

## 5 Getting the Word Out and Going for Votes

John McCain's 2008 presidential run was an uphill climb. He clawed his way back to victory in the Republican primary only to find himself pitted against Barack Obama in the general election, a candidate whose message of hope and change had propelled him to celebrity-like status around the world. Although initial polling put Obama and McCain in a dead heat, it soon became evident that the Republican senator would have to close the enthusiasm gap by enhancing his personal image and convincing voters that his experience and policies were right for the country moving forward.<sup>1</sup>

McCain set out to make his case with all of the usual campaign strategies and a heavy dose of entertainment talk show interviews. He made countless speeches across the country, his team aired millions in television ads and developed a sophisticated web presence, and he maintained a hectic schedule of appearances across an array of shows. He was a frequent guest on news programs like *Meet the Press*, *Larry King Live*, and *Good Morning America* while also making stops at the most prominent entertainment venues from *The Tonight Show*, *The Late Show*, and *The Daily Show to Live with Regis and Kelly*, *The View*, and *Ellen*. In fact, McCain, who had developed an affinity for these shows over the years, engaged in the most prolific entertainment talk show strategy to date. Some of his interviews highlighted his playful spirit, others delved into his policy proposals, and still others combined personal and political topics.

The press kept tabs on McCain's interviews along the way. Although they modestly praised most of his performances, including his "good natured sparring" with David Letterman, his willingness to laugh along with Jimmy Kimmel, and his ability to communicate policy ideas on *The Daily Show*, they also made note of his less successful appearances.<sup>2</sup> There were stories, for example, describing the awkwardness with which McCain returned to *The Late Show* after ducking out on Letterman four weeks earlier, how the audience booed when McCain became defensive as he was "clobbered over the head with questions" during "a pretty good grilling" on *The View*, and how he "clashed" with Ellen DeGeneres over the fact that they "don't exactly see eye to eye when it comes to gay marriage."<sup>3</sup> These descriptions, while telling,

paint little more than an anecdotal picture of the effect that McCain's entertainment talk show strategy had on his chances in the race. They give strong impressions but leave important questions unanswered about the extent to which these interviews actually helped (or hurt) McCain. Did talk shows make any real difference in what viewers knew about him and how they felt towards him, or were they merely entertainment with little strategic value?

This kind of media commentary and assessment is common for most entertainment talk show interviews. Articles and reports generally start by highlighting candidates' objectives with claims that they are hitting the late night stage to "polish their regular guy aura" or "to show that they can laugh at themselves," while daytime talk shows are characterized as the perfect place for candidates to "soften their image" and "show their more personal side."<sup>4</sup> Reporters might then assess the interview with casual comments on the extent to which the candidate "appeared relaxed," "joked with the host," or "engaged the audience."<sup>5</sup> There is almost never any serious discussion of how the interview might have actually affected the millions of viewers watching from home.

Even researchers have only just begun to explore the impact that these interviews have on those who watch them. A small number of studies have produced some useful findings, but most of this work has either focused on a limited number of interviews and/or used imprecise exposure measures to estimate effects.<sup>6</sup> There is still a great deal that we do not know about what, if anything, viewers learn from these interviews and how it affects their feelings about the race. The result is that candidates have spent more than 20 years going on these shows with clear and widely publicized objectives, and yet there is relatively little precise information on how viewers are likely to react.

In this chapter, I use results from six online experiments conducted during the 2008 campaign to explore the impact that entertainment talk show interviews have on viewers' political decisions. I am specifically interested in the extent to which these interviews inform, prime, and ultimately persuade viewers. What, if anything, do viewers learn from watching? When are these interviews most likely to affect the criteria viewers use to evaluate candidates? And, most importantly, when are candidates most likely to generate support by going on these shows? I start in the next section with a theoretical discussion about the potential impact that these encounters could have on those who watch them. I then describe the experimental process used to test these predictions before presenting the results. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of what these findings say about candidate and voter behavior in an age of entertainment politics.

## THE POTENTIAL IMPACT OF ENTERTAINMENT TALK SHOW INTERVIEWS

Entertainment talk show interviews have the potential to influence viewers in three critical ways. They are likely, under certain conditions, to affect

what viewers know about the candidate, what they think about when evaluating the candidate, and ultimately the extent to which they are inclined to support the candidate. As such, they have the potential to significantly help those making a bid for the White House.

Informing voters is a critical first step in the persuasion process. Long-shot hopefuls and even well-known contenders recognize that voters must first receive and comprehend their message if they are to support it, and while some voters need little more than the candidates' party affiliation to make their decision, most seek out additional information about candidates and their positions on certain issues.

There is considerable debate about what viewers learn from "soft news" programs that include political material (e.g., *Entertainment Tonight*, *Oprah*). While some studies show higher political knowledge among viewers of certain soft news shows (e.g., *The Daily Show*) and many Americans claim to regularly learn about politics from entertainment-based sources, critics contend that they actually absorb little, if anything, from these shows. They argue that although amusement-seeking viewers may encounter bits of political information, most of what they come across focuses on the sensational or arguably less important aspects of political life—"roughly sex, drugs and celebrities"—and even then, they show only a weak tendency to process and recall this information.<sup>7</sup> Questions remain about the precise educational value of watching these shows.

Candidate *interviews* on entertainment talk shows, however, are different in that they routinely feature more of the substantive information that may be lacking from day-to-day episodes (see Chapter Four). Matthew Baum's research shows that when "substantive information is presented in an entertaining context, it can be piggy-backed (i.e., attached) to information intended primarily to entertain [which] renders political information cost-effective for even apolitical individuals."<sup>8</sup> In other words, viewers can learn about the candidate as an "incidental byproduct" of being entertained. These interviews have the additional advantage of allowing candidates to speak in simpler terms, in an atmosphere—i.e., with music, energetic discussion, and a live studio audience—that is known to stimulate cognitive involvement and learning.<sup>9</sup> There is even some limited empirical evidence to further support the idea that viewers pick up information about the candidates by watching their interviews. For example, Paul Brewer and Xiaoxia Cao show that exposure to a candidate appearance on a late night or comedy program during the 2004 Democratic primary was "positively related to knowledge about the campaign."<sup>10</sup> Still, additional analysis is required to determine the extent to which these learning effects are widespread and the factors that make them most likely to occur.

Of course, *what* viewers learn will be a reflection of what is discussed. Interviews focused on personal anecdotes will obviously help viewers understand the candidate better, while those focused on policy ought to inform them about where the candidate stands on the issues. It follows then that interviews combining personal and policy information would maximize the

breadth of what viewers learn about the candidate. It also stands to reason that viewers' political interest will play an inverse role in the learning process such that those with the lowest levels of political interest will, if they are sufficiently engaged by the interview, be in a position to learn the most from information that is likely to be new to them.<sup>11</sup> They simply have more to learn than those who have been following the campaign closely because highly interested viewers cannot "learn" something they already know. This means that candidates ought to get their messages out to voters, particularly those with limited campaign interest, by appearing on these shows.

These interviews also have the potential to shape the criteria viewers use when assessing the candidate. That is, they can "prime" viewers to alter the relative weight they give to certain considerations. The basic idea is that exposure to a message will activate specific considerations, making them easily accessible and therefore more likely to be emphasized in subsequent judgments. For example, hearing a candidate talk about the outsourcing of jobs could prime viewers to place more weight on their assessment of his or her economic policies when deciding for whom to vote. However, priming is not a simple or automatic process in that the primed criteria has to be made easily accessible *and* deemed relevant to the evaluation. In fact, it is "something like a two-stage process" in which "the priming stimuli should influence the accessibility of some knowledge constructs more than others, but whether people use those primed constructs as evaluative criteria depends on the degree to which they are perceived as applicable to the judgment task."<sup>12</sup> Priming is therefore predicated on the enhanced accessibility *and* saliency of certain criteria.

Entertainment talk show interviews provide candidates with perhaps their best opportunity to promote and prime their personal empathy—i.e., their compassion and ability to connect with ordinary people—by routinely featuring a good deal of self-deprecating humor and personal stories.<sup>13</sup> This ought to make perceptions of the candidates' "regular guy" image more accessible and perhaps even more relevant to viewers' evaluations. Although some studies show that late night television viewing in general has little impact on how viewers measure up candidates, work by Patricia Moy, Michael Xenos, and Verena Hess suggests that late night *interviews* can sometimes prime a candidate's empathy.<sup>14</sup> They found that late night viewers were more likely than non-viewers to emphasize George W. Bush's "caring" disposition after his second 2000 interview with David Letterman, although there was no evidence of similar priming effects for three other candidate interviews, highlighting the conditional nature of this type of priming.

These interviews also have the potential to prime policy considerations. As shown in Chapter Four, hosts routinely ask candidates about their positions on the key issues of the day. Of course, some hosts will challenge them from time to time, but in most cases candidates are given the opportunity to lobby viewers without much of the harsh confrontation found on other

programs. This amiable discussion ought to increase the accessibility of certain issues so that viewers who find them relevant can emphasize them in their evaluations. Evidence of issue priming has been found in numerous studies, including the Moy, Xenos, and Hess study mentioned above and an experimental study of John Kerry's 2004 appearance on *The Late Show* where viewers were primed to focus on economic and security matters at the expense of personal image considerations because the interview "made policy concerns . . . readily accessible to viewers who then elected to use them as the basis of their evaluation."<sup>15</sup>

Although research finds that candidate interviews on entertainment talk shows can prime personal and policy considerations, there is also a sense that these priming effects might be conditional. All else equal, the amount of discussion on particular topics ought to affect the type of priming that occurs. Interviews featuring abundant personal material should prime empathy, those featuring policy discussion should prime the issues most discussed, and those that mix content should prime both personal and policy considerations assuming that a "hydraulic effect" does not occur in which viewers feel compelled to focus on certain criteria over others.<sup>16</sup> The general priming literature further suggests that viewers have to be convinced that the topics being discussed are pertinent to their evaluation and are, in fact, worthy of *more* weight than voters are currently giving them. The volume of discussion or explicit statements about the importance of certain considerations may help with this, although it can be difficult to increase the saliency of considerations that are already on voters' minds. For example, an interview that features an extended discussion of the Iraq War will only produce priming effects if viewers believe the issue is pertinent and deserving of more weight than they were planning to give to it. In the end, these interviews are likely to prime viewers to the extent that viewers find certain considerations easily accessible, salient, and deserving of extra attention.

