

# How sex is portrayed on TV affects the way we think about abortion and contraception.

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*What we watch on television influences what we think about the world. But what about shows which are supposedly apolitical? In new research, **Nathaniel Swigger** finds that such shows can still carry important messages about behavioral norms and expectations. Using two television sitcoms which give different portrayals of sex, “How I Met Your Mother” and “Parks & Recreation”, he finds that messages that “Boys will be boys” mean that viewers are more likely to believe that women bear responsibility for sex and its consequences, such as contraception and abortion.*



We know a great deal about how news affects public opinion. We know considerably less about the effects of pop culture, even though we know that the average American would much rather be entertained than **informed**. Of course, most television shows aren't necessarily *trying* to be political. Inevitably, though, a television show depicts a version of life and tells its audience, implicitly, what constitutes normal, acceptable behavior. The more time a viewer spends in a fictional world, the more likely he or she is to internalize the norms depicted on **the show**. The more we watch, the more the cues and norms are present, the more accessible they become in our minds. It may well be that there is no such thing as apolitical television, and programs that reach millions of Americans carry important messages about behavioral norms and expectations that can affect beliefs about public policy.

In fact, entertainment programs can have a bigger impact precisely because they are not meant to be political. People don't like to be **contradicted**, and they certainly don't like to watch news programs that contradict their preexisting **views**. Entertainment programming, on the other hand, lowers the viewers' defenses because it puts them in a **good mood**. Because viewers aren't expecting a political argument, they may actually be more inclined to accept it.

**In some of my recent work**, I examined these implications, asking whether sexual norms displayed in sitcoms could affect viewers' political opinions about abortion and contraception. I started by dividing a sample of college students into three groups: a negative message treatment, a positive message treatment, or a control condition. Participants in the control condition watched no television. The negative treatment featured a show with a fairly common “boys will be boys” message; students watched an episode of *How I Met Your Mother* featuring sexist pickup artist Barney and his long history of lying to women and tricking them into sleeping with him. Though Barney's behavior is treated as vaguely disreputable, none of the other characters seems particularly troubled by it. Even his admission that he once sold a woman is greeted with a laugh. In fact, numerous characters specifically state that the women who believe Barney's lies and sleep with him deserve what they get.

The way that sex is portrayed changes the way that we think about the consequences of sex. Attitudes on issues like abortion and contraception are inexorably tied to beliefs about personal responsibility and individual morality.

