

Did Jon Stewart Elect Donald Trump? Evidence From Television Ratings Data

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Abstract

To identify the effects of televised political comedy on political behavior and attitudes in the 2016 election, we leverage the change in hosts of two popular television shows, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, and both shows' subsequent ratings declines. By combining granular geographic ratings data with election results and public opinion data, we are able to isolate the shows' effects on the 2016 presidential election and a variety of political attitudes. We observe small but significant effects on attitudes about several social issues. For *The Daily Show*, we find a strong positive effect on Jon Stewart's departure and Donald Trump's vote share. By our estimate, the transition at *The Daily Show* spurred a 1.1% increase in Trump's vote share at the county level. Our results have implications for media effects research.

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Can a political television show change political outcomes? It is easy to be skeptical that this is possible. In an era of highly polarized political media (Sunstein 2017), in which Americans are able to self-select into media tailored to their precise ideological-partisan configurations, it seems unlikely that any single show could leave a trace. Self-selection simply looms too large; the effects of any one show are probably too small. Yet some television shows transcend narrow political niches, becoming objects of national fascination and attracting sizable audiences. At least theoretically, unusually popular political media *may* be able to overcome the selection problem, and structure the political beliefs and behaviors of a large number of people.

So too might the removal of such media. If a show can affect politics at the height of its popularity, then that show's decline might also be politically consequential. In this paper, we examine the effects of the ratings declines of two of the most well-known political television shows of recent years, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. *The Daily Show*, which has aired on the cable channel Comedy Central since 1996, has been the subject of numerous previous investigations (e.g., Annenberg 2004; Baumgartener and Morris 2006). In contrast to those scholars, who studied the show at the height of its popularity, we exploit the replacement of its extraordinarily popular host, Jon Stewart, with Trevor Noah, and its subsequent sharp drop in popularity. Leveraging the change in hosts, and the resultant large drop in ratings, permits us to tease out the effects of the show on the 2016 presidential election and a wide array of political attitudes. We do the same for Stephen Colbert's eponymous show. Around the same time that Noah replaced Stewart, Colbert was replaced by *The Nightly Show With Larry Wilmore*. Once again, this change in hosts precipitated a large drop in ratings. And so again, we leverage the change in hosts and the subsequent decline in popularity—in this case, understood as audience size in the same time slot—to isolate the effects of the show on political attitudes and voting.

To look at the effects of the shows' rating declines on voting, we examine Republican

presidential vote share at the county level. We find that the drop in ratings that followed Jon Stewart's departure from *The Daily Show* had a significant positive effect on Donald Trump's vote share in the 2016 election at the county level, compared to Mitt Romney's vote share in those same counties in 2012. By our estimate, Trump's vote share at the county level was increased 1.1% over the prior Republican nominee because of Stewart's departure. We observe no similar effects for Colbert's replacement by Wilmore.

To study the effects of the ratings decline on attitudes, we use 2016 CCES data. We find that, across a variety of hot-button political issues, the change in hosts for both shows affected views about social issues. To be sure, these effects were small. But on issues relating to abortion, crime, the environment and gun control, the changes in host and the subsequent audience decline affected major political attitudes. The effects were not always in the expected or even a uniform direction; some effects were conservatizing, and others were liberalizing. Sometimes, the effects for different shows were indeed different. For example, while the host change and subsequent audience decline at *The Daily Show* led people to become more supportive of banning assault rifles, the Colbert-Wilmore hand-off led people to become less supportive of such a ban. Finally, similar to how Kearney and Levine (2016) study whether a television show can influence a life event, we consider whether the change in Comedy Central hosts had effects on life events. Across a broad range of measures, we find that, with only one exception, the changes to both shows had no impact on major life events.

In a paper like this, it is especially important to minimize the possibility that effects are spurious and owed instead to omitted variables not captured in our specifications. To do so, we include ratings for several other Comedy Central shows during the time periods studied. We do not detect any voting effects for these shows, suggesting that *The Daily Show* voting effects cannot be explained by longer-term trends in the channel's popularity or cable in general. *The Daily Show*'s decline appears to have wielded unique influence over

voting behavior. As we show in a series of simulations, the show's decline was perilous for Clinton's fate in the electoral college. In a counterfactual world in which Noah maintained Stewart's ratings, the election may very well have turned out differently.

This paper is structured as follows. We begin by describing the context of our research, detailing the ratings rise and fall of both shows. We then offer a literature review to explain how our project offers more causally credible estimates than previous examinations of *The Daily Show*'s effects. Next, we describe our research design, our data and our findings. We conclude with thoughts on the implication of our research for understandings of media effects on political attitudes and behavior.

