

Political Punditry in Punchlines

*Late Night Comics Take on the
2004 Presidential Debates*

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The “spin room,” a holding tank for spokespersons eager to tout their respective candidates to reporters, is a fixture of contemporary political debates. Ann McFeatters, Washington bureau chief of the *Pittsburg Post-Gazette*, observes, “The goal is to ‘spin’ the media and public perception on who won, regardless of what happened. And it often works.”¹ Despite the predictable agendas in spin room rhetoric, mediated postdebate analysis can be quite impacting.² But conventional postdebate punditry is not the only place viewers can get a take on the night’s proceedings. During post-prime time, another type of political punditry appears: late night political comics offer their analysis, commentary couched in comedy.

This chapter returns to the first presidential debate of 2004, surveying some of the late night humor that prefaced and then followed the match between George W. Bush and John Kerry. I then discuss the idea that late night comedic postdebate analysis warrants closer scrutiny from scholars to assess both the content and potential effects of this political punditry in punchlines.

Late Night Political Humor

Interest in political humor on late night TV spiked during and immediately after Campaign 2000, an election campaign that “completely obliterated the line that once separated pure campaign discourse and parody.”³ *Saturday Night Live (SNL)*, *The Daily Show*,

The Tonight Show, and *The Late Show* were among the obliterating forces, offering political parodies, tongue-in-cheek analyses, and a slew of political zingers. According to the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA), late night television comedians Jay Leno and David Letterman rattled off 31,543 political jokes in a decade's time.⁴ Perhaps showing the unique resiliency of political humor, the CMPA noted that late night humor "bounced back" four months after the tragic events of 9/11: Jay Leno, David Letterman, and Conan O'Brien were telling more than nine political jokes each night, 38 percent more than they were telling before 9/11.⁵

The topics of late night jokes are regularly political, but what about their tone? Content analyses suggest that it's overwhelmingly negative.⁶ David Niven, Robert Lichter, and Daniel Amundson's analysis of 13,301 late night jokes led them to conclude

In most years, nine out of ten political jokes are not directed toward a political issue but more likely to a personal foible of a political leader. According to late night shows, presidents and presidential candidates are incredibly old, fat, dumb, lecherous, or prone to lie.⁷

Not only are late night jokes increasingly political, they are also increasingly nasty: this is the attack politics of late night comedy. But do these jokes have any effect?

It appears they do. Viewers, especially ones with less political knowledge, pick up on politicians' traits that are ridiculed by late night comics.⁸ There is even some evidence that they might be learning something,⁹ or at least *think* they are learning something.¹⁰ Besides evaluations of candidates and political knowledge, other studies have assessed late night comedy's potential influence on cynicism¹¹ and normative political outcomes.¹² When we also consider that 61 percent of young adults report regularly or sometimes learning campaign information from television comedy (late night talk shows and/or comedy shows like *SNL* and *The Daily Show*),¹³ it's reasonable to conclude that the laughing matters.

Of the many possible directions for future late night comedy research, focusing on how it characterizes specific political events is particularly promising. In these moments, the late night comedy is not just political, but it's topically political. Perhaps no event demonstrates this better than the presidential debates. The Racine Group, a collection of scholars with expertise in political campaign debates, noted that debate content "matriculates to other forums, including

non-traditional outlets, such as late-night talk shows...and comedy.”¹⁴ Michael Pfau’s analysis of the “subtle effects” of political debates includes a call to explore programs like these when assessing debate effects.¹⁵

Presidential debates offer unique moments in election campaigns. The Racine Group noted: “Because they command the attention of the public, the media, and the candidates, televised political debates have become a permanent aspect of America’s political landscape.”¹⁶ Most importantly, debates matter, as a mountain of research¹⁷ and a recent meta-analysis¹⁸ attest. But just because they are important and impacting does not mean that they are immune from late night ridicule. Pre- and postdebate, the late night comics weigh in, adding to what television critic Kay McFadden calls “the distortion that occurs as information proceeds from news to spin to entertainment.”¹⁹

Late night comedy hit the 2000 presidential debates full force, with the presidential debates in *Saturday Night Live*’s comedic cross-hairs.²⁰ Chris Smith and Ben Voth explored these debate parodies in their rhetorical analysis, “The Role of Humor in Political Argument: How ‘Strategy’ and ‘Lockboxes’ Changed a Political Campaign.”

