

Satirical News Programs are No Joke

How Satirical News Programs Impact the American Public Policy Process through Agenda

Setting

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Abstract.....	2
2. Introduction.....	2
3. What is Public Policy and How is it Made?.....	4
4. Agenda Setting and <i>The Daily Show</i>	7
5. Actors in the Policy Process.....	9
6. Satire.....	10
7. Content Analysis.....	16
8. Hypotheses.....	16
9. Methods.....	17
10. Data and Findings.....	20
11. Discussion.....	24
12. Conclusion.....	28
13. Bibliography.....	30

ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the potential for satirical news programs to impact the American public policy process. Typically overlooked for its humorous and light nature, satire may actually play a more important role in the U.S political system than people may believe. While literature suggests that these programs have had a profound impression on the political arena, there is very little quantitative evidence available to prove this. By looking at *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart's* coverage of the Zadroga (9/11 First Responders) Health Care Bill, the ineffective and backlogged Department of Veterans Affairs, and gun control, a content analysis was performed in an attempt to address the question: do satirical news programs influence the systemic agenda?

INTRODUCTION

In 1996 the satirical news program, *The Daily Show*, premiered on Comedy Central. *The Daily Show* was originally hosted by Craig Kilborn, a former college athlete who took the news of the day and gave it his own satirical twist. When Kilborn left the program in 1999 to become the successor to Tom Snyder on the *The Late Late Show*, Comedy Central chose Jon Stewart, a stand-up comedian who rose to fame as host of MTV's *Jon Stewart Show*, as his replacement. When Stewart took the helm, many were skeptical of his ability to keep *The Daily Show* afloat in the absence of Kilborn. However, Stewart not only catapulted the show into success but changed the narrative of *The Daily Show* from one that primarily discussed pop culture to a current events driven, political satire program that engaged an apathetic generation to care about what was going on in the world around them (Silman 2015).

Before his retirement from *The Daily Show*, many considered Stewart to be “the most trusted newscaster in America after the death of Walter Cronkite” (Poniewozik 2015). But while

Stewart may, indeed, have been a trusted name in news, many others believe that his influence went far beyond his nightly broadcast. In fact, Stewart addressed several important policy issues over his 16 years as host of *The Daily Show* which not only encouraged his audience to think critically about how the U.S. government was handling problems but appeared to actually make a significant impact in the political arena. Public policy changes are typically made incrementally over time but when Stewart or his protégé Stephen Colbert (former host of another satirical news program, *The Colbert Report*) highlighted issues such as a lack of health care for 9/11 First Responders, an ineffective and backlogged Department of Veterans Affairs, and the questionable use of Super PACs in political campaigns, national discussions and sweeping reforms occurred quickly and many point to Colbert and Stewart's ability to shed light on such important matters as reasons for these changes in the political arena.

Though Stewart and Colbert are no longer covering the news in their satirical format, they have paved the way for others such as John Oliver and Trevor Noah to emerge as new voices in satirical news. While sometimes teetering on the edge of being too controversial, satire's "no holds barred" highlights the issues of today and appears to be a force for bringing about change in public policy. But while there has been a great deal of research on how these shows influence public opinion, their supposed effect on public policy making lacks substantial attention.

Because there is limited research on this subject, the goal of this paper is to explore the relationship between these satirical news shows and public policy. While many times overlooked as a serious form of political expression, satirical television programs may actually be a factor in how lawmakers choose to introduce and enact legislation. If there is a significant

relationship, further research can be done to see if satirical news programs, like *The Daily Show*, actually play a role in the agenda setting stage of the policy process.

However, before we can even begin to discuss the impact of satirical news on public policy, it is important to discuss the process and theories behind public policy making.

WHAT IS PUBLIC POLICY AND HOW IS IT MADE?

Experts have been unable to come to a consensus on an exact definition for public policy but Thomas A. Birkland has compiled a list of characteristics that give a clearer understanding:

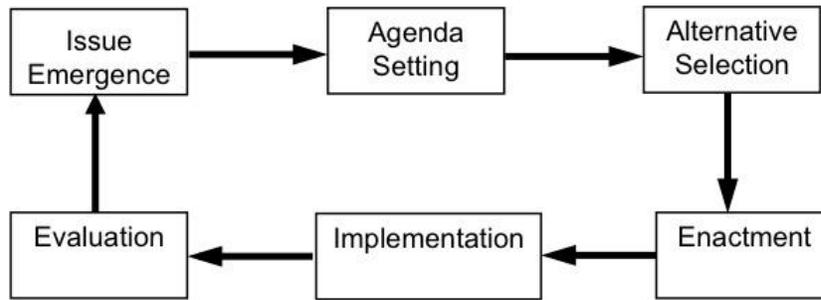
1. Policy is made in response to some sort of problem that requires attention.
2. Policy is made on the “public’s” behalf
3. Policy is oriented toward a goal or desired state, such as the solution of a problem
4. Policy is ultimately made by governments, even if the ideas come from outside government or through the interaction of government and non-governmental actors.
5. Policy is interpreted and implemented by public and private actors who have different interpretations of problems, solutions, and their own motivations.
6. Policy is what the government chooses to do or not to do. (2011, 9)

Further, Birkland argues that “policies take many different forms. A policy might be a law, or a regulations, or the set of all the laws and regulations that govern a particular issue area or problem” (2011, 9).

