Stephen Colbert’s Civics Lesson:
How Colbert Super PAC Taught Viewers about Campaign Finance

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Abstract

This study tests whether exposure to *The Colbert Report* influenced knowledge of super PACs and 501(c)(4) groups, and ascertains how having such knowledge influenced viewers’ perceptions about the role of money in politics. Our analysis of a national random sample of adults interviewed after the 2012 presidential election found that viewing *The Colbert Report* both increased peoples’ perception of how knowledgeable they were about super PACs and 501(c)(4) groups and increased actual knowledge of campaign finance regulation regarding these independent expenditure groups. Findings suggest that the political satirist was more successful in informing his viewers about super PACs and 501(c)(4) groups than were other types of news media. Viewing *The Colbert Report* also indirectly influenced how useful his audience perceived money to be in politics.
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After faux-right-wing satirist Stephen Colbert signed control of his super PAC “Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow” over to his Comedy Central colleague and Daily Show host Jon Stewart and, in the process, renamed it “The Definitely Not Coordinating with Stephen Colbert Super PAC,” the comic announced his candidacy for “President of the United States of South Carolina.” Some scholars characterized these moments of Colbert’s direct engagement with post-Citizens United campaign finance laws as “commentary that is entertaining and ironic, yet also critically serious” (Jones, Baym, & Day, 2012, p. 34). Others questioned whether the efforts would amount to much. Writing for The New York Times, David Carr commented, “Maybe the whole system has become such a joke that only jokes will serve as a corrective. But if Mr. Colbert succeeds only in drawing out more humor, then the whole idea is a failure” (Carr, 2011, August 21, n.p). In this study, we test whether Colbert’s super PAC acted as a civics lesson or served merely as a collection of jokes about the process. To do so, we test five hypotheses and a research question about the inter-relationships among viewing The Colbert Report, knowledge of super PACs and 501(c)(4)s, generalized political knowledge, news media use, and beliefs about the influence of money in the political process. Our results are drawn from analysis of a national random sample of 1,232 adults interviewed by cellular and landline telephone after the 2012 presidential election.

Soft News, Political Satire, Humor, and Learning

Years of theorizing about humor and learning (e.g., Garner 2006; Kaplan & Pascoe, 1977; Zillmann & Bryant, 1983; Zillmann et al., 1980) ground the inference that Colbert’s treatment of super PACs/501(c)(4)s would foster knowledge acquisition. Within this literature, a
large body of research has focused on the effects of “soft news” (Baum, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2005; Brewer & Cao, 2006; Hollander, 2005; Prior, 2003; Young, 2004; Xenos & Becker, 2009). Much of this research suggests that viewers of political comedy programs hold higher levels of political knowledge than non-viewers. Baum (2003a), for example, showed that “soft news” has become a source of “incidental” information, finding “factual knowledge-enhancing effects associated with consuming soft news programming” (p. 187) and reported a positive link between exposure to “soft news” and knowledge of foreign policy crises (Baum, 2003b). Viewers of political satire shows have been shown to be more knowledgeable about political campaigns (Hollander, 2005; Young, 2004). Candidate appearances on these shows have been shown to increase knowledge during primaries (Brewer & Cao, 2006; Cao, 2008).

The process that produces these effects has been studied as well. Baum (2002, 2003a, 2003b) argued that casting content as entertainment that evokes laughter reduces the costs of consuming political information for those less motivated to seek out traditional news. Additionally, priming high-cost information in a comedic framework can lead to the enhanced attention of related information in other media (Baum, 2003b). In other words, political comedy can act as a “gateway” to additional news use. Feldman and Young (2008) reported that during the 2004 presidential primaries, the rate of increased interest in the presidential election was greater for those who watched late-night comedy than for those who did not. In two experimental studies, Xenos and Becker (2009) found moderate support for the notion that exposure to a political comedy program increases attentiveness to an issue in other media and “ tepid support” for the conclusion that such exposure increases knowledge acquired from other news sources. Feldman (2013) found that viewers of The Daily Show who think of the show as a
mix of news and entertainment learned more than viewers who held a purely entertainment orientation to the show.

“Because humor often involves the intersection of an established frame of reference with an incongruous, unexpected one, scholars have posited that comprehension and appreciation of humor fosters attention and recall by default” (Young, 2013, p. 181). In one experimental study, after finding significant differences in retention and learning between those exposed to a lecture video containing humor and others exposed to the same video without the humorous material, Garner (2006) concluded that “humor can have a positive effect on student enjoyment and content retention. The use of appropriate humor can facilitate a more relaxed atmosphere and provide a cognitive break that allows students to assimilate the information” (Garner 2006, p.179). Similarly, Ziv (1988) reported strong evidence from two experiments that humor facilitated higher scores on exams. In both experiments, a teacher was trained to use humor in the treatment class and teach the exact same material without humor in the control class. The results clearly showed that humor fostered learning. In one of the experiments, for example, the humor class scored almost 10 points higher than the control. Kaplan and Pasco (1977) found that retention of humorous content was significantly higher than non-humorous material six weeks after exposure.

