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Stephen Colbert's Civics Lesson: Or, how a TV humorist taught America about campaign finance

PHILADELPHIA – Score one for the “Colbert Nation.”

Viewers of “The Colbert Report” who watched faux-conservative TV host Stephen Colbert set up a super PAC and 501(c)(4) organization during the last presidential election cycle proved to be better informed about campaign financing and the role of money in politics than viewers of other news channels and shows, according to a new study.

“It’s the first study actually showing that Colbert is doing a better job than other news sources at teaching people about campaign financing,” said Bruce W. Hardy, Ph.D., lead author of the study and a senior researcher at the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC) of the University of Pennsylvania. “Consistently, we found that Colbert did better than every other news source we included in our model.”

The study, published online in *Mass Communication and Society*, tested “The Colbert Report” against CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, and broadcast nightly news, as well as talk radio and newspapers as sources of political information. The study, “Stephen Colbert’s Civics Lesson,” was based on phone survey data from 1,232 adults 18 years or older who were interviewed between Dec. 13, 2012 and Dec. 23, 2012.

Watching “The Colbert Report” served as “an extended civics lesson,” the researchers said. The show not only increased people’s perceptions that they knew more about political financing, but significantly increased their actual knowledge, and did so at a greater rate than other news sources. Other activities that also increased knowledge about super PACs and 501(c)(4)s, but to a lesser degree, included reading a daily newspaper, listening to talk radio, and watching Fox News.

“Colbert did better than any other news source at teaching,” Hardy said. “There were two reasons. First was the narrative structure. He walked us through creating a super PAC and every episode was a continuation of that story. And second was the use of humor and satire.”

The researchers said that the use of a continuing narrative in which the humorist crossed from being an observer to an active participant engaged viewers more than the traditional approach used by the news media. The “inverted pyramid” used in many news stories, in which the most important news comes first, has been compared with “being told the punchline before the joke,” the study noted.

Starting in 2011, Comedy Central's "The Colbert Report" took a critical and satirical look at the world of campaign financing as authorized under the 2010 U.S. Supreme Court's Citizens United ruling. On the March 30, 2011 show, former Federal Election Commission chairman Trevor Potter advised Colbert on how to set up a political action committee or PAC. Colbert created a super PAC, unaffiliated with any candidate, called "Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow," which was allowed to accept unlimited corporate donations. With Potter's guidance, Colbert also created a 501(c)(4) "shell corporation," to which donations could be given anonymously. That group was allowed to funnel the anonymously given money to the super PAC.

As Colbert put it: "Clearly, (c)(4)s have created an unprecedented, unaccountable, untraceable cash tsunami that will infect every corner of the next election. And I feel like an idiot for not having one."

The study is consistent with earlier research on the positive effects of "soft news" and political satire on viewers' knowledge, and on political comedy as a "gateway" to additional news use. A 2008 study of Jon Stewart's "The Daily Show" found it less effective than traditional news media at informing viewers about the Supreme Court nominating process. But the two examples are very different, the current study said, and "The Colbert Report" succeeded by creating a narrative in which Colbert played an activist role.

In the New York Times, media columnist David Carr wrote in 2011: "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." This APPC study concluded: "Colbert's efforts were educational, not just a proliferation of jokes."

Hardy's co-authors on the study were Jeffrey A. Gottfried, a research associate at the Pew Research Center; Kenneth M. Winneg, managing director of survey research at APPC; and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of APPC.

The **Annenberg Public Policy Center** (<http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org>) was established in 1994 to educate the public and policy makers about the media's role in advancing public understanding of political and health issues at the local, state and federal levels.

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