

Jon Stewart, Enemy of Democracy?

By Richard Morin
Friday, June 23, 2006; A02

This is not funny: Jon Stewart and his hit Comedy Central cable show may be poisoning democracy.

Two political scientists found that young people who watch Stewart's faux news program, "The Daily Show," develop cynical views about politics and politicians that could lead them to just say no to voting.

That's particularly dismaying news because the show is hugely popular among college students, many of whom already don't bother to cast ballots.

Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris of East Carolina University said previous research found that nearly half -- 48 percent -- of this age group watched "The Daily Show" and only 23 percent of show viewers followed "hard news" programs closely.

To test for a "Daily Effect," Baumgartner and Morris showed video clips of coverage of the 2004 presidential candidates to one group of college students and campaign coverage from "The CBS Evening News" to another group. Then they measured the students' attitudes toward politics, President Bush and the Democratic presidential nominee, Sen. John F. Kerry (Mass.).

The results showed that the participants rated both candidates more negatively after watching Stewart's program. Participants also expressed less trust in the electoral system and more cynical views of the news media, according to the researchers' article, in the latest issue of American Politics Research.

"Ultimately, negative perceptions of candidates could have participation implications by keeping more youth from the polls," they wrote.

Miserly Republicans, Unprincipled Democrats

Are Republicans stingy but principled while Democrats are generous but racist?

"I wouldn't put it quite so starkly," said Stanford University professor Shanto Iyengar. He would prefer to call Democrats "less principled" rather than bigoted, based on his analysis of data collected in a recent online experiment that he conducted with The Washington Post and washingtonpost.com.

As reported in this column a few weeks ago, the study found that people were less likely to give extended aid to black Hurricane Katrina victims than to white ones. The race penalty, on average, totaled about \$1,000 per black victim.

As Iyengar and his colleagues subsequently dug deeper into these data, another finding emerged: Republicans consistently gave less aid, and gave over a shorter period of time, to victims regardless of race.

Democrats and independents were far more generous; on average, they gave Katrina victims on average more than \$1,500 a month, compared with \$1,200 for Republicans, and for 13 months instead of nine.

But for Democrats, race mattered -- and in a disturbing way. Overall, Democrats were willing to give whites about \$1,500 more than they chose to give to a black or other minority. (Even with this race penalty, Democrats still were willing to give more to blacks than those principled Republicans.) "Republicans are likely to be more stringent, both in terms of money and time, Iyengar said. "However, their position is 'principled' in the sense that it stems from a strong belief in individualism (as opposed to handouts). Thus their responses to the assistance questions are relatively invariant across the different media conditions. Independents and Democrats, on the other hand, are more likely to be affected by racial cues."

To test the effects of race, participants in the study were asked to read a news article about Katrina victims. Some read a story featuring a white person. Some read identical stories -- except the victim was black, Asian or Hispanic. Then they were asked how much assistance they think the government should give to help hurricane victims. Approximately 2,300 people participated in the study.

Iyengar said he's not surprised by the latest findings: "This pattern of results matches perfectly an earlier study I did on race and crime" with Franklin D. Gilliam Jr. of UCLA. "Republicans supported tough treatment of criminals no matter what they encountered in the news. Others were more elastic in their position, coming to support more harsh measures when the criminal suspect they encountered was non-white."

Who Would Have Thought? *Healthy Marriage, Pictures Sell, And 'The Sopranos'*

? "*How Does Marriage Affect Physical and Psychological Health? A Survey of the Longitudinal Evidence*" by Chris M. Wilson and Andrew J. Oswald, Warwick Economics Research Paper Series. British researchers discover that a happy marriage may be as beneficial to health as quitting smoking.

? "*Risk Avoidance: Graphs Versus Numbers*" by Hannah Faye C. Chua, Frank J. Yates and Priti Shah, *Memory & Cognition*, Vol. 34, No. 2. University of Michigan researchers find that people are more likely to buy an improved but more expensive new toothpaste if the probabilities of getting gum disease are expressed visually in a chart than if they are expressed numerically.

? "*Disability, Gender and Difference on The Sopranos*" by Kathleen LeBesco. *Women's Studies in Communication*, Vol. 29, No. 1. A Marymount-Manhattan College communications professor argues that story lines in the hit TV show "The Sopranos" that feature mob boss Tony Soprano's one-legged mistress and the "morbidly obese" wife of a crony send mixed messages about the disabled.