For these priming effects to be beneficial, candidates must also convince viewers that they are reasonably empathetic and earn their support on the issues. Interviews that prime negatively evaluated considerations will obviously have an adverse effect overall. Candidates who can win over viewers by recounting personal stories and elaborating on their proposals stand to gain the most from any priming effects that occur because viewers will be emphasizing positive criteria that will enhance their composite ratings.<sup>17</sup> Viewers will be thinking about the candidate's favorable attributes when making their evaluation. This suggests that candidates, by appearing on entertainment television and talking about their personal lives and political objectives, have the opportunity to potentially focus viewer attention on things that could help later in the evaluation process.

Entertainment talk show interviews should also help to increase the candidate's overall support. That is, viewers should feel more warmly towards the candidate and be more likely to vote for the candidate.<sup>18</sup> It stands to reason that a friendly conversation in which the candidate is given an

uninterrupted opportunity to promote his or her candidacy ought to have some positive impact on viewers at home.

These effects could also be conditional, however, in that interviews that mix personal and political information ought to be the most persuasive because those with little more than personal anecdotes, although they may increase warmth ratings, give viewers little substantive reason for strengthening their vote intentions. Moreover, viewers who are accustomed to the normal energy and excitement of entertainment television may ignore candidates and hosts who mire themselves in extended policy discussions. Some candidates might see these interviews as an opportunity to explain their policies to ordinary voters, but they should remember that persuasion is predicated on the ability to keep viewers engaged with more than stump speech boilerplate. Interviews that balance lighthearted stories with substantive policy information ought to draw viewers in while also giving them multiple reasons to increase their support. The implication is that candidates might benefit most from appearances on shows with a reputation for mixing content (e.g., *The Late Show*) and/or by controlling the conversation as much as possible so as to cover both personal and political topics.

Viewers' political interest and partisanship could also play a role in the persuasion process. Those with little interest in politics rarely encounter political information on their own and thus have relatively weak partisan preferences. Watching a candidate interview on entertainment television should therefore provide them with new information that stands a reasonably good chance of altering their opinions because "politically inattentive persons will often be unaware of the implications of the persuasive communication they encounter, and so often end up 'mistakenly' accepting them."<sup>19</sup> Highly interested individuals, on the other hand, have well-formed belief systems that allow them to better resist "persuasive communications that are inconsistent with [their] political predispositions."<sup>20</sup> This means that candidates appearing on entertainment talk shows should be more likely to persuade politically disinterested viewers, including those from the opposing party, than their highly interested counterparts.

These predictions suggest that, under certain conditions, candidates ought to benefit from appearing on entertainment television. Their messages should get across to viewers, and there is a chance that their conversations might prime and/or persuade the millions who are watching at home. For their part, viewers should also benefit as they learn about the candidate and receive information that could be useful in making political decisions. All of this suggests that entertainment talk show interviews have the potential to be much more than merely entertaining.

## EXPERIMENTAL TESTS

Extant research highlights the challenges of studying viewer reaction to entertainment talk show interviews. While experimental studies have

provided tight exposure measures and control over a host of variables, they have been constrained by low levels of mundane reality, limited and non-representative samples (e.g., college sophomores), and a small number of cases that hampers the generalizability of their results.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, survey-based studies have often included a slightly larger number of interviews and better samples, but they have struggled to provide airtight exposure measures that ensure that viewers have actually seen the interview being studied. In fact, some studies have had to rely on national survey data that treat specific interview "viewers" as anyone who has watched a particular *type* of entertainment talk show at least once in the past week—e.g., at least one episode of either *The Late Show* or *The Tonight Show*.<sup>22</sup>

To address these challenges and investigate the predictions made above, I conducted a series of online experiments during the 2008 presidential campaign. I started by creating a standard online survey template that measured demographics, political attitudes, and media use habits. Then, as the campaign unfolded, I captured video of six late night candidate interviews that seemed to represent a cross section of typical appearances—three each by Barack Obama and John McCain (described below). I then embedded each video into its own survey and added a few political knowledge questions based on the specific interview. Each survey, along with a nearly identical control group survey that did not include the video, was then sent within 24 hours of the interview's initial airing to Market Tools, an online survey research firm. Market Tools then sent email invitations to its national sample for three days, and those willing to participate were randomly assigned to either the control or test condition.

The online survey was designed with an initial question to weed out anyone who had already seen the interview. Participants then answered a few demographic questions, and while those in the control group simply continued with the rest of the survey, those in the test condition watched one of the six candidate interviews before answering some questions about it and completing the rest of the survey. To ensure their exposure to the interview, test condition participants had to confirm that they had watched the entire video and correctly answer questions about which candidate was in the interview, which host conducted the interview, and whether the interview took place face-to-face or via satellite. The survey software was programmed to immediately drop any participants who did not verify their exposure or got at least one of the exposure confirmation questions wrong.

The entire study included 1,503 participants, with 761 answering the control condition surveys while the other 742 participants served in the test conditions.<sup>23</sup> Participants came from all over the country and represented the typical late night viewing audience fairly well (see Chapter Three) with 50% of the sample being female, 88% white, and 37% college educated. In addition, the median age was 41, median household income was between \$50,000 and \$60,000, and 33% of the sample was Republican compared to 39% Democratic and 28% independent or other party. Additional analysis confirms that there were no statistically significant differences between



conditions or between any of the six independent studies on any of these measures.

This approach exceeds other experimental studies in that it includes multiple interviews and, while the samples for each experiment are not overly large (approximately 250 participants for each of the six experiments), they are nationally representative. I also took steps to ensure an accurate exposure measure—something that has hampered past studies—and to control for a number of key variables such as show type (late night), candidates (Obama or McCain), and campaign year (2008) in order to isolate the impact that interview content has on viewers' reactions. Of course, the tradeoff is that I can only speculate about the impact that interviews on other types of shows (i.e., daytime), with other candidates during other campaigns, have on those who see them.

The results in Table 5.1 show that the six interviews covered a range of content and tone. John McCain's April 1 interview with David Letterman was fairly serious for a late night talk show. Letterman and the presumptive Republican nominee exchanged some humorous jabs during the opening monologue, but they got down to business once the actual interview started. In fact, the amount of policy discussion (58% of comments dealt with policy) far exceeded any jokes (9%) or references to personal (18%) or campaign (24%) topics. McCain started by defending his conservative principles and warning that Republicans needed to do more to cut government spending if they were to regain the trust of the American people. He then launched into a lengthy explanation of how he would rebuild the middle class, including proposals for increased mortgage interest deductions and refinancing options, job training for high-tech industries, and controlling the excesses on Wall Street. Although he claimed, "the fundamentals of the American economy are very strong," McCain conceded that "we have to take action to help people in danger of losing their home, losing the American dream, who are sitting at the kitchen table saying I may have to get another job, may have to dip into our savings." McCain may have started with humor, but his interview with Letterman ultimately ended up being one of the most detailed and policy-laden entertainment talk show interviews of the 2008 campaign.

Barack Obama's April 21 visit to *The Daily Show* also favored political topics over personality. The interview occurred via satellite just before the Pennsylvania primary, prompting Obama and Stewart to discuss the race in detail before talking about some of its major issues. Although Stewart brought up the Reverend Jeremiah Wright controversy and wondered if Obama represented "too much change," the candidate nevertheless pushed forward with an idealistic vision for America's foreign and domestic policy. "Folks are a lot more concerned now about the economy. They're not talking as much about Iraq, but they see a connection between us spending ten billion dollars a month there [and] the lack of investment here at home . . . What they're hoping is for significant change in Washington,"

Table 5.1 Content and Tone of Experiment Interviews.

|                                   | Policy | Personal | Campaign | Jokes |
|-----------------------------------|--------|----------|----------|-------|
| McCain on <i>The Late Show</i>    | 58     | 18       | 24       | 9     |
| Obama on <i>The Daily Show</i>    | 34     | 16       | 50       | 26    |
| McCain on <i>The Daily Show</i>   | 36     | 28       | 36       | 29    |
| Obama on <i>Jimmy Kimmel Live</i> | 7      | 78       | 15       | 31    |
| McCain on <i>The Tonight Show</i> | 16     | 52       | 32       | 33    |
| Obama on <i>The Late Show</i>     | 44     | 40       | 16       | 21    |

Note: Entries are the percentage of all references in the interview.

Obama said. Although Stewart and Obama shared some laughs (26% of comments included a joke), most of their conversation focused on policy (34%) and the campaign (50%) with very little mention of Obama's personal life or background (16%).

John McCain's visit to *The Daily Show* on May 7 featured more of a balance between humorous personal references and serious policy discussion. Stewart promised to be "more respectful"—a reference to their testy encounter a year earlier—but the two still traded barbs over McCain's age and what his secret service code name should be—"traiblazer," "McSteamy," "Grumpelstiltskin," or "jerk." They also joked about the Democratic primary candidates "beating each other over the head." "It's terrible, I hate to watch," McCain mocked. However, sprinkled throughout the humor and personal references were some serious questions about McCain's strategy for the Iraq War. The senator reminded Stewart that he had long criticized the Bush administration's handling of the war and that he recognized that withdrawing would be a long process that might include a "security arrangement" like those with South Korea, Kuwait, Japan, and Germany. In the end, McCain's interview was almost equally balanced between good natured ribbing (29% jokes), campaign talk (36%), personal references (28%), and policy debate (36%).

Then, on June 15, Barack Obama appeared on *Jimmy Kimmel Live* for an extremely lighthearted and casual chat. The interview, which came just a week after Hillary Clinton dropped from the race, featured an upbeat Obama looking to retool his appeal for a general voting audience. Kimmel introduced the presumptive nominee as "number 23, point guard, Senator Barack Obama." They then talked about Father's Day and Obama's tendency to lose things before spending the better part of nine minutes chatting about basketball: Obama's love of the game, his plan to replace the White House bowling alley with a basketball court, and the pick-up games he plays on the road. Kimmel ended the interview by offering to serve as

Obama's running mate, leading the candidate to diplomatically explain, "I think obviously you got some popularity and you'd help bring in some votes, but frankly, I don't think you'd vet." The vast majority of this interview mentioned personal references (78%) with a healthy share of jokes (31%) throughout, while issues (7%) and the campaign (15%) were really only mentioned in passing.

John McCain's August 25 interview on *The Tonight Show* was also quite friendly, although he managed to sneak in a few political references from time to time. With the race in a dead heat, McCain opened with some self-deprecating cracks about his age—"my Social Security number is eight"—and although he offered Leno a place on his ticket, the host kindly declined, noting, "I can make more doing a week in Vegas, but thanks." The two then chatted like old friends for the rest of the interview, focusing most of their attention on the running mate selection process, McCain's friendship with Joe Biden, and his respect for Hillary Clinton. The only really earnest exchange came when the senator asked for a minute to explain his home ownership gaffe.<sup>24</sup> McCain mentioned his time as a prisoner of war in Vietnam and explained that his wife's good fortune and generosity had allowed them to buy multiple homes. Other than this self-described "moment of seriousness," the vast majority of John McCain's *Tonight Show* interview featured jokes (33%) and relaxed conversation about personal topics (52%) with only the occasional reference to issues (16%) and a few more to the campaign (32%).

