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TELEVISION AND POLITICS TODAY

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Introduction: The Changing Face of Politics on Television

One week after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the late-night talk shows of network television went back on the air after a brief pause from the national shock. *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher*, the political discussion-entertainment show on the ABC network, began in somber tones with all comedy segments removed and a vacant chair for a guest killed in the attacks while traveling to Los Angeles for a taping of the program. Host Bill Maher and panelist Dinesh D'Souza began a discussion of whether President Bush's labeling of the terrorists as "cowards" was an accurate characterization. D'Souza argued that the word was misplaced, and Maher agreed saying, "We have been the cowards, lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away. That's cowardly. Staying in the airplane when it hits the building, say what you want about it, it's not cowardly." Although Maher was referring to American military conduct during the Clinton administration, radio talk show hosts used the statement the following day to excoriate Maher as an unpatriotic traitor.¹ Amid the public outcry, a reporter asked White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer if President Bush had a comment on Maher's remarks. Fleischer noted that the president had not seen the show, but nevertheless chided, "It's a terrible thing to say, and it's unfortunate. There are reminders to all Americans that they need to watch what they say, watch what they do, and this is not a time for remarks like that; there never is." Although supposedly an "entertainment" program that some critics had attacked for years as providing little more than uninformed drivel,² *Politically Incorrect's* political talk, it seems, warranted special attention from the White House during a national security crisis. Indeed, the talk it produced was now deemed a "threat."

If Maher felt his performance on the show had a special connection to the White House in some way, that feeling certainly wasn't new. Several years earlier, Maher had waged an almost nightly campaign in defense of President Bill Clinton during the presidential scandal over sexual relations with an intern. Seeing the scandal as part of a right-wing campaign against the Clintons, Maher considered himself one of the president's leading defenders. The program routinely debated the scandal and subsequent impeachment, focusing on what Maher considered to be the persecution of America's leading official over nothing more than his lying about oral sex. In an interview, Maher commented on what he hoped might be a forthcoming exchange between himself and the soon-to-be ex-president: "I would like to think that when he's out of office, we could have a conversation with him. And I'd like to think he might say, 'Hey, I appreciated the support during that rough period, that little tough time I had. I appreciated you saying some of the things I couldn't say myself.'"³ Again, although it was considered an "entertainment" show for many, Maher was convinced that his program provided a needed contribution to American political debate simply because it said what others would not. He firmly believed that he helped the president receive a more balanced airing of public opinion on the matter than that given in other television forums.

Whether Presidents Bush and Clinton personally paid much attention to a program watched by two to three million people every weeknight, or whether they felt comforted or threatened by discussions occurring there, is not known.⁴ What most certainly has occurred, however, is that new forms and forums of politics on television (such as *Politically Incorrect*) have altered the television landscape over the preceding decade. Politics is now appearing on numerous and disparate channels and is packaged in a variety of formats and genres, including sitcoms, satires, parodies, town halls, roundtable discussions, talking-head debates, and viewer-participation programs. The conventional lines between the "serious" and the "entertaining" in television programming have become remarkably blurred, and the location for where institutional politics now resides within those lines is questionable. Discussions on television about a presidential scandal or terrorist attacks no longer occur solely among Washington insiders and the news media. Instead, the nightly sense-making of events is processed in new ways by new voices, and rarely operates by the previous assumptions that guided televised political discourse.

For decades, politics on television was largely controlled by the network oligopoly, in particular, network journalists and news bureaus. Through intense competition in the cable marketplace in the 1990s, however, politics gained currency as a programming strategy for television producers who offered new alternatives for viewers seeking political discussion, information, and entertainment.⁵ Although talk radio was perhaps the first (rude) awakening to a new type of mediated political discourse that could be popular with audiences, televisual changes seemed most noticeable when new forums for politics played

an increasingly important role in the 1992 presidential campaign. Candidates began appearing with great frequency on “entertainment” talk shows, while critics were aghast at what they considered a degradation of the electoral process, widely proclaiming this the “entertainmentization” of politics.⁶