In a similar vein, Zillmann and colleagues (Miron, Bryant, & Zillmann, 2001; Zillmann & Bryant, 1989; Zillmann et al., 1980) have argued that humor in the classroom and in educational television promotes vigilance, defined as a “steady state of alertness and wakefulness” (Miron, Bryant, & Zillmann, 2001, p. 153), which in turn fosters learning. For example, Zillmann et al. (1980) found that humor on television elicited viewers’ vigilance, which increased retention of educational messages that followed the humorous passage. By performing
an alerting function, humor overcomes the problem created by the fact that attention and vigilance cannot be readily sustained at a high level. Building on the Elaboration Likelihood Model, Wanzer, Frymier, & Irwin (2010) proposed the Instructional Humor Processing Theory, which states that related appropriate humor “motivates students to engage in elaboration and to process the humorous message” (p. 7).

Additionally, political humor often relies on the satiric tradition which functions by implication and requires audiences to be active in decoding the satire (Holbert, 2005; Young, 2003; 2004), leading to higher engagement with the content and fostering knowledge effects, which in turn can influence political beliefs.

Overall, the existing literature suggests that when political information is presented within the context of humor, viewers will be more attentive, motivated, and engaged with the content, which in turn will foster learning of that content, perhaps even more so than other sources of information. Thus, given Stephen Colbert’s treatment of super PACs and 501(c)(4)s throughout the 2012 presidential election, we hypothesize that viewing The Colbert Report is positively related to knowledge of super PACs and 501(c)(4)s, even more so than viewing other more traditional news media.

**Citizens United, Speechnow.org, Super PACs and 501(c)(4)s**

Since our study focuses on Colbert’s treatment of recent changes in campaign finance regulations, we begin by reprising those alterations. On January 21, 2010, by a 5-4 vote, the Supreme Court set aside a century-old body of law limiting corporate spending in political elections. In *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, the Court held that both the 2002 Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (known as McCain-Feingold Act or “BCRA”) violated the

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First Amendment and, as a result, independent expenditures by corporations, associations, or labor unions were remissible.

Three months later on March 26, 2010, the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals, in SpeechNow.org v. FEC, ruled that contribution limits “violate the First Amendment by preventing [individuals] from donating to SpeechNow in excess of the limits and by prohibiting SpeechNow from accepting donations in excess of the limits.”\(^2\) The holding did not affect contributions to candidates, but rather contributions to a group that makes independent expenditures. Consistent with these rulings, the Federal Election Commission (FEC) held that the independent expenditure committees “may solicit and accept unlimited contributions from individuals, political committees, corporations, and labor organizations.”\(^3\)

In part because of these rulings, the 2012 election cycle featured unprecedented third-party spending from two related, but different, types of outside groups. The first, which includes PACs and super PACs, is required by federal campaign finance law to disclose donors’ names to the FEC, and can accept unlimited donations from these donors. The second type of outside group, known as a 501(c)(4), is not required to disclose the names of its donors to either the FEC or the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) because such groups are supposedly organized as tax-exempt non-profits that promote social welfare and benefit the community by advocating issues during political campaigns. Since 501(c)(4)s do not have to disclose donor names, anonymous individuals can donate funds to these groups which can then funnel that money to a super PAC under the non-profit 501(c)(4)’s name. In short, super PACs can engage in funded campaign activity without having to either adhere to contribution limits or disclose donor identity.


Since understanding the complexity of the interrelationships among candidates, PACs, super PACs, and 501(c)(4)s requires effort for even the most astute students of law, it is unsurprising that average citizens were largely uninformed about the workings of these outside groups during the 2012 election. An August 2012 report by the Pew Research Center confirmed that six in ten Americans were either unaware of what a super PAC was or incorrectly defined such groups (Pew, 2012). By creating a new super PAC and then a 501(c)(4) to dissect the complexities of new campaign finance regulations, Colbert addressed a consequential but complex new campaign finance regulation structure.

*Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow*

To illustrate the intricacy and detail of *The Colbert Report’s* treatment of super PACs and 501(c)(4) groups, we briefly recount the narrative of Stephen Colbert’s super PAC *Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow*. During the run-up to the Republican primaries, on March 10, 2011, Colbert aired a segment of a PAC ad promoting former Minnesota Governor and 2012 Republican presidential candidate Tim Pawlenty’s new book “Courage to Stand” and a Pawlenty endorsement advertisement for Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker. In a parody of these ads, the comic showcased a mock PAC ad sponsored by ColbertPac.com. This segment sparked the creation of the Federal Election Commission (FEC) approved Colbert PAC. On March 30, 2011, Trevor Potter, a former FEC Chairman, broadcast law expert, and attorney provided Colbert with on-air legal advice about forming a Colbert PAC. The ruse for the segment was captured in the comedian’s assertion that “I clearly need a PAC but I have no idea what PACs do.”

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On the show, the former FEC chairman detailed the functions of a PAC and aided Colbert in filling out the required paperwork. Because the show is on *Comedy Central* which is owned by Viacom, the effort raised concerns that forming the super PAC would enmesh Viacom in the act of making illegal contributions. On the April 14, 2011 episode, Potter advised the satirist to create a super PAC to assuage any legal concerns about parent company contributions. On Colbert’s April 28, 2011 show, Potter explained that all one has to do is “add a cover letter saying it is a super PAC, then that’s it.” The discussion revealed that *Citizens United* allows super PACs to accept unlimited corporate donations.

