments of levity with some discussion of serious policy issues. CBS News (2004) described the encounter by writing,

Democrat John Kerry joked Monday on "The Late Show with David Letterman" about changes under President Bush's tax plan, including that Vice President Dick Cheney can claim the president as a dependent. . . . Kerry also poked fun at the tedious debate negotiations between rival campaigns that ended in agreement on Monday. . . . [However,] Kerry's interview with Letterman, at the Ed Sullivan Theater, wasn't all jokes. The Massachusetts senator . . . discuss[ed] serious topics ranging from global warming to . . . where he thinks the president has gone wrong in Iraq and what changes he would make as commander in chief.

Subsequent content analysis by twelve undergraduate researchers not otherwise involved in the experiment matches this description quite well. Each coder was given a copy of the transcript used in the experiment with all identifying information blacked out and asked to independently indicate how many lines were devoted to specific topics. Results show that most of the discussion revolved around (often humorous) anecdotes concerning life on the campaign trail.¹⁴ Coders found, on average, that more than half of the

appearance (54 percent of the lines) had something to do with campaign stories that highlighted Kerry's personal side. The most discussed substantive policy issue was security (i.e., war in Iraq, terrorism), with 27 percent of the lines, followed by the economy (5 percent) and the environment (3 percent), while the world AIDS problem (2 percent) and health care (1 percent) received the occasional mention.¹⁵ These results fit with Baum's (2005, 214-16) more general content analysis of candidate interviews on talk shows, in that issues, while not ignored, were overshadowed by personal references.

This appearance was therefore ideal for testing the priming predictions laid out above. The television visuals, entertaining context, and the chance to hear about critical issues—particularly security and, to a lesser extent, the economy—present the possibility that participants, if attentive to the dialogue, could elect to emphasize policy positions when evaluating Kerry. However, the healthy amount of humorous banter creates a real test, in that it provides an opportunity for viewers to substantiate the conventional wisdom by focusing on Kerry's personal image.

Priming Results

The dependent variable used to test the priming effect is based on the following feeling thermometer question: Using a scale from 0 to 10—where 0 means you feel very cold and not favorable, 5 means you are neutral, and 10 means you feel very warm and favorable—please rate how you feel toward John Kerry. The distribution skewed toward favorable evaluations with an average score of 6.62 (*SD* 2.47); however, 30 percent of respondents rated the Democratic candidate from neutral to very cold.

Key independent variables include ratings of Kerry's image and participants' impressions on security and economic issues. Following past research, I constructed four image variables based on twelve questions (see, e.g., Kinder 1986). The competency variable combines responses to how well intelligent, hard working, and knowledgeable (alpha .774) describe Kerry, while leadership combines commands respect, inspiring, and provides strong leadership (alpha .793). The empathy variable combines cares about people, in touch with ordinary people, and compassionate (alpha .761), while integrity is based on honest, moral, and decent (alpha .838).¹⁶

Although numerous issues were measured, security and economy were selected as the principal issue

Table 1
Kerry Evaluations across Conditions

	Control	Video	<i>Letterman</i> Text	<i>Face the Nation</i> Text
(Constant)	-2.089** (1.020)	-2.150** (0.896)	-3.901*** (1.323)	-1.952 (1.241)
Party identification	0.835**** (0.194)	0.609**** (.163)	0.501* (.254)	0.519** (0.244)
Security	1.120 (0.907)	2.139*** (0.874)	3.173*** (1.145)	0.732 (1.110)
Economy	-0.055 (1.334)	2.134* (1.083)	1.638 (1.853)	-0.875 (1.352)
Competency	-0.201 (1.626)	1.753 (1.498)	2.931 (2.551)	3.804* (1.893)
Leadership	4.398*** (1.380)	0.542 (1.435)	-1.609 (1.946)	4.148** (1.714)
Empathy	2.739* (1.511)	0.546 (1.328)	1.231 (2.221)	0.644 (1.782)
Integrity	0.465 (1.610)	1.919 (1.476)	4.427 (2.682)	1.421 (1.990)
R ²	.819	.756	.815	.710
N	66	87	45	52

