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## Entertaining Politics and the College Student

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Alexandra Rubin

## Entertaining Politics and the College Student

**Abstract:** Mass media is crucial in forming and reflecting opinion in society. Newspaper, television, and the internet all play a critical role in the daily lives of Americans; disseminating information that shapes views of life, culture, and politics. It seems like all forms of media communication, either subliminally or blatantly, reflect the political climate of the day. The news media flood American homes with images, audio, and commentary on political happenings.

My questions are as follows: How much basic political knowledge does an average college student possess? Where does the average college student receive his or her political knowledge? Does celebrity endorsement of a political ideology influence college students? If so, then to what extent?

My goal is to survey approximately 400 random URI undergraduate students. The survey will ask questions relating to three areas. The first is a political knowledge index- basic information about politics. I want to have a general idea of the student's depth of basic political fact, i.e., name the Vice President of the United States, how many Senators represent Rhode Island? The second will explore where the student gets political information, i.e., how often do you watch network news broadcasts? If so, which ones?" The third section will explore celebrity-endorsed politics. I will write statements said by celebrities or included in musical lyrics. I will then ask whether the student agrees with the statement, to what extent. I will also ask if the student regularly listens to the artist or watches the celebrity's television programs.

In order to better understand their own ideologies, I will also include a brief section on their political behaviors: Did they vote in the last election? If so, for whom did they vote? Do they affiliate with a political party?

The results of the survey will be discussed and compared to past research done in this field.

**Keywords:** politics, celebrities, late-night comedy, mass media, college students, elections.

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## Introduction

The public is less interested in political activity than celebrity activity. Thirty-seven million people watched the second presidential debate between Al Gore and George W. Bush in 2000, but more than 40 million people watched the season finale of *American Idol 2* (Mindich, 2). Even in other countries, politics is turning into a made-for-television game, literally. In 2002, an Argentinean television channel sponsored, *The People's Candidate*, a show modeled after *Pop Idol* where an audience call-in would vote off one contestant every week. The winner received an all-expense paid campaign for Congress.

“We’ve reached a point where our politics, religion, news, athletics, education, and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business,” (Street, 439). There is no denying that in the past decade, there has been a fusion among politicians, the media, and celebrities. It used to be that the public would see government figures as distinctive politicians who gave speeches and signed legislation. The president in particular would exude power and grandeur while interacting with the press.

This is no longer the case. Politicians have opted less for political grandeur as politicians and have begun to strive for stardom, like a celebrity. Politicians will do guest stints on television shows like *Saturday Night Live* and even use show business feedback to better their campaign. For example, in 2000, Al Gore’s advisors made him watch a *Saturday Night Live* skit mocking his debate style the night before one of his presidential electoral debates. Sometimes, the reverse is true; famous celebrities and movie stars decide they want to become politicians. For example, Ronald Reagan was an actor who became president and Arnold “The Terminator” Schwarzenegger is currently the governor of California. The mass media accentuates this politician-celebrity love affair by devoting much coverage to this blend of entertainment and politics. “The commercial and political interests of the press lead to a tabloidisation of the news agenda. The celebrity politician is simply the result of a celebrity obsessed media,” (Street, 442).

This media has changed overtime from solely hard, factual news to softer, human-interest based stories. To attract a variety of different audiences, it fragmented. It used to be that there were three network channels: NBC, ABC, and CBS and then FOX came

later. Beginning in the 1980s, cable channels, the television equivalent of an all- news radio station, appeared. CNN came first, followed by MSNBC and Fox News. Similar to network stations,” all of the cable channels have begun reaching for a larger audience by infusing more entertainment-based news in their coverage,” (Morris 62). Today there is almost an unlimited amount of resources available for young people to access information to politics and celebrities. Besides network and cable television, there are daily newspapers, and of course, the internet. In fact, television news and printed newspapers have formed an alliance with the internet; the majority of news resources have sister-sites with content updated 24 hours per day.

Besides the mass media, the politician has another forum for celebrity inspired coverage and treatment: the late-night talk show. “These shows are framed around issues that appear daily in the news and hence provide running commentary on everything from the OJ trial to the 9/11 terrorist attacks,” (Jones, 54). The late-night shows used to be primarily celebrity-guest interviews with current-event jokes built into the monologues; however, it is now common for a political candidate, as a guest, to come on the show to promote his policies. Ever since Bill Clinton played his saxophone on *The Arsinio Hall Show* in 1992, politicians have flocked to them. Arnold Schwarzenegger announced his candidacy for governor of California on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and John Edwards announced his candidacy for president on *The Daily Show*. “It’s now expected of serious candidates for high elective office to submit to interviews by the likes of David Letterman, Jay Leno, and Jon Stewart,” (Darrow, 80).

Critics have likened these shows to a “Politics for Dummies” manual (Jones, 59) and look down upon politicians appearing on such entertainment based programming. The comedians naturally make a myriad of jokes, comments, and gags at their expense. Presidential Historian Michael Beschloss said, “The effect of late night comedy was akin to political cartoons of an earlier era multiplied by 50,” (Amundson, 119). The shows reflect what voters feel, and the comedian’s observations affect how the voters view the candidates, more so than network news anchors because there is no impartiality. Because these shows are becoming so popular, especially with the younger audience, critics are afraid that young adults are getting their hard news from them instead of legitimate news sources. The hosts disagree however, citing there is a certain knowledge requirement to

understand the comedy to begin with, and studies are showing that the program's audiences are indeed informed.

Well known for endorsing products for companies, celebrity spokespersons appear in thousands of print and television advertisements. If Oprah Winfrey endorses a book or product, the item moves to the top of the best-seller list. This celebrity endorsement has an effect on young adults. “The effect of familiarity, likeability, and similarity between celebrity and perceiver would predict that celebrities’ opinions ought to influence the ideas of young people. After all, the youth orientation of much pop culture creates the tendency of young people to dress and act like their favorite celebrities...” (Darrow, 83). Used to promote products and films, it is almost natural for celebrities to venture to promoting politics. Whether they are endorsing a presidential candidate or party (or speaking out against them) the media notices, and the public listens. “Whenever a top entertainer has a political bone to pick, he or she has an instant platform. Both network and cable television love nothing more than to bestow air time on a celebrity,” (Ingraham, 81).

Nevertheless, what does all of this have to do with college students? For one, politics to them has always been more interactive and easier to identify with than previous generations because of technology. “For people coming of age in the 1980s and 1990s, politics came to actually mean presentations... it became a process of expressing oneself in terms of some shared identity” (DeZengotita, 132). In a time where there are so many mediums to receive information with the media and the general public obsessed with celebrities, “political representations must be packaged in a certain way, they must grab the most attention possible in the least amount of time and get across some simple message,” (DeZengotita, 134).

### *Young Adult Political Activity*

The general ideology (and fear) is that college students are increasing their knowledge about athletes and celebrities, while their knowledge of politics and current event is decreasing. Public opinion indicates that college students are not as engaged in political thought and activity as they once were.

According to the Pew Research Center for People and the Press, only 52% of young people reported having a party affiliation. In 2003, Harvard University found that 3/5 of the undergraduates surveyed planned to vote in the 2004 presidential election, but actually only 52% of eligible young voters even registered. This is even with celebrity-sponsored “get out the vote” campaigns and the 1998 Higher Education Act that requires colleges to make a good faith effort to distribute voter registration.

There are many students who do not see the necessity in voting; they do not care to learn about the candidates, or they feel it is a waste of time and that their vote does not count. While candidates have tried to make their agendas accessible to young voters by adding special sections to their websites, many college students do not bother to look at them. “The candidates don’t think we are an age group worth targeting,” said Kelly Mahan a student at Wake Forest University (Marklein, 10). Student Melissa Ciurlino sums it up as, “we are a generation that has been raised during political scandals and world turmoil. The abundant media coverage has ensured that we have heard about these situations from every possible angle. Why should we believe in our elected officials?” (Ciurlino, 12). Are college students as disinterested in the political process as these facts show?

### *Media Consumption*

“Despite their disengagement with news, young people are as thoughtful and passionate and self-reflective as they have ever been, ready to interact with news if we provide the right conditions,” (Mindich, x). There have been a number of studies that indicate although young adults may not be as politically involved as their elders were, they are conscious of the news and political occurrences. The problem lies in how best to get them involved. The 2004 Pew Research Center for People and Press found that 31.5% of respondents 18-34 strongly agreed that, “I need to get the news everyday” (Mindich, 20).

Young people have many genres of media available to them to receive political information and get political commentary; however, many do not bother watching the evening newscasts. Researchers and journalists have tried to understand why. MTV journalist Tabitha Soren said, “It’s a Catch-22. Why cover them if they don’t watch you?

But why should they watch you if you don't cover them?" (Mindich, 4). Advertisers have also noticed the drop in young viewers. "The ads during CBS Evening News are denture cleaners, arthritis medication, and Viagra," (Mindich, 3).