Systems and Stages Models

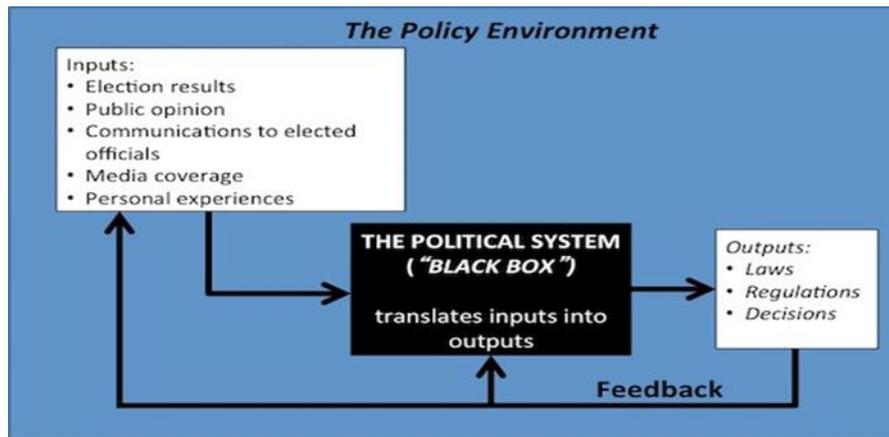
There are several models that political scientists use to demonstrate how the policy process works. In his book, *Introduction to the Policy Process*, Thomas Birkland introduces the “Stages Model” (See *Figure 1*) and the “Systems Model” (See *Figure 2*).

Figure 1: Stages Model



Source: Matthew C. Nowlin

Figure 2: Systems Model



Source: Matthew C. Nowlin

Birkland suggests that the Stages Model is the most simplified and traditional approach to viewing public policy. The Stages Model argues that if a problem in society arises, it must make it to the policy agenda before any policy solutions are put forth to address the issue. In the context of this paper, satirical news coverage can play a role in that critical “Agenda Setting” link in the Stages Model. The Systems Model expands upon the Rational Decision Making Model or “Input/Output Model” and emphasizes the role of the political evaluations of inputs play in creating an output (the policy) (Birkland 2011, 26). Satirical news in the framework of

this model can be categorized as an input and therefore has the potential to be a substantial part in the political process according to Birkland.

It is important to look at these two models in the context of this project because they reinforce the idea that there are a number of steps that must happen before policy change can occur and therefore while these shows may not lead to direct policy change, their ability to bring attention to an issue may be able to push an urgent problem one step closer to being addressed.

Multiple Streams Approach

One of the most widely accepted theories regarding the creation of public policy comes from political scientist John Kingdon. In 1984, Kingdon introduced the Multiple Streams Approach (MSA). According to Kingdon, in MSA, there are three “streams”: a problem stream, a political stream, and a policy stream. When these streams converge, there is “a policy window” and the creation and implantation of a process is possible (Birkland 2011, 86).

According to Birkland:

The problem stream encompasses the attributes of a problem and whether it is getting better or worse, whether it has suddenly sprung into public and elite consciousness through a focusing event, and whether it is solvable with the alternatives available in the policy streams. The policy stream contains the potential ideas that could be advocated as solutions to a problem. The politics stream encompasses the state of politics and public opinion. (Birkland 2011, 297)

In this model, satirical news programs would fall under the “political stream” category.

This “framework” functions under three assumptions: 1. “Individual attention or processing is serial; systemic attention or processing is parallel”. 2. “Policymakers operate under significant time constraints.” 3. “The streams flowing through the system are independent.” (Zahariadis 2014, 28-29). Although policy change is typically made incrementally over time, this model shows that some policies may be pushed through faster since the “policy window” or “window of opportunity” only stays open for a short amount of time (Kingdon 1984). While it is

not guaranteed that a policy will be implemented in the multiple streams approach, Zahariadis states “the combination of all three streams into a single package dramatically enhances the chances that policy makers will adopt a specific policy” (2014, 25-26).

Narrative Policy Framework

Another approach to the public policy scholarship focuses less on the process and more on agenda setting and the factors that can contribute to the creation of public policy. One example of this can be seen in what is called “The Narrative Policy Framework.” Introduced by McBeth, Jones and Shanahan, in this model, “[the] central question turns an empirical eye on the truth claim of the power of narrative: that is, it asks, do narratives play an important role in the policy process?” (McBeth, Jones, and Shanahan 2014, 225). A policy narrative is made up of a setting, characters, plot and a moral which all come together to convince law makers to give more attention to an issue or in some cases create a call to action for individual citizens to get involved for a certain cause (McBeth, Jones and Shanahan 2014, 228). In her book, *Policy Paradox*, Deborah Stone also discusses the significance of narrative stories and their impact on the policy agenda. As Stone writes, “Policy stories are tools of strategy” (Stone 1988, 162). Through the use of powerful literary devices, those who utilize narrative stories are able to craft the public discourse in such a way to gain favor for their interests. Ambiguity of content and facts, the use of synecdoche (one thing represents an entire group), and metaphors are the most influential literary techniques that help to advance the narrative policy (Stone 1988, 137).

AGENDA SETTING AND THE DAILY SHOW

While *The Daily Show*’s influence in public policy can viewed through the lens of any of the theories discussed above, it is the show’s seemingly apparent role in setting the agenda which exemplifies their role in public policy making. Agenda setting is “the process by which

problems and alternative solutions gain or lose public or elite attention” (169). Issues are “put on the agenda” through a process called attention allocation (Jones and Baumgartner 2005, 208). According to Jones and Baumgartner, “attention is a severely constraining factor in politics- a bottleneck through which all matters must squeeze” (2005, 208). While not always fairly placed, the more attention an issue receives, the more likely it is that policy-makers will act to address the problem (Jones and Baumgartner 2005, 208).

