

**Skepticism or Cynicism: Attitudinal Impacts of *The Daily Show*  
and *The Colbert Report* on Young Americans**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to weigh in on the debate regarding the effect of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. Do the shows make their audiences more cynical about politics and the media? Or, do they make them skeptical? In the paper I report on research in which I developed measures of skepticism that distinguish that attitude from cynicism and tested those measures in a comparison of those who are fans of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. Our findings indicate that these two satire shows appear to engender skepticism for politics and the media, not cynicism.

On January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2013 Nobel Laureate Economist Paul Krugman conducted an interview with ABC, in part to criticize a segment that had appeared on the late-night television program, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Host of *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart, lampooned the potential solution to circumvent the 2013 debt-ceiling crisis that called for the minting of a \$1 trillion coin by the Treasury Secretary.<sup>1</sup> Only days before Stewart's harsh critique, Krugman had commented favorably on the trillion-dollar coin as a means to avoid a government shutdown and default due to political gridlock in Congress (Krugman, 2013a). Agitated with Stewart for dismissing the proposed idea as lunacy, Krugman condemned Stewart's handling of the issue:

You want to be funny from a point of view of understanding what the issues are... Part of the point about Stewart ... is that he is funny, but that the show is actually better informed than most of our public discussion. But when he turns it into dumb, 'I don't know nothing but those people look dumb to me,' he's ruining his own brand.(Krugman, 2013b)

Krugman asserts that *The Daily Show* is more substantive source of information than most of contributors to public discussion. Furthermore, he argues that by making a mockery of a rational, and quite realistic, solution to a grave national issue, Stewart is in some way violating the spirit of his obligations as a legitimate and influential player in our political discourse. Stewart responded to Krugman the next night in the following way:

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<sup>1</sup> According to H.R. 3610 (104<sup>th</sup>) — also known as the Omnibus Consolidated Appropriations Act — “The Secretary may mint and issue platinum bullion coins and proof platinum coins in accordance with such specifications, designs, varieties, quantities, denominations, and inscriptions as the Secretary, in the Secretary's discretion, may prescribe from time to time.”

Look, as with most bits we do — whether of the fully-fleshed out or more drive-by variety — there are always various counterarguments and nuances of language and thought which can be cited as evidence of this show’s inherent unfairness or ignorance. Typically a bluntness people forgive when in agreement with our point of view. So I stand by our research on the topic, the due diligence, and my ignorant conclusion that a trillion-dollar coin minted to allow the president to circumvent the debt ceiling, however arbitrary that may be, is a stupid [expletive] idea.<sup>2</sup>

This flippant response to Krugman’s claims illustrates the complex nature of Stewart’s role in American politics. The back-and-forth between the two men raises the question, what role does Stewart play in our political discourse? Krugman believes that Stewart and the content of his program must fulfill certain obligations and meet certain requirements. Stewart, however, does not acknowledge or accept his role as an influential player in American politics. This sentiment is echoed in one of Stewart’s most notable interviews outside of the context of his television program—an appearance on CNN’s *CrossFire*. During the interview Stewart responds to Tucker Carlson’s assertion that Stewart had a responsibility to ask then presidential nominee John Kerry tougher questions by saying:

You know, it’s interesting to hear you talk about my responsibility. The show that leads into me is puppets making crank phone calls. What is wrong with you? You have a responsibility to the public discourse and you fail miserably.

Stewart has often used this argument—that he is a comedian and his show is comedy—as a defense against those who claim that he has a journalistic responsibility to the public. Regardless of his stated position, it is clear that Stewart’s *Daily Show* and the

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<sup>2</sup> Stewart, J., “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart,” January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2013, <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/mon-january-14-2013/paul-krugman---the-trillion-dollar-coin>.

spinoff *Colbert Report* are having an effect on politics. Academics have begun to amass evidence that indicates that satirical news programs such as *The Daily Show* and its sister program *The Colbert Report* have significant impacts on their audience and the political environment they operate within. It is the goal of this paper to further understand the impact satirical news programs such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* have on their viewers by attempting to assess whether these shows have a negative effect by feeding public cynicism or whether they engender something much more positive for a democratic society—a healthy skepticism regarding politics and the media.

### **Traditional News versus “Fake News”**

A 2012 Gallup poll found that trust in the American news media has hit record lows. According to the poll, sixty percent of Americans report that they have little or no trust in the mass media to report the news fully, accurately and fairly (Gallup, 2012); in the 1970s seventy-two percent of Americans said that they trusted the mass media a great deal or a fair amount. The lack of trust in the American news media to provide adequate information has been the subject of much academic and journalistic scrutiny. The news media — famously deemed the fourth estate of government by the British philosopher and politician Edmund Burke—holds a position of tremendous influence and responsibility in our democratic system. A properly functioning mass media should serve as an accountability institution that promotes government transparency, scrutiny and critical evaluation. It should initiate discussion and serve as a forum for public debate and reflection. At the most fundamental level, the media must collect and distribute information to the masses. The media, then, has a public responsibility that requires the fulfillment of a wide array of

obligations. When the media fails to fulfill these obligations, there may be profound implications for democracy.

According to many scholars, the American news media is failing to fulfill its obligations (Baym 2005, 2009, Dagnes 2010, Gierzynski 2011, McChesney and Nichols 2010, Postman 1985). These scholars argue that privatization, consolidation and the primacy of profit maximization along with advances in media technology have had damaging effects on the way news is collected, produced, distributed and consumed by the public. Profit maximization has diluted substantive news and replaced it with programs driven by entertainment, sensationalism and conflict. This results in a poorly informed electorate that expresses record levels of distrust in news media (Ramsay *et al*, 2010).

With trust in traditional news sources declining, alternative sources have emerged in the last two decades that offer new ways to obtain information about government and politics. Two such sources are *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (“TDS” from this point forward) and *The Colbert Report* (“CR” from this point forward). While the academic community has not yet reached agreement on the affects TDS and CR have on their regular viewers, there is agreement that both TDS and CR play a meaningful role in shaping America’s public discourse. Both television programs often outperform popular television programs on network and cable news channels in average viewership. In 2011, TDS averaged 2.3 million viewers per episode—up seven percent from 2010—and ranked first in late-night comedy programs on cable, while CR averaged 1.5 million viewers per episode—up two percent from 2010—which ranked second in late-night comedy programs on cable (Nielsen Media Research, 2011).

Certainly these programs are among the most popular on cable television, but recent scholarship indicates that these programs may be more than entertaining sources of comedy; these programs may actually provide substantive information in a way that resembles traditional news programs more than late-night sketch comedy. Despite the primacy of humor and entertainment, TDS and CR provide substantive sources of information and commentary on a wide range of political issues. Fox (2007) found that while TDS's content during the 2004 Presidential Campaign contained considerably more humor than substance, that content was just as substantive as the broadcast networks' campaign coverage. A Project for Excellence in Journalism study that analyzed content on TDS for an entire year found that the substantive content of TDS is quite similar to that of the mainstream press and concluded that TDS is performing a journalistic function. This substantive policy coverage and political commentary found in TDS and CR may account for the relatively high levels of political knowledge demonstrated by regular viewers of the programs. The National Annenberg Election Survey found that those who regularly watch TDS have higher levels of campaign knowledge than national news viewers and even newspaper readers. Further evidence of the important role TDS and CR play in our political discourse appear in a 2007 Pew Center Study; a greater percentage of TDS and CR viewers scored as high or higher on a political knowledge test than regular viewers of any other television program, internet site or newspaper.

We have, then, evidence that while TDS and CR are first and foremost comedy programs, the substance of their nightly content is proportionally as substantive as traditional news sources on television. Baym writes of TDS's role, "It [TDS] undoubtedly is comedy — often entertaining and at times absurd — but it is also an informative

examination of politics and media practices, as well as a forum for the discussion of substantive public affairs.” (Baym, 2005, p. 263) Baym (2009) goes so far as to argue that TDS and CR represent what may be an emerging paradigm of television news, one that combines the standards of news from the golden era of TV news—exhibiting a taste for reason and evidence—with satire to ridicule the post-modern practices of today’s television news.

Appearing on TDS in 2007, former Vice President Al Gore lauded the program as one that allows the audience to, “get through a lot of the nonsense and get to the heart of what the most important news of the day is... and its ironic.”<sup>3</sup> The irony, Gore suggests, lies in the fact that Americans feel the need to tune into a comedy program to become adequately informed. Stewart himself voiced frustration with this irony in a 2010 interview with Fox News’ Chris Wallace: “The embarrassment is that I am given credibility in this world because of the disappointment that the public has in what the news media does.”<sup>4</sup> The aforementioned shortcomings of the American news media have given rise to comedy programs such as TDS and CR as valued and influential sources of political commentary. Stewart and Colbert differ in their methods of comedy and the format of their program but they both affect comedy through satire. Stewart deconstructs the news on a nightly basis for examination of its validity; often pointing out the absurdity in what we are shown and told. Colbert differs in that he assumes the character of conservative pundit in order to affect satire. He deconstructs the day’s news but — in contrast to Stewart — reconstructs it through the lens of his fictionalized-character (Baym 2009).

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<sup>3</sup> Al Gore appearing on *The Daily Show*, May 24, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Jon Stewart interview with Chris Wallace, June 19<sup>th</sup>, 2011.



While TDS and CR provide relatively substantive news to its audience, some scholars argue that it plays an additional role—that of accountability institution. As the mass media continues to highlight sensationalism, conflict and entertainment as a way to attract audiences, there are concerns with how such an institution can be held accountable for failing to fulfill its obligations as the fourth estate of government. The academic literature suggests that TDS and CR serve as accountability mechanisms of traditional news. Painter and Hodges (2010) conducted a 12-month analysis of TDS and found that TDS holds traditional media accountable in four different ways: pointing out falsehoods (20 instances), pointing out inconsistencies (51 instances), pointing out when inconsequential news is blown out of proportion (39 instances) and critiquing the very nature of broadcast news (36 instances). Baym (2005, 2009) is effusive in his normative argument that TDS and CR hold those in power accountable in significant ways. He argues that TDS uses satire to interrogate power, parody to critique contemporary news, and dialogue to enact a model of deliberative democracy. Gierzynski (2011, p. 118) argues that TDS and CR make audiences aware of the shortcomings of television as a medium through which we obtain information. “These comedies satirize television news itself — its format, its presentation, its pretense to be a serious source of information, its focus on trivial and sensational.”

As young people are increasingly tuning into ‘fake-news’ programs such as TDS and CR and turning away from traditional news sources, academics have attempted to study whether or not there are measurable and significant attitudinal affects caused by exposure to the content on these programs.

Scholars are of two minds on the effects of TDS and CR. Some argue that the negative tone and consistent mockery of the political system, and the mass media, on TDS

and CR foster cynicism amongst its viewers (Baumgartner and Morris 2006, Guggenheim *et al* 2011, Hart and Hartelius 2007). Others suggest that TDS and CR instead act as positive forces in our public discourse by encouraging skepticism and holding politicians and the mass media accountable (Painter and Hodges 2010, Baym 2005, 2009, Gierzynski 2011, Gierzynski and Moore 2008, Jones, 2005).

Hart and Hartelius (2007, p. 254) accuse Jon Stewart and TDS of “political heresy,” and “find his sins against the Church of democracy to be so heinous that he should be branded an infidel.” Their specific charge is that, “Mr. Stewart has engaged in unbridled political cynicism.” The authors argue that Stewart embodies the classic cynic by ridiculing contemporary social and political norms in “the most physically grotesque ways.” The content of his program, they argue, is a cynical rhetoric that is both caustic and malleable; allowing Stewart to avoid any mechanism of accountability for the claims he makes. This normative condemnation of TDS has been offered empirical support by several studies. Baumgartner and Morris’s experimental study found that participants exposed to a brief clip of TDS, more negatively evaluated the politicians featured in that clip relative to a control group that was shown a clip of a CBS Evening News featuring the same politicians. Additionally, they found a negative correlation between exposure to TDS and external political efficacy—the feeling that government is responsive to its citizens’ needs. Low levels of external efficacy represent a measure of political cynicism and these findings support the theory that exposure to the material on TDS may cause audiences to be more cynical. It is worth noting that while the researchers found a negative relationship between external efficacy and exposure to TDS, they found a positive and significant relationship between exposure to TDS and internal political efficacy—the feeling that an individual can

understand what is going on in government. Additionally, participants of their study exposed to a clip TDS were more likely to express distrust in the news media relative to the control group that was shown a clip featuring traditional news.

While Baumgartner and Morris' study was limited to one-time and brief exposure to TDS, Gugenheim *et al* (2011) found a positive correlation between systemic cynicism and consumption of CR and TDS, taking into account how frequently participants consumed CR and TDS over time. TDS and CR frequently direct jokes at politicians, the electoral and political process, and the mass media. It could be expected, then, that the negative issue framing employed by TDS and CR—through the use of comedy and satire—increases expressions of cynicism within their audiences. Additionally, the sort of metacoverage<sup>5</sup> done by TDS and CR has been associated with increased media cynicism due its inherently negative tone (Cappella and Jamieson 1997, Kerbel 1998).