Cable news began with the advent of CNN, which debuted on June 1, 1980, but did not garner great ratings until the early 1990s for its dramatic coverage of the Gulf War. "CNNs approach provided coverage that was sophisticated, timely, and unprecedented in its dramatics," (Morris, 59). Later in the decade, MSNBC and CNBC followed, but Fox News Channel in 1996 set the stage for cable audience fragmentation. "Fox News offered 'straight, factual information to the American public so they can make up their own minds with less spin and less face time for anchors,'" (Morris,60). Particularly after September 11, 2001, Fox News took on an even more patriotic tone and pro-American stance. Coverage of the campaign in Afghanistan contained phrases like "our troops" and "terror goons" (Morris, 61). It is common knowledge that Fox News attracts viewers who lean to the right. CNN on the other hand is more likely to attract viewers who lean to the left; a survey done by the Pew Research Center affirmed this. It found that Fox News viewers were less likely to follow stories critical of the Bush administration that CNN viewers had a better understanding of more in-depth material, and that Fox News viewers were more likely to underestimate the number of American casualties in Iraq than those who watched CNN (Morris, 56). This leads to questions of agenda setting by television media, which can be particularly effective in influencing viewers because television tends to be more emotionally investing and stirring than newspapers. The Pew Research Center's Media Consumption Survey asks media viewing habits every two years. Using a Political Knowledge Index (PKI), they found that Fox News viewers were the least knowledgeable of the other cable channels. "It points toward the possibility that Fox is most effective in capturing an audience that is more cynical and less engaged as a whole," (Morris, 68).

Internet has become more popular as a source for political and entertainment information. One-half of internet users have high-speed broadband connections (Ahlers, 34) and gain instant access to a variety of information. One quarter of 18-29 year olds receive news online (Ahlers, 48). For this reason, many media analysts are beginning to fear the internet is a threat to traditional news media. Philip Meyer, the Knight chair and



professor of journalism at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill says, “the newest of the disruptive technologies are online information services,” (Ahlers, 30).

The number of Americans who read the newspaper daily has declined 12% between 1990 and 2002 (Morris, 59). The readership has declined for college students as well. “College students generally find newspapers irrelevant to their lives,” (Jones, 18). Newspapers are losing young consumers because they are building business models that do not include them, only 23% of 18-29 year olds read the newspaper daily (Ahlers, 48). For this reason, many newspapers offer online companion sites that update subscribers throughout the day. “Many consumers utilize the online news media more as a compliment than as a substitute,” (Ahlers, 34). The Online Publishers Association surveyed online political information users about their newspaper habits. They found that 64% of online newsreaders, read the paper frequently or occasionally, and that 21% use the online sites to follow up something they read in the print version.

So are college students that disinterested in the news, or are they simply taking advantage of their numerous options? Research points to the latter. According to the 2004 National Annenberg Election Survey by University of Pennsylvania, 18-29 year olds have a strong grip on political knowledge through a high consumption of media. Forty percent of the 18-29 year olds answered the entire PKI portion of its survey perfectly. Of those with the perfect scores, 40% watched the network news everyday, 48% watched cable news everyday, and 46% read the newspaper daily. There was another component to the information-location survey that is interesting: 42% of the students who scored perfect on the PKI frequently watched late-night television.

### *Late-Night Television*

There are two types of late-night entertainment shows: the version that focuses on celebrity (Letterman and Leno) and the version that focuses on politics (Stewart).

The latter of the two, *The Daily Show* is unique in that its satirical news style has gotten it recognition as a legitimate news source. The crew covered the Democratic National Convention in 2004 and its host, Jon Stewart, gave commentary for NBC after the 2004 State of the Union address. “It’s quickly becoming the coolest pit stop on television,” (Childress, 70). The late ABC news anchor Peter Jennings was a fan of *The*

*Daily Show*, stating, “Jon Stewart can enunciate important things about politics and politicians that the norms of objectivity won’t allow me to say,” (Jones, 6). The average viewer of *The Daily Show* is a white male in his 30s, but it has become increasingly popular with the college-age crowd. “College kids particularly thing Stewart is a god” (Childress, 76). As a sign of his popularity, Stewart agreed to host the 2006 Academy Award telecast, honoring the best in motion pictures. While ratings went down from the year before (38.8 million viewers v. 42.1 million viewers), the number of males 18-34 increased 5% (Oscar’s..., Online).

These shows are innovative in that they changed the assumptions about who is allowed to talk about politics on television. Whereas unbiased news anchors used to be the sole commentators on political figures, these comedians now give an Average-Joe commentary about politics that show the public another side to the story. They say things that many people think, but that news anchors cannot say.

The popularity of these programs shows that the public wants to hear about politics, but not in a boring way. “It suggests that audiences are receptive to (if not hungry for) political programming that is meaningful and engaging to them, programming that connects with their interests and concerns, and speaks to them through accessible and pleasurable means,” (Jones, 9). They take issues that many find boring and turn them into something tolerable and funny. As Jay Leno said, “you don’t change people’s minds; you just reinforce what people already believe. If you believe Gore is boring or Bush is dumb, there’s not a lot you can do on a late night show to change that,” (Niven, 120).

However, they are certainly not without their critics. Jon Stewart’s book, *America: The Book. A Citizens Guide to Democracy Inaction* written as a supplement to his late-night show contains jabs at Republicans and President Bush. When describing the role of the President he writes:

The president is commander-in-chief of the armed forces, a power vested in him whether he is a veteran of the military (Washington, Grant, Eisenhower) or a veteran of running away from the military (Bush Jr.) (44)

When he describes what would be included in “The Time Capsule of the Future,” he includes butterfly ballots from the 2000 election because, “what better way to explain to humans why they live in a blasted, remorseless hellscape” (179).

Critics of the book and *The Daily Show*, say that Stewart is too Democratic and spreads anti-right wing sentiments. To his critics he has replied, “The point of view of the show is that we’re passionately opposed to b.s. Is that liberal or conservative?” (Jones, 55).

Perhaps a larger concern is the idea that young adults are taking the late-night commentary from Stewart and the others’ and substituting it for hard news. “A student of mine once began a sentence, ‘Journalists like David Letterman...’” (Mindich, 7). The comedians passionately disagree. Jay Leno stated, “You can’t know more than anybody watching. We’ve found once you get past secretary of state, and even that’s a stretch, no one knows what you’re talking about,” (Jones, 59). Stewart agrees joking that, “...we’re on channel 45 in New York, literally on the remote-control journey you could absorb more news than you would from our show,” but then adds, “Our show is so reactionary, it’s hard to imagine it’s stimulating the debate,” (Childress, 72). As far as college students are concerned, who is right?

There have been a number of studies on late-night television and the political knowledge of those who tune in. The 2004 National Annenberg Election Survey questioned more than 19,000 adults about their political knowledge and viewing habits. It showed that the viewers of late-night comedy programs, especially *The Daily Show*, were more likely to know about the issues and positions of presidential candidates than those who did not watch. The surveyors asked six questions in the PKI section. The results are show in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Annenberg Survey: Late-Night Viewing and Political Knowledge

<b>Late-night Television Viewing</b>	<b>Questions Correct</b>
None	2.62
Letterman	2.91
Leno	2.95
Stewart	3.59

The respondents who did not watch the late-night shows averaged 2.62 questions correct. The respondents who watched late-night comedy scored higher, but Stewart's viewers on average scored half a point higher than the other two comedy shows surveyed.

They found that viewers of *The Daily Show* were younger and more liberal than the average Letterman or Leno viewer. The show also assumes a higher level of political knowledge for understanding than the Letterman or Leno programs require. "More of Stewart's viewers have college degrees (39%) compared to Leno's (27%) and Letterman's (29%)" (Douthat, 56). Stewart's jokes are generally longer with less of a punch line, while Letterman and Leno jokes are more numerous, shorter, and have a sharp punch line. Letterman and Leno often also focus their jokes on celebrities more so than Stewart; however, since celebrities are becoming more involved with politics, Stewart may be adding more celebrity based commentary in his political show in the near future.

#### *Celebrity Endorsement and Commentary*

"Actors and musicians in increasing numbers are endorsing and campaigning for candidates and making political statements with the obvious goal of influencing opinions and behaviors of their fans," (Darrow, 80). Where stars are in touch with popular culture and sentiment, it makes them the perfect representative of virtually anything, but particularly now more than ever, politics. "No awards program is without presenters and winners endorsing a cause or political idea, either in explicit words or through the colorful array of ribbons they wear," (Jackson, 84).

A recent survey of college students in Canada suggests that celebrity endorsement of politics increased the level of agreement with political statements. "The results suggest that celebrity endorsements make unpopular statements more palatable, while increasing the belief of agreement with already popular opinions," (Darrow, 80).

John Street argues there are two types of celebrity politicians: the celebrity who becomes the politician by seeking office, and the celebrity who by word and action represents political figures and causes. My survey will focus on the effect of the latter.

Right-winged critics are concerned about the involvement of celebrities in politics because they are infamous for being liberal and supporting Democrats. Critics like Laura Ingraham call them the “Dem-elite establishment,” (Ingraham, 76). Jerry Nachman, the late editor-in-chief of MSNBC once sneered to actress Janeane Garofalo, “most celebrities are dopes whose knowledge seems to be informed by a bumper sticker and not much else,” (Wolcott, 44). However, the tides are shifting and there are now more conservative celebrities asserting their political stance; Hollywood is no longer only for Democrats.

“Like minority groups, conservatives in show business have steadily been coming out of the closet,” (Rhoads, 14). Former *Frasier* star Kelsey Grammar is a staunch Republican and former *Law and Order* star Angie Harmon and her husband, former NFL football player Jason Sehorn, spoke at the Republican National Convention in 2004. And of course, there is Arnold.

Critics have affirmed that celebrity endorsement of politics may inspire young people who would otherwise not be an active participant in the political process, if for no other reason, they like the celebrity. However, the fear that comes along with this is that serious political policies may be trivialized if the young people do not stop to think about what the celebrity endorsing. Instead of thinking, “how did the United States become involved in Iraq,” one may underestimate it to, “the war in Iraq is wrong because movie actor Sean Penn says so.”