Punctuated Equilibrium Theory

Posed by Baumgartner, Jones, and Mortenson, the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET) tries to figure out how the policy agenda is set in the political arena (2014, 59). According to Baumgartner, Jones and Mortenson, “though generally marked by stability and incrementalism, political processes occasionally produce large-scale departures from the past” (2014, 59). PET attempts to understand why that is the case. The policy process is typically slow but can at times, particularly after focusing events, be sped up to address pressing concerns (2014, 59). This theory in particular is important to note because it seems satirical news programs will sometimes expect the policy process to be much faster than it is in actuality and, therefore, will occasionally try to use their shows to highlight public outrage and move legislation forward.

The validity of the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory as it related to *The Daily Show*'s ability to partake in agenda setting is reinforced by its similarities to how the media sets their own agenda. In her book, *Making the News*, Amber Boydstun, makes the case that “the news does not ebb and flow; rather it fixates and explodes” (2013, 1). The same can be said about satirical news. For example, after devoting a show to the controversial issue of net-neutrality, John Oliver encouraged his audience to let the Federal Communications Commission know their thoughts on the matter. The FCC was contacted by so many people after this episode that their

servers crashed (Lukerson 2015). John Oliver “fixated” on net-neutrality and the viewers took action. The example from Oliver demonstrates how critical it is to understanding how the media plays a role in agenda setting and showcasing interests. As Boydston writes “because of its ability to influence politics and society, media attention is worth studying as a powerful political resource” (2013, 13). Boydston argues that the media follows what is called a “patrol/alarm model.” According to Boydston, “In alarm mode, the media rushes to cover breaking news. In patrol mode, the media digs in, surveying the geographical or policy “neighborhood” surrounding the event/issue at hand” (Boydston 2013, 60). *The Daily Show* also appears to follow this patrol/alarm model as well, covering major stories of the day while also trying to uncover why these issues are occurring. But, while it is possible that a satirical news programs could be considered a vehicle for an agenda change, who really sets the agenda?

ACTORS IN THE POLICY PROCESS

The policy agenda is set by what are called official and unofficial actors in the policy process. The official actors are those whose “responsibilities are sanctioned by laws or the constitution and...therefore have the power to make and enforce policies” (Birkland 2011, 92). According to John Kingdon, it is the President who has the most success in agenda setting (Kingdon 1984, 23). Congress, on the other hand, is weak in its ability to set the agenda but has a greater impact in the decision-making portion of creating public policy. The choices made by these actors are decided based on the institutional agenda, “a list of issues that is currently considered by a governmental institution such as an agency, legislature, or court” (Birkland 2001, 172).

While they do not have a direct role in deciding public policy, unofficial actors in the policy process play a critical role in agenda setting. Unofficial actors are those “without formal

government positions [and] include interest groups, researchers, academics, consultants, media, parties and other elections-related actors, and the mass public” (Kingdon 1984, 45). These kinds of actors have various means of garnering attention for the issues they believe are most important. Unofficial actors are responsible for getting issues on to the systemic agenda. According to Birkland, the systemic agenda is “any issue, problem, or idea that could possibly be considered by the participants in the policy process, provided that the idea does not fall outside well-established social, political, and ideological norms” (Birkland 2001, 170). Those who are particularly skilled at setting the agenda are what John Kingdon would call “policy entrepreneurs.” Based on his apparent ability to attract the attention of his viewers, Congress and the President, as well as his persistence and artful approach to shedding light on important issues, it could be said that Jon Stewart exemplifies a policy entrepreneur. In this project I want to emphasize the idea of Jon Stewart as a policy entrepreneur and his ability to influence the systemic agenda and possibly even the institutional agenda.

SATIRE

Williams and Carpini state that cable news and satirical news “have become significant sources of political news” (2011, 184). According to the authors, “For a large and relatively young audience, shows like *The Daily Show*, *Colbert Report*, and on occasion *Saturday Night Live* hold media and political elites accountable, and help to set the public agenda and provide a basic summary of the most important events of the day” (2011, 184). Before we can begin to make connections as to how *The Daily Show* and other satirical news programs work within the policy process, it is critical to understand satire as a genre.

Satire is a form of humorous political expression. According to Jonathan Gray, “satire takes natural human emotions- ‘anger, shame, indignation, disgust, contempt’ - and channels or

domesticates them, transforming ‘a potentially divisive and chaotic impulse...into a useful and artistic expression,’ one with enormous political power” (2009, 12). It is important to note that “satire” is different from “parody” which “attacks a particular text or genre, making fun of how that text or genre operates” (Gray 2009, 17). While satire is strictly focused on the context and substance in its humor (Gray 2009, 17). Satire has been used throughout history “because it deals with issues in a simple, approachable manner, thereby bridging the divide between philosophy and the general public” (Gray 2009, 11).

The medium in which satire is presented has taken many forms over the years. However, the most prominent form in recent years has been television. “With the rise in popularity of what has been called ‘soft news’ or ‘non-traditional news’,” many have begun to research the impact late-night television programs such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *The Colbert Report*, *Late Night with Jimmy Kimmel*, and *Saturday Night Live* have on public opinion and knowledge of current events (Compton 2011, Introduction Para. 4)¹. There have been a variety of ways researchers have chosen to tackle topic of influence of late-night comedy programs.

