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More Than Laughing? Survey of Political Humor Effects Research

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A general consensus is that humor does matter, with some scholars calling it “a most essential element in a democracy”¹ and “one of the most basic and effective ways of responding [to politics].”² Yet despite its importance, scholarly scrutiny of humor is limited—a dearth recognized by political players and academics. Robert Orben, former head of President Ford’s speechwriting staff, noted: “It seems to me that we’ve only scratched the surface in our study of the effective use of humor.”³ Communication theorist Owen Lynch offered a similar conclusion: “[C]uriously the communication field has only skimmed the surface of the world of humor.”⁴

Whether we have skimmed or scratched, there is little doubt that there’s much more to learn about humor, and particularly, what happens when it goes political. Rhetorical and critical scholarship has, in many areas, given us rich, nuanced views of political humor. Less common are empirical investigations of effects, which are the focus of this essay.

The first section of this chapter examines effects research on two popular forms of political humor, editorial cartoons and late night comedy television programming. The second half of the chapter explores other venues for political humor, including entertainment television, print media, Internet, film, and campaign events. Throughout, I highlight the ways that humor effects research can continue to clarify when, in politics, laughing matters.

Political Cartoons

Cartoons are a unique persuasive medium,⁵ visually impacting and often humorous.⁶ According to William Koetzle and Thomas Brunell, “the defining characteristic of the editorial cartoon is its use of humor to make a political point.”⁷ Audrey Handelman noted that editorial cartoonists “are a special breed in the mass media; they make no claims on objectivity.”⁸ With this journalistic freedom, political cartoonists go after public figures with vigor, subjecting them to “exaggeration, ridicule, and sarcasm.”⁹

Many have described political cartoons as powerful forces in affecting attitudes and beliefs. Cartoons have been called “one of the most powerful weapons in the journalistic armoury,”¹⁰ “a vital component of political discourse,”¹¹ and “a cornerstone of American democracy.”¹² David Ammons, John King, and Jerry Yeric argued that with cartoons, images of politicians are “lodged [in the mind] perhaps more forcefully...than by the myriad news stories and editorials.”¹³

A couple of historical examples are typically often offered as proof of the power of political cartoons, specifically, Thomas Nast’s cartoons attacking the Tweed gang and Herbert Block’s caricatures of Richard Nixon.¹⁴ The Tweed case elicited the now famous quotation by William Marcy Tweed, “I don’t care what they print about me, most of my constituents can’t read anyway... But them damn pictures!”¹⁵ As for Nixon, Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist Patrick Oliphant asserted: “It is no stretch to claim that the political cartoon had a distinct influence on the termination of the Nixon presidency.”¹⁶ Most historians believe that these cartoonists had some influence over the chain of events that followed publication of their cartoons.¹⁷

An impressive body of rhetorical and critical work has examined political cartoons, revealing rich, nuanced meanings. Yet empirical support for political cartoon effects is limited. Matthew Morrison’s observation in 1969, “There has been a paucity of quantitative research on the effects of editorial cartoons,”¹⁸ continues to ring true.

Fortunately, a few empirical effects studies have highlighted the unique and at times confounding reactions viewers have toward this potentially powerful, and often humorous, political force. LeRoy Carl’s study highlighted an inconsistency between what cartoonists intend and what readers perceive. Random samples of citizens in two towns and a university city revealed that small-town residents were in disagreement 70 percent of the time with what the cartoonist

intended. The university-city sample, which included more professional and academic readers, scored only slightly better, as 63 percent did not correctly perceive the cartoonists' intended messages. Several times, readers' interpretations were not only a little off, but were in direct opposition to what was intended by the cartoonist. The findings came as a surprise to many, including editorial cartoonists. On hearing the results, one cartoonist apologized, while another expressed embarrassment that he was not able to more clearly articulate his point.¹⁹

Political cartoons seldom appear in isolation, so Del Brinkman wondered how cartoons fared when paired with editorials. His experimental study found that cartoons accompanied by editorials were more persuasive than either alone, but that a cartoon was less persuasive than an editorial. The most effective was a cartoon that made the same argument as the accompanying editorial.²⁰