Finally, there was more of a balance between personality and politics when Barack Obama hit the *Late Show* stage on September 10. Obama started with a series of humble references to Sarah Palin's growing popularity and jokes about how it was causing him to field offers from magazines like *Popular Mechanics* rather than *Newsweek* or *Time*. They're offering me "a centerfold with a wrench," he told Letterman. Obama then promoted his "hope" and "change" message by claiming to represent "something fundamentally different" that could help the average American. Although there were jokes (21%) and other personal references to his youth and family (40%) throughout the rest of the interview, a good portion also covered the campaign (16%) and the central issues of the day (44%), most notably the economy, the Iraq War and especially the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan. "I think that if we had stayed focused on Afghanistan, if we, instead of spending a trillion dollars in Iraq, had focused our energy on problems here at home [and] implemented the 9/11 commission report," Obama said, "then we . . . would be further along in making sure that America was safe." Just as McCain had done months earlier on *The Daily Show*, Obama was sure to mix humorous passages with serious policy considerations during his interview with David Letterman.

## THE POLITICAL IMPACT OF TALK SHOW INTERVIEWS

I present the results from these experiments in three sections. I start with a focus on how these interviews affected viewers' knowledge about the

candidate and his policies. I then look for priming effects to see if and when they altered the criteria viewers use in their candidate evaluations. Finally, I test for persuasion effects to see if viewers became more likely than non-viewers to support the candidate. The results section concludes with a brief discussion of how these effects relate to each other as part of the candidate's overall entertainment talk show strategy.

### Informing

Participants in each experiment were asked a small number of questions to assess their knowledge of the candidates. Those participating in the Obama-Kimmel experiment were asked only two questions due to a lack of policy specifics in the interview—one about the effect that Hillary Clinton's candidacy had on Obama and another on Obama's tendency to misplace things. Those participating in the other experiments, however, were asked three questions that typically covered both personal and political information found in the interview. For example, those in the McCain-Leno experiment answered questions about his economic plan, his thoughts about drilling for oil, and the story about him possibly running with John Kerry in 2004, while Obama-Stewart participants were asked about what Obama thought was keeping the country from progressing, the name of his controversial pastor who had made anti-American remarks, and the fact that he was often criticized for not wearing an American flag lapel pin.<sup>25</sup>

Figure 5.1 shows the difference in the proportion of control and test condition participants who gave the correct answer for each of the 17 questions. The first thing to note is the consistency with which viewers outpaced non-viewers in answering these questions correctly. These differences are statistically significant in all but one case: the question on whether or not John McCain supported offshore drilling ("Drilling").<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the proportion of viewers who knew the correct answer almost always exceeded the 50% mark, which demonstrates that the majority of those who watched a particular interview were "in the know." This provides clear and compelling evidence that these interviews can convey information about the candidates and where they stand on some critical issues. For example, those who watched Barack Obama's *Late Show* interview learned about what he would have done differently after 9/11 if he had been president; his plan to maintain his friendship with Bill Clinton without offering him a cabinet position; and his positive thoughts about George W. Bush's efforts to deal with the AIDS epidemic in Africa.

These learning effects span both "easy" and "hard" questions. On easy questions—where most of the control group answered correctly—those who saw the interview were even more likely to know the right answer. For example, whereas 65% of non-viewers correctly answered that John McCain's plan for fixing the economy included spending less on foreign oil, 91% of those who watched his interview with Jay Leno got it right ("Fix Economy").<sup>27</sup> On harder questions—where most of the control group

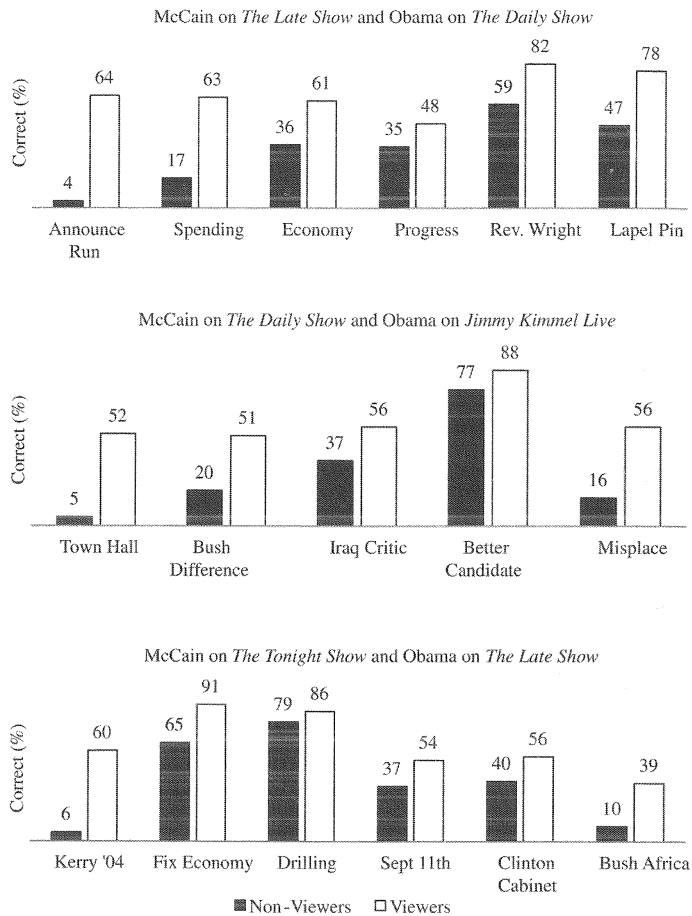


Figure 5.1 Non-Viewer and Viewer Knowledge.

answered incorrectly—the discrepancies are starker, suggesting that viewers were able to process and retain even relatively complex information. This is exemplified by the fact that only 17% of non-viewers knew that John McCain thought government spending was hurting the Republican Party while 63% of viewers understood this after hearing McCain explain it to David Letterman (“Spending”).<sup>28</sup> Across the board, from relaxed to

more serious interviews, viewers picked up personal information about the candidates, such as their forgetfulness or where they decided to announce their candidacy, as well as more substantive facts from how the candidates planned to solve the nation’s economic problems to what they believed was keeping America from moving forward.

These results are further substantiated by logistic regressions that control for the effect of standard demographic variables (party identification, age, gender, race, education, and income) as well as political interest (see Appendix 5.1).<sup>29</sup> In each case, watching an interview was a statistically significant predictor of getting the question correct. In fact, even after controlling for factors that might affect an individual’s ability to answer correctly, those who saw an interview were vastly more likely than those in the control group to get it right. For example, the odds of knowing that John McCain had criticized the Bush administration’s handling of the Iraq war were 1.94 times greater for those who watched him with Jon Stewart where he said “a failed strategy was employed for the war in Iraq” (“Iraq Critic”).<sup>30</sup> This is further evidence that candidates can deliver information to viewers by going on entertainment talk shows.

The consistency in these results suggests that all types of interviews, from predominantly personal chats to cerebral policy discussions, can inform viewers. However, interview content can still affect *what* viewers learn. Barack Obama’s interview with Jimmy Kimmel is the most obvious example of this. Viewers certainly picked up information about the candidate’s personality, but they could not have learned much about his policies or the campaign because these topics went almost completely unmentioned during the entire eight-and-a-half minute exchange. While this lends some credence to the contention that there is little good news in soft news, it is important to note that largely personal interviews are quite rare (see Chapter Four) and that it does not take much substantive discussion for viewers to find meaningful information as evidenced by John McCain’s casual chat with Jay Leno.<sup>31</sup> In this case, although most of the time was spent on personal matters (52% of references), viewers still learned about the senator’s economic and energy plans. In short, interview content does not seem to affect *whether* viewers learn, but it can affect *what* they learn.

Additional analysis shows that these interviews are particularly effective at increasing the knowledge of those with limited political interest. For 11 of the 17 questions in this study, the difference in learning between control and test group participants was greater for those claiming to be “not at all” or “a little” interested in politics than it was for those claiming to be “somewhat” or “very interested.” For example, 23% of control group participants with little or no interest in politics knew that Barack Obama would have focused on Afghanistan after 9/11 compared to 41% of minimally interested participants who watched his *Late Show* interview. Among politically interested participants, the difference between conditions was 57% to 59%. This 2% increase for the politically engaged is significantly smaller

than the 18% increase among less interested participants. The same pattern of results is found with ten other, largely issue-based, questions.<sup>32</sup> The fact that low-interest viewers often gain more than high-interest viewers is at least partially driven by the fact that low-interest viewers simply have more to learn than their high-interest counterparts. It is also worth noting that low-interest viewers rarely achieve the levels of knowledge demonstrated by high-interest viewers. The proportion of correct answers for low-interest viewers is only close to the proportion of correct answers for high-interest viewers on three of the seventeen questions.<sup>33</sup> This means that, although low-interest viewers can gain in a relative sense, they still lag behind high-interest viewers in their absolute level of political knowledge.

Entertainment talk show interviews clearly inform those who watch them. Viewers consistently come away knowing more about the candidates and their positions, and it is often the least engaged viewers who gain the most. Of course, the learning process is not perfect in that the type of information can limit what viewers learn, and viewers do not always get the right answer. Still, the overall picture is one in which these appearances can, more often than not, provide candidates with an opportunity to inform all sorts of viewers about who they are and where they stand on the issues—i.e., they can get their message out effectively.

### Priming

How do these interviews affect the criteria that viewers use to evaluate candidates? I followed the standard test for priming effects by using regression models to determine the relative weight that control and test condition participants give to certain criteria when evaluating their vote choices.<sup>34</sup> This analysis focuses specifically on the extent to which participants think about the candidate's empathy and his position on the issues that were most important in the campaign and most discussed during the interviews: jobs and the economy, the Iraq War and terrorism.<sup>35</sup> I measured empathy, which is the most obvious personal quality candidates seek to promote on entertainment television, with standard questions about how well, on a four-point scale from "not at all well" to "very well," participants thought the following words or phrases described the candidate: compassionate, cares about people, and in touch with ordinary people. Scores were then summed and divided by three to produce an overall empathy score between one and four.<sup>36</sup> I also measured support for each of the candidates' policies on a five-point scale from "strongly disapprove" to "strongly approve." Vote intentions were measured with a similar five-point scale ranging from "definitely McCain" to "definitely Obama" with "other" options excluded from the results. Wherever necessary, I recoded the vote intentions scores so that higher scores always reflected more support for the candidate being interviewed. I then regressed vote intentions on the empathy and issue variables,

along with standard controls for party identification, age, gender, race, education, and income. I ran individual models for each condition across the six experiments as well as combined models with interactions for each individual experiment to see if the emphasis placed on certain criteria differed between viewers and non-viewers.