Despite the aforementioned findings, there is disagreement from some scholars who argue that the content and format of TDS and CR increase audience's expressions of political skepticism rather than political cynicism. While TDS and CR employ negative framing of issues at times, Brewer and Marquardt's 52 episode content analysis found that TDS engaged in substantial levels of issue framing. Issue framing presents politics and government in terms of policy debates, policy proposals, and the policy stances of politicians. Issue framing may foster political trust among audience members (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997) and issue frames help citizens make political judgments on the basis of policy preferences. At the conclusion of their content analysis, the authors speculate that

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<sup>5</sup> Defined as "news about the role, presence and behaviors of the news media." Brewer and Marquardt (2007), p. 254.

the considerable amount of issue framing on TDS has the potential to dampen political cynicism.

The issue framing on TDS may be the reason why Baumgartner and Morris found a positive relationship between exposure to TDS and internal political efficacy. Baumgartner and Morris (2006, p. 353) account for the high levels of internal political efficacy among TDS's audience by arguing that the political humor on TDS "simplifies political reality because confusing counterarguments on issues and events are largely ignored." The evidence provided by Brewer and Marquardt—that there is substantial use of issue framing on TDS — refutes Baumgartner and Morris' reasoning in this case. Finally, high levels of internal political efficacy increases the likelihood of participation in the electoral process. According to the aforementioned 2004 National Annenberg Election Survey, 88 percent of 18-29 year old viewers of TDS reported that they intended to vote compared to 78 percent of all 18-29 year olds. Political alienation and apathy is a foundational pillar of political cynicism. As evidenced by their engagement in the political process—whether participating in the electoral process or seeking knowledge about the political system—audience members of TDS and CR are anything but apathetic and removed from politics and government. This data suggests that TDS and CR may serve as sources of political skepticism rather than cynicism.

While the metacoverage employed by TDS and CR may increase cynicism about the media, an alternative explanation suggests that the program's coverage of the news media "could promote the sort of critical thought that it pillories the traditional news media for failing to encourage." (Brewer and Marquardt, 2007, p. 255) In other words, the critique of the traditional news media on TDS and CR may encourage their audiences to be skeptical

about the content of traditional news media when seeking information. Gierzynski and Moore (2008) argue that the metacoverage of TDS and CR cause their audiences to realize that they do not get the information they need from traditional news sources, which may lead them to seek out multiple alternative sources of information. This may be another reason why Baumgartner and Morris found increased internal efficacy among viewers of TDS and explain why viewers of TDS and CR are among the most politically knowledgeable in the electorate. This is supported by the 2012 PEW Research Center poll, which found that 73 percent of regular viewers of TDS and CR say they trust certain news sources over others; well above the 55 percent national average. The same poll found that 74 percent of CR's regular viewers and 72 percent of TDS's viewers believe that news should not have a political point of view; CR and TDS ranked first and third highest respectively in this attitude. That regular viewers of TDS and CR trust certain news sources over others indicates skepticism when seeking news sources. Additionally, the high percentage of TDS and CR viewers that believe news should have no political point of view suggest that these individuals at the very least seek news sources with substantive issue framing.

Part of the debate involves methodological concerns about the ways in which scholars measure attitudes of political cynicism and political skepticism. Political cynicism may be easily confused with political skepticism (Brewer and Marquardt 2007, Fu *et al* 2011) which, if true, would suggest that previous studies condemning TDS and CR for having negative political impacts on their viewers should be reexamined.

With consensus largely absent, it is the goal of this paper to provide additional insight as to which impacts TDS and CR have on their viewers. While there are scholars who have provided empirical data suggesting that TDS is positively related with political

cynicism and media cynicism (Baumgartner and Morris, 2006; Guggenheim et al. 2011), some scholars interpret their results in differently. Brewer and Marquardt theorize that the exposure to TDS's coverage of the mass media may promote critical scrutiny of media practices and of politician's efforts at media management. Taking that possibility into consideration, "Baumgartner and Morris's findings may reflect an impact on skepticism rather than cynicism." (Brewer and Marquardt, 2007, p. 265) In a study of similar relevance Fu et al. (2011) found that their measure of political cynicism was positively correlated with political involvement. Since cynics typically alienate themselves from political involvement (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997) the researchers reasoned that their measure of cynicism may have been flawed and that political skepticism may have been mistakenly measured instead of political cynicism. It is difficult for the academic community to measure impacts of TDS and CR due the fact that the science of measuring political attitudes is one of imperfection and relative subjectivity. There is an absence of agreement on how to formulate distinct and accurate measures of each attitude. This paper will attempt to create distinct measures using the theoretical conceptions of cynicism and skepticism outlined in its previous sections. By operationalizing variables of cynicism and skepticism using fundamental tenants of each attitude, this paper hopes to illuminate the oft-muddled conception of political cynicism and political skepticism as it relates to TDS and CR.

### **Skepticism v. Cynicism**

It is the aim of this paper to measure expressions of skepticism and cynicism in relation to exposure to TDS and CR. Crucial to this aim, then, are clear definitions and delineations of each attitude and an understanding of the impact variation in these

expressions may have. Scholars have offered a number of definitions of skepticism and cynicism. Pinkleton and Austin (2004) write that skepticism refers to the tendency to critically evaluate information and put presented information on hold for further confirmation. Political cynicism, on the other hand, refers to the tendency to harbor an immovable mistrust and a deep-seated notion that the political system is corrupt and ineffective (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). The cynic holds the view that politicians are simply “Machiavellian partisans uninterested in the public good...sealed within his/her own self-reinforcing assumptions, the cynic can interpret even selfless actions as calculated attempts to create an image of selflessness.”(Cappella and Jamieson, 1997, p. 19) The scholarship of Roderick Hart (1998) is useful in further understanding the important differences between political cynicism and political skepticism. Hart defines the cynic as someone who believes in human frailty and institutional corruption and who harbors and overwhelming need to predict future unhappiness. Cynicism places faith in observation rather than participation and rejects critical inquiry into issues on the basis of an in-malleable philosophy toward government and politics. Where as cynicism is characterized by an already established philosophy that cannot be subject to conversion, skepticism is the doctrine that all knowledge is uncertain; the method of suspended judgment, criticism, or doubt. Cappella and Jamieson cite journalist Thomas Friedman in illustrating the difference between the two concepts and it bears repeating here:

Skepticism is about asking questions, being dubious, being wary, not being gullible.

Cynicism is about already having the answers — or thinking you do. The skeptic

says 'I don't think that's true. I'm going to check it out.' The cynic says, 'I know that's not true. It couldn't be.'<sup>6</sup>

Instrumental to the conception of political skepticism are the five tenets of skepticism created by Hart. According to Hart, the skeptic believes that:

1. Because one's sensory powers are limited, appearance can deceive.
2. Because impulsiveness is dangerous, deep reflection about human affairs is best.
3. Because people are social creatures, and hence imitative, conventional wisdom is rarely wise.
4. Because people are fallible, one should never trust but one source of information.
5. Because most data are mediated, primary sensation should be prized.<sup>7</sup>

In these tenets we can see obvious differences between the cynic and the skeptic. The skeptic is constantly seeking knowledge and confirming information presented to them as fact only after careful investigation. They are dubious of presented information until they can confirm such information as valid. As Hart (1998, p. 180) summarizes, "skeptics are buoyed by the need to know."

Expressions of skepticism and/or cynicism have a variety of potential impacts on public discourse and the operation of the American political system. Pinkelton and Austin (2004) found that cynical voters tend to believe that the political system is corrupt and politicians cannot be trusted. The more cynical voters become, the less likely they are to engage themselves in opportunities for political participation and the more likely they distance themselves from the political process (Pinkelton and Austin, 2004). Political cynicism engenders political alienation, mistrust, lack of confidence, political inefficacy and

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<sup>6</sup> Cappella, J. N., and Jamieson, K. H. (1997), p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> Hart, (1998), p. 179-180.



apathy. Furthermore, cynicism provides an excuse for not participating (Dagnes 2010, Hart 1998).

The high levels of political cynicism within the electorate is damaging to public discourse and the political process. Political skepticism within the electorate, however, is viewed as a productive and healthy phenomenon. Pinkelton and Austin (2004) found that political skepticism is positively related with political involvement and negatively related with political apathy. While the cynical citizen is more likely to become alienated from the political system, the skeptic is more likely to employ critical inquiry about government, politics, and the media, participate in the electoral process and contribute to a vibrant public discourse.

Dating back to the 1960s, public trust in government institutions has been on the steady decline. In a November 1958 ANES poll, seventy-three percent of Americans reported that they trusted the federal government just about always or most of the time. Despite acute spikes due to individual events such as the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks, trust in the federal government has declined sharply since the first poll taken in 1958. According to a 2013 Pew Research Center Poll, the current level of trust in the federal government stands at just twenty-six percent. Similarly, trust in the mass media has decreased substantially—sixty percent of Americans have little to no trust in the mass media to report the news fully, accurately and fairly. The declines of both trust in government institutions and participation in shaping those institutions is often viewed as a parallel and interrelated relationship, often called the spiral of disaffection. Cappella and Jameson (1997) argue that the use of negative framing, strategy coverage and focus on conflict in the mass media has created a spiral of cynicism—a process of reciprocity

comprised of the conflict-driven sound-bite-oriented discourse of politicians and strategy-oriented structure of press coverage.

If the traditional news media is contributing to an increasingly cynical electorate, how do non-traditional news sources such as TDS and CR fit into the information environment that appears to be failing? Are these programs guilty of contributing to mistrust in American governing and media institutions or are they sources that counteract this growing trend toward political alienation and apathy?

### **Media Effects Theory**

Why should we expect entertainment programs like TDS/CR to have attitudinal effects in the first place? Isn't it possible that the viewers of these programs simply tune in to be entertained and laugh at the humor that is so prevalent?

There are some audience members of TDS/CR who tune in with the intention of learning or picking up information about the days news or to hear commentary about the days news. There are, however, viewers who simply tune in to be entertained by the humor of each program. Despite the differences in viewer motivation, it is expected that both type of consumer will be attitudinally impacted by the content of each program to varying degrees.

Communication scholars have differentiated two types of cognitive viewing frames as active learning and passive learning (Perse, 2001). Active learning is, "an active, constructive process whereby the learner strategically manages the available cognitive resources to create new knowledge by extracting information from the environment and integrating it with information already stored in memory."<sup>8</sup> When one is engaged in active

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<sup>8</sup> Perse, E. 201. pp 132-133

learning they are far more likely to be able to apply pre-existing knowledge structures in order to enhance support or resist the political messages presented based on their active and existing knowledge of a specific issue. Since TDS/CR are primarily comedy programs — despite their significant informative content — it would be expected that many of the audience members are not engaging in active learning when consuming the program.

Another relevant type of learning theory is *Passive Learning*. Passive learning is the acquisition of knowledge through sources that are not necessarily promoting an idea meant for consumption as knowledge. In other words, learning is the byproduct of some other activity than teaching or intended knowledge acquisition. While this paper is not focused on issue positions specifically, passive learning theory suggests that the thematic elements of the TDS/CR may be more readily consumed by the audience due to the programs primacy on humor. TDS/CR may be able to affect their audiences more acutely due the fact that viewers cognitive framing of issues and politics is not as well activated if they were watching a traditional news program.

Another theory of media effects relevant to this study includes the cumulative effects theory and, more specifically, cultivation theory. The cumulative effects model posits that repetition and consistency of specific themes and messages across media content apprehends the individual's ability to limit exposure to these messages (Perse, 2001). The effects of this theory are a result of cumulative exposure over time and are generally reality-construction effects. Reality-construction in that, via cumulative exposure, individuals begin to adopt the media's framing as their own representation of reality. Applying this theory to TDS/CR, long-term, consistent viewers of the program will likely adopt the skeptical or cynical framing of the government, politics and the media and apply

it when assessing those institutions outside the context of TDS/CR. In other words, if there are consistent themes within TDS/CR that promote skepticism toward the news media, it would be expected that increased exposure to those themes would cause the viewer to apply that skepticism when interacting with the news media and government in situations outside viewing TDS. In the same vein, cultivation theory is the process by which repeated and heavy exposure to television results in viewers beginning to believe that the real world is similar to the television world. When looking at TDS/CR specifically, it is expected that the nightly display of critical inquiry, media criticism and attempts at accountability would cause the viewer's worldview to contain similar thematic attributes.