Note: Unstandardized coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. *Letterman* = *Late Show with David Letterman*.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$. **** $p < .001$.

variables based on their prevalence in the appearance and responses to Gallup's October-November 2004 Most Important Problems survey, which showed them to be the two most critical issues in the campaign.¹⁷ A security variable was created by combining responses to which candidate had better policies for dealing with the war in Iraq and terrorism (alpha .901), while the economy variable combines unemployment, federal debt, and taxes (alpha .821).¹⁸ To determine how Kerry's appearance affected viewers' evaluative criteria, I specified an ordinary least squares regression model predicting Kerry evaluations with the issue and image variables along with a standard control for party identification.¹⁹ The model was run for each of the four conditions.

The first column in Table 1 reports the results for the control group. It shows that those who had no exposure to the appearance relied on party identification and perceptions of Kerry's leadership and, to a lesser extent, empathy in their evaluation of him. The results also show that control group participants overlooked the two most important issues in the campaign—opinions about security and economic matters failed to alter their evaluations. This indicates that the sample's baseline propensity was to focus on Kerry's party affiliation and personal image as a caring leader at the expense of critical issue concerns.

The second column in Table 1 shows that those who watched Kerry's appearance on *Letterman* emphasized very different criteria than those in the control group. After watching the late night interview, viewers came to stress security and, to a lesser extent, economic policies, while disregarding the image considerations Kerry was there to promote. This suggests that the interview, while providing abundant information

about Kerry's personal character, must have also made policy concerns—particularly security—readily accessible to viewers who then elected to use them as the basis of their evaluation. Presumably, the saliency of critical issues led viewers to see them as applicable to the decision at hand (e.g., Althaus and Kim 2006). Indeed, it makes sense that hearing about serious security and economic concerns—even from a late night comedy show—could lead people to evaluate the candidate based on his policies for dealing with these pressing issues over his personal style and image. In fact, viewers probably had some sense that these must have been truly important issues, given that they were mentioned at length on late night television (Zaller 2003). Thus, there was a hydraulic effect (Miller and Krosnick 1996), in which the increased emphasis on issues diminished the importance of personality factors.²⁰ These results show that contrary to the prevailing wisdom and the candidate's stated objectives, the talk show interview primed viewers to give more weight to pertinent issues than to image when evaluating the Democratic candidate.

What was it about the appearance that led viewers to focus on issues at the expense of image? The theory above posits that viewers will be drawn in by the televised visuals and novel context of these exchanges, causing them to notice and process the discussion of key issues. If this is correct, there should be significant differences between the video condition, the condition that read the transcript ascribed to the *Letterman* Web site, and the condition that read the *Face the Nation* transcript. That is, differences should result from taking each individual element (i.e., visuals and context) away. If visuals are critical, issue priming effects should be stronger for

Table 2
Open-ended Reasons to Vote for Kerry

	Control (n = 66)	Video (n = 87)	Letterman Text (n = 45)	Face the Nation Text (n = 52)
Policy	36.2 (37)	71.2 (131)	64.0 (48)	42.8 (54)
Personality	62.7 (64)	27.7 (51)	33.3 (25)	56.3 (71)
Other	0.9 (1)	1.1 (2)	2.7 (2)	0.7 (1)
Total comments	102	184	75	126

Note: Condition percentage with number of comments in parentheses. *Letterman* = *Late Show with David Letterman*.

appearance viewers than for those who are given the appearance without visuals—the *Letterman* transcript readers. If the late night atmosphere is key to drawing people in, effects should be stronger for those who are aware that the appearance took place on late night television (i.e., viewers and *Letterman* transcript readers) than those without the context who think it occurred on a formal news program (i.e., *Face the Nation* transcript readers).

