

Who watches the Daily Show? Optimism, cynicism and need for cognition in frequent viewers of political satire.



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ABSTRACT

We surveyed individuals online about their television and on-line media viewing habits and found that individuals who regularly watched political satire, when compared to individuals who did not, reported being more politically liberal, less politically cynical, and had a higher need for cognition.

INTRODUCTION

Some have criticized political media by suggesting that it has a negative focus, which results in higher political cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997).

Political cynicism refers to an individual's distrust for public officials and institutions, and a lack of confidence in the political system (Pinkleton & Austin, 2001).

- It seems politicians only care about themselves or special interests.
- It seems our government is run by a few big interests who are just looking out for themselves.
- Politicians are out of touch with life in the real world.
- Candidates for office are interested only in people's votes, not in their opinions.
- Politicians lose touch with the people quickly after being elected.

We were interested in investigating the possible relationship between political cynicism and the viewing of politically satirical media, such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* and what characterizes frequent viewers of these shows.

METHODS

Participants:

523 participants (52% Female, mean age = 31, SD = 13.5)

Procedure:

Participants completed the survey measures on the on-line research database Mechanical Turk or were recruited through social networking sites.

METHODS

Surveys:

Political Cynicism (Pinkleton & Austin, 2001)

5-point Likert scale that measures cynicism, situational involvement in campaigns and elections, and perceived media importance

The Final Conservatism-Liberalism Scale (Mehrabian, 1996)

4-point, 7 question Likert scale that measures political affiliation

Self-Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen & Williamson, 1988)

5-point, 10 question Likert scale that measures an individual's perceived stress

Need for Cognition Questionnaire (Caccioppo & Petty, 1982)

4-point, 18 question Likert scale that assesses a person's propensity to engage in and enjoy thinking

Self-Control Scale (Tangney et al., 2004)

4-point, 36 question Likert scale that measures an individual's self-control

Life Orientation Test-Revised (Scheier et al., 1994)

5-point, 10 question Likert scale that measures individual differences in optimism and pessimism

Barret Impulsiveness Scale-11 (Patton et al., 1995)

4-point, 11 question Likert scale that measures an individual's impulsiveness

Empathy Questionnaire (Davis, 1980)

5-point, 45 question Likert scale that assesses an individual's ability to empathize with others

Mindfulness Attentional Awareness Scale (Brown & Ryan, 2003)

6-point, 15 question Likert scale that assesses the core characteristics of mindfulness

Voting Optimism Questionnaire (Craig, Niemi, & Silver, 1990)

5-point, 3 question Likert scale that was collected from a larger Political Efficacy measure, that we used to evaluate how optimistic individuals are about the effectiveness of his or her vote.

RESULTS

Means and Standard Deviations

	*Need for Cognition	Self-Control	Perceived Stress	Optimism	*Pol. Cynicism	Voting Optimism	*Con-Lib	*Emp. Imp.	*Mindful	
Satirical	27.89 (3.74)	39.94 (9.24)	20.22 (7.14)	13.67 (5.73)	8.35 (4.40)	9.15 (3.40)	-11.06 (10.27)	56.43 (10.73)	43.73 (11.82)	58.49 (11.79)
Non-Satirical	25.92 (4.25)	41.13 (9.00)	19.47 (6.61)	13.42 (5.30)	10.00 (5.17)	8.81 (3.23)	1.06 (12.95)	54.14 (11.08)	45.93 (12.07)	55.20 (15.41)



RESULTS

Demographics

	N	Mean Age	Women	Men	High School	College	Graduate
Satirical Group	116	32.3	50%	50%	12.9%	64.7%	20.7%
Non-Satirical	397	30.7	53.4%	46.6%	22.7%	60.7%	12.2%

- There were no differences in gender and age between those who watched political satire and those who did not. However, satire viewers tended to be more educated.
- We conducted a stepwise linear regression to determine the best predictors of whether an individual would report watching political satire (*The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*).

Regression Analysis

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Conservatism-Liberalism Scale	-.382	-9.240	.000
Need For Cognition	.165	3.999	.000
Political Cynicism	-.140	-3.395	.001

DISCUSSION

- Prior evidence suggests that cynics are less likely to participate in public affairs, and therefore may watch less media pertaining to politics (Atkin, 1973; Chew, 1984).
- Consistent with this, we found viewers of political satire to be less cynical. Even when controlling for education and conservatism, these viewers were less cynical, had a higher need for cognition and were more mindful. However, they were not more empathetic.
- We found that conservatism, need for cognition, and political cynicism best predicted media habits.

REFERENCES

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