Hollywood actor Sean Penn is unusual in that instead of just speaking for or against policy, he took a large amount of action, and received a high level of criticism for it. In 2002, he paid for a full-page advertisement in *The Washington Post*- a letter to President Bush asking him to rethink the consequences of an invasion. “It was written in a respectful tone and reflected a serious moral concern,” (Wolcott, 142). He traveled to Baghdad in 2002, touring hospitals and snapping photographs, and to Iran in 2005 to investigate what was occurring with the country’s elections. He wrote a series of columns in the *San Francisco Chronicle* about his experiences. Nonetheless, *Wall Street Journal* columnist Clifford D. May essentially likened him to a communist,” he was branded a traitor and bracketed with Jane Fonda...’Baghdad Sean’ to her Hanoi Jane” (Wolcott, 142).

However, Sean Penn is by no means alone in his criticism of the current administration.

- Country music star Natalie Maines of The Dixie Chicks spoke out against President Bush at a 2003 concert in London stating, “Just to let you know, we’re ashamed the president of the United States is from Texas,” (Ingraham, 77). Musician Bruce Springsteen publicly supported the group stating on his official website, “they’re terrific American artists expressing American values by using their American rights to free speech,” (Ingraham, 85)
- Actor Robin Williams stated in 2003, “We have a president for whom English is a second language. He’s like ‘we have to get rid of the dictators’ when he’s pretty much one himself” (Ingraham, 77).
- Actress Jennifer Aniston blatantly remarked “Bush is a f\*\*\*\*\* idiot,” (Ingraham, 77) in a 2001 interview with Rolling Stone Magazine.

Instead of endorsing (or resenting) political figures and policies, some celebrities promote political activeness. Sean “Puff Daddy Diddy” Combs, hip-hop mogul, rap star, Bad Boy Entertainment CEO, and fashion designer, did so in this past presidential election. He founded Citizen Change, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to encourage young people to vote by making voting, “hot, and relevant,” (Collegian, online). While young people ages 18-30 make up 25% of the voting population, only 42% were registered to vote in the 2000 election (Collegian, online). Featured on tee shirts, websites, and all over MTV was his tagline, “Vote or Die.” He had a host of celebrity friends including Mariah Carey, 50 Cent, and Paris Hilton wear the merchandise and travel across the country to speak at colleges and voter registration drives. “Cultural leaders- music artists, business moguls, fashion designers... move millions of young people to exercise their \$890 billion in buying power to purchase the latest albums, clothing, cars, bling.... I expect to get these same cultural leaders to influence the same young people to vote,” (Collegian, Online) he said. Diddy’s cause created some controversy. The National Legal and Policy Center filed a complaint against him that the Federal Election Commission will review later this year. The complaint alleges that while the drive was supposed to be a “get out the vote” campaign, it actually endorsed Kerry by allowing Leonardo DiCaprio to make pro-Kerry statements at a rally. It was also revealed

that celebrity socialite Paris Hilton, who endorsed the “Vote or Die” campaign neither voted nor registered to vote. Nonetheless, a post 2004 election survey by the Vanishing Voter Project at Harvard University’s Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy suggests it may have had an effect on mobilizing young voters. “First-time voters were ‘more likely to say they became interested ‘because so many celebrities were encouraging people to vote,’” (Darrow, 81).

There are other correlations between young adults and political influence of musicians besides Combs. “It’s apparent that certain genres establish conventions and opportunities for political engagement (e.g. folk, rock, and hip-hop) in ways that others do not” (Street, 94). One fan of Bruce Springsteen’s said, “I think it’s good that someone in his position, when they write a line on a piece of paper, millions of people get to hear it, as opposed to when I write something only I get to hear it,” (Street, 447).

Musicians like the Grammy Award winning group Green Day, who have sold 50 million albums worldwide, have used their popular place in society to write songs of political dissent. In the early 1990s, Green Day was the ultimate punk-rock revivalist band. Their 1994 album, *Dookie*, sold 8 million copies. They faded for almost a decade after; however, their 2004 album, *American Idiot* became a surprise success. The aggressive rock opera interweaves songs about politics, the Iraq war, and loss of innocence. Lead singer Billie Joe Armstrong wrote them in response to his feelings about the state of America. “I am anti-war so a lot of the album has to do with that... the song “Holiday” is about this mishmash of people with all these strong opinions who can’t agree and leave decision to the person who’s standing in the middle confused and overwhelmed,” (Moss, Online). The single, “American Idiot” included the lyrics, “Don’t wanna be an American idiot/ One Nation controlled by the media/And can you hear the sound of hysteria?/I’m not a part of a redneck agenda.”

Country music star Toby Keith used his position to endorse the president’s policies and reaction to September 11, 2001 with his song, “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American).” Mark Binelli of Rolling Stone calls it, “...an unapologetic and at time patently jingoistic response to 9/11,” (Binelli, 43), and it spent 65 weeks at the top of the Billboard charts in 2002. It was obviously music people wanted to hear; Commander of the Marine Corps James L. Jones told Keith, “it was his

duty to record it,” (Keith, Online). That year Keith publicly feuded with the Dixie Chicks over their remarks about Bush, and he ended up beating them for the 2003 Entertainer of the Year award from the Academy of Country Music. Not surprisingly, Keith endorsed Bush’s re-election and played at a rally in Dallas the night before the election.

Kanye West produced music for Mariah Carey, Janet Jackson, and Ludacris before he debuted in 2004 with his album, *College Dropout*. His rap career took off and he received a lot of airtime and publicity. In the summer of 2005, the first single, “Gold Digger” from his follow-up album *Late Registration*, debuted in the top 20 on the Billboard single charts. It was one reason NBC asked him to appear in its Hurricane Katrina telethon on September 2, 2005. During the broadcast, he deviated from the script, and spoke the now infamous phrase, “George Bush doesn’t care about black people.” NBC immediately cut the feed and edited the comment from the west coast broadcast, but 13.8 million people saw it live. “West touched a collective nerve worn raw from New Orleans images of men and women, displaced by the flood waters...and mostly black,” (Mitchell, 5). It quickly became one of the top downloaded clips on the internet, and led to its own tee shirt. Kanye’s album debuted that week at Number 1 with 860,000 copies sold, and the single “Gold Digger” soared to Number 1 as well.

### *The Project*

I want to explore the links among these areas in relation to the college student. I want to compare the aforementioned past research with my own, surveying college students about their political behaviors, ideologies, and knowledge, their media consumption, their opinions and habits concerning late-night television, and their opinions and exposure to celebrity politics.

My hypotheses are:

- 1) More than 52% of URI students voted in the last election.
- 2) There are more registered Democrats than Republicans on the URI campus.
- 3) Sixty percent of students will receive perfect scores on the Political Knowledge Index.
- 4) Students read the newspaper more often than assumed from past research.



- 5) Students who read the newspaper on a daily basis are more politically informed than those who do not.
- 6) Television is the primary source of media consumption.
- 7) More Democrats than Republicans watch *The Daily Show* on a regular basis.
- 8) Those who watch *The Daily Show* on a regular basis are more politically informed than those who do not.
- 9) College students do not use late-night television as a primary source of news.
- 10) URI students were not influenced by the “Vote or Die” campaign.
- 11) URI students are exposed to celebrity politics on television daily.
- 12) URI students would be more likely to agree with Kanye West than Toby Keith.
- 13) Republicans would be more likely to agree with Toby Keith than other parties would.

## **Method**

### *Selection*

My goal was to survey 100 undergraduate students enrolled at the University of Rhode Island. I thought the best method of survey was through e-mail; there would be no face-to-face pressure to respond, and in this age of electronic communication, most students check their e-mail accounts frequently throughout the day.

I selected the students at random using the student listing in the print edition of the 2004-2005 URI Campus Directory. At the time, it was the only directory available in print. I had to be careful to weed out graduated seniors (they are listed in the 2004-2005 edition), and I needed to exclude current freshmen from the survey (they are not listed in the 2004-2005 edition). To ensure I was not including graduated seniors, I rechecked the selected student names in the online version of the directory to make sure they were still active undergraduates. The online version is also where I accumulated many of the student e-mail addresses.

There are approximately 11,000 current undergraduates at URI. I assumed I would need to send 500 emails for 100 student replies; a return rate of 20%. I divided 11,000 by 500 to reach 22- the minimum random number required to ensure all 11,000 students had equal chance of participation. Using the random number generator on my

graphing calculator, I got 62 as my random number sample. That is, I would check every 62<sup>nd</sup> person for class status and e-mail through the online version of the directory. If I found they were still active students, they received an e-mail. If I could not find their name in the online directory, I continued with the next name.

In total, I sent 736 e-mailed surveys; seven groups of 100 and one group of 36. All together 648 e-mails were received; 88 e-mails were sent back to me because the students' inbox was full. Shown in Table 2 below is the amount of e-mails that returned from each group.

Table 2: E-mails Returned and Received

<b>Group</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<b>Number Returned</b>	13	18	11	16	7	10	8	5
<b>Number Received</b>	87	82	89	84	93	90	92	31

I stopped sending e-mails once I received 100 returned surveys. The response rate was 15.43%.

### *Participants*

One hundred University of Rhode Island students participated in the survey. All were registered undergraduates in the sophomore, junior, and senior classes. N= 100. Selected at random, they represent a variety of academic disciplines and each of the seven URI degree-granting colleges.

