Bears, Baby Carrots, and the Colbert Bump:

An Analysis on Stephen Colbert's Use of Humor to Set the Public's Political Agenda

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Dedication:

This project is dedicated to my family—Gregory, Delois, Brian, Benjamin, and Little Gregg McKay—you're the reason I believe in a God who loves us.

1 Corinthians 13:13

And—to Robot.

Acknowledgements:

A little more than seven years ago I saw a television commercial featuring Jerry Falwell Sr. advertising a little school in central Virginia called Liberty University. I had never heard of it before but soon found myself enrolling—never having visited or knowing just what I was getting myself in to. Thanks to God's provision and an outrageous amount of support from my family, I made it through that first four years to a very happy graduation day and thought my time at Liberty was complete—but God had other plans. When I made that final decision to return a year later, nothing could have prepared me for the new experiences I would embark on—a journey that would happily, successfully, and finally conclude my time here at Liberty.

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Abstract

In recent years, political satire has risen in popularity and recognition as an effective means of transmitting political news to a younger generation of voters. This recent development brings forth new questions about the role of political satire in setting the public's political agenda. Using Agenda-Setting Theory as a framework, this study takes *The Colbert Report*, one of the most popular satire television shows of this generation, and analyzes it for a possible political agenda. In the end, what this study finds is that in the six weeks leading up to the 2008 U.S. presidential election *The Colbert Report* chose to significantly and primarily focus on the issue of economics, therefore setting a political agenda to its audiences. The effects of this political agenda are yet to be measured.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

"Folks I have spent almost two years now telling you what you think. Now go vote!"

–Stephen Colbert, November 3, 2008

In 2008, PEW Research Center for People and the Press tested the American public's political knowledge. What they discovered was audiences who regularly viewed formal television news shows and stations such as C-SPAN, MSNBC, CNN, and FOX News ranked well-behind audiences of Comedy Central's *The Colbert Report* in their knowledge of political trivia such as what is the current house majority party and who is the nation's secretary of state (Who Knows News, 2008). According to the 2008 study, when being compared to every other major political news outlet, viewers of *The Colbert Report* ranked number nine in overall political knowledge. Since the emergence of Comedy Central's *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* with host Stephen Colbert, "entertainment-news" is steadily making its way into mainstream media. In recent years, Colbert has not only made a name for himself as one of the most entertaining television-news hosts, but also as one of the most politically influential. This factor is what makes him and his late night show an area ripe for discussion and analysis.

Truthiness: The Life of Stephen

Colbert has a history grounded in humor and performance. He was born May 13, 1964 into a large Catholic family of 10 children—Colbert made 11—in Washington D.C. (Rogak, 2011, p. 21). Soon after, the family relocated to Charleston, S.C. where Colbert's father, James Colbert, took up a career working as the academic vice president at the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC) College of Medicine (p. 30). The Colbert household was one full of

comedy. Colbert said, “I grew up in a ‘humorocracy’ where the funniest person in the room is king” (p. 10). He said his brothers are sisters were always much funnier than he was and over the years he stole a lot of their comedic material for his own acts (p. 10). His home was warm and his childhood idyllic, but it was in September 1974 that Colbert would experience the greatest tragedy of his life.

On September 11, 1974 an Eastern Airlines jet flying from Charleston, S.C. crashed into a wooded area near Charlotte, N.C. (Rogak, 2011, p. 44). Seventy-two of the passengers did not survive the crash; among the casualties were Colbert’s father and two youngest brothers, Peter and Paul (p. 48). Colbert was 10 at the time of the accident. His remaining brothers and sisters, who were much older in age, had already moved out of the home (p. 53). Only he and his mother remained. Colbert initially withdrew from his environment, but found solace in escaping into the world of science fiction novels (p. 53). He later attributed his mother and her unwavering faith in Jesus Christ as the reason to why he did not grow bitter after their deaths saying, “She taught me to be grateful for my life regardless of what that entailed, and that’s directly related to the image of Christ on the cross and the example of sacrifice that he gave us. What she taught me is that the deliverance God offers you from pain is not ‘no pain’—it’s that the pain is actually a gift. What’s the option? God doesn’t really give you another choice” (McGrath, 2011).

Soon after their deaths, he and his mother relocated to a new home and Colbert was quickly enrolled in a private college prepatory school (Rogak, 2011, p. 58). But his shy and withdrawn disposition made him a target for bullies. Colbert says he was beaten up on a regular basis and many of his peers saw him as a “huge loser” (p. 58). He once again found solace in science fiction, but this time it was in the performance of the fantasy role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* (p. 58). In high school, Colbert would go on to join the debate club as

well as the boys' glee club where he would hone in on his keen performance abilities (p. 63). After graduating, he moved to Virginia to attend Hampden-Sydney, a small private liberal arts college, where he would become involved with acting on a more professional level before transferring to Northwestern University in Chicago, IL. (p. 73).

Colbert soon made a professional name for himself as a member of Chicago's Second City touring company (Rovak, 2011, p. 84). He quickly rose in the ranks of comedians and television came calling when he landed a spot on *Exit 57*, a comedy skit-show produced for the cable network of Comedy Central (p. 100). But the show was soon cancelled and Colbert, now with a wife and small child, struggled to find steady work (p. 105). After a brief stint on *Good Morning America*, Colbert finally landed a spot on *The Daily Show*—then hosted by Craig Kilborn—playing a controversial news correspondent (p. 107). In 1998, Stewart would take over Kilborn's role of host, and together he and Colbert would refine the influential character that would go on to host *The Colbert Report* (p. 111).

Colbert the character made his debut on *The Daily Show* in June of 1997, but it wasn't until October 2005 that Colbert stepped out of his comedic correspondent's role on Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* to begin a new venture of his own television news parody. Airing on Comedy Central four nights a week, *The Colbert Report* attempts to make a mockery of the numerous political talk shows that have recently made their way to the forefront of news media. In 2006, *Time* magazine named Colbert one of the 100 most influential people in the world (Fowler, 2008, p. 534). Colbert's show began as a simple parody of the Fox News broadcast *The O'Reilly Factor*, but today it has become the source for where a growing number of young adults now turn to for their political news.

Colbert and Agenda Setting

The purpose of this study is to address *The Colbert Report* in terms of the political agenda the show sets for its audience. Colbert himself remains ambiguous about many of his political leanings on specific issues therefore it is not easily deduced whether or not he is in fact a) setting a political agenda to his young audience or b) what that possible political agenda is. In order to have a better understanding of Colbert, his show, and his possible agenda, this researcher will conduct a careful review of the content of this important news parody during one of the most historic presidential elections in American history.

The 2008 presidential election was historic; not only in its results but also in the way the media covered it. From Tina Fey's popular impersonation of Sarah Palin on *Saturday Night Live* to Katie Couric's infamous interview with Palin on CBS, traditional broadcast journalists and comedians both played a pivotal role in the coverage (Wegner & MacManus, 2009, p. 430). The use of new technology also catered to a younger generation by utilizing the new social media sites that sprung into popularity just after the 2004 presidential election. This impacted not only the demographic of people who were being informed about the political race, but also the way the race was being perceived.

It is estimated that 23 million Americans under the age of 30 voted in the 2008 presidential election (Circle, 2008). This was an increase of 3.4 million compared to the previous election (2008). Roughly 51% of 18 to 29 year olds came out to vote, making it the third highest rate of participation by young voters in a presidential election since 1972 (McKinney & Banwart, 2011, p. 2). The percentage of young voters had risen for the third time in a row, while the turnout of older Americans ages 30 and above actually declined from where it was just four years earlier in 2004 (p. 2). Among young voters, 68% of them supported the then Senator Barack

Obama while only 32% voted for Senator John McCain. Some people attributed this to Obama's ability to identify with the younger generation of digital natives—whose entire lives have now been eclipsed with new digital technology such as YouTube, Twitter, blogs, texting, and other social networking (p. 2). Others have attributed the surge in active young voters to the emergence of *The Colbert Report* and the *Daily Show* as many of the viewers of these shows are well under the age of 50—the *Colbert Report* with only 22% of their viewers over the age of 50 and the *Daily Show* with only 23% of viewers over the age of 50 (Who Knows News, 2008).

Due to this presidential election's uniqueness, various studies have been conducted to analyze the role of television and the Internet on the American youth and the media bias during that time. This study seeks to add to the investigations being conducted by answering the following research questions: 1) In the six weeks prior to the 2008 presidential election, which news segment type does *The Colbert Report* show more frequently—political segments or non-political segments? 2) How frequently did the political segments involve references to the issues voters said would be important to them while voting in the 2008 election? 3) Is there a quantitative correlation between the hierarchy of political issues discussed in the episodes of *The Colbert Report* that aired prior to the 2008 election and the hierarchy of issues voters said would be important to them while voting back in 2008?

In order to answer this study's research questions, the researcher will first conduct a literature review of the 1972 agenda-setting theory discussing how the media sets the political agenda for its audience. This review will then discuss past studies on persuasive humor to determine whether or not Colbert's humor aids in influencing his audience members political worldview. The review will also include recent studies conducted about Colbert and his influence both in popular culture and politics.

The intricacies of the methodology that will be used to answer this study's research questions will be explained in the methodology chapter. In summary, a content analysis similar to the one conducted in the 1972 agenda-setting study conducted by researchers Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw will be used. The methodology chapter will go into detail explaining the reasoning behind choosing McCombs and Shaw's study as the basis for discovering Colbert's possible political agenda in the weeks leading up to the 2008 presidential election.

Last in the results chapter, the researcher will analyze whether or not the data collected provide answers about the Colbert Report's possible political agenda in the weeks prior to the 2008 presidential election. Before his 2005 debut, Colbert had this to say about his show: "…I guarantee you that it has no political objective. I think it's dangerous for a comedian to say, 'I have a political objective.' Because then they stop being a comedian and they start being a politician…" (Solomon, 2005). Six years later Colbert's words from 2005 appear moot, as he has successfully launched a Super PAC with approval to raise unlimited amounts of campaign cash to influence the 2012 presidential election (Carnia, 2011). In the end, this study will allow conclusions to be drawn on whether or not *The Colbert Report* sets a political agenda for its viewers as well as give insight as to what that political agenda may be.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Through the years a number of studies have been conducted examining the media's political influence on its audience. As *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* have grown more popular, research conducted on the effects of political satire has grown in popularity as well. This chapter will first take a look at those studies conducted examining the media's political influence on its audience. The primary focus will be on the agenda-setting media theory and how politicians and the media work together in setting the public's political agenda. Second, the chapter will outline a few key studies investigating how humor can be used to influence and persuade an audience. Third, the chapter will go into detail about specific research done on *The Colbert Report* and its influence on politics. Specific attention will be given to the ambiguity of Colbert's celebrity persona and how it affects his viewers, as well as how some candidates' campaigns have been affected by appearances on the show. There will then be a brief summary of conclusions that might be drawn from the above research and what questions remain.