A decade later, however, changes in the relationship between politics and television were much starker. In 2002, for example, prime-time network television programming with government institutions as the central theme or setting included three shows on the CIA, one on the FBI, one on the White House, two on the Supreme Court, one on City Hall, two on the U.S. armed forces, and one on an American embassy.⁷ As one journalist noted in expressing his surprise at this new spate of government-related programming, “As far as TV was concerned, there were once three branches of government: lawyers, judges and hard-nosed cops who played by their own set of rules. Otherwise, government was ratings death.”⁸ Over the course of the preceding decade, cable channels such as Comedy Central, MTV, Court TV, Bravo, HBO, MSNBC, Fox News, CNN, and CNBC attempted a variety of different programs that addressed differing viewer interests and pleasures in politics. For instance, Comedy Central ran a sitcom/parody, *That’s My Bush*, which brutally ridiculed a moronically portrayed President George W. Bush and his wife shortly after he assumed office. Bravo ran Michael Moore’s left-wing populist program of documentary vignettes called *The Awful Truth*, and in August 2004, Showtime planned to air a reality program in the mold of *American Idol* called *American Candidate*, in which citizens would compete as candidates in a faux political campaign for president.⁹

In 2000, both Democratic and Republican presidential candidates appeared on a special prime-time edition of *Saturday Night Live* the night before the election—formerly the place where they were satirized; now they participated in satirizing themselves *during* a campaign. In 2003, movie star Arnold Schwarzenegger announced his candidacy for governor of California on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and Senator John Edwards announced his candidacy for president of the United States on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. By early 2004, most of the Democratic presidential candidates were guests on either *Real Time with Bill Maher* or *The Daily Show* (or both), being interviewed by comedian-hosts who rarely operate within traditional journalistic boundaries or mindsets.¹⁰

Other political players have increasingly come to recognize the influence that these new forms of political programming can have. Appearances by politicians are not simply limited to candidates looking for free airtime or a format that can help them look more “real” and less constructed to the voters. HBO aired a program in 2003 called *K Street* (shot in a video *verité* style to enhance its documentary feel) that centered on a make-believe lobbying firm and featured a mixture of actors and real life politicians (such as political consultants James Carville and Mary Matalin, but also cameos by lawmakers



Senator Joseph Lieberman appearing on The Daily Show with Jon Stewart.

such as Senators John McCain, Hillary Clinton, and Orrin Hatch).¹¹ Both of the political comedy-entertainment shows *Real Time* and *The Daily Show* have interviewed a variety of political guests, such as former UN Ambassador Madeleine Albright, former U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Joseph Wilson, former CIA Director R. James Woolsey, Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle, House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt, and Senators Joseph Biden and Hillary Clinton, among others. Even *ABC World News Tonight* anchor Peter Jennings is a fan of *The Daily Show* and has acknowledged that the program's host, Jon Stewart, can enunciate important things about politics and politicians that the norms of objectivity won't allow Jennings to say.¹² And during the 2000 presidential election, Al Gore's advisers made him watch a *Saturday Night Live* skit (as he prepared for a debate) that parodied his debating style.¹³ In many of these instances, there seemingly is an underlying recognition that new political television expresses a measure of truth, honesty, or realness that is missing from more formulaic political coverage. These political figures aren't bemoaning some loss of credibility because of a changed political culture—they are embracing it, contributing to it, and as might be expected, attempting to exploit it.

Perhaps the most revealing change at the intersection of popular culture and political culture, however, occurred when the Bush administration took several unconventional opportunities for addressing the American people in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The FBI sought leads or tips on twenty-

two terrorist suspects via a special edition of *America's Most Wanted*, the program dedicated to catching criminals by enlisting the viewing audience's assistance.¹⁴ The Pentagon then attempted to explain the concept and workings of military tribunals via the CBS dramatic program *JAG*, providing more details and explanations of the workings of such tribunals to the program's scriptwriters than that offered to reporters.¹⁵ The State Department even sought diplomacy with young citizens of the world by sending Colin Powell to appear in a live "town hall" meeting on MTV's *Be Heard*, fielding questions from young adults in seven countries.¹⁶ Finally, the producers of a program called *D.H.S.—The Series* (about the Department of Homeland Security) attempted to sell the pilot to prospective networks by noting that the counterterrorism agencies that are depicted in the show (the White House, DHS, FBI, EPA, etc.) "have rallied their resources and support behind the vision of *D.H.S.—The Series*, including President G. W. Bush and Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge, who both endorse and contribute sound bites to the introductions of the series."¹⁷ In short, the administration obviously recognized the power and potential benefits in circumventing traditional channels of communication (namely, journalists and news networks) to speak directly to American and global citizens through a variety of entertainment programming. As the travails of Bill Maher that opened this chapter also suggest, entertaining political programming now *interacted* with formal politics—and vice versa—at an unprecedented level.