In early March, Potter helped the show’s host file a “media exemption” (March 11, 2011) which allowed Colbert to voice his preference for specific candidates on air. On May 31, 2011, Potter returned to the show to discuss the uses to which donations to Colbert’s PAC might be put. In the segment, the comic questioned Potter about whether 2008 Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin had acted within the law by taking her family on vacation using money from Sarah PAC. Because Palin had not officially declared her candidacy, the former FEC chairman confirmed that her use of funds was legal. Colbert inquired, “But she’s getting this money because people think she might become a federal candidate?” Potter responded, “Right, but that’s the joy of a PAC. You’re sort of part way there but not a full candidate.” Colbert then jested that he wanted to take his children on a for-profit vacation. On June 30, 2011, the FEC approved Colbert’s PAC.

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In September 2011, the faux-conservative host expressed his amazement at the amount of money raised by Karl Rove’s super PAC, American Crossroads, and 501(c)(4), Crossroads GPS.

By comparing 501(c)(4)s to a “Secret Santa,” Colbert explained the differences between these two types of groups. The satirist also noted that while American Crossroads only brought in two hundred dollars, Crossroads GPS raised 5.1 million dollars. “Clearly (c)(4)s have created an unprecedented, unaccountable, untraceable cash tsunami that will infect every corner of the next election” explained Colbert. “And I feel like an idiot for not having one.”

In response, Potter explained that corporations are nervous about donating directly to a super PAC because their names would be publicly disclosed. He went on to say that if instead a corporation donated to a 501(c)(4) no one would know. The former FEC chairman then assisted the comedian in setting up a 501(c)(4) shell corporation to which unlimited donations could be given anonymously.

Potter explained that Colbert did not have to file with the IRS until May 2013.

Colbert: So I could get money from my (c)(4), use that for political purposes, and nobody knows anything about it until 6 months after the election?

Potter: That’s right. And even then they won’t know who your donors are.

Colbert: That’s my kind of campaign finance restriction…Okay, so now I can get corporate and individual donations of unlimited amounts for my (c)(4). What can I do with that money?

Potter: Well, that (c)(4) could take out political ads and attack candidates or promote your favorite ones as long as it’s not the principle purpose for spending its money.

Colbert: No, my principle purpose is an educational entity, right? I want to educate the public that gay people cause earthquakes. Ok?

Potter: There are probably some (c)(4)s doing that.

Colbert: Can I take this (c)(4) money and then donate it to my super PAC?

Potter: You can.

Colbert: But wait, wait, super PACs are transparent.

Potter: Right…

Colbert: And the (c)(4) is secret.

Potter: Mhmm..

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**Colbert**: So I can take secret donations of my (c)(4) and give it to my supposedly transparent super PAC.

**Potter**: And it’ll say given by your (c)(4).

**Colbert**: What is the difference between that and money laundering?

**Potter**: It’s hard to say.

On the January 12, 2012, Colbert announced plans to run for “President of the United States of South Carolina.” Potter, however, pointed out that it would be illegal for Colbert to run for president while simultaneously being chairman of his super PAC because he would be essentially coordinating with himself – though it would be perfectly legal for him to “volunteer” on its behalf. To protect his presidential bid, the satirist then signed over control of his super PAC to *Daily Show* host Jon Stewart and announced that the organization would now be referred to as “The Definitely Not Coordinating With Stephen Colbert Super PAC.”

Although, Colbert’s name did not end up on the South Carolina ballot, until the November 12, 2012 dissolution of his super PAC, the humorist continued to air segments featuring the intricacies of post *Citizens United* campaign finance. So, for example, when the host wanted to keep the nearly $800,000 left in the account but not disclose doing so to the IRS, Potter on the November 12 program discussed the intricacies of dissolving the Colbert super PAC and ways to “hide” the “secret money.” At this point, Potter advised Stephen that he could form a second anonymous 501(c)(4), then make out a check with the remaining funds to his first 501(c)(4) along with an Agency Letter which instructed the original 501(c)(4) to pay those funds to the second 501(c)(4) and give dispersal instructions to that second 501(c)(4). In doing so, he could avoid telling anyone - even the IRS - where the money went.11 In the end, however, Colbert donated the remaining money.

Prior research looked at the impact of the Colbert super PAC on knowledge (Lamarre, 2013). In an experiment, Lamarre (2013) compared consumption of Colbert’s super PAC satire across different media contexts. After exposing participants to either a segment from the Colbert Report or a clip of the talk show Morning Joe featuring the satirist, Lamarre found that issue knowledge and support for campaign finance reform were greater among the satirical Colbert Report condition than the political talk show Morning Joe condition. By not only triangulating methods, but also by comparing The Colbert Report to a variety of other news programs, our study complements Lamarre’s. Additionally, our study examines the relationship between viewing The Colbert Report and knowledge of super PACs/501(c)(4)s in the presence of controls including general political knowledge, identifies how the effects of exposure to the Colbert’s discussions differ from those on a variety of other more traditional news media, and documents the influence of exposure on perceptions of money in politics.