Agenda Setting: The Media and Politicians

In 1972, a duo by the name of McCombs and Shaw reported a thorough investigation of the central idea that there are certain people who control the flow of information going to and from the general public, also known as gatekeepers (Baran & Davis, 2009, p. 280). McCombs and Shaw applied this idea specifically to the media by conducting a content analysis on both the press and television newscasts to identify what issues the media were emphasizing during the 1968 presidential election (Zhu & Blood, 1996, p. 97). In the process they researched 100 registered voters from 1968's presidential election and looked at the voter's rankings of what

specific issues were important to them (Baran & Davis, 2009, p. 280). They then compared those findings to the content analysis of what issues were making an appearance on television news prior to the election (p. 280). McCombs and Shaw came to the conclusion that readers learn how much importance to attach to an issue based on if and how the media presents it therefore setting the "public's agenda." This finding was then further developed and termed the Agenda-Setting Theory (p. 280).

Although the term agenda setting is traced back to this 1972 study, the idea of the media determining what the public views as important can be traced back to the early 1900's. In 1922, Walter Lippmann argued that the "mass media create(s) images of events in people's minds, and warned of the serious responsibility of the press as purveyors and interpreters of events in society" (as cited in Zhu & Blood, 1996, p. 98). In 1963, Bernard Cohen wrote the following:

> (The press) may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about. And it follows from this that the world looks different to different people, depending not only on their personal interests, but also on the map that is drawn for them by the writers, editors and publishers of the papers they read (as cited in Zhu & Blood, 1996, p. 98).

The media agenda is often measured by how frequently and how prominently an issue is covered by the news while the public agenda is often measured by how people respond to the question: "What is the most important problem facing our nation today?" (Zhu & Blood, 1996, p. 100). For the most part during political campaigns, it is up to the media to cover the horserace to see which candidate is gaining ground and which candidate is losing it (Ridout & Smith, 2008, p. 598). But in recent years there is one feature of election coverage that stands out amidst the

numbers: the media's emphasis on the controversial issues where the two opposing sides disagree (p. 599).

There are many reasons why the media choose to focus on controversial issues, but one of the major reasons is that differing opinions on the controversial issues are what make each candidate distinguishable. Ideally in an unbiased manner the media is setting the agenda for viewers by showing them the differences between the two candidates on specific issues. These issues could possibly make or break the viewers deciding vote.

Another reason is that controversy and conflict attracts viewers. During his run for president in 2004, John Kerry was featured in U.S. newspapers over 500 times for allegedly lying about his heroism in Vietnam—much more than for his stances on public policy issues (as cited in Rideout & Smith, 2008, p. 599). In the same year, coverage of George W. Bush's alleged failure to fulfill his National Guard duties were abundant in comparison to coverage of his plans to incorporate private accounts into the social security system (p. 599). The media focused on these issues for the sake of ratings. This is most evident in the way the media covers political advertising campaigns.

One 2007 study took a look at how politically influential advertisements are (Franz, p. 465). The study reported that over $1 billion was spent in political advertising in the U.S. in 2004 (p. 465). The study concluded that political advertising persuades, but its impact depends on the characteristics of the viewer (p. 485). The study also argued that those who were most influenced by advertising were people who knew less about politics (p. 485).

In 2004, one academic study took an in-depth look at the impact of political ads and their media coverage. "Ad watches" is the term used to describe "newspaper columns and television segments that are devoted to monitoring the accuracy of political advertising" (Rideout & Smith,

2008, p. 599). Although ad watches are meant to inform the public about possible deception in advertising, "playing the ad in an ad watch causes people to remember the message of the ad more than the analysis that the reporter provided" giving the candidates "free advertising" (p. 599). In the 2004 study, it was discovered that these ad watches tend to focus on negative advertisement campaigns (p. 599). Researchers also discovered that when neither candidate goes negative in his or her ads, there is an average of seven ad watches during the race (p. 599). When one of the candidates puts out negative ads, there is an average of 24 ad watches, but when both candidates go negative with their ads that number increases to an average of 40 ad watches per race (p. 599). The study also claimed that by broadcasting the advertisements, many people remember the advertisement instead of the message being reported on thus amplifying the political advertisement itself (p. 599).

From the results of these two studies, one can deduce that advertisements are influential to a degree but are not the only method of influence when it comes to the way a person votes. It can also be concluded that the media's coverage of these ads can distract from and even distort the message behind the advertisements. It is also evident that the impact of negativity and controversy fuels media coverage of political campaigns and that the media amplifies the message simply by talking about it.

On the other side of the agenda setting tug-of-war are the candidates who use the media to highlight certain topics and aspects of issues they find to be the most important to their campaign. In March 2008, a study was conducted on whether or not a political candidate's ability to set the public's agenda depends on the media's willingness to reflect that candidate's issue emphases (Hayes, 2010, p. 134). In other words, this study raised the question: do political

candidates depend on members of the media to willingly accept and participate in highlighting certain topics that may or may not aid in running a successful campaign?

It is evident that candidates often desire to call attention to issues where they will be seen in a favorable light during the course of their political campaigns. Many times the general public does not experience direct contact with the political world (Hayes, 2010, p. 135). This creates a sense of uncertainty when it comes to what people view as the most important issues facing the country, their state, and their community (p. 135). To ease this uncertainty, the general public depends on the "political elites" of the media to give them information in a clear and concise way, focusing on only a small handful of problems (p. 135). In addition voters do not have the capability to recall every fact they know about a candidate, but instead recall the issues that receive the most attention during the campaign (p. 135). Based on this belief, the 2008 study asserted that candidates are most successful in setting the public agenda when the media reflects the candidate's issue emphasis (p. 135).

To prove this point the study evaluated the differences between candidate-media convergence and candidate-media divergence (Hayes, 2010, p. 136). When the candidate and the media both agree on the issues of importance during political campaigns, uncertainty about what issues they should know about is reduced for voters; this is candidate-media convergence (p. 136). Candidate-media divergence occurs when issues outside of what the candidates are presenting are brought to the general public by other outlets such as the media, creating a diffuse environment (p. 136). To prove that the effects of Agenda Setting Theory would be stronger when the candidate and the media's agenda converge rather than diverge, the 2008 study evaluated the 2006 Texas gubernatorial campaign (p. 136).

Recruiting 157 subjects from Austin, TX and the surrounding areas rather than a student sampling, the study offered a politically, socially, and demographically diverse sampling (Hayes, 2010, p. 136). The study also drew from the Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder "sequential" experiments in its methodology and exposed its subjects to candidate and media communications twice within the same week (p. 136). The subjects were also instructed to refrain from reading or watching the news during the 24-hour time lapse of experimental exposure in order to avoid contamination of the effects (p. 136).

The results of the 2008 study showed that each of the four treatment groups (media, candidates, convergence, and divergence) increased their perceived importance of taxes (Hayes, 2010, p. 140). The study found that statistically the increase of perceived importance of taxes among the participants in the divergence group was not different from that of the control group, which had no exposure to political material (p. 140). In contrast, the perceived importance of taxes among the convergence group increased more than twice the size of the divergence group in the study (p. 140). This research supports the idea that the public's perceived importance of a political issue is increased when the candidate's agenda and the media's agenda converge.

From the early 1900's to today, there is strong evidence to support the belief that the media and the candidates set the public's agenda in what issues they view as important. Whether it is through advertising or simple media coverage, candidates and the media are telling people what political issues and topics they should think about. This leads some people to question the methods the media and politicians will go to, to accomplish this goal of setting the public's political agenda.

Humor: Persuasion and Politics

The one thing that makes a show like *The Colbert Report* stand out among other news and political broadcasts is the "deadpan" humor Colbert brings to his audience through his character. One question some people have about the show is: Is he using humor for entertainment purposes or for purposes of political persuasion?

There has been extensive research throughout the years about the impact of humor on persuasion. This research is most often applied to persuasion through advertisements. In 1989, one study estimated that 24.4% of prime television advertising in the U.S. was intended to be humorous (as cited in Weinberger & Gulas, 1992, p. 35). One study in 1986 found that humorous content increases the comprehension of an advertisement while another study in 1986 found that humorous advertisements outperform non-humorous ads when it comes to gaining attention (p. 36). In a 1987 study, researchers concluded that comprehension effects might be dependent upon an individual's "comic wit" or type of humor (p. 38). These findings are also supported by earlier research, which suggested that humorous messages are seen as more interesting than comparable serious ones, but there was equal evidence that reported no significant difference between humorous and serious messages (Markiewicz, 1974, p. 413). It is evident through a review of the literature on the topic of humor as persuasion that the overall results have been mixed.

Brian Sternthal and C. Samuel Craig conducted one of the largest studies of humor and persuasion in 1973 (p. 12). Although they concluded that there was insufficient evidence to prove that humor was more persuasive than non-humor approaches, they also concluded that people are distracted by humor and this distraction factor causes some to be easily persuaded (as cited in Sternthal & Craig, 1973, p. 17). The study also reported that some types of humor could enhance the trustworthiness of a source as well as the likeability of the source (p. 17). Later

research supported this belief, as it was found in 1990 that "likeability" is a very important variable in the effectiveness of an advertisement (as cited in Weinberger & Gulas, 1992, p. 47). Also in 1990, it was found that individuals who "liked a commercial were twice as likely to be persuaded by it than people who felt neutral toward the advertising" (p. 17). In 1991, it was found that advertising that is "funny or clever" predicted the success of an ad 53% of the time whereas advertisements that are labeled as "boring" predicted failure 73% of the time (p. 47).

In 1986, a study grounded in the model of persuasion known as the Elaboration Likelihood Model found that if the message is sent through a route that is using less cognitive work, such as an entertainment news show, the potential for persuasion is much greater (as cited in Baumgartner & Morris, 2008, p. 624). From this research, it can be deduced that these two factors of likeability and trustworthiness can ultimately have a strong effect on the audience's ability to be persuaded. Although it is not been proven that humor creates persuasion, these findings are evidence that humor creates likability as well as a lack of cognitive work on the audience, which in turn increases the possibility of persuasion.