Caricatures, or humorous visual representations, play prominent roles in many political cartoons. Mary Wheeler and Stephen Reed used a particularly creative method for studying them. Participants in the study were given cut-out, caricatured faces of Richard Nixon. The researchers had participants sort the faces into those they found positive and those they found negative. The researchers discovered that faces sorted in the negative category were from a time period that reflected low approval of the president, while the positive faces were from a period of high presidential approval.²¹ While we are limited in the extension of this study into political cartoon effects research (disembodied heads are not the norm in editorial cartoons!), this experiment clarifies the power of caricatures to elicit affective evaluations.

Perhaps scarce political cartoon effects research reflects general neglect of political cartoons.²² Matthew Diamond noted that cartoons "often get short shrift in the academy."²³ Then again, existing empirical effects research, combined with the complex nature of cartoons demonstrated by rhetorical and critical analyses, may reflect challenges to assessing effects—"the insurmountable barriers to controlling how readers will use a text's irony."²⁴ Or, it might be that many agree with the assessment by Haydon Manning and Robert Phiddian that "thinking [of the effects of political cartoons] will remain in the realms of speculation until someone is courageous (or foolish) enough to embark on extensive quantitative research on the effects of

cartooning.”²⁵ Continued empirical effects research will continue to clarify the unique and powerful effects of political cartoons.

Late Night Television Comedy

Late night television comedy is increasingly political, drawing the attention of communications scholars and political scientists. Like political cartoons, political players and journalists think that late night television comedy matters. Mandy Grunwald, former media advisor to Bill Clinton, noted: “If [comics] are making jokes about you, you have a serious political problem.”²⁶ Jeff Simon, writing for *Buffalo News*, called late night comedy the place “where the real climate of opinion is now being forged.”²⁷ But it appears late night comics don’t give themselves much credit for affecting viewers. When asked about studies showing young viewers reportedly learning from his show, Jon Stewart of Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show* replied, “I just don’t think that’s possible.”²⁸

Many young viewers think it matters. According to The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 61 percent of young people reported regularly or sometimes learning campaign information from comedy television, meaning late night talk shows and/or comedy shows like *The Daily Show* and *Saturday Night Live* (SNL).²⁹ “My best resource [for presidential election news in 2000] has been *Saturday Night Live*,” offered Chaz Duncan, a high school sophomore.³⁰ Young people are turning to late night comedy for political information, supplementing what they learn from traditional news.³¹ But are viewers really learning anything? And are there any other effects of this late night laughter?

Some of our insight into late night comedy effects comes from studies that looked at broader genres, sometimes called new media, non-traditional news media, or soft news. This moniker usually includes late night comedy, but also includes other shows like daytime talk and entertainment news. Research exploring this genre has examined influences on candidate image,³² political knowledge (some argue it helps,³³ others argue it may not help that much³⁴), campaign interest,³⁵ and levels of support for U.S. policies.³⁶ Other research has looked specifically at late night comedy as a genre. Analyzing data from the 2004 Political Communications Study of the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, Barry Hollander found that the

younger viewers who watch late night comedy programs for political information are more likely to *recognize* than *recall* political information.³⁷ Finally, other research has focused on specific types of late night comedy, including talk shows, variety shows, and “fake news.” These specific types of late night comedy are surveyed next.

Darrell West and John Orman labeled late night hosts “the high priests of political comedy that can make or break a politician.”³⁸ Of course, political joking on late night talk shows did not begin with Jay Leno, David Letterman, and Conan O’Brien. Their predecessors, including Johnny Carson, “middle America’s contemporary Will Rogers,” broached political issues years earlier.³⁹ President George H. W. Bush, speaking after Carson’s death in 2005, noted, “His wit and insight made Americans laugh and think, and had a profound influence on American life and entertainment.”⁴⁰ Scholars have increasingly turned to late night talk shows to assess their effects, peaking with the 2000 presidential campaign.

