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# the social side of politics

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W. W. Norton & Company  
NEW YORK | LONDON

## laughter and the political landscape

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Making fun of politicians is a fundamental part of American culture—particularly as we race toward each major election. As this group of scholars points out, political humor is unique in its ability to humanize and criticize, while also creating serious political and social commentary through satire, stand-up, and other comedic forms. Social science helps untangle the meanings and effects of American political humor.

*What are the dominant forms and persistent themes of political humor?*

**Kristen Landreville:** Popular venues for political humor today include late-night comedy shows and satirical websites. While oftentimes the humor focuses on more trivial matters, such as a politician's appearance or per-

sonality, political humor also has a serious side that sometimes provides serious political, social, or economic commentary. It is this type of political humor that politicians, institutions, and authority figures over the centuries have feared the most. For example, satire . . . can make politicians nervous because of [its] attacks on their character, policy, or even larger issues like the electoral system. . . . The cogs start spinning in people's minds, and, soon enough, people begin to deeply question a particular politician, authority figure, or group.

History shows us that politicians have been persistently cautious, and sometimes hostile, to political humor and satire. Plato saw satire as a type of magic that needed legal penalties. In early Rome, emperors banned satire and employed a punishment of death to satirists. British authority also banned it during the Middle Ages. You get the point: It's tough to be an authority figure and love political satire.

**Don Waisanen:** I think the label "humor" can often gloss over an incredibly rich diversity of comedic forms. For instance, some political humor is based upon exaggerating characters, imitating an individual's physical tics, quirky mannerisms, or unreflective slogans—such as Stephen Colbert's parody of combative media figures.

On the other hand, comedians like Jon Stewart are more satirical . . . primarily attacking substance rather than style. . . . [A]s soon as a statement might be made about dominant types of humor, we find examples of evasive and evolving comedy that defy traditional categories. Some comics now even create humor through a type of paradoxical "anti-comedy." Fred Armisen's bad political comedian character on *Saturday Night Live* is one such example.

**Bruce Williams:** [W]e live in a world now where professional journalists speaking through newspapers and network news broadcasts have lost a lot of their authority to shape the kind of language and narrative of politics in the United States. Now . . . political information is coming at us through a bewildering number of conduits [and] individuals are much more able to shape the kind of media diet they consume. . . . That's a very different situation than by the end of the 1980s, when eight out of every ten television sets that were turned on were watching one of the three nightly news broadcasts, not because people were more committed or were better citizens then, but because it was the only thing on!

Jon Stewart has to attract and keep his audience every single night. . . . [O]ne of the concepts that I am most skeptical about is the idea that there somehow is a

sharp distinction between news and entertainment or between serious stuff and stuff that's less serious or fluffy. . . . [H]umor . . . is just one of the ways in which, in a fragmented market, providers of information or people who want to comment on the political world can attract and maintain an audience. . . . [T]he context is different even if the kinds of humor that get deployed are not that different.

*What are the limits to what's "appropriate" to joke about in politics?*

**Robert (Lance) Holbert:** There are some classic rules that apply to joke telling in general that are also applicable to politics. For example, there are certain political events that require some time or emotional distance before humorous perspectives can be offered about them. This issue was made salient after the 9/11 tragedies. This issue is a classic one concerning the tragedy-comedy dichotomy—when can we make the switch from tragedy to comedy?

As for satire, this question speaks to the issue of effectiveness. When will a piece of satire be well received and deemed to have possible influence on a public? One perspective offered on this matter argues that there needs

to be an implicit agreement between the satirist and the satirtee (i.e., the audience member consuming the satire) that the subject of the satirical material (i.e., the satirized) is worthy of satirization. Two questions are usually raised when judging worthiness: (1) Has the person being satirized made choices that have led them to being a public figure? and (2) Is the characteristic of the person being satirized a genuine example of human folly/weakness? If you can answer in the affirmative on both counts, then the object is worthy of possible satirization. So, there can be a satirical piece about President Obama and how he often thinks very highly of his intellectual abilities (i.e., hubris as human weakness). However, a piece of satire about the President's daughters, who have not chosen to be public figures, and their academic performance would be deemed off limits for a majority of the American public.