In terms of politics, humor has been used in various persuasive mediums—one of the most popular of these being political cartoons. In the early 1980's, editorial cartoonists were viewed to as "a special breed in the mass media" with one critic saying, "they make no claims on objectivity" (Compton, 2008, p. 40). In the late 1990's, cartoonists often went after public figures and subjected them to "exaggeration, ridicule, and sarcasm" (p. 40). One critic in 2004 wrote that political cartoons were "one of the most powerful weapons in the journalistic armory" (p. 40). But just how persuasive are they really? Quantitative studies on the subject are lacking, but one 1968 study analyzed a random sampling from two towns and a university city to reveal that 70% of the time, small town residents misunderstood the meaning of the political cartoons

(p. 40). For the same study in the university-city sampling, which included more academic readers, it was shown that 63% of the time those readers also misperceived the cartoonists' intended meaning (p. 40). According to the study, not only did the readers not understand but several of them also believed the cartoon's meaning was in direct opposition to what was truly intended (p. 41).

Another political cartoon study took a look at how caricatures play a prominent role in political cartoons. In this 1975 study, participants were each given cutout caricatured faces of Richard Nixon and asked to categorize the faces into ones they viewed as negative and ones they viewed as positive (as cited in Compton, 2008, p. 41). The study found that the caricatured faces drawn during the time period when the president had a low approval rating were placed into the negative category by the study's participants more often than the caricatured faces taken from a time period of high presidential approval rating (p. 41).

More recent studies have turned to late night television comedy as a platform for analysis and critique in terms of its political persuasiveness. Ranging in topic from late-night talk shows with Jay Leno to David Letterman to Conan O'Brien, and dating back to the years of Johnny Cason, researchers have found a growing interest in the political effects these shows and their hosts can have on voters. In 2005, one researcher from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that young viewers who watch late night comedy programs for political information are more likely to simply recognize rather than recall specific political information (Hollander, p. 407). Another study conducted in 2004 found that the viewers with lower political knowledge were the ones most influenced by these late-night comedy shows (as cited in Compton, 2008, p. 43). In 2006, the same researcher found evidence that late-night comedy viewers who demonstrated lower political knowledge were also more likely to reflect the

"negative character traits ridiculed in monologue jokes in their evaluations of these candidates" (p. 43).

In applying these findings to a show such as *The Colbert Report,* it can be proposed that it is possible the show is using humor to be persuasive in some way about the political issues it presents. It is also possible that humor is being used to distract viewer's attention away from noticing that there is a political agenda being set by *The Colbert Report*. But from the research it can also be said that audience members who are more politically savvy are not likely to be influenced by humor as persuasion while viewers who lack political knowledge find themselves more likely to be persuaded in the midst of humor.

***The Colbert Report:* Politics and Influence**

In October 2005, Colbert spun away from Stewart to create his own show *The Colbert Report.* Since then, he has created a world of influence commercially as well as politically. In 2006, he was the featured speaker at the White House Correspondents Dinner (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008, p. 622). In 2007, a Rasmussen poll showed Colbert would win 13% of the vote in a three-way voting contest with Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Rudy Giuliani (p. 534). In 2008, Colbert applied to run for president on the Democratic ticket in his home state of South Carolina—his application was later rejected (Kurtz, 2007). According to one poll report that same year, Colbert would have taken 2.3 percent of the vote had he been able to successfully run in the Democratic primary (Cillizza, 2007). More recently in 2010, he addressed the U.S. Congress about the treatment of Mexican migrant farm workers (Parker, 2010). Later that same year, he put on a political rally with Stewart to "Restore Sanity/Keep Fear Alive" in Washington, DC (Tavernise & Stelter, 2010).

Putting his most recent public appearances on Capitol Hill aside, Colbert continually demonstrates his mass influence in large form through the media outlet of his show. In the past, he has called his viewers to perform outlandish acts such as changing the Wikipedia page about elephants to state "the world population was no longer in need of protection because it had tripled in the last decade" (Fowler, 2008, p. 534). Within minutes, Colbert's fans responded and this myth became "fact" via Wikipedia. He also convinced viewers to vote for him in an online competition to have a Hungarian bridge named after him (p. 534). He received a total of 17 million votes (p. 534). Colbert's influence has also infiltrated into the English language as he coined the word "truthiness," which was recently voted the word of the year by the American Dialect Society (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008, p. 624).

Academic studies on the entertainer and his political influence are few, but in 2007 one researcher at Washington State University investigated whether or not shows such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* had any influence on how high school students perceive and understand politics and current events (Epstein, p. 2). The study was conducted using 173 high school students (juniors and seniors) in a small northwestern town (2007, p. 26). The experiment included a pre-test and post-test survey where the students were broken into two groups (p. 26). One group watched episodes of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*, while the other group watched episodes of *Sponge Bob Square Pants* (p. 26). The study found that both *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* positively affected how much students understood politics (p. 36). The study also found that both of these shows have little direct effect on how much a participant was willing to participate in politics (p. 37). This 2007 study supports the belief by some people that shows such as *The Colbert Report*

have educational political value, but no real influence on changes in political ideologies or willingness to participate in the political process.

In 2008, one associate professor of political science at the University of California, San Diego took a more mathematical approach at the show's political influence. This study analyzed what Colbert has termed "the Colbert bump" (Fowler, 2008, p. 533). Colbert coined the term to describe what he believes is the positive effect appearing on his program has on candidates running for office (p. 533). Prior to his appearance on *The Colbert Report* in 2007, Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee was polling at 1% (p. 533). Following his appearance, Huckabee was polling at 3% (p. 533). In November 2006, former New Orleans singer Democrat John Hall became the victor in a close congressional election for New York soon after appearing on Colbert's show (p. 533). Another notable victory would be Democrat Ned Lamont win as the Democratic nominee in the Connecticut race for U.S. Senate against Joe Lieberman, who refused to appear on Colbert's program (p. 533). Colbert also credited himself with doubling the support of Republican candidate Ron Paul, who appeared on the show during his 2008 presidential campaign (p. 533).

The Colbert Report has a long-running segment titled "Better Know a District," dedicated to interviewing candidates and profiling the districts where they serve (Fowler, 2008, p. 533). It is undetermined whether or not the majority of political candidates believe going on Colbert's show as a positive campaign move or a negative one, but in 2006 former House Speaker and Democrat Nancy Pelosi said, "I wouldn't recommend that anyone go on the show. I would think it would be okay to go on if you were live to tape, but don't subject yourself to a comic's edit unless you want to be made a fool of" (p. 533). Pelosi made her first appearance on the show in February 2012 (Parkinson, 2012).

Taking a look at the numbers, the 2008 study looked at data acquired from the Federal Election Commission (FEC) on all individual contributions to U.S. House campaigns between January 1, 2005 and October 30, 2007 (Fowler, 2008, p. 534). According to the study, a total of 1,568 candidates received at least one donation during this time period including 806 Democrats, 670 Republicans, and 92 third parties. Every candidate who appeared on *The Colbert Report's* segment "Better Know a District" was then paired with a comparable candidate, based on incumbency status (p. 534). The candidates were then ranked by the number of donations they received as well as the amount of money they received 30 days prior to appearing on the show (p. 534). Through this process, it was evident that Democrats received about 7.7 contributions less than their counterparts 30 days prior to their appearances on *The Colbert Report* (p. 534). The eight Republicans who appeared on the show received a monthly average of 53.6 contributions more than their matched counterparts 30 days prior to their appearances on the show, according to the research (p. 534).

The numbers take a turn following the candidate's appearances on *The Colbert Report*. In the 30 days after their appearances, Democrats receive significantly more contributions than their matched candidates, suggesting a "bump" of about one third over the normal number of donations received (Fowler, 2008, p. 534). According to the data, they also receive about two-fifths of a bump over the average amount of monthly monetary donations. The Republicans on the other hand, take a dip into the negative after appearing on the show as the number of monthly contributions and amount of monetary donations slightly decrease (p. 534). The 2008 study stated that it is possible that the changes in numbers may not be because of changes in public opinion or voting (Fowler, p. 539). Despite this, it is significant to note that candidates who appeared on *The Colbert Report* prior to their individual elections have won 67.7% of the vote

compared to the 64.7% the group of candidates who did not appear gained during their elections (p. 539).

In a 2009 study, researchers investigated "biased message processing of political satire in *The Colbert Report* and the influence of political ideology on perceptions of Stephen Colbert" (LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, p. 212). The study sought to answer two major questions. First what role does individual political ideology play in processing political satire? And second are individuals driven by in-group favoritism or a similar need to reinforce the favorable status of their political group to "see what they want to see in political satire?" (p. 213). In answering these questions the study found it was true that viewers perceive Colbert in reflection of their already established political ideologies (p. 223). This study supports the belief that Colbert is not influential in shifting a person's political ideology.

Political parties allow members to assimilate with a group as well as remain distinct within the group (LaMarre et. al., 2009, p. 214). The 2009 study expanded on earlier studies of "biased processing" and asserts that people process ambiguous information in a way that favors themselves and therefore also their political beliefs or groups (p. 215). One researcher stated that late-night political comedy is many times an ambiguous form of comedy and therefore requires audiences to "apply cognitive effort in processing the jokes" (p. 216). Some late-night comedians move in and out character providing viewers with personal and unambiguous commentary (p. 217). In contrast, Colbert of *The Colbert Report* engages in what is known as "deadpan" satire (p. 217). Colbert relies on a straight-faced approach to joke telling and remains in character throughout each episode. He does not provide his viewers with external cues of his personal beliefs and how they should interpret the message which, according to the 2009 study, creates conditions under which biased processing is likely to occur (p. 217). Although the audience can

tell that Colbert is being humorous, it is up to each individual to interpret not only the meaning of the message but also what his underlying meaning and if it is sincere (p. 217).

When the audience judges the satirist as being sincere, the statements the comedian makes are judged by the audience as being his or her true beliefs (LaMarre et. al., 2009, p. 217). Past studies have shown that audiences struggle with deadpan humor, which requires high levels of cognitive effort in order to be interpreted accurately, and it often results in miscues and errors (p. 217).