Content analyses reveal a negative tone of monologue jokes—focusing on image over issues.⁴¹ A recent textual analysis of late night jokes about Vice President Cheney’s heart problems highlighted a case where personality was not the only target of image attacks. Even health is grounds for ridicule.⁴² But beyond knowing what monologue jokes are targeting, we also have a better idea of what they seem to be doing. Dannagal Goldthwaite Young found that those with lower political knowledge were most influenced by late night comedy viewing.⁴³ In another study, Young assessed whether late night comedy made candidate traits more salient. While her analysis did not reveal a direct influence of late night viewing on salient character traits, Young found evidence that late night comedy viewers with lower political knowledge were most likely to reflect the negative character traits ridiculed in monologue jokes in their evaluations of these candidates.⁴⁴

Late night comedy may be affecting more than evaluations of candidates. Patricia Moy, Michael Xenos, and Verena Hess assessed whether viewing “infotainment” programming was associated with political behaviors. The researchers found a positive association between late night comedy viewing (*The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, *The Late Show with David Letterman*) and political involvement and political discussions. Viewers who were more politically sophisticated were even more likely to vote and talk to others about politics.⁴⁵ Assessing effects of communication forms, including late

night comedy, Michael Pfau, Brian Houston, and Shane Semmler found that late night talk shows such as *The Tonight Show* and *The Late Show* exerted a positive influence on political expertise and attitude toward the process during the 2004 presidential campaign.⁴⁶

Collectively, these studies reveal late night talk shows as a potentially powerful force in politics, but not necessarily in ways we might have expected. There is not much evidence for direct effects on assessments of candidates, but the comedy may have some influence on how viewers evaluate them. Moreover, it may also have an effect on their engagement in and attitude toward politics.

Other research has focused on late night comedy shows, including *Saturday Night Live* and *The Daily Show*. *Saturday Night Live* has a history of political mockery. Historical and rhetorical analyses argue that this mockery matters. Consider President Ford. Gerald Gardner concluded that *SNL*'s mockery of Ford (even his own children laughed at the clumsy caricature of their father)⁴⁷ squashed his chances in 1976.⁴⁸ Drawing on Burke's comic frame, Chris Smith and Ben Voth examined how *SNL*'s political parodies served as political argument, noting how comedic treatments of Bush and Gore in 2000 "evolved into a legitimate disseminator of information for the political and public sphere."⁴⁹ Empirical effects research on *Saturday Night Live* is rare, but some evidence suggests that shows like *SNL* had a negative influence on political knowledge and participation during the 2004 campaign.⁵⁰

While *The Daily Show* fits into the genre of late night political comedy, many observers consider it a unique player in the field. A *Newsweek* profile noted, "Unlike late-night talk shows that traffic in Hollywood interviews and stupid pet tricks, *The Daily Show* is a fearless social satire."⁵¹ Geoffrey Baym explained that *The Daily Show* "undoubtedly is comedy—often entertaining and at times absurd—but it is also an informative examination of politics and media practices, as well as a forum for the discussion of substantive public affairs."⁵² Its viewers are also unique. "*Daily Show* viewers have higher campaign knowledge than national news viewers and newspaper readers," noted Dannagal Goldthwaite Young.⁵³ Young emphasized that the data assessed correlation between *Daily Show* viewership and knowledge, not causation, and that it is probably a matter of both: people with more political knowledge watch *The Daily Show*, and they learn some things while watching.⁵⁴

We have some empirical evidence of *The Daily Show's* attitudinal effects on viewers. Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris found that viewing *The Daily Show's* ridicule of 2004 presidential candidates George W. Bush and John Kerry derogated both candidates' images and led viewers to feel more cynical about government and the news media. However, viewers were more likely to report higher levels of internal efficacy, or the confidence to successfully deal with politics.⁵⁵

Political appearances on these shows have also received scholarly attention. These appearances have not always been popular. Mandy Grunwald, Clinton's former media advisor, recalled Clinton's appearances on talk shows in 1992: "The notion a presidential candidate would go on any of these shows was denigrated, laughable. People really made fun of us."⁵⁶ Now candidates appear on programs to banter with genial hosts, or even show off a talent, like when Bill Clinton played saxophone on *The Arsenio Hall Show*. Some candidates even *become* candidates there (e.g., Arnold Schwarzenegger on *The Tonight Show* and John Edwards on *The Daily Show*).

