



*Spicing Up Politics: How Soft News and Infotainment Form Political Attitudes*  
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# **Spicing Up Politics: *How Soft News and Infotainment Form Political Attitudes***

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## **English Summary**

Television is still people's major source of news by far. How political issues are covered on television and reach citizens is, therefore, of great importance for the functioning of democracy. With the great number of media options people currently have, citizens increasingly tune out from the traditional news media – newspapers and regular news broadcasts – and instead have turned to more entertaining alternatives. Think, for example, of “soft news” coverage that relies on personalized narratives behind larger political issues or opinionated news that explicitly includes the opinion of the journalist. Additionally, not only has news become more entertaining over time, entertainment has also turned more political. This is called infotainment. Hence, citizens can get in touch with political matters without actually watching news programs.

Claims have regularly been made that such entertaining ways of dealing with politics in the media may undermine the quality of the democratic process. This view, however, ignores that the traditional news media's method of dealing with politics – serious, factual, and rational – is far from perfect as well when considered from democratic ideals. This is evidenced by the ever-existing lack of democratic engagement and political knowledge among a large share of the population; even in times when the serious media still had a monopoly on political news coverage.

A democracy that does not only want the elite to politically participate may become accessible to more citizens by complementing the rationalist style with more diverse ways of presenting politics in the public sphere. This traditional manner of communication only suits the knowledge and skills of a relatively small group of citizens and leaves most people in the dark about politics. For a popular inclusion in the public sphere, the latter should be open to a range of styles, modes, and topics that match the capacities, experiences, and interests of non-elite citizens. An entertainment approach toward producing news can make obscure political topics relevant for a broader but initially uninterested audience and may thus play a democratizing role.

To investigate the consequences of soft news and infotainment for democracy, this dissertation explores whether and how these new news genres contribute to the formation of public opinion. Therefore, it investigates the effects on political attitude formation of the three most prominent entertainment-oriented styles of political television coverage: (1) human interest framing that is used to make news coverage more personal; (2) opinionated news that explicitly includes the opinions of the reporting journalists; and (3) political satire, the most prominent entertainment genre (comedy) that adopted politics. In this manner, both the developing nature of non-traditional news coverage and the incorporation of politics into entertainment programming are included.

To investigate whether and how exposure to these entertaining news formats causes attitude formation, three experiments have been conducted. Experiments are the most advantageous method for the study of media effects, because experiments allow for a strict control over the content to which participants are exposed. Hence, exactly those features that are particular for soft news and infotainment could be manipulated and their effects could be investigated by comparing it to (traditional) news coverage without these features. Stimuli for the experiments were manipulated in ways that similar

information was provided but in styles that varied on the degree of being entertaining. The stimuli were crafted with the help of a professional voice-over and, for the last study, purposefully made by the producer of a satire program that is broadcasted on national television every weekday.

The first empirical study focused on how human interest framing within television news influenced the formation of political attitudes. A news story with a human interest frame explains a broader (political) issue by portraying one or more people who are personally involved with that issue. News about “hard” political topics is frequently softened in news broadcasts by personalizing these issues; in this manner, audiences can more easily understand these abstract topics and identify with the actors that are involved.

This study on human interest-framed news showed that framing news in a way that highlights personal consequences caused people to attribute responsibility to the government for the issue that is covered: The people who saw a mother argue against a ADHD health care policy reform that would hurt her child believed more strongly that the government should take care of this issue than people who saw a politician argue against this plan. The attribution of responsibility to the government subsequently negatively influenced citizens’ support for this plan.

The second experiment investigated how opinionated news affects the political attitudes of people. Opinionated news deviates from traditional news, even more than human interest-framed news, by moving away from journalistic standards such as objectivity, fairness, and accuracy. Although these television shows by-and-large still label their products as “news” (e.g., *FoxNews*), opinionated news would arguably be better considered a form of political entertainment.

The experiment showed that opinionated news positively affected citizens’ attitudes toward the widening of a highway through “the influence of presumed influence.” This means that viewers believe others are positively impacted by opinionated news and subsequently tend to follow how they believed others think about this subject. However, the opinionated news item also simultaneously negatively impacted the attitude by evoking emotions of anger through hostile media perceptions. The latter occurred, in particular, for people with left-wing political preferences because they perceived relatively more bias in the content of the opinionated right-wing news source.

The third and last experiment illustrates how political satire affects political attitudes. Compared with human interest framed-news and opinionated news, political satire deviates the most from traditional forms of news coverage, and satirists accept this outright by labeling their content as “fake news” and denying to (want to) have any influence on the political process. Yet, this study finds that satire actually has an influence on the political attitudes of its viewers, especially the younger ones.

Because satire, just as other entertainment forms, naturally draws the attention of viewers by absorbing them in the message, the audience’s capacity to critically evaluate the persuasive message is reduced. This absorption was particularly the case for younger adults. Hence, their attitude is easily swayed with the satire’s message. However, the study also showed that participants discounted the credibility of the message, which counterbalanced the negative effect on the attitude toward the satirized subject. The reason for this is that satire is perceived as funnier than regular news coverage. However, the satire was not perceived to be funny by those who had political preferences that were incongruent with the humorous message; though this was only the case for people who were provided with background information, so they could more easily be aware of the incongruence between their existing opinion and the satirical message they saw.

The conclusion, thus, seems justified that soft news and infotainment do not damage the public sphere in terms of its ability to let citizens form political attitudes. Instead, by personalizing political matters, tailoring opinionated coverage to viewers’ political preference, or adding a humoristic layer, news

content most likely becomes more attractive for citizens who normally would not be engaged with politics. The three empirical studies in this dissertation found mechanisms that imply that citizens indeed formed political attitudes after exposure to the stimuli. In times in which people have increasingly tuned out from the traditional news, soft news and infotainment may attract those who otherwise might be lost to democracy and allow them to form political attitudes. This will help democracy to function well, as it is essential that a large share of the citizenry is following political matters and holds political attitudes, so they can engage in political discussions and express their viewpoints.