Media Effects and Political Comedy

This paper contributes to two ongoing literatures. The first focuses on evaluating the political effects of televised political comedy. The second deploys large data sets on social and political attitudes, and the audience size of various media, to make causal claims about the effects of such media. By taking insights from the second literature, we offer new credible estimates about the causal impact of political media on voting and attitudes.

While late night humor has been studied by a variety of researchers, the immense popularity of *The Daily Show*, combined with its nakedly partisan sense of humor, have made it a rich target for researchers interested in the relationship between political media and political attitudes. Baumgartner and Morris (2006) find that not only does the show arouse anti-Republican sentiment—not surprising, given the open partisan leanings of its host—but also coincides with an increase in political cynicism. On the other hand, though they may have been more cynical, the show's viewers are comparatively well-informed about ongoing political events (Annenberg 2004; Cooper and Bailey 2008). Still, the partisan leanings of the show appear to be unusually impactful. Morris (2009) shows

that, during the 2004 presidential election, exposure to the show, which was merciless in its mocking of the Republican ticket, depressed the favorability ratings of that ticket. Stewart's ability to generate partisan affect, in favor of his preferences, may have been unique among late-night comedy hosts. Parkin (2010) looks at John Kerry's appearance on the show during the 2004 presidential election, and concludes that otherwise disengaged voters were especially likely to be affected by it. Young (2004) studies how the late-night comedy of David Letterman and Jay Leno affected the 2000 election, and finds that any detectable effects were mediated by viewers' pre-exposure partisanship. Parkin (2010) looks at John Kerry's 2004 appearance on *The Daily Show* and offers evidence that it was especially impactful among otherwise unengaged voters.

The present paper put research on *The Daily Show*, and indeed political comedy in general, into conversation with scholarship that seeks to precisely identify the causal effects of mass media on social attitudes and behavior. Some of this work relies on random variation in the dissemination of particular media. DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007) leverage the gradual distribution of Fox News across U.S. cable networks to isolate the effects of the availability of Fox News on the 2000 election. Because those districts that had access to Fox News in 2000 were statistically indistinct from those that did not, based on pre-2000 voting and demographic data, they are able to conclude that the introduction of Fox News led to an increase of .4 to .7 percentage points in the 2000 election—or more than enough votes to swing what was an historically close contest. More recently, Martin and Yurukoglu (2017) increased Republican vote share by .3 percentage points among voters who watched just 2.5 additional minutes of the network a week because of its place on the proverbial cable dial.

Television can also have effects on questions that are further afield. For example, Gentzkow and Shapiro (2008) adopt a similar identification strategy to Gentzkow (2006), but look instead at how preschool exposure to television—again, with random variation in

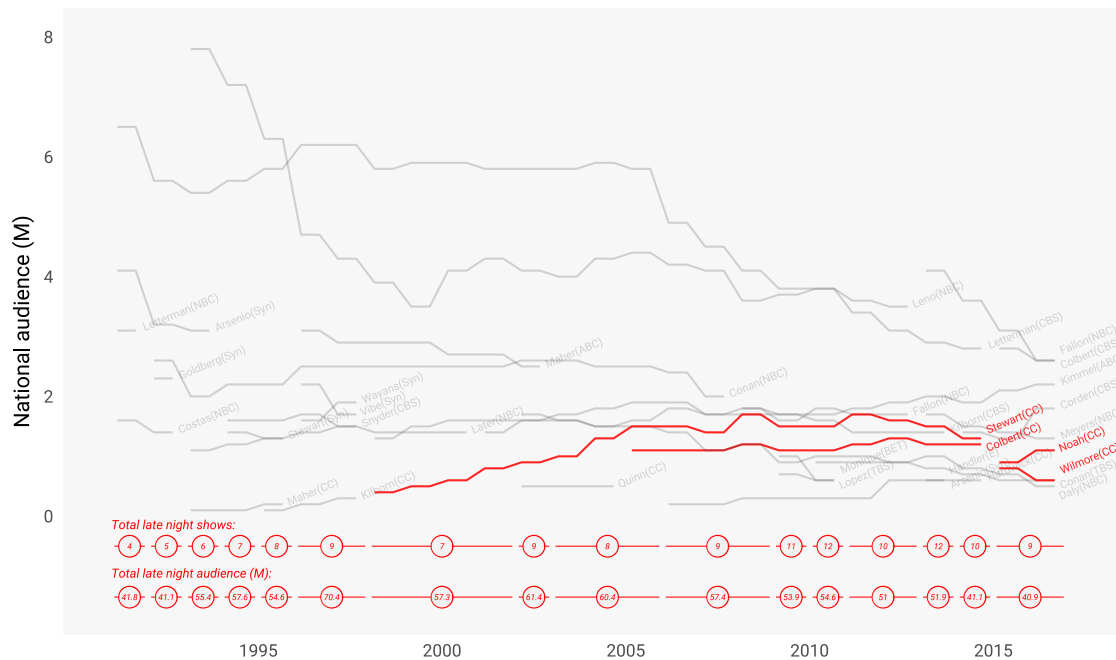
the introduction of TV to U.S. markets—affected subsequent educational test scores. Contrary to the common myth that television harms cognitive development, they observe small but significant *positive* effects on test scores. Television does not rot your brain after all. Likewise, violent movies *do not* cause upticks in violence—quite the opposite. Dahl and DellaVigna (2009) utilize random variation in the weather, as well as changes in subsequent box office, to find that the debut of violent movies into a marketplace leads to a decrease in violent crime; the more people who watch a violent movie, the less violent crime there is.