What we are experiencing, then, is a fundamental change in political communication in America. We have passed a point in which entertainment television would only occasionally dip into politics (such as *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In*, *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, *Saturday Night Live*, etc.). Politics is now clearly an integral part of entertainment programming these days, and as such, its cultural location has broken the traditional bounded nature of programming assumptions about politics. Yet these changes are often derided and dismissed with simple statements that politics and entertainment have become one and the same. Since it is quite easy (and often popular) to view both politicians and the entertainment industry with cynical disdain, it is also tempting to let normative desires (i.e., that politicians should not act like politicians, or that the entertainment industry should offer "better" programming) overcome serious analysis of the changes that are occurring and the effect of such changes on our political culture. To label the changes outlined above *Entertaining Politics*, as I have done in the title of this book, is to risk the scorn of numerous academic and cultural critics who have decried the encroachment of television, celebrity, and entertainment into politics. Admittedly, these critics may have a point when we witness a wealthy pop superstar like Arnold Schwarzenegger waltzing through a populist campaign for governor by simply smiling broadly, touching his fans, and avoiding tough questions by repeating lines from movies. Or perhaps such criticism is merited when we see a former political apparatchik like

George Stephanopoulos elevated to the role of “journalist”/host on a pundit talk show simply because of his good looks and youthful appeal.

Yet critics go too far when they lay the blame for increased interactions between politics and entertainment (and the supposed “effects” that result) at the feet of television, a medium that is often seen as *inherently* detrimental to democracy. For instance, Robert Putnam’s problem with television is ontological—citizens have forgotten the importance of social connections and the benefits those connections have in producing a rich, democratic polity because we have divorced ourselves from each other through our isolated acts of watching entertainment television. For Neil Postman, the problem is epistemological—television is an inferior (even dangerous) means of knowing the arena of politics. Due to the technological biases of electronic communication (as opposed to his privileging the written word), television offers little more than amusement, entertainment, and distraction because the medium is incapable of helping us think in any other way. For Roderick Hart, the problem is phenomenological—television is a cynical medium that may encourage us to *feel* engaged or empowered politically, but ultimately it provides feelings that are false, temporal, and certainly not residual. These critics maintain a certain normative standard of rational-critical discourse that should be found (although rarely is) in the public sphere of television. The changes in mediated politics noted above, therefore, are likely to be viewed skeptically by those who find these critiques of television affirming.

These criticisms are faulty, however, in several important regards, the first being the long history of association between entertainment and politics. Politics is drama, and as such has always had entertainment value for individuals, communities, and the nation.¹⁸ Politicians are showmen, and they depend upon similar rhetorical and performative tools and techniques that show business hucksters use to create and sustain their audience.¹⁹ Second, politics (as it is practiced) is increasingly crafted through and for media spectatorship, and hence the desired separation between media and politics no longer exists. The conduct of politics is rarely conceived and executed without consideration of the actions themselves as communicative events, including how they will “play” across the myriad of media channels and forms. And third, such criticisms are rarely built upon analyses of actual audiences. Critics freely make claims about entertainment television’s supposed detrimental effects on democracy, but they almost never conduct or refer to direct studies of audiences to prove their point.²⁰ The study offered here asks that we interrogate this conjoining of politics and popular culture by engaging in intensive scrutiny of exactly what is occurring and why. To do so, we must recognize that the medium of television is a multifaceted communication medium that allows for numerous performative, rhetorical, perceptive, and disseminative positions for presenting, understanding, celebrating, and critiquing politics. We must also be aware of the multivocality of media texts,

as well as make an attempt to understand the complex readings and relationships that audiences both make and have with television, including their abilities to negotiate, appropriate, and appreciate many different types of programming forms that include politics.