With Will Ferrell playing a goofy, squinty-eyed George Bush and Darrell Hammond embodying a sly, overbearing Al Gore, *SNL*’s parody of the debate painted the candidates, not as respectful politicians, but as comic clowns.²¹

Smith and Voth’s Burkean analysis examined not only the parodies, but also the candidates’ reactions to the comic characterizations, arguing that late night comedy functioned as an influential form of political argument.

But while *Saturday Night Live* is known for its spot-on impersonations and sharp political humor, late night talk show hosts’ takes on the debate are more of the “badoom-boom formula.”²² Monologue jokes do not permit much extended satire. Instead, zingers and one-liners are the tools of their presidential debate banter. Myles Martel called the kind of postdebate analysis by traditional, conventional political commentators “meta-debating.”²³ To others, it’s known as just spin. So what can we call the postdebate analysis by non-traditional political commentators, late night comics? “Meta-musing debating”? Or maybe, “jest-spin”?

Whatever we call it, people are watching. Even the news media turn to the jokesters for their takes. One journalist observed

When the first debate between George W. Bush and John Kerry finished at 10:30 pm, a fair proportion of the 62.5 million viewers did not bother with the traditional post-debate analysis by cable and network news outlets. Instead, they hit the remote to find out what late-night jokesters like Dave Letterman, Jay Leno, Conan O'Brien and Jon Stewart thought.²⁴

Similarly, another recalled: "After the great men had finished yammering in Florida Thursday night, I did what any sensible political columnist does these days: I turned to the late-night comedians for their take on the affair."²⁵

Late night comics did not wait for the first debate to begin mocking it. They began setting the stage beginning September 13, more than two weeks before George W. Bush and John Kerry faced off. Instead of taking aim at either of the candidates, they targeted the debates themselves.

The debate format caused some discord between the campaigns. The Commission on Presidential Debates, formed in 1987 by Republicans and Democrats for bipartisan involvement, had recommended three 90-minute debates, and set dates, locations, and moderators.²⁶ But the details proved messy, with both campaigns organizing teams of big-name negotiators to work things out.²⁷ The *New York Times* called these negotiations "the predebate debates," and highlighted their importance in ironing out details that would cater to each candidate's strengths.²⁸ The result? Thirty-two pages of rules. Even the lecterns were dictated: "fifty inches from the stage floor to the outside top...facing the audience and...forty-eight inches from the stage floor to the top of the writing surface facing the respective candidates."²⁹

This pre-debate debating was not limited to the campaigns' negotiation teams. Late night talk show hosts chimed in, too, in their monologue jokes. Jay Leno's quip began a consistent theme among the comics.

Both sides are arguing about the formats of the big presidential debates.... Bush wants to sit, Kerry wants to stand.... You know, split the difference. Make them squat.³⁰

Referencing the thirty-two pages of agreed-upon debate rules (and the tabloid-trendy reports of Jennifer Lopez's marriage to Marc Anthony), David Letterman said "it's like being a J-Lo husband."

Jay Leno and David Letterman also "previewed" the debate categories. Leno was first, with: "The first debate will cover the 1960s. The

second debate will cover the early '70s. And the third debate, if there's time, some topical issues."³¹ While Leno's joke mocked the priorities of the two campaigns—much of their rhetoric was swirling around controversies related to George W. Bush's National Guard service and John Kerry's time in Vietnam in the late 1960s and early 1970s—Letterman's punchline format was to give two "real" categories, followed by a humorous third. From Letterman, viewers learn: "There will be three debates, and each debate will have a category, and the categories will be domestic policy, foreign policy, and movie sidekicks."³² Later, Letterman labeled the third category "girl groups from the '60s,"³³ "sitcom neighbors,"³⁴ and finally, "one-hit wonders."³⁵

The bipartisan Commission on Presidential Debates may have offered official recommendations, and the campaigns' negotiation teams may have hammered out the details. But the bi-comedic quips of two of the most political late night talk show hosts were adding their two cents, too, with millions of viewers tuning in and getting an early picture of the upcoming presidential debates.

