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## **Stephen Colbert's Impact on American Politics**

Stephen Colbert's character portrayed on the television series "The Colbert Report" has become more than just a character, but an influencer in American politics. Through his character and television show, Colbert has a medium to change the dialogue in the United States through satire. Using elaborate stunts, he often shifts the focus of his audience and the general public to issues he believes are relevant and should be examined.

### **The Colbert Bump**

Though his character isn't one to appreciate the value of "facts" and "statistics," the science behind Colbert's influence is there. After appearing on his show in 2007, Governor Mike Huckabee received a 300% popularity spike (from 1% to 3%) in a poll during the Republican Presidential Primary.<sup>1</sup> However, in addition to this half-hearted claim, there is further data to support the "Colbert Bump."

According to research by James Fowler of the University of California, San Diego, Democratic candidates who appear on "The Colbert Report" receive about a

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<sup>1</sup> The Washington Post, "The Colbert Bump," Sept. 1, 2008,  
<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/08/31/AR2008083101760.html>.

30% increase in donations in the 30 days following their appearance.<sup>2</sup> This is a significant increase and shows Colbert's relevance in American politics. Any show that can increase political donations is an asset to a campaign looking to raise funds.

On the other hand, Fowler also believes the "Colbert Bump" may have a negative effect on Republican politicians appearing on the show. Their donations often drop or flat-line in the same 30 day period following their appearance on the show. However, Fowler reasons that particularly skillful Republicans still may benefit to appear on the show because of Colbert's large and intelligent audience.

Colbert often boasts about his relevance while in-character on his show, however as this data shows, he has the science to back it up. Colbert's show is a perfect platform for candidates and causes, and he often uses his political prowess to highlight causes that he believes are particularly worthy.

### **2006 White House Correspondents' Dinner**

Stephen Colbert didn't always have the power to help candidates by having them appear on his show. His popularity skyrocketed in 2006 after he was featured at the White House Correspondents' Dinner. Standing just feet away from President George W. Bush, Colbert delivered a memorable roasting of the President, his policies, and the White House press corps.

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<sup>2</sup> PS: Political Science and Politics, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Jul., 2008), pp. 533-539, "The Colbert Bump in Campaign Donations: More Truthful than Truthy," James H. Fowler

The routine was met with awkward silence in the audience and initial press coverage was either negative, or failed to mention the routine altogether.<sup>3</sup> Colbert even joked about his poor performance, saying that the crowd's response was just "very respectful silence."<sup>4</sup> However, the initial press coverage and reaction in the room was completely forgotten several days later, when a video of the stand-up act went viral on the Internet. While the Press didn't find Colbert's lashing of the press corps and the Administration for failed reporting and policies, the American people seemed almost relieved that someone had finally said something to the President and the media.

This helped launch Colbert's character from obscurity to mainstream American pop culture. In 2006, Colbert was included on Time's 100 Most Influential People list, likely due to his performance at the White House Correspondents' Dinner.<sup>5</sup> His image as a faux conservative news pundit was solidified with this performance, and it's often remembered as one of the best performances in the Dinner's history. Without this performance, it's likely that Colbert's ability to change the dialogue in America may not have been as powerful as it is today.

## **Immigration**

One cause that Stephen Colbert decided to highlight with his character's faux

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<sup>3</sup> The Washington Post, "The Colbert Blackout," May 2, 2006,

<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/blog/2006/05/02/BL2006050200755.html>>

<sup>4</sup> The Washington Post, "Colbert, Still Digesting His White House Correspondents' Dinner Reception," May 2, 2006,

<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/05/01/AR2006050101558.html>>

<sup>5</sup> Time Magazine, "Stephen Colbert," May 8, 2006,

<[http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1975813\\_1975838\\_1976306,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1975813_1975838_1976306,00.html)>

conservative ideology was immigration. In September 2010, Colbert was invited to testify before the United States Congress on the issue of immigration after having completed a day-long “Take Our Jobs” program where he completed tasks often performed by low-wage illegal aliens. Of the 8,600 people who inquired about the program Colbert participated in, only seven people have actually taken the job opportunity offered at the end.<sup>6</sup>

According to Representative Zoe Lofgren’s opening statement at the hearing, undocumented workers make up between 50 to 75 percent of seasonal crop workers.<sup>3</sup> Colbert, who filmed a segment for his show laying out these issues, was then to speak before Congress based on his perceived expertise. Colbert testified, “I don’t want a tomato picked by a Mexican. I want it picked by an American, sliced by a Guatemalan and served by a Venezuelan in a spa where a Chilean gives me a Brazilian.”<sup>3</sup>

Not everyone found his routine to be funny, and many called him out for taking a joke too far by making a mockery of a Congressional hearing. Representative Steve King said Congress should be “thinking about real jobs” instead of wasting their time listening to Colbert talk about immigration. Colbert broke character at one point, and said in a serious tone that he likes “talking about people who don’t have any power ... It seems like the least powerful people in the United States are migrant workers who come here.”<sup>3</sup>

Ultimately, Colbert’s testimony changed the dialogue in the United States for

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<sup>6</sup> The Washington Post, “Stephen Colbert, in GOP pundit character, testifies on immigration in D.C.,” Sept. 25, 2010, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/24/AR2010092402734.html>>

several days, and the testimony received coverage on all the major news networks and print publications. Many Democratic lawmakers were unsure if his satire was taking the focus away from the message or drawing people towards it, however they welcomed the coverage in a hearing that would otherwise have gone unnoticed.