### **Methodology**

In order to differentiate between skepticism and cynicism — our dependent variables — among fans of TDS and CR versus nonfans, a number of survey questions were developed that were then used in two separate surveys—one of college students in classes at the University of Vermont, the other an on-line survey.

In this study, levels of skepticism/cynicism were measured toward both government and the media separately. In order to elicit a comprehensive data set of the respondent's attitudes, we devised three measures of skepticism/cynicism for both attitudes toward government and the news media.

Skepticism/cynicism toward government were operationalized in the following three ways. The first was by creating interactive measures of participation and distrust. Cynics and skeptics will not likely differ on levels of trust as measured by the classic question "How much of the time do you trust the government in Washington to do what is right?"

But they will likely differ in that skeptics will not be disengaged—that is they will evince distrust but they will still participate and follow what goes on in government in politics. So in addition to the trust question, a battery of questions were asked about whether the respondent had participated in a number of different political activities, from voting to contributing to or working on a campaign. The activities that the respondent had participated in were added up and multiplied by the responses to the trust question so that higher scores represented those who were distrustful of the government in Washington but were still engaged, politically.

**H1a:** Fans of TDS are more likely to score higher on the participation x distrust measure than non-fans.

**H1b:** Fans of CR are more likely to score higher on the participation x distrust measure than non-fans.

The second way skepticism was measured was asked in the following question:

When it comes to disagreements between people over how things are, which of the following statements comes closer to what you believe?

- It is impossible to know which claims are accurate because studies and evidence can be manipulated to prove whatever someone wants to prove.
- It is possible to know which claims are accurate based on a careful assessment of the research and evidence.

Respondents who select the first option in this question would be considered a cynic, those who selected the second option, skeptics. The option that is meant to reflect cynicism comes from Baym's (2009) description of the post-modern media paradigm that is dominant in broadcast and cable news programs today. The option that is meant to reflect skepticism is derived from the definitions of skepticism discussed above.

**H2a:** Fans of TDS are more likely to evince skepticism about assessing the factual validity of claims than non-fan.

**H2b:** Fans of CR are more likely to evince skepticism about assessing the factually validity of claims than non-fans.

The third measure of skepticism versus cynicism toward governments asked respondents whether they bought into a variety of the contemporary conspiracy theories that exist today. The thinking behind this measure was that cynics — given their tendency to reject standards of evidence and reason and, since conspiracy theories play to a person's cynicism — would likely be gullible enough to believe some of the conspiracy theories in circulation. An example of the operationalized conspiracy theory measure reads:

Within our culture there exist theories about certain historical and scientific events. Some of these theories are listed below. Please indicate whether you believe the theory.

	Yes, I believe this is true (1)	No, I don't believe this is true (2)
The U.S. government staged the terrorist attacks of 9/11.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Bush Administration ignored warnings regarding the terrorist attacks of 9/11.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
There was a conspiracy to assassinate John F. Kennedy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Global warming is not occurring.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The 1969 Apollo moon landing never actually happened.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Barack Obama's birth certificate is not authentic.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Two categories were created out of these responses: respondents who stated they believed any of these theories — save the 2<sup>nd</sup> one which was put in to provide respondents an option less extreme than the 1<sup>st</sup> conspiracy theory — were coded as cynics, the rest skeptics.

**H3a:** Non-fans of TDS are more likely to believe in one or more conspiracy theories than fans.

**H3b:** Non-fans of CR are more likely to believe in one or more conspiracy theories than fans.

Skepticism versus cynicism towards the media was also operationalized via three separate measures. Again, it is expected that both skeptics and the cynics will demonstrate similar levels of distrust toward the mass media as an institution writ large, but patterns of media use would vary greatly between skeptics and cynics. Measuring these differences was attempted in several different ways. One question used was designed to measure how respondents utilized the media, asking:

Which of the following best describes your use of news media sources?

- I don't really see the point in following the news.
- I follow the news every now and then when something big happens.
- I selectively follow the news, seeking out information on government, politics, and/or international affairs that I think is important to know.
- I watch the news all the time, watching (either on TV or online) as many different news and talk shows as I can, but I don't have time to read too many news stories.
- I follow the news all the time in all forms, watching a lot of television news shows, listening to radio talk shows, and regularly reading news articles online or in print.

The idea behind this question is that those who are skeptical of the media, as opposed to cynical, would most likely choose the third option, selectively following the news.

**H4a:** Fans of TDS are more likely to selectively follow the news than non-fans.

**H4b:** Fans of CR are more likely to selectively follow the news than non-fans.

The second measure of skepticism versus cynicism toward the media utilized a variation of the question that is used to measure confidence in institutions writ large. Respondents were asked separate questions regarding how much confidence they had in media organizations and journalists, with the idea that skeptics and cynics would not differ much on their views of the media organizations, but that skeptics might have greater confidence in journalists.

**H5a:** Fans of TDS are more likely to profess trust in journalists than non-fans.

**H5b:** Fans of CR are more likely to profess trust in journalists than non-fans.



The third measure of skepticism versus cynicism toward the media asked respondents to indicate how closely they paid attention to information about government and politics. While skeptics might indicate distrust in the mass media, it was expected that skeptics would indicate significantly higher levels of attention paid to information about the political system.

**H6a:** Fans of TDS are more likely to pay close attention to information about government and politics than non-fans.

**H6b:** Fans of CR are more likely to pay close attention to information about government and politics than non-fans.

To measure the independent variable — fandom of TDS and CR — two separate measures of exposure were combined. The first measure was exposure to each program related to frequency in the short-term. The frequency questions read, “How often would you say you watch the following programs?”, with program options including TDS and CR along with a number of other shows—*The O’Reilly Factor*, *Hardball with Chris Matthews*, and *The Late Show with David Letterman*. Responses included “never,” “sometimes,” “regularly,” and “almost always.” The second measure was exposure to each program related to duration of exposure in the long-term. The duration of exposure questions read, “How long have you been watching of the following television programs?” with the options “I have never watched it,” “for about a year or less,” “between one and three years,” and “for more than three years”. In order for a respondent to be coded as a fan of TDS/CR, they had to answer that they watched the program “often” or “almost always” on the frequency measure, as well as answering that they were a fan of the program “between 1 and 3 years” or “for more than 3 years” on the duration of exposure measure. A dichotomous variable

for fandom was then devised for fandom; respondents who satisfied both conditions were coded as '1' and those who did not satisfy both conditions were coded '0'. The stringent operationalization of the independent variable of 'fandom' was crucial in that it takes into account both short-term and long-term exposure to the content of each program and allows for a more clear analysis of fans/non-fans.

A number of questions were also included to control for a number of factors that might be associated with both fandom of TDS and CR and skepticism. A series of questions were asked to measure need for cognition; thinking that those who score high on need for cognition would likely be attracted to TDS and CR and evince characteristics of skepticism. The respondents were asked whether were political science majors or minors as well as a number of other standard control variables—gender, education levels, and how much the respondents read outside of school when they were younger.

These questions were incorporated into two different surveys. One survey was a paper and pencil survey administered to 410 undergraduate students at the University of Vermont. While not a random sample, such captive samples do have very high response rates. Additionally, in this and the other sample, the relevant interest is in the relationship between being a fan of TDS and CR and the levels of skepticism versus cynicism. The other survey was a project developed by Professor Gierzynski with his Politics & the Media class and run on-line using Qualtrics' survey tool. In addition to sharing a number of identical questions on Professor Gierzynski's class survey, I sat in on a class period to help formulate research questions, hypotheses and variable operationalization. The 40 students in the class distributed the link to the survey in a number of different ways—Tweeting it, posting it on Facebook, emailing it to friends and family, and posting it on list serves. Respondents

were offered the chance to win a \$50 gift card for participating. 510 complete responses were received but because of the skewed age distribution — to younger respondents — only the 460 respondents who were under the age of 34 were utilized. This sample is also not random, but again this study is interested mainly in determining whether there is a difference between TDS and CR fans and nonfans on the measures of skepticism versus cynicism.

## **Results**

In the initial bivariate analysis, several interesting results were recorded. In line with previous research fans of TDS/CR demonstrated much higher levels of internal efficacy — the feeling that one can understand what is going on in government and politics — compared to non-fans (Figure 7). When measuring external efficacy — the feeling that government is responsive to its citizens' needs — both fans and non-fans of TDS/CR showed little attitudinal variance (Figure 8). The lack of differentiation between fans of TDS/CR and non-fans in this attitude runs counter to the findings of Baumgartner & Morris (2006), in which they found significantly lower levels of external efficacy among TDS viewers relative to non-viewers. That finding was not replicated in this study.

Additionally, fans of TDS/CR indicated that they pay far more attention to information about government and politics than non-fans (Figure 6), read the newspaper more frequently (Figure 10), and participate more in the political process than non-fans (Figures 13 & 14). As expected, both fans and non-fans of TDS/CR indicated similar levels of mistrust in both government (Figure 9) and the mass media (Figure 11).

Additional comparisons between fans of TDS and CR and those who are not fans of those shows on our various measures of skepticism versus cynicism can be found in Figures 1 through 5. On every measures of skepticism versus cynicism those who were coded as a fan of TDS and CR at score higher on skepticism and lower on cynicism than those with a lower exposure to those shows. This is true whether skepticism is measured as a product of distrust and participation (Figure 1); in response to the question as to whether it possible to know which claims are accurate based on a careful assessment of the research and evidence (Figure 2); and, as measured by belief in conspiracy theories (Figure 3). Based on this evidence, the hypotheses concerning attitudes toward government — H1a, H1b, H2a, H2b, H3a, H3b — were supported

With regard to the media, we found that exposure to TDS and CR was associated with skepticism as opposed to cynicism whether skepticism is measured as attention paid to information about government and politics (Figure 6), as demonstrated selectivity in seeking and consuming news (Figure 4), and as trust in journalists compared to the mass media (Figure 5). Again, based on this evidence, the hypotheses concerning attitudes toward the media —H4a/H4b, H5a,/H5b, H6a-H6b — were supported. TDS and CR fans were more likely to selectively follow the news to find information about government and politics. As theorized, while there was little difference in confidence in media organizations writ large between fans and nonfans, fans of TDS/CR were more likely to show confidence in journalists than non-fans. Finally, fans of TDS/CR are far more likely pay attention to information about government and politics than non-fans.

These findings, when combined with the findings of previous studies of the impact of TDS and/or CR, provide evidence to support the argument that TDS and CR engender

skepticism, not cynicism. Previous studies have demonstrated a causal link between TDS and cynicism; especially the experiment by Baumgartner and Morris (2006). Here it has been shown that what was measured as cynicism is more likely to be a healthy skepticism.

In order to rule out some possible alternative explanations for the findings above a series of multivariate analyses were run using multiple regression or logistic regression, where appropriate. These analyses provided control for other differences such as, need for cognition, whether the respondent was a political science major, and gender. The results of the tests can be found in Tables 1 through 6. After running those tests, being a fan of TDS or CR were still statistically significant predictors two measures of skepticism (the measure derived from multiplying distrust times number of political activities respondents engaged in and the response to the question “When it comes to disagreements between people over how things are, which of the following statements comes closer to what you believe?”). Being a fan of TDS and CR also remained a statistically significant predictor of being a selective news gatherer of important information as can be seen in Tables 5 and 6.

[Tables 1 through 6 About Here]

## **Discussion**

Previous work on this subject has put forth two divergent narratives of the impacts of TDS and CR. The theory that TDS and CR serve as sources of political cynicism — given empirical weight by findings of Baumgartner & Morris (2006), Guggenheim *et al.* (2011) — characterizes these programs as having negative effects on the political system. The theory that TDS and CR serve as sources of political skepticism — put forth in the form of normative arguments found in Baym (2005,2009), Gierzynski & Moore (2008), Gierzynski

(2011) — characterizes these programs as having positive effects on the political system. In the previous literature there has been no empirical support to the latter theories of TDS/CR as sources of political skepticism. This study has found preliminary empirical evidence that suggests TDS/CR increase expressions of political skepticism among their audience rather than political cynicism.

Rather than using more simplistic measures of cynicism — such as external efficacy and trust in government and the media — this study created six separate measures of skepticism versus cynicism toward both government and the media. Due to the lack of cohesiveness in the previous work on this topic, it was of vital importance to distinctively operationalize cynicism and skepticism. The six measures that were created took into consideration the fundamental tenants of skepticism and cynicism, the ways in which each attitude would manifest themselves when looking at participatory tendencies of the respondents, and the ways in which each attitude would effect the volume and strategies of consumption of information about politics and government. Furthermore, we applied the theories of skepticism and cynicism to more abstract operationalizations — such as the belief in conspiracy theories — in an attempt to tap into to more latent expressions of each attitude. Since scholars previously have failed to clearly operationalize and separate each attitude, this study took great lengths to do just that.