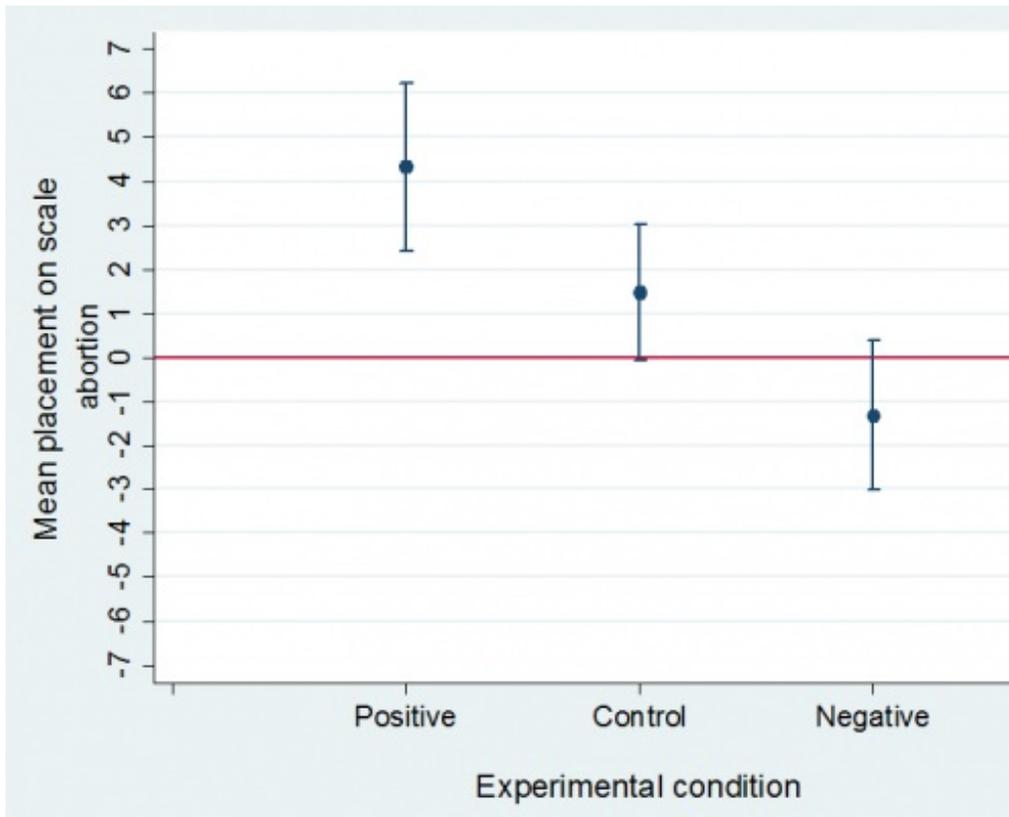
- Nathaniel Swigger

The positive treatment featured an episode from *Parks and Recreation*. The main plot of the episode involves the main character Leslie overcoming her first date anxiety and learning to simply be herself and just enjoy spending time with a man she likes. Notably, at one point in the episode Leslie gets intoxicated, yet her love interest, Dave, does not take sexual advantage of her, but simply makes sure she gets home safely. Like the previous condition, the norms contained in this show are relatively subtle, and there is no explicit political content.

In the last part of the study, I asked the participants to report on their attitudes on access to abortion and contraception. (On the abortion issue, respondents indicated whether or not a woman should have access to legal abortion under 7 circumstances. I combined all items into a single index running from -7 (opposed under every circumstance) to 7 (in favor under every circumstance.) For contraception, participants simply indicated whether or not they thought employers should have to provide insurance that covers birth control.

Even with such a relatively benign treatment as 25 minutes of a sitcom, there was a strong difference across conditions on attitudes related to abortion. In comparison to the control condition, people in the positive sitcom condition (who watched Leslie in *Parks and Rec*) supported abortion access more, and people in the negative sitcom condition (who watched Barney in *How I Met Your Mother*) supported it less (Figure 1). Figure one shows the mean response and 95% confidence interval within each treatment group on the issue of abortion. The mean in the positive condition was significantly higher indicating increased support for legal abortion compared to the control group. Meanwhile, the mean in the negative condition was significantly lower than the control.