To suss out the effects of MTV’s popular show *Sixteen and Pregnant* on teen pregnancy rates, Kearney and Levine (2016) offer an instrumental variable design in which MTV ratings prior to the introduction of the show are assumed to be uncorrelated with teen pregnancy rates after the show’s debut. Such a strategy requires them to have access to both county-level television ratings and county-level teen pregnancy rates. They conclude that the show spurred a sharp drop in teen pregnancy. They estimate a 4.9% reduction in teen pregnancy due to the show in its first year, which would account for nearly a quarter of the overall reduction observed across the U.S. in that time period. There are, however, limits to the effects of television. After embedding various messages into daytime television soap operas, Paluck et al (2015) are unable to detect any long-lasting or substantively significant effects on behavior related to the messages (e.g., a message related to drunk driving did not reduce incidence of drunk driving).

Context

Televised political comedy is almost as old as the medium itself. As Figure 1 shows, over the past twenty years, the audience has fragmented dramatically, with options on both cable and broadcast television. On cable, two Comedy Central shows, *The Daily Show*

Figure 1: Audience Decline Across the U.S.



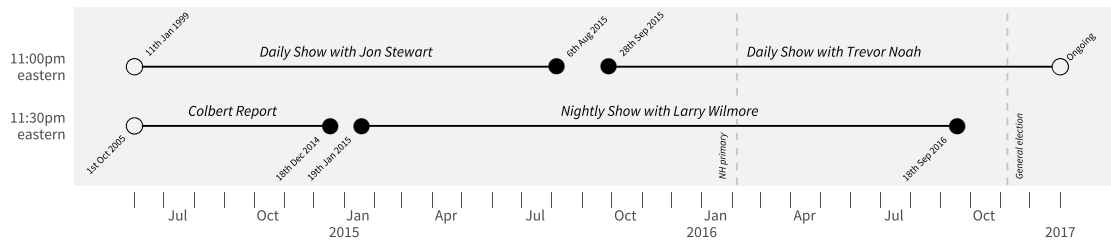
The decline in audience of both shows across the United States.

and *The Colbert Report*, consistently outperformed their cable counterparts.

While *The Daily Show* launched on Comedy Central in 1996, it was not until after Jon Stewart took over, in 1999, that the show began to achieve outsized political importance. A mixture of on-air interviews with celebrity personalities, including politicians, taped segments, and Stewart's own riffing on the news of the day—often interspersed with short cuts of prominent politicians, edited to make the politicians look buffoonish—the show featured an openly pro-Democratic bent. Political hypocrites were skewered; but better if the hypocrites were Republican (Smith 2016).

The show featured a number of “correspondents,” comedians who interjected their own humorous and often Democratic-leaning take on current events. Among the most

Figure 2: Audience Decline Across the U.S.



The decline in audience of both shows across the United States.

popular was Stephen Colbert. Colbert was eventually given his own show, *The Colbert Report*, which debuted in 2005. While Stewart mocked Republican politicians, Colbert took him one step further, and created the character of “Stephen Colbert,” an outspoken Republican similar to Fox News’s Bill O’Reilly. In the spirit of satire, the Colbert character always went one or three steps too far (Franklin 2005). At his peak, Stewart drew 4.3 million viewers to one show—a 2008 interview with then-presidential candidate Barack Obama (Steinberg and Kissell 2016)—while Colbert would attract about half that (O’Connell 2015).

Stewart finished his run as host in August 2015 and was replaced by Trevor Noah in late September of that year. Colbert, meanwhile, surrendered his show in December 2014, and instead of continuing *The Colbert Report* with a different host, Comedy Central started *The Nightly Show with Larry Wilmore* in Colbert’s time slot a little over a month later. Neither host was able to match the popularity of his predecessor Wilmore’s was canceled in August 2016. And although he has had some sporadic ratings success, by and large Noah’s *Daily Show* has been far less popular than Stewart’s (Cuccinello 2016). Figure 2 illustrates the time line of host replacements for both shows.