The third column in Table 1 shows how Kerry was evaluated by those who read the appearance from the fabricated *Letterman* Web site. Comparing these participants to those in the second column (i.e., viewers) shows that there are few differences in the effect that the appearance had on those who watched it and those who read it—both groups emphasized security. While those who watched the interview seem to have placed more emphasis on economic issues, combined models (not shown) fail to produce statistically significant interactions between the conditions and any of the issue or image variables. The symmetry between those who saw the appearance and those who read it on the supposed *Letterman* Web site suggests that despite the expectations noted above, visuals did not play a critical role in grabbing people’s attention, as participants in both conditions seem to have noticed and incorporated the discussed issues into their evaluation of John Kerry.

In fact, it appears that the late night context is primarily responsible for engaging viewers, thereby making issues accessible so that they can be used in evaluating the candidate. The fourth column in Table 1 shows how Kerry was assessed by those who thought his interview occurred on *Face the Nation*. Results indicate that those without knowledge of the late night context focused on Kerry’s partisan affiliation, leadership ability, and to a lesser extent, his perceived competency. Although this group has the same demographic makeup as the other groups and read exactly the same text as those in the *Letterman* condition, they failed to incorporate security or economic concerns into their evaluation. The differences

between the third and fourth groups highlight the fact that without the late night atmosphere, these young participants seem to lose interest, disregarding the issue discussion in favor of basing their evaluation on whether they think Kerry is generally smart and/or inspiring.²¹ In fact, the *Face the Nation* condition closely resembles the control group, which suggests that for these young people, getting the content from a formal political news show was almost like having no exposure to it at all.²²

These results are substantiated by responses participants gave to an open-ended question that asked, “Is there anything in particular about John Kerry that might make you want to vote for him?” Respondents gave up to three answers that were then coded as either dealing with personality, policy, or other.²³ Table 2 shows that within conditions, those in the control and *Face the Nation* groups favored comments about Kerry’s personality, such as “he cares about all people,” “he’s smart,” or “he seems level-headed,” over his position on issues, such as taxes, jobs, or foreign affairs. Specifically, personality was mentioned in 62.7 percent of the control groups’ comments and 56.3 percent of those made by participants in the *Face the Nation* condition. However, those in the video and *Letterman* text conditions mentioned Kerry’s position on policies more frequently than personality traits—71.2 percent of video condition and 64.0 percent of *Letterman* text condition comments offered policy positions as a reason to vote for John Kerry.

Table 2 also shows a clear pattern between the conditions, which comports with the regression results. Two-tailed difference of proportion tests failed to detect any statistically significant differences between the control and *Face the Nation* groups in their propensity to mention policy ($z = 1.01, p = .31$) or personality ($z = 1.00, p = .33$)—both favored personality. However, it should be noted that *Face the Nation* respondents offered more comments on average than those in the control group, suggesting that the formal text may have stimulated at least

some thinking about the campaign. There were also no statistically significant differences between the video and *Letterman* text groups in terms of policy ($z = 1.11, p = .27$) or personality ($z = 0.88, p = .38$)—both of these groups favored policy. However, both the control group and the *Face the Nation* group differ significantly ($p = .000$) from the video and *Letterman* text conditions by mentioning personality much more frequently and policies much less often. Clearly, personality was the preoccupation of control and *Face the Nation* participants, while those in the video and *Letterman* text conditions focused on policy.