In *The Colbert Report*, Colbert plays a conservative political pundit who makes "socially conservative, authoritative, and aggressive statements" toward other groups who do not share his same opinions (LaMarre et. al., 2009, p. 217). The 2009 study asserts that political conservatives who watch *The Colbert Report* are significantly more likely than liberals to interpret Colbert's statements as "pro-conservative" (p. 217). To prove this point the study sites a 2007 interview Colbert did with CNN anchor Anderson Cooper about global warming. During the interview Colbert remains in character and asks Cooper, "What's wrong with the ice melting…maybe now Greenland will actually turn green" (p. 218). Rush Limbaugh, a conservative political talk show host, brought up similar arguments about the global warming debate earlier that same year (p. 218). Colbert went on to ask Cooper the ambiguous question of, "what can a person like me do that will in no way inconvenience me?" (p. 218). By inserting questions such as this one into his debates, he leaves the audience to interpret the message how they will. The 2009 study argues that when viewers are faced with such ambiguity, they will see what they want to see in the situation (p. 218).

The 2009 study presented material collected from an online survey of 332 participants who were enrolled in undergraduate communication classes at a large mid-western university

(LaMarre et. al., 2009, p. 219). The participants were asked questions about their individual exposures to political entertainment and perceptions about Colbert's political party affiliation and ideology prior to showing them a clip of *The Colbert Report* (p. 220). Post viewing the clip, the participants were asked to confirm that they were able to see and hear the entire clip, if the answer was yes they were then directed to a series of demographic questions as well as questions about their perceptions of Colbert (p. 220).

The 2009 study came to a series of conclusions based on the results gathered from the various experiments. First, it concluded that individual political conservatism was a significant predictor of perceptions that Colbert was using humor but truly meant what he said about liberals (LaMarre et. al., 2009, p. 222). In other words, conservatives believed Colbert was expressing his genuine feeling toward liberals through his comedy. The study also concluded that individual political ideology was a significant predictor of perceptions of Colbert's political ideology (p. 223). Conservatives were more likely to perceive Colbert as "politically conservative" and many participants who identified themselves with the Republican Party, perceived Colbert as a Republican (p. 223). As for the participants who identified themselves as politically liberal, they did not perceive Colbert as conservative, Republican, or disliking liberals (p. 223). Instead they believed Colbert was only joking and playing a character. In reference to whether or not Colbert was actually humorous, both sides agreed that he was (p. 223).

One of the most significant findings in the 2009 study was the assertion that bias processing has an indirect effect on individual-level political attitudes (LaMarre et. al., p. 226). In the video clip of *The Colbert Report* used in the study, the topic discussed between Colbert and his guest was that of the military's use of embedded journalists in the Iraq War (p. 226). The study found that individual conservatism was a positive predictor of perceptions that Colbert

personally favored embedded journalists in the Iraq War (p. 226). In addition, "perceptions of Colbert's opinion regarding embedded journalist positively predicted individual-level opinion regarding embedded journalists" (p. 226). The study found that individual attitudes concerning the issue of embedded journalists were "fully mediated by perceptions of Colbert's opinion regarding embedded journalists" (p. 226). This conclusion indicates that Colbert's influence reaches into his viewer's perceptions of political issues, however accurately or in some cases, inaccurately.

Throughout the years, studies have drawn a variety of conclusions about agenda setting, the media, politics, and humor. It is evident from the literature that the media and politicians are both willing participants in setting the public's agenda. They not only tell the public what they should think is important, but in many cases they seek to also demonstrate to the public exactly how they should process this important information.

So what sets Colbert and his show *The Colbert Report* apart from the news media? The answer to that question would be humor. Studies have been mixed on the effects of humor on persuasion. Although many believe it is a valuable asset in persuading people, it is evident that there must be some type of relevance of the humor to the topic at hand. It is also evident that the public's individual knowledge about the subject does have an effect on how well the humor is received and possible persuasion occurs.

A strong question that remains is: Is *The Colbert Report* setting the public's political agenda? Studies have shown that Colbert does have an effect on the way his viewers think about their politics. One mathematical study has brought forth evidence that candidates who go on his show are received slightly better by the general public than their non-guest counterparts. Another study found evidence that people put Colbert in political categories that are similar to their own,

whether that be conservative or liberal, and in time this affects the way they trust his opinions and may persuade them to take on his opinions as their own. The next chapter will explain the methods by which this study will discover whether or not Colbert's show is setting a political agenda.

Chapter 3

Methodology

When Stephen Colbert debuted his late-night television show satire in October 2005, the comedian hoped to develop a successful show by channeling different media personas (Bierly, 2005). One of the major television personas he channeled while planning his character was Bill O' Reilly of *The O'Reilly Factor* who has been widely known to set political agendas (2005). At the start of his television satire, Colbert defined his comedic character, known formerly as The Rev. Sir Dr. Stephen T. Colbert, as "a well-intentioned, poorly informed, high-status idiot" rather than an agenda setting news correspondent (2005).

Through the years *The Colbert Report* has proven to be successful in mixing genuine news with satirical comedy and attracting millions of viewers. Soon after airing his 400th episode in June of 2008, Colbert received the prestigious Peabody Award for his political news satire (Coyle, 2008). Despite his original intent, studies discussed previously in the literature review chapter have shown that Colbert does have some type of political influence in reference to the show's effects on political campaign funding (Fowler, 2008, p. 535). But has the show grown so influential that it now holds political clout in setting a particular political agenda for its audiences? Or does it remain simply a political mockery making light of cable-television news programs? This chapter will outline the methodology that will be used to discover whether or not *The Colbert Report* sets a political agenda and what that political agenda might be.

Quantitative Methodology

In the past, studies conducted about *The Colbert Report* have been primarily quantitative. In the previously mentioned 2008 study, Fowler took a quantitative approach to discovering whether or not *The Colbert Report* influenced the amount of political campaign funding

candidates received after appearing on the show (p. 534). This study depended primarily on statistical data received after conducting research on a series of candidates and tracking the number of donations they obtained prior to and after appearing on the show. (p. 534). Another previously mentioned study conducted in 2008 sought to discover Colbert's influence on the American youth. This particular study also used a quantitative method. The researcher set up experimental groups of college-aged students and evaluated the statistical results collected after participants were surveyed about their knowledge and opinions on various political issues (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008, p. 629).

In addition, a primarily quantitative approach has also been used to determine whether or not agenda setting is present in the media. The most prominent of these was the McCombs and Shaw study conducted in 1972, as previously mentioned in the literature review. The study was based primarily on the statistical results the researchers received after asking 100 registered voters to rank the political issues in order of importance (Baran & Davis, 2009, p. 280). They then compared those results to what issues the media was presenting to viewers at that time (p. 280).

Taking into account these successful methods of the past, this study attempts to use a similar method of research in order to discover whether or not a political agenda is being set on *The Colbert Report*. The chosen method of research for this study was a quantitative content analysis of selected segments of *The Colbert Report* that aired prior to the 2008 presidential election. The following will explain the details of what was researched, the specifics of how the study was conducted, and the reasons as to why this methodology was chosen.

What Was Researched

Political influence in terms of agenda setting and *The Colbert Report* is approached in this study using a quantitative content analysis. In a political field of study, personal and political biases on behalf of the researcher may interrupt the research and taint the results. To avoid this contamination, a primarily quantitative methodology was chosen. Three specific research questions were asked during the course of study. Later, in the results and discussion chapters, we will go into detail about how each of these research questions was answered.

RQ1: In the six weeks prior to the 2008 presidential election, which segment type does *The Colbert Report* show more frequently—political news segments or non-political news segments?

RQ2: How frequently did the political segments involve references to the issues voters said would be important to them while voting in the 2008 election?

RQ3: Is there a quantitative correlation between the hierarchy of political issues discussed in the episodes of *The Colbert Report* that aired prior to the 2008 election and the hierarchy of issues voters said would be important to them while voting back in 2008?

These research questions were used to define if Colbert had a political agenda and what that agenda was when it came to the political issues that were promoted on his show in 2008.

Defining Terms & Categorizing

For the purposes of this study, frequently used terms must be defined. The most important of these terms is "political agenda." A political agenda is defined as, "a set of policies or issues to be addressed or pursued by an individual or group" (Dictionary.com, 2011). In this study, the term political agenda is used when referring to a particular bias in the frequency with which a specific political issue is displayed or talked about during the segments of *The Colbert*

Report being analyzed. For example, if results from the segments analyzed showed that *The Colbert Report* most frequently featured the issue of abortion, the show would therefore be setting a political agenda about that topic.

In order to define the possible issues voters were concerned about during the 2008 election, the results of a 2008 CNN tracker poll will be used (CNN.com). In the week prior to the 2008 presidential election (October 30, 2008 to November 1, 2008), CNN in conjunction with Pollingreport.com conducted a phone survey of 714 likely voters to discover which issues would be most important to them when they decided how they would vote for president. The results of the survey were as follows: 57% economy, 13% war in Iraq, 13% health care, 10% terrorism, 5% illegal immigration, 2% other, and 1 % unsure (CNN.com, 2008). This survey was chosen because it most accurately depicts what voters were thinking at the time of the 2008 election. Conducting a survey of voters today about issues of concern from three years ago would not have been accurate due to possible contamination in political opinions during the time that has passed. This CNN survey will provide the study with accurate, statistical information from the time frame being researched.

In order to answer the first research question, segments of *The Colbert Report* were determined to be "political" if there was any mention of the political issues defined from the following 2008 CNN list of campaign issues: abortion, Afghanistan, Cuba, economy, education, energy, environment, free trade, guns, health care, homeland security, housing, immigration, Iran, Iraq, Israel, LGBT (lesbian, Gay, bisexual, transgender) issues, Russia, social security, stem cell research, and taxes (CNN.com). Also included in the list of political segments were segments that specifically discussed the politicians themselves. Segments that did not discuss these topics were categorized as "non-political" Examples of "non-political" segments include

music, book, and guest interviews that did not involve the discussion of politicians or political issues.

To answer the second research question, the researcher categorized the results of the study in terms of percentages based on frequency of each issue discussed. For political segments that did not include the discussion of a particular political issue, but do discuss politicians or political parties, these segments were categorized as "other."

In order to answer the third research question, the results of the findings will then be put together into levels of percentages based on the frequency of use to discover whether or not the political issues shown and discussed on *The Colbert Report* prior to the election, matched up with the order of importance voters assigned to each issue during that time. This quantitative study seeks to demonstrate whether or not *The Colbert Report* was actively participating in agenda setting during the 2008 election and what type of agenda was being promoted.