As Figure 3 makes clear, the audiences of both declined precipitously across the United

States. In Figure 4, we present a time series of both shows' ratings, highlighting the discontinuity in hosts. Once again, it is clear that the transition from Stewart to Noah, and Colbert to Wilmore, was followed by a sharp drop in the number of people watching Comedy Central at those hours.

Data and Results

The data for this project come three sources. First, our ratings data come from comScore, a ratings company which tracks network, cable, and digital streaming audiences in 15 minute increments across 156 designated market areas (DMA) in the continental united states. We acquired a massive data set of Comedy Central ratings, between November 2014 and February 2016, for *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*, *The Colbert Report*, *The Nightly Show with Larry Wilmore*, *Key and Peele*, *South Park*, and *Inside Amy Schumer*. This provides variation in the size of the Comedy Central audience geographically and temporally. We exploit the following variation: smaller than expected fluctuations in the Comedy Central audience in some markets, or within this market over some period, allow us an unusually precise means to compare respondents on the basis of the exposure to comedic political programming.

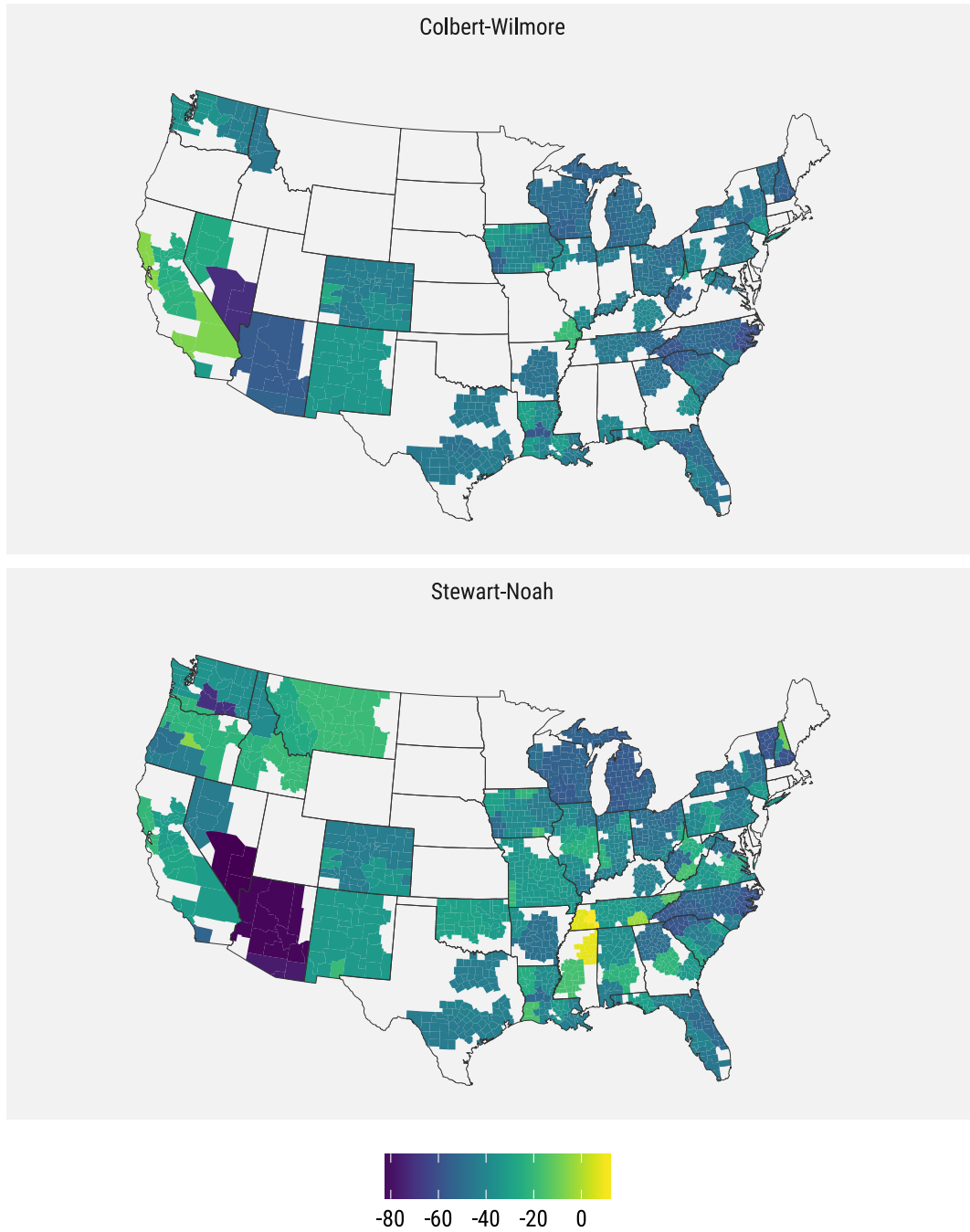
Next, we exploit the reported vote counts measured at the county level. Given the well documented problems of the potential omitted variable bias when using aggregate data to explicate a theory based on individual political cognition., we also measure political attitudes at the individual level, by taking political attitude items from the 2016 CCES.