**Landreville:** The limits are perpetually being tested and redrawn. Comedians and satirists push the limits of commentary on religion, race, capitalism, gender identity, sexual affiliation, the political system, stereotypes, and a myriad of other topics that parents typically teach their children not to discuss around polite company. However, the extent to which limits are pushed depends largely on

the media outlet. While television broadcasters and cable networks have to obey Federal Communication Commission laws on obscenity and indecency, print outlets and Web sites such as *The Onion* do not have such heavy restrictions. No matter in what media outlet the humor is showcased, I believe that calls for violence, bigotry, and xenophobia are less tolerated as humorous. For example, *The New Yorker* magazine learned that not all satire is perceived the same way. Recall its July 2008 cover of Barack Obama dressed as a Muslim and Michelle Obama dressed as a terrorist, with a photo of Osama bin Laden in the background and a burning American flag in the fireplace. [M]any people thought the satire went too far and reinforced stereotypes... This example tells us that there are limits to certain groups' tolerance of satire.

**Waisanen:** Mark Katz, President Clinton's humor writer (yes, this was an official position!), said that in politics, you "can do jokes about the smoke and not the fire. We can do jokes about the hoopla of impeachment, but not what brought us to the brink of impeachment." I also once read *The Daily Show* correspondent Mo Rocca's comments that during the Iraq War, "Since we couldn't make fun of the events themselves, we could make fun of some of the coverage of the events." While perhaps not

holding true in every situation, these comments generally tell us that there are serious limitations to humor itself—primarily that it's only one . . . mode of communicating among many other choices that might be made. Of course, any effort to curtail what is or is not appropriate in comic discourses should also be seen as suspect, as comedians are some of our best critics and free speech advocates, providing alternative interpretations and attitudes about public events when sorely needed.

**Heather LaMare:** One of the comedian's roles is to test limits. And right now we have that going on with Colbert's SuperPAC, this would be a perfect example of limit testing. Never before can I think of that, in a time when a piece of satire was taken outside the comedic . . . form. And he has now created satirical PSAs, he's raising real money, real people are actually contributing their real dollars to this satirical SuperPAC. . . . [Colbert is] forcing the media to pay attention because he's moving outside his late-night show.

**Williams:** For all its faults, the rules of professional journalism are very explicit. . . . It is a profession, people are trained how to do it. . . . When we get to comedy as an increasingly influential way in which citizens under-

stand the political world, then . . . I get a little queasy, because I think the rules are *very* unclear about what someone like Jon Stewart is doing and what he's not doing . . . I don't think we have a good way of thinking about "What is their responsibility? What is it okay to talk about and how is it okay to talk about it?"

*Has humor always played a key role in politics?*

**Holbert:** There is a long history of political leaders calling for satirists to be jailed, excommunicated, or censored. . . . I would argue that the jury is still out on the degree and nature of satire's influence. There is much more work to be done at a wide range of levels of analysis before we can offer any valid or reliable conclusions in relation to this empirical question.

**Dannagal Young:** Humor has always played an important role in political life. In fact, satirists like Aristophanes writing in ancient Greece used rich political satire and irony to expose hypocrisy and flaws among elites and within policies and institutions. What we see now is a media environment in which the former division between entertainment and information has become obsolete, hence we tend to think of political humor as a "new"

thing . . . In reality, humor has always had a very natural place in politics, particularly in democratic regimes where elected officials are accountable for their actions and citizens look at them with a critical eye.