Hypotheses and Research Question

Colbert’s treatment of this complex issue did not simply explain the complexities of new campaign finance regulations, but also walked his audience through the detailed process of creating super PACs and 501(c)(4)s. His insertion into the campaign process and real interaction with the legal system, FEC, and mock candidacy allowed him to instruct as he entertained. Through the use of this super PAC narrative, The Colbert Report presented an intricate and detailed discussion that was reinforced throughout and after the election in a humorous and satirical fashion. In addition to influencing viewers’ factual knowledge of super PACs and 501(c)(4)s, viewing The Colbert Report may also increase viewers’ perception of how knowledgeable they are about these groups. In our survey, we not only asked factual knowledge questions but also asked how much respondents thought they knew about super PACs and
501(c)(4)s. Based on the past research outlined above which suggests political comedy fosters engagement and information retention, we hypothesize:

**H1:** Watching The Colbert Report increased perceived amount of knowledge of super PACs and 501(c)(4) groups.

**H2:** Watching The Colbert Report increased actual knowledge of super PACs and 501(c)(4) groups.

Democracy requires that a free press wrangle with topics that require deliberation, hold leaders accountable, and communicate accurate information in a venue hospitable to debate. In a system of government such as ours, the press holds a central role because “The country’s democracy may belong directly or indirectly to its citizens, but the democratic process can only be truly meaningful if these citizens are informed” (Gans 2003, 1). While not a traditional news institution, The Colbert Report does draw a politically knowledgeable audience. In 2007, the Pew Research Center reported that more than half (54%) of The Daily Show/The Colbert Report viewers were highly knowledgeable about public affairs – a percentage that tied with newspaper readers and was higher than any other news outlet (Pew Research Center, 2007).

Nonetheless, contrary to the general finding that such comedic shows contribute to political knowledge, Kim and Vishak’s (2008) experimental comparison of those viewing The Daily Show and others watching traditional media on the topic of the U.S. Supreme Court Justice and Chief Justice nomination process found The Daily Show to be less effective than legacy media at informing viewers. Their finding raises the possibility that some forms of comedic exchange or exchanges on some topics are more likely than others to produce learning. In many ways the Colbert campaign on which we focus differs from other comedic segments in that Colbert’s discussion of the super PACs/501(c)(4)s was “satirical political activism” (Lamarre
2013) and “ironic authenticity” (Day 2011) in which the satirist crossed over from being a humorist observer to an active participant.

The Colbert PAC was embedded in the greater narrative of the 2012 presidential campaign. The use of such narrative structures increased engagement with and retention of the content (see Machill, Köhler, & Waldhauser, 2007) and, in this case, content on a complicated political topic. By contrast, traditional television news is less likely to invite active engagement because its inverted pyramid structure “is like being told the punchline before the joke, or knowing the result before watching the game, or being told the ‘whodunit’ at the beginning of murder mystery” (Lewis, 1994, p. 30). An Elaboration Likelihood Model suggests that involvement with the narrative and response to the characters and plot twists increases engagement with the material (see Slater & Rouner, 2002).

The unique features of the Colbert campaign were noted by Jones, Baym, and Day (2012) when they wrote, “From the start, the most sustained part of [The Colbert Report’s] experiment has been the extended civic lessons offered on the program itself…By interviewing his lawyer Trevor Potter, and other policy experts, Colbert has explored campaign finance in far more detail than even the wonkiest of news reports” (Jones, Baym, & Day, 2012, p. 50). Although we did not conduct a content analysis of news coverage on super PACs, we agree with Jones, Baym, and Day’s (2012) assertion that The Colbert Report covered the topic more thoroughly than traditional news sources. Past research has shown, though, that such soft news programs do provide opportunities for viewers to engage with politics, perhaps even more so than traditional news media. Farnsworth and Lichter (2003), for example, found that during the 2000 presidential campaign, both Al Gore and George W. Bush received more airtime on during their one-time appearance each on The Late Show with David Letterman than they did on the three broadcast
channels’ evening news programs for an entire month. Overall, *The Colbert Report*’s detailed coverage, combined with a humorous approach within a narrative structure should increase learning of super PACs/501(c)(4)s above and beyond traditional news. Therefore, we hypothesize:

\[ H_3: \text{Watching The Colbert Report increases actual knowledge of super PACs and 501(c)(4) groups more so than other news sources.} \]

Knowledge acquisition in and of itself is not as consequential as the translation of knowledge into beliefs and attitudes about our political system. In the last decade or so, political communication scholars have focused on the normative implications of entertainment media and politics in the United States\(^{12}\) (e.g. Holbert, 2005; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). It is important to understand how knowledge acquisition from political comedy influences political beliefs. Here we examine a very specific realm of knowledge, and since knowledge of super PACs and 501(c)(4) groups largely concerns campaign finance, we hypothesize that having accurate knowledge of the financing rules influences individuals’ perceptions of whether money is useful in politics. Thus, we hypothesize:

\[ H_4: \text{Accurate knowledge of super PACs and 501(c)(4) groups influences the perception that money is useful in politics.} \]

We have hypothesized that viewing *The Colbert report* will increase knowledge of super PACs and 501(c)(4)s and that this knowledge will influence beliefs about the role of money in politics. The theoretical next step is stating a formal mediation process. Thus, we hypothesize:

\[ H_5: \text{Watching The Colbert Report influences the perception that money is useful in politics through the mediation of knowledge of super PACs and 501(c)(4) groups.} \]