Table 5.2 provides an overview of the priming results. Specifically, it indicates the cases in which viewers were led to emphasize different criteria than those in the control group. A "+" indicates that viewers placed significantly more emphasis on the consideration than non-viewers, a "-" indicates that viewers placed significantly less emphasis on the consideration than non-viewers, and no entry indicates that viewers and non-viewers placed roughly the same amount of emphasis on the consideration. Appendix 5.2 provides the interaction coefficients for each consideration multiplied by condition.

The first column in Table 5.2 shows that these interviews can, at times, focus viewers' attention on the candidates' perceived empathy. John McCain's relatively balanced discussion with Jon Stewart led viewers to find him relatively empathetic (2.9 out of 4) while placing significantly more emphasis on his perceived compassion and connectedness in their evaluations.<sup>37</sup> Whereas a one-unit increase in McCain's perceived empathy was associated with a 0.005 increase in vote intentions for non-viewers, the bump for viewers was significantly stronger at 0.280. Obama's lighthearted chat with Jimmy Kimmel, in which 78% of comments focused on personal topics, had a similar effect in that viewers rated the Democrat as highly empathetic (3.2 out of 4) and were dramatically more inclined to consider his empathy when making their assessment.<sup>38</sup> In this case, the impact that empathy had on non-viewers' vote intentions was estimated to be 0.285 compared to 0.514 for those who watched the interview. Obama's *Late*

Table 5.2 Priming Effects.

|                                   | Empathy | Economy | Iraq | Terrorism |
|-----------------------------------|---------|---------|------|-----------|
| McCain on <i>The Late Show</i>    |         | +       |      |           |
| Obama on <i>The Daily Show</i>    |         |         |      | -         |
| McCain on <i>The Daily Show</i>   | +       |         | +    |           |
| Obama on <i>Jimmy Kimmel Live</i> | +       |         |      |           |
| McCain on <i>The Tonight Show</i> |         |         |      |           |
| Obama on <i>The Late Show</i>     | +       | -       |      | +         |

Note: Entries represent the relative emphasis given to each consideration by viewers compared to non-viewers in their vote choices.

Show appearance also primed empathy, as those who saw him make self-deprecating jokes and chat about his family (40% of references were to personal matters) were significantly more moved by his ability to relate, which they rated a 2.8 out of 4.<sup>39</sup> Non-viewers only increased their intention to vote for Obama by 0.128 for every additional point on empathy while viewers' vote intentions jumped by 0.458.

Figure 5.2 depicts this relationship by plotting the predicted vote intention of non-viewers and viewers, holding all other factors constant. The graph shows how viewers' empathy scores had a much more pronounced impact—i.e., steeper slope—on their likelihood of voting for Obama than non-viewers. In this and the other cases, perceptions of empathy were a big deal for those who saw the interviews while having relatively little impact on how non-viewers thought about their vote choices. In other words, watching the interview led viewers to think about Obama's empathy more than non-viewers when deciding for whom to vote.

The results in Table 5.2 also show the limitations of this type of priming. Perhaps unsurprisingly, interviews failed to prime empathy when they featured an abundance of policy information over personal details. Only 14% of Obama's *Daily Show* interview and 18% of McCain's *Late Show* appearance referenced personal topics, and in both cases, those who watched the interview gave basically the same emphasis to empathy as those in the control group. Perhaps more surprisingly, McCain's friendly chat with Jay Leno, in which 45% of paragraphs included a personal reference, also failed to prime empathy. Both non-viewers and viewers thought it was a marginally significant factor to consider. Specifically, a one-point increase in empathy generated a 0.274 increase in the likelihood of voting for McCain among

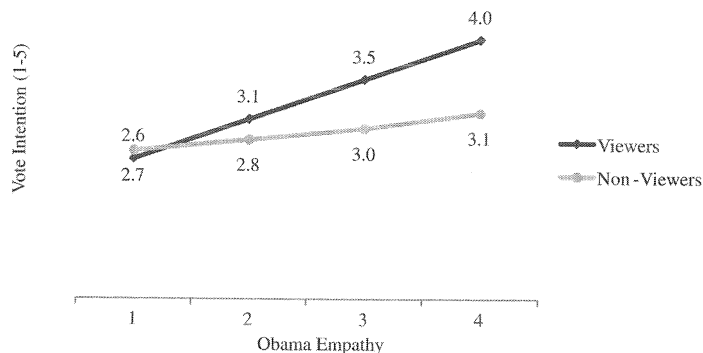


Figure 5.2 Predicted Vote Intention by Perceived Empathy.

non-viewers compared to a 0.248 increase among viewers. This speaks to the difficulty of priming a consideration that is already in voters' minds and the fact that priming requires that viewers be made aware of the candidate's empathy and believe that it is a particularly useful criterion on which to evaluate the candidate. Apparently those who saw McCain with Leno in late August were not convinced that they should place any *extra* weight on this aspect of his personality.

The story is a little more complex when it comes to issue priming. The two interviews with very little policy discussion (Obama on *Jimmy Kimmel Live* and McCain on *The Tonight Show*) predictably failed to prime any of the three issues. The candidates did almost nothing to increase the accessibility or saliency of these issues—Obama never mentioned them and McCain only referenced jobs and the economy 3 times and terrorism 4 times in his 11 total policy references—despite the fact that each candidate had an incentive to discuss them more. Public opinion polls at the time showed a plurality of voters (48% to 32%) believed that Obama “would do a better job handling the economy” while McCain enjoyed a commanding lead on the Iraq War (52% to 41%) and terrorism (58% to 34%).<sup>40</sup>

Interviews that provided more policy discussion, however, had various effects on the criteria viewers used to evaluate the candidate. John McCain went into his April 1 interview with David Letterman nearly tied with Obama on his perceived ability to handle economic problems (43% to 47%) while leading dramatically on security issues (Iraq War: 54% to 40%; terrorism: 60% to 34%).<sup>41</sup> Although his discussion with Letterman focused on Iraq (56% of policy references), there was more talk about the economy (27%) than there was about terrorism (10%). The result was that control and test condition participants were equally committed to considering Iraq and terrorism in making their vote choices, while viewers focused on jobs and the economy more than non-viewers. The policy-heavy interview compelled viewers to maintain a strong focus on security matters while ramping up the effect that McCain's economic policy had on their thinking. Fortunately for McCain, he was able to establish modest support for his economic policies among viewers (3.1 out of 5) so that the priming effect was reasonably beneficial.

Obama's *Daily Show* appearance, in which the economy and Iraq accounted for half of all policy references (25% each) while there was not a single mention of terrorism, had a peculiar priming effect.<sup>42</sup> Those who watched the interview emphasized Iraq in their evaluations, albeit no more so than non-viewers, and whereas both viewers and non-viewers failed to think much about Obama's economic policy, viewers were significantly primed *away* from considering terrorism by the interview's complete lack of discussion about it. Terrorism was a major consideration for those in the control group but had virtually no effect on viewers' evaluations. Viewers did not hear about it so they did not think about it much. This actually benefited Obama because

it took the viewers' minds off his weakest issue—only 34% of Americans thought Obama would be better than McCain at handling terrorism.<sup>43</sup>

John McCain's visit to *The Daily Show* had a slightly different result. The discussion balanced personal stories with policy details focused on Iraq (31% of policy references) and terrorism (46%) with the occasional mention of economic issues (11%). Interestingly, neither viewers nor non-viewers thought much about terrorism in their assessments of McCain, despite the fact that it was mentioned in nearly half of the policy references. Instead, members of both groups focused equally on the economy while viewers were primed to focus even more of their attention on Iraq. Whereas a one-unit increase in perceptions of McCain's Iraq policy was associated with a 0.335-unit increase in vote intentions among non-viewers, the impact for viewers was more than twice as strong at 0.789. The interview not only established a slight advantage for McCain on Iraq (3.2 out of 5)—an issue on which he enjoyed public confidence for his ability to handle (51% to 42%)—it also primed viewers to give it significantly more weight in their evaluations.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, Obama's interview with David Letterman near the end of the campaign seems, at first glance, to have hurt the candidate by priming viewers to focus on one of his weaknesses at the expense of one of his strengths. The Democratic nominee went into the appearance with a slight advantage on his perceived ability to handle economic issues (48% to 45%)—the most important issue at the time—and clear deficits in terms of Iraq (42% to 52%) and terrorism (38% to 55%).<sup>45</sup> Nearly half of all policy references during the interview focused on terrorism (47%) while only 11% focused on the economy. This created a somewhat predictable “hydraulic effect” in which viewers focused their evaluations on terrorism while giving less weight to Obama's economic plans than those in the control group. The potential pain of this was offset by the fact that Obama's discussion of terrorism had a positive impact on viewers—i.e., it was persuasive (2.7 out of 5 for the control group compared to 3.1 for the test condition)—so that focusing on what initially appeared to be a weakness actually helped to improve his overall evaluation.<sup>46</sup> Still, the interview precluded an opportunity for Obama to capitalize on his economic message (3.2 out of 5), but he was nevertheless able to turn a negative on terrorism into a positive so that its priming did not cause any harm.

There are a number of conclusions to draw from these results. They clearly show that entertainment talk show interviews, more often than not, alter the criteria viewers use to evaluate candidates. In five of the six cases above, the interview had a significant impact on the relative weight that viewers gave to personal and/or policy considerations. The results also show that these priming effects generally map onto the topics of conversation in that lighthearted interviews tend to prime empathy but not issues, more serious interviews tend to prime issues but not empathy, and balanced interviews tend to prime both. In fact, balanced interviews had empathy priming

effects that were as strong, if not stronger, than those produced by more carefree exchanges, suggesting that viewers may be more comfortable relying on personality cues when they are primed to emphasize policy considerations as well.

This also speaks to the idea that, although interview content seems to be related to the accessibility of certain considerations, viewers still have to be convinced that these considerations are so important and relevant that they should be given even more weight than non-viewers give them in their evaluations. The importance of heightened saliency is evidenced by the fact that the issue priming results above were not always strictly tied to the volume of discussion. For example, McCain's *Late Show* interview, which primed jobs and the economy, featured more than twice as much discussion on Iraq (56% of policy references) as it did on economic issues (27%). In this case, although viewers heard a lot about Iraq and considered it to be important in their evaluation, they were not motivated to give it *more* weight than non-viewers, whereas the relatively limited discussion on the economy compelled them to emphasize McCain's economic policies.