While some may believe that all late night comedy programs are equal, that is not actually the case. In fact, L.H Hoffman and D.G. Young claim that there are two subcategories of late-night programing: “late-night comedy (as in *The Late Show* and *The Tonight Show*) and political satire or parody (*The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*)” (2011, 160). Author, Jeffrey Jones believes that *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* can also be placed in a category with shows like *Real Time with Bill Maher* and can be called “political entertainment” (16). This defining of late-night has had an effect on which shows and hosts researchers choose to look at when trying to determine their influence on the body politic. For the purposes of this

¹ This line was taken from a paper previously written for Dr. Wilson’s Research Method’s course in 2014 entitled: “The Late Night Bump”

paper, I will be focusing on political satire and political entertainment, rather than late night comedy.²

Modern American satirical television has experienced a dramatic change in its content and significance following the events of September 11th, 2001. In a time when the American people needed catharsis and information that was honest, they turned to satirical news. McClennen and Maisel note that it was the reporting which occurred during the immediate aftermath of 9/11 that allowed satirical news to survive, and this medium still continues to thrive as a political voice fifteen years later. The fact that satire continues to remain a relevant form of political commentary indicates that its presence in American media is vital (2014). According to McClennen and Maisel, “[satire] does more than serve a court jester’s function of poking fun at an authoritarian system; it actually invigorates active citizenship and engaged debate of social issues...contemporary satire has played a central role in shaping public debates and in fostering productive engagement” (McClennen and Maisel 2014, 6-7).

Gray believes that satire is a powerful and positive form of expression that can motivate others to become engaged in the political arena as well (Gray 2009, 12). While there is a tendency to dismiss satire as a serious form of political expression because of its association to humor, Gray sees the merit in it because it “demands a heightened state of awareness and mental participation in its audience” that is needed to understand the humor (Gray 2009, 8 and 15). Gray also notes that satire points out the places for improvement that are desperately needed in society (Gray 2009, 15). As Gray aptly put it: “satire [can become] a means to ‘shake us out of our apathy or indifference’, a means through which citizens can be more critically aware” (2009, 15).

² Some of the lines in this paragraph were derived from a previous paper written for Dr. Wilson’s Research Methods Course in 2014 entitled “The Late Night Bump.”

John Self also believes in the value of satire. In his chapter entitled “The (not-so) Laughable Political Argument,” Self discusses how satire can be used as a viable argument tool. According to Self, “satire has four definite strengths as a form of argument.” The first strength is that “satire gives an argument presence” (2011, 70). In this case, presence is very similar to agenda setting in that it means that the satirist is bringing issues to the forefront (Self 2011, 70). The next “strength of satire as an argument is catharsis for the audience member” (Self 2011, 71). Satire signals to the audience that they can find comfort in the fact that they are not alone in their anger about certain issues in society. The third strength is “the potency of the arguments develops out of this nation of catharsis” (Self 2011, 71). What this means is that the mockery produced by the satirist resonates so strongly with the audience because the audience and the satirist are on the same page and share similar values and beliefs. The final strength is that “this form of argument does have a persuasive effect” because “when we hear a good joke, we usually want to tell someone else about it” (Self 2011, 72). This element of human nature means that the message of the satirist has the potential to be heard by more than just the “self-selecting audience” (Self 2011,72). This is demonstrated when people share video clips of satirical news on social media (Self 2011, 72).

Sophia McClennen and Remy Maisel are also proponents of the positive influence of satire saying that they believe “satire is saving our nation” (2014, 175). However, according to McClennen and Maisel, not everyone views satire in such a positive light. In what they have deemed the “satire scare,” they have noticed twelve reasons for why some are not convinced that satire has merit. According to skeptics, “satire is 1) too cynical 2) too persuasive 3) not persuasive enough, 4) too confusing 5) too pedantic 6) too popular 7) too subtle 8) too brash 9) too close to the news 10) not newsy enough 11) too fun 12) not fun enough” (McClennen and

Maisel 2014, 175). Regardless of whether or not one is a proponent or opponent of satire, there is no denying that satire does leave an impression on audiences.

While there is still some skepticism as to whether satire is a positive or negative influence on society, there is no denying that *The Daily Show* and other satirical news programs have made an impact on the public. McClellan and Maisel strongly believe in the positive power of these news programs and argue that satirical news programs have become a form of “public pedagogy” in which the audience learns about the important issues of today (2014, 31). Particularly for young viewers, satirical news has become a major, if not their only, source for the news of today (McClellan and Maisel 2014, 31). But while these shows allow their audiences to stay abreast in what is happening in the world, they also encourage critical thinking and push their audiences to evaluate what is going on in the news and in the government (McClellan and Maisel 2014, 112). Beyond that, their impact on public life can be seen by the way they generate future activists and engaged citizens. As the author Craig Stark once wrote:

Satire can potentially help a student see the world in a different way and even spur the student to work for change. The link between the concepts of awareness and power should be obvious: satire is useful in helping students gain not only further knowledge, but also the potential to do something with that knowledge in the world at large. (McClellan and Maisel 2014, 112)

During their tenure, Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert have had their fair share of political “wins.” In their book, *Is Satire Saving our Nation*, McClennen and Maisel compiled a list of the ten most significant moments they had on their respective television shows. This list included Jon Stewart’s coverage and advocacy for health benefits for the first responders on 9/11 (which many believe aided in the eventual passage of the Zadroga Act) and Colbert’s presidential run in his home state of South Carolina which exposed the faults with Super PACs (2014, 89-90). While many believe that today’s younger generation has become disengaged and a part of what

has been called “Slacktivism,” McClennen and Maisel believe that Stewart and Colbert have inspired young people to become “satiractivists”- people learning about the needs of society through satirical news and deciding to do something about it (2014, 196).

Satirists and humorists are often times over looked because the nature of their commentary is not considered serious. However, if there is some indication that satirists are a critical part of the policy process and do play a role in setting the public agenda, this could prove the merit of this genre as much more than a form of entertainment.