On all six measures of skepticism versus cynicism, fans of TDS and CR demonstrated significantly higher levels of skepticism than non-fans. A concern in our methodology was the somewhat subjective nature of the definition and operationalization of the dependent variables. After all, the motivation behind the emergence of the research question was due in large part to the failures of previous scholars to reach a consensus on how to account for

each attitude. But due to the fact that fandom of both TDS and CR was significantly and positively correlated with each of the six measures for skepticism — rather than cynicism — there is evidence that our understanding of these political attitudes was correct and subsequently operationalized successfully.

The evidence found in this study offers empirical support to the normative argument suggesting TDS/CR are sources of political skepticism rather than political cynicism. The potential implications of such findings warrant brief discussion. First, and most general, is that the condemnations of TDS and CR as negative influences on our public discourse appear to be misguided. Rather than being concerned about the increase in popularity and viewership of these programs, the data here indicates that we should be encouraged by it. Instead of being concerned that viewers of these programs are less informed, more alienated, more apathetic, and less engaged in politics, we should be encouraged that they are more likely to engage in the political process and effectively and cautiously seek-out and consume information about that process.

Another potential implication of the findings presented here is that programs like TDS and CR may serve as an emerging source of news that calls attention to the failings of the traditional news media; specifically television as a medium through which news is presented. In his book on the harmful effects to our public discourse caused by the emergence of television as the dominant medium by which news is produced and consumed, Neil Postman (1985) argued that one of the few solutions to combat these effects was to create television programs that satirize television's incoherent and trivialized presentation of the world. Such a show could potentially make citizens more aware of the absurdity of television-based-conversations about government and politics

and cause them to seek out different sources of news containing far more substantive information. Based on the selectivity demonstrated in the habits of news consumption in fans of TDS/CR relative to non-fans, it seems that TDS and CR are indeed serving the function Postman discussed. TDS and CR have emerged as the type of programs Postman thought might mitigate the harmful effects of television news thus playing an important role of accountability institution.

In the same vein as Postman, Baym (2009) laments the drastic transformation of the mass media since World War II. As discussed thoroughly in his book, the high-modern era was a time in which the news media set, and adhered to, clear boundaries between information and entertainment, where the relationship between the broadcaster and the public was one of trust, and where the viewers were considered citizens seeking out a public good. That era dissolved into the post-modern paradigm of journalism due to consolidation, corporatization and increased access to 24-hour television cable networks. In the post-modern era, the emphasis of content devolved from primarily informative to primarily entertaining. Rather than providing a public service to citizens, news in the post-modern era has become a product marketed to consumers. In such a corporate landscape, “broadcasters became more committed to capital accumulation and shareholder value than to any theoretical concept of the public good.” (Baym, 2009, p. 171) As the content of the nightly news drifted toward the sphere of entertainment, an emphasis on actuality and issue context gave way to story-telling and constructed narratives. This paradigm shift transformed the way citizens learn, talk and think about issues and transformed the way politicians and the media presented those issues. The post-modern paradigm has caused Americans to be collectively more cynical about politics and government as well as the



mass media itself. Cappella and Jameson (1997) illustrate this trend in what they call “the spiral of cynicism”. They argue that the use of negative framing, strategy coverage and focus on conflict in the mass media perpetuates a process of reciprocity where the conflict-driven sound-bite-oriented discourse of politicians feeds the strategy-oriented structure of press coverage.

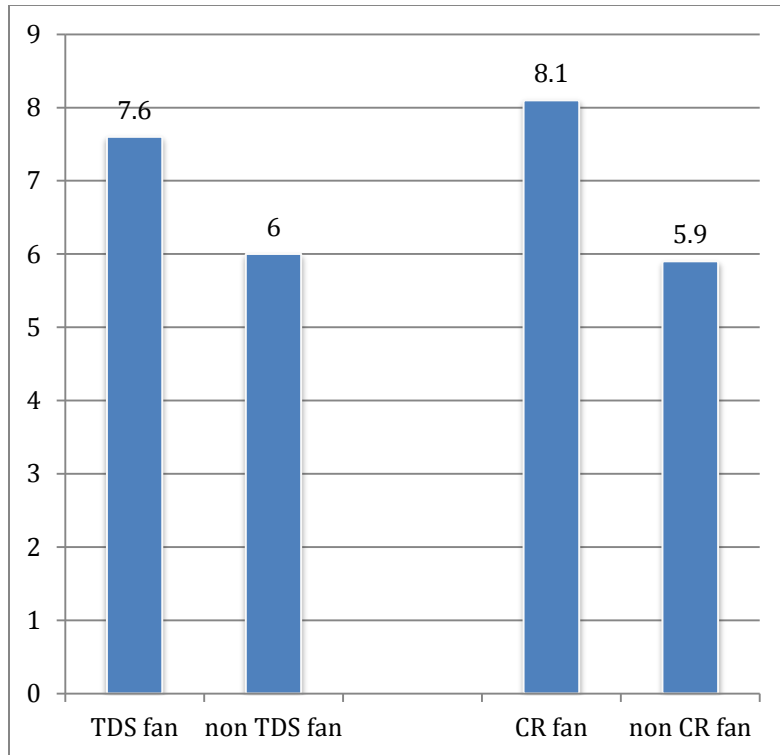
Baym’s book, *From Cronkite to Colbert* (2009), argues that TDS and CR represent an emerging news paradigm for television, one that uses satire to ridicule the cynical post-modern paradigm that dominates the rest of television news while at the same time exhibiting characteristics of the more rational and fact-based approach to television news from the high-modern period. He argues that news is not just a source of knowledge but a form — a means by which a society orients itself and knows where it stands. The implications of TDS and CR as an emerging news paradigm are not simply an important measure in terms of what people know. Rather, “the fundamental question becomes *how* we know — the ways in which we talk of and think about politics, and act in political ways.” (Baym 2009, p. 168) The evidence presented in this paper suggests that rather than contributing to the prevailing cynicism surrounding government, politics and the media — caused in-part by the practices of the post-modern media — TDS and CR instead may represent an emerging news paradigm that promotes critical inquiry, substantive debate and deliberation on relevant issues.

### **Conclusion**

Baym (2009) offers a compelling normative argument that *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* serve as positive sources of political skepticism rather than harmful sources

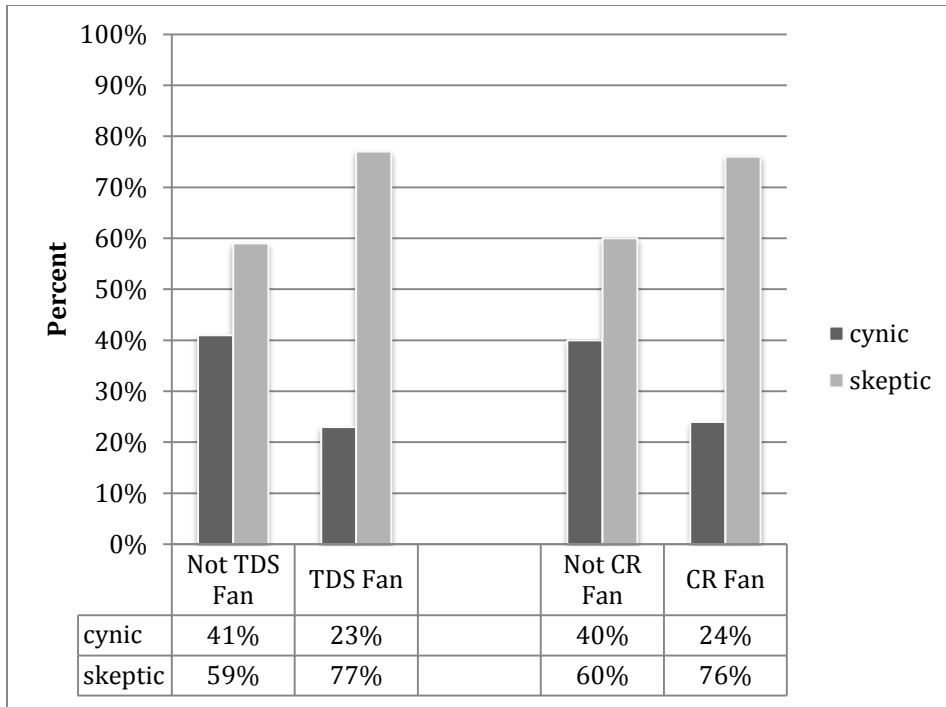
of political cynicism. Furthermore, he argues that TDS and CR represent an emerging paradigm of news, in which satire, humor and information effectively blend to promote a new form of critical inquiry and deliberation while serving as a source of media and government accountability. It was expected that if Baym was correct the qualities of TDS and CR that he outlined would be found in the audiences of the two shows. Using two surveys and a number of different approaches to measuring skepticism and distinguishing it from cynicism, we found evidence that supports Baym's argument. Those who are exposed to TDS and CR on a regular basis appear to have the characteristics of skeptics not cynics. The implications of our findings are that these two shows are actually contributing to a healthier democracy, that they are helping America and not hurting it.

The research presented here is based on survey data and thus cannot establish a cause and effect between viewing TDS and CR and skepticism — though previous research has provided evidence of causality between TDS and undifferentiated measures of cynicism/skepticism. The multivariate analysis does provide some additional support by ruling out some alternative explanations, but the measures of model fit are low, raising the question of whether this study has failed to control for some key predictors. Future research using an experimental design and similar measures of skepticism and cynicism used here would help to solidify the findings. This research has furthered the understanding of the impacts of viewing satirical news shows such as TDS and CR. Furthermore, this study is the first to offer empirical support to the argument that TDS and CR are positive sources of skepticism rather than harmful sources of cynicism.



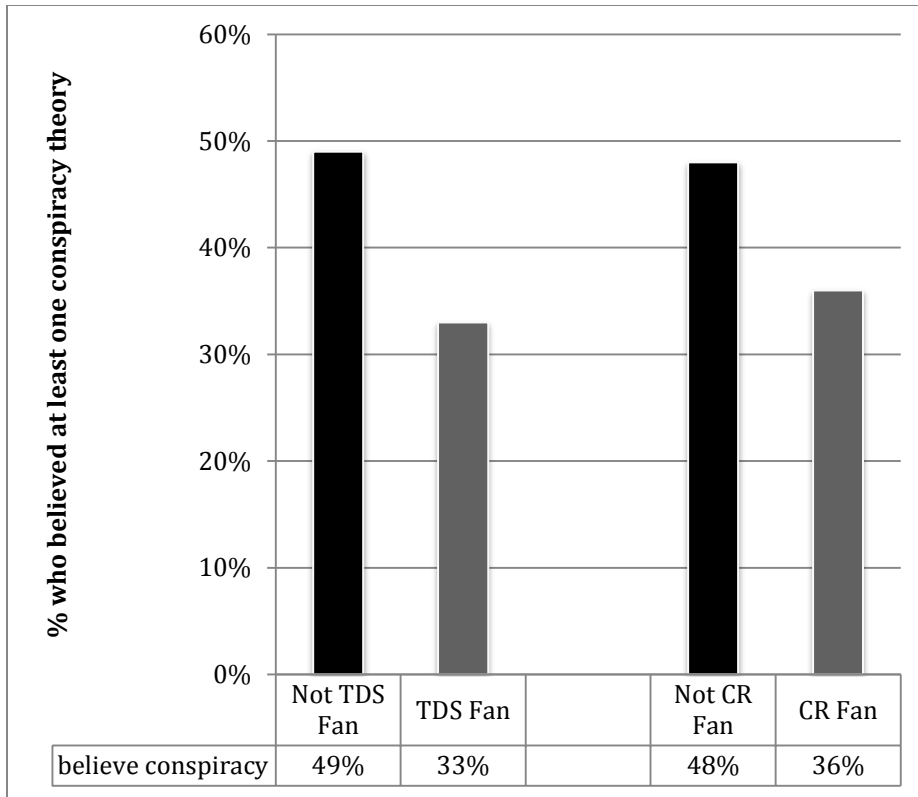
**Figure 1:** Skepticism as measured by trust X participation for TDS and CR fans and nonfans.

ANOVA for TDS fans versus non TDS fans,  $F = 8.1$ , sig. 0.005; ANOVA for CR fans versus non CR fans,  $F = 13.8$ , sig. 0.000.