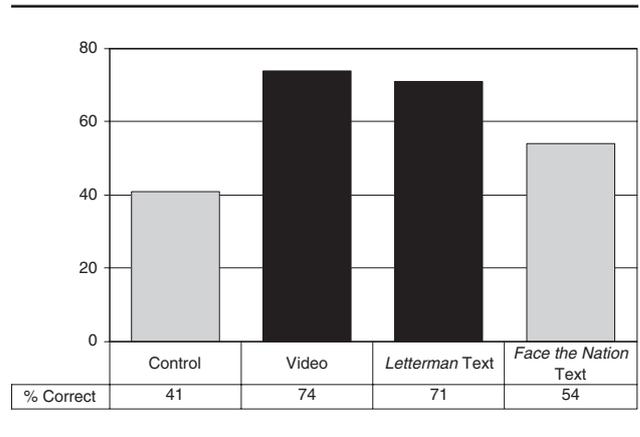
Taken together, the results in Tables 1 and 2 show that contrary to common expectations and the candidate's objectives, Kerry's late night appearance primed pertinent issues over image. The pattern of results across the experimental conditions shows that the entertaining context (but not television visuals) worked to engage otherwise politically disinterested young people in the discussion of security (and, to a lesser extent, economic) issues. This, in turn, made specific policies accessible so that they could be easily used by those who found them to be relevant and thus a solid basis on which to evaluate a presidential contender.²⁴

Late Night Learning

To test issue learning from Kerry's late night appearance, I compared the conditions in terms of their knowledge of the security situation in Iraq. At one point in the interview, Kerry talks about what he considers to be the failed policy in Iraq and states, "I absolutely voted against it [supplemental funding for the war in Iraq], and I'm glad I voted against it 'cause we now see that the 20 billion hasn't even been spent effectively, most of it is going to Halliburton in fraud and no-bid contracts which is completely inappropriate; I'd fire Halliburton tomorrow." The survey included an open-ended question asking all participants, "According to John Kerry, which corporation would not get any more government contracts if he were president?"²⁵

Figure 1 shows a familiar pattern between the conditions and knowledge of this issue. While 41 percent of the control group answered correctly, 74 percent of those who watched the video and 71 percent of those who read the *Letterman* text correctly identified Halliburton. Only 54 percent of *Face the Nation* transcript readers got it right without the late night context, which again suggests that they were less attentive to the issue discussion. A series of two-tailed difference

Figure 1
Learning from John Kerry's Late Night Appearance



Note: *Letterman* = *Late Show with David Letterman*.

of proportions tests confirm that all differences between the conditions are statistically significant at the .05 level except the relationships between the control and *Face the Nation* groups ($z = -1.398, p = .165$) and the video and *Letterman* transcript conditions ($z = 0.298, p = .766$).

These findings hold even after controlling for political interest, general political knowledge, formal news consumption, party identification, age, gender, and race. The results of a logistic regression (see supplemental materials at <http://prq.sagepub.com>) indicate that watching the appearance made viewers 4.031 times ($p = .002$) more likely than those in the control group to get the Halliburton question correct, all else equal. In addition, those who read the *Letterman* transcript were 5.254 times ($p = .002$) more likely to get it right. Reading the *Face the Nation* text, however, had no statistically significant effect ($p = .598$) on participants, as they were about equally likely to get the question correct as those who had had no exposure to the appearance.

These results fit with earlier research (e.g., Baum 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2005; Young 2004; Brewer and Cao 2006) showing that people can learn factual political information from entertainment television. In fact, the specific pattern of results reported here supports the growing realization among scholars that entertaining television shows can, at times, be efficient sources of political information precisely because many find them entertaining and thus more engaging than formal news outlets (see, e.g., Baum and Jamison 2006). They also help to substantiate the issue priming process by showing that late night's

entertaining context can draw viewers in so that they attend to an important issue in the campaign.

Conclusion

Candidates continue to hit the talk show circuit, and critics continue to express concern about the effect this has on voters. The results of this study, however, show how a late night candidate appearance can do more than leave viewers uninformed and overly image conscious. In fact, the entertaining aspects of these exchanges can serve to engage viewers so that even if they have little initial political interest, they attend to the issue discussion that typically occurs during late night interviews. This helps viewers learn about political issues and makes certain policy considerations easily accessible so that they can be used by those who see them as relevant to their assessment of a presidential candidate.