\(^{12}\) See Althaus (2012) for an excellent discussion on normative assessments in political communication.
Because a main criterion variable is content specific political knowledge, an alternative explanation for the relationship between viewing The Colbert Report and knowledge of super PACs and 501(c)(4)s is that those who are more politically knowledgeable seek out the program, which in turn increases knowledge about campaign finance. While the previously noted Pew Research Center (2007) reported that more than half of Daily Show/Colbert Report viewers were highly knowledgeable, we do not know whether higher levels of general political knowledge is positively related to viewing the Colbert Report in the face of socio-demographic controls. Therefore, we ask:

*RQ1: Is general political knowledge positively related to viewing The Colbert Report, which in turn leads to an increase in knowledge of super PACs and 501(c)(4) groups?*

**Methods**

Our research is based on data from the Annenberg Public Policy Center’s (APPC) 2012 Institutions of Democracy Political Knowledge Survey, a six-wave national cross-sectional telephone survey of U.S. adults, 18 years or older, conducted during and after the 2012 presidential election. The variables of interest in this paper appeared in the sixth wave only, which was fielded between December 13 and December 23, 2012. Under contract to the APPC, Social Science Research Solutions (SSRS) completed a total of 1,232 interviews with randomly selected adults contacted through random-digit dialing (RDD) of landline telephones (N=792) and cell phones (N=440).\(^{14}\)\(^{15}\)
Dependent Variables

**Perceived Knowledge of Super PACs and 501(c)(4) Groups:** Respondents were asked how much they know about super PACs and 501(c)(4) groups on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 4 (a great deal) (super PACs: mean=2.03, SD=1.05; 501(c)(4) groups: mean=1.58, SD=0.90).

**Specific Knowledge of Super PACs and 501(c)(4) Groups:** Respondents were asked three knowledge items about super PACs and 501(c)(4) groups. Respondents were read the following statements about super PACs and 501(c)(4) groups, and were asked to indicate whether they thought each statement was accurate or not: 1) “Super PACs and the candidates they are supporting are legally required to operate independently of each other,” 2) “Super PACs can accept unlimited contributions from individuals, unions, and corporations,” and 3) “Super PACs do not have to tell the IRS how much money they have transferred to these 501(c)(4) groups.” The correct answer to each is that the statement is accurate. Those who reported not having any knowledge of super PACs were not asked the first two items and those who reported not having any knowledge of 501(c)(4) groups were not asked the third item. Each item was first coded to indicate whether it was answered correctly or not. If respondents were not asked the question because they reported not having any knowledge of super PACs or 501(c)(4) groups, then the item was coded as not correct. A little over a third of the sample (38.8%) knew the correct answer to the first item, 45.2 percent knew the correct answer to the second, and 17.8 percent

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15 All interviews were conducted by live interviewers using computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) software. In households reached by landline, an adult was selected at random based on their age (or most recent birthday). The questionnaire was delivered in Spanish for those who selected that option. Non-responsive phone numbers were contacted up to 6 times, and in cases where initial attempts were met with soft refusal (i.e. abrupt hang-ups), refusal-conversion attempts were made. Accounting for design effects, the margin of error is +/-3.7 percent. The response rate was 10 percent. Response rate uses the standard AAPOR RR3 formula.
knew the correct answer to the third. The items were summed to create a total knowledge scale ranging from 0 to 3 (mean=1.14, SD=1.07; α = 0.769).

**Perception of Money in Politics:** Respondents were asked whether they agree or disagree with the following two statements on a scale ranging from 1 (disagree strongly) to 4 (agree strongly): 1) “Money in politics plays a useful role in shaping legislation,” and 2) “Money in politics increases the amount of useful campaign speech.” These items were reverse coded and a scale was created by computing the mean of the two items (r=.372, p<.001), ranging from one to four (mean=2.44, SD=1.02).

**Independent Variables**

**The Colbert Report Viewership:** Respondents were asked if they watched *The Colbert Report* during the general election. About a quarter of the respondents (25.4%) indicated that they did so. Those who reported that they did watch *The Colbert Report* were asked, “In a typical week, *The Colbert Report* airs four new episodes. During the general election season, on average how many of those episodes did you watch per week either on television or online?” A scale was created to indicate the number of episodes per week during the general election that respondents watched *The Colbert Report*. Those who reported not having watched *The Colbert Report* at all were coded as zero (mean = 0.48; SD = 1.01).

**Traditional News Media Consumption:** Respondents were asked how many days per week they watch national news on a broadcast television network, watch FOX News, watch CNN, watch MSNBC, read a daily newspaper online or in hard copy, and listen to radio shows that invite listeners to call in to discuss current events, public issues or politics (broadcast national news: mean = 3.15, SD = 2.89; FOX News: mean = 1.82, SD = 2.58; CNN: mean =
1.54, $SD = 2.34$; MSNBC: \textit{mean} = 1.18, $SD = 2.15$; newspaper: \textit{mean} = 2.87, $SD = 2.90$; radio: \textit{mean} = 1.53, $SD = 2.42$.\footnote{We recognize the noted concerns about self-reported media measures (e.g. Prior 2009; 2012). Particularly, respondents have been shown to over-report consumption of media. Since we are looking primarily at the direct effect of media consumption on knowledge, though, over-reported media consumption would suggest that the magnitudes of the effects found in our analyses are lower than the true effects. This is because those who falsely reported consuming media would be analyzed as having consumed media, diluting the effect of those who actually consumed media.}

\textit{General political knowledge.} Respondents were asked three general political knowledge questions: 1) “Do you happen to know which party has the most members in the United Stated House of Representatives?”; 2) “Do you happen to know who is the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives?”; 3) “Do you happen to know who is the vice president of the United States?” The items were coded into correct or not and summed together into a scale ranging from zero to three correct answers (mean=1.74; SD=1.06).