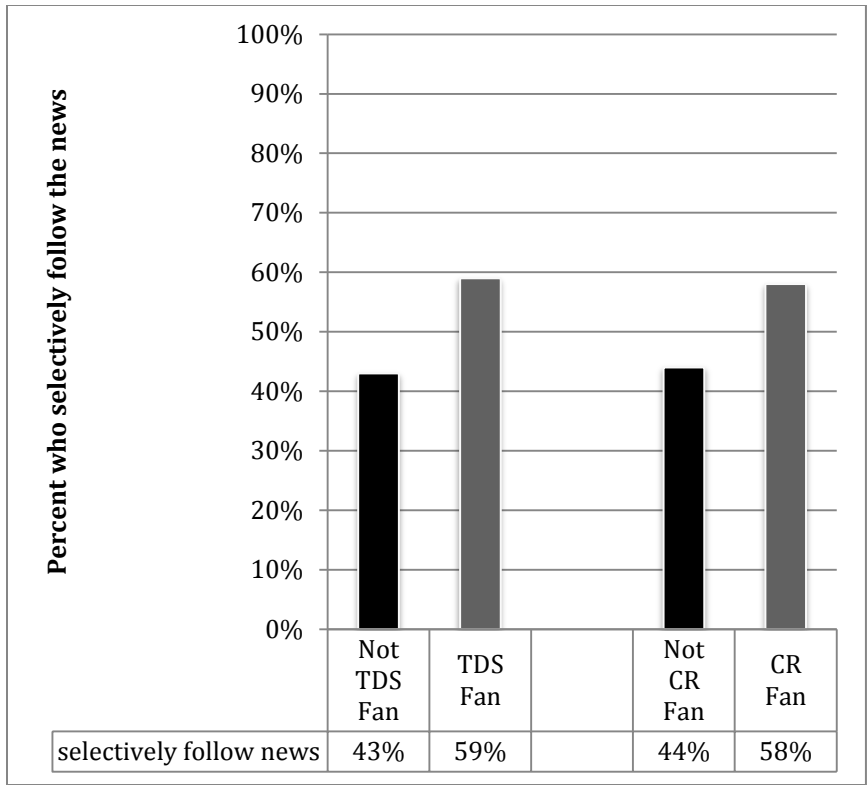
**Figure 2:** Percentage of respondents (under the age of 34) choosing the cynical versus skeptical response to the question: “When it comes to disagreements between people over how things are, which of the following statements comes closer to what you believe? It is impossible to know which claims are accurate because studies and evidence can be manipulated to prove whatever someone wants to prove. Or, It is possible to know which claims are accurate based on a careful assessment of the research and evidence.”

n = 460, confidence interval  $\pm$  4.6 percentage points



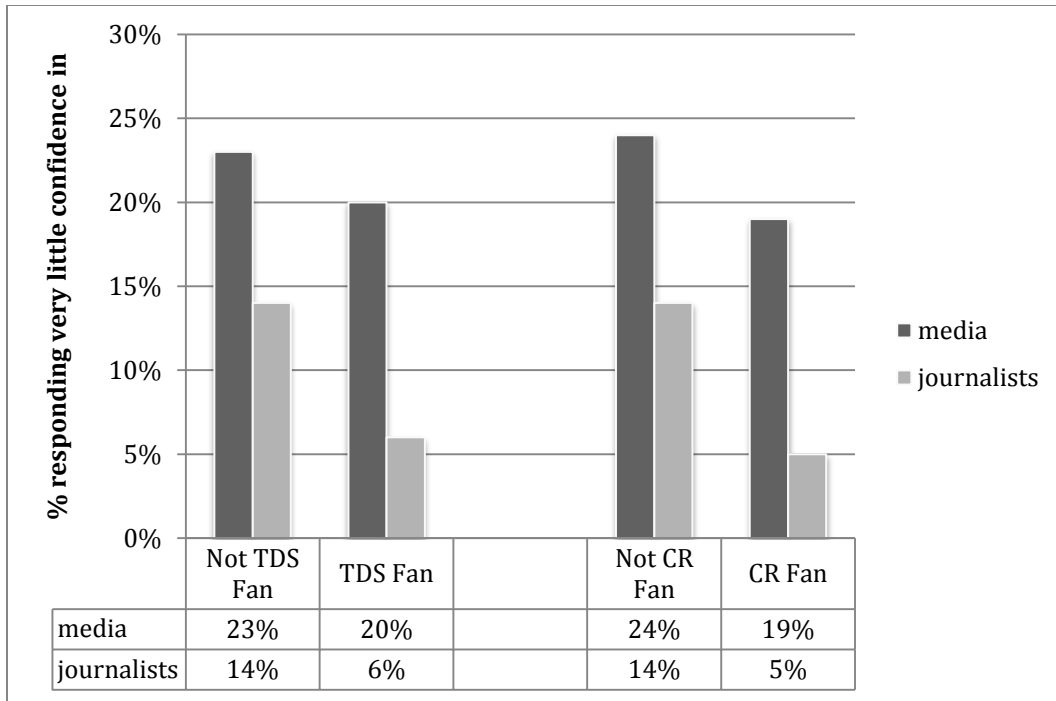
**Figure 3:** Percent of respondents (under the age of 34) who believed in at least one of the conspiracy theories by TDS and CR fandom.

n = 462, confidence interval  $\pm$  4.6 percentage points



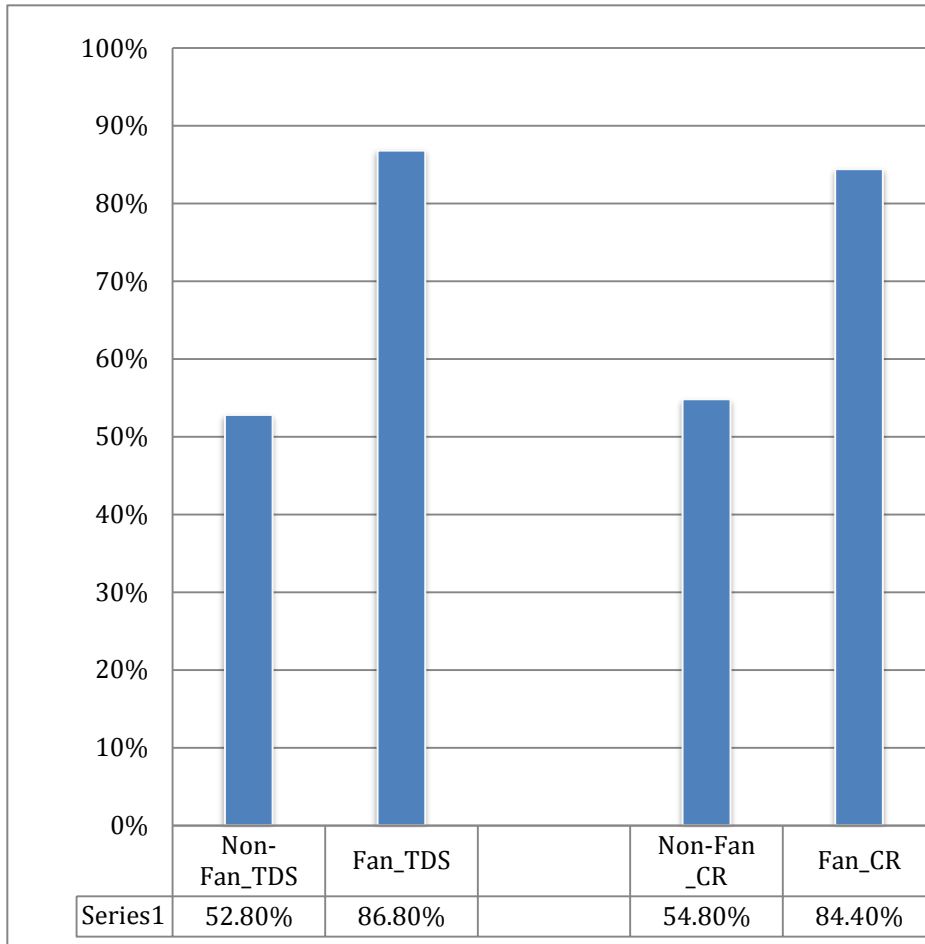
**Figure 4:** Percentage (under the age of 34) who “selectively follow the news, seeking out information on government, politics, and/or international affairs that I think is important to know” by fandom of TDS and CR.

n = 459, confidence interval ± 4.6 percentage points



**Figure 5:** Percent (under age of 34) saying they have “very little” confidence in news media organizations and journalists by TDS and CR fandom.

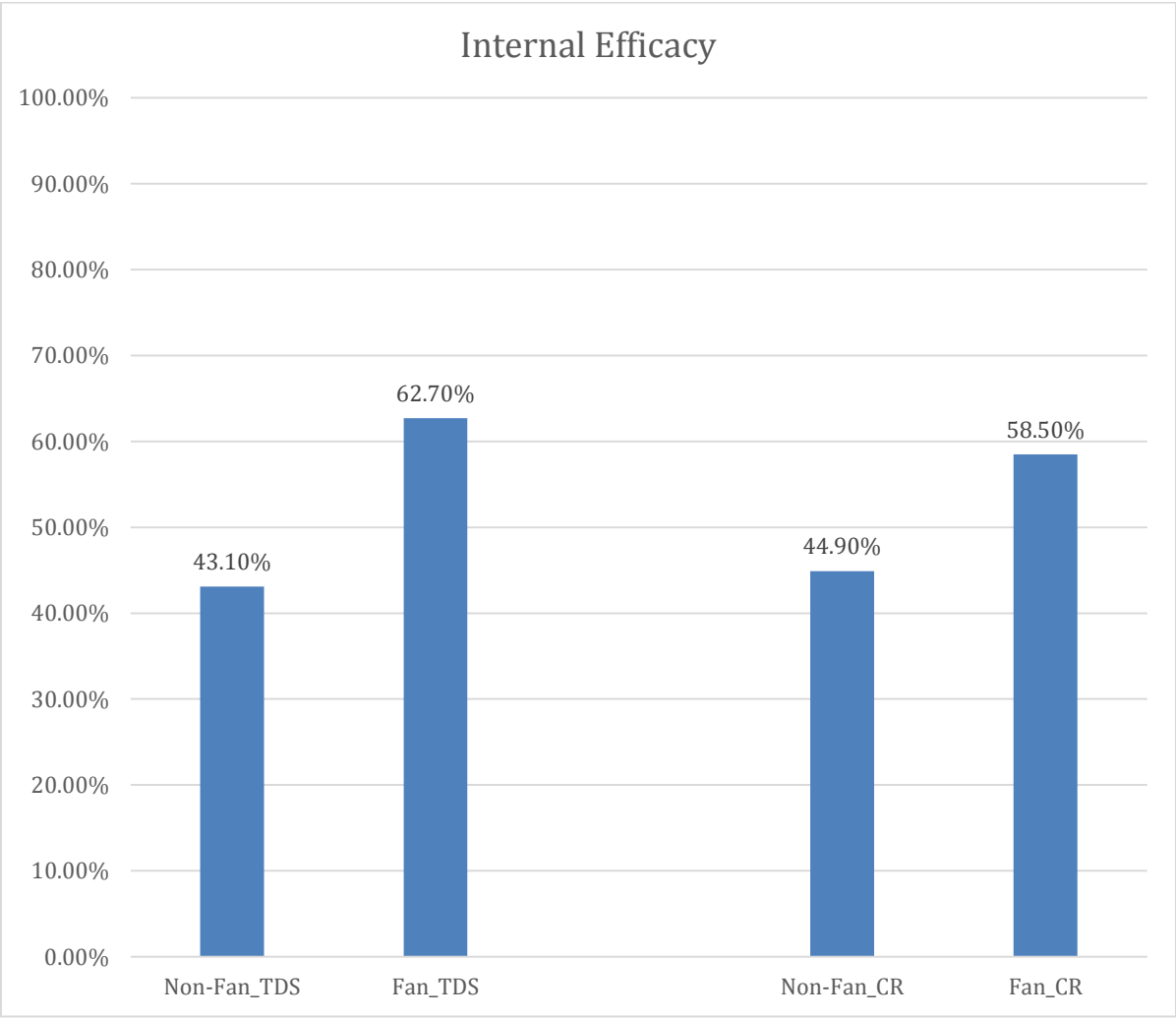
n = 463, confidence interval  $\pm$  4.6 percentage points



**Figure 6:** Percentage of respondents who indicated they pay 'moderately close' or 'extremely close' attention to information about government and politics.