## **Procedure**

Before I could administer the e-mails, I needed to receive clearance from the University of Rhode Island Institution Review Board. I applied for exempt review status because there are no risks associated with the survey questions. The IRB granted approval in mid-March 2006.

After selecting student names (following the procedure in the above section), I composed the e-mail. In the body of the message were both an informed consent statement and the survey. The informed consent stated among other things the purpose of

the survey, participation requirements, and contact information of the principal researchers and the URI Research and Outreach Office. It also made clear participation in the survey was confidential; that is no one by myself would ever know if a particular student responded to a survey. The entire informed consent statement is viewable in Appendix A.

Below the informed consent statement was the survey questions. The e-mail instructed respondents to reply to my original e-mail with their answers to the survey questions. The survey is viewable in Appendix B.

I copied the responses into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet immediately after receiving them. Once I loaded 100 student responses into the spreadsheet, I began data calculations using the mean and standard deviation features of Microsoft Excel.

### *Confidentiality*

To ensure confidentiality, as stated in the informed consent, I did not record the names of the students who replied to the survey; when I copied the responses into the spreadsheet, I re-named the students in the order that they responded. For example, the first student who replied to the survey became “Student #1” in the Excel spreadsheet. The initial e-mail was deleted from my e-mail outbox, and the response e-mail was deleted from my e-mail inbox. I emptied the trashcan to my e-mail account after I deleted the responses to ensure the student e-mail addresses remained confidential.

## **Materials**

The survey asked questions regarding demographics, political knowledge, political behavior, media consumption, late-night comedy viewing habits, celebrity political endorsement, and exposure to celebrities in the media. The sections were:

### *Demographic Information and Political Behavior*

This section asked respondents their grade level, major, gender, and political party affiliation. It also asked them to indicate if they voted in the last presidential election; if so, whom they voted for, and if not, why they chose not to vote.

### *Political Knowledge Index*

This section asked respondents to answer five questions regarding American government and political current events. The answers are in bold. The questions were:

1. Who is the Vice President of the United States? **Richard Cheney**
2. Who was recently confirmed as a justice on the Supreme Court? **Samuel Alito**
3. How many senators represent Rhode Island? **2- the same as any other state**
4. Name the three branches of government **Executive, Judicial, Legislative**
5. What political party controls Congress? **Republican**

### *Media Consumption*

This section asked respondents to answer questions regarding their use of media to obtain political news and information. Questions asked about the mediums of television (network and cable), internet, and newspaper. They also indicated on a Likert Scale, how often they consumed information from the medium (1= daily, 3= sometimes 5= never).

### *Late Night and Celebrity Political Endorsement and Exposure*

This section included student responses to celebrity statements about politics and frequency to which they see to celebrities in the media. In the survey, late-night comedians are included in the celebrity section; however, for purposes of analysis they are separate.

The first part of this section asks respondents to indicate on a Likert Scale (1= strongly agree, 5= strongly disagree) their reaction to a political statement made by hip-hop star Kanye West and lyrics by the rock band Green Day and the country musician Toby Keith. The celebrity and band names are purposely missing from the statement because I did not want that influence the response. Using the same Likert Scale, they had to indicate their reaction to movie actor Sean Penn's involvement in Iraq and whether the "Vote or Die" campaign established by hip-hop mogul Sean Combs affected their decision to vote. They were also asked to indicate if they learn about politics while watching late-night comedy, whether those comedians are qualified to make political statements, and if Jon Stewart's hosting the Academy Awards effected their decision to watch the telecast.

The second part of this section asked respondents to indicate on a Likert Scale (1= daily, 3= sometimes, 5= never) their exposure to celebrity political statements on television. They indicated how often they watched MTV (Music Television Network), *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart, *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, and *Late Show with David Letterman*. They also indicated how often they see a celebrity making political statements in the media.

The third part of this section asked respondents to indicate, True or False, whether they own or have downloaded music from the three musicians whose statements were used earlier in the survey. If they answered true, I considered them a fan. If they answered false, I did not consider them to be a fan.

## Results

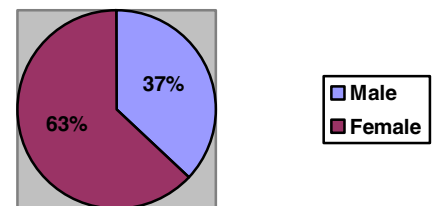
### General Survey Results: Demographics and Political

#### Behavior

##### *Gender*

There were 63 females and 37 males who responded to the survey. Figure 1 is a visual representation of the gender breakdown.

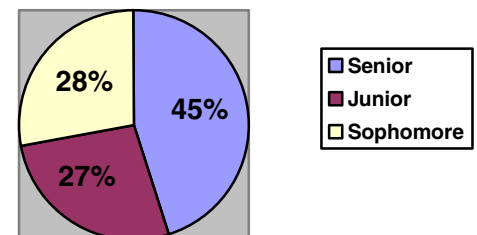
**Figure 1: Gender Results**



##### *Class Rankings*

The 100 respondents represent the sophomore, junior, and senior classes. There were 28 sophomores, 27 juniors, and 45 seniors included in the data. Figure 2 is a visual representation of the class breakdown.

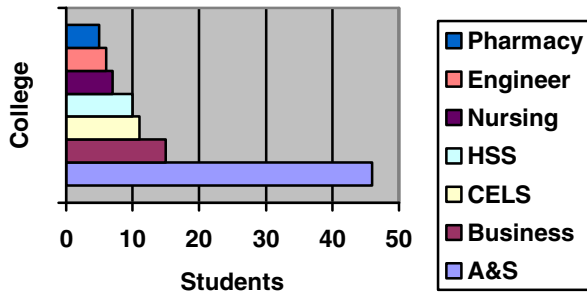
**Figure 2: Class Percentages**



*Majors*

The 100 students represent 37 programs of study and each of the seven undergraduate colleges. The most commonly represented majors were political science (8), nursing (7), communication studies (6) and history (6). The most represented college

**Figure 3: Breakdown by College**



was the College of Arts and Science with 46 students followed by College of Business Administration with 15 students, College of Environmental Life Science with 11 students, College of Human Science and Services 10 students, College of Nursing with 7 students, College of

Engineering with 6 students, and the College of Pharmacy with 5 students. The breakdown of students in each college is shown in Figure 3.

*Voting*

Nearly two-thirds (74%) of students voted in the 2004 presidential election. Of the 74 students who voted, 74% voted for Democratic candidate John Kerry. The results of those who voted are in Table 3.

Table 3: Votes by Candidate

Candidate	Number of Students Who Voted	Percentile
John Kerry	55	74.32%
George W. Bush	15	20.27%
Ralph Nader	2	2.70%
Al Gore	1	1.35%
Declined to Report	1	1.35%

Twenty-six percent did not vote in the 2004 presidential election. The reasons why are listed in Table 4.

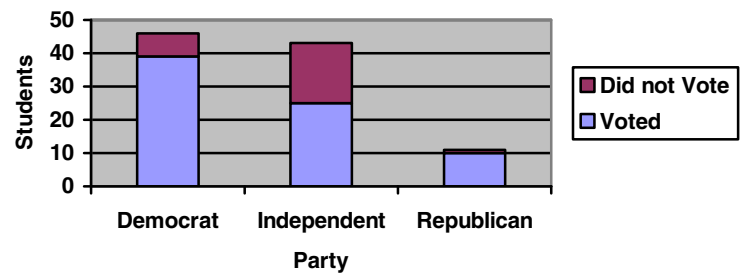
Table 4: Reasoning for Non-voters

Reason	Number of Students	Percentile
Was not 18 at the time	7	26.92%
Not Registered	4	15.38%
Didn't Care	4	15.38%
Didn't Know Enough About the Candidates	4	15.38%
Didn't Like the Candidates	2	7.69%
Out of State	2	7.69%
Not a U.S. Citizen	2	7.69%
Declined to Report	1	3.87%

*Political Party Affiliation*

The respondents classified themselves as Democrat, Republican, or Independent. The majority of students identified as Democrats (46 students), followed by Independents (43) and far behind was Republicans (11). The amount of students who voted, broken down by party is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Voters by Party



Of the 46 Democratic students, 39 voted and 7 did not. Of the 43 Independent students, 25 voted and 18 did not. Of the 11 Republican students, 10 voted and one did not.

Political Knowledge Index (PKI)

Thirty-eight students correctly answered the political knowledge questions. Of the 38 students, 22 were female and 16 were male. They included 19 seniors, 10 sophomores, and 9 juniors. The most represented majors were political science (6 students), journalism (4), history (4), and economics (3). Twenty-two were Democrat, 11 Independent, and 5 Republican. Thirty-six students voted. Twenty-five voted for John Kerry, 7 voted for George W. Bush, and 4 either did not vote or voted for someone else. The most common media source used for information was television (14 students) followed closely by

newspaper (12) and the internet (11), one student mentioned radio. Table 5 summarizes the results.