\textit{Analyses}

Two multiple linear regression models predicting self-reported knowledge of super PACs and 501(c)(4)s from \textit{The Colbert Report} and traditional news media viewing were created to test the first hypothesis. Next, a multiple linear regression model predicting total knowledge from \textit{The Colbert Report} and the traditional news media viewership was structured to test the second hypothesis. A series of \textit{F}-tests were conducted to test for differences between the coefficients for \textit{The Colbert Report} and the traditional media sources in the knowledge regression, testing the third hypothesis. A multiple linear regression model predicting the perception of money in politics from the super PAC/501(c)(4) knowledge scale and \textit{The Colbert Report} and traditional news viewership was created for a test of the fourth hypothesis. Finally, the fifth hypothesis was tested with a path analysis conducted using MPlus (Muthén, & Muthén 2006). The research
question was also tested in this path model. All analyses control for online news consumption,\textsuperscript{17} general political knowledge, having voted in the 2012 general election,\textsuperscript{18} party identification, political ideology, education, race, gender, and age.\textsuperscript{19}

**Results**

*Perceived Knowledge of Super PACs and 501(c)(4) Groups*

Table 1 presents the multiple linear regression models for the test of H1, which predicts that watching *The Colbert Report* would increase the perception of how knowledgeable respondents thought they were about super PACs and 501(c)(4) groups. Viewing *The Colbert Report* increased both respondents’ belief that they were knowledgeable about super PACs ($b=0.18$, $p<.001$) and 501(c)(4) groups ($b=0.08$, $p<.01$). FOX News viewing ($b=0.03$, $p<.05$), newspaper reading ($b=0.03$, $p<.001$), and talk radio listening ($b=0.05$, $p<.001$) were also associated with greater self-reported knowledge of super PACs. MSNBC viewing ($b=0.05$, $p<.001$), newspaper reading ($b=0.03$, $p<.001$), and talk radio listening ($b=0.07$, $p<.001$) were all significantly associated with greater self-reported knowledge of 501(c)(4) groups. Viewership of national nightly broadcast news was associated with lower self-reported knowledge of 501(c)(4) groups ($b=-0.03$, $p<.01$). Therefore, H1 is supported.

![TABLE 1 HERE]
It should also be noted that the coefficient of *The Colbert Report* was greater on self-reported knowledge of super PACs than watching CNN ($F=35.72, p<.001$), watching MSNBC ($F=22.38, p<.001$), watching FOX News ($F=25.07, p<.001$), watching national nightly broadcast news ($F=44.35, p<.001$), reading a daily newspaper ($F=25.71, p<.001$), and listening to talk radio ($F=20.14, p<.001$). Because of the construction of these variables, the $F$-tests presented across the analyses can be interpreted as a test of the difference between the effect of every additional day (or episode) of watching Colbert and the effect every additional day of another news source. Additionally, the coefficient of watching *The Colbert Report* was greater on self-reported knowledge of 501(c)(4) groups than watching CNN ($F=9.94, p<.01$), watching FOX News ($F=4.45, p<.05$), and watching national nightly broadcast news ($F=13.06, p<.001$), but there was no significant difference for MSNBC, newspapers, or talk radio.

**Actual Knowledge of Super PACs and 501(c)(4) Groups**

Table 2 presents the multiple regression model for total knowledge of super PACs and 501(c)(4) groups. Watching *The Colbert Report* significantly increased knowledge ($b=0.15, p<.001$). These results present clear evidence that watching *The Colbert Report* significantly increased accurate knowledge of super PACs and 501(c)(4) groups, supporting H2. Turning to the traditional news sources, reading a daily newspaper ($b=0.04, p<.001$), listening to talk radio ($b=0.06, p<.001$) and watching FOX News ($b=0.03, p<.05$) also increased knowledge.

[Table 2 here]

To test H3, which posits that *The Colbert Report* viewing had a greater effect on knowledge than other news media, $F$ statistics were calculated.\(^{20}\) The relationship between

\(^{20}\) Due to the difference in the days per week that Colbert Report airs compared to the days per week that the other news sources air, the ranges of the scales for Colbert Report viewership and viewership of other news media differ. Colbert viewership ranges from 0-4 days (or episodes) per week and the other news media range from 0-7 days per week. The questions were deliberately asked in this fashion to be able to make the fairest comparison.
viewing *The Colbert Report* and knowledge of super PACs and 501(c)(4)s is greater than CNN ($F=22.02, p<.001$), MSNBC ($F=14.96, p<.001$), FOX News ($F=14.80, p<.001$), newspapers ($F=12.90, p<.001$), broadcast nightly news ($F=27.84, p<.001$), and talk radio ($F=9.14, p<.001$). Not only did watching *The Colbert Report* increase knowledge of super PACs and 501(c)(4) groups, but it did so at a greater rate than any other news source. H3 is supported.