**Waisanen:** Humor has probably played a role in just about every election and political circumstance. While we can look back to ancient figures such as Cicero for advice on how wit can be used in the political realm, I would argue humor's centrality to the political process has less to do with politics and more to do with how humor is found in every human society. What might be found humorous in one society or culture often differs from another, but I think one would be hard-pressed to find a situation where humor was not involved to some extent. Even when humor is not a part of "official" public discourse, humor is a regular part of group communication and is thus as much a part of "unofficial" interpersonal communication and backroom, informal political conversations as anything else.

**Williams:** I think that humor has always played a part in American elections and politics, but we notice it more at some points than others. . . . [I]f you go back to the earliest days of the American republic . . . a lot of the campaign

arguments were made in political cartoons. I show my class cartoons that were aimed at Thomas Jefferson, that pointed to his supposed loyalty to France, um, you know, there were no mentions of "freedom fries" at that point, but, the idea that he was more loyal to France was brought out in cartoons. There were allusions to his relationship with Sally Hemings in the newspapers of the time; there was the kind of, you know, satirical character assassination that we take for granted today. Also, if you think about the late nineteenth century and the political cartoons of Thomas Nast . . . they were effective in reaching the audience he wanted.

*What are the effects of humorous media?*

**Holbert:** Political satire programming attracts a highly knowledgeable audience (you need to know a thing or two about politics if you are going to get the jokes), so does political satire generate humor or are those individuals who are already knowledgeable about politics selectively exposing themselves to this material? It is most likely a bit of both.

As for attitudes and behaviors, there is no question . . . political entertainment media can impact an audience member's attitudes. . . . However, questions still remain

concerning how long lasting these effects are, how well they stand up to counterpersuasion, and whether insights generated from satire can impact how other pieces of political information (e.g., from news) are processed cognitively. On the behavioral front, there has been work done on how political entertainment media exposure can generate political discussion. Someone sees something funny about a political topic and then discusses it with others, or a piece of political humor is not fully understood by an audience member and they talk to friends or family members about it in order to gain some clarification about the message's meaning.

**Landreville:** [C]onflicting findings . . . suggest that political humor and satire are much more nuanced than researchers once believed. Humor and satire can be complicated messages that demand quite a bit of cognitive energy for people to decode, or humor and satire can be fairly simple messages that people disregard and do not pay much attention to. Both ways of processing these messages (critically and uncritically) can lead to different effects. . . . Thus, it is very difficult to summarize the effects of such a diverse and complicated genre. However, there have been links [found between] late-night comedy viewing to increased presidential debate viewing for

young people . . . [and] to increased traditional media use for political information. These studies are evidence for a democratizing effect of late-night comedy. Other studies have found increased cynicism for politicians after exposure to late-night comedy and a lack of information acquisition and memory . . . It's complicated.

**Young:** Literature to date has demonstrated nuanced effects of political humor . . . For instance, exposure to political humor programming, particularly among those people who are not politically engaged, can spark an interest and attention to politics, leading to information seeking . . . In addition, political humor has been found to increase the "salience" of issues and concepts that rest at the heart of political jokes. This means that people who frequently watch late-night comedy jokes about a political candidate for being boring, unintelligent, or dishonest will be more likely to have that trait come to mind when they think of that particular candidate in the future. We know that people who report watching shows like *The Daily Show* are more politically interested in general, more politically knowledgeable, more participatory in political life, and more likely to discuss politics with friends and family than people who do not watch such programming. While these are merely correlational findings, they do

suggest that there is a unique audience of young, politically savvy people who are tuning into these shows.

In terms of the subtle cognitive implications of political humor, one of the reasons that political humor has received so much attention from scholars [is that] humor seems to hold a certain persuasive capacity that other forms of discourse do not. Recent work has . . . [found] that humor is actually less likely to foster the kind of "counterargumentation" or "argument scrutiny" that serious discourse usually receives . . . People just do not scrutinize arguments received through humor to the extent that they do when [it's] presented seriously.