According to the Pew Research Center, in 2015, “12% of Americans get their news from *The Daily Show*” (Gottfried, Matsa, and Barthel 2015). Another study found that in 2014, 76% of Americans get at least some of their news from *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report* (Gottfried and Anderson 2014). This begs the question: Are satirical news programs actually news? While many young people get their news from satirical news programs, there has been no consensus among experts as to whether *The Daily Show* and *Last Week Tonight* should be considered viable source of news. Though political entertainment may not be considered news by some, including Jon Stewart himself, it does seem to function like a news source for the current generation.

Satirical news hosts, like Stewart, identify themselves as comedians rather than journalists or news anchors (Self 2011, 60). However, since many young people are turning to political entertainment to receive their news, Robert Spicer asks the question: “What is the satirist responsible for?” In other words, do they have a moral or ethical obligation to be held to the same standards as traditional journalists (Spicer 2011, 20)? Further, are these “newsman” really responsible for influencing the public’s agenda?

CONTENT ANALYSIS

As discussed previously, there has been a great deal of research on the influence of the satirical news programs' on public opinion but very little scholarship exists about the potential impacts and influence the shows may have on public policy and the policy process. Because of this deficiency, I wanted to see if there was a quantifiable connection that suggests satirical television shows and their hosts play an active role in agenda setting. Using Jon Stewart's tenure as host of *The Daily Show* as a case study, I looked at three issues that were given a great deal of attention on *The Daily Show* and compared the amount and types of coverage on the show to the amount of news coverage these stories received by *The New York Times* before and after they were discussed on Stewart's program in order to see if this attention translated into an agenda change or at the very least signaled Stewart's role as a policy entrepreneur.

HYPOTHESES

For this project, I was working to prove the following four hypotheses:

1. As the amount of time (attention) given to an issue on *The Daily Show* increases, the likelihood of that issue making it onto the systemic agenda increases.
2. If Stewart discusses the issue rather than a correspondent, the issue is more likely to make it onto the systemic agenda.
3. The more "serious" Stewart becomes during a segment, the more likely the issue he was discussing will make it onto the systemic agenda.
4. If Jon Stewart invites a guest to his show to talk about the issue, the likelihood of that issue making it onto the systemic agenda increases.

When deciding which factors may contribute to Stewart's ability to set the systemic agenda, I decided to focus on four potential aspects of his broadcast:

Amount of Time Spent on an Issue

Inherently, I would think that the more airtime an issue receives, the more indicative this would be of how much weight the audience should place on said issue which is why I chose to look at the number of minutes and segments Stewart spent on the given cases.

Stewart as a Policy Entrepreneur

Since this research is focused on the idea of Stewart as a policy entrepreneur, I was curious to see how other individuals that made appearances on his show such as his guests and correspondents may have either undermined or highlighted Stewart's ability to act as a policy entrepreneur.

Stewart's Delivery

Stewart is known for being a satirist but occasionally on his program he would pause the jokes and speak from his heart about things that made him upset or angry. Given that the main emphasis of this project is determining the merit of satirical news programs, I was interested to see if it was satire that was a driving factor in an issues appearance on the agenda or was it instead those rare moments where Stewart stopped being funny that really made an impact on his supposed ability to set the agenda.

METHODS

In order to see if there was a way to quantify influence and agenda change, I completed a content analysis of *The Daily Show* specifically concentrating on the time in which Jon Stewart completed his tenure as host. For the analysis, I decided to look at three specific issue areas covered on the show: gun control, problems with the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the

9/11 First Responders Health Care Bill also known as the Zadroga Act. These cases were chosen mainly in part because the last two of the cases listed resulted in an actual policy change in the months shortly after Stewart covered them on his program while the gun control issue has not resulted in a policy change. If there was evidence showing *The Daily Show's* ability to set the agenda, I was interested in finding out why some cases gained enough momentum to eventually lead to a policy change while others did not.

With the recent spike in mass shootings, gun control has been a very prominent issue in the American psyche. I chose to look at gun control as the issue that did not result in a policy change because I was interested in seeing how Stewart decided to cover such a sensitive issue. Further, with all the information and coverage this issue has received, if Stewart was in some way able to have some influence with regard to the gun control issue, it would be highly indicative of his ability to make an impact in the political arena.

The other two cases, Stewart's coverage of the 9/11 First Responders Bill and the VA's issues with backlogged claims, were some of the most commonly cited cases when researching the political influence of satire and were consistently highlighted in articles written about Stewart's legacy on *The Daily Show* around the time of his final episode. Because of this, I thought these two cases were important to analyze because they exemplify Stewart's potential role as a policy entrepreneur.

Each *Daily Show* episode is broken up into three segments with one additional minute or less closing segment called the "Moment of Zen" in which Stewart played a humorous clip or a news clip that dealt with an issue he touched upon with on that night's broadcast. The first two segments are usually devoted to discussing a prominent issue that is making headlines. These segments consist of Stewart giving his satirical twist to the news of the day or a "correspondent"

reporting “on location” about a given topic. The final segment is devoted to Stewart interviewing a prominent figure such as an actor, an artist, a member of Congress, or even the President of the United States. For more noteworthy guests such as a sitting president, Stewart will devote the last two segments of his show to the guest interviewee and allocates only the first segment for his political satire. By using *The Daily Show*’s episode and video database on the Comedy Central web page, I was able to search using keywords to find segments or full episodes relating to the cases I was looking into.