**Perception of Money in Politics**

Table 3 presents the multiple linear regression model for the test of H4, which states that accurate knowledge of super PACs and 501(c)(4) groups will influence the perception of money in politics. In the model, our knowledge scale is positively and significantly related to the combined belief that money does not play a useful role in shaping legislation, and does not increase the amount of useful campaign speech.

![Table 3 Here](image)

Figure 1 presents the path analysis conducted using MPlus. An alternative model tested H5 using the Hayes (2012) PROCESS macro for SPSS, which found similar results and significant mediation using a bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval based on 10,000 bootstrap samples.
Importantly, basic political knowledge was not significantly related to viewing *The Colbert Report*. Consistent with Table 2, Figure 1 shows that basic political knowledge was robustly related to knowledge of super PACs and 501(c)(4) groups, and thus indirectly related to perceptions of money in politics ($\beta = 0.11, p < .01$). This suggests that viewing *The Colbert Report* produced a unique indirect effect on the perception of money in politics.

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

**Discussion**

This study tested whether exposure to *The Colbert Report* influenced perceived and actual knowledge of super PACs and 501(c)(4) groups, and how, if at all, such knowledge influenced viewers’ perceptions about the role of money in politics. First, we found that *The Colbert Report* viewing increased both perception of how knowledgeable the respondents were about super PACs and 501(c)(4) groups and also increased actual knowledge of campaign finance regulation related to these independent expenditure groups. While we do find some evidence that other news outlets produced increases in perceived knowledge and actual knowledge, there is strong support for the notion that *The Colbert Report*’s influence was greater than that of other types of news media. We also found that viewing *The Colbert Report* indirectly influenced perception of money in politics. Our findings suggest that *The Colbert Report* succeeded in tackling a complicated political issue to an extent that other news sources did not. Consistent with elaboration likelihood approaches, humor and satire within the narrative structure of *The Colbert Report* potentially increased engagement (Slater & Rouner, 2002; Wanzer, Frymier, & Irwin, 2010), providing an extended civics lesson on the role of third-party independent expenditure groups in political campaigns.
The findings complement past research (Lamarre, 2012) and confirm the legitimacy of Jones, Baym, and Day’s (2012) conclusion that *The Colbert Report* can productively be viewed as an extended civics lesson. At the same time, this study adds to the literature in a number of ways. The findings connect learning from *The Colbert Report* about super PACs and 501(c)(4) groups to political beliefs. The study also shows that this learning is not a function of more politically knowledgeable individuals seeking out the show. In all analyses, when we held general political knowledge constant, viewing the *Colbert Report* still produced consistently significant coefficients. The results suggest unique learning effects from viewing the show.

The importance of this study also lies in the complexity of the issue *The Colbert Report* tackled. In this instance, *The Colbert Report* was successful in teaching its viewers the ins and outs of the current laws about campaign finance reform. And the satirist was more successful in doing so than any other news outlet we measured. This knowledge of super PACs and 501(c)(4) groups translated, albeit somewhat weakly, into the belief that money *does not* play a useful role in shaping legislation nor increasing the amount of useful campaign speech. Given its ironic and satirical treatment of the issue, it is notable that viewing *The Colbert Report* did not have a direct effect on this belief. Understanding of the issue gained from viewing the program and not just viewing the show influenced respondents’ perceptions of money in politics.

At first these findings seem to contradict those of Kim and Vishak (2008) who found that *The Daily Show* was less successful than traditional news media in informing viewers about the Supreme Court nomination process. However, the Supreme Court nominating process and campaign finance are two distinct topics, and more importantly, two different formats were studied – individual segments versus an ongoing campaign narrative in which the satirist assumed an activist pose.
Political communication scholars are becoming nuanced in their theorizing about political comedy and satire. Holbert et al. (2011) have parsed specific effects from Juvenalian and Horatian types of satire. Feldman (2013) found that the effect of political comedy on learning was dependent on whether a viewer thought of the show as either pure entertainment or a mix of entertainment and news. Another avenue political communication scholars might productively explore is the specific effect of narrative structure versus individual segments. Theoretically, one could argue that narrative would produce deeper learning than multiple unconnected segments on the same topic because of increased engagement with the material.

The main limitation of this study is that we do not measure direct exposure to the Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow narrative presented on the show. This study captures reported viewership of The Colbert Report measured after the 2012 election. Like many communication studies before and many to come, our exposure measure is blunt and we do not test actual exposure to the super PAC content.

