

# Political satire makes young people more likely to participate in politics. Trevor Noah's *The Daily Show* is likely to continue that trend.

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2015/04/03/political-satire-makes-young-people-more-likely-to-participate-in-politics-trevor-noahs-the-daily-show-is-likely-to-continue-that-trend/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2015/04/03/political-satire-makes-young-people-more-likely-to-participate-in-politics-trevor-noahs-the-daily-show-is-likely-to-continue-that-trend/)

*This week saw the announcement that comedian Trevor Noah will succeed Jon Stewart as host of Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*, a program which increases the likelihood that young people who watch will participate in politics, according to research by [Amy Bree Becker](#). She writes that such programs can have a real impact on voters' attitudes and that Noah's arrival occurs at a time when political comedy is benefiting from a new wave of talent, such as John Oliver of *Last Week Tonight*, which is likely to further increase the influence of the genre.*



For the better part of what has now become two decades, [researchers in communication and political science have spent considerable time studying the impact of watching political comedy](#) – and the political satire programs of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert in particular—on American politics. Ample research has shown that on the whole, political satire is a win for democracy. Tuning into political comedy encourages [young people to seek out additional news information](#) from traditional sources and [follow the course of political campaigns](#), [feel better about their own ability to participate in politics](#), and even feel more inclined to participate in lower commitment oriented acts of political expression.

More specifically, my [own research](#) on the impact of watching politicians being interviewed on *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* vs. on a cable news program airing on *MSNBC* or *FOX News*, shows that tuning into a comedy interview increases the likelihood that young people will take part in a protest, march or demonstration, sign an email petition, or sign a written petition about a political or social issue. They are also more likely to recall basic facts about the politician if they catch them on comedy as opposed to cable news.

Of course to be fair, watching political comedy can influence our attitudes towards politicians – both [negatively](#) and [positively](#), tends to make us feel [more cynical about our political institutions](#), and is [perceived to privilege a partisan political outlook](#). Despite these drawbacks, [political comedy is seen by most as a boon for our democracy, not a bust](#). Political comedy is particularly important for young people, who are the core of the *Comedy Central* audience. In 2012, the Pew Research Center [reported](#) that 39 percent of Jon Stewart's audience is under the age of 30; 43 percent of the audience for *The Colbert Report* was also reported as being under 30.

With the [departure of Stephen Colbert from \*The Colbert Report\* in December 2014](#) and the [announcement that Trevor Noah](#) (a young comedian originally from South Africa and [currently mired in his own Twitter controversy](#)) will be replacing Jon Stewart as the host of *The Daily Show* (a position Stewart inherited from Craig Kilborn way back in 1999), many are left wondering whether political satire and the late night programs that air on *Comedy Central* in particular will continue to hold sway over American politics.

Change is inevitable to be sure, and it will certainly take Trevor Noah some time to establish a strong foundation and following as the host of *The Daily Show*. The same is true for [Larry Wilmore who took over the 11:30 PM slot on \*Comedy Central\* from Stephen Colbert with his new \*The Nightly Show\*](#). And don't forget John Oliver over on HBO; his new program, *Last Week Tonight*, has just started its second season. Oliver's impact is already being felt – his 13-minute piece on net neutrality last summer [ended up crashing the Federal Communication Commission's web site](#) as viewers of Oliver's program flocked

to offer comments about the pending proposal. At present writing, the [segment clip](#) has had over 8 million views on YouTube since it was uploaded on June 1, 2014.

And these are just alumni from *The Daily Show* we've been talking about. There's plenty of political comedy that still appears in the monologues of network late night comedians – whether we are talking about [Jimmy Fallon](#), Jimmy Kimmel, Seth Meyers, or others. In addition, there's been a fair amount of speculation as to whether [Stephen Colbert's new version of the \*Late Show\*, which will start airing on CBS on September 8, 2015](#), will take up the political charge as well.

In addition, as [my own research has shown](#) we can't forget about the old standby that is *Saturday Night Live*, a now 40-year old variety program that has made fun of every president since Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. Watching politicians make fun of themselves and act as the comedian making the joke has become a truly valuable experience for voters who are increasingly seeking to identify with candidates running for office. And as we saw during the height of the 2012 campaign, we can no longer ignore the impact that [viral video content](#) like the *Mitt Romney Style* parody of Psy's *Gangnam Style* megahit can have on voters' attitudes, particularly when you throw a young viewer's prior dispositions towards the two candidates into the mix.

In part, whether the new incarnation of *The Daily Show* with Trevor Noah will develop the same impact on American politics and the youth audience will depend on the type of guests Noah interviews on the air. As [my latest research shows](#), more than half of each year's interview guests appearing on *The Daily Show* between 2003-2014 were involved in intellectual rather than entertainment-oriented pursuits. The show is a regular pit stop for journalists, politicians, academics, policy activists, and writers looking to connect with a youthful audience – [the same dynamic was present, in fact even more so on \*The Colbert Report\*](#).

I'm excited to see what this new crop of comedians, and Trevor Noah in particular, brings to the table — besides much needed diversity for political satire. I am optimistic that politics will benefit from this new wave of talent.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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## About the author

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Dr. [Amy Bree Becker](#) (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2010) is an Assistant Professor in the [Department of Communication at Loyola University Maryland](#). Her research focuses on public opinion, political entertainment and comedy, science communication, and new media. She studies what factors drive engagement with controversial political issues and what non-traditional media content, particularly political comedy and viral social media, teaches us about politics. Professionally, Becker worked in the world of political polling and corporate market research, providing analysis and strategic insight for political candidates running for national and state office and for major corporations looking to redefine their brand image.