These results also suggest that entertainment talk show interviews can often, although not always, produce priming effects that benefit candidates. In all of the cases above, the candidate established a strong empathy rating among viewers—often closing in on three out of four—that made any empathy priming beneficial. There were also some cases in which candidates were asked about and elaborated on favorable issues—i.e., those on which they had a public opinion advantage—so that increasing the accessibility and saliency of these issues would also produce a net benefit. Even in those cases where the discussion focused more heavily on the candidate's weaker issues, there is evidence that this still provided an opportunity to improve their rating so that any priming effects would at least be neutral, if not positive. Of course, there is still the possibility that candidates might fail to gain more support on their weaker issues, causing harmful priming effects, but at least in the interviews studied here, priming effects appear to have been more beneficial than not. I now turn to a closer examination of how these interviews affect support for the candidate.

## Persuading

The results above show that talk show interviews can inform and sometimes prime viewers, but how do they ultimately affect the candidate's support? Following past research, I gauge support with two measures. The first is a “feeling thermometer” in which participants rate how warmly they feel towards the candidate on a scale from 1 (“very cold”) to 10 (“very warm”). The second is the vote intention measure used above, which is again reversed when evaluating support for McCain so that higher numbers consistently indicate more support for the candidate being interviewed.

Table 5.3 shows the differences in how viewers and non-viewers evaluated Obama and McCain. While viewers routinely rated the candidate higher than non-viewers, these differences were only statistically significant on occasion. Results in the first row show that John McCain's April 1 encounter with David Letterman significantly increased his anemic feeling thermometer score from 4.5 to 5.3 out of 10, but it failed to generate increased vote support as viewers maintained a slight tendency to vote for his opponent.<sup>47</sup> This is likely the result of viewers finding McCain to be significantly more empathetic than non-viewers but only being primed to give more weight to his economic policies in their evaluation. Had the interview primed some of the issues on which he enjoyed a significant public opinion advantage, most notably terrorism, it might have done more to increase McCain's vote support.

Barack Obama's appearance on *The Daily Show* three weeks later had even weaker effects. Although viewers were generally supportive, rating Obama 5.8 on the feeling thermometer and 3.1 on the vote intention scale, they were no more supportive than non-viewers.<sup>48</sup> By focusing most on the campaign (50% of references) and policy (34%) with few personal details (16%), this interview did little to improve upon Obama's already strong ratings.

However, when McCain visited *The Daily Show* on May 7, his support ratings increased significantly. Viewers were much warmer towards the Republican (5.8 to 5.1) and expressed a stronger intention to vote for him (3.4 to 3.0).<sup>49</sup> Unlike the Obama-Stewart interview, McCain and Stewart spread their discussion almost evenly across personal (28%), policy (36%), and campaign (36%) matters, which resulted in viewers emphasizing their positive empathy assessments (2.9 out of 4) and their generally supportive thoughts about McCain's policy for the Iraq War (3.2 out of 5). McCain's balanced appearance on *The Daily Show* clearly improved his support among viewers.

Table 5.3 Candidate Support.

|                                   | Feeling Thermometer |         | Vote Intentions |         |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------|---------|-----------------|---------|
|                                   | Non-viewers         | Viewers | Non-viewers     | Viewers |
| McCain on <i>The Late Show</i>    | 4.5                 | 5.3     | 2.4             | 2.7     |
| Obama on <i>The Daily Show</i>    | 5.5                 | 5.8     | 3.1             | 3.1     |
| McCain on <i>The Daily Show</i>   | 5.1                 | 5.8     | 3.0             | 3.4     |
| Obama on <i>Jimmy Kimmel Live</i> | 5.9                 | 6.4     | 3.1             | 3.4     |
| McCain on <i>The Tonight Show</i> | 5.9                 | 6.0     | 2.8             | 2.8     |
| Obama on <i>The Late Show</i>     | 5.1                 | 5.7     | 2.9             | 3.3     |

Note: Entries are average non-viewer and viewer feeling thermometer scores (1–10) and vote intentions (1–5) with statistically significant differences shaded.

The same cannot be said, however, for two of the breeziest talk show interviews of 2008: Obama on *Jimmy Kimmel Live* (June 15) and McCain on *The Tonight Show* (August 25). In both cases, viewers felt warmly towards the candidates (6.4 for Obama and 6.0 for McCain), but so too did those in the control condition (5.9 for each candidate), and whereas viewers were slightly, but not significantly, more likely than non-viewers to signal their intention to vote for Obama (3.4 to 3.1), there was absolutely no difference between viewers and non-viewers in their vote intentions towards McCain (2.8 to 2.8).<sup>50</sup> These interviews, which both focused heavily on humor and personality, failed to move viewers in any meaningful way—they may have been entertaining, but they were not persuasive.

The final interview between Obama and Letterman (September 10) once again had a strong impact on viewers' feelings and vote intentions. This interview, which mixed personal (40%), policy (44%), and campaign (16%) information, persuaded and primed viewers to focus on Obama's empathy and terrorism policy. This likely helped to significantly increase Obama's thermometer score among viewers (5.1 to 5.7) as well as their vote intentions (2.9 to 3.3).<sup>51</sup> Just as McCain's balanced interview with Jon Stewart four months earlier, the Obama-Letterman interview informed, primed, and persuaded viewers.

Regression models controlling for party identification, age, gender, race, income, and education verify these results (see Appendix 5.3). In other words, any statistically significant differences found in Table 5.3 are also found in the regression models after controlling for factors that could affect voters' assessments and vote choices. For example, those who saw Obama's *Late Show* interview were estimated to feel nearly a full point warmer toward him (0.814) and significantly more inclined to vote for him (0.468) than those in the control group, all else equal.

These results suggest that candidate interviews are most likely to persuade viewers when they mix personal content with political details. This supports the contention that lighthearted stories make the candidate more likeable while political content gives viewers a substantive base on which to make their vote choices. Viewers are moved most by this combination because both elements are important in the evaluation process.

John McCain's interview with Jon Stewart on May 7 is a good example of this. Viewers came away liking McCain after seeing him play along with Stewart and make self-deprecating jokes about his temperament, but they also seemed to react to McCain's discussion of serious issues, including his plans for the war in Iraq. McCain's personal stories gave viewers a reason to like him without failing to provide compelling policy reasons for earning their vote. Had McCain's interview given him fewer chances to open up or steered away from policy specifics, as other interviews had, it might not have helped him as much.

Additional analysis shows that these interviews are particularly persuasive with low-interest viewers, even those from the opposition party, which

supports earlier findings.<sup>52</sup> However, the results presented here further demonstrate that these effects are largely confined to interviews that mix personal anecdotes with political discussion. Breaking down the differences in candidate support between viewers and non-viewers by political interest and party identification shows that the two most policy-laden interviews (McCain on *The Late Show* and Obama on *The Daily Show*) had sporadic conditional effects that were constrained to feeling thermometer scores with no effect on vote choices. Specifically, high-interest viewers felt significantly warmer towards McCain than low-interest viewers (5.0 to 4.1), while Obama was rated more favorably by high-interest Democratic viewers than low-interest Democratic viewers (9.1 to 8.2) and by high-interest Republican viewers than low-interest Republican viewers (3.9 to 2.7).<sup>53</sup>

John McCain's appearance on *The Daily Show*, however, produced much more variation between non-viewers and viewers in these categories. Viewers with limited interest in politics were significantly warmer towards McCain (5.4 to 4.4) and significantly more likely to vote for him (3.2 to 2.5) than their non-viewing counterparts, as were both Democratic (4.0 to 3.2 and 1.7 to 1.2) and Republican viewers (8.3 to 6.9 and 4.7 to 3.7) over their non-viewing equivalents.<sup>54</sup> This translates into low-interest Democrats giving the Republican candidate noticeably higher marks after watching his discussion with Jon Stewart (4.4 to 3.2), as did high-interest Republican viewers over high-interest Republican non-viewers (7.8 to 6.7).<sup>55</sup> Table 5.4 shows that this also led to stronger vote intentions with low-interest Democratic viewers being more supportive than low-interest Democratic non-viewers (2.6 to 1.8), while high-interest Republican viewers showed more support than high-interest Republican non-viewers (4.3 to 3.7).<sup>56</sup>

By mixing humor with policy, McCain's interview was able to not only win over his fellow Republicans, especially those interested in politics, but also Democrats with limited interest who were more susceptible to his appeals. In fact, low-interest Democratic viewers, who rated McCain 1.2 points higher on the feeling thermometer and 0.8 points higher on the vote intention scale, were moved almost as much as all Republican viewers who were 1.4 and 1.0 points higher than their non-viewing counterparts. McCain's late night conversation with Jon Stewart, perhaps because it was entertaining and informative, clearly assuaged viewers who might not otherwise offer their support.

Obama's *Late Show* interview produced similar results. Like McCain, Obama's mixture of personal and policy information caused low-interest viewers to improve their thermometer and vote intention ratings over those of low-interest non-viewers (5.9 to 4.7 and 3.5 to 2.9).<sup>57</sup> Obama's message was also roughly as effective on both Democrats (8.2 to 7.2 and 4.5 to 3.9) and Republicans (4.1 to 3.2 and 2.2 to 1.6), showing that these shows, with their casual and non-partisan feel, can be widely persuasive. Moreover, Obama's *Late Show* exchange had its strongest effect on low-interest Republican viewers who increased their likeability by 1.5 points (3.3 to 4.8) over their

Table 5.4 Vote Intentions by Party and Interest.