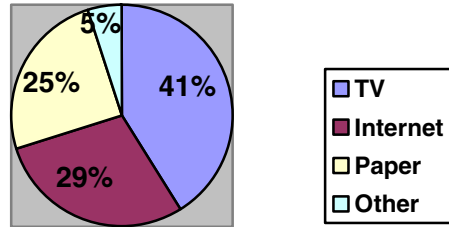
Table 5: Results of PKI

<b>Category</b>		<b>Total Students</b>	<b>Answered All Correctly</b>
<b>Gender</b>			
	Male	37	22
	Female	63	16
<b>Party</b>			
	Democrat	46	22
	Independent	43	11
	Republican	11	5
<b>Grade Level</b>			
	Sophomore	28	10
	Junior	27	9
	Senior	45	19
<b>Major</b>			
	Political Science	8	6
	History	6	4
	Journalism	4	4
	Economics	3	3
<b>Vote</b>			
	Yes	74	36
	No	26	2
<b>Candidate</b>			
	Kerry	55	25
	Bush	15	7
<b>Medium</b>			
	Television	41	14
	Newspaper	25	12
	Internet	29	11
	Other	5	1



Media Consumption

**Figure 5: Most Common Medium**

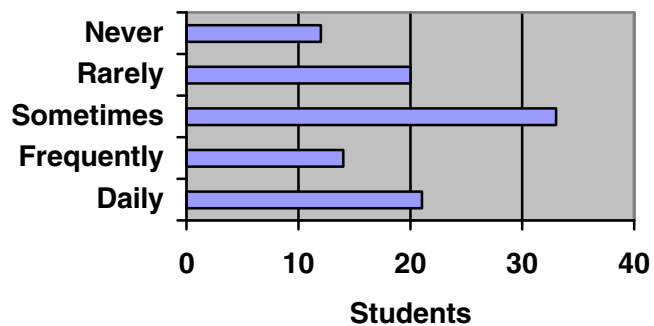


The most common medium for students to get their political news and information is the television (41 students), followed by the internet (29), newspaper (25) and then other (5). Figure 5 is a visual representation of the data.

*Network News*

Students responded to how often they watch the network nightly news on a scale from 1 (daily) to 5 (never). Twenty-one students watch the nightly news daily; 12 never watch it. The average response was 2.88 (sometimes). The standard deviation was 1.29. Figure 6 is a visual representation of the data.

**Figure 6: Frequency Students Watch Network News**

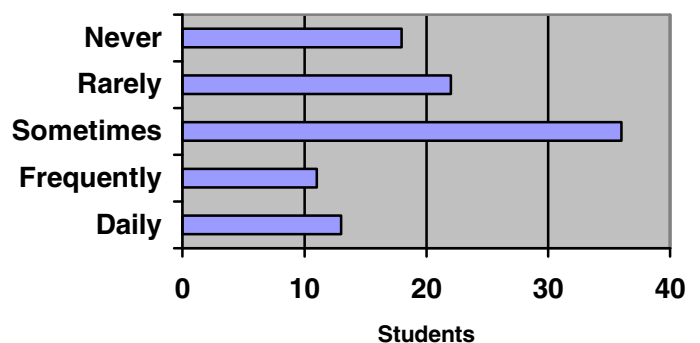


The most popular nightly network newscast was “NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams” with half of the respondents choosing it. “ABC World News Tonight” was second with 19 responses.

*Cable Television*

Students were less likely to watch cable television than network television; the average is 3.21 and the standard deviation is 1.24. Only 13

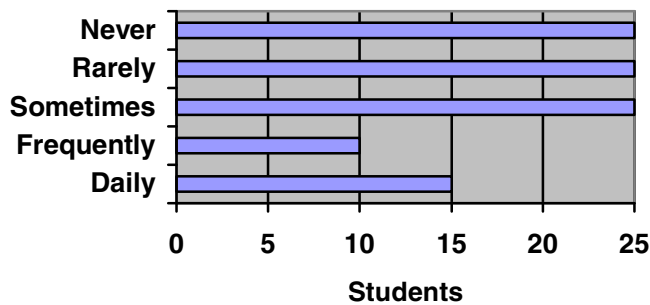
**Figure 7: Frequency Students Watch Cable News**



percent report watching cable television for news, everyday. Figure 7 is a visual representation of the data.

The most common cable television station to watch was CNN with 36 respondents, followed by Fox News Channel with 23 respondents.

**Figure 8: Frequency Students Use the Internet**



*Internet Use for Political News*

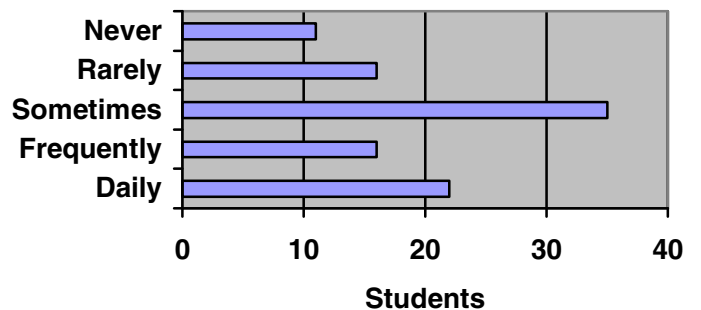
Twenty-five percent of students use the internet daily or frequently to search for political information. The average was 3.35 with a standard deviation of 1.36. Figure 8 is a visual representation of the data. The most common internet sites to

find political information were those associated with cable television stations and newspapers; CNN.com received 22 votes while New York Times.com received 9 votes.

*Newspaper*

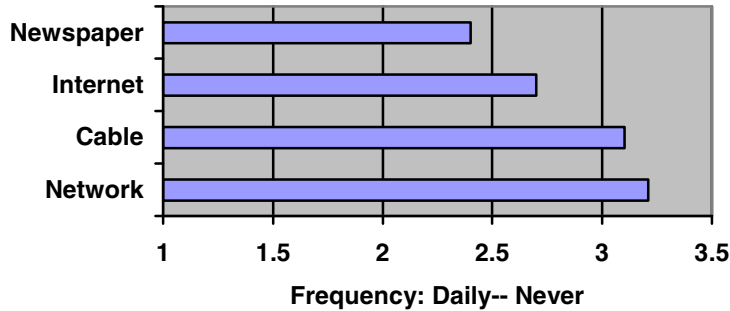
Thirty-eight percent of students report they read the newspaper daily or frequently. The average response was 2.78 and the standard deviation was 1.27. Figure 9 is a visual representation of the data. The most popularly reported newspapers were The Providence Journal (45 votes) and The New York Times (19 votes).

**Figure 9: Frequency Students Read the Newspaper**



*Political Knowledge by Medium*

**Figure 10: PKI Most Common Medium**



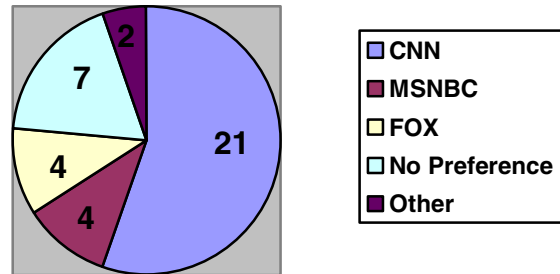
I analyzed the responses of those students who received perfect scores on the PKI section for daily media consumption habits. The average frequency of viewing network evening news was 3.21 with a standard deviation of 1.55.

The average frequency of viewing cable news was 3.10 with a standard deviation of 137. The average frequency of reading about politics on the internet was 2.7 with a standard deviation of 1.4, and the average frequency of reading the daily newspaper was 2.39 with a standard deviation of 1.30. Figure 10 is a visual representation of the data.

*Political Knowledge by Cable Channel*

I analyzed the cable television habits of the students with perfect PKI scores. Of the 38 students with perfect score, 21 watch CNN most frequently, 4 watch MSNBC most frequently, and 4 watch Fox News most frequently. Figure 11 is a visual representation of the data.

**Figure 11: PKI Common Cable Channel**

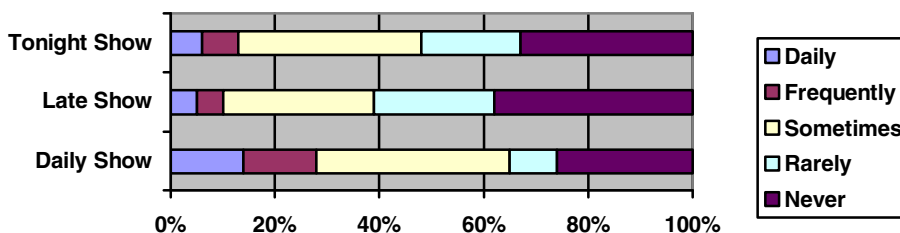


Late-Night Comedy Influence

*Frequency of Viewing*

Respondents were asked to indicate on a Likert Scale (1= daily, 3= sometimes, 5= never), how often they watched *The Daily Show*,

**Figure 12: Frequency of Nightly Viewing of Late-Night Comedy**



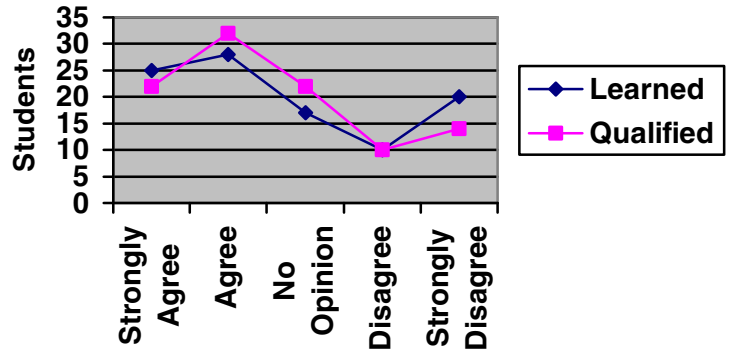
often they watched *The Daily Show*,

*The Late Show with David Letterman* and *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. The average for *The Daily Show* was a 3.19 with a standard deviation of 1.35; *The Late Show* average was 3.84 with a standard deviation of 1.14; *The Tonight Show* average was 3.66 with a standard deviation of 1.18. It is interesting to note that while 28% of respondents said they watched *The Daily Show* daily or frequently, only 10% indicated the same loyalty to *The Late Show* and 13% indicated the same loyalty to *The Tonight Show*. Figure 12 shows the daily viewing habits of the programs.