To measure the independent variable, we divided each market into two periods for each

The American politics canon is littered with examples of the failure to adequately address this issue—most famously in the exchange between Larry Bartels and Thomas Frank, where the issue of measuring the relationship between income and vote choice provided different marginal relationships when income was measured at the state or individual level.

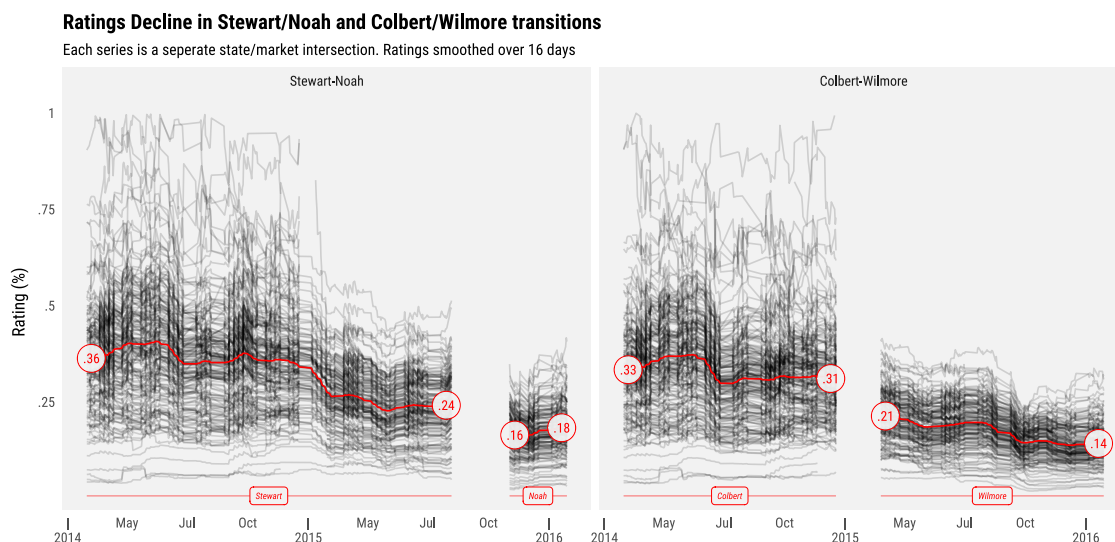
Figure 3: Audience Decline Across the U.S.

Percentage Decline in Audience, by Series and State DMA intersection



The decline in audience of both shows across the United States.

Figure 4: Audience Decline Over Time



A time series display of both shows' audience declines.

of the two sets of Comedy Central late night talk shows. The periods were determined by the host of each show—either the high rated predecessor, or the less successful successors. For each market/show/host combination, we omitted the repeated shows, and took an average of the night ratings. We then described the percentage declined within each market as the shows transitioned between hosts. This percentage decline is the key independent variable for the subsequent models.

For the relative county decline in *The Daily Show* audience across the handoff between outgoing host Stewart and replacement host Noah The model takes the form of

$$GOP\ county\ vote_{i,2016} - GOP\ county\ vote_{i,2012} = b_0 + b_1 (Noah\ Ratings_i - Stewart\ Ratings_i)$$

where i indexes counties. For simplicity, the county level sociodemographic controls (educational attainment, racial composition, and income), are included in these models, but omitted here. Separate models are estimate for the effect of the Noah and Wilmore induced declines in the Stewart and Colbert audiences, respectively. The average contemporaneous decline in the control Comedy Central shows during this period (*Key and Peele*, *Inside Amy Schumer*, and *South Park* are averaged and included as a control)