After watching the videos found on the Comedy Central website, I would record the number of minutes Stewart talked about the issue as well as the number of segments Stewart spent on the issue, whether there was a guest on the program that specifically discussed the issue, and whether there was a correspondent covering the topic with or instead of Stewart. I also made note of the tone of the segment. Was he using satire throughout the entire segment? Did he switch into a serious monologue or was there a combination of serious and satirical delivery? Though this was generally a quantitative study, I thought this qualitative element may have been an important element to include if the results yielded a positive outcome.

The difficult question that needed to be addressed in this research project was how does one measure influence? For the sake of this project, influence is measured by the number of *New York Times* articles written about the given case after it was covered on *The Daily Show*. Baumgartner and Jones “assess the systemic agenda via general news coverage” and are proponents of the use of *The New York Times* as a measure of attention (2005, 175). This, coupled with *The New York Times*’ name recognition and reputation as a respected publication are the main reasons for why the newspaper was chosen for this study. While Baumgartner and

Jones do not explicitly state why *The New York Times*, in particular, is good indicator of influence, there is some anecdotal evidence for the use of the publication as well.

As an intern on Capitol Hill working for Senator Joe Manchin, one of our tasks each morning was to distribute newspapers to staff in the office, including the Senator. The periodical that the Senator and a majority of the staff requested was *The New York Times*. Based on this knowledge, the newspaper's potential to make an impression on the institutional agenda was another attractive reason for picking *The New York Times*. In addition, as of 2015, *The New York Times* has over 1 million digital subscribers and 1.1 million who have both digital and paper subscriptions which indicates the newspaper reaches a wide audience and has the ability to carry the discussions of the day.

Because of this reach, it could be argued that issues emphasized in *The New York Times* may have the ability to influence an agenda change and therefore if Stewart's reporting is mentioned, it is possible that he, too, is able to in some way influence agenda setting.

DATA AND FINDINGS

Gun Control

Gun control had the most coverage over a longer period of time on *The Daily Show* than the other two cases I looked at for this study. Since 2002, the issue of gun control was mentioned in a total of 27 episodes of *The Daily Show*. Within these episodes, the issue was highlighted in 31 segments which amounted to roughly 191 minutes of coverage within a 14 year time span. After viewing the segments containing reporting of gun control, a few things stood out.

First, based on the way the issue was presented and the kind of coverage it received, Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show* writers appeared to have a noticeable bias in favor of gun control.

Second, the way Jon Stewart delivered his take on the issue was mostly satirical in nature. Of the 31 segments, 23 of them had a satirical delivery marked with harsh criticism coupled with humorous jabs at the media and Congress for their responses to mass shootings and issues of gun control. In two episodes, Stewart went back and forth between using satire and a serious monologue. One episode in particular which illustrated this format was the first Daily Show episode to air after the mass-shooting that took place in Sandy Hook, Connecticut where the topic of gun control took up 22 minutes of the 30 minute broadcast. Stewart gave a more serious rendition of gun control related issues in 2 segments, accounting for about 11 minutes of non-satirical coverage; the most poignant of these segments being Stewart's monologue after the Charleston, South Carolina church shooting in 2015. In this instance, Stewart began the show with a solemn demeanor and continued to express anger, sadness, and confusion in his monologue. Jon Stewart was not the only individual discussing the issue of gun control on the show; he also had 6 guests who spoke on issues related to gun control as well as 11 instances where one of his correspondents helped to cover the issue. It is also important to note that a majority of coverage relating to gun control occurred after major mass shootings and the failure of Congress to act after these shootings suggesting that Stewart did not have a significant role as a policy entrepreneur in relation to the issue of gun control.

The New York Times coverage of these issues looked at a few different factors: how many mentions of the issue occurred on or near the dates *The Daily Show* covered the issue, what section of the newspaper these articles are found and, finally, if *The Daily Show* or Jon Stewart in particular were mentioned in the article. Within the 27 episode, 14 year span of coverage on the issue of gun control, there were a total of 15 articles relating to the issue (11 of which were

found in section A of the paper). Of all the articles, only four mentioned *The Daily Show* by name and all of these articles were published between 2013 and 2015.

Department of Veteran's Affairs

Stewart's coverage of issues relating to the Department of Veterans Affairs dates back to March of 2009. There are a total of 19 episodes that address issues with the VA which amounted to 21 segments totaling roughly 123 minutes total over 6 years. In 11 of the 19 episodes, the VA issue was addressed in a satirical manner with Stewart speaking highly critically of the agency for their inability to run effectively and targeting, the former director Eric Shinseki, in particular. With the VA episodes, Stewart transitioned between moments of seriousness and satire more than he did in the gun control case with 4 episodes totaling close to 40 minutes of this form of delivery. Three episodes showed a more subdued version of Stewart who expressed disappointment over how the government was addressing this terrible situation. Stewart's serious monologues about the VA accounted for 16 minutes of the 123 total minutes spent on this topic. While the number of guests Stewart invited on the show to discuss the VA backlog (five) is close to the same number of guests he had for the gun control case, he had only two instances where correspondents were used to cover the VA.

The VA backlog issue was covered in a total of ten *New York Times* articles within the time span the topic was covered on *The Daily Show*. Of those ten articles (all of which save one were in Section A of the paper), four of them mentioned *The Daily Show* or Stewart by name. This means that 40% of the time the VA topic was addressed in the papers around the time of Stewart's reporting on the issue, *The Daily Show* or Stewart were associated with the issue indicating that there may be a connection between the news program and the issue's placement on the systemic agenda.