Why the change? Probably because it works. Matt Baum found that interviews with candidates feature fewer partisan cues than conventional news, portray candidates in a decisively positive light, and slight issues. He also revealed that appearances on daytime talk shows matter to politically unaware viewers. These viewers were more likely to have higher opinions of candidates and vote for them, even if it meant crossing party lines.⁵⁷ Paul Brewer and Xiaoxia Cao revealed a positive relationship between seeing candidates on late night or political comedy shows and political knowledge, suggesting that candidate appearances may help promote the democratic process.⁵⁸ Using data from the 2000 National Annenberg Election Survey, Patricia Moy, Michael Xenos, and Verena Hess revealed that George W. Bush's appearance on *The Late Show* seems to have led viewers to rely more on character in their overall evaluations of him.⁵⁹

From conventional late night talk shows to variety shows to "fake news," there is evidence that humor matters. After reviewing political humor effects research in political cartoons and late night comedy, we can now turn to some future directions for effects research. We will start with the two forms already surveyed, cartoons and late night television comedy, before turning to other venues of political humor.

Directions for Political Humor Effects Research

Political Cartoons

There are several directions to pursue with political cartoon effects research. Scholars can continue to assess cartoons' overall effects on attitudes toward those being caricatured, but can also increase the scope to other types of effects, like those pursued by late night comedy effects researchers. Might political cartoons also have effects on cynicism, faith in the media, political involvement, political knowledge, and so on?

As Edward Lordan observes in his review of political cartoons, it is difficult to determine the effects of cartoons in isolation.⁶⁰ One study looked at cartoons along with editorials⁶¹; future experimental research should continue to explore context in this manner. For example, what occurs when multiple cartoons appear on the same page but with counter-attitudinal interpretations? Would multiple cartoons be more influential than a single editorial? Political cartoon researchers can also further consider the political knowledge of readers in assessing effects, as late night comedy researchers have done.⁶² Edward Lordan observed that "the editorial cartoon requires a relatively sophisticated audience to be successful."⁶³ Effects researchers should find out how much political knowledge matters with effects of political cartoons.

Comic strips have received even less empirical analysis than editorial cartoons. Scholars have noted that political comic strips, such as Garry Trudeau's *Doonesbury*, are different from political cartoons.⁶⁴ "*Doonesbury* is perhaps a truer indicator of our culture than any other comic strip," argued Christopher Lamb.⁶⁵ Perhaps comic strips like *Doonesbury* do more than reflect, but also affect their readers in ways effects research could reveal.

Late Night Television Comedy

While it is the focus of increasing scholarship, late night comedy has not been exhausted as an object of study. Monologue jokes have received analyses, as have candidate appearances. However, the skits and clips on talk shows have not received much specific attention. Consider a recurring feature on *The Late Show*, "Great Moments

in Presidential Speeches.” During this segment, Letterman plays clips of eloquent past presidential speeches, and then ends with a clip of President Bush bungling a phrase. “In many ways on Letterman,” said Robert Thompson, director of Syracuse University’s Center for the Study of Popular Television, “the president is telling the joke about himself.”⁶⁶ Likewise, Conan O’Brien has a recurring skit that uses politicians’ faces on a large-screen TV, but with actors’ mouths mimicking their voices in conversations with the host. Marshall Sella called these “[t]he most subtle—that is, most exquisitely biased—caricatures.”⁶⁷ Empirical research should see if these unique types of political humor have influences that differ from conventional monologue jokes or actual appearances.