Entertaining Politics suggests a double meaning: one is that television producers, audiences, and politicians have shown their desire or willingness to *entertain* politics in newly creative ways. From dramatic narratives to debates, to parodies, to investigative reports from a satirical perspective, politics has become a subject area that is more frequently contemplated in a myriad of televisual formulations. Two, entertaining politics highlights the fact that politics can be *pleasurable*, and that engaging or contemplating it need not always be the equivalent of swallowing bitter medicine. Politics is naturally interesting, dramatic, strange, unpredictable, frustrating, outrageous, and downright hilarious in ways that far exceed the reductive formulations of politics as horse races, policy maneuvers, and palace court intrigue that insider presentations of politics tend to emphasize. What the success of new forms of political programming suggests—whether it is *The West Wing*, *The Awful Truth*, or *The Daily Show*—is that television has begun to explore multiple avenues for presenting politics in imaginative ways, treatments that can offer voices, positions, and perspectives not found in traditional television presentations of politics. It also suggests that audiences are receptive to (if not hungry for) political programming that is meaningful and engaging to them, programming that connects with their interests and concerns, provides new ways of thinking about politics, and speaks to them through accessible and pleasurable means.

Finding politics meaningful and engaging is no small matter. Numerous scholars have pointed to a legitimacy crisis in Western democracies, that is, the increasing disaffection from politics among citizens, as measured by declining voting rates, low opinions of politicians, lack of trust and declining confidence in government, political apathy, low levels of political knowledge, and declining rates of civic volunteerism.²¹ Yet, other scholars contend that these traditional measures of civic vitality may not paint a complete picture of contemporary political culture. They point instead to postmodern approaches to civic engagement and changing conceptions of citizenship that include redirected political activity more closely connected to people's lives and identities (such as new social movements and identity politics).²² There is also a recognition that media's role in contemporary processes of citizenship formation and maintenance is changing, including the strong commitments and relationships people maintain with popular culture. These issues, as well as the role and place of new political television in such debates, are discussed in chapter 2.

What this book offers, then, is an investigation into new manifestations of entertaining political programming on television. It seeks to understand why

such programming is produced, what it presents, why audiences are attracted to it, and what this means for American democracy. In order to limit the investigative focus within the broad array of genres and fictional and nonfictional programming mentioned above, I concentrate on new forms of political *talk* on television, specifically *humorous* political talk shows. Political talk (including news) has traditionally been the defining form of political sense-making on television and is also widely considered one of the most important and accessible means of involvement with politics (beyond voting). I have also chosen new political talk because of its radical departure from the types of programs typically offered in this genre. These shows are markedly different from pundit political talk programming (e.g., *The McLaughlin Group*, *Crossfire*) where “experts” discuss narrowly defined issues with much gravity. New political talk also offers something more complex than the simple jokes about politicians found in the monologues of late-night talk show comedians (e.g., Jay Leno and David Letterman) or in the political skits of sketch-comedy shows such as *Saturday Night Live*. These shows are also different from the personal politics found on afternoon audience participation shows (e.g., *Oprah* and *Donabue*), which generally do not stray into formal political processes.

Programs such as *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher* (Comedy Central and ABC), *Dennis Miller Live* (HBO), *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (Comedy Central), and more recently, *Real Time with Bill Maher* (HBO), and *Dennis Miller* (CNBC), are entertainment programs—first and foremost—yet with political talk as their central compositional and discursive feature. They offer direct and specific talk (by entertainment television standards) about the formal, institutional political process and its players and outcomes, yet do so by eschewing the “insider” perspectives offered elsewhere. Instead, they feature comedians and nonexperts on politics (i.e., political “outsiders”) discussing, arguing, satirizing, parodying, laughing, and ranting about political events and issues in a serious yet entertaining manner. They are also highly intent on speaking truth to power, whatever partisan or ideological stripes such power represents. It is in these shows that new modes of political discussion on television are located, and hence these programs are at the center of discussions in chapters 3, 4, and 5.