While ridiculing the debate formats and rules were common joke topics for Jay Leno and David Letterman, a preponderance of their jokes took aim at the debaters, and sometimes, both of them at the same time. A handful of these referenced the particularly busy 2004 hurricane season (Hurricanes Charley, Frances, and Ivan, among others). Consider this montage of hurricane-themed jokes that took swipes at George W. Bush and John Kerry.

David Letterman: The first presidential debate will be in Florida. Haven't those people suffered enough?³⁶

David Letterman: The first Kerry-Bush debate takes place Thursday in Miami, and today thousands of local residents began evacuating.³⁷

Jay Leno: You know where the first debate is being held? Miami . . . I mean, first hurricanes. Now Bush and Kerry going down there? Haven't these people suffered enough?³⁸

In jokes like these, neither candidate is promoted over the other. Both are ridiculed. But this type of joke was far less common than jokes that targeted one or the other of the candidates.

John Kerry was pummeled for being rich, aloof, and inconsistent. Consider Jay Leno's observations.

Kerry just can't seem to shake this rich guy image, you know? Like today, he challenged President Bush to three debates and a yacht race.³⁹

Kerry's advisers are now working hard to try and prepare him for the debates. You know, they told him he has to try and connect with regular people.... They told him, if you need a glass of water, don't yell, "Jeeves!"⁴⁰

Debate experts say President Bush could win if he does not get off-message. And then they say Kerry could win if he *gets* a message.⁴¹

A few jokes, including Jay Leno's, took aim at John Kerry's appearance: "They say this debate is helping the economy. In fact, this week, millions of people are buying those big-screen TVs so they can see Kerry's entire head."⁴²

John Kerry's famously wealthy wife was not immune to late night mocking. Both Jay Leno and David Letterman mentioned her by name and referenced her wealth. In a nod to Oprah Winfrey's well-publicized gesture of giving cars away to audience members of her talk show, Leno quipped: "They say John Kerry already has begun preparing for the debates.... He figured he'd start off by having his wife buy everyone in the audience a new car,"⁴³ while Letterman remarked: "The candidates must remain at least ten feet apart. And they cannot talk directly to one another. It's actually based on the John Kerry-Teresa Heinz prenup agreement."⁴⁴

George W. Bush was characterized as ignorant and an "underdog" in the debates. Jay Leno and David Letterman took swipes, as did Conan O'Brien. Leno remarked: "President Bush and John Kerry have agreed on three debates. Kerry wanted more, but Bush said no, he thought three was a good, even number,"⁴⁵ and later

Kerry tried to lower expectations of himself. He said... "Bush has never lost a debate, and he's a formidable opponent." And then Bush lowered expectations of himself when he said, "Hey, what does 'formidable' mean?"⁴⁶

Letterman remarked

President Bush, here's his strategy, he's seeking to portray John Kerry as confused.... You think about it, you know you're in trouble when you're running against George Bush and you're the one who looks confused.⁴⁷

O'Brien added: "President Bush won the coin toss before the debate, and as a result, at the end, he was allowed to have the last word.... Not surprisingly, the word was 'courageosity.'⁴⁸

Jokes that portrayed Bush as the “underdog” in the debate included this one from Leno: “A week from now, John Kerry will debate President Bush in Florida. Right now, Kerry has a bad cold and can barely understand what he’s saying. So it looks like it should be a fair fight.”⁴⁹