The Zadroga Act (9/11 First Responders Health Care Bill)

The most concentrated coverage of a policy problem facing the United States came from Stewart's reporting of the 9/11 First Responders Healthcare Bill or, as it is more formally known, the Zadroga Act and Congress' inability to pass the legislation. His attention and exposure of this issue to the public is considered by many to be one of Stewart's most influential moments as host of *The Daily Show*. The Zadroga Act's first mention on *The Daily Show* occurred in August of 2010 and really took off in December of that same year when Stewart highlighted the issue on three episodes. In fact, one of these episodes was entirely devoted to Congress' failure to pass the Zadroga bill. In all, Stewart highlighted the Zadroga Act in 8 episodes totaling 65 minutes of coverage over 10 segments. Stewart's coverage of the Zadroga controversy was mostly satirical with only one episode showing a completely serious tone when Stewart interviewed Dr. Sanjay Gupta about the health complications that have arisen from being at Ground Zero during and after 9/11. Two episodes used a combination of seriousness and satire. One of the episodes which used this combination included a two part interview with Senator Kirsten Gillibrand of New York who was one of the Senators who spearheaded the Zadroga Act and credits Stewart for his role in its passage. In this interview, Stewart mainly used a serious tone but sprinkled in a few jokes and satire. In the other episode (which was devoted entirely to coverage Zadroga bill), a satirical segment was followed by a more serious segment where Stewart invited four first responders on his show to talk about their health issues and why the passage of the first responder's bill was so critical. Stewart had 7 guests in total on his show to discuss the challenges this bill's passage faced in Congress. But while the number of guests is similar to

the other two cases, this case is unique in that it was Stewart alone who took on this issue; no correspondents were used at all in the Zadroga coverage.

The New York Times published a total of eight articles about the Zadroga Act during the same time in which Jon Stewart discussed the subject matter on *The Daily Show*. Of the eight articles, four of them mentioned Stewart or *The Daily Show* by name which means 50% of the time there was an article written about the issue, Stewart was in some way associated with the issue. This is significant because it builds the narrative that Stewart is a policy entrepreneur.

DISCUSSION

Overall, it appears that the data does not seem to indicate a strong correlation between coverage of a case on *The Daily Show* and translation into an agenda or policy change but also does not refute the relationship between *The Daily Show* and public policy. From the analysis of the data, there were a few outlying instances that were seemingly significant to this relationship.

Arguably, the quantity of coverage on *The Daily Show* does not necessarily translate into the quantity of coverage in other media. Rather consistent coverage of an issue within a short time span, such as was the case with the VA and the 9/11 First Responder's bill, does seem to increase the likelihood of coverage by *The New York Times*. Gun control which was given the most coverage over Stewart's tenure produced the least amount of traction based on the number of times it was covered on the program. This means my first hypothesis was incorrect.

Based on the data, whether or not a correspondent covers an issue may be telling of Stewart's role as a policy entrepreneur. Using these initial findings, it seems that Stewart's coverage of the 9/11 First Responder's Bill demonstrates the program's ability to influence an issue's placement onto the systemic agenda. Because of this discovery, there is an indication

that there might be some validity to my second hypothesis. As discussed previously, what is unique about this case is that there is not a single instance of a correspondent covering the issue instead of Stewart himself. This appears to show that Stewart may have cared too deeply about the issue to let a correspondent handle Zadroga Act coverage, but it also demonstrates the magnitude of Stewart's role as a policy entrepreneur, at least in this situation.

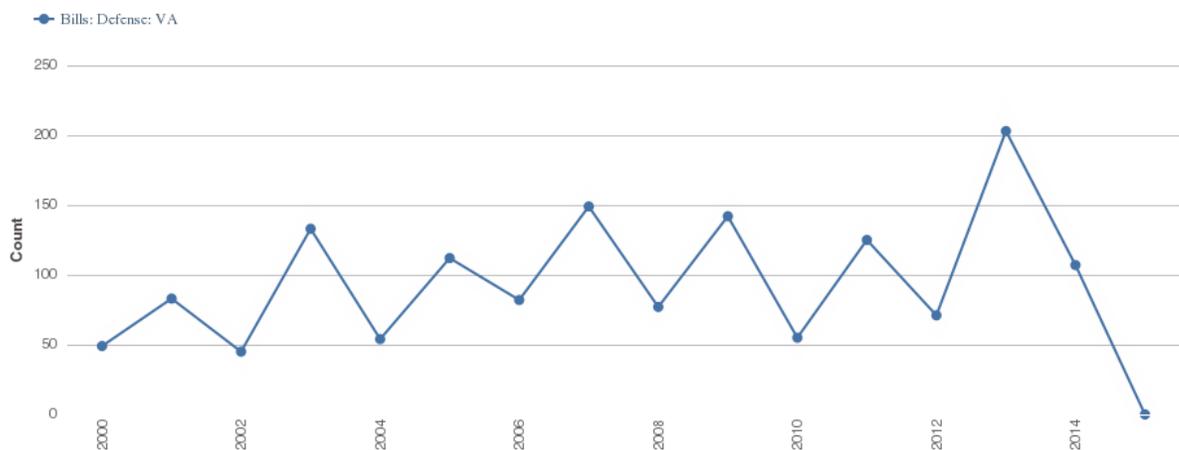
When compared to the other cases, Stewart's delivery seemed to make a difference only when discussing issues of gun control. For example, the segment that appeared to gain the most attention by *The New York Times* was Stewart's monologue on the Charleston, South Carolina shooting in which Stewart appeared very somber. His other coverage of the gun control issue which was either all satirical or a combination of satire and seriousness seemed to produce less of an impact. This signals that there may be some merit to my third hypothesis.