|                                   | Democrats    |         |               |         |              |         | Republicans   |         |              |         |               |         |
|-----------------------------------|--------------|---------|---------------|---------|--------------|---------|---------------|---------|--------------|---------|---------------|---------|
|                                   | Low Interest |         | High Interest |         | Low Interest |         | High Interest |         | Low Interest |         | High Interest |         |
|                                   | Non-viewers  | Viewers | Non-viewers   | Viewers | Non-viewers  | Viewers | Non-viewers   | Viewers | Non-viewers  | Viewers | Non-viewers   | Viewers |
| McCain on <i>The Late Show</i>    | 1.5          | 1.7     | 1.4           | 1.6     | 3.9          | 4.2     | 4.1           | 4.2     | 3.9          | 4.2     | 4.1           | 4.2     |
| Obama on <i>The Daily Show</i>    | 4.2          | 4.3     | 4.5           | 4.7     | 2.1          | 2.0     | 1.6           | 1.7     | 2.1          | 2.0     | 1.6           | 1.7     |
| McCain on <i>The Daily Show</i>   | 1.8          | 2.6     | 1.5           | 1.9     | 3.6          | 3.8     | 3.7           | 4.3     | 3.6          | 3.8     | 3.7           | 4.3     |
| Obama on <i>Jimmy Kimmel Live</i> | 4.1          | 4.3     | 4.5           | 4.7     | 2.4          | 2.5     | 1.6           | 1.9     | 2.4          | 2.5     | 1.6           | 1.9     |
| McCain on <i>The Tonight Show</i> | 1.7          | 1.9     | 1.5           | 1.9     | 4.3          | 4.4     | 4.5           | 4.8     | 4.3          | 4.4     | 4.5           | 4.8     |
| Obama on <i>The Late Show</i>     | 4.2          | 4.5     | 4.3           | 4.6     | 1.7          | 2.4     | 1.6           | 1.8     | 1.7          | 2.4     | 1.6           | 1.8     |

Note: Entries are average vote intentions (1 to 5) with significant differences between viewers and non-viewers shaded. Entries are the differences between non-viewers and viewers, \*\*\*  $p \leq .01$ , \*\*  $p \leq .05$ , \*  $p \leq .1$  in two-tailed difference of means tests.



non-viewing counterparts. This even translated into stronger vote intentions, as low-interest Republican viewers were 0.7 points (1.7 to 2.4) more likely to support Obama than low-interest Republicans who did not see the interview (see Table 5.4).<sup>58</sup> This again suggests that interviews are most persuasive, especially with non-supporters, when they allow the candidate to open up about who they are *and* provide details about where they stand on the issues.

McCain's interview with Jay Leno and Obama's chat with Jimmy Kimmel failed to incite the same reaction. In fact, neither appearance had a significant effect on any of the subgroups, which suggests that joking around and barely mentioning any issues may have entertained some viewers but failed to entice more support out of those with low political interest, even low-interest viewers from the candidates' own party. Without much policy information, even highly susceptible viewers failed to react in any significant way. And once again, all of these results are confirmed by regressions with controls for party identification (where applicable), age, race, gender, education, and income.<sup>59</sup>

These results show that entertainment talk shows can generate additional support for candidates. They can even help them gain ground among non-supporters with limited political interest, who, because of their relatively weak preferences, are susceptible to persuasive appeals. However, these effects are conditional in that candidates gain the most when their interviews mix personal and political content, providing viewers with both a reason to find the candidate more likable and a substantive basis on which to increase their vote intentions. Viewers do not seem to react much when one of these considerations is promoted more than the other. The fact that personality-focused interviews fail to make viewers overly image conscious speaks to V.O. Key's longstanding contention that candidates will be motivated to give voters substance when voters react to substance.<sup>60</sup> When it comes to talk show interviews, viewers show a promising level of thoughtfulness.

These results also speak to the process by which candidates benefit from going on entertainment television. Earlier chapters showed that overall interview content has become more balanced with time as late night cable shows that typically feature a healthy dose of political information have emerged alongside network offerings that tend towards more personal details. The end result is that this increasing content balance ought to be paying dividends to candidates who increasingly find themselves talking about their personal lives and their political objectives. These results also speak to the political advantage of getting on those shows that are known for mixing content, as this not only affects audience size and media reaction, it is also a critical element in persuading viewers.

## CONCLUSION

Presidential candidates have been appearing on entertainment talk shows for decades. They have chatted with daytime hosts about everything from

their families to their upbringing while also laughing it up with an ever-growing number of late night comedians. While there has been plenty of media commentary and speculation, there has been relatively little empirical evidence on how this strategy actually affects the millions of viewers watching at home. Six experiments conducted during the 2008 campaign show that they routinely inform viewers, and can, under certain conditions, affect what viewers think about when evaluating candidates and how they ultimately feel towards them. Although these findings are not definitive—more work with additional shows, candidates, and campaigns is still required—they nevertheless have important implications for both candidates and voters in an increasingly entertainment-based political environment.

Entertainment talk show interviews clearly have the potential to benefit candidates, especially under certain conditions. Candidates, almost regardless of how much their interviews focus on seemingly inane topics or serious policy concerns, can get their message out by appearing on these shows. In fact, they can inform millions of viewers, especially those with limited political interest, about who they are and, more often than not, where they stand on the issues. This is critical because informing is a necessary step in the persuasion process.

These interviews also give candidates a chance to prime viewers to focus on advantageous criteria, although candidates do not always seem fully aware of this. Viewers appear to follow the general contours of an interview by putting more emphasis on the personal and political topics that are discussed, so long as they deem these considerations to warrant more attention than they are already receiving. This provides candidates with an opportunity to steer the conversation towards favorable criteria so that viewers will be more supportive of the candidate overall.

Most importantly, these interviews provide candidates with what they most covet: the opportunity to win support. The ability to do this, however, appears to be conditional in that mixed-content interviews do more to generate favorable assessments than interviews emphasizing either personal qualities or policy positions. Viewers may enjoy the lighthearted chats and they may learn from the policy-focused discussions, but they react most positively to the combination of personal and political topics. This, again, gives candidates an incentive to highlight both aspects of their candidacies whenever possible.

Of course, different interviews with different candidates on different shows could produce different results. It could be, for example, that viewers are less likely to pick up on the candidate's message on daytime talk shows, or that priming and persuasion effects are weaker when the candidate is struggling to gain traction. Only additional studies will tell. However, these results show that learning effects are found on a wide range of late night interviews and that both McCain and Obama, on different shows, had similar results in terms of priming and generating support. This suggests that content—something that has rarely been emphasized in past studies—plays

an important role in determining the impact that these interviews have on viewers. Consider, for example, the consistency between McCain's interview with Jon Stewart on May 7 and Obama's interview with David Letterman on September 10. Differences between the candidates, the timing, and the hosts were seemingly irrelevant compared to the fact that both interviews mixed personal and political content.

These results also imply that viewers can gain a great deal from watching candidate interviews on entertainment television. Chances are they will learn something useful, particularly if they do not follow politics too closely, and the interview could provide them with some guidance on what to consider when evaluating the candidate and how to think about him or her overall. In short, these interviews could significantly help viewers participate more effectively in the electoral process by giving them information and guidance that they might not otherwise encounter. Some viewers may even find it more useful to get this information from an entertainment-based source as it makes them more attentive than they would be with a more formal news source. In fact, while they are likely to engage with candidates appearing on entertainment talk shows, they could tune out the same candidate being interviewed in a more formal setting.<sup>61</sup> This is not to say that these interviews are a panacea for the challenges facing American electoral democracy, but they do provide at least some viewers with an ideal venue for getting the political information they need to participate in the process.

This chapter provides new information on the effect that entertainment talk show interviews have on viewers, and while there is still more to learn, the results can help candidates and commentators move the conversation from speculation and conjecture to more widely verified empirical realities. The findings provide a better understanding of when the entertainment talk show strategy might work and when it might fail, and show that hitting the talk show stage can have a real impact on viewers' political decisions.

## Appendix 5.1

### Knowledge Regressions

|                  | Coefficient<br>(Standard Error) | Exp(B) |
|------------------|---------------------------------|--------|
| Announce Run     | 3.674***<br>(0.797)             | 39.427 |
| Spending         | 2.047***<br>(0.498)             | 7.742  |
| Economy          | 1.520***<br>(0.419)             | 4.571  |
| Progress         | 0.758*<br>(0.381)               | 2.135  |
| Rev. Wright      | 0.407*<br>(0.199)               | 1.503  |
| Lapel Pin        | 0.928***<br>(0.349)             | 2.530  |
| Town Hall        | 3.556***<br>(0.867)             | 35.023 |
| Bush Difference  | 1.787***<br>(0.672)             | 5.971  |
| Iraq Critic      | 0.663*<br>(0.319)               | 1.940  |
| Better Candidate | 2.234*<br>(1.143)               | 9.340  |
| Misplace         | 2.053***<br>(0.589)             | 7.788  |
| Kerry '04        | 2.932***<br>(0.507)             | 18.772 |
| Fix Economy      | 2.441***<br>(0.586)             | 11.485 |

(Continued)

Appendix 5.1 (Continued)

|                 | Coefficient<br>(Standard Error) | Exp(B) |
|-----------------|---------------------------------|--------|
| Drilling        | 1.052*<br>(0.545)               | 2.863  |
| September 11th  | 0.740*<br>(0.308)               | 2.096  |
| Clinton Cabinet | 0.493*<br>(0.261)               | 1.638  |
| Bush Africa     | 1.214***<br>(0.354)             | 3.369  |

Note: Entries are "condition" coefficients, standard errors in brackets, and logged odds from independent logits controlling for party ID, age, gender, race, education, income, and political interest. \*\*\*  $p \leq .01$ , \*\*  $p \leq .05$ , \*  $p \leq .1$  in two-tailed tests.

## Appendix 5.2 Priming Regressions

|                                   | Empathy             | Economy            | Iraq                | Terrorism           |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| McCain on <i>The Late Show</i>    | 0.038<br>(0.193)    | 0.332**<br>(0.163) | -0.171<br>(0.132)   | -0.030<br>(0.153)   |
| Obama on <i>The Daily Show</i>    | 0.043<br>(0.168)    | 0.196<br>(0.145)   | -0.042<br>(0.121)   | -0.299**<br>(0.144) |
| McCain on <i>The Daily Show</i>   | 0.351*<br>(0.209)   | -0.053<br>(0.165)  | 0.349***<br>(0.131) | -0.175<br>(0.132)   |
| Obama on <i>Jimmy Kimmel Live</i> | 0.236*<br>(0.144)   | 0.137<br>(0.189)   | -0.001<br>(0.163)   | -0.033<br>(0.200)   |
| McCain on <i>The Tonight Show</i> | 0.053<br>(0.193)    | 0.212<br>(0.179)   | -0.177<br>(0.156)   | 0.042<br>(0.149)    |
| Obama on <i>The Late Show</i>     | 0.567***<br>(0.190) | -0.279*<br>(0.165) | -0.228<br>(0.154)   | 0.362**<br>(0.178)  |

Note: Entries are interaction coefficients ("condition" × "empathy" or issue) with standard errors in brackets from independent OLS regressions controlling for party ID, age, gender, race, education, and income. \*\*\*  $p \leq .01$ , \*\*  $p \leq .05$ , \*  $p \leq .1$  in two-tailed tests.