New late night comedy shows also warrant attention, including *The Colbert Report*, a spin-off of Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show*. Called “jujitsu satire” by one television critic,⁶⁸ *The Colbert Report* parodies political talk shows like Bill O’Reilly’s *The O’Reilly Factor*, featuring a satirical combination of monologue, recurring skits, guest interviews, and often, appearances by politicians. Some politicians believe they benefit from appearing on the show. “When people who are 25 who have never voted for you think you are funny because you did the show, that’s instant validity,” said Rep. Jack Kingston (R-GA).⁶⁹ Others are not so quick with praise. Rep. Barney Frank (D-MA), who was unhappy about his own experience with the show, thinks it “degrades politics. It’s not a good way to engage young people.”⁷⁰ Others simply are not sure. Interviewed about her experience, Rep. Donna Christensen (D-VI) remarked, “Most of the time, you’re trying to project your very best image, and this could leave you vulnerable. Now that you’re asking me, I’m kind of wondering why I did agree to it so quickly.”⁷¹

We have evidence that not all late night comedy functions in the same way.⁷² What differences would we find between candidate appearances on traditional late night talk shows, such as *The Tonight Show*, and “fake” news interview shows such as *The Colbert Report*? Candidate appearance effects research would benefit from distinguishing the “good” from the “bad.” For example, many television critics and political pundits considered John Kerry’s first appearance on *The Tonight Show* (an appearance that had him bantering with Triumph the Insult Comic Dog, a sock puppet) a disaster.⁷³ Similar assessments were made of an appearance by George W. Bush on

The Late Show in 2000.⁷⁴ Effects research can offer clarity as to when appearances work for candidate image, when they do not, and why.

Researchers should also further assess what occurs when late night comedy clips are shown during conventional news broadcasts. *Saturday Night Live* skits commonly popped up on traditional news outlets during Campaign 2000,⁷⁵ and ABC's Sunday morning political talk show, *This Week*, featured a series of segments from humor-based comedy programs titled "Funny Pages." An experiment conducted by Dolf Zillman and his colleagues raises interesting implications for comedic content featured on conventional news programs. In their experiment, when newscasts ended with humorous content, viewers were less worried about the preceding serious news stories and found the issues less severe. The researchers used a humorous clip of Jay Leno, David Letterman, and *SNL* actors making fun of politicians as their experimental material for the humorous content, showing yet another potential effect of late night comedy political humor.⁷⁶

Entertainment Television

There is growing scholarly interest in entertainment television. Robert Lichter, Linda Lichter, and Daniel Amundson analyzed how government officials were portrayed on entertainment television (including comedy shows like *The Simpsons* and *Spin City*) and found a predominance of negative portrayals.⁷⁷ Michael Pfau, Patricia Moy, and Erin Szabo found some positive relationships with situation comedy viewing and attitudes toward some aspects of government,⁷⁸ and other research examined how prime-time television viewing can affect trust in government.⁷⁹ Lance Holbert and his colleagues have empirically investigated entertainment television viewing effects on myriad political issues: environmental attitudes and behaviors,⁸⁰ portrayals of the president,⁸¹ women's rights,⁸² and capital punishment and gun rights.⁸³ Holbert also created a nine-part typology for continued study of the distinct genres of entertainment television. Three parts of his typology include programming that often features, explicitly or implicitly, political humor: traditional satire (e.g., *The Daily Show*), situation comedy satire (e.g., *The Simpsons*), and entertainment talk show interviews with politicians (e.g., Leno and Letterman). Holbert notes that there is a growing body of empirical research in some of these areas, but not all, including situation comedies.⁸⁴