Several chapters intensify the investigation by focusing specifically on *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher* (*PI.*). These sections of the book offer the specificity typical of cultural studies through a detailed analysis of the factors that comprise the show and its audience. *PI.* was the earliest, most successful, and perhaps defining show in this move toward entertaining politics in the last decade. Indeed, I argue that the show led the way for television producers to take risks with the programming of politics in innovative ways. The program receives extended treatment here for several reasons. First, *PI.*'s beginnings on a comedy channel and subsequent move to network television

is informative in understanding the production and programming decisions behind an *entertainment* channel's selection of a hybrid program that blended several genres of television talk while ignoring the traditional separation between entertainment programming and serious public affairs programming.²³ Why Comedy Central (where *P.I.* began) bought the show and what the channel wanted from it, as well as why it was picked up by ABC as a follow-on program to its long-running public affairs program *Nightline*, illustrates the intentions within the industry in utilizing political programming with an entertainment bent as a programming strategy (including what such programming would accomplish irrespective of the show's success or failure). The show's subsequent cancellation by ABC amid controversy over Maher's 9/11 comments also speaks to the particular demands and limits of network television as a source for innovative and politically provocative programming.

Second, both the types of guests and the types of discourse on politics produced on *P.I.* are outside the norm of conventional talk about politics on television. *P.I.* boldly included guests who are typically not experts on politics discussing politics (indeed, their nonexpertise was largely the show's premise and draw). The producers aimed to create a televised cocktail party with guests from numerous areas of public life (television, politics, sports, music, interest groups, publishing, etc.) debating current events. The show invited viewers to identify and link names and faces seen in other public forums with the guests' opinions on politics and social issues. By centering the show on celebrities and public persons discussing topical issues, the show does not stand apart from other media and cultural offerings. Culture and politics mix, and audiences are not encouraged to see the arbitrary boundaries traditionally constructed between the two. Instead, they are encouraged to relate these texts (via the show's eclectic guests, topics, and sense-making strategies) to other things that confer meaning in their lives, such as tastes in music and literature, political issues (such as animal rights or gun control), sources of information (such as op-ed columns or talk radio), or simple life experiences. Indeed, I argue, it is this conjoining of popular culture and politics that represents the fundamental shift in political programming on television.

Because the majority of guests are also not political experts, they tend to utilize the same means for making sense of public issues as the viewing audience. Specifically, they discuss politics in a language resembling more of what would be found in a bar or basement or barbershop than what occurs at the National Press Club or on *Meet the Press*—a common vernacular that is accessible and familiar. Furthermore, the guests apply more commonsensical notions to what politics means to them than the conventional elite discourse on television that is largely derived from insider knowledge and concerned with political maneuverings. As social psychologist Michael Billig

argues, common sense is a means through which publics think through and discuss deeper “ideological dilemmas” that often lie at the heart of public issues and events.²⁴ Also, part of that freedom to think and talk in commonsensical terms is the opportunity to make fun of or satirize both politicians and other guests who “just don’t get it.” Humor, often lacking on most political talk shows, becomes an important tool of political critique, especially if political events seem surreal or absurd (e.g., the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, the 2000 presidential election, Bush flying a war plane, etc.). Examining *P.I.* provides the opportunity to analyze the mixture of humor and serious political discourse—and how that is attractive to certain audiences—while determining if that discourse is nonsense or perhaps some other form of sense.

Which leads to the third point about why *P.I.* receives extended attention here among the programs available for investigation: the audiences that enjoy this type of programming and the reasons why they watch. To study audience behavior toward any television program qualitatively, one could analyze fan mail and conduct interviews with audiences (as is done here). What makes *P.I.* also ripe for investigation is an on-line discussion forum on the program that allows viewers to debate and discuss the show, its guests, and the issues presented there after the show goes off the air (and into the following days and weeks).²⁵ It is a forum for political discussion that other shows don’t share to such a degree, and the political discussions that occur there often derive from discussions that originate on the program. In sum, *P.I.* provides multiple avenues for examining fan thinking and behavior related to the show, ultimately leading us to answers about why audiences watch this type of programming and how they employ the show for their own political needs through their interactions with it in their private and public lives.