**LaMarre:** It's long been thought that the effect was limited because people used it in a cathartic way: They laughed at the comedian and then they went home and went about their business. And it's only in, probably since the 1980s, that we started doing effects research, looking at what happens after they leave the play or they leave the stand-up comedy club or they turn the TV off and go about their daily lives.

In that area, we are starting to understand a couple of basic things. One is message receptivity. People have their guard down . . . so they're more open and receptive to messages [than] maybe otherwise . . . [humor] sort of



disarms them . . . There's a gateway hypothesis . . . that entertainment brings in the "politically uninterested"—especially young people, and that leads to more information seeking, participatory behavior, voting.

**Williams:** First, I think that, I think that *The Daily Show* and

*The Colbert Report*, for their audience, do the same thing that the nightly network news broadcasts used to do. . . . *The Daily Show* . . . provides, in thirty minutes . . . a way of thinking about what's happened [and] the media that delivered that information to you. And how are you going to do that in a way where people can just change the channel any time they want?

Well, I think humor is a real . . . a very effective way of doing that. . . . [W]e trust Jon Stewart, just like we trusted Walter Cronkite, and I think that part of that trust for Jon Stewart is the idea that you know who he is. You know that he is gonna make fun of things, but he's not gonna make stuff up. That he's going to be scrupulous about the kind of facts that he introduces. . . . I think we're gonna see what happens. We're gonna see where the youth vote goes. We're gonna see whether new media mobilizes people [and how it's] gonna affect mobilization and participation [over] the next couple of elections.

*Does humor help people engage in politics or create apathy toward the process?*

**Holbert:** Researchers who are critical of various types of political entertainment argue that it makes a skeptical citizenry (i.e., a democratic good) into a cynical citizenry (i.e., a democratic evil). There is some empirical evidence to support this claim, but it is also the case that those who are more cynical about politics naturally gravitate to this material as well (once again, an issue of selective exposure). With this being stated, there are a host of potentially positive effects that have been linked to various types of political entertainment media outlets. Empirical studies have shown that certain political entertainment messages can generate critical thinking on political issues, create greater breadth and depth of attitudinal structures, and (at least indirectly) increase political behaviors like giving money to political causes, talking about politics, or watching political debates.

**LaMarre:** We've answered the question of whether it engages audiences, we know that. But engages them how and to what end? We're not sure. In some cases, we find they learn more about the issues. In other cases, we find they

don't understand the sarcasm or satire, and so they come away misinformed. In a lot of cases, we find evidence that, because comedians . . . cherry-pick segments and then use them to an exaggerated point to make it funny, sometimes audiences don't understand that it *was* exaggerated.

*Is political humor just for liberals?*

**Landreville:** Political humor and especially satire is about deconstructing politics, politicians, policy, institutions, and authority. This deconstruction often involves questioning, mocking, and criticizing the status quo, the traditions, and the standards. From mocking a politician's expensive haircut to mocking the hypocritical politician who employs illegal residents yet rails against immigration, humorists are making statements about society. Perhaps liberals are more attracted to satire and humor that exposes the hypocrisy of traditions and traditional society because part of being liberal is being progressive and deconstructive of restrictive societal norms. However, conservatives are certainly attracted to satire and humor that exposes the hypocrisy of liberalism and progressive society. That is probably why some conservatives watch *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* and

view it as interesting and insightful comedy on liberals—these shows do not hold back on criticizing anyone. In the end, I think all shades of political red, blue, and purple benefit from political humor.

**Waisanen:** This issue is far more complicated than it might appear. Certainly, comedians like Jon Stewart have tended to embrace a leftist political perspective, while in recent years, others like Dennis Miller have leveraged their comic credentials toward conservative political causes. . . . But I think a more important consideration is to move beyond thinking about this issue in terms of people or political worldviews, asking instead what kind of radical or conservative perspective might be invited by any particular *act* of political humor. That is, how much does any comic act, like a particular joke, invite its audiences to think of their worlds in ways that maintain or interrogate the status quo? In a single HBO stand-up special by someone like Chris Rock, for example, I think we can note ways that some jokes both embrace and perpetuate racial and ethnic stereotypes as much as other jokes invite us to think critically about them. As such, the politics of comedy is probably best described and evaluated as close to each text and context as possible.