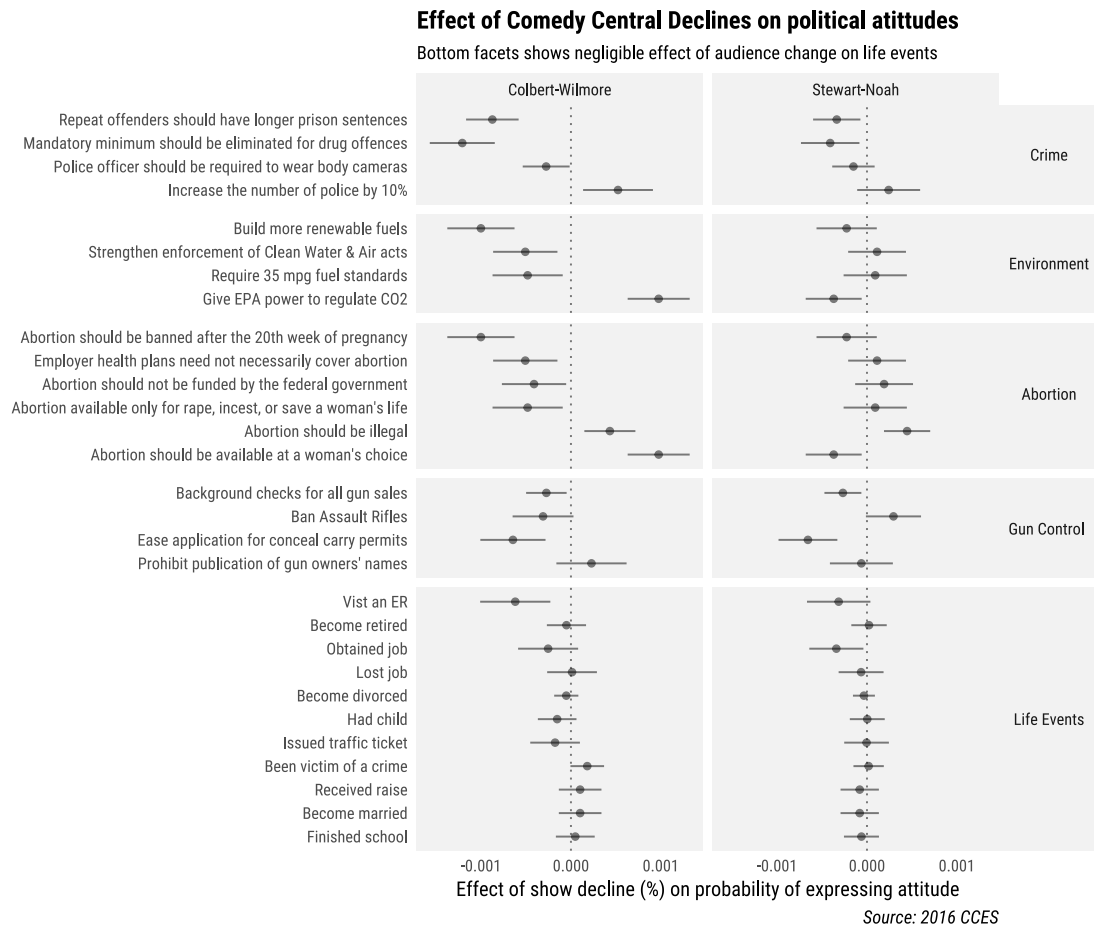
This approach has two key advantages. First, the breadth of unobserved factors which determined the size of the Comedy Central audience in a particular market during the initial period are largely controlled by differencing the series. Second, to control for prior variation in political attitudes, each regression also includes county level estimates of 2012 presidential vote, as well as individual level controls, to remove the effect of potential political confounders.

Attitude Results

Figure 5 shows the effects of the *decline* in the two classes of comedy central audiences—the decline in the Colbert-Wilmore audience in the left column facet, and the decline in the Stewart-Noah audience in the right column. Each row facet shows the effect on attitudes in a different class of political contests—crime in the top facet, environmental questions in the second, abortion in the third, and gun control in the fourth. The next facet offers a plausibility test on the results, by measuring the effect (if any) changes in the Comedy Central audience had on *non-attitudinal* measures. If it was the case that we were merely seeing the effects of ephiphenomenal changes in the Comedy Central audience as a result of social or economic changes, we would see comparably large effects for life events as political attitudes (since the Comedy Central independent variable would simply be me-

These models' results are described in table 1 on page 15.

Figure 5: Effects on Political Attitude and Life Events



The effects of both shows' rating declines on political attitudes and life events.

diating these confounding effects.) This is very clearly not what we find—instead, the life event dependent variables are far more modestly related to these outcomes.

Vote Choice Results

In this section, we look at how the transitions in both shows affected vote share in the 2016 presidential election. Specifically, we examine how the diminished ratings of both shows correlated with 2016 Republican vote share at the county level. We find that the ratings decline associated with Stewart’s departure had a pronounced positive effect on Trump’s vote share, compared to Romney’s 2012 vote share. However, the decline associated with Colbert’s replacement by Wilmore had no discernible effect.