This book, then, sets out to study new political television by interrogating issues related to these shows’ production, content, and audiences. Some of the questions of production taken up in chapters 3, 4, and 5 include: Why did television producers turn to *politics* in search of new and original programming when prima facie evidence suggested that voters were “sick and tired” of politics in the populist 1990s?²⁶ What role has the individual creative talent, or comedian-host, played in shaping these shows? Why did the producers feel comfortable in mixing humor and politics? Why have these shows generally originated and appeared on cable television more than on the broadcast networks? How have technology (such as fax machines, satellite link-ups, the Internet), politics (such as populism, terrorist attacks, and military invasions), economics (such as increased competition in television and the need for inexpensive programming), and culture (such as the liberal versus conservative culture wars) influenced the decisions producers have made in offering such programming?

Questions of content are examined in chapters 5, 6, and 7, including: What makes such programming “popular”? That is, what type or quality of talk about politics occurs on these programs that viewers might find appealing (such as parody and satire, impassioned narratives, discursive drama, ideological diversity, etc.)? Does the programming entertain issues and concerns not regularly discussed in pundit political programming? Is the language spoken there more accessible, or does it make “sense” of these events in ways that are different from the sense made in more traditional political formats? How is the political content affected by the entertainment and celebrity system in which it exists? Does the comedian-host as political commentator have a different license to speak from that of newscasters and other traditional voices of political commentary on television, thereby operating outside the bounds of the traditional discursive structures and frameworks constructed and maintained by the latter?

Chapter 8 examines audiences for new political television by asking: Why do viewers watch such programming? Do they locate people or issues there that they identify with or who they feel represent them and their concerns in some way? What do they take away from this programming, and how does it affect their relationship to politics? Are they engaged by the programming (behaviorally or cognitively), and if so, how is that manifested? How is it linked to their ritual attendance to television and their affective relationships with popular culture more generally? Does the blending of politics and entertainment worry them in some way? What do they think this programming contributes to the realm of public talk in America? Answers to these questions are key to developing an understanding of the changes in political programming that have occurred over the last decade, why it has appeared, why it has been successful, and what this means for us as citizens.

Which leads to the concluding chapter in which these analyses are situated within the framework of what Peter Dahlgren calls our “civic culture.” He defines civic culture as the “dispositions, practices, and processes” that are “pre-conditions” for citizen participation in public life and offers a typology for the six factors he believes comprise that culture—values, knowledge, affinity, practices, identities, and discussion.²⁷ I find Dahlgren’s theorization a helpful heuristic for measuring and evaluating the ways in which new political television contributes to public life at the level of citizenship. For ultimately, the point of primary interest here is not that what is appearing on television is “new and different” for television’s sake, but how such political texts and symbolizations that are occurring in the public sphere engage or affect the body politic in meaningful ways. What these changes in television programming suggest is that the role of popular culture in shaping citizen understandings, expectations, behaviors, attitudes, and commitments to democratic governance—in short, our civic culture—is a significant role that should no longer be ignored or dismissed.

This book, then, advances five main arguments. First, entertaining politics allows for political life to be evaluated in different terms: humorously, based on common sense thinking, with values, beliefs, and experiences at the forefront of the analysis; in short, the components of meaning-making rarely featured or explored elsewhere on political television. Second, entertaining politics allows for different people to evaluate political life on television. Comedian-hosts with a different license to speak offer political critiques beyond the scope of what news and pundit political talk have previously imagined. Similarly, celebrities talking politics (including these comedian-hosts) offer a special representative appeal for viewing audiences. Third, comedy is not just frivolous entertainment. It is a narrative, a story we tell each other to make sense of our common world. The “serious” discourse of pundit television is one such narrative or story, but so are the narratives of new political television that are driven by humor—narratives that can be brutally honest and damningly forthright. Fourth, the combination of information and entertainment that occurs in entertaining politics offers the same complex mixing of interests and competencies citizens maintain in their daily lives, yet which television has tended to segregate in the past. Finally, entertaining politics provides pluralist forums of social conversation that invite engagement and interactivity with the texts, offering linkages between and across the public and private aspects of citizens’ lives. In short, entertaining politics offers a *cultural* site where new issues, languages, approaches, and audience relationships to politics on television are occurring. This book shows how and why that is the case, and what such changes mean for our common political culture.