

# From Black and White To Red and Blue?

## Television's New Colors

By Daniel Weiss

**Y**ou might not think your political persuasion has anything to do with the television shows you prefer, but a new data analysis by media research company Experian Simmons finds that your partisan identity and what you watch to relax at the end of the workday are intertwined in some interesting ways.

Republicans, for instance, are partial to competitive reality shows like *The Amazing Race*, *American Idol* and *America's Got Talent*. Underscoring their penchant for competition, GOP voters are 29 percent more likely than the average American to watch episodes of *Dancing with the Stars* when results are announced, but just 17 percent more likely to watch non-results episodes.

Democrats are also disproportionately drawn to some competitive reality shows, including *America's Next Top Model* and *Top Chef Masters*. More generally, though, Democrats gravitate toward character-driven dramas such as *Mad Men* and *Dexter* and female-focused shows such as *30 Rock* and *Private Practice*. Democratic favorites also tend to be critically acclaimed niche favorites scorned by Republicans. For example, Democrats are 59 percent more likely than average to watch *Mad Men*, while Republicans are 41 percent less likely than average to watch it.

Likewise, Republicans seem to be particularly drawn to

hits. Fully nine of the ten highest-rated shows on broadcast television last spring were more popular among Republicans than Democrats. Democrats like these shows, too, of course; Republicans just like them a bit more than everyone else.

Some GOP favorites are a bit surprising. Among their ranks are *Modern Family*, which features a gay couple raising a child; *Desperate Housewives*, whose characters are famously morally compromised; and *The Big Bang Theory*, an atheist-friendly show that regularly jokes about the existence of God.

"I think people have it in their minds that there is a certain kind of show that attracts Republicans, and this list kind of bucks that trend a bit," says John Fetto, senior marketing manager at Experian Simmons.

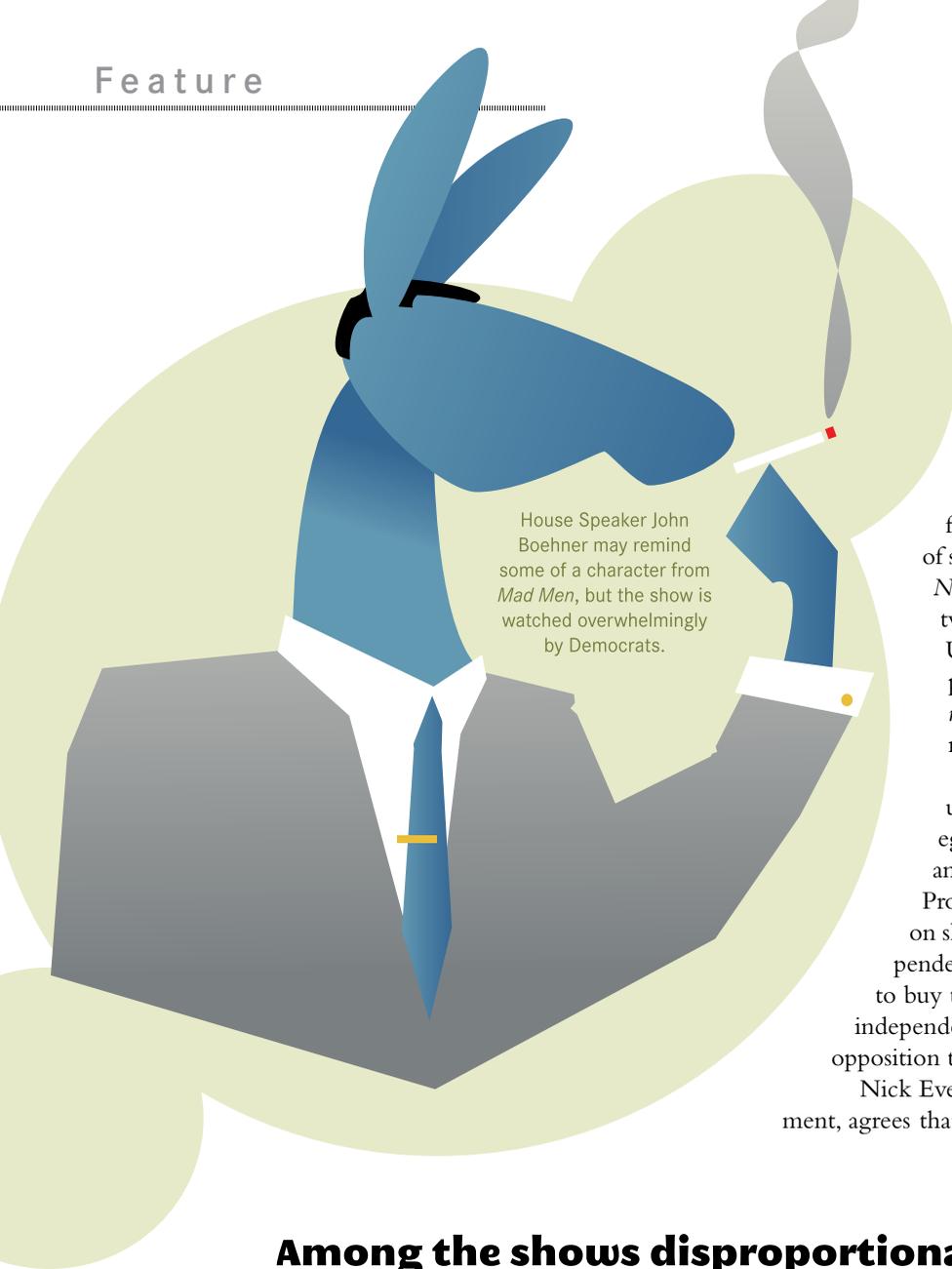
Among the shows disproportionately viewed by both Republicans and Democrats are *The Good Wife*, which focuses on the wife of a disgraced politician; *Friday Night Lights*, about a small-town high school football team; and *Monday Night Football*. Apparently, politics and football are strong bipartisan draws.