Selecting Segments of Study

As of March 2012, *The Colbert Report* has aired over 1,000 episodes with each episode running for 22 minutes (Colbertnation.com, 2011). The episodes feature various political, entertaining, and sometimes unique reoccurring segments including: Better Know a District, Democralypse Now!, Formidable Opponent, The Word, Threat Down, Tip of the Hat Wag of the Finger, People Destroying America, and Yaweh or No Way (2011). With the massive catalogue of material that could be reviewed, the importance of narrowing down a particular number of episodes to analyze was pertinent. The researcher performed a content analysis of the 24 episodes airing in the six weeks prior to the 2008 presidential election from September 23, 2008 to November 3, 2008. Choosing the episodes that broadcasted in the weeks immediately prior to the most recent U.S. presidential election allowed for the study to gain the most relevant material

that could be analyzed. *The Colbert Report* also aired on September 23, 2008 after coming back from a break in showings, therefore the six weeks of episodes that were be analyzed during this study represent a consistent block of time when the audience was able to view the show on a regular basis.

Taking all of these factors into consideration, the most important reason these episodes were selected for analysis was because they perfectly coincided with the time frame of the 2008 CNN survey that was used for the study. This is important because the accuracy of this study depends primarily on whether or not issues discussed on the episodes shown prior to the 2008 election match up with the political issues of concerns people claimed to have prior to the 2008 election. To summarize, this study sought to discover the political issues Colbert chose to feature on his show in the months leading up to the 2008 presidential election, therefore demonstrating if he had a political agenda and what that political agenda might have been during this time in American history.

In 1972, McCombs and Shaw began a study of research that opened the door for researchers of mass communications to discover the effects the news media has on its audience. Now that entertainment news shows such as *The O'Reilly Factor,* have opened the door for comedic parodies like *The Colbert Report*, this has created a shift in the way news is distributed. Using methods that have been developed and adapted from the original study on agenda setting conducted by McCombs and Shaw, this study is a continuation of the discussion and seeks to discover how changes in the way the public gets their news have also changed the sources of agenda setting.

Chapter 4

Results

The following chart represents the number of segments classified as political and non-political. During the study, segments covering entertainment news or Colbert's daily sign-off were categorized as "other." In the end, 77.9% of the segments were categorized as political and 22.1% were categorized as non-political.

Segments	Amount	Percent
Political	113	77.9%
Non-political	32	22.1%
Total	145	100%

The following chart depicts how many political segments discussed issues and how many were classified as other. For example, segments that discussed politicians, the election, or the political parties were classified as other. In the end, 72.6% of the segments analyzed were categorized as political issues and 27.4% were categorized as "other."

Political	Segment Amount	Percent
Political Issues	82	72.6%
Political Other	31	27.4%
Total	113	100%

The following chart represents the cross-tabs analysis of the frequency of issue mentions. It depicts the issue, the number of episodes that mentioned the issue, and the percentage of episodes where the issue was mentioned.

Issues	Episodes	Percent
Economy	22	91.7%
Iraq	17	70.8%
Afghanistan	10	41.7%
Terrorism	9	37.5%
Housing	9	37.5%
LGBT	8	33.3%
Energy	7	33.3%
Taxes	7	29.2%
Environment	6	25.0%
Health Care	5	20.8%
Social Security	5	20.8%
Guns	5	20.8%
Education	4	16.7%
Immigration	4	16.7%
Iran	4	16.7%
Russia	4	16.7%
Free Trade	3	12.5%
Cuba	3	12.5%
Israel	1	4.2%
Homeland Security	1	4.2%
Not Mentioned: Abortion, Stem Cell		

This analysis found that the economy was mentioned in a total of 22 episodes making it the most discussed issue prior to the 2008 presidential election. Among the frequency of episodes, the issues of Israel and homeland security were brought up the least—each being mentioned only in one episode. It should also be noted that two issues were not mentioned in any of the episodes prior to the 2008 presidential election. These were the issues of abortion and stem cell.

The following chart depicts the hierarchy of the study's findings in comparison to the 2008 CNN survey conducted of the issues voters said were most important to them in the weeks leading up to the presidential election.

Issues	Percent of Episodes	CNN Survey	Percent of Voters
Economy	91.7%	Economy	57%
Iraq	70.8%	War in Iraq	13%
Terrorism	37.5%	Health Care	13%
Health Care	20.8%	Terrorism	10%
Immigration	16.7%	Illegal immigration	5%

The CNN survey also showed that 2% of voters surveyed chose "other" as the most determining factor and 1% were "unsure." The study found that the major difference between the CNN survey from 2008 and the issues featured on The Colbert Report at that time was health care. Health care was featured on *The Colbert Report* far less than discussions about the war in Iraq, but according to the CNN study, both of these issues were equal in importance to voters at that time.

The following chart depicts the linear regression of probability distribution of *The Colbert Report*'s most discussed issue (the economy) throughout the six weeks prior to the 2008 presidential election.

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	77.786	1	77.786	6.011	.024
Residual	258.805	20	12.940		
Total	336.591	21			

*Predictors: (Constant) Weeks
*Dependent Variable: Economy

This test found there was statistical significance in the probability distribution of the discussion of the economy over the six weeks prior to the election. Linear regressions were also run on the other 23 issues, but no statistical significance was found when it came to the discussion of any of those issues during the six weeks prior to the 2008 presidential election.

The following chart depicts the linear regression of probability distribution of *The Colbert Report*'s most discussed issue (the economy) throughout the episodes that aired prior to the 2008 presidential election. Linear regression was chosen in order to determine whether or not there is significance in the relationship between this study's dependent and independent variables.

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	66.016	1	66.016	4.880	.039
Residual	270.575	20	13.529		
Total	336.591	21			

*Predictors: (Constant) Episodes
*Dependent Variable: Economy

This test found there was statistical significance in the probability distribution of the discussion of the economy over the course of the 24 episodes that aired prior to the election. Therefore not only was the discussion consistent over the course of six weeks, it was consistent in episode distribution as well.

The following chart depicts information about the frequency of the data analyzed in this study. The first chart shows: 1) The frequency of episodes Afghanistan was mentioned in 2) The number of Afghanistan mentions those specific episodes held 3) The percentage of the Afghanistan mentions those episodes held and 4) The percentage episodes which featured those Afghanistan mentions.

Afghanistan	Mentions	Number of Episodes	Percent	Percentage of Episodes
	1	8	80.0%	33.3%
	2	1	10%	4.2%
	5	1	10.0%	4.2%
Total	15	10	100%	41.7%

Example: Afghanistan was mentioned one time in eight different episodes. This made up a total of 80% of the overall Afghanistan mentions and a total of 33.3% of all episodes.

Afghanistan was mentioned twice in one episode accounting for 10% of all Afghanistan mentions and 4.2% of the episodes. Afghanistan was mentioned five times in one episode. This also accounted for a total of 10% of all Afghanistan mentions and made up 4.2% of the episodes. Finally, Afghanistan was mentioned in 10 different episodes and 15 times over the course of six weeks, accounting for 41.7% of episodes.

The following charts will depict this same frequency data from each issue analyzed in the study of the 24 episodes that aired prior to the 2008 presidential election.

Cuba	Mentions	Number of Episodes	Percent	Percentage of Episodes
	1	2	66.7%	8.3%
	2	1	33.3%	4.2%
Total	4	3	100%	12.5%

Cuba was mentioned one time in two different episodes. This made up 66.7% of all Cuba mentions and 8.3% of all episodes. Cuba was also mentioned twice in one episode. This made up 33.3% of all Cuba mentions and 4.2% of all episodes. Over the six weeks of *Colbert Report* episodes that aired prior to the 2008 presidential election Cuba was mentioned a total of four times and in three episodes, accounting for 12.5% of the episodes that aired prior to the 2008 presidential election.

Economy	Mentions	Number of Episodes	Percentage of Mentions	Percentage of Episodes
	1	4	18.2%	16.7%
	2	2	9.1%	8.3%
	3	1	4.5%	4.2%
	4	1	4.5%	4.2%
	5	4	18.2%	16.7%
	6	2	9.1%	8.3%
	7	1	4.5%	4.2%
	8	1	4.5%	4.2%
	9	1	4.5%	4.2%
	10	2	9.1%	8.3%
	11	1	4.5%	4.2%
	12	1	4.5%	4.2%
	15	1	4.5%	4.2%
Total	129	22	100%	91.7%

Economy was mentioned once in four different episodes. This made up 18.2% of all economy mentions and 16.7% of episodes. Economy was also mentioned twice in two different episodes, making up 9.1% of all economy mentions and 8.3% of episodes. In one episode the economy was mentioned three different times. This made up 4.5% of economy mentions and 4.2% of episodes. In another episode the economy was mentioned four times. This also made up 4.5% of economy mentions and 4.2% of episodes overall. In four different episodes the economy was mentioned five times, making up 18.2% of the economy mentions and 16.7% of overall episodes. In two separate episodes the economy was mentioned six times, making up 9.1% of its total mentions and 8.3% of episodes overall.

In one episode each, the economy was mentioned 7, 8, and 9 times. Each of these combinations made up 4.5% of the overall economy mentions and 4.2% of episodes overall. In two separate episodes the economy was mentioned 10 different times each, making up 9.1% of total economy mentions and 8.3% of episodes. Finally, in one episode each the economy was mentioned 11, 12, and 15 times. The data gathered from each of these episode combinations made up 4.5% each of all economy mentions and 4.2% of episodes. In sum, the economy was

mentioned a total of 129 times over the span of 22 different episodes that aired during the six weeks prior to the 2008 presidential election.

Education	Mentions	Number of Episodes	Percent	Percentage of Episodes
	1	3	75%	12.5%
	8	1	25%	4.2%
Total	11	4	100%	16.7%

Education was mentioned once in three different episodes. This combination made up a total of 75% of education mentions and 12.5% of episodes. Education was also mentioned eight times in one episode. This combination made up 25% of all education mentions and 4.2% of all episodes. In sum, Education was mentioned 11 times and in four episodes accounting for a total of 16.7% of all episodes analyzed.