## **Colbert SuperPAC**

In the 2012 presidential campaign, one of the largest issues was the role of money in American politics. To highlight the recent Citizens United Supreme Court decision which allows for unlimited money to be spent anonymously in elections, Stephen Colbert formed his very own SuperPAC.

In typical Colbert fashion, he hand delivered the necessary paperwork to form a SuperPAC to the FEC in June 2011. He had to get FEC approval because he requested a “media exemption” to allow him to advertise the group on his show.<sup>7</sup> This allowed him to solicit donations on air, air content created by his SuperPAC on air, and raise and spend unlimited money on political campaigns.

Stephen Colbert raised over \$1 million and used that money to create campaign ads during the Iowa caucus and the South Carolina primaries, airing them in local districts.<sup>8</sup> The ads, which were of course satirical, included one which called Mitt Romney a serial killer. Because of Romney’s stance on corporate spending and free

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<sup>7</sup> Business Insider, “FEC Allows Formation of Colbert’s SuperPAC,” Jun. 30, 2011, <<http://businessinsider.com/colberts-superpac-joke-may-revolutionize-campaign-finance-system-2011-6>>

<sup>8</sup> The New York Times, “Colbert’s Super PAC Raises More Than \$1 Million,” Jan. 31, 2012, <<http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/31/colberts-super-pac-raises-more-than-1-million-dollars/>>

speech, and his use of the phrase “corporations are people my friends,” Colbert accused Romney of cutting up small business and selling them for profits. And if small business are people, as Romney stated, then Colbert logically concludes that Mitt Romney is serial killer - or, “Mitt the Ripper.”<sup>9</sup>

Ultimately, Colbert did not do much with the money he raised in terms of actual content creation following the Republican primaries. However, he often had segments on his program showing the legal loopholes surrounding SuperPACs. One such loophole, for example, allows Colbert to write himself a check for the \$776,000 left in the account after the election.<sup>10</sup>

Colbert’s creation of his SuperPAC, like his testimony on immigration, received widespread coverage in the press. He was able to show how easy it was to manipulate the system to do seemingly unethical things with the money people were donating to his SuperPAC. While it’s unclear whether or not there will be legislation put forward to reverse the effects of the Citizens United ruling, Colbert’s stunt helped inform the general public and displayed the ridiculousness of American politics.

## **Conclusion**

In many cases, Stephen Colbert has been able to change the dialogue on American politics by using his show and his character as a platform. In 2010, Colbert

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<sup>9</sup> The Hill, “Colbert super-PAC jokes that Romney is ‘serial killer’ of corporations,” Jan. 16, 2012, <[http://thehill.com/video/campaign/204299-colbert-super-pac-accuses-romney-of-being-a-serial-killer->](http://thehill.com/video/campaign/204299-colbert-super-pac-accuses-romney-of-being-a-serial-killer-)

<sup>10</sup> Time Magazine, “Stephen Colbert Shuts Down His Super PAC,” Nov. 14, 2012, <[http://newsfeed.time.com/2012/11/14/stephen-colbert-shuts-down-his-super-pac/>](http://newsfeed.time.com/2012/11/14/stephen-colbert-shuts-down-his-super-pac/)

and fellow fake newsman Jon Stewart held a “Rally To Restore Sanity And/Or Fear.” The event was meant to highlight the growing problems in America and the media’s inability to cover it properly. It’s estimated that “hundreds of thousands” of people showed up to this rally to listen to what Colbert and Stewart had to say.<sup>11</sup>

On countless occasions, Colbert has showed his ability through stunts and jokes to target issues he believes are important. From immigration to campaign finance reform, if Stephen Colbert is focusing on an issue, then the media often follows his lead. As a satirist, he is given some leeway in how he covers the news, but many would agree that he does it better than the mainstream media.

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<sup>11</sup> Huffington Post, “Rally To Restore Sanity Attendance Estimated in Hundreds of Thousands,” Oct. 31, 2010, <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/10/30/rally-to-restore-sanity-attendance\\_n\\_776547.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/10/30/rally-to-restore-sanity-attendance_n_776547.html)>