Registered independents, as one might expect, share some television-watching habits with Republicans and some with Democrats. Like Republicans, they, too, are drawn to competitive reality shows. Indeed, in a number of cases—including *Survivor*, *America's Got Talent* and *Dancing*

A stylized illustration of a man in a black tuxedo with a white shirt and a blue bow tie. He has a large, thick red mustache. To his left is a sign on a stick with the number '10' on a yellow circular background. The background consists of several light green circles of varying sizes.

10

Republicans love  
*Dancing with the Stars*, especially  
when results are announced.



House Speaker John Boehner may remind some of a character from *Mad Men*, but the show is watched overwhelmingly by Democrats.

of young males of the three groups, which helps to explain their attraction to edgy late-night talk and comedy shows. Indeed, this attraction to edgier fare shows up at the very top of the list of shows preferred by independents, *Kitchen Nightmares*, which they watch at more than twice the rate of the average American. Unlike the food-focused *Top Chef Masters*, preferred by Democrats, *Kitchen Nightmares* deals almost exclusively with restaurant disasters and mishaps.

So, is this sort of information of any use in developing a media buying strategy for campaigns? Jim Fogarty, president and creative director of 2 Ticks & the Dog Productions, says that running negative ads on shows watched disproportionately by independents could be effective. “You would want to buy those specific programs to try to persuade independent or undecided voters to lean in favor or opposition to a particular candidate,” he says.

Nick Everhart, president of Strategic Media Placement, agrees that the information on independents could

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*with the Stars*—they are even bigger fans than Republicans.

Independents are also huge fans of late-night talk shows such as *The Tonight Show* and *The Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson*, which are also far more popular with Democrats than Republicans. Interestingly, three late-night cable politics shows, *The Colbert Report*, *Real Time with Bill Maher* and *The Daily Show with John Stewart*, all generally considered left leaning and watched more by Democrats than Republicans, are most popular of all with independents.