Some of the jokes could be perceived as not only attacking one of the candidates, but also of promoting one over the other. For example, one of Leno’s jokes about George W. Bush’s intelligence also credited John Kerry, noting that the

experts say Kerry can’t look like a know-it-all, and Bush can’t appear too simplistic.... So the entire presidential race comes down to this. The smart guy has to look a little dumber, and the dumb guy has to look a little smarter.⁵⁰

Similarly, Letterman offered this quip: “Bush is concerned about the lectern, Bush is worried about the room temperature, he’s worried about lighting, and Kerry is making the mistake of concentrating on the issues.”⁵¹

This cursory review of some of the jokes surrounding the first presidential debate represents four main types: jokes that poke fun at the debates, jokes that ridicule both candidates at the same time, jokes that ridicule one specific candidate, and jokes that derogate one candidate while promoting the other. This cacophony of late night debate humor began weeks before the first debate.

Did the late night discourse change after the first debate? Yes and no. In some ways, late night comics confirmed what they predicted. But a few new jokes also cropped into the postdebate, late night analysis.

After the first debate, many political commentators and public opinion polls indicated a strong win for John Kerry. Scot Lehigh of the *Boston Globe* announced: “Last night, John Kerry won as clear a debate victory as we’ve seen since Ronald Reagan outdueled Jimmy Carter in 1980.”⁵² A *New York Times/CBS News* poll indicated that more people thought John Kerry looked more presidential than the president.⁵³ Echoing this perception, the late night jokesters turned most of their attention toward George W. Bush and his lackluster performance. Leno joked: “Political experts say Bush was off his game the other night. They said he looked distracted, confused, at a loss for words. Off his game? That is Bush’s game.”⁵⁴ Letterman’s take? “Experts are saying that if this was a game show, Bush would have gone home with a handshake and a quart of motor oil.”⁵⁵

Perhaps as damaging, if not more so, for George W. Bush, late night comics also mentioned some issues. Referencing a well-publicized Homeland Security incident with a former musician, Letterman said: "Last night's debate was on foreign policy, and if you saw it you know Bush spent the entire night gloating about the arrest of Cat Stevens."⁵⁶ Referring to a charge that George Bush, Sr. "pulled some strings" to keep his son out of active military service, Letterman joked: "But that's it for George Bush. He will not have to be in the next debate because his dad got him out of it."⁵⁷

Jay Leno and Conan O'Brien, consistent with pre-debate jokes, again made fun of George W. Bush's intelligence. Leno joked

You can see where President Bush made some mistakes during the debate, like when he said, "I know how this world works." You think that's true? You think maybe President Bush doesn't even know how the magic wallet works?⁵⁸

O'Brien quipped: "Last night was the first, the very first presidential debate, and it lasted a full 90 minutes. . . . Or, as President Bush calls it, three *Sponge Bobs*."⁵⁹

Some jokes that were borderline favorable toward George W. Bush used the "praise" as setups for the zingers. And in these cases, the zinger was usually alcohol-related.

Jay Leno: People underestimate President Bush when it comes to debating. He is pretty good at it. Back in college, he was able to argue both sides of that "tastes great, less filling" debate.⁶⁰

David Letterman: This is just my observation, at the debate, Bush appeared confident, he appeared relaxed, he appeared calm. That's right, he's drinking again.⁶¹

From specific mentions of his lackluster performance to jabs about his competence, George W. Bush was declared the loser of the first matchup. In many ways, this postdebate analysis is consistent with how the comedians set the stage prior to the debate: Bush was projected to be a bad debater, and, after the debate, the comedians concluded that was indeed the case.