The experimental design used here provides insight into the mechanisms by which late night candidate appearances can affect viewers' evaluative criteria and political knowledge. It cannot, however, confirm that viewers will always learn and come to emphasize issues over image—only that these are possible and logical outcomes. Further research with a more diverse sample using different candidates, saying different things, at different times, on different shows is required to fully illuminate the conditions under which these results hold. Indeed, situating this study among past research (e.g., Moy, Xenos, and Hess 2005; Baum 2005) highlights the need to consider certain factors in determining the effect of late night appearances more generally.

This and future studies need to consider the impact that timing, content, and issue saliency have on the eventual outcome. To begin with, Moy, Xenos, and Hess (2005, 205) speculate that image priming effects “may be stronger for lesser-known candidates than for those who have been in the public eye for a longer period of time.” This might help explain why Kerry's appearance late in the campaign after his image had been fairly well solidified could have led viewers to focus on pertinent issues rather than well-worn personality characteristics. It is also important to consider the specific content of these appearances, as it remains unclear how the relative mix of personal banter and policy dialogue affects priming and learning. In this case, issue priming and learning results were manifest when a quarter of the interview focused on security within the late night talk show context—would the results hold with less security discussion,

and if so, how much less? Questions also remain about how viewers might react to similar issue content in different formats such as *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report*, which tend, as mock news programs, to emphasize issues in a different way.

This study also speaks to the significance of issue saliency. It is not only unclear how much but also what kind of policy dialogue is required for issue priming and learning. The fact that Kerry's interview primed security more heavily than economic concerns could simply be the result of their disparate discussion and thus differences in accessibility. However, the fact that security was such a germane topic during the 2004 campaign might help explain why those who were attentive to the appearance recalled facts about the Iraq War and elected to use Kerry's security stance as the primary criterion for evaluating him. It seems that the inescapable magnitude of the security issue could have helped participants see it as applicable to their assessment once it was activated by the interview. Indeed, entertainment-based interviews often function as “burglar alarms,” alerting viewers to the candidate's position on the most vital issues of the day (Zaller 2003). This raises the question, however, of exactly how salient an issue must be for a late night interview to prime it as a key factor in the evaluation of a candidate.

As they are, the findings from this study have some intriguing implications. First of all, the differences across the experimental conditions demonstrate that the context within which political information is presented can influence its impact on voters. When politics is presented in an entertaining way, viewers are more likely to pay attention and thus are better able to recall and process policy facts. When exactly the same information was presented in a formal news context—that is, *Face the Nation*—it had almost no effect on young people, who seemed to turn off. This suggests a possible aversion among young people to the well-respected Sunday morning political news format, which raises questions about the future of these shows and others like them. Conversely, the much stronger impact of the often-maligned late night talk show highlights the potential value of entertainment media for engaging viewers—particularly young, politically disinterested viewers—and thus for providing them with substantive information that can influence their political knowledge and judgment (see, e.g., Prior 2005). In short, the entertaining aspects of unconventional news sources can have a real impact on what people know about politics and how they make their decisions.

This raises an important question about how these appearances fit within the larger campaign media environment. On one hand, it is possible that some viewers may come to rely almost exclusively on entertainment-based programs for their political news, thinking that late night talk shows and comedy programs are sufficient sources of credible political information. On the other hand, Young and Tisinger (2006) have shown that a considerable segment of young people is starting to supplement political news from entertainment-based sources with information from harder news outlets. In this way, late night appearances might serve as a gateway for viewers who become engaged and thus better equipped to process political information from a wider array of sources.