“Maybe independents like their political programming to be a bit more on the entertaining side,” observes Fetto. He adds that independents have the highest proportion

of young males of the three groups, which helps to explain their attraction to edgy late-night talk and comedy shows. Indeed, this attraction to edgier fare shows up at the very top of the list of shows preferred by independents, *Kitchen Nightmares*, which they watch at more than twice the rate of the average American. Unlike the food-focused *Top Chef Masters*, preferred by Democrats, *Kitchen Nightmares* deals almost exclusively with restaurant disasters and mishaps.

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Selected Shows Preferred by Democrats	Democratic Scores	Republican Scores	Independent Scores
Countdown With Keith Olbermann	184	31	126
*Mad Men	159	59	111
Dexter	161	147	66
Top Chef Masters	142	67	77
America's Next Top Model	135	42	102
Nova	133	70	121
Private Practice	127	94	81
Brothers & Sisters	127	103	78
30 Rock	126	68	92
The Good Wife	124	119	90
Friday Night Lights	119	111	66
Monday Night Football	115	112	98

Selected Shows Preferred by Republicans	Republican Scores	Democratic Scores	Independent Scores
Glenn Beck	238	35	115
The Amazing Race	132	100	117
Dancing with the Stars (Results)	129	105	135
Property Virgins	125	102	113
Modern Family	124	108	119
American Idol	122	103	107
The Big Bang Theory	119	99	116
The Mentalist	119	116	101
America's Got Talent	118	106	120
Desperate Housewives	116	116	84
18 Kids and Counting	116	102	87
What Not to Wear	116	105	96

