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Stephen Colbert's Impact on American Politics

Stephen Colbert, or as his character is known, Sir Dr. Stephen T. Colbert, DFA, is an American comedian and host of the Emmy-award winning series "The Colbert Report," and author of *I Am America (And So Can You!)*, which spent 29 weeks on the New York Times Bestseller's List ("About The Show"). In 2006, Colbert was named one of the "Most Influential People" by Time magazine for his parody of conservative news commentators on "The Colbert Report" (Williams). Over the past decade, satirist Stephen Colbert has influenced American politics with his faux-conservative comedy routine.

Standing only a foot away from President George W. Bush, Stephen Colbert delivered a controversial comedy act at the 2006 White House Correspondents' Association Dinner, where he was the featured entertainer. He performed the jokes in character with false support for the president, saying, for example, that the president's 32-percent approval rating was "just a collection of statistics that reflect what people are thinking in reality. And reality has a well known liberal bias" (Colbert 222). The harsh roasting was met with awkward laughs and, at times, complete silence in the room, however the act was much more successful on the internet, where it received thousands of views within days of its availability. Its reception widely varied based on political affiliations, with some Democrats saying it was "one of the most patriotic acts [they've] witnessed" (qtd. in Steinberg). The White House had no official comment on how President Bush reacted to the speech, though many said that he "appeared irritated" by the end of the act (Steinberg). The impact of the speech was not truly seen until five months later, just

before the midterm elections, when New York Times columnist Frank Rich called Stephen Colbert's act the "defining moment of the 2006 campaign" and "a cultural primary" (2). Colbert's speech captured Democratic contempt towards the Republicans that had amassed over the past six years as the minority party, and the reaction it received foreshadowed the results of the 2006 midterm elections.

In late 2007, Stephen Colbert officially announced his candidacy for president, planning to run as both a Democrat and Republican in the South Carolina presidential primary. It wasn't immediately clear if Colbert was serious about running, but he cleared that up on NBC's "Meet the Press" saying "I don't want to be president. I want to run for president" (qtd. in "Colbert says run is no joke"). Only a week after he announced he was seeking office, Stephen Colbert's name appeared in national polls, with about two percent of Democrats saying they'd vote for him. That two percent put him in fifth place among Democratic candidates, behind the likes of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, but in a statistical tie with Senator Joe Biden ("Colbert Choice of 2%"). Sadly for Colbert, he was denied the right to run for office after South Carolina's Democratic Executive Council voted 13-3 to keep him off the ballot ("Colbert drops presidential bid"). Colbert accepted the verdict, saying he would rather lose "by the slimmest margin in presidential election history ... [than] put the country through an agonizing Supreme Court battle," referring to the 2000 presidential election between Al Gore and George Bush (qtd. "Colbert drops presidential bid"). Even though his presidential aspirations were over, Colbert continued to cover the 2008 elections on "The Colbert Report." With the Democratic nomination still up in the air and an important primary in Pennsylvania days away, the three top presidential candidates seeking nomination from the party appeared on "The Colbert Report." Senators Hillary Clinton and John Edwards both made personal appearances, while Senator Barack Obama joined via satellite, all of them competing for last minute support before the important

primaries ahead (Bosman). The candidates wanted to appeal to Stephen Colbert's relatively large audience of young Democrats, hoping to steal supporters from their like-minded opponents, showing how much of an influence Colbert's show can be on the political process.

Stephen Colbert's influence isn't just based on truthiness, researchers have actually studied the political effects of appearing on "The Colbert Report." Known as the "Colbert bump," politicians who appear on his show often times see a "bump" in campaign contributions or poll numbers. For example, Mike Huckabee saw a 300 percent boost in poll numbers after appearing on the show, going from one percent to three percent in the polls. James Fowler of the University of California at San Diego found that Democrats who appear on the show can receive as much as a 40 percent boost in campaign contributions whereas Republican guest will actually see a fall in contributions ("The Colbert Bump"). Stephen Colbert's audience of active young Democrats is very appealing to a Democratic candidate seeking support or contributions, and the "Colbert bump" is a great way to gain that extra support.

Stephen Colbert's influence is still present today; in September 2010 he testified before Congress, once again in character. Mocking Congress's inaction to help hard-working illegal immigrants, Colbert delivered yet another controversial act that was met with silence in the room, but would later become an internet hit ("Colbert testifies to Congress"). In November 2010, Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart hosted "The Rally to Restore Sanity And/Or Fear" to counter Glenn Beck's "Rally to Restore Honor." Tens of thousands attended the rally, where Colbert and Stewart mocked political "fear-mongers," saying both politicians and the media play into American fears. Political satirists have influenced politics for years; from Mark Twain to Stephen Colbert, comedians are often more influential than politicians because of their appeal to the masses.