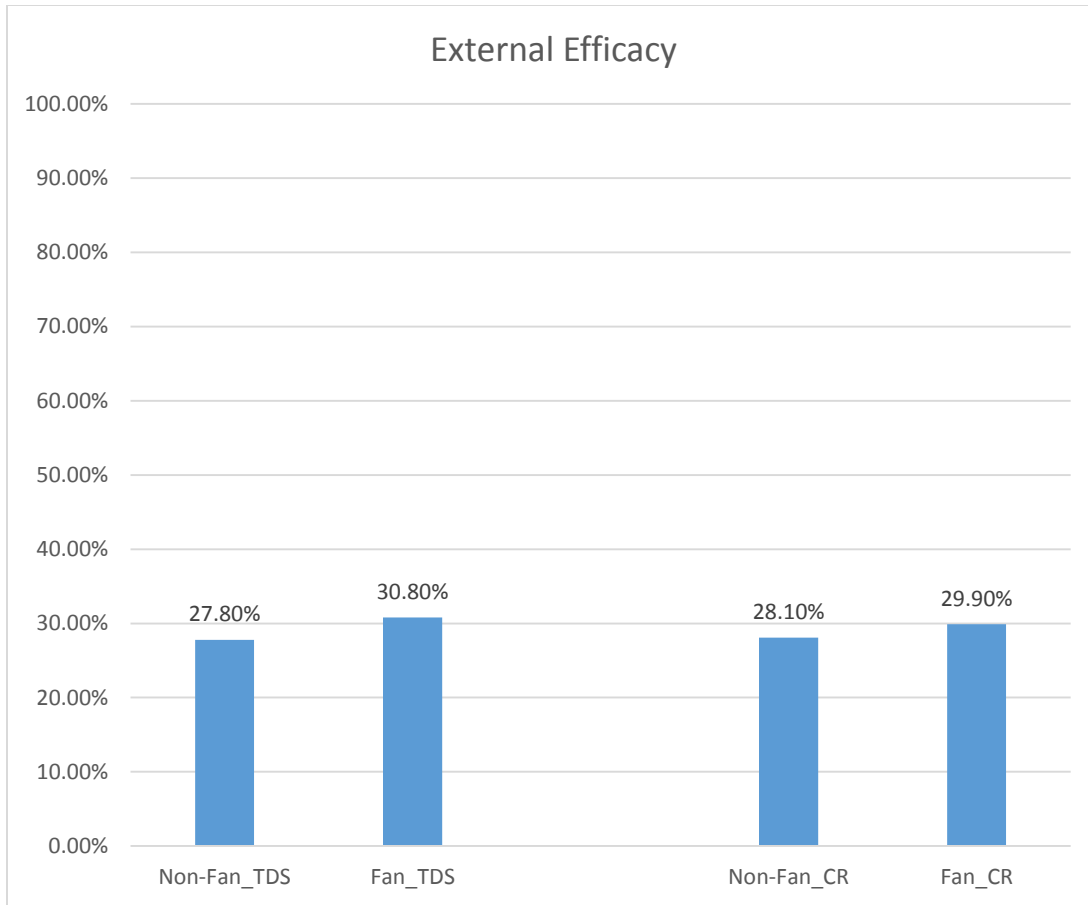
n = 410, margin of error  $\pm$  4.8





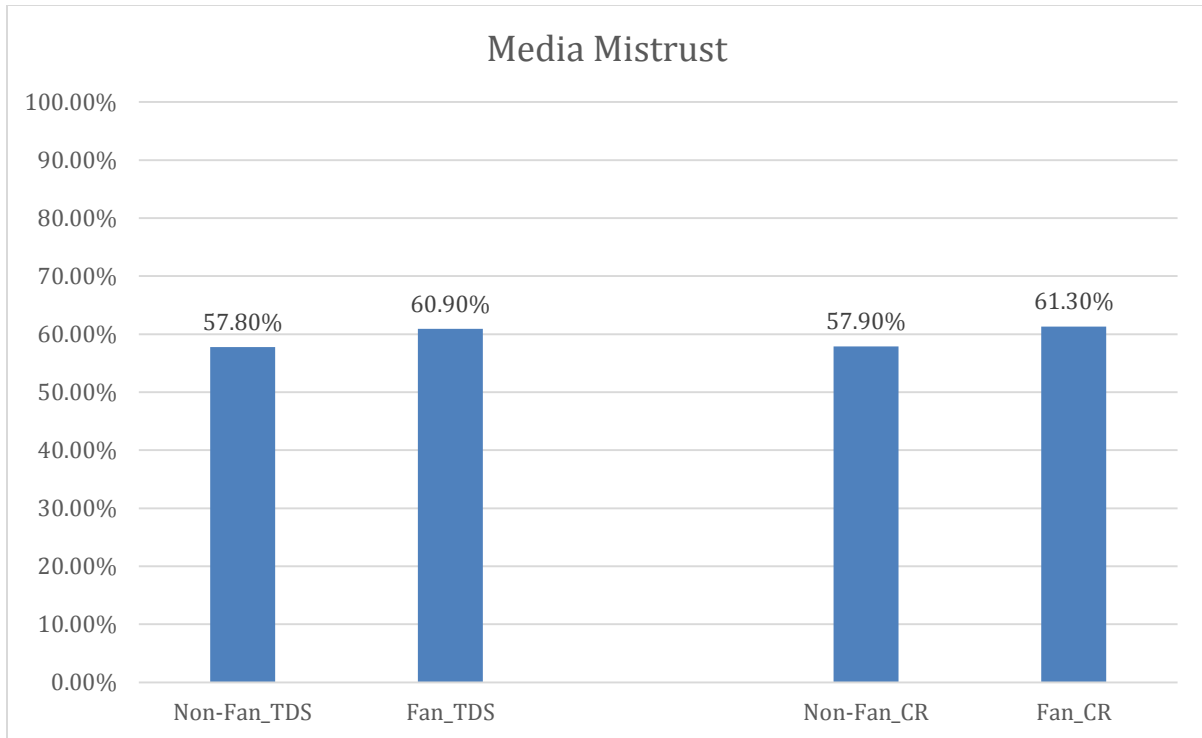
**Figure 7:** Percentage of respondents who either 'disagree somewhat' or 'disagree strongly' with the statement "Sometimes politics and government seems so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what is going on."

n = 410, margin of error ± 4.8



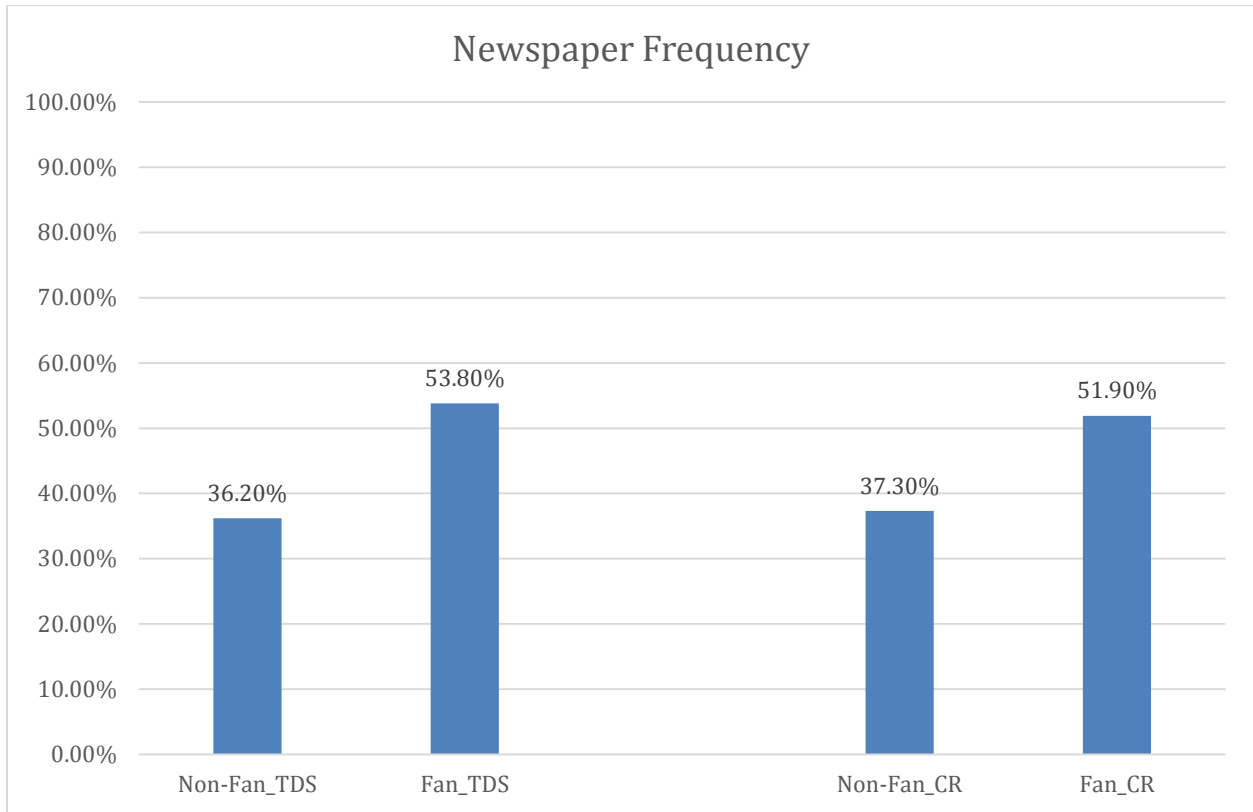
**Figure 8:** Percentage of respondents that either ‘agree somewhat’ or ‘agree strongly’ with the statement “People like me have no say about what the government does.” The percentage above indicates those respondents with low levels of external efficacy.

n = 410, margin of error  $\pm$  4.8



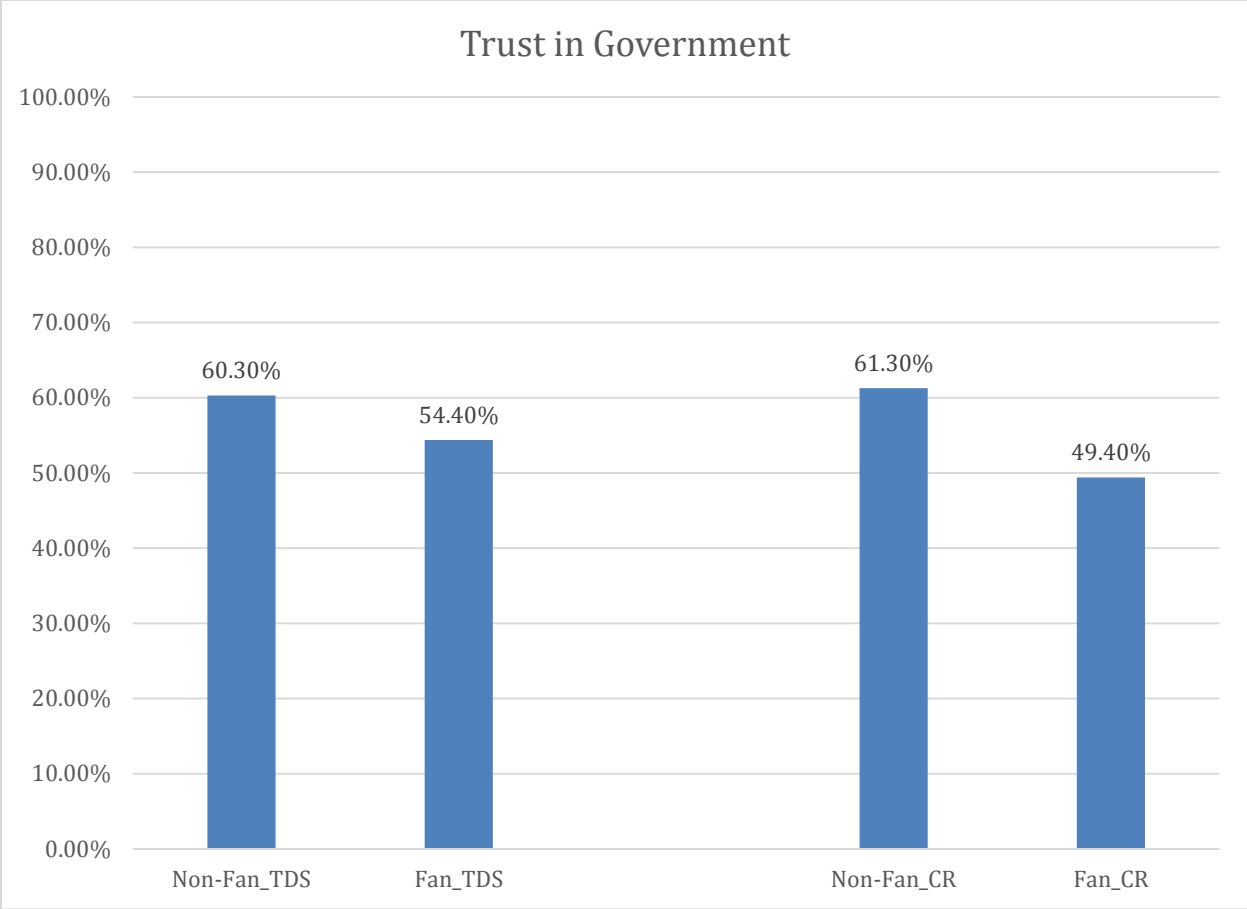
**Figure 9:** Percentage of respondents that indicated low levels of trust in the media to fulfill its role as ‘watchdog’ over the political system. Fans of TDS/CR expressed nearly identical trust levels in the media but most interesting is that the 60% level of mistrust in the media is identical to the national percentage found in the 2012 Gallup Poll on media trust.

