

Measuring the 'Colbert Bump'

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Democratic politicians receive a 40% increase in contributions in the 30 days after appearing on the comedy cable show *The Colbert Report*. In contrast, their Republican counterparts essentially gain nothing. These findings appear to validate anecdotal evidence regarding the political impact of the program, such as the assertions by host Stephen Colbert that appearing on his program provides candidates with a "Colbert bump" or a rise in support for their election campaigns.

This analysis of one of America's most well-known pop icons of recent years is conducted by political scientist James H. Fowler (University of California, San Diego), who is also a self-identified fan of the show. The research appears in the July issue of *PS: Political Science and Politics*, a journal of the American Political Science Association. It is online at www.apsanet.org/imgtest/PSJuly08Fowler.pdf.

While Fowler notes that Colbert often makes "outlandish" claims for laughs, he also observes that specific segments of the program are devoted to politicians and that politicians themselves have taken notice of the *Colbert Report*'s impact. Moreover, even a cursory analysis demonstrates that despite being a comedy program *The Colbert Report* appears to exercise "disproportionate real world influence"—likely due to the "elite demographic" of its audience. To investigate the claim of the Colbert bump, the author uses data acquired from the Federal Election Commission on fundraising by Congressional Democrats and Republicans.

His analysis finds that Democrats who appear on *The Colbert Report*

enjoy a significant increase in the number and total amount of donations they receive over the next 30?? days when compared to similar candidates who do not appear on the show. Specifically, Democrats who come on the program raise \$8,247 more than colleagues who don't do so on the 32nd day following their appearance—"a bump of roughly two-fifths over the normal rate of receipts." Republicans do not appear to benefit at all from appearing on the program; notably, they raise more funds in the month before coming on the program while actually raising less money in the month following their appearance—hinting at a possible "Colbert bust" for the GOP instead.

While conceding that it is "important not to read too much into these results" Fowler does also state that "one might be tempted to dismiss the importance of the Colbert bump because it is just money." Clearly, political fundraising is done for a purpose and the most important consequence of any bump is whether Colbert candidates win elections. With only the 2006 elections having been completed since The Colbert Report came on the air, the upcoming 2008 elections will likely provide greater insight into this interesting and humorous wrinkle in modern American politics.

Source: American Political Science Association

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