*Finally, what happens when politicians try to be funny?*

**Holbert:** It depends on the type of humor. There are certain politicians who have comedic timing. President Obama is one . . . former governor Mike Huckabee of Arkansas is another recent politico who comes to mind . . . When they have [comedic skill], they can use it to connect to an audience. However, if the presentation of humorous material appears forced, then, just as at dinner parties, people seek other company really quick.

A special case of humor often used by politicians is self-deprecation. Senator John McCain is a classic example of someone who uses self-deprecation well [as was] Vice President Albert Gore, Jr. in the latter years of the Clinton presidency . . . Politicians as elites are always looking for ways to appear more common, and self-deprecation is one way to go about achieving this goal. However, . . . self-deprecation is effective only when the focus of the deprecation is perceived to be a true personal weakness/character flaw. For example, former president Bill Clinton may make fun of his famous temper, [but] if the politician pokes fun at a personal characteristic that many perceive to be an actual positive trait, then the act of self-deprecation could be seen by many as a tawdry attempt to receive praise. Such acts of

praise seeking are never well received by the general public.

Self-deprecation can also be used for image repair. A recent example would be Governor Rick Perry, who ran a series of television advertisements leading up to the Iowa caucuses where he poked fun at himself for not being the best debater . . . the most effective strategic communication decision his campaign could make was to acknowledge the personal weakness and make light of it in some way in these advertisements.

**Landreville:** It is risky business. When politicians attempt to correct a perceived failure, such as Rick Perry's "oops" moment in a Republican presidential debate, and use humor to do so . . . they could be making themselves more down-to-earth and carefree, but they could also be bringing more attention to a negative event . . . Also, if the attempt at humor is awkward and uncomfortable, then the politician will be portrayed as stiff, unlikable, and elitist. Clearly, playing with humor is like playing with fire for politicians.

**Waisanen:** To an extent, humor always both unites and divides audiences. When politicians try to be funny, they can unite one audience while dividing another. Ronald

Reagan was known for his humor, but it's easy to see how a quip like "The nine most terrifying words in the English language are: 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help'" could reinforce one audience's belief that the government was a problem, as much as it confirmed for another that the president's beliefs were a problem. Some humor can unite more than divide, but in so doing, may run the risk of losing its critical edge. Think Jay Leno versus Jon Stewart. Leno plays his humor relatively safe and maintains a mainstream, large audience, while Stewart plays to a smaller cable audience with humor that is more divisive and critical. This is the tough tightrope that politicians themselves walk when attempting to use humor.

**Williams:** [W]ho was it who has on their tombstone something like "Dying is easy, comedy is hard"? Comedy is really hard. And some people can do it, and some people can't . . . you have to have a certain amount of being relaxed enough and comfortable in—at least seeming to be comfortable in—your own skin to make jokes. . . . [O]ne of the ways that comedy can often help politicians [is in] humaniz[ing] them. Nixon, as uncomfortable as he looked saying "Sock it to me!" there was something about his willingness to do that.

[O]ften, when it comes to celebrity—and politicians are celebrities—we have this desire to get to know who they *really* are, as if we can kind of puncture somehow the public image that they show us. And often, humor is used or seems to be a way to get past that public mask.

**LaMarre:** I think it depends on when you use it and do it. President Obama sent Betty White a Happy Birthday message [recently], and he cracked a joke about wanting to see her birth certificate. And I, myself, found that hysterical! . . . Even the leader of the free world can tell a joke. I think the big question is going to be . . . whether people under thirty are . . . developing a sense of humor about politics that's good for democracy or a disgust about politics that's bad for democracy. That remains to be seen!

#### PARTICIPANT PROFILES

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