Energy	Mentions	Number of Episodes	Percent	Percentage of Episdoes
	1	6	75%	25%
	2	1	12.5%	4.2%
	3	1	12.5%	4.2%
Total	10	7	100%	33.3%

Energy was mentioned once in six separate episodes. This made up 75% of total energy mentions and 25% of episodes. Energy was also mentioned twice in one episode and three times in one episode. Each of these episode mentions made up 12.5% each of all energy mentions and 4.2% each of all episodes. Overall, energy was mentioned a total of 10 times in a total of seven episodes over the course of six weeks, showing up in a total of 33.3% of the episodes analyzed.

Environment	Mentions	Number of Episodes	Percent	Percentage of Episodes
	1	3	50.0%	12.5%
	2	1	16.7%	4.2%
	3	2	33.3%	8.3%
Total	11	6	100%	25.0%

Environment was mentioned once in three separate episodes. This made up 50% of all environment mentions and 12.5% of episodes. The topic was also mentioned twice in one episode making up 16.7% of all environment mentions and 4.2% of episodes. Environment was mentioned three times in two different episodes accounting for 33.3% of all environment mentions and 8.3% of all episodes. In sum, the environment was mentioned a total of 11 times in a total of six episodes making up 25% of all episodes that were analyzed in this study.

Free Trade	Mentions	Number of Episodes	Percent	Percentage of Episodes
	2	1	33.3%	4.2%
	4	1	33.3%	4.2%
	7	1	33.3%	4.2%
Total	13	3	100%	12.5%

Free trade was mentioned twice in one episode, four times in another episode, and seven times in a final episode. The data gathered from each one of these episodes made up 33.3% of free trade mentions and 4.2% of episodes overall. In sum, free trade was mentioned 13 times in a total of three episodes over the six weeks prior to the 2008 presidential election.

Guns	Mentions	Number of Episodes	Percent	Percentage of Episodes
	1	4	80.0%	16.7%
	2	1	20%	4.2%
Total	6	5	100%	20.8%

Guns were mentioned once in four separate episodes, making a total of 80% of all gun mentions and 16.7% of all episodes. Guns were also mentioned twice in once episode. This made 20% of all gun mentions and 4.2% of all episodes. Guns were mentioned a total of six times and in five different episodes, making a total of 20.8% of all episodes that aired in the six weeks before the election.

Health Care	Mentions	Number of Episodes	Percent	Percentage of Episodes
	1	2	40.0%	8.3%
	2	2	40.0%	8.3%
	3	1	20.0%	4.2%
Total	9	5	100%	20.8%

Health care was mentioned once in two different episodes. This made up a total of 40% of all health care mentions and 8.3% of all episodes. Health care was also mentioned twice in two different episodes. This combination made up 40% of all health care mentions and 8.3% of all episodes. Health care was mentioned three times in one episode. This combination made up 20% of all health care mentions and 4.2% of all episodes. In sum, health care was mentioned nine times and in five episodes that aired in the six weeks prior to the 2008 presidential election accounting for 20.8% of the episodes.

Homeland Security	Mentions	Number of Episodes	Percent	Percentage of Episodes
	2	1	100%	4.2%
Total	2	1	100%	4.2%

Homeland security was mentioned twice in one episode. This made up 4.2% of all the episodes that aired six weeks prior to the 2008 presidential election

Housing	Mentions	Number of Episodes	Percent	Percentage of Episodes
	1	6	66.7%	25.0%
	2	2	22.2%	8.3%
	9	1	11.1%	4.2%
Total	19	5	100%	37.5%

Housing was mentioned once in six different episodes. This accounted for 66.7% of housing mentions and 25% of all episodes that aired in the six weeks prior to the 2008 election. Housing was also mentioned twice in two different episodes, accounting for 22.2% of all housing mentions and 8.3% of all episodes. Housing was also mentioned nine times in one episode. This combination made up 11.1% of all housing mentions and 4.2% of all episodes. Overall, housing

was mentioned a total of 19 times and in a total of five episodes. This made up 37.5% of all episodes analyzed.

Immigration	Mentions	Number of Episodes	Percent	Percentage of Episodes
	1	2	50.0%	8.3%
	2	1	25.0%	4.2%
	3	1	25.0%	4.2%
Total	7	4	100%	16.7%

Immigration was mentioned once in two different episodes. This combination made up 50% of all immigration mentions and 8.3% of all episodes. Immigration was also mentioned twice in once episode and three times in another. Each of these combinations made up 25% of all immigration mentions and 4.2% of all episodes. Overall, immigration was mentioned a total of seven times and in four episodes in the six weeks that aired prior to the 2008 presidential election.

Iran	Mentions	Number of Episodes	Percent	Percentage of Episodes
	1	2	50.0%	8.3%
	2	1	25.0%	4.2%
	3	1	25.0%	4.2%
Total	7	4	100%	16.7%

Iran was mentioned once time in two different episodes. This combination made up 50% of all Iran mentions and 8.3% of the episodes. Iran was also mentioned twice in one episode and three times in another. Each of these combinations made up 25% of all immigration mentions and 4.2% of all episodes. In sum, Iran was mentioned a total of seven times and in four episodes in the six weeks prior to the 2008 election.

Iraq	Mentions	Number of Episodes	Percent	Percentage of Episodes
	1	11	64.7%	45.8%
	2	3	17.6%	12.5%
	3	1	5.9%	4.2%
	5	1	5.9%	4.2%
	8	1	5.9%	4.2%
Total	33	17	100%	70.8%

Iraq was mentioned once in 11 different episodes. This made up a total of 64.7% of all the Iraq mentions and 45.8% of all the episodes. Iraq was also mentioned twice in three different episodes. This combination made up 17.6% of all Iraq mentions and 12.5% of all episodes. Iraq was also mentioned three times in one episode, five times in one episode, and eight times in one episode. The data pulled from each one of these combinations made up 5.9% of all Iraq mentions and 4.2% of all episodes analyzed. In sum, Iraq was mentioned a total of 33 times and in a total of 17 different episodes, accounting for 70.8% of all episodes analyzed.

Israel	Mentions	Number of Episodes	Percent	Percentage of Episodes
	1	1	100%	4.2%
Total	1	1	100%	4.2%

Israel was mentioned once in one episode. This accounted for 4.2% of the episodes.

LGBT	Mentions	Number of Episodes	Percent	Percentage of Episodes
	1	4	50.0%	16.7%
	2	3	37.5%	12.5%
	4	1	12.5%	4.2%
Total	14	8	100%	33.3%

LGBT was mentioned once in four different episodes, accounting for 50% of all LGBT mentions and 16.7% of all episode mentions. LGBT was also mentioned twice in three different episodes. This combination made up 37.5% of all mentions and 12.5% of all episodes. Lastly, LGBT was mentioned four times in one episode. This accounted for 12.5% of all LGBT

mentions and 4.2% of all episodes. In sum, LGBT was mentioned 14 times and in eight different episodes making up a total of 33.3% of the episodes.

Russia	Mentions	Number of Episodes	Percent	Percentage of Episodes
	1	4	100%	16.7%
Total	1	1	100%	16.7%

Russia was mentioned one time in a total of four episodes. This made up 16.7% of all episodes analyzed.

Social Security	Mentions	Number of Episodes	Percent	Percentage of Episodes
	1	4	80.0%	16.7%
	5	1	20%	4.2%
Total	9	5	100%	20.8%

Social security was mentioned once in four different episodes. This combination made up a total of 80% of all social security mentions and 16.7% of episodes. This issue was also mentioned five times in one episode. This combination made up 20% of all social security mentions and 4.2% of episodes. Overall, social security was mentioned nine times and in five episodes making up a total of 20.8% of the episodes analyzed.

Taxes	Mentions	Number of Episodes	Percent	Percentage of Episodes
	1	4	57.1%	16.7%
	3	1	14.3%	4.2%
	4	1	14.3%	4.2%
	7	1	14.3%	4.2%
Total	18	7	100%	29.2%

Taxes were mentioned once in a total of four episodes. This made up 57.1% of all taxes mentions and 16.7% of the episodes. Taxes were also mentioned three times in one episode, four times in one episode, and seven times in one episode. Each of the data gather from each of these combinations made up a total of 14.3% (each) of all taxes mentions and 4.2% (each) of all

episodes. In sum, taxes were mentioned a total of 18 times and in a total of seven episodes. This made up a total of 29.9% of the episodes analyzed.

Terrorism	Mentions	Number of Episodes	Percent	Percentage of Episodes
	1	3	33.3%	12.5%
	2	2	22.2%	8.3%
	3	3	33.3%	12.5%
	5	1	11.1%	4.2%
Total	21	9	100%	37.5%

Terrorism was mentioned once in three different episodes making up 33.3% of all terrorism mentions and 12.5% of all episodes. Terrorism was also mentioned twice in two different episodes making up a total of 22.2% of all terrorism mentions and 8.3% of all episodes. The issue was also mentioned three times in three different episodes. This made up 33.3% of all terrorism mentions and 12.5% of all episodes. Lastly, terrorism was mentioned five times in one episode. This made up 11.1% of all mentions and 4.2% of all episodes. In sum, terrorism was mentioned a total of 21 times and in a total of nine different episodes, making up 37.5% of all episodes.

As previously mentioned, two issues are not depicted in the above charts. The issues of abortion and stem cell were not mentioned in any of *The Colbert Report* episodes that aired in the six weeks prior to the 2008 presidential election. The topic of "other" was also not depicted in the above charts as that topic, for the purposes of this study, was classified as segments that discussed politicians and political parties rather than specific political issues. A one-way ANOVA test was also conducted using the issues as the dependent variable and the weeks the episode aired as the independent variable. This test found no statistical significance.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of agenda setting in *The Colbert Report* in the weeks leading up to the 2008 presidential election. The study examined the frequency and prominence upon which the top political issues in America at that time were discussed on the show. RQ1 asked, "In the six weeks prior to the 2008 presidential election, which segment type does *The Colbert Report* show more frequently—political news segments or non-political news segments?" This content analysis revealed that in the six weeks prior to the 2008 presidential election, *The Colbert Report* showed a total of 113 political and 32 non-political segments. The non-political segments primarily involved musical guest artists and Colbert's nightly sign-off.

These results show that the focus of *The Colbert Report* was on political topics. Political segments were a strong majority making up 77.9% of the segments analyzed in this study. As a mock television news show, it is not necessary that the show be focused primarily on politics; traditional news segments focus on a variety of topics including sports, entertainment, weather, and crime. In the six weeks prior to the 2008 election, Colbert chose to focus the majority of his segments on what was going on in the political race, paving the way for a political agenda to be set to his young audience in terms of what he chose to discuss on his show during that time. But it should also be noted that because of Colbert's focus on politics over any other type of news segments an agenda was already being set, even without further analysis. Colbert set an agenda for his audience showing them that politics and knowledge about what was going on in the political race was something of importance—more important than other news about sports, entertainment, or weather, etc. For Colbert at that time, politics was something that deserved

more attention than anything else going on in the world and that is what he chose to discuss and relay to his audience.