Indeed, a later chapter in this volume by Peter L. Francia examines the evolution of political-based situational comedies. As Francia argues, situation comedies can matter in a political context, and often reflect the current state of American political and popular culture. Even animated situational comedies can have meaning. In this regard, *The Simpsons* is particularly promising.⁸⁵ Bruce Williams and Michael Delli Carpini offered: “We may well conclude that the political relevance of a cartoon character like Lisa Simpson is as important as the professional norms of Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw, or Peter Jennings.”⁸⁶ John Alberti argued that this show “represents some of the most daring cultural and political satire in television history.”⁸⁷ Animated political humor may underscore the complexity of some political and social problems,⁸⁸ and by leaving many conclusions open-ended, the show “actively solicits political engagement.”⁸⁹ Empirical research could further complement our understanding of the effects of television programming like *The Simpsons*.⁹⁰ Later in this book, Nicholas P. Guehlstorf, Lars K. Hallstrom, and Jonathan S. Morris highlight the rich array of various forms of humor prevalent in *The Simpsons*. In their estimation, not only is *The Simpsons* critical of politicians in its humor—it is also quick to highlight the political flaws and hypocrisies of the American mass public.

Other Print Media

Cartoons and comics are not the only places we find political humor in newspapers. Editorials and columnists often use humor to discuss political issues. Here, we have some effects research from which to build. James Powell’s experimental research found political satire was not very effective in changing the attitudes of highly involved subjects, but was effective in bolstering attitudes against subsequent attempts at counter-persuasion.⁹¹ We may find order effects of humorous newspaper columns, meaning that *when* an editorial is read has impacts on effects.

Then there are humorous newspapers and other publications that periodically feature political humor, from *Entertainment Weekly* (e.g., pitting rapper Lil’ Kim against North Korean Dictator Kim Jong II)⁹² to the more highbrowed *New Yorker* (e.g., a commentary regarding the success and appeal of conservative “red-neck” humor).⁹³ Perhaps *The Onion* is the best-known contemporary satirical newspaper in

this country. This newspaper and its online version have garnered the attention and laughs of readers with what the *American Journalism Review* called “its often hilarious, pitch-perfect parody of newswriting conventions.”⁹⁴ In her review of one of *The Onion’s* ancestors, the humor magazine *Ballyhoo* launched in 1931, Margaret McFadden concluded: “The case of *Ballyhoo* suggests the tremendous power of humor to debunk or reinforce cultural norms and ideologies and therefore to have profound cultural and political effects.”⁹⁵ Empirical effects research of humorous periodicals could offer empirical support to claims like these.

Humorous political books are popular, but empirical assessments of their effects are rare. A Pew Internet & American Life Project report indicated that 16 percent of adult Americans read a political book during the 2004 presidential campaign. The report noted that Comedy Central’s Jon Stewart had a best-selling book during this time, *America (The Book): A Citizen’s Guide to Democracy Inaction*, which satirized civics textbooks.⁹⁶ Timothy Weiskel observed: “Capturing and publishing collected ‘Bushisms’ has become a modest industry in its own right.”⁹⁷ Discovering what effects these books have, if any, on political attitudes, values, and behaviors would be a welcome addition to the literature on political humor effects.

Film

Humorous political film is another rich field for effects researchers. John Nelson argued that “attention to popular films can help us learn how genre conventions communicate politics.”⁹⁸ But it has received scant attention. William Elliott and William Schenck-Hamlin noted that film, in general, has been reduced to “a second class medium for communication research.”⁹⁹ Their own experimental research found some effects of watching a political film, *All the President’s Men*.¹⁰⁰ Contemporary political comedy films include 2006’s *American Dreamz*, which presented an *American Idol* spoof involving the president as a guest judge, and 2004’s *Team America: World Police*, a puppet action film that skewered action movies and political issues. Besides comedies, other film genres feature at least some political humor.

Consider Michael Moore’s 2004 documentary, *Fahrenheit 9/11*. According to a Pew Internet & American Life Project report, 31 percent of adult Americans watched a political documentary film

about the 2004 election. Michael Cornfield, senior research consultant, noted that this was unique: "Rarely do voters in the digital age spend a long time paying close attention to a single message about an upcoming election."¹⁰¹ While *Fahrenheit 9/11* is not a comedy, it did feature prominent comedic elements. G. Thomas Goodnight said it "packed a whallop of satire."¹⁰² We also have some empirical evidence of the effect of this film on viewers. Lance Holbert and Glenn Hansen's experimental study revealed that *Fahrenheit 9/11* influenced viewers' affective ambivalence toward President Bush, finding evidence of an interaction among watching the film, political party, and need for closure.¹⁰³ This is but one area of potential future scholarship relating to film effects.