n = 410, margin of error ± 4.8



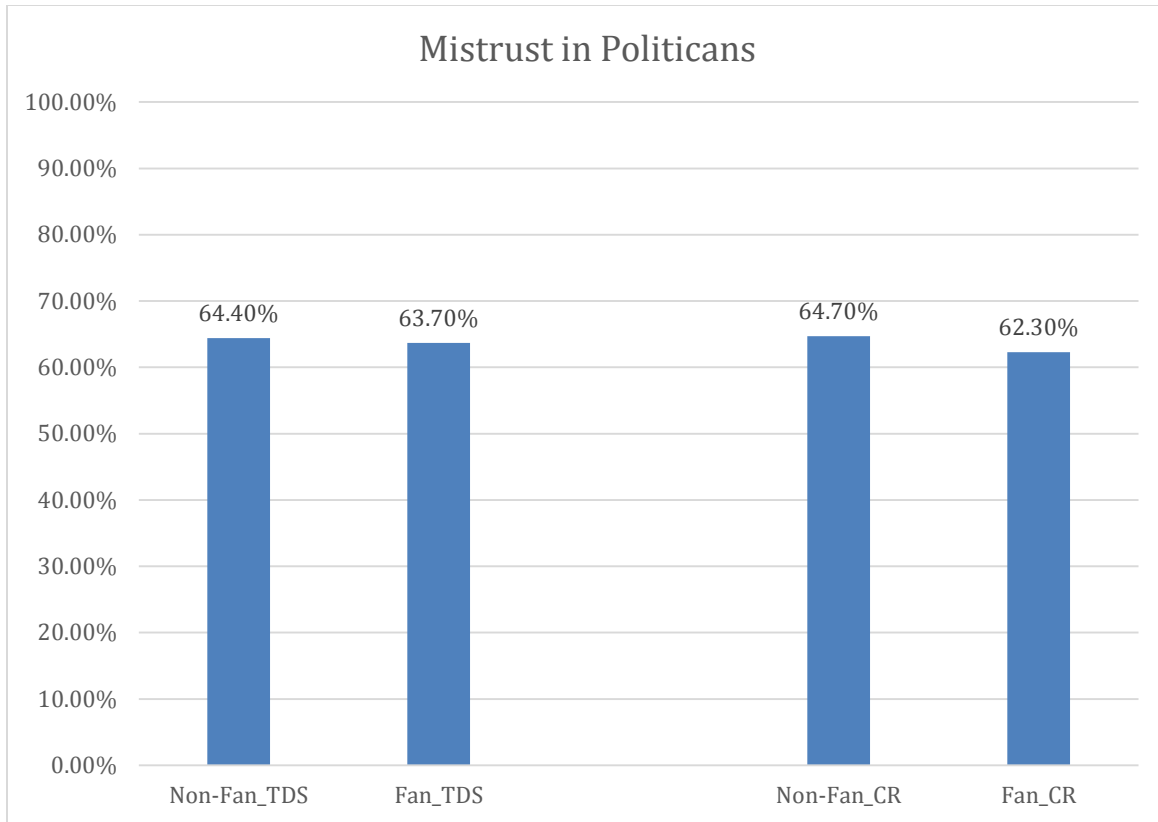
**Figure 10:** Percentage of respondents that read the newspaper at least three times in the last week.

n = 410, margin of error  $\pm$  4.8



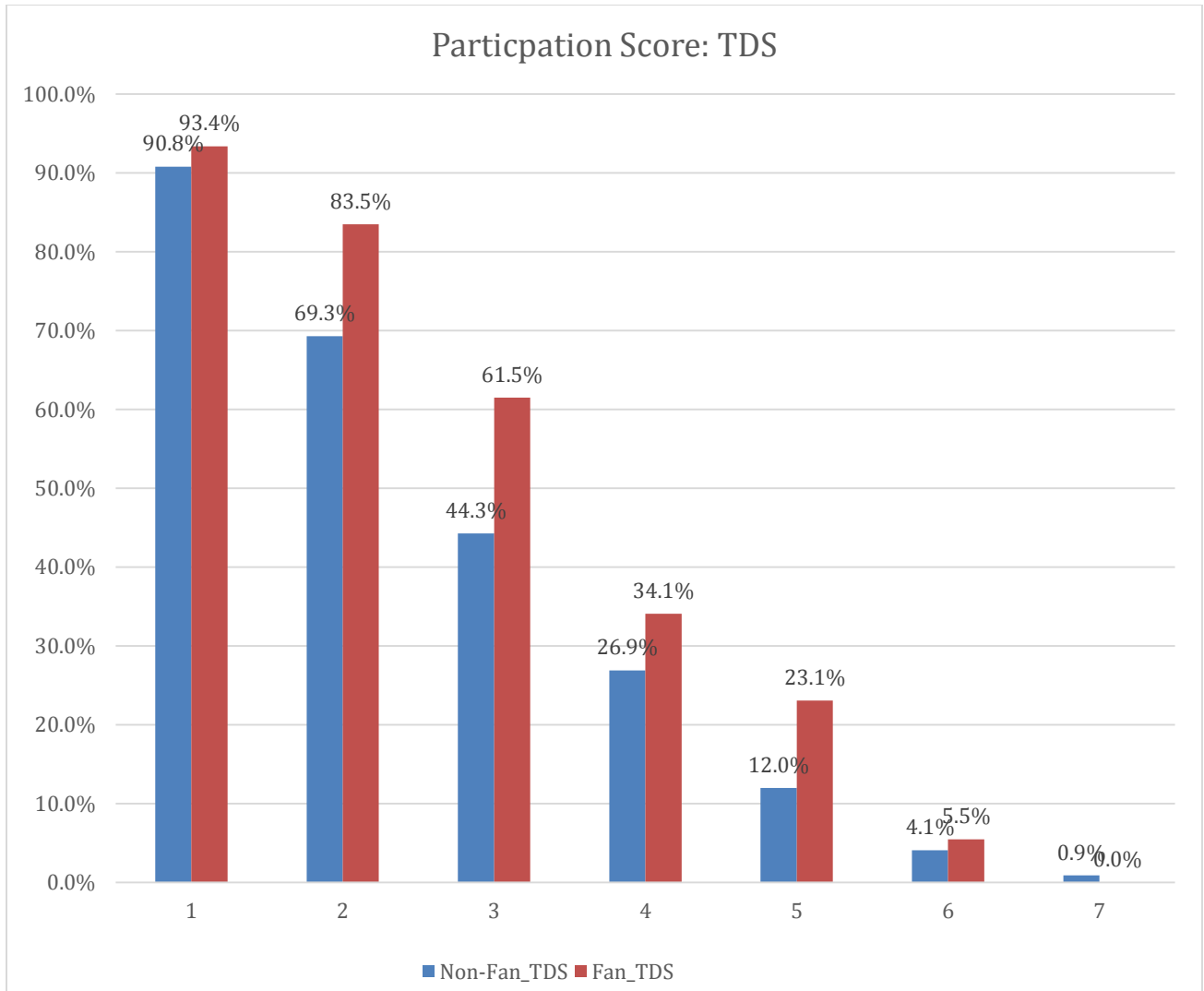
**Figure 11:** Percentage of respondents that either ‘somewhat agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ with the statement “I trust the government in Washington to do what is best for the country.”

n = 410, margin of error ± 4.8



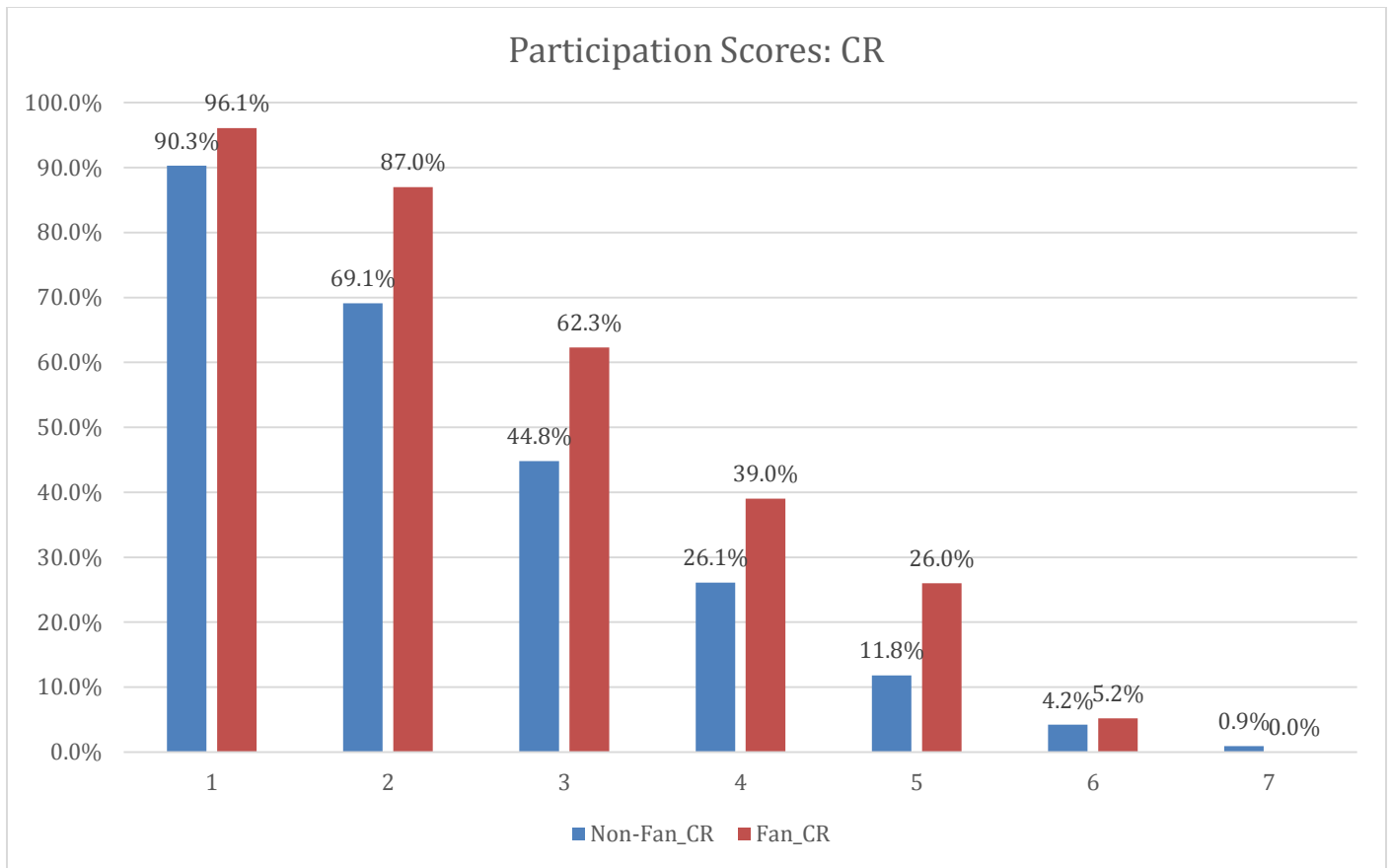
**Figure 12:** Percentage of respondents that either ‘somewhat agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ with the statement “Politicians are out of touch with the real world and only care about their special interests.”

n = 410, margin of error  $\pm$  4.8



**Figure 13:** This figure illustrates the distribution of participation scores for fans and non-fans of TDS. Each score interval indicates the percentage of fans/non-fans that engaged in at least 'X' number of participative political actions.

n = 410, margin of error  $\pm$  4.8



**Figure 14:** This figure illustrates the distribution of participation scores for fans and non-fans of CR. Each score interval indicates the percentage of fans/non-fans that engaged in at least 'X' number of participative political actions.

n = 410, margin of error  $\pm$  4.8



**Table 1:** Regression Analysis, regressing skepticism (as measured by distrust X number of political activities) on need for cognition, political science major, gender, and TDS exposure

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	1.026	1.294		.793	.428
Need for Cognition	.490	.160	.150	3.055	.002
Pol. Sci. major/minor	2.085	.474	.214	4.401	.000
Male	-1.255	.471	-.132	-2.664	.008
<b>TDS Exposure</b>	<b>.198</b>	<b>.059</b>	<b>.171</b>	<b>3.378</b>	<b>.001</b>

Adjusted R-square = .123

**Table 2:** Regression Analysis, regressing skepticism (as measured by distrust X number of political activities) on need for cognition, political science major, gender, and CR exposure

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	1.043	1.291		.808	.419
<b>CR Exposure</b>	<b>.224</b>	<b>.061</b>	<b>.185</b>	<b>3.646</b>	<b>.000</b>
Need for Cognition	.480	.160	.147	2.995	.003
Pol. Sci. major/minor	2.047	.473	.210	4.323	.000
Male	-1.297	.471	-.136	-2.756	.006

Adjusted R-square = .127

**Table 3:** Logistic Regression, dependent variable skepticism as measured by question asking “When it comes to disagreements....” Response “It is possible to know which claims are accurate based on a careful assessment of the research and evidence” code 1, cynical response coded 0.