RQ2 asked, "How frequently did the political segments involve references to the issues voters said would be important to them while voting in the 2008 presidential election?" The content analysis revealed that out of the top five issues voters said were important to them in 2008, Colbert discussed the economy 129 times, the war in Iraq 33 times, terrorism 21 times, health care 9 times, and immigration 7 times. In all, Colbert mentioned political campaign issues a total of 364 times in the six weeks leading up to the 2008 presidential election.

The CNN survey showed that voters were most concerned about five major topics. Colbert mentioned all of these topics in the episodes that aired prior to the 2008 presidential election demonstrating that his show and its creators were in tune with what the American voters were concerned about. In terms of the issues *The Colbert Report* discussed during that time, rather than choosing a political agenda that entirely skewed away from the voter's political concerns, the show essentially gave viewers information about the topics they wanted to know more about. From these results it can be argued that in terms of issues, Colbert did not set his own personal or political agenda but rather stayed in line with the political agenda Americans had already set up for themselves.

RQ3 asked, "Is there a quantitative correlation between the hierarchy of political issues discussed in the episodes of *The Colbert Report* that aired prior to the 2008 election and the hierarchy of issues voters said would be important to them while voting back in 2008?" The content analysis revealed there were strong similarities in the hierarchy of campaign issues. Economy remained consistently the most dominant issue in both the 2008 CNN survey and the number of times it was mentioned on *The Colbert Report*. Out of the five primary issues polled

in the survey, health care was the one that proved to be most inconsistent with the frequency upon which it was mentioned on the show. The 2008 poll showed health care as important an issue to the American public as the war in Iraq, both polling in at 13%. Despite this, Colbert chose to discuss this issue in half as many episodes as his discussions on the war in Iraq, and putting it well below his discussion of the issues: terrorism, housing, taxes, the war in Afghanistan, LGBT, free trade, environment, and energy.

This can imply many things. For the most part, Colbert's hierarchy of issue discussion stayed in line with what the American public said they were concerned about during that time. They found the economy to be the most valuable topic and so did *The Colbert Report* discussing it in 90% of the episodes that aired. But these results also show that Colbert does stray away from the American public at times. The show's decision not to focus on health care, despite the fact that the American public was concerned about the issue as much as they were concerned about what was going on in the war in Iraq, shows that at times the show sets a new political agenda. In the weeks leading up to the 2008 presidential election, the show demonstrated to its audiences that health care was not as important of a discussion as other things such as terrorism, housing, taxes, the war in Afghanistan, LGBT issues, free trade, the environment, and energy. Some of these topics the show saw as more valuable than health care can arguably be placed into the top category of the economy including housing, taxes, free trade, and even at times energy. The war in Afghanistan can also arguably be categorized under the issue of terrorism. But from these results it can be concluded that the show demonstrates the issues of LGBT and the environment should be more of a concern to its viewers than the issue of health care. Specific reasons for this are unclear, but it should be noted that then Democratic nominee Senator Obama and then Republican nominee Senator McCain differed starkly on various elements of the

economy (Sahadi, 2008). These results also raise questions about the possibility that the show at times did set its own political agenda outside of the public's already established political concerns.

Other Research and Analysis Observations

There were only two political issues Colbert did not mention during the six weeks of episodes that aired prior to the 2008 election—abortion and stem cell. This would imply that the show was setting the agenda to its audience that the topics of abortion and stem cell are not of importance. But there are other more obvious conclusions that can be drawn about this. Despite Colbert's mockery of conservative political talk show hosts, Colbert himself is Catholic and frequently refers to this fact on his show. *The Colbert Report* is a satire, which leaves everything Colbert says on the show to be left up to interpretation. Traditional Catholics have been vocal about their disapproval of abortion as well as embryonic stem-cell research. It can be speculated that Colbert did not discuss these topics as to not leave room for inquiry about his personal beliefs and opinions on these subjects. More recent activity on Colbert's show would argue to the contrary of this faith-based theory as he has vocally discussed the 2012 debate over whether or not religious organizations should be mandated to provide women with contraceptives for free. The Catholic Church, which is doctrinally against contraception, and many other religious organizations have has spoken out against this mandate. Colbert meanwhile has used satire to openly mock those who are in agreement with the church on this issue. Taking all these things into account, a further and more in-depth analysis would have to be conducted to discover whether or not Colbert's behavior accurately reflects the behavior encouraged by the doctrine of his chosen faith.

Another observation is the fact that over half of the different episodes analyzed, 66.7%, included political segments that were dedicated solely to the discussion of politicians and political parties. They had no mention of any political issues. From these results it can be concluded that the show also set a political agenda that politicians and political parties should be as important to its viewers as many of the political issues are.

Limitations

The largest limitation in this study was placing *The Colbert Report*'s political segments into the "other" category. The 2008 CNN poll reported that 2% of voters polled decided that some "other" issue was most important to them when choosing a president. No information was given as to what this "other" issue was. There are a number of possibilities including political party association, demographics, rumors that came up about the politicians during the race, or a number of other political issues not mentioned in the CNN poll.

In the year prior to the election, it was reported that when choosing a leader Republicans looked for decisiveness, a strong belief in God, and military service (Bennis, 2009, p. 222). Democrats on the other hand valued a leader who had new ideas, was understanding and sympathetic to others, as well as likeable (p. 222). Any of these characteristics could have been a deciding factor to that 2% of voters. When choosing what segments would make up the "other" category while analyzing *The Colbert Report*, it was decided that only political segments involving the discussion of politicians and political parties, but not specific issues, would be placed in that category. This gives an improper reflection of the hierarchy of "other" when comparing the 2008 CNN poll to the episodes of *The Colbert Report*.

Another technical limitation to this study was the fact that one segment of "The Word," which aired on October 15th, is no longer available to be viewed by the public. This segment

was titled "Freaky Three-way Calling" and discussed accusations against the National Security Agency's (NSA) listening in and distributing information of personal phone calls between American soldiers, journalists, and aide workers. In 2008, ABC News reported that members of the NSA listened in on telephone sex conversations and passed these conversations around to others in their office (Ross, 2008). Colbert reported on this in his October 15th episode but the segment has been taken off his website, Colbertnation.com.

It should be noted that there were other episode segments from this six week time period that were not available through his website, but all of those included some type of musical performances and were specifically cited as being "unavailable." These segments were also easily found elsewhere on the web—primarily through TV Guide's website which also stores episodes of *The Colbert Report*. Colbert's October 15th "The Word: Freaky Three-way Calling" segment could not be viewed elsewhere on the web nor was its previous presence cited anywhere on Colbertnation.com.

The final limitation to this study was the lack of demographics on the CNN survey used in the comparison of political issues done for this study. *The Colbert Report* has a specific, predominantly young demographic. The CNN survey used in this study did not specify the ages of those who were surveyed for their take on political issues. As a result, the comparison conducted could be a bit skewed. Had the survey been given to a specific demographic that matched up with Colbert's audience, it would have been a more accurate comparison.

Future Areas of Study

The major area of future study would be to address Colbert's discussion and framing of politicians and political parties. This is a relevant area of future study. Many of the episodes analyzed from *The Colbert Report* discussed the political parties and politicians themselves more

dominantly than the issues. Some included comedic references such as Colbert's September 25th episode where he interviewed National Organization for Women (NOW) president Kim Gandy about Palin, asking her whether or not her disapproval of Palin was because she believed Palin was a man. While others took a more serious tone including Colbert's numerous mentions of the McCain's "negative political ads." It is also noticeable to point out that whether referred to positively or negatively, McCain and Palin were mentioned many more times than Obama was in the episodes that were analyzed.

Another area of future study that goes back to the foundation of agenda setting is the selection of guests who appeared on the show. Each guest brought with them their own set of political opinions and agendas. Throughout the interview segments many of the guests voiced opinions contrary to that of Colbert's conservative "character." The list included that of director Oliver Stone, who came on to discuss his 2008 movie 'W' about the life of former President George W. Bush, and political analyst David Gergen, who came on and discussed his disapproval of Palin and McCain's lack of rebuke toward rebellious crowds shouting racists comments during their political rallies. The episodes analyzed also showed interview segments from guests who were not categorized as "liberal" but many of which did not approve of the Republican nominees. This included conservative guest Kathleen Parker who on October 13th came on the show to discuss her disapproval of Palin as the vice-presidential nominee. On October 28th Brian Moore, a socialist candidate running for president in 2008, came on the show to discuss the reasons why Obama should not be classified as a socialist. Colbert also had writer and Native American Sherman Alexie come on to discuss why McCain may be a better choice for Native Americans, but he is not the best choice for the country as a whole.

One noticeable guest selection that stood out among the others was that of Joe Scarborough on October 8th. Scarborough, a well-known conservative and host of the Morning Joe on MSNBC, was one of the few guests who supported the Republican nominees. During his interview he told Colbert that McCain would have a better chance of winning the election if voter's primary concern had been the war in Iraq, but because voters were more concerned about the economy it was more likely Obama would prevail victorious. Scarborough's interview was also one of the few that focused and analyzed the political race simply on the issues rather than the politicians and the rumors that surrounded their campaigns.

Conclusion

Much has changed in American politics and the media since the 2008 presidential election. Today Republicans and Democrats are strongly divided not only in what they stand for but also in what traits they value in a president. Back in 2008, many political figureheads on both sides of the political fence came out in support of then Senator Barack Obama, including retired general and former Republican Secretary of State Colin Powell (Bennis, 2009, p. 222). Powell described Obama as a "transformational figure," believing he was the right leader for that time in American history and interestingly enough, as a result of the 2008 presidential election, Obama became America's 44th president (p. 222). While the everlasting impact of this powerful and historic election is yet to be seen accurately and fully evaluated, it can be concluded from this study that *The Colbert Report* played a significant role in setting a strong political agenda for its viewers during this pivotal time in American history.