The Internet

Another area that warrants more scrutiny from empirical assessments of effects is political humor on the Internet. We find similarities to the type of political comedy we find on "fake news" programs such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, as well as *Saturday Night Live*'s "Weekend Update." As Brad Reagan put it, "Dummied-up 'official' reports are the stock in trade of numerous humor sites, whether phony news stories, mock memos or parodies of commercials."¹⁰⁴ Kirsten Foot and Steven Schneider's overview of election-oriented Web sites during the 2000 presidential election campaigns included a section they labeled "carnival," offering a smorgasbord of political humor Web content that warrants further study and analysis.¹⁰⁵ Effects of this type of political comedy are, for the most part, unknown, although there is some speculation regarding its impact. Karl Frish, Howard Dean's multimedia communications director in 2004, noted that the volume of Dean-scream parodies following his infamous yell after the Iowa primary "certainly quickened the death" of his campaign.¹⁰⁶ D. Travers Scott proposed that academics turn their attention to these political e-mail *virals*, or messages that are designed to pass to others.¹⁰⁷

Speeches, Campaign Advertisements, and Other Political Events

Before turning to the use of humor in political speeches, we will consider another type of "speech" that features political humor:

political comedy routines. While comedians with late night television shows have been studied, other comics have received little attention.¹⁰⁸ Stand-up comics (e.g., Mark Russell, Janeane Garofalo, Dennis Miller, and Al Franken), political comedy troupes (e.g., San Francisco Mime Troupe), and political impersonators (e.g., Andy Borowitz's John Kerry and Steve Bridges' George W. Bush) give live performances that are often broadcast on television. Critics seem to think these "politicomics"¹⁰⁹ have effects on their audiences. Reviewing one of Bill Maher's shows for *Toronto Star*, Richard Ouzounian notes that the "[i]nitially shocked crowd [was] won over by edge and wit."¹¹⁰ Comics hope they have effects, too. Paul D'Angelo suggests that "if I can make people laugh and at the same time educate them, that's a real challenge, and it validates both views."¹¹¹ We have some empirical evidence for the impact of humor routines from James Powell's study of how Art Buchwald's speeches affected attitudes. He found that the comical treatment of an issue "inoculated" some viewers against subsequent serious treatments of the issues.¹¹² But much more is to be studied in terms of how stand-up comedy affects its audiences. Whoopi Goldberg's fundraiser speech for John Kerry's campaign during the summer of 2004 was controversial after her use of sexual puns to mock President Bush.¹¹³ It cost her a Slim-Fast endorsement deal¹¹⁴—but does humor like this have other effects?

Of course, politicians use humor in their own speeches and campaign events as well. Gerald Ford was the first president to hire a professional comedy writer solely to write one-liners, jokes, and anecdotes,¹¹⁵ but he certainly wasn't the first or last politician to try humor. Gerald Gardner argued that political humor has influence, including salvaging an image when used well (e.g., Reagan, Kennedy, Johnson), and derogating an image when used poorly (e.g., Carter, Ford) or not used enough (e.g., Mondale, Nixon).¹¹⁶ Empirical effects research can further assess this power, both as a persuasive function and as an influence on image. Charles Gruner's early experiment found that satire was ineffective in changing attitudes, and furthermore, derogated the image of the speaker.¹¹⁷ His follow-up study supported the original finding that satire was not very effective in changing attitudes, but he did not find derogation of the speaker's image.¹¹⁸ Later, he reasoned that the key issue is whether the humor is considered appropriate.¹¹⁹ Other research has found the use of humor to decrease image.¹²⁰ In short, political humor does not always work as planned. As Don Nilsen noted, "like other powerful

weapons, [humor] can backfire.”¹²¹ Continued effects research can clarify when and why it works, and what it means when it doesn’t.