Ultimately, all of this suggests that critics' concerns may be overstated. Growing evidence confirms that these informal exchanges are not as inane as many believe. They typically contain, amid the jokes and laughter, some real policy dialogue that apparently affects viewers. Moreover, this study shows that even as campaigns become increasingly image driven, voters are still willing and able to focus on critical policy issues. As such, the increasing frequency with which entertainment is mixed with politics may actually provide some hope that typically disinterested citizens will attend to the key issues in a campaign. Critics may need to worry less about the throngs of voters turning to entertainment television for political information because these sources—sometimes more than formal news sources—have the potential to be effective conduits of important political information that many voters will take seriously.

Notes

1. Nielsen ratings show that candidate appearances typically draw larger than average talk show audiences. For example, Al Gore's September 11, 2000, appearance on *Oprah* drew 8.7 million households (Baum 2005, 214), while the Gore and Bush appearances on the *Late Show with David Letterman* (*Letterman*) and *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* (*Leno*) in 2000 drew between 3 million and 5 million viewers each (Moy, Xenos, and Hess 2005, 199).

2. In a related study, Baumgartner and Morris (2006, 341) argue that *The Daily Show* "may have detrimental effects, driving down support for political institutions and leaders among those already inclined toward nonparticipation."

3. To be clear, the concern is not that voters will consider the candidate's image but that they will focus on image to such an extent that they disregard the policy implications of their decision.

4. The authors caution that their findings "need to be tempered given how [their] measure of late-night comedy viewing was one of frequency of exposure to this particular genre, not a particular

show" (Moy, Xenos, and Hess 2005, 206). Their indirect measure categorizes respondents as "late night comedy viewers" if they had watched "a late night talk show such as *Leno* or *Letterman*" at least once in the past week. "Nonviewers" are those who did not watch any late night shows in the past week. The authors then compare how the two groups evaluate the candidates after they appear on either of the shows (i.e., *Leno* or *Letterman*). As the authors suggest, this is an inexact measure of exposure that does not control for the other content found on these shows (e.g., opening monologues) or the content of other shows aired during the week.

5. Kerry's appearance received a Nielsen rating of 5.4, with each point equivalent to 1.084 million homes and each household having an estimated average of 1.3 viewers (i.e., $5.4 \times 1.084 = 5.8536$; $5.8536 \times 1.3 = 7.60968$). On average, *Letterman* usually draws 4.8 million viewers each night (*Billings Gazette* 2004).

6. All commercials were removed as well as Kerry's rather lengthy entrance (no conversation) and two initial jokes about Letterman's opening monologue (i.e., one on the relationship between Bush and Cheney and one on the debate negotiations). To ensure the believability of the written text for the *Face the Nation* condition (see below), I also removed Kerry's "Top Ten" list, which was balanced out by cutting a brief (2 min.) segment that dealt primarily with the war in Iraq.

7. Copies of the transcripts are available at <http://prq.sagepub.com> in the supplemental materials of the electronic version of this article.

8. This is fairly strong evidence, considering that participants were asked to identify the possibility that the transcript came from a list of outlets so they knew that six of the seven were incorrect, driving down their willingness to say that any one source was particularly likely. In comparison, "news magazines like *Time* and *The New Yorker*" scored 3.21 (standard deviation [SD] 2.44), "evening interview shows like *Larry King Live*" scored 4.64 (SD 1.43), "evening news magazines like *20/20*, *60 Minutes* or *Nightline*" scored 3.97 (SD 1.73), "daytime talk shows like *Oprah*, *Montel Williams*, and *Dr. Phil*" scored 2.33 (SD 1.33), and "late night television shows like *Letterman*, *Leno*, or *Jimmy Kimmel*" scored 2.95 (SD 2.06).

9. The sample's news media use may actually be lower than the population average according to Young and Tisinger (2006).

10. Cross-tabulations by condition for party identification, ideology, gender, race and major in school all produced statistically insignificant chi-square statistics (i.e., $p > .10$). Means comparisons for age, political activity, and the three news consumption variables show that the average for each condition is within one standard deviation of the overall sample mean.