This study also confirms that *The Colbert Report* is more than a source of simple entertainment. It is not merely a conglomeration of comedic segments featuring political gaffes, but rather it holds a steady political agenda in terms of the specific issues it chooses to showcase

or ignore. As a result *The Colbert Report*, which started as a simple mockery of "legitimate" television news, now finds itself side-by-side with those television shows it originally intended to make light of. Whether intentional or not, Colbert's show is a legitimate source of political news that sets its own political agenda for its viewers. While this is an important revelation, the true political implications of this discovery will only be found in our nation's future generations. In addition, this study demonstrates that Colbert sets another kind of important, but less discussed political agenda with his satire television show. Over the past six years, his uninhibited enthusiasm for politics and current events in our nation has shown young viewers that above all political knowledge should be something sought after and viewed as extremely valuable.

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Appendix

The following is an outline of the episodes that were analyzed for this study including the episode number and title. A brief summary of each episode is also included discussing the topic each episode opens with and the special guest each episode features. This will give a general overview of the collection of episodes that were analyzed quantitatively based on their content.

#04119: "OhMyGodSocietyIsCollapsingAndWeWillSoonBeDevouring EachOtherInTheStreetsLikeDogsAndACrippledOne-EyedBoyWillBeKingIfWe Don'tFixThisByNextWeek!" Colbert begins this episode with a discussion about his recent Emmy win. The featured guest was singer Jackson Browne (Colbertnation.com, 2011).

#04120: "Untitled" In this episode Colbert begins with a discussion about the economic crisis. His featured guests were writer Joe Nocera and philosopher Cornel West (Colbertnation.com, 2011).

#04121: "Untitled" Colbert begins the episode discussing the possible postponement of the first presidential debate. The featured guests were former president of National Organization for Women (NOW) Kim Gandy and writer Nick Carr (Colbertnation.com, 2011).

#04122: "Ye of Little Faith" This episode begins with a discussion about the first presidential debate. The featured guest was Democratic political consultant Paul Begala (Colbertnation.com, 2011).

#04123: "Untitled" Colbert begins this episode discussing the bailout bill Congress passed in order to help with the economic crisis. The featured guest was singer James Taylor (Colbertnation.com, 2011).

#04124: "Future Perfect" This episode opens up with a discussion about the economic crisis. The featured guest was Dave Levin (Colbertnation.com, 2011).

#04125: “Untitled” Colbert begins this episode with a discussion about the vice-presidential debated. His featured guests were literary critic Stephen Greenblatt and writer Naomi Klein (Colbertnation.com, 2011).

#04126: “Maverick Without A Cause” This episode begins with a discussion about O.J. Simpson’s arrest for kidnapping and armed robbery. The featured guest was Jim Kramer (Colbertnation.com, 2011).

#04127: “Untitled” Colbert opens this episode with a discussion about the second presidential debate. The featured guest was Nate Silver (Colbertnation.com, 2011).

#04128: “Untitled” Colbert opens this episode by apologizing for his attire during a town-hall meeting in the previous episode. The featured guest was Joe Scarborough (Colbertnation.com, 2011).

#04129: “Untitled” This episode begins with a discussion about the economic crisis. The featured guests were David Gergen and Oliver Stone (Colbertnation.com, 2011).

#04130: “Untitled” Colbert begins this episode discussing a clue relating to John McCain in the *New York Times* crossword puzzle. The featured guests were Bethany McLean and Kathleen Parker (Colbertnation.com, 2011).

#04131: “POW” This episode begins with a discussion about the Nobel Prize for Economics and the economic crisis. The featured guest was economist Joseph Stiglitz (Colbertnation.com, 2011).

#04132: “Freaky Three-Way Calling” This episode begins with Colbert discussing the economic crisis. The featured guest was editor Tina Brown (Colbertnation.com, 2011).

#04133: “Untitled” Colbert begins with a discussion about the final presidential debate. The featured guests were the Director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History Brent Glass and director Robert Greenwald (Colbertnation.com, 2011).

#04134: “Untitled” Colbert opens up this episode discussing Colin Powell’s endorsement of Barak Obama. The featured guest was Wynton Marsalis (Colbertnation.com, 2011).

#04135: “Fantasyland” Colbert begins with a discussion about his adopted eagle son named Stephen Jr., who had been recently spotted in Oregon. The featured guest was Chancellor of Patrick Henry College Michael Farris (Colbertnation.com, 2011).

#04136: “Untitled” This episode begins with a discussion about John McCain reaching out to the middle class. The featured guests were Cedric the Entertainer and former speechwriter for President George W. Bush David Frum (Colbertnation.com, 2011).

#04137: “Untitled” Colbert begins this episode referring to when he disapproved of *Newsweek* for printing a close up shot of Sarah Palin. This episode’s featured guest was Newsweek columnist Jonathan Alter (Colbertnation.com, 2011).

#04138: “It’s Alive!” Colbert starts the episode of by discussing John McCain’s guarantee victory for president. This episode featured cellist Yo-Yo Ma (Colbertnation.com, 2011).

#04139: “Untitled” This episode begins with a discussion of Ted Stevens being found guilty of seven felonies. This episode featured socialist candidate Brian Moore and writer Sherman Alexie (Colbertnation.com, 2011).

#04140: “I Endorse Barack Obama!” Colbert begins this episode by claiming John McCain is doing badly in the polls because of a prank. The featured guest was creator of HBO’s “Generation Kill,” David Simon (Colbertnation.com, 2011).

#04141: “Untitled” This episode begins with a discussion about Barack Obama’s 30-minute infomercial. The featured guest was Wilco (Colbertnation.com, 2011).

#04142: “Untitled” Colbert starts this episode announcing the “winners” of the presidential election. The featured guests were editor Charlie Cook and writer Andrew Sullivan (Colbertnation.com, 2011).

Appendix II

The following is a list of segments that made up each episode that aired in the six weeks prior to the 2008 presidential election and were analyzed in this study.

September 23, 2008:

- Intro
- Stephen Loses to Don Rickles
- The Word - OhMyGodSocietyIs
- Peter Grosz Insults
- John McCain's Theme
- Jackson Browne
- Jackson Browne - Going Down to Cuba

September 24, 2008:

- Intro
- Stephen Suspends the Show
- Joe Nocera
- Alpha Dog of the Week - Bill Bennett
- Cornel West
- Colbertnation.com

September 25, 2008:

- Nights in Rodanthe Premiere
- Stephen Settles the Debate – FDR vs. TR
- NOW's Presidential Endorsement – Kim Gandy
- Nicholas Carr
- One More Thing

September 29, 2008:

- Intro
- The First Debate Winner
- The Word - Ye of Little Faith
- Cheating Death Car Bacteria
- Paul Begala
- Good Night

September 30, 2008:

- Intro
- Partisanship Kills the Bailout
- Prescott Oil Loves the Earth
- Tip/Wag – Wall Street Jagoffs
- James Taylor
- Out of Time

October 1, 2008:

- Intro
- Campbell's Soup Stock

- Colbert Teen Talk – Voter Abstinence
- Dave Levin
- You Snooze, You Lose

October 2, 2008:

- Intro
- Stephen Shoots an Audience Member
- Shakespearean Candidates – Stephen Greenblatt
- Formidable Opponent – Business Syphilis
- Naomi Klein
- That's All She Wrote

October 6, 2008:

- Intro
- OJ Simpson Guilty
- The Word – Maverick Without A Cause
- Un-American News – Financial Edition
- Jim Cramer
- Life Drawing Lesson

October 7, 2008:

- Intro
- Stephen's Town All
- ThreatDown – Zombies
- The Red Lending Menace
- Nate Silver

- Phone Book

October 8, 2008:

- Intro
- Town Hall Fashion Apology
- The Second Presidential Debate
- Atone Phone – Gilbert Gottfried
- Joe Scarborough
- Stephen's Post-Show Routine

October 9, 2008:

- Intro
- Dismayed Stockbroker Photos
- Campaign Personal Attacks – David Gergen
- Who's Not Honoring Me Now? – Nepal
- Oliver Stone
- Bad News

October 13, 2008:

- Intro
- McCain Crossword Clue
- The Computer Menace – Bethany McLean
- Bears & Balls – Salt-based Economy
- Kathleen Parker
- Happy Birthday

October 14, 2008:

- Intro
- Paul Krugman's Nobel Prize
- The Word – P.O.W.
- Tip/Wag – Palin's Newsweek Cover
- Joseph Stiglitz
- Good Night

October 15, 2008:

- Intro
- KFC Snacker
- The Word – Freaky Three-way Calling (Unavailable for analysis)
- Sport Report – Lame Sports Edition
- Tina Brown
- Chest TiVO

October 16, 2008:

- Intro
- The Final Debate
- Portrait Accepted – Brent Glass
- Robert Greenwald
- A New Portrait

October 20, 2008:

- Intro
- Colin Powell Endorses Barack Obama

- Fareed Zakaria
- Colbert Aluminum – Paris
- Wynton Marsalis
- Good Night

October 21, 2008:

- Intro
- Stephen Jr. Campaigns for McCain
- The Word – Fantasyland
- Battle of the Gods
- Atone Phone – The Pony Down
- Michael Farris
- Another One Tomorrow

October 22, 2008:

- Intro
- McCain Loves the Middle Class
- Too Much Political Knowledge
- Movies that Are Destroying America – Quantum of Solace
- David Frum

October 23, 2008:

- Intro
- The Palins in People Magazine
- ThreatDown – Who's Nailin' Paylin
- Difference Makers – The National Hummer Club

- Jonathan Alter
- A Short Goodbye

October 27, 2008:

- Intro
- McCain Guarantees Victory
- The World – It's Alive!
- Alpha Dog of the Week – Mark Ciptak
- Yo-Yo Ma
- Yo-Yo Ma – "Panxolina"

October 28, 2008:

- Intro
- Ted Stevens is Found Guilty
- Obama the Socialist
- Socialist Candidate for President – Brian Moore
- Canton, Ohio
- Sherman Alexie
- Tickets to Canada

October 29, 2008:

- Intro
- John McCain's Big Prank
- The Word – I Endorse Barack Obama
- Was It Really That Bad? – The Great Depression
- David Simon

- Colbert Completists

October 30, 2008:

- Intro
- Obama Infomercial
- Tip/Wag – Apple Computers
- The DaColbert Code – The Election
- Wilco Interview
- Exclusive – Wilco Song

November 3, 2008:

- Intro
- 2008 Campaign Winners and Losers
- Charlie Cook
- How to Be a Maverick
- Andrew Sullivan
- Election Eve Prayer