Other political events provide forums for humor. David Paletz called the annual Gridiron dinner “one of Washington D.C.’s strangest events.”¹²² At this event, politicians mingle with journalists, humorously approaching serious topics of the day. As Linton Weeks noted, although journalists are not supposed to report on what goes on there, “information does leak out.”¹²³ The White House Correspondents Association dinner is also known as a humorous event. At the 2006 event, Comedy Central’s Stephen Colbert delivered a keynote speech that received rants and raves. It became one of the most viewed clips on the Internet and rose to the top of iTunes charts.¹²⁴ It also got a lot of play on blogs.¹²⁵ Additionally, President Bush gave a speech that parodied himself by speaking simultaneously next to an impersonator. This skit was generally well-received and was also replayed extensively in the mainstream media. While the live audience for these events is relatively small, clips of humorous moments are often replayed during news broadcasts or shared via streaming clips on the Internet. These clips can serve as unique experimental materials for political humor effects researchers.

Humor used in campaign advertising also warrants further study by effects researchers. L. Patrick Devlin’s survey of presidential campaign commercials during the 2000 election revealed a number of humorous television advertisements for third-party candidates. Using a reactive focus group composed of undergraduate college students, Devlin found that the humorous ads were most popular with her students.¹²⁶ We even find political humor in presidential candidates’ videocassettes, known as “meet the candidate videos.” Bill Bradley included a joke he told in a campaign speech, and Al Gore included a segment of his appearance on *The Late Show with David Letterman*.¹²⁷

The broad categories surveyed here miss many other forms of political humor, including political bumper stickers,¹²⁸ lapel buttons,¹²⁹ political graffiti,¹³⁰ word-of-mouth political jokes,¹³¹ and humorous political stories.¹³² Any of these, and many more, could be intriguing areas of study for effects researchers delving even further into political humor.

Conclusion

This survey of effects research highlights a high proportion of television studies. This may be attributed to the characteristics of television

and political humor. Political humor as a genre is usually negative. Theoretical musings about political humor¹³³ and content analyses¹³⁴ alike reveal that attacks on character and image are common. It is perhaps little surprise that so much political humor effects research turns to television as the medium of choice. Television's visual nature makes character issues salient,¹³⁵ and television allows viewers to literally peer into the otherwise private lives of politicians.¹³⁶ Further, this is where most people get most of their political information.¹³⁷ If political humor is most likely to target character, television would be the best place to do so. But as this review highlighted, television is not the only place to find political humor, and researchers should continue to explore the effects of political humor in all of its venues.

While the latter part of this chapter focused on venues for political humor, continuing effects research should also look at different types of political humor. It is not all the "badoom-boom formula favored by late-night comedians."¹³⁸ Some political humor is harsh and biting, while other humor is warm and lighthearted.¹³⁹ It can support or subvert authority.¹⁴⁰ Hans Speier notes how political humor can be used as both a weapon and as a defense.¹⁴¹ Different senses of humor also warrant further scrutiny regarding political humor effects. Glenn Wilson's review of psychological humor reaction research finds distinct differences in how conservatives and liberals respond to different types of humor.¹⁴² Researchers have offered helpful taxonomies to guide such research, including David Paletz's categories of targets, focus, social acceptability, and presentation,¹⁴³ and John Meyer's analysis of the four basic functions of humor.¹⁴⁴ For example, Michael Nitz and his colleagues used Paletz's work to guide their content analysis of late night humor.¹⁴⁵ Political humor effects research can also be guided by taxonomies such as these.

Some observers are clearly concerned about the potential effects of political humor. Noting that young people reportedly get political news from late night comedy shows, Timothy Weiskel warned: "We could perhaps all laugh if the results were not so tragic and devastating in the world at large."¹⁴⁶ Continuing empirical research will help as we appraise effects of political humor. When we find ways humor hurts the political process, we can find ways to fix it. When we find ways that it is helping, we can all laugh a little easier.

Notes

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