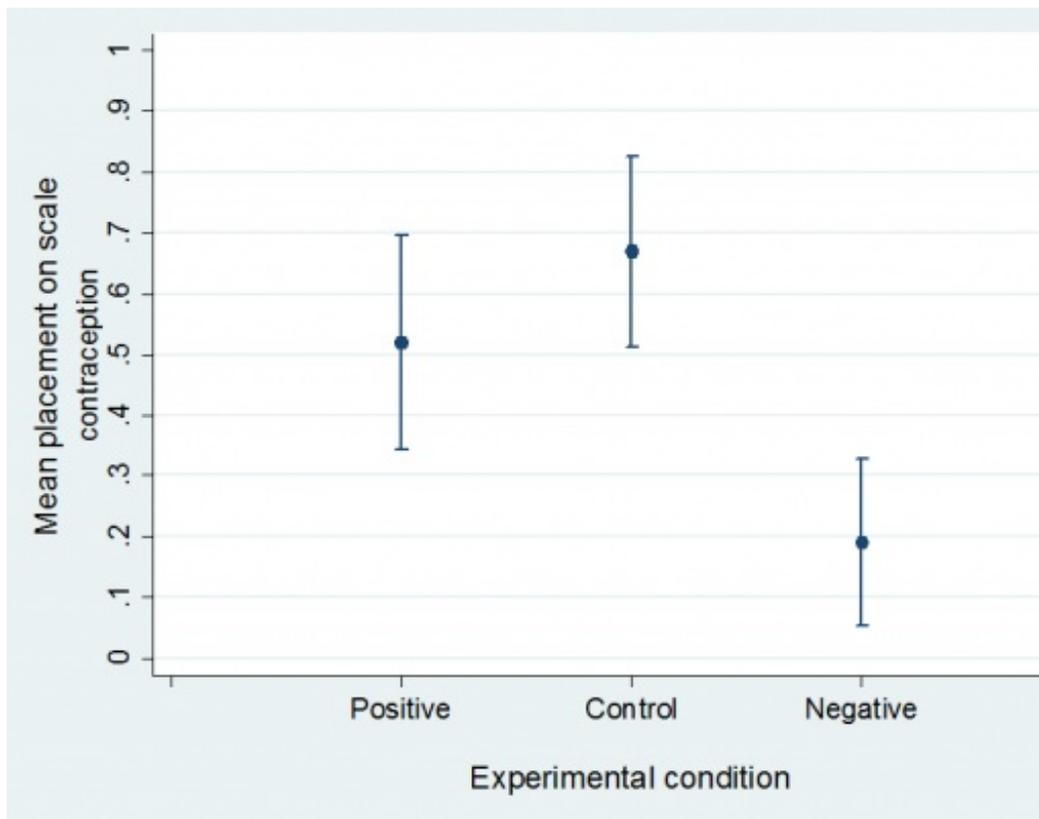
**Figure 1 – Comparison of mean on support for access to abortion, by condition**



***Figure depicts the mean response in each condition with 95% confidence intervals shown.***

Figure 2 tells a similar story on Obamacare's contraceptive mandate. Though there was no significant difference between the control and positive conditions, participants in the negative condition were much less likely to endorse the mandate.

**Figure 2 – Comparison of mean on support for contraception mandate, by condition**



**Figure depicts the mean response in each condition with 95% confidence intervals shown.**

These results are consistent with expectations. The way that sex is portrayed changes the way that we think about the consequences of sex. Attitudes on issues like abortion and contraception are inexorably tied to beliefs about personal responsibility and individual morality. Imposing a policy solution like guaranteeing access to contraception (as provided for under the Affordable Care Act) tacitly suggests that birth control may be a societal problem, one for which men may bear equal responsibility. “Boys will be boys” messages found in programs like the one in the negative condition suggest that women are the only responsible party in any sexual exchange. If an individual actually accepts this myth then it becomes easier to suggest that the woman should have to live with the consequences of sex since the responsibility is hers alone, and that public policy should not be designed to intervene on her behalf.

The findings here are limited to a lab experiment with a non-representative sample and, like most media effects, are likely [short-lived](#). However, they demonstrate that people take political messages away from programs that do not actually have anything to do with politics. While the effects watching just one show may not last, the cumulative effect of pop culture may actually have an enormous impact on the public’s attitudes on any number of gender, social or economic issues due the way that norms and values are portrayed. Sitcoms and pop culture may have far more influence on public opinion than news programs or politicians.

So, what are you watching tonight?

Featured [image](#) credit: [Luiyo](#) (Flickr, [CC-BY-SA-2.0](#))

This article is based on the paper, [‘The Effect of Gender Norms in Sitcoms on Support for Access to Abortion and Contraception’](#) in *American Politics Research*.

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### About the author

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Nathaniel Swigger is an Associate Professor, at the Newark campus of The Ohio State University. His research and teaching interests are American politics with emphasis on public opinion, political psychology, campaigns and elections, and media analysis. His current research focuses on gender and politics, and inter-generational differences in political engagement.



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