Another interesting note about the data on gun control is that two of *The New York Times* mentions of *The Daily Show* occurred during the last few months of Stewart's tenure. This could signal that Stewart's ability to make an impact on the agenda progressed with time.

While there is no definitive proof of the true scope of satirical news' influence on the systemic agenda, the show's influence on the institutional agenda is even less known. Unfortunately, without actually asking a lawmaker what their reasoning behind deciding to introduce or vote for a piece of legislation, there is very little that can be done to prove what ultimately, influences decision-making in public policy. One way I tried to get a sense of whether or not Stewart had a hand in influencing the institutional agenda was by using the University of Texas at Austin's Policy Agendas Project which allows a person conducting research to look at a trend analysis of certain issues based on a few different variables like the amount of bills addressing a given topic introduced over a certain time period or the number of

mentions the issue received in *The New York Times*. I tried using the Policy Agendas Project for each case but based on the website's codes, the only viable case to be tested was the VA issue. For the VA issue, I chose to look at the number bills related to VA issues that were introduced between 2000 and 2015. As shown in Figure 3, according to the Policy Agendas Project, there appears to be a spike in the number of bills introduced regarding the Department of Veterans Affairs in 2013.

Figure 3: Bills Introduced Regarding VA Issues by Year



Source: Policy Agendas Project

When looking at the data I collected, *The Daily Show* first mentioned the VA backlogged claims issue in 2013 and covered the issue on 4 episodes that year alone. In fact, while searching through the types of bills passed in 2013, there was one in particular, H.R. 2138 - Ending VA Claims Disability Backlog and Accountability Act, which may suggest the influence Stewart and *The Daily Show* may have on the institutional agenda. The first episode of *The Daily Show* that touched upon the VA backlog aired on March 27th, 2013. The issue was also discussed at length on three subsequent episodes airing April 4th, May 2nd, and May 20th; the bill, H.R. 2138, was introduced by Congressman Kevin McCarthy on May 23rd, 2013. While this is not definite proof

that *The Daily Show* coverage was the reason McCarthy introduced the bill, the fact that the bill was introduced after substantial satirical coverage by Stewart means that Stewart's role as a policy entrepreneur cannot and should not be overlooked.

Factors to Keep in Mind for Further Research

While the results of this research project did not exactly yield what I was expecting, there are some factors that must be considered for further research of this topic:

Time

If given more than a semester to work on this project, the amount of data that could have been collected may have yielded other results. For the sake of time, I only looked at three prominent cases of coverage by *The Daily Show* during Stewart's tenure. It would have been beneficial to see if any other issues would have proved to be an ideal case for this project as well. Further, it would have also been advantageous to have looked at several different satirical news programs, not just *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, particularly because Stewart is no longer on the air and, therefore, he is not the policy entrepreneur he may have once been.

Lack of Personal Accounts

Another missing piece of this research that would have been beneficial are personal interviews from lawmakers, their staff as well as those who work or have worked on *The Daily Show*. At the beginning of the semester, I sent ten letters to various producers that worked on the show and are currently working for *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, and *The Nightly Show with Larry Wilmore* requesting interviews with them about their experiences on the show and thoughts about the research topic. Unfortunately, I received no responses back so there is no way to currently gauge whether or not the producers knew of any impact the show may have been making on public policy.

Controlling for other Potential Influencing Factors

One variable that could not really be controlled for is whether or not Stewart was introducing an issue to the agenda himself or if his role was merely that of a journalist, reporting on what was already being covered by other news outlets. For instance, much of Stewart's gun control coverage occurred after mass shootings happened meaning he was not the only one reporting on gun control.

Finding a Measure of Influence

Another issue that proved to be difficult to overcome was figuring out how to measure influence. Since there are several factors that happen out of the view of the public that can also be attributed to the attention or lack of attention an issue receives, it is extremely difficult to how to measure the influence, which is qualitative in nature, in a quantitative way.

Resource Availability

A final challenge was resource availability. In this project, I only used *New York Times* mentions as a measure of influence but this may have only given me one piece of the puzzle. If I had the ability to look through more print and cable news coverage, as well as the ability to look at the Nielson Ratings for the episodes I catalogued, I could begin to get a better picture of whether Stewart was influencing the systemic agenda which meant other news media was following his lead or if he was simply reporting on what other news outlets were also already covering.

CONCLUSION

I began this project with the purpose of demonstrating that there was merit to studying satirical news programs and determining a relationship between these shows and public policy. While this research did not prove a direct correlation between satirical news and public policy, it

did show that there may be more research that can and should be performed on this subject.

After this attempt to quantify influence, what can be said about the significance of satirical news in relation to agenda setting in the public policy process?

Based on the models and theories of public policy discussed earlier, there are several ways for an issue to make it onto the policy agenda. As a result, it is difficult to determine the influence of a single input in the policy process. So while this means that satirical news programs do not make the profound sweeping changes I first assumed, based on the findings, I believe a case can be made that they do play a role in the policy process depending on the issue.

The hosts of these shows may also be critical unofficial actors in the policy process. While Stewart claims he is only a comedian, his role in society may be far more reaching than he realizes. As exemplified in his coverage of the VA and Zadroga Act, Stewart acted as a policy entrepreneur during his time on *The Daily Show*. Though it is true that he may not have been the only one talking about these issues, the fact that the VA situation was addressed and the Zadroga Act was passed during his tenure, could indicate that Stewart was an important part of these national conversations.

Clearly, the popularity and format of these shows may do more than just influence public opinion. If a generation is turning to these satirical shows for information, the affect they may have on actual public policy may one day be proven. Being able to connect the use of television satire to this area of political science could have important implications as to how effective public policy may be shaped in the future.

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