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
TDS_Fan	.580	.212	7.522	1	.006	1.787
Need for Cognition	.070	.022	9.983	1	.002	1.073
Male	.331	.209	2.502	1	.114	1.392
Pol. Sci Major/Minor	.402	.368	1.193	1	.275	1.495
Constant	-1.518	.560	7.351	1	.007	.219
Percent predicted correctly, 66.3						

**Table 4:** Logistic Regression, dependent variable skepticism as measured by question asking “When it comes to disagreements....” Response “It is possible to know which claims are accurate based on a careful assessment of the research and evidence” code 1, cynical response coded 0.

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
CR_Fan	.526	.206	6.510	1	.011	1.692
Need for cognition	.071	.022	10.141	1	.001	1.073
Male	.366	.209	3.068	1	.080	1.442
Pol. Sci. Major/minor	.502	.362	1.923	1	.166	1.651
Constant	-1.523	.559	7.427	1	.006	.218
Percent predicted correctly = 66.0						

<b>Table 5: Logistic Regression, dependent variable selective use of the news</b>						
	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
TDS_Fan	.608	.195	9.755	1	.002	1.836
Need for cogn	.037	.021	3.192	1	.074	1.038
Male	.040	.190	.045	1	.832	1.041
Pol. Sci. major/minor	-.457	.295	2.395	1	.122	.633
Constant	-1.203	.529	5.165	1	.023	.300
Percent predicted correctly = 57						

<b>Table 6: Logistic Regression, dependent variable selective use of the news</b>						
	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
CR_Fan	.368	.187	3.860	1	.049	1.445
Need for Cogn	.042	.021	4.031	1	.045	1.042
Male	.108	.188	.328	1	.567	1.114
Pol. Sci. major/minor	-.313	.288	1.185	1	.276	.731
Constant	-1.248	.526	5.627	1	.018	.287

## Appendix A: Classroom Survey

**Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research project. Your participation and honest opinions are of utmost importance to the success of this research and will remain completely anonymous. Please answer the following questions by filling out the bubble on the scan form for the option that best fits what you think and feel. Do not put your name on the scan form.**

<b>1. How many days in the last week did you read a daily newspaper? This may include articles online that are taken directly from a newspaper.</b>				
<b>a.</b> I did not read a daily newspaper last week	<b>b.</b> One or two days	<b>c.</b> Three days	<b>d.</b> Four or five days	<b>e.</b> More than five days
<b>2. Do you agree or disagree with the statement: People like me do not have any say about what the government does?</b>				
<b>a.</b> Agree strongly	<b>b.</b> Agree somewhat	<b>c.</b> Neither agree nor disagree	<b>d.</b> Disagree somewhat	<b>e.</b> Disagree Strongly
<b>3. Do you agree or disagree with the statement: Sometimes politics and government seems so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on?</b>				
<b>a.</b> Agree strongly	<b>b.</b> Agree somewhat	<b>c.</b> Neither agree nor disagree	<b>d.</b> Disagree somewhat	<b>e.</b> Disagree strongly
<b>4. For whom did you vote for in the 2012 presidential election?</b>				
<b>a.</b> Barack Obama	<b>b.</b> Mitt Romney	<b>c.</b> Other	<b>d.</b> I do not plan on voting	<b>e.</b> I am not eligible to vote
<b>5. One of the main purposes of the news media is to act as a "watchdog" over the American Political System. To what degree do you feel that the media in the United States fulfills this purpose?</b>				
<b>a.</b> Strongly Agree	<b>b.</b> Agree somewhat	<b>c.</b> Disagree somewhat	<b>d.</b> Strongly Disagree	
<b>Have you done any of the following during your life?</b>				
<b>6.</b> Written a letter/email to or called a public official			a. yes	b. no
<b>7.</b> Worked on a political campaign			a. yes	b. no
<b>8.</b> Volunteer or worked in a government or political official's office			a. yes	b. no
<b>9.</b> Contributed money to a political campaign			a. yes	b. no
<b>10.</b> Attempted to convince someone to vote a certain way			a. yes	b. no
<b>11.</b> Been part of an organization that involves itself in politics in some way, such as environmental groups, gun rights groups, student organizations that deal with politics, etc.			a. yes	b. no
<b>12. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: Politics and the decisions made by politicians have an important impact on my day-to-day life.</b>				
<b>a.</b> Strongly Agree	<b>b.</b> Somewhat Agree	<b>c.</b> Somewhat Disagree	<b>d.</b> Strongly Disagree	

Within our culture there exist theories about certain historical and scientific events. Some of these theories are listed below. Please indicate whether you believe the theory.	Do you believe this theory?	
13. The U.S. government staged the terrorist attacks of 9/11.	a. Yes	b. No
14. There was a conspiracy to assassinate John F. Kennedy	a. Yes	b. No
15. Global warming is not occurring	a. Yes	b. No
16. The 1969 Apollo moon landing never actually happened.	a. Yes	b. No
17. Barack Obama's birth certificate is not authentic	a. Yes	b. No

18. How closely do you pay attention to information about what is going on in government and politics?			
a. Extremely closely	b. Moderately closely	c. Slightly closely	d. Not closely at all

19. Do you agree or disagree with the statement: Politicians are out of touch with the real world and only care about their special interests.			
a. Strongly Agree	b. Somewhat Agree	c. Somewhat Disagree	d. Strongly Disagree

20. Do you agree or disagree with the statement: I like to have the responsibility of handling a situation that requires a lot of thinking.				
a. Agree strongly	b. Agree somewhat	c. Neither agree nor disagree	d. Disagree somewhat	e. Disagree strongly

21. Do you agree or disagree with the statement: It is important to grapple with complex issues.				
a. Agree strongly	b. Agree somewhat	c. Neither agree nor disagree	d. Disagree somewhat	e. Disagree strongly

22. Do you agree or disagree with the statement: I trust the government in Washington to do what is best for the country.			
a. Strongly Agree	b. Somewhat Agree	c. Somewhat Disagree	d. Strongly Disagree

How often do you watch the following television programs?	Never	Sometimes	Regularly	Almost Always
23. The O'Reilly Factor	a.	b.	c.	d.
24. Hardball with Chris Matthews	a.	b.	c.	d.
25. The Daily Show with Jon Stewart	a.	b.	c.	d.
26. The Colbert Report	a.	b.	c.	d.
27. The Late Show with David Letterman	a.	b.	c.	d.

How long have you been watching of the following television programs?	I have never really watched it	for about a year or less	between one and three years	for more than three years
28. The O'Reilly Factor	a.	b.	c.	d.
29. Hardball with Chris Matthews	a.	b.	c.	d.
30. The Daily Show with Jon Stewart	a.	b.	c.	d.
31. The Colbert Report	a.	b.	c.	d.
32. The Late Show with David Letterman	a.	b.	c.	d.

33. When you read news articles how much of the article do you usually get through?				
a. I usually skim the article for important points	b. I usually read the first few paragraphs	c. I usually read half the first half of the article	d. I usually read most of the article	e. I usually read all of the article

Finally, please answer the following questions about yourself.

34. Are you a political science major or minor?	
a. Yes	b. No

35. Please indicate your gender				
a. Female	b. Male	c. Transgendered	d. Gender neutral	e. Other

36. Please tell us your age				
a. 17-18	b. 19-20	c. 21-22	d. 23-25	e. 25 or above

37. Outside of the books you were assigned for school, what kind of reader were you when you were younger?		
a. I was not much of a reader of books	b. I was an occasional reader of books	c. I was an avid reader of books

38. What race do you consider yourself?				
a. White	b. Black or African American	c. American Indian or Alaska Native	d. Asian	e. Of Mixed race or some other race
39. Do you consider yourself Hispanic or Latino(a)?				
a. Yes	b. No	c. I am part Hispanic/Latino(a)		

40. When it comes to politics, do you usually think of yourself as very liberal, liberal, moderate or middle of the road, conservative, or very conservative?				
a. Very liberal	b. Liberal	c. Moderate	d. Conservative	e. Very conservative

Thank you for your time. If you would like to learn more about my research you may email me at [wandreyc@uvm.edu](mailto:wandreyc@uvm.edu)

## Appendix B: Online Survey

Q15 Which of the following best describes your use of news media sources?

- I don't really see the point in following the news. (1)
- I follow the news every now and then when something big happens. (2)
- I selectively follow the news, seeking out information on government, politics, and/or international affairs that I think is important to know. (3)
- I watch the news all the time, watching (either on TV or online) as many different news and talk shows as I can, but I don't have time to read too many news stories. (4)
- I follow the news all the time in all forms, watching a lot of television news shows, listening to radio talk shows, and regularly reading news articles online or in print. (5)

Q14 When it comes to disagreements between people over how things are, which of the following statements comes closer to what you believe?

- It is impossible to know which claims are accurate because studies and evidence can be manipulated to prove whatever someone wants to prove. (1)
- It is possible to know which claims are accurate based on a careful assessment of the research and evidence. (2)

Q6 Within our culture there exist theories about certain historical and scientific events. Some of these theories are listed below. Please indicate whether you believe the theory.

	Yes, I believe this is true (1)	No, I don't believe this is true (2)
The U.S. government staged the terrorist attacks of 9/11. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Bush Administration ignored warnings regarding the terrorist attacks of 9/11. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
There was a conspiracy to assassinate John F. Kennedy. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Global warming is not occurring. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The 1969 Apollo moon landing never actually happened. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Barack Obama's birth certificate is not authentic. (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q7 Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the statements.

	agree strongly (1)	agree somewhat (2)	neither agree or disagree (3)	disagree somewhat (4)	disagree strongly (5)
Sometimes politics and government seems so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on? (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
People like me do not have any say about what the government does? (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q8 When you read news articles (either online or in newspapers) how much of the article do you usually get through?

- I don't read news articles (5)
- I usually skim the article for important points (1)
- I usually read the first few paragraphs (2)
- I usually read half the first half of the article (3)
- I usually read most or all of the article (4)



Q18 Below is a list of institutions in American society. Please tell me how much confidence you, yourself, have in each one: a great deal, quite a lot, some, or very little

	a great deal (1)	quite a lot (2)	some (3)	very litte (4)
Corporations (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
News media organizations (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Journalists (9)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Congress (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Courts (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Religious institutions (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The military (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Presidency (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q1 How often would you say you watch the following programs?

	Never (1)	Rarely (2)	Sometimes (3)	Often (4)
The O'Reilly Factor (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Daily Show with Jon Stewart (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Colbert Report (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Hardball with Chris Matthews (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Late Show with David Letterman (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Newsroom (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q2 How long have you been watching of the following television programs?

	I have never really watched it (1)	For about a year or less (2)	Between 1 and 3 years (3)	For more than 3 years (4)
The O'Reilly Factor (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Daily Show with Jon Stewart (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Colbert Report (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Hardball with Chris Matthews (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Late Show with David Letterman (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Newsroom (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q3 Are you or were you a political science major or minor?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q5 What is your gender?

- Female (1)
- Male (2)
- Transgendered (3)
- Gender Neutral (4)
- Other (5)

Q20 Below is a 7-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative." "Where would you place yourself on this scale?

- 1 - Extremely Liberal (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- Moderate (4)
- 5 (5)
- 6 (6)
- 7 - Extremely Conservative (7)

Q17 Outside of the books you were assigned for school, what kind of reader were you when you were younger?

- I was not much of a reader of books. (1)
- I was an occasional reader of books. (2)
- I was an avid reader of books. (3)

Q19 Thinking about yourself, how characteristic would you say the following statements are about you?

	Extremely characteristic (1)	Somewhat characteristic (2)	uncertain (3)	Somewhat uncharacteristic (4)	Extremely uncharacteristic (5)
I form opinions about everything. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have many more opinions than the average person. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I often prefer to remain neutral about complex issues. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I only think as hard as I have to. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I like to have the responsibility of handling a situation that requires a lot of thinking. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It's enough for me that something gets the job done; I don't care how or why it works. (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It is important to grapple with complex issues. (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q22 How old are you?

- Under 13 (1)
- 13-17 (2)
- 18-25 (3)
- 26-34 (4)
- 35-54 (5)
- 55-64 (6)
- 65 or over (7) \_\_\_\_\_

Q24 What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- Less than High School (1)
- High School / GED (2)
- Some College (3)
- 2-year College Degree (4)
- 4-year College Degree (5)
- Masters Degree (6)
- Doctoral Degree (7)
- Professional Degree (JD, MD) (8)

Q26 Are you or have you been a student at the University of Vermont?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Answer If Are you or have you been a student at the University of V... Yes Is Selected

Q28 Have you had any classes taught by Professor Gierzynski?

- Yes (4)
- No (5)

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