

Entertaining Politics: New Political Television and Civic Culture, by Jeffrey P. Jones. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005. 264 pp. \$27.95 paper.

Reviewed by GEOFFREY BAYM

Jeffrey P. Jones's *Entertaining Politics* is a work of border exploration. Its target is that curious breed of politically oriented comedy shows, such as Bill Maher's *Politically Incorrect* and Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*, currently gaining considerable attention in the popular press and the academic convention circuit. Jones dubs this wave of late-night programming "NPTs"—new political television—a genre categorizable by its disregard for the traditional discursive boundaries that once separated politics from entertainment, public affairs from popular culture, and the serious from the funny. It is this border crossing and textual poaching—the borrowing and recombining of generic styles and forms—that is intriguing to scholars of political communication and challenging for practitioners of political journalism.

This study also is a work of *academic* border crossing. Jones rightly suggests that to profitably understand the implications of NPTs, we must bridge the divide between political communication and cultural studies—between the former's interest in political norms and civic participation and the latter's recognition that political culture is a complex process of meaning making. The ultimate question driving *Entertaining Politics* is what role NPTs might be playing in rewriting political norms, transforming political culture, and encouraging civic engagement.

As such, the book claims a broad agenda: to delimit the context of production from which NPTs have arisen, analyze the parameters of political discourse they generate, and explore audience engagement with them. The central argument, although highly repetitive, is compelling. First, Jones suggests that politics has become primarily a textual or discursive phenomenon and that citizenship has become more monitorial than participatory. Second, he argues that hybrid textual locations of politics such as NPTs are more relevant to the way people understand politics and public life than are traditional news and political discussion programs. Third, and this is the core of the argument, he maintains that NPTs represent a shift in political *epistemology*: rejecting a paradigm of expert authority in favor of experiential and lay knowledge, speaking in a populist rather than a technocratic conceptual language, and offering open-ended and polysemic interpretations of political events. Finally, he argues that these are positive changes, resulting in texts that contain the potential to be more politically engaging than many of the current alternatives.

That is a reading of *Entertaining Politics* at its best, for it is also an inconsistent work whose agenda may be overly broad and argument stretched too thin. At its core, this is an enlightening study of the now-defunct *Politically Incorrect*, and particularly that program's handling of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. That focus, however, is pulled to fit *PI*'s September 11 downfall, comedian Denis Miller's programs (before his re-emergence as a conservative tout on MSNBC), and *The Daily Show*, whose recent output has established it as the preeminent program of its type. The sections on *PI* are rich

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in detail and conceptualization, while the analysis of the other two is spotty and hurried. Further, the subtle yet important distinctions among these programs are effaced under the broad banner of NPT, and it is questionable whether the conclusions generated from an analysis of *PI* are necessarily extendable to the others.

The discussion of context likewise is unsatisfying. Jones repeatedly insists that NPTs are a reaction to the “fakery in public life as manifest in news and late-night television talk” (p. 52). This assertion, although appealing, needs far greater development than Jones gives it. He focuses primarily on the rise of cable television punditry, but neglects careful consideration of the ongoing breakdown of objective, “serious” journalism, the rise of “happy talk” news and its countless imitations, and traditions of comedic social commentary, which all serve as influences on the emergence of NPTs. Similarly, the greater context of technological change, economic reorganization, and increasing disagreement over cultural standards receives but brief mention. The result is an incomplete picture of complex origins that must be better understood.

Finally, *Entertaining Politics* raises but does not resolve important questions about public engagement and the democratic value of NPTs. Jones constructs an optimistic argument, demonstrating that audiences are actively engaged with NPTs, be it in the form of writing letters to the show producers, contributing to Internet discussion groups, or, most important, using the shows as a resource for interpersonal political discussion. The question remains, however, whether such *textual* engagement is isomorphic with *political* engagement. Undoubtedly, contemporary politics has become largely textual, but to conflate passionate engagement with television and political participation neglects the materiality of electoral politics and the legislative process. Ultimately, active viewing is no substitute for nontextual political behavior, and the relationship between those variables remains in need of elucidation.

At its strongest, the book offers a cogent argument that NPTs cannot be dismissed as mere entertainment or begrudged as yet another sign of the degradation of the national political conversation. Rather, they must be understood as arising from and contributing to deep, and perhaps irreversible, shifts in the ways people conceptualize, discuss, and enact politics in their everyday lives. For that, *Entertaining Politics* deserves our time and our careful consideration.

The Values Divide: American Politics and Culture in Transition, by John Kenneth White. New York: Chatham House, 2003. 263 pp. \$24.95 paper.

Reviewed by PHILIP DALTON

“It’s the economy stupid,” a phrase credited to Democratic political operative James Carville, is a maxim that had shaped political strategy in the United States even before the 1992 presidential election. As the argument goes, a president’s reelection hopes are intertwined with national economic performance. The presidential race in 2000, however, ran contrary to the seemingly intuitive prediction that the incumbent party would

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