While most of the jokes targeted George W. Bush, a few made fun of both candidates. Jay Leno called the debate "the big head versus the airhead,"⁶² said the networks were calling it "Rich White Guy Survivor,"⁶³ and asked: "Did you watch the rich white guy who went to Yale and wore the red tie, or the rich white guy who went to Yale and wore

the blue tie?”⁶⁴ Referencing the thirty-two pages of debate rules again, he asked: “You know the one rule they should’ve put in? No lying!”⁶⁵

The comics may have gone a little easier on John Kerry after his strong showing in the debate, but he did not completely escape mockery. Referring to the rule forbidding candidates from leaving their respective podiums, Jay Leno noted this was “especially tough on Kerry—not being allowed to change position.”⁶⁶ John Kerry’s wealth was also mentioned. Leno noted: “Kerry’s people have been advising him, keep it simple. They say Kerry gets the biggest payoff when he uses the shortest sentence. Like when he said, ‘I do,’”⁶⁷ and said that John Kerry won the coin toss because “his wife owns all the coins.”⁶⁸ Comics took aim at John Kerry’s appearance, too. When describing the lights installed on each candidate’s podium to give time signals, Leno said: “For Kerry, they actually used a tanning light.”⁶⁹ A few days later, Leno said that “the terror alert on John Kerry’s face has gone from orange back to pasty white” and that he hoped Kerry’s win “doesn’t give him a swelled head.”⁷⁰ Yet the prevailing perception that John Kerry had won overshadowed these light barbs, with David Letterman calling Kerry “so confident that he’s windsurfing again”⁷¹ and had “even picked up the support of one of the Bush twins.”⁷²

Over the next few weeks, we would see similar jokes lobbed before and after the second and final debate. George W. Bush would again be stamped incompetent. David Letterman quipped, “I watched the debates, and frankly Bush did look confused, at one point he tried to buy a vowel.”⁷³ Bush’s image as a bad debater would also continue in late night joking. For example, Jay Leno said that it was raining so hard, “cars were spinning out of control like President Bush in the debate.”⁷⁴ A few of the jokes would also approach some issues, including war in Iraq. Consider this one from Leno

President Bush apparently had a hard time getting past reporters and leaving the auditorium...last week after the debate. He couldn’t get out of the auditorium. Literally, the President— isn’t that amazing? Bush not having an exit strategy?⁷⁵

But this type of issue-related joke was rare, and even those that did broach some issues spoke in generalities to set up a punchline.

John Kerry’s performances in the debates, sometimes praised by the comics themselves, did not earn him total reprieve from continuing ridicule. Jay Leno launched this extended joke

Tomorrow night's debate . . . will be before an audience made up entirely of undecided voters, which creates a huge dilemma for John Kerry. Does he sit on the stage beside President Bush, or does he sit in the audience with all of the other people who can't make up their minds?⁷⁶

And in another joke, Leno again returned to the idea that Kerry was aloof and detached:

Some people are now saying that the questions at the end of the debate the other night actually helped John Kerry 'cause they made him look more human. Well that, and you know, taking the bolts out of his neck.⁷⁷

Echoing themes from pre-debate late night mockery, Kerry continued to be portrayed as inconsistent and aloof.

Future Directions

After the first debate between John Kerry and George W. Bush, political analyst Jack Pitney observed: "We're now at the point where comedy shows are the true debate referees."⁷⁸ Whether or not Jay Leno, David Letterman, and the like are "true debate referees" may be arguable, but the idea that they are offering their own pre- and postdebate spin is not.

Because televised debates warrant continued scholarly attention,⁷⁹ and late night comedy is a growing force in politics, examining the two together could yield particularly insightful scholarship. Indeed, looking at late night comics' analysis (jest-spin?) would help answer some calls for future research made by debate scholars.

[I]t is shaped by pre-debate attempts to raise or lower expectations, by post-debate "spinning," and by media analysis and commentary over the days following the debate. Which of these components . . . shape audiences' perceptions of the debate, and why, is important to know in order to account for the effects that debates can be shown to produce.⁸⁰

Late night comics' characterizations of the presidential debates could explore each of these areas, from pre-debate predictions to postdebate analysis.