*Late-night Comedian Opinion*

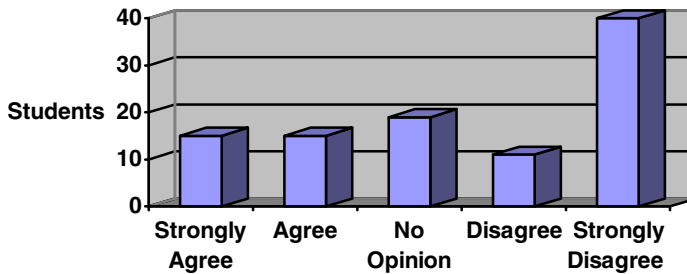
Respondents were asked to indicate on a Likert Scale (1= strongly agree, 5= strongly disagree) if they had ever learned something about politics from watching the late-night comedy shows. The average response was a 2.72 with a standard deviation of 1.45. The follow-up question asked them to indicate whether they believed comedians were qualified to make political commentary and statements. The average response was a 2.62 with a standard deviation of 1.31. Figure 13 is a visual representation of the data.

**Figure 13: Late-Night Learning and Qualifications**



*Jon Stewart Oscar Influence*

**Figure 14: Jon Stewart Oscar Hosting Influence**



Respondents had to indicate whether Jon Stewart hosting the Academy Awards had any effect on their tuning in. The average response was 3.46

with a standard deviation on 1.51. Figure 14 is a visual representation of the data.

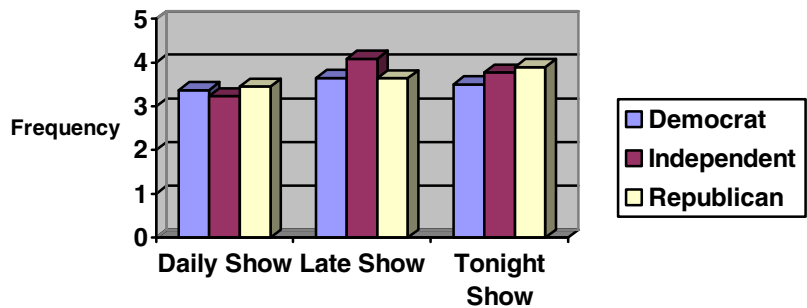
*Political Party Viewer ship*

The viewing frequencies for each show were analyzed based on political party identification. Respondents were asked to indicate answers on a Likert Scale (1= daily, 3= sometimes, 5= never). The respondents, who identified themselves as Democrats, had an average of 3.37 for watching the *The Daily Show*, 3.65 for watching *The Late Show*, and 3.5 for watching *The*

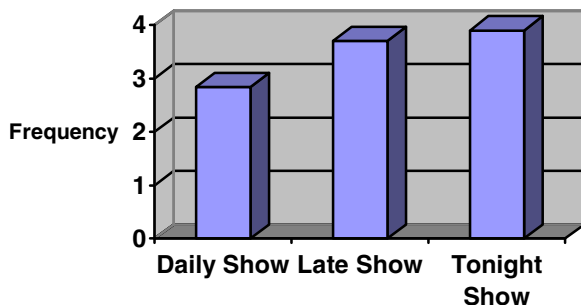
*Tonight Show*. The respondents who identified themselves as Independents had an average of 3.23 for *The Daily Show*, 4.09 for *The Late Show*, and 3.77 for *The Tonight Show*. The

respondents who identified themselves as Republicans had an average of 3.45 for *The Daily Show*, 3.64 for *The Late Show*, and 3.90 for *The Tonight Show*. Figure 15 is a visual representation of the data.

**Figure 15: Viewers by Party**



**Figure 16: Frequency of PKI Late-Night Viewers**



*Political Knowledge*

I analyzed the late-night comedy viewing habits of the respondents who scored perfect on the PKI. Respondents were asked to indicate answers on a Likert Scale (1= daily, 3= sometimes, 5= never). The average daily frequency of

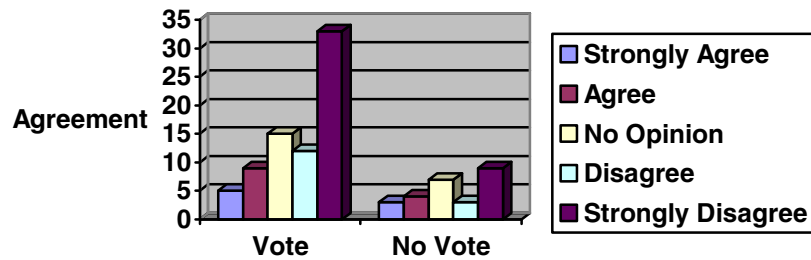
watching *The Daily Show* was 2.84 with a standard deviation of 1.03. The average daily frequency of watching *The Late Show* was 3.7 with a standard deviation of 1.09. The average daily frequency of watching *The Tonight Show* was 3.9 with a standard deviation of 1.03. Figure 16 is a visual representation of the data.

Celebrity Influence and Exposure

*Citizen Change*

Respondents were asked to indicate on a Likert Scale (1=strongly agree, 5=strongly disagree) whether they were made aware of the importance of voting because of Sean

**Figure 17: Vote or Die Influence**

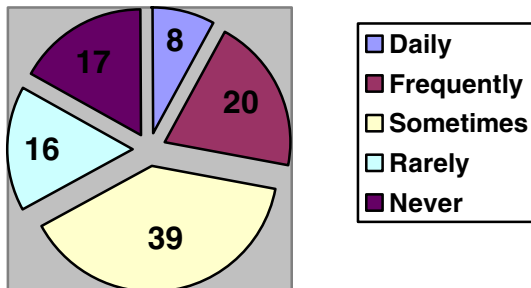


Combs’ “Vote or Die” campaign. Of the 74 students who voted, the average response was 3.80 with a standard deviation of 1.31. Of the 26 students who did not vote, the average response was 3.42 with a standard deviation of 1.42. Figure 17 compares the results.

*Celebrity Exposure on Television*

Respondents were asked to indicate on a Likert Scale (1= daily, 3= sometimes, 5= never) how often they are

**Figure 18: Celebrity Endorsement Exposure**

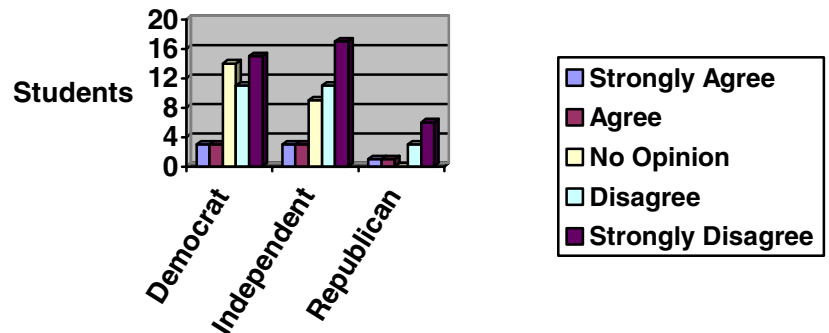


exposed to a celebrity speaking about politics on the television on a daily basis. The average response was 3.14 with a standard deviation of 1.16. Figure 18 represents the data.

### Sean Penn

Respondents were asked to indicate on a Likert Scale (1= strongly agree, 5= never) how they feel about Sean Penn’s statement that as an actor he has “added responsibility” to

Figure 19: Agreement of Penn by Party

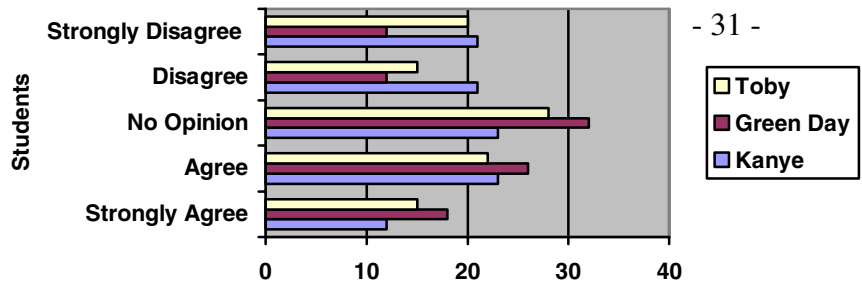


investigate the government’s policies. I analyzed the results based on political party affiliation. The average agreement for Democrats was 3.70 with a standard deviation of 1.19. The average agreement for Independents was 3.84 with a standard deviation of 1.23. The average agreement for Republicans was a 4.09 with a standard deviation of 1.38. Figure 19 is a visual representation of the data.

### Musician Agreements

Respondents were asked to indicate on a Likert Scale (1= strongly agree, 5= strongly disagree) their agreement to the political statements made by musicians. The average agreement for the Kanye West statement (“George Bush doesn’t care about black people”) was 3.16 with a standard deviation of 1.32. The average agreement to the Green Day lyrics (American Idiot: critical of the war) was 2.74 with a standard deviation of 1.24. The average agreement to the Toby Keith Lyrics (The Angry American: pro-war) was a 3.03 with a standard deviation of 1.34. Figure 20 is a visual representation of the data.