11. The first two groups (i.e., control and video) were slightly oversampled to ensure an accurate test of the appearance's primary effect. Specifically, participants counted off "1, 2, or 3" before the "1" group left to watch the video. Slightly more "control" surveys were then distributed to the remaining participants (i.e., "2" or "3").

12. Participants were told to remain in their seats for 20 min. so that those in the control group did not leave noticeably before the others.

13. Tests on the randomized variables show no differences based on question order.

14. Examples include Kerry's discussion of meeting friendly people on the campaign trail; making train stops in small towns; campaigning with his wife, Teresa Heinz Kerry; and baseball analogies to describe his campaign.

15. To measure intercoder reliability, I analyzed Pearson correlations between all pairs of coders. All correlations exceed .932 and are statistically significant at the .01 level. I also calculated the average difference between the coders in their counts for each topic mentioned in the appearance: campaign anecdotes 8.72 (*SD* 6.59), security 5.92 (*SD* 4.00), economy 2.75 (*SD* 1.96), environment 2.00 (*SD* 1.60), health 0.60 (*SD* 0.61), and AIDS 0.88 (*SD* 0.67).

16. Specifically, participants were asked whether “the following words or phrases describe John Kerry: (1) not well at all, (2) not too well (3) quite well, or (4) extremely well.”

17. The Gallup survey showed that 26 percent of a national sample thought the war in Iraq was the most important problem, while a further 13 percent thought it was terrorism. Moreover, 14 percent of Gallup respondents thought the most important problem was unemployment, 4 percent said the federal debt, and 2 percent thought it was taxes.

18. For the issue questions, participants were asked, “Which presidential candidate do you think would do a better job with each of following issues . . . Definitely Kerry, Probably Kerry, Same, Definitely Bush, Probably Bush?” The list of issues was taken directly from Gallup’s September 2004 survey of Most Important Problems.

19. All independent variables are standardized on a 0 to 1 scale. Although the study employs a controlled experiment with randomization, the model was also run with additional control variables. However, these variables were dropped because they consistently failed to reach conventional levels of statistical significance and never altered the overall pattern of results. The excluded variables include additional issue measures (e.g., environment, health care), interest in politics, media use, general political knowledge, gender, age, and race. I also controlled for whether participants had recalled seeing Kerry’s appearance on *Letterman* when it first aired on September 20 (8.9 percent of the entire sample recalled watching the appearance in the previous month). This variable was also dropped from the model because it was consistently insignificant and had no noticeable impact on the results.

20. Differences between the control and video conditions are substantiated by combined models (not shown) that produce statistically significant interactions in two-tailed tests between condition and security ($p = .07$), leadership ($p = .016$), and empathy ($p = .04$). The interaction between condition and economy is nearly significant ($p = .16$).

21. Combined models (not shown) find significant interactions (two-tailed) between the condition (i.e., *Letterman* or *Face the Nation*) and security ($p = .002$) and leadership ($p = .072$), while the interaction with competency is insignificant ($p = .653$). Models comparing the video condition to the *Face the Nation* condition find consistent interactions with security ($p = .10$), the economy ($p = .06$), leadership ($p = .011$), and competency ($p = .012$).

22. A combined model (not shown) confirms that other than placing more emphasis on competency ($p = .044$), participants in the *Face the Nation* condition were no different than those in the control group.

23. The “other” category includes nonsensical mentions such as “research” and mentions of “Democrat,” which do not fall clearly into the personality or policy categories.

24. I also ran regression models predicting evaluations of George W. Bush. The results show that Kerry’s appearance had little effect on the criteria participants used to evaluate the president. Unlike with evaluations of John Kerry, security was a consistent

predictor across all conditions when evaluating the incumbent commander in chief. This suggests that Kerry’s appearance rendered the security issue more salient when evaluating his candidacy, although it was always considered important in evaluating George W. Bush.

25. Unfortunately, no other policy knowledge questions were asked of the participants.

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