We display our results in Table 1. The first column looks at the effects of Stewart’s replacement by Noah, while the second looks at Colbert’s replacement by Wilmore. Our modelling strategy is a standard difference-in-difference approach. To isolate the effect of changes in Comedy Central viewership, we regress the differential performance of the GOP’s presidential candidates in 2012 and 2016 on the difference in the viewership of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report-Nightly Show*. There is an expansive econometric literature on the advantages of the difference-in-difference design in removing the effect of unobserved confounding.

As our dependent variable is the *difference* in county-level Republican vote share from 2012 to 2016 and our independent variable of interest is the decline in television ratings, positive numbers indicate a positive effect on Trump’s vote share and negative numbers indicate the opposite. By our estimate, the ratings decline at *The Daily Show* was associated with a 1.11 percentage point increase in Republican presidential vote share at the county level, significant by conventional standards ($p < .01$). The effect of the ratings decline following Colbert’s departure is not significant.

To account for the possibility that our effects are owed not to anything specific about the shows but instead reflect broader trends related to cable subscriptions and Comedy Central’s popularity, we include ratings for the same time periods from other well-known Comedy Central shows. The *CC Controls* variable accounts for ratings for *South Park*, *Key and Peele* and *Inside Amy Schumer* during both hand-off periods. We also include a host of standard control variables in our models, including the percentage of the county with some college, with a B.A. degree, the percentages of black, Hispanic and foreign-born residents, the median household income and median household value, per capita income, and the adult poverty rate.

As Table 1 shows, none of the other shows’ ratings during these time periods exhibited effects on voting. This indicates that our results cannot be dismissed by pointing to broader cable or channel-specific trends. To put the effect size in context, consider the results from the demographic controls. While several generated significant results on voting—unsurprisingly—the effects of *The Daily Show*’s ratings decline loom larger. Indeed, the ratings decline effect easily outpaces the effects of traditionally important demographic variables related to race, education and income.

Vote Choice Simulation

To understand the consequences of this effect for the outcome of the 2016 presidential election, we conducted three sets of simulations of the election, the results of which appear in Figure 6. All simulations rely on the multilevel model deployed in the previous section. The simulation process is as follows—for each simulation, we bootstrap a new version of the multilevel model presented in the previous section. We then estimate the difference in the GOP vote share for each country, as a function of each covariate in the model. Each covariate is held at its observed level, except for the level of decline in the two

Table 1: Comedy Central and the 2016 Election

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Trump Vote Share (16) - Romney Vote Share (12)	
	(Noah Handoff)	(Wilmore Handoff)
Decline in Noah audience	1.11*** (0.42)	
CC Controls During Noah Transition	1.25 (0.78)	
Decline in Wilmore Audience		-0.46 (0.47)
CC Controls During Wilmore Transition		0.81 (0.91)
Perc Some College	-0.07*** (0.02)	-0.05** (0.02)
Perc BA+	-0.41*** (0.01)	-0.39*** (0.02)
Perc Black	-0.09*** (0.01)	-0.08*** (0.01)
Perc Hispanic	-0.08*** (0.01)	-0.06*** (0.01)
Median Household Income (000s)	-0.08*** (0.01)	-0.06*** (0.02)
Per Capita Income (000s)	0.18*** (0.02)	0.15*** (0.02)
Median Household Value (00,000s)	0.15** (0.06)	0.34*** (0.11)
Adult poverty rate	0.03 (0.03)	0.07* (0.04)
Perc Foreign Born	-0.05** (0.02)	-0.05* (0.02)
Constant	12.59*** (1.01)	12.89*** (1.30)
Observations	1,790	1,163
Log Likelihood	-4,289.01	-2,717.70
Akaike Inf. Crit.	8,606.02	5,463.41
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	8,682.88	5,534.23

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

comedy central handover shoes, whose manipulations make up the key quantity in these simulations. Their manipulation is described below. Each separate county estimates is aggregated to estimate a state presidential election result. These state results are converted into electoral college votes to simulate an national presidential outcome.

In the first set, in the left panel, we run 1,000 simulations in which there is no ratings decline, and thus no effect of a ratings decline, after Stewart's departure. In the second set, in the center panel, we run 1,000 simulations in which the ratings decline and effect on voting mirrors what was actually observed. And in the third set, we run 1,000 simulations in which the ratings decline and effect was four times larger.