## Appendix 5.3

### Feeling Thermometer and Vote Intention Regressions

|                                   | Feeling Thermometer | Vote Intentions     |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| McCain on <i>The Late Show</i>    | 0.621*<br>(0.334)   | 0.111<br>(0.146)    |
| Obama on <i>The Daily Show</i>    | 0.427<br>(0.314)    | 0.024<br>(0.147)    |
| McCain on <i>The Daily Show</i>   | 0.792**<br>(0.333)  | 0.492***<br>(0.172) |
| Obama on <i>Jimmy Kimmel Live</i> | 0.292<br>(0.357)    | 0.197<br>(0.171)    |
| McCain on <i>The Tonight Show</i> | 0.261<br>(0.317)    | 0.033<br>(0.152)    |
| Obama on <i>The Late Show</i>     | 0.814**<br>(0.323)  | 0.468***<br>(0.151) |

Note: Entries are "condition" coefficients with standard errors in brackets from independent OLS regressions controlling for party ID, age, gender, race, education, and income.

\*\*\*  $p \leq .01$ , \*\*  $p \leq .05$ , \*  $p \leq .1$  in two-tailed tests.

## NOTES

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2. See, e.g., "People," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 3, 2008, A2; Bill O'Reilly and Tonya Reiman, "Body Language: John McCain, Billy Ray Cyrus, and Naomi Campbell," *The O'Reilly Factor*, June 23, 2008; David Jackson, "McCain to Pitch Environmental Policy in Oregon; Speech to Outline Cap-and-Trade Plan," *USA Today*, May 12, 2008, 9A; Andrew Malcolm, "McCain, 71, Nods Off on 'Late Night with Conan'," *Los Angeles Times.com*, July 18, 2008, accessed August 14, 2013, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/washington/2008/07/mccain-conan.html>.
3. Katherine Q. Seelye, "The View Couch Not So Cozy for McCain," *The Caucus*, September 12, 2008, accessed August 15, 2013, <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/09/12/the-view-couch-not-so-cozy-for-mccain/>; Rebecca Traister, "The McCain's Should Spend Everyday with Rachael Ray," *Salon.com*, September 22, 2008, accessed August 11, 2013, [www.salon.com/2008/09/22/rachael\\_ray\\_mccains/](http://www.salon.com/2008/09/22/rachael_ray_mccains/); Jason Szep, "McCain Faces Tough Questions on Abortion," *Reuters*, September 12, 2008, accessed August 11, 2013, [www.reuters.com/article/2008/09/12/us-usa-politics-mccain-women-idUSN1231594920080912](http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/09/12/us-usa-politics-mccain-women-idUSN1231594920080912); Robert Barnes and Michael D. Shear, "McCain Gets an Earful on 'The View'," *Washington Post*, September 12, 2008, accessed August 14, 2013, <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2008/09/mccain-gets-an-earful-on-the-v.html>; "Cindy McCain Slams Women of The View," *ABC News.com*, September 15, 2008, accessed August 14, 2013, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/video?id=5800473>; Tirdad Derakhshani, "Sideshow," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 24, 2008, D03.
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5. See, e.g., Lloyd Grove, "October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011, Burbank, CA," *Newsweek*, November 14, 2011, 15.
6. See, e.g., Matthew A. Baum, "Talking the Vote: Why Presidential Candidates Hit the Talk Show Circuit," *American Journal of Political Science* 49-2 (2005): 213-34; Patricia Moy, Michael A. Xenos, and Verena K. Hess, "Priming Effects of Late-Night Comedy," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 18-2 (2005): 111-31; Michael Parkin, "Taking Late Night Comedy Seriously: How Candidate Appearances on Late Night Television Can Engage Viewers," *Political Research Quarterly* 63-3 (2010): 3-15.
7. Markus Prior, "Any Good News in Soft News? The Impact of Soft News Preference on Political Knowledge," *Political Communication* 20 (2003): 149-71; also see Young Min Baek and Magdalena E. Wojcieszak, "Don't Expect Too Much! Learning from Late-Night Comedy and Knowledge Item Difficulty," *Communication Research* 36-6 (2009): 783-809; Marshall Sella, "The Stiff Guy vs. The Dumb Guy," *New York Times Magazine*, September 24, 2000, 72-80, 102; Julie Mason, "Kerry Makes Rounds to Aid Image; More Candidates Seeking Advantages of Popular Shows," *Houston Chronicle*, September 22, 2004, A14. For an overview of the debate, see Paul Brewer and Xiaoxia Cao, "Late Night Comedy Television Shows as News Sources: What the Polls Say," in *Laughing Matters: Humor and American Politics in the Media Age*, eds. Jody C. Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris (New York: Routledge, 2008), 263-79.

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11. This logic stems from Baum, "Talking the Vote," 213-34; and John R. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Also see Xiaoxia Cao, "Political Comedy Shows and Knowledge about Primary Campaigns: The Moderating Effects of Age and Education," *Mass Communication and Society*, 11-1 (2008): 43-61; Barry A. Hollander, "Late-Night Learning: Do Entertainment Programs Increase Political Campaign Knowledge for Young Viewers?" *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 49-4 (2005): 402-15; Michael A. Xenos and Amy B. Becker, "Moments of Zen: Effects of The Daily Show on Information Seeking and Political Learning," *Political Communication* 26-3 (2009): 317-32.
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13. This conceptualization of "empathy" comes from Donald R. Kinder, "Presidential Character Revisited" in *Political Cognition: The 19th Annual Carnegie Symposium on Cognition*, eds. Richard R. Lau and David O. Sears (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1986), 233-55 and Carolyn L. Funk, "Implications of Political Expertise in Candidate Trait Evaluations," *Political Research Quarterly* 50 (1997): 675-97.
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19. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, 44-5.
20. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, 44. Also see Baum, "Talking the Vote," 228 and Heather L. LaMarre and Whitney Walther, "Ability Matters: Testing the Differential Effects of Political News and Late-Night Political Comedy on Cognitive Responses and the Role of Ability in Micro-Level Opinion Formation," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 25-3 (2013): 303-22.
21. For an example of these issues, see Parkin, "Taking Late Night Comedy Seriously," 3-15.
22. Examples include Baum, "Talking the Vote," 213-34 and Moy, Xenos, and Hess, "Priming Effects of Late-Night Comedy," 111-31. The problem is not so much with viewers remembering what they watched (see Susanna Dilliplane, Seth K. Goldman, and Diana C. Mutz, "Televised Exposure to Politics: New Measures for a Fragmented Media Environment," *American Journal of Political Science* 57-1 (2013): 236-48) but with the probabilistic measure of exposure based on watching multiple shows over a lengthy period.
23. The sample breaks down in the following way: McCain-Letterman control group has 128 participants and the test condition has 126 (254); Obama-Stewart control is 126 and test is 125 (251); McCain-Stewart control is 130 and test is 124 (254); Obama-Kimmel control is 119 and test is 122 (241); McCain-Leno control is 128 and test is 118 (246); and Obama-Letterman control is 130 and test is 127 (257).
24. Jonathan Martin and Mike Allen, "McCain Unsure How Many Houses he Owns," *Politico.com*, August 21, 2008, accessed November 16, 2012 [www.politico.com/news/stories/0808/12685.html](http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0808/12685.html).
25. The specific questions were as follows with correct answers in italics. For McCain-Letterman: Announce Run: "On which of the following shows did John McCain announce his intention to run in the 2008 presidential election? The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, Good Morning America, *The Late Show with David Letterman*, Face the Nation, don't know"; Spending: "According to John McCain, which of the following has hurt the Republican party most in recent years? The Republican position on the environment, *the Republican position on spending*, the Republican position on the economy, don't know"; and Economy: "John McCain believes that the fundamentals of the American economy have \_\_\_\_\_ during the recession. Been damaged beyond repair, weakened slightly, *remained strong*, don't know." For