First, consider potential impacts of pre-debate joking. Journalists call it "the expectations game," when campaigns try to lower expectations of their candidates by pumping up the skills of the opponent. In 2004, well before the first debate, both campaigns touted the

other. Matthew Dowd, George W. Bush's chief campaign strategist, called John Kerry "the best debater since Cicero."⁸¹ Tad Devine, John Kerry's chief campaign strategist, said: "The fact is, George Bush has never lost a debate."⁸² Might late night comedy also play this "expectations game"? Chris Smith and Ben Voth argued that *SNL's* debate parodies during Campaign 2000 might have. "After *SNL* ran their parody of the first debate," they noted, "the expectations of Bush's level of performance was drastically lowered."⁸³ The sample of jokes surveyed here suggest an "expectations game" in late night comedy monologue jokes as well. In this case, it may not have helped Kerry much. Many of the jokes touted Kerry's debating skills and questioned Bush's aptitude. At least one called the Kerry campaign out on its strategy to lower expectations for his own performance and then lowered expectations of Bush.

Kerry tried to lower expectations of himself. He said... "Bush has never lost a debate, and he's a formidable opponent." And then Bush lowered expectations of himself when he said, "Hey, what does *formidable* mean?"⁸⁴

If the "expectations game" works, do comic versions influence viewers? Future research should find out.

We have evidence that traditional postdebate analysis matters,⁸⁵ but does postdebate comedic analysis change the way people think? Chris Smith and Ben Voth wondered if *Saturday Night Live's* debate parody did this: "Voters seeking to understand the substance of ideas in the debate may have found the parodies of the debate to be a useful organizing tool for their inherent complexities."⁸⁶ Could the one-liners in Leno's and Letterman's jokes have impacted how people perceived the debates and/or the candidates? Will the inevitable jokes told before and after the next presidential debates make a difference? Investigating this particular type of "debate coverage" (using, for example, William Benoit's Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse⁸⁷) would help answer these and other questions.

Of course, whether debate-topical jokes actually affect perceptions of candidates needs to be confirmed. Extant research into effects of late night comedy suggests that it may, especially with those of lower political knowledge.⁸⁸ Honing in on debate-topical jokes may reveal stronger effects: late night joking is overwhelmingly image based,⁸⁹ and the relational impacts of presidential debates are particularly impacting.⁹⁰

Besides potential effects research looking into this unique postdebate analysis, future research should also look into the tone and nature of

these topical jokes. We have content analyses to which we can compare debate-topical jokes with general political humor.⁹¹ Additionally, scholars should take a closer look at the noncandidate-specific debate jokes. When Jay Leno jokes, “You know who won tonight’s debate? Anybody that watched baseball,”⁹² does this derogate both candidates, increase voter cynicism, decrease interest in the campaign, or some of each? What about jokes that spoke of neither candidate, but instead, the debates themselves, e.g., format, categories, rules? Political scientists and political communication scholars continue to warn of growing cynicism,⁹³ and research has found a link to late night comedy and cynicism.⁹⁴ Downplaying presidential debates in general may contribute to this growing skepticism toward campaigns and elections. Comics are doing more than “turn[ing] the candidates into walking punchlines,”⁹⁵ they are turning debate activities themselves into punchlines as well.

The sample of debate jokes mentioned in this chapter did not include other late night comedic takes on the debates. Comedy Central’s Jon Stewart, host of *The Daily Show*, had 2.5 million viewers tune in to his show after the first debate, a record.⁹⁶ Although, some critics lamented that *SNL*’s debate parodies of 2004 were not as sharp as they were in 2000,⁹⁷ *Saturday Night Live*’s 2004 postdebate show was the most watched season premiere in three years.⁹⁸

Rong Xiaoqing of *South China Morning Post*, mused: “[I]t does make one wonder, in some future election, whether the comedians will not only decide the election, but end up winning it.”⁹⁹ Both claims, that comedians are deciding elections and may eventually win them, remain, appropriately enough in the context of this chapter, debatable. Continuing research into this unique form of late night political punditry will clarify what role, if any, comics play in influencing perceptions of presidential debates.

Notes

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