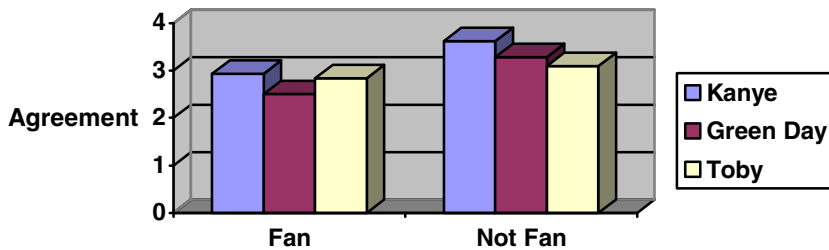
**Figure 20: Agreement of Musicians**



*Fan Agreements*

Respondents were asked to indicate on a Likert Scale (1= strongly agree, 5= strongly disagree) their agreement to whether they download or own music from the musicians. There were 67 students who indicated they own or have downloaded

**Figure 21: Agreement of Musicians by Fans vs. Not Fans**



music (fans) by Kanye West, and 32 students who indicated they do not own and have not downloaded music (not fans) by Kanye West (1 student did not answer). Of the

students who own or have downloaded his music, their average agreement is 2.93 with a standard deviation of 1.27. The students, who are not fans, have an average agreement of 3.62 with a standard deviation of 1.39.

There were 71 fans of Green Day, and 28 students who indicated they were not fans (1 student did not answer). Of the students who are fans, their average agreement is 2.5 with a standard deviation of 1.08. The students who are not fans averaged 3.29 for agreement with a standard deviation of 1.46.

There were 29 fans of Toby Keith, and 70 students who indicated they were not fans (1 student did not answer). The fans' average agreement is 2.83 with a standard deviation of 1.20. The students who are not fans averaged 3.1 with a standard deviation of 1.40. Figure 21 shows the results.

*Political Party Agreement*



Respondents were asked to indicate on a Likert Scale (1= strongly agree, 5= strongly disagree) whether they agree with the statements. I analyzed the average agreements based on political party affiliation.

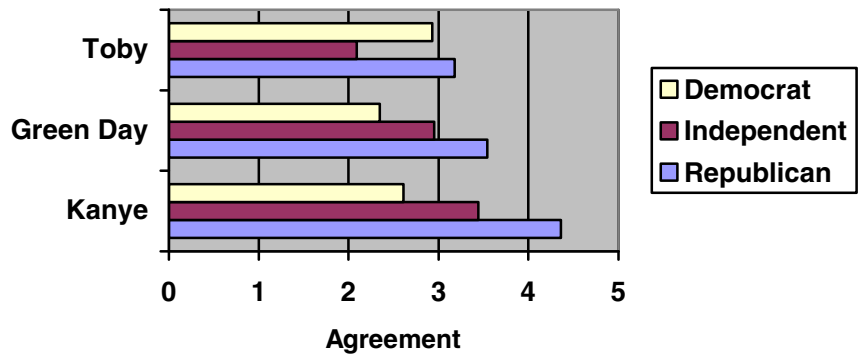
For Kanye West, the students identified as Republicans averaged 4.36 with a standard deviation of 1.20. The students identified as Independents averaged 3.44 with a standard deviation of 1.20.

The students identified as Democrats averaged 2.61 with a standard deviation of 1.27.

For Green Day, the students identified as Republicans averaged 3.54 with a standard deviation of .93. The students identified as Independents averaged 2.95 with a standard deviation of 1.25. The students identified as Democrats averaged 2.35 with a standard deviation of 1.16.

For Toby Keith, the students identified as Republicans averaged 3.18 with a standard deviation of 1.17. The students identified as Independents averaged 2.09 with a standard deviation of 1.34. The students identified as Democrats averaged 2.93 with a standard deviation of 1.39. Figure 22 shows the results.

**Figure 22: Agreement of Musicians by Party**



*Political Knowledge*

I analyzed the agreement statistics for the 38 students who scored perfectly on the PKI. The average agreement with the Sean Penn statement was 3.76 with a standard deviation of 1.5. The average agreement with the “Vote or Die” statement was 3.94 with a standard deviation of 1.39. The average agreement with the statements made by Kanye West was 2.92 with a standard deviation of 1.44. The average agreement with the statements made by Green Day was 2.5 with a standard deviation of 1.31. The average agreement with the statements made by Toby Keith was 2.12 with a standard deviation of 3.5.

## Discussion

### *Results*

In short, to answer my hypothesis:

- 1) More than 52% of URI students voted in the last election. **True: 74% of the URI students surveyed voted in the last election.**
- 2) There are more registered Democrats than Republicans on the URI campus. **True: 46% of students surveyed identified as Democrats while only 11% identified as Republicans.**
- 3) About sixty percent of students will receive perfect scores on the Political Knowledge Index. **False: 38% answered all questions correctly.**
- 4) Students read the newspaper more often than assumed from past research. **True: Students reported reading the daily newspaper more often than watching the evening network news.**
- 5) Students who read the newspaper on a daily basis are more politically informed than those who do not. **Possibly: Students who are politically informed read the newspaper more frequently than those who do not.**
- 6) Television is the primary source of media consumption. **True: 41% of students say their primary medium is television.**
- 7) More Democrats than Republicans watch *The Daily Show* on a regular basis. **True: But not by much, and Independents watched more regularly than Democrats.**
- 8) Those who watch *The Daily Show* on a regular basis are more politically informed than those who do not. **True: Most of the perfect PKI's watched the "The Daily Show" more regularly than the other programs.**
- 9) College students do not use late-night television as a primary source of news. **True: they may use it as a secondary source.**
- 10) URI students were not influenced by the "Vote or Die" campaign. **True: Those who voted would have done so regardless, and those who did not were aware of the campaign but still ignored the cause.**

- 11) URI students are exposed to celebrity politics on television daily. **False: They only see celebrity politics on television sometimes.**
- 12) URI students would be more likely to agree with Kanye West than Toby Keith. **False: They agreed with Green Day more than either of them, but they also agreed with Toby more than Kanye.**
- 13) Republicans would be more likely to agree with Toby Keith than other parties would. **False: Independents agreed with Toby more than Republicans did.**

### Demographics and Political Behavior

Roughly, 60% of the respondents were female which coincides with the gender breakdown of the URI undergraduate student body. There were more seniors represented than the other two classes; perhaps this is due to sympathy (seniors feeling bad for a member of the class doing a senior project) or the older students are more politically involved. An overwhelming amount of responses came from students enrolled in programs within the College of Arts and Sciences (46) - three times the amount of the next represented college. Not surprisingly, there were more political science students represented than any other major. Perhaps this is because students in Arts and Sciences are more interested in politics than specialty and technical majors like pharmacy or engineering.

Seventy-four percent of the students voted in the last presidential election, this is much higher than the national statistic of 52% of young people ages 18-29 registered to vote and even higher than Harvard University's 2003 pre-election survey that indicated 60% of undergraduates surveyed planned on voting. The most common response for not voting was that the respondent was not of voting age at the time; it is implied that if they had been of age they would have registered. This data shows that URI students are indeed more politically active than other research may have indicated they would have been from age group data in general.

As predicted, there are more Democrats at URI than Republicans: 46% v. 11%. This is not entirely surprising, as young people tend to be more likely to identify as Democrats than Republicans. I was surprised at the number of Independents; there were

almost as many Independents then Democrats. It is interesting to note that a higher percentage of Republicans voted than Democrats or Independents.

### Political Knowledge Index

Only 38% of URI students answered all five questions correctly. This was surprising because the questions were simple civics questions and one current event response, which was highly publicized in the media. However, it is almost the exact same as the Annenberg study of 18-29 year olds; 40% scored perfect PKIs in that test. Not surprising, the most frequently represented majors to answer the questions correctly were political science and journalism. Of the 38 students, 36 reported voting in the election; it can be inferred that the more knowledge one has in politics, the more likely one will be an active political participant.

### Media Consumption

Forty-one percent of students received most of their information by watching television; this does not coincide with research that indicated television news is having a difficult time attracting younger viewers. There are indications that while newspaper may not be the primary choice of media consumption, students still read it frequently. In fact, on the average day they were more likely to read a daily newspaper (2.71) than watch the network evening news (2.88).

Research indicates that the internet does not pose a threat to the other forms of media. Only 25% of students said they used online sources to look up political news and information and for those who did, many used sister websites of daily newspapers and cable stations (New York Times and CNN respectively). This is the same as the 2004 Pew Research.

Of the 38 students who scored perfectly on the PKI, 21 watched CNN and only 4 watched Fox News, which affirms the Pew study that those who watch CNN had a better understanding of material while those who watched Fox were not as informed. The students who scored perfectly on the PKI were also more likely to get their information from the daily newspaper as opposed to more popular sources like television.

### Late-Night Comedy Influence

Students reported more frequency and loyalty to viewing *The Daily Show* than the other two programs. Twenty eight percent said they watched the program daily or frequently, while *The Tonight Show* only received 13%.

The students agreed (2.72) that they had learned something about politics, but where it was in the middle of the scale, I believe we can assume that they are not using it as a primary source of news but rather as an additional source.

Where students responded on average with a 3.46 to whether Jon Stewart hosting the Oscars made them watch the telecast, we can conclude that although the late-night comedians are popular, they are not necessarily influential because if he were that influential over college students this would have been lower on the scale. Political party had little influence over who watched the late-night television shows.