- Obama-Stewart: Progress: "According to Barack Obama, which of the following is most responsible for keeping Americans from believing that progress can be made? A belief that the economy is in ruins, *a belief that the country is divided between 'red' and 'blue' states*, a belief that the country will never win in Iraq, don't know"; Rev. Wright: "Who was Obama's former pastor in Chicago who stirred controversy with critical statements about race and the American government? The Reverend Al Sharpton, *The Reverend Jeremiah Wright*, The Reverend Jerry Falwell, don't know"; and Lapel Pin: "Which of the following was a criticism repeatedly leveled against Barack Obama during the Democratic primary season? He did not do well in law school, he did not attend church with his family, *he did not wear an American flag lapel pin*, don't know." For McCain-Stewart: Town Hall: "According to John McCain, which of the following helped him the most in winning the Republican nomination? His position on immigration, his history as a war veteran, *his willingness to conduct town hall meetings*, don't know"; Bush Difference: "John McCain claims to be most different from George W. Bush on which of the following issues? Immigration, taxes, *climate change*, don't know"; and Iraq Critic: "John McCain says that he repeatedly \_\_\_\_\_ the Bush administration's handling of the early part of the Iraq War. Praised, Defended, *Criticized*, don't know." For Obama-Kimmel: Better Candidate: "According to Barack Obama, running against Hillary Clinton in the primary has made him... *a better candidate*, a weaker candidate, don't know"; Misplace: "Which of the following does Barack Obama apparently do quite often? *Misplace things*, sleep in, bowl, don't know." For McCain-Leno: Kerry '04: "Who said, in 2004, that John McCain should consider running as John Kerry's Vice Presidential candidate? Joe Lieberman, *Joe Biden*, Ted Kennedy, Mitt Romney, don't know"; Fix Economy: "According to John McCain, the United States can solve some of its economic problems by doing what? Increasing taxes, *spending less on foreign oil*, raising the minimum wage, don't know"; and Drilling: "True or false, John McCain supports offshore drilling for oil? True, *false*, don't know." For Obama-Letterman: September 11th: "Barack Obama says that he would have done which of the following after 9/11 if he were president. *Focused U.S. efforts on Afghanistan*, focused U.S. efforts on Iraq instead of Afghanistan, focused U.S. efforts on Iraq and Afghanistan simultaneously, focused U.S. efforts on neither Iraq nor Afghanistan, don't know"; Clinton Cabinet: "True or false, Barack Obama has said that, if he becomes president, he will ask Bill Clinton to serve in his cabinet? True, *false*, don't know"; and Bush Africa: "Barack Obama has praised the way in which George W. Bush has handled which of the following? Hurricane Katrina relief efforts, *the African AIDS crisis*, the U.S. mortgage crisis, all of the above, none of the above, don't know."
26. All differences are statistically significant at the .1 level or better in two-tailed difference of means tests, except for the difference on "drilling" (79 to 86,  $t_{244} = 0.619, p .536$ ).
27. Viewers are significantly more knowledgeable than non-viewers (0.91 to 0.65,  $t_{244} = 3.677, p .000$ ) on the "fix economy" question.
28. Viewers are significantly more knowledgeable than non-viewers (0.63 to 0.17,  $t_{244} = 7.637, p .000$ ) on the "spending" question.
29. Partisanship is measured on a five-point scale from "strong Republican" (1) to "strong Democrat" (5); age is in years; gender is female (1) or male (0); race is white (1) or other (0); education is the highest level of education completed from grade school (1) to graduate or professional degree (5); income is the participant's approximate annual household income in \$10,000 categories from \$0-10,000 (1) to \$210,000+ (22); and political interest ranges from "not at all" interested (1) to "very" interested (4).
30. The percentage change in odds would be 94% given the formula:  $100 * (\text{Exp}(b) - 1)$ .
31. Prior, "Any Good News in Soft News?" 149-71.
32. Knowledge differences between low-interest viewers and low-interest non-viewers compared to high-interest viewers and high-interest non-viewers are statistically significant at the .1 level in two-tailed difference of means tests for all questions except: Better Candidate (8.0 difference between low-interest viewers and low-interest non-viewers compared to 8.6 difference between high-interest viewers and high-interest non-viewers,  $t_{239} = 0.424, p .671$ ); Kerry '04 (52.5 to 53.3,  $t_{244} = 0.057, p .944$ ); Clinton Cabinet (4.0 to 3.0,  $t_{255} = 0.707, p .479$ ); Rev. Wright (8.0 to 7.1,  $t_{249} = 0.636, p .542$ ); Lapel Pin (21.0 to 20.2,  $t_{249} = 0.057, p .932$ ); and Announce Run (37.0 to 36.1,  $t_{252} = 0.636, p .525$ ).
33. The three questions on which low- and high-interest viewers are close are: Better Candidate (84.6 to 89.8,  $t_{120} = 0.368, p .713$ ); Clinton Cabinet (54.1 to 55.7,  $t_{125} = 0.103, p .910$ ); and Iraq Critic (53.6 to 56.8,  $t_{122} = 0.226, p .821$ ).
34. See, e.g., Moy, Xenos, and Hess, "Priming Effects of Late-Night Comedy," 201.
35. See, e.g., Lydia Saad, "Economy Reigns Supreme for Voters: More than Half Rate it Extremely Important to the Vote for President," *Gallup.com*, October 29, 2008, accessed April 2, 2012, [www.gallup.com/poll/111586/economy-reigns-supreme-voters.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/poll/111586/economy-reigns-supreme-voters.aspx).
36. See, e.g., Funk, "Implications of Political Expertise in Candidate Trait Evaluations," 675-97. The Cronbach's alpha for McCain's empathy score is 0.873 and 0.895 for Obama's empathy score across the six experiments.
37. Although viewers rated McCain's empathy highly, the difference between non-viewers' and viewers' empathy rating is not statistically significant (2.6 to 2.9,  $t_{352} = 0.405, p .686$ ).
38. Viewers rated Obama's empathy highly, and the difference between non-viewers' and viewers' empathy rating is statistically significant (2.9 to 3.2,  $t_{239} = 3.375, p .001$ ).
39. Although viewers rated Obama's empathy highly, the difference between non-viewers' and viewers' empathy rating is not statistically significant (2.7 to 2.8,  $t_{255} = 0.303, p .762$ ).
40. Frank Newport, "Obama Has Edge on Key Election Issues," *Gallup.com*, June 24, 2008, accessed November 12, 2012, [www.gallup.com/poll/108331/obama-has-edge-key-election-issues.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/poll/108331/obama-has-edge-key-election-issues.aspx); Jeffrey M. Jones, "Obama Holds Lead over McCain on Top Issue of Economy," *Gallup.com*, August 25, 2008, accessed April 2, 2012, [www.gallup.com/poll/109786/obama-holds-lead-over-mccain-top-issue-economy.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/poll/109786/obama-holds-lead-over-mccain-top-issue-economy.aspx).
41. Data from the February 8-10 Gallup survey comes from Lydia Saad, "Obama Wins the Economy, McCain on Terrorism," *Gallup.com*, October 14, 2008, accessed November 12, 2012, [www.gallup.com/poll/111130/obama-wins-economy-mccain-terrorism.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/poll/111130/obama-wins-economy-mccain-terrorism.aspx). Also see "Clinton Backers Cool to Obama—White Female Support in Question," *Pew Research Center*, May 29, 2008, accessed November 12, 2012, [www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/425.pdf](http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/425.pdf).
42. Race relations and affirmative action accounted for the other 50% of policy mentions.
43. Data from the February 8-10 Gallup survey comes from Saad, "Obama Wins the Economy," *Gallup.com*. Also see "Clinton Backers Cool to Obama."

44. Data from the August 21–23 Gallup survey comes from Saad, “Obama Wins the Economy.”
45. Frank Newport, “On Economy, McCain Gains Ground on Obama,” *Gallup.com*, September 10, 2008, accessed November 12, 2012, [www.gallup.com/poll/110170/economy-mccain-gains-ground-obama.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/poll/110170/economy-mccain-gains-ground-obama.aspx).
46. The difference between viewers and non-viewers on the perceived ability to handle terrorism is statistically significant (3.1 to 2.7,  $t_{255} = 1.923$ ,  $p .056$ ).
47. Differences between viewers and non-viewers on thermometer scores are statistically significant (5.3 to 4.5,  $t_{244} = 1.920$ ,  $p .056$ ) but not quite significant on vote intentions (2.7 to 2.4,  $t_{244} = 1.437$ ,  $p .152$ ).
48. Differences between viewers and non-viewers on thermometer scores are not significant (5.8 to 5.5,  $t_{249} = 0.841$ ,  $p .401$ ), nor are the differences on vote intentions (3.139 to 3.136,  $t_{244} = 0.014$ ,  $p .988$ ).
49. Differences between viewers on non-viewers on thermometer scores are significant (5.8 to 5.1,  $t_{252} = 1.882$ ,  $p .061$ ), as are differences on vote intentions (3.4 to 3.0,  $t_{252} = 2.213$ ,  $p .028$ ).
50. Differences between viewers and non-viewers on Obama thermometer scores are not quite statistically significant (6.4 to 5.9,  $t_{239} = 1.387$ ,  $p .166$ ), while differences between viewers and non-viewers on McCain thermometer scores are clearly insignificant (6.0 to 5.9,  $t_{244} = 0.277$ ,  $p .782$ ). Differences between viewers and non-viewers on vote intentions are also insignificant for Obama (3.4 to 3.1,  $t_{239} = 1.06$ ,  $p .289$ ) and for McCain (2.81 to 2.79,  $t_{244} = 0.323$ ,  $p .747$ ).
51. Differences between viewers and non-viewers on thermometer scores are significant (5.7 to 5.1,  $t_{255} = 2.121$ ,  $p .035$ ), as are differences on vote intentions (3.3 to 2.9,  $t_{255} = 1.1789$ ,  $p .075$ ).
52. Baum, “Talking the Vote,” 227–8.
53. Differences between high and low-interest McCain–Letterman viewers on thermometer scores are statistically significant (5.0 to 4.1,  $t_{252} = 2.304$ ,  $p .022$ ). Differences between high-interest Democratic viewers and low-interest Democratic viewers on thermometer scores are statistically significant (9.1 to 8.2,  $t_{118} = 2.305$ ,  $p .023$ ), as are differences between high-interest Republican viewers and low-interest Republican viewers on thermometer scores (3.9 to 2.7,  $t_{109} = 3.073$ ,  $p .003$ ). Independents are excluded from the party/interest analyses.
54. Differences between low-interest viewers and low-interest non-viewers on thermometer scores are statistically significant (5.4 to 4.4,  $t_{252} = 2.561$ ,  $p .011$ ), as are differences between low-interest viewers and low-interest non-viewers on vote intentions (2.5 to 3.2,  $t_{252} = 1.793$ ,  $p .074$ ). Differences between Democratic viewers and Democratic non-viewers on feeling thermometer scores and vote intentions are statistically significant (3.2 to 4.0,  $t_{129} = 2.048$ ,  $p .042$  and 1.7 to 1.2,  $t_{129} = 1.777$ ,  $p .079$ ), as are differences between Republican viewers and Republican non-viewers (8.3 to 6.9,  $t_{121} = 1.793$ ,  $p .075$  and 4.7 to 3.7,  $t_{121} = 1.768$ ,  $p .079$ ).
55. Differences between low-interest Democratic viewers and low-interest Democratic non-viewers on thermometer scores are statistically significant (4.4 to 3.2,  $t_{65} = 2.121$ ,  $p .038$ ), as are differences between high-interest Republican viewers and high-interest Republican non-viewers (7.8 to 6.7,  $t_{54} = 1.944$ ,  $p .058$ ).
56. Differences between low-interest Democratic viewers and low-interest Democratic non-viewers on vote intentions are statistically significant (2.6 to 1.8,  $t_{65} = 2.828$ ,  $p .003$ ), as are differences between high-interest Republican viewers and high-interest Republican non-viewers (4.3 to 3.7,  $t_{54} = 2.121$ ,  $p .039$ ).
57. Differences between low-interest viewers and low-interest non-viewers on thermometer scores and vote intentions are statistically significant (5.9 to 4.7,  $t_{128} = 4.242$ ,  $p .000$  and 3.5 to 2.9,  $t_{128} = 2.121$ ,  $p .036$ ).
58. Differences between Democratic viewers and Democratic non-viewers on thermometer scores and vote intentions are statistically significant (8.2 to 7.2,  $t_{126} = 1.768$ ,  $p .079$  and 4.5 to 3.9,  $t_{126} = 2.121$ ,  $p .036$ ), as are differences between Republican viewers and Republican non-viewers (4.1 to 3.2,  $t_{120} = 3.182$ ,  $p .002$  and 2.2 to 1.6,  $t_{120} = 2.121$ ,  $p .036$ ). Differences between low-interest Republican viewers and low-interest Republican non-viewers on thermometer scores and vote intentions are statistically significant (4.8 to 3.3,  $t_{59} = 1.768$ ,  $p .082$  and 2.4 to 1.7,  $t_{59} = 2.475$ ,  $p .016$ ).
59. Details are available from the author.
60. See Vladimir O. Key, Jr. *The Responsible Electorate: The Rationality of Presidential Voting, 1936–1960* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966).
61. See, e.g., Baum and Jamison, “The Oprah Effect,” 946–959; Parkin “Taking Late Night Comedy Seriously,” 3–15.