As with almost all cross-sectional survey research, the causal arrow from X to Y could be questioned and the potential non-recursive nature of the relationship is both a conceptual and a methodological issue. Conceptually, it is possible that those who are more knowledgeable about super PACs and 501(c)(4) groups were more likely to consume The Colbert Report in the face of controls. Despite this possibility, we find it more plausible, particularly with the specificity of our knowledge measures, that the direction of the relationship is that viewership led to knowledge. Methodologically, testing non-recursive relationships in cross-sectional data requires statistical techniques such as two-stage least squares (2SLS) regression or simultaneous equation models with various estimation techniques (see Kline, 2005; Bollen, 1989). Both of these approaches hold stringent assumptions about outside variables differentially feeding into
the independent and dependent variable of the reciprocal relationship in order to ensure model identification (Bollen, 1989). Because of the constraints to run these types of analysis and because our models control for general political knowledge and other news media consumption, it methodologically and theoretically makes sense to model the directionality the way we did.

While our research suggests that political comedy shows like The Colbert Report have the ability to simplify and explain complex issues in a way that fosters learning, it is likely a difficult process for other news programs to replicate. FOX News did not succeed in its attempt with the short lived The ½ Hour News Show. However, if other shows can effectively present complex issues using a humorous narrative, viewers may become better informed about the issues and more engaged in the political process. It must be noted, though, that the narrative presented in The Colbert Show was unique, with the satirist effectively able to inform by participating in the political process. Given the uniqueness of the opportunity presented to Colbert in the 2012 election cycle, whether Colbert will even be able to replicate what he accomplished on another political topic is a whole other question, letting alone the larger question of whether other programs can emulate what he did. Finally, additional programs like The Colbert Report may increase cynicism among viewers (see Baumgartner & Morris, 2006), and depending upon whether the program has an ideological bias, more programs could lead to more political polarization.

Nevertheless, we find pro-civic results of exposure to The Colbert Report on knowledge of the complicated political issue of super PACs and 501(c)(4) groups, and we find as well that having such knowledge can influence political perceptions. Our findings answer the question posed by The New York Times’ David Carr. Colbert’s efforts were educational, not just a proliferation of jokes.
References


Young, D. G. (2003, November). The counterargument-disruption model of political humor in the context of late-night programming Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Miami Beach, FL


Table 1: Multiple Regression Models Predicting Perceived Knowledge of Super PACs and 501(c)(4) Groups from Exposure to *The Colbert Report* and Other News Media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Perceived Knowledge of Super PACs</th>
<th>Perceived Knowledge of 501(c)(4) Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>Std. err.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Colbert Report</em> (days/week)</td>
<td>0.18***</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNN (days/week)</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>MSNBC</em> (days/week)</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>FOX News</em> (days/week)</td>
<td>0.03*</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Newspaper</em> (days/week)</td>
<td>0.03***</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Talk Radio</em> (days/week)</td>
<td>0.05***</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadcast Nightly News (days/week)</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumes News Online</td>
<td>0.12*</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic Political Knowledge</td>
<td>0.38***</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted in 2012</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
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<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>-0.08**</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (years)</td>
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<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Black</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1,032</td>
<td>1,022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.25</td>
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</table>

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001*
Table 2: Multiple Regression Model Predicting Actual Knowledge of Super PACs and 501(c)(4) Groups from Exposure to The Colbert Report and Other News Media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge of Super PACs and 501(c)(4) Groups</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>Std. err.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Colbert Report (days/week)</td>
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<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNN (days/week)</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSNBC (days/week)</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOX News (days/week)</td>
<td>0.03*</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper (days/week)</td>
<td>0.04***</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk Radio (days/week)</td>
<td>0.06***</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadcast Nightly News (days/week)</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumes News Online</td>
<td>0.13*</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic Political Knowledge</td>
<td>0.35***</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted in 2012</td>
<td>0.17*</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>0.15*</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (years)</td>
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<td>0.01</td>
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<td>Female</td>
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<td>0.06</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
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<td>Constant</td>
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N 1,014
R² 0.32

* p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001
Table 3: Multiple Regression Model Predicting Perception of Money in Politics from Knowledge of Super PACs and 501(c)(4) Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model Term</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>Std. err.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of Super PACs and 501(c)(4)</td>
<td>0.043**</td>
<td>0.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Colbert Report (days/week)</td>
<td>0.046</td>
<td>0.033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNN (days/week)</td>
<td>-0.025</td>
<td>0.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSNBC (days/week)</td>
<td>-0.011</td>
<td>0.017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOX News (days/week)</td>
<td>-0.044**</td>
<td>0.014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper (days/week)</td>
<td>0.013</td>
<td>0.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk Radio (days/week)</td>
<td>0.013</td>
<td>0.013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadcast Nightly News (days/week)</td>
<td>0.013</td>
<td>0.012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumes News Online</td>
<td>-0.038</td>
<td>0.070</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic Political Knowledge</td>
<td>0.032</td>
<td>0.037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted in 2012</td>
<td>0.154</td>
<td>0.092</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
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<td>0.080</td>
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<td>Democrat</td>
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<td>0.080</td>
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<td>Conservative</td>
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<td>Education (years)</td>
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<td>Female</td>
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<td>Age</td>
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<td>0.002</td>
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</table>

Constant 2.38

N 1034

R² 0.083

* p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001
Figure 1: Indirect Effect of *The Colbert Report* Viewing on the Perception of Money in Politics through Knowledge of Super PACs and 501(c)(4) Groups

**Notes:** * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001. Black paths are statistically significantly and grey dashed lines are not.

*Chi Square*(4)=3.897, *p*=.42; *TLI*=1.00; *RMSEA*=0.01