

BOOK REVIEW

Entertaining Politics: New Political Television and Civic Culture. By Jeffrey Jones. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004, ISBN 0–7425–3087–6, 264 pages, \$75.00 (cloth); ISBN 0–7425–3088–4, 264 pages, \$27.95 (paper).

Jamie Warner
Marshall University

Common wisdom suggests that democracy is in decline in America. Voter turnout, trust in elected leaders, party affiliation, group membership, and levels of political knowledge all have waned in recent years. For many who study this phenomenon, the primary cause of this disillusionment is obvious: television. According to these critics, the most egregious problem is that television is a passive medium, one that encourages us to sit home most evenings (rather than going, say, bowling) and become solitary consumers of information. Television that does have political content is watered down into sound bites (because our attention spans are now 15 seconds long), biased (we happen to like those who preach to the choir), or purely entertaining (he who makes the most ridiculous statement wins). Countless hours before the idiot box have transformed the United States into a nation of isolated, noncritical thinking, pseudocitizens, sleepwalking through the public square, quickly bored, increasingly cynical, and easily manipulated by media and political elites. This, according to the critics, is the sad state of democracy in America.

Or is it? Jeffrey Jones would beg to differ. In his timely book, *Entertaining Politics: New Political Television and Civic Culture*, Jones suggests that the problem is not necessarily with disengaged citizens, but, instead, with our framework for evaluating that citizenship. Perhaps the reason American citizens seem to come up short is that the normative ideal of the engaged, rational, fully informed citizen does not really exist (if it ever did). Certainly, the model citizen who faithfully reads the newspaper, attends Lions Club on Thursdays, and votes in every election is becoming less and less the norm. However, Jones argues, this model does not exhaust the myriad ways people now “participate” politically. In fact, he suggests that the very technology blamed for the decline of citizenship in America has actually opened up new ways to act as citizens. Specifically, *Entertaining Politics* looks at what Jones calls “new political television”: television that uses humor, satire, and “common sense” to analyze current political topics. Instead of being responsi-

ble for a decline in civic engagement, Jones argues that television itself presents new ways for citizens to engage politically.

According to the description on the back of the book, *Entertaining Politics* makes its case by examining three examples of new political television: *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher*, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, and *Dennis Miller Live*. Bill Maher, however, is the real case study here. Miller and Stewart get some analysis in chapters 3 and 5, but this is obviously a book about Maher. Even the discussion of political parody in chapter 6 uses Maher as its example, despite the fact that parody plays only a minor role in Maher's discussion-based show, and *The Daily Show* is nothing but parody. This, however, is more a case of false advertising than it is of shoddy scholarship.

To rebut those who insist that television is slowly but surely destroying democracy, Jones makes three claims about new political television. First, these shows revolve around the voices of political outsiders, rather than the traditional insider perspectives of political pundits or media elites. Here Jones offers a brief history of political talk on television, beginning with the network pundit-based shows of the 1950s and 1960s, moving through cultural and technological changes that led to the more populist bent of talk radio and cable news and entertainment programming of the 1980s and 1990s, and ending with new political television—which might include the perspectives of insiders, but which is framed by an outsider perspective. Second, because of this outsider perspective, new political television offers up critique based on an often humorous version of “common sense” (as opposed to the jargony, didactic, or overtly abstract discussion of political insiders). The insider frames imposed by elites, and by extension the elites themselves, are thus ripe for the everyman ridicule of these comedians. Finally, to test his claim that this type of television encourages political activity, Jones looks specifically at audience engagement for *Politically Incorrect*. Analyzing viewer mail, audience interviews, and online discussion groups, Jones concludes that many (albeit self-selected) viewers of *Politically Incorrect* do engage in “active” political behavior. *Politically Incorrect* functions as an “instigator” of political discussion around the water cooler or in cyberspace, a “connector” of audience members’ public concerns about their nation with their private lives, and is seen by its audience as more “representative” of their concerns, concerns that aren’t being addressed by political and media elites (p. 185). Thus, new political television actually encourages discursive political participation—which might not be the same as attending rallies or voting, but which cannot be discounted in today’s postmodern society.

Entertaining Politics is engaging and well-written, with the exception of Jones’s penchant for lists and numbered points. It focuses on a very important cultural and political phenomenon that has been ignored by traditional scholarship. I wish Jones would have lingered a little longer in his theoretical discussions, especially on Clifford Geertz’s notion of common sense and Mary Douglas’s concep-

tion of jokes. Common sense and humor are very difficult concepts to nail down and both are caught up in a weird kind of performative contradiction: If you have to explain in detail what's so funny (and then why it is funny, to whom, under what circumstances, with what effects), then you ruin the joke. Common sense is similar. If you have to ask what it is and how it works, then you probably don't have it. Because of these difficulties and given the centrality of both concepts to his argument, a more sustained discussion would have been helpful. With that said, this volume offers a counterargument to the gloomy assessment of the role of television in late modern capitalist democracies like the United States and will be of interest to those who study this particular medium and its relation to the broader culture, as well as those interested in evolving notions of citizenship, political participation, and the subversive role of humor.

Jamie Warner is an assistant professor of Political Science at Marshall University, where she teaches courses in political theory. Her current research focuses on the use of humor in the reframing of political argument, specifically that of *The Daily Show* and the satirical newspaper, *The Onion*.