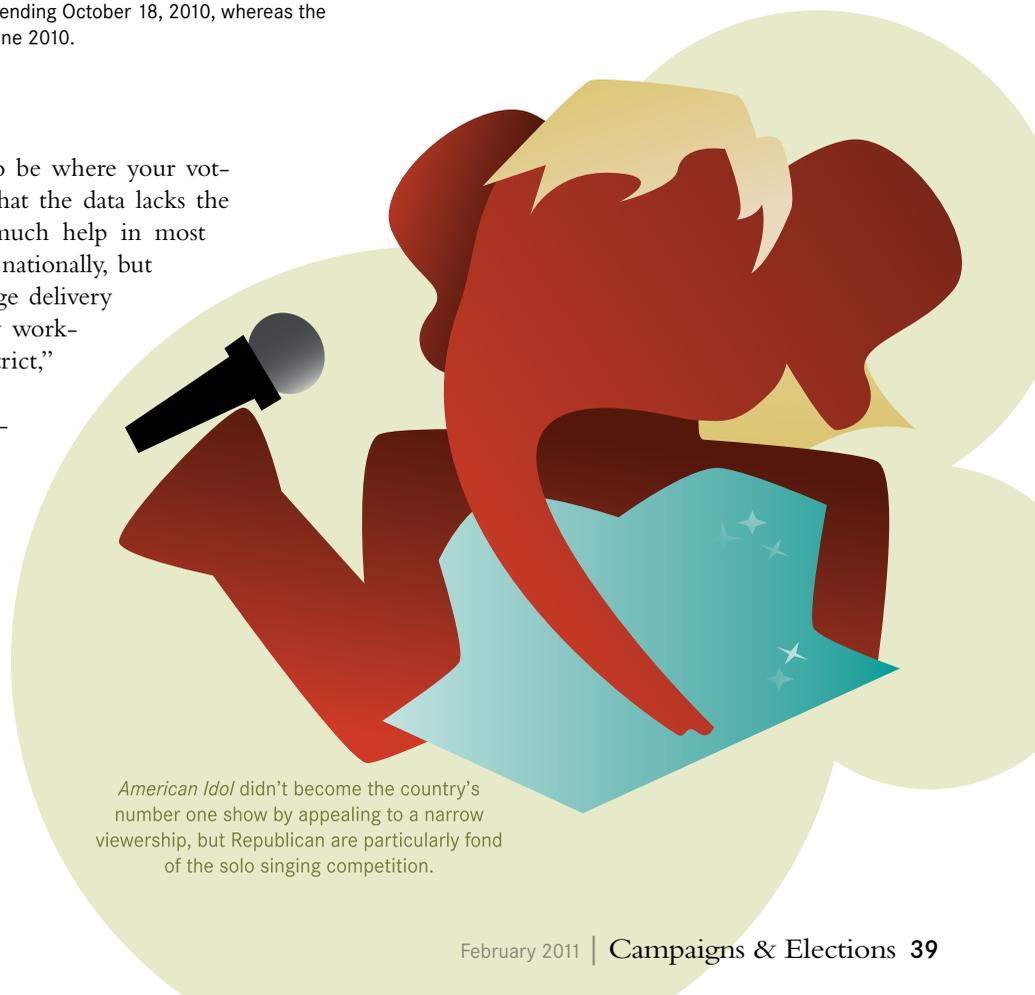
Source: Experian Simmons

Note: A score of 100 indicates viewership at a rate equal to that by all Americans. Larger or smaller numbers indicate proportionally increased or decreased viewership. Registered Democrats comprised 34 percent of the sample; registered Republicans, 24 percent; and registered independents, 11 percent.

\*Mad Men data covers two to three months ending October 18, 2010, whereas the rest of the data covers April 2009 through June 2010.

duck season,” he says. “You need to be where your voters are.” However, Everhart notes that the data lacks the geographical specificity to be of much help in most races. “It’s great if you are buying nationally, but the problem from a political message delivery perspective is that you are typically working state by state or district by district,” he says.

In addition to finer geographical detail, the data would benefit from information on how other demographic factors contribute to television preferences that appear at first glance to be due to partisan identity. For example, notes Bud Jackson, president of Jackson Media Group, Democrats may prefer female-focused shows not because they are Democrats per se but because they are the most heavily female of the groups. (Indeed, 57 percent of Democrats in the sample were



*American Idol* didn't become the country's number one show by appealing to a narrow viewership, but Republicans are particularly fond of the solo singing competition.

Selected Shows Preferred by Independents	Independent Scores	Republican Scores	Democratic Scores
Kitchen Nightmares	212	74	93
The Colbert Report	200	57	123
The Tonight Show	190	70	113
Real Time with Bill Maher	181	30	165
Breaking Bad	180	50	117
NASCAR Camping World Truck Series	172	112	78
The Daily Show with John Stewart	169	53	140
The Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson	158	84	114
Glee	154	98	113
Late Night with Jimmy Fallon	146	59	130
V	137	122	90
Survivor	131	118	100

Source: Experian Simmons

female, compared with 49 percent of Republicans and 47 percent of independents.)

“There are things in there that are interesting, but groundbreaking? No,” says Jackson. “Campaigns already target voters based on polling and apply those findings to media buys in a way that is much more relevant and targeted.” Campaigns are more likely to need to target narrow demographic slices, he says, such as single women who haven’t graduated from college or married women over fifty-five, than such broad categories as all Democrats, Republicans or independents.

Jackson, who works exclusively for Democrats, does, however, take some delight in the finding that Republicans are 24 percent more likely than average to watch *Modern Family*, the show featuring a gay couple raising a child. “Maybe that tells us something about the Republican public perspective versus what they really feel at home behind closed doors,” he says.

The raw data for the analysis was provided by careful records of television-watching habits kept by 25,000 people across the country from April 2009 through June 2010. The analysis was generally limited to entertainment programming, because the breakdown of news viewership would have been too predictable. “If we had included news,



Tina Fey's *30 Rock* is beloved by Democrats, but Republicans give it a pass.

everything on Fox would have been on the Republican list, and everything on MSNBC would have been on the Democratic list,” says Fetto of Experian Simmons.

To provide an example of the partisan news split, the company looked at two opinionated shows. The results: Democrats were almost twice as likely as average to watch MSNBC’s *Countdown With Keith Olbermann*, and Republicans were almost two-and-a-half times as likely to watch Fox’s *Glenn Beck*. Independents, interestingly, watched both shows at somewhat above-average rates. Meanwhile, members of the respective opposing party were just a third as likely as average to tune in to Olbermann or Beck. But you already knew that, didn’t you. 

*Daniel Weiss is managing editor of C&E.*