While *The Daily Show* is commonly referred to as anti-conservative, the average frequency of viewing for Democrats was a 3.37 and Republicans as a 3.45; in fact, Independents responded as watching the show more frequently than Democrats with an average score of 3.23.

Regarding the students who scored perfect on the PKI, they watch *The Daily Show*, much more frequently than the other two programs. The average score for *The Daily Show* was 2.84 while the next most frequently watched program, *The Late Show*, had 3.7. This is consistent with the 2004 Annenberg Survey results that showed *The Daily Show* viewers scored higher on PKI's than those who viewed the other two programs most frequently. We can infer that viewers of *The Daily Show* have more political knowledge, but again not using the show as a primary source of news because they, for the most part, rely on the newspaper. In order to appreciate Stewart's commentary anyways, one would need to possess a stronger knowledge of politics because his jokes are longer and more in-depth than the average punch line joke of Leno or Letterman.

### Celebrity Influence and Exposure

The "Vote or Die" voter registration program was not effective in mobilizing student voters at URI. Those who voted disagreed with the statement, "I was made aware

of the importance of voting in the presidential election due to the “Vote or Die” campaign with a score of 3.80. Those students who did not vote averaged a score of 3.62, indicating while they were more aware of the importance of voting through the campaign, it still did not mobilize them to vote. In this case, the URI students who voted would have done so even without the celebrity campaign.

URI students sometimes see celebrities endorsing politics. The average score was 3.14. This surprised me because I often see celebrities speaking about politics in the daily media, but the average student does not see it or ignores it if he does.

For the most part, students disagree with Sean Penn’s statement that as an actor he has an “added responsibility” to be concerned with government action. Democrats were a bit more sympathetic, an average agreement of 3.7 as opposed to Republicans with an average score of 4.09. I would assume this is because Democrats, in general, feel more support towards Hollywood politics.

Respondents as a whole agreed more with the Green Day lyrics than with the Toby Keith lyrics or the Kanye West statement. The average agreement to Green Day was 2.74, 3.06 for Toby Keith, and 3.16 for Kanye West.

The fans of each musician on average agree much more with the artists than those who are not fans. Kanye West’s fans agreed with him with an average score of 2.93, his non-fans agreed with an average score of 3.62. Green Day’s fans agreed with them with an average score of 2.5, their non-fans agreed with an average score of 3.29. Toby Keith’s fans agreed with him with an average score of 2.83, his non-fans agreed with an average score of 3.01. This indicates that while celebrities politically influence their younger fans, they do not influence those who are not fans.

Democrats were more likely to agree with the Kanye West and Green Day statements than Republicans were. However, the two parties almost agreed completely with the Toby Keith statements, while Independents agreed with him much more. This was an interesting finding because I predicted that Republicans would agree with Toby Keith more to an extent than the other two parties.

The students who scored perfectly on the PKI were more likely to agree with the celebrity and musician statements than those who did not. However, they overwhelming

disagreed with the “Vote or Die” campaign statement indicating that those who are politically informed would have voted to begin with.

### *Problems*

I encountered three problems in completing this report. The first was timing; I should have started the initial research clearance process earlier. I did not realize the formality of asking for clearance and that the IRB board only met every few weeks. I did not get approval until the end of March and that created anxiety for me in that I had only a week or so to obtain the names, e-mail addresses, and send hundreds of surveys. It took about 4 hours to go through each batch of 100. It was exhausting and taxing and if I had more time, it would have been much easier on me.

The second problem was the method in which I surveyed. URI does not have a listing of off-campus phone numbers, or I would have called the students to obtain direct answers. While everyone uses e-mail, not all students check their URI accounts frequently, which for me meant that I had to wait a considerable amount of time for responses, and then for weeks after I obtained the 100 responses, I still had people e-mailing me their surveys. I also had 88 e-mails come back to me because when the students stop checking their accounts; their in-boxes fill up. If I had to do it again, I would implore a more direct method of survey, even if it meant standing in a booth in the Union physically handing out surveys. It would not have been as randomized, but it would have made data collection much easier and gotten a larger number of responses.

The third problem is that I think the project covered too broad of a range. I enjoyed doing the research because it is something I am interested in; however, I think that I could have drawn better conclusions if I focused on only one area: media consumption OR late-night television OR celebrity influence. Because the survey only asked a few questions about each topic, I have a limited amount of data to draw my conclusions, which were mostly inconclusive.

### *Future Direction*

This is an interesting area to study more in-depth and to a larger degree. It would be exciting to do a large-scale study of college students across the country and see where

they get their information, their views on celebrities and politicians, and their late-night viewing habits. This was an extremely small-scale study so the results are inconclusive, but interesting to look at.

Further research should be done on media viewing habits so the media can better include stories relating to college students in the appropriate mediums. Late-night comedy can work to serve as more reinforcement for a better-informed public. Celebrities with political ties should be used by candidates to endorse campaigns because their fans will be more likely to follow suit. Perhaps John Street sums it up best, "...not all examples of the celebrity politician are to be seen as legit, but the representative claim has to be analyzed more carefully and discriminatingly than critics typically suppose," (Street, 435).

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## Appendix A

The University of Rhode Island  
Department of Political Science  
Entertaining Politics and the College Student

### CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH

Dear Participant:

You have been asked to take part in the research project described below.

The purpose of this study is to explore the links among media and celebrity endorsement of politics on college students political knowledge, ideologies, and behaviors. Responses to these items will be analyzed and presented in May 2006 during the URI Honors Program Senior Project exhibition.

**You must be at least 18 years old to be in this research project.**

If you decide to take part in this study, your participation will involve filling out a survey pertaining to your political knowledge, ideologies, and behaviors.

There are no risks or discomforts associated with this survey.

Although there are no direct benefits of the study, your answers will help increase the knowledge regarding political influences on the college population.

Your part in this study is confidential. That means your answers to all questions are private. No one else will know if you participated in this study and no one else will find out what your answers were. Scientific reports will be based on group data and will not identify you or any individual as being in this project.

The decision to participate in this research project is up to you. You do not have to participate and can refuse to answer any question.

If you have any questions feel free to call Alexandra Rubin at 617-838-1593 or email her at arub4378@hotmail.com, or email Dr. Brian Krueger at bkrueger@uri.edu, the people

mainly responsible for this study. In addition, you may contact the office of the Vice Provost for Graduate Studies, Research and Outreach, 70 Lower College Road, Suite 2, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, Rhode Island, telephone: (401) 874-4328.

Thank you,  
Alexandra Rubin

## Appendix B

### Entertaining Politics and the College Student Survey

#### Your Demographic/ Affiliation

1. Grade Level:
2. Major:
3. Gender:
4. Political Party Affiliation:
5. Did you vote in last presidential election?
  - a. If yes, for who?
  - b. If no, why not?

#### Political Knowledge Index

6. Who is the Vice President of the United States?
7. Who was recently confirmed as a justice on the Supreme Court?
8. How many senators represent Rhode Island?
9. Name the three branches of government
10. What political party controls Congress?

#### Media Consumption

1. Where do you get most of your news?

Internet	Newspaper	Television	Radio	Other
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2. How often do you watch the nightly news on television? 1= daily, 3 = sometimes, 5= never

1	2	3	4	5
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Which networks do you watch?
3. How regularly do you watch cable stations (i.e. Fox News, CNN, MSNBC)? 1= daily, 3= sometimes, 5= never

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

Which stations do you watch?
4. How often do you go online to look at political information? 1= daily, 3= sometimes, 5= never

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

What internet sites do you visit to get political information?

5. How often do you read newspapers? 1 = daily, 3= sometimes, 5= never

1      2      3      4      5

What newspapers do you read?

### **Celebrity Influence**

Indicate how much you agree with the statement 1= strongly agree, 3= no opinion, 5= strongly disagree

1. During a 2005 Hurricane Katrina telethon, a well-known celebrity stated the following: “George Bush doesn’t care about black people.” How do you feel about this statement? 1    2    3    4    5
2. One of the top songs of 2005 included these lyrics: “Don’t wanna be an American idiot. One nation controlled by the media. I’m not part of a redneck agenda.” How do you feel about these lyrics? 1 2 3 4 5
3. One of the top country songs of 2002 included these lyrics: “And you’ll be sorry that you messed with the U.S. of A. `Cause we’ll put a boot in your ass It’s the American way.” How do you feel about these lyrics? 1 2 3 4 5
4. Actor Sean Penn visited Iraq in 2002 stating that as an actor he had “added responsibility” to make sure our government was acting appropriately. How do you feel about this statement? 1 2 3 4 5
5. I was made aware of the importance of voting in the presidential election due to the MTV “Vote or Die” campaign. 1 2 3 4 5
6. I have learned something about politics from comedians like Jon Stewart, Jay Leno, and David Letterman. 1 2 3 4 5
7. I think that comedians like Jon Stewart, Jay Leno, and David Letterman are qualified to make political commentary. 1 2 3 4 5
8. I watched the Academy Awards telecast because Jon Stewart hosted. 1 2 3 4 5

Indicate the extent you do the following: 1= daily, 3= sometimes, 5= never

1. Watch MTV
2. Watch “The Daily Show” with Jon Stewart.
3. Watch “The Tonight Show with Jay Leno.”
4. Watch “Late Show with David Letterman.”
5. See a celebrity on the news speaking about politics

True or False:

1. I own or have downloaded music from Kanye West
2. I own or have downloaded music from Green Day
3. I own or have downloaded music from Toby Keith