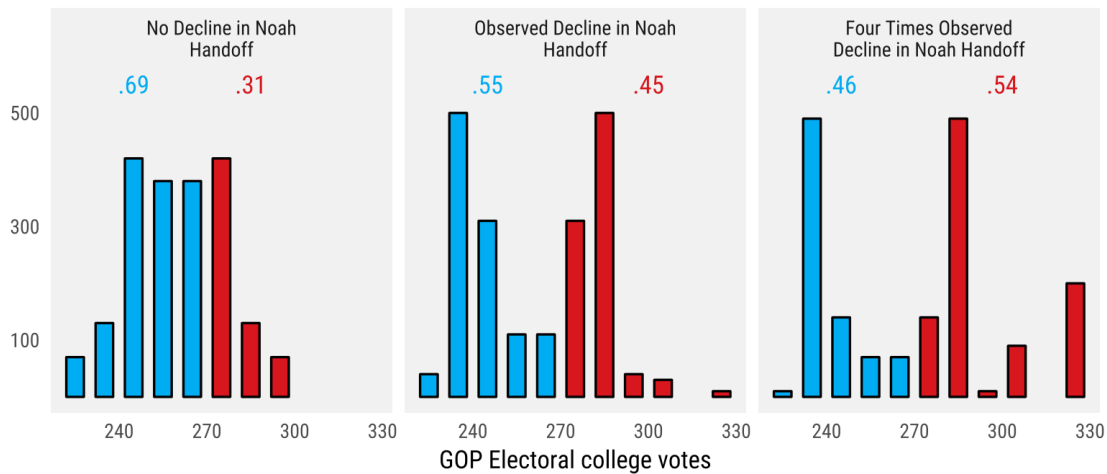
For each simulation, we aggregate the effects at the county level to the state level. The x-axis is a count of electoral votes for each simulation, and the y-axis is a count of how many times that particular electoral college outcome was observed in the simulations. The center panel makes clear that, with our observed effect, Clinton prevails 55% of the time. The far right panel shows that, had the decline been four times steeper, Trump would have won 54% of the time.

The left panel answers a counter-factual question: If *The Daily Show*'s ratings had not declined, would the 2016 presidential election have turned out differently? Our evidence suggests that the answer is yes. In a world in which Trump does not gain 1.1% of the vote share over Romney at the county level, Clinton wins the electoral college 69% of the time. The results of these simulations should be interpreted cautiously.

Conclusion

In this paper, we leverage transitions at two of Comedy Central's flagship shows, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, as well as attendant ratings decline, to isolate the effects of these shows on the 2016 election, as well as controversial political issues. We observe

Figure 6: Vote Choice Simulation Results



Simulations of three 2016 electoral college results.

small but significant effects about a variety of social issues, including those relating to abortion, gun control and crime. We also find that the transition in hosts at *The Daily Show*, and the subsequent ratings decline, had a large and significant positive effect on Donald Trump’s 2016 vote share. We do not find that the replacement of Colbert with Wilmore had similar effects on voting, nor do we find that ratings of other Comedy Central shows affected voting. Only *The Daily Show* was able to shape voting.

Granted, the effects on voting were not large. Yet in an election decided by less than 100,000 votes in three states, every vote mattered. The null results on other shows suggest that the effects from *The Daily Show* cannot be explained by broader trends in cable and Comedy Central. And as we show via simulation, our results indicate that, had the Stewart-to-Noah transition not occasioned any loss in viewership, the 2016 presidential election might have turned out very differently.

Though this conclusion may sound dramatic at first brush, it is not altogether surprising. Jon Stewart was a popular liberal commentator, often but not always friendly to

Democratic politicians, whose views were shared with millions night after night. The effect of his departure, and the comparative unpopularity of his replacement, might not have been enormous, but it was in the direction one would have anticipated in advance. And in an election decided by the narrowest of margins, it mattered.

Indeed, our results echo several findings of the extant literature. Baum (2005) shows that, when presidential candidates appear on televised comedy shows, they are able to have an unusual impact on otherwise disengaged voters. In such informal environments, less engaged voters are likely to view candidates from the opposite party more favorably. Parkin (2010) studies John Kerry's appearance on *The Daily Show* specifically and also finds that effects were concentrated on otherwise disengaged voters. In an age of ideological self-segregation, mere exposure to co-partisan media sources can mobilize voters (Dilliplane 2011). If they were not being exposed to Stewart, otherwise disengaged voters who shared his partisan proclivities may have been more likely to stay home. Such viewers are akin to those who, when a quirk of an election deprives them of access to one candidate's messaging, are more likely to be persuaded by his opponent's messaging (Huber and Arcenaux 2007).

When asked to describe his audience, Stewart famously said that "A lot of them are probably high" (CBS 2004). And when asked to describe his importance, he replied: "On a scale of zero to 10, I'd go with a zero, not very important" (Cooper and Bailey 2008). Yet as is well-known, many viewers counted *The Daily Show* as a primary news source during Stewart's tenure (Pew 2004). When they turned on Jon Stewart, they encountered Democratic politicians behaving informally, interviewed by a generally friendly host. Stoned or not, their political behavior and beliefs were likely affected by Stewart's departure, with broad consequences.

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