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IT'S NO JOKE:

**The Use of Humor by Presidential Candidates from Kennedy to Trump
and the Path to Power Through One-Liners, Talk Shows, and Tweets**

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Introduction

On October 21, 2016, one day after their final debate and at the tail-end of a nasty campaign, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton walked into New York’s Waldorf Astoria for a night of “light humor” and “civility.”^{1,2} The occasion was the Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner, an annual white-tie fundraiser supporting Catholic charities that has featured humorous speeches from presidential candidates since 1960.³ Trump and Clinton entered the ballroom from separate sides, finding their seats without shaking hands.⁴ Waiting to hear their remarks were the gala’s attendees — 1,500 of New York’s elite — as well as at least 10.3 million viewers tuned in at home via CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC.^{5,6}

Trump was up first. He began with a rare self-deprecating joke: when handed the microphone, he quipped, “And it’s working,” referencing his claim of a faulty microphone after one caught him sniffing constantly during the debates.^{7,8} He landed a few good lines:

[Complaining about media bias] “Michelle Obama gives a speech, and everyone loves it. It’s fantastic. They think she’s absolutely great. My wife, Melania, gives the *exact same speech*, and people get on her case! And I don’t get it. I don’t know why.”

“We can actually be civil toward each other. In fact, before taking the dais, Hillary accidentally bumped into me, and she very civilly said, ‘Pardon me.’ And I very politely replied, ‘Let me talk to you about that after I get into office.’”⁹

¹ “The 72nd Annual Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner.” *The Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation*. <<http://www.alsmithfoundation.org/the-dinner/>>.

² Cardinal Timothy Dolan. “Al Smith Dinner.” *Cardinaldolan.org*. August 14, 2012. <<http://cardinaldolan.org/index.php/al-smith-dinner/>>.

³ Seth Amramovitch. “Alfred E. Smith Dinner Gag Writer on Clinton-Trump Roast: ‘The Rules Don’t Apply.’” *The Hollywood Reporter*. October 20, 2016. <<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/alfred-e-smith-dinner-gag-940213>>.

⁴ Sam Sanders. “At Al Smith Dinner, Donald Trump Turns Friendly Roast Into 3-Alarm Fire.” *NPR*. <<http://www.npr.org/2016/10/21/498804666/clinton-trump-trade-barbs-at-al-smith-dinner>>.

⁵ Mark Lungariello. “At dinner together, Trump gets boos; Clinton less so.” *USA Today*. October 20, 2016. <<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2016/10/20/trump-clinton-al-smith-dinner/92499010/>>.

⁶ A.J. Katz. “10.3 Million Watch Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump at Al Smith Dinner.” *Adweek*. October 21, 2016. <<http://www.adweek.com/tvnewser/10-3-million-watch-hillary-clinton-and-donald-trump-at-al-smith-dinner/308959>>.

⁷ “Read the Transcript of Donald Trump’s Speech at the Al Smith Dinner.” *Time*. October 21, 2016. <<http://time.com/4539981/read-the-transcript-donald-trump-speech-al-smith-dinner/>>.

⁸ Jessica Roy. “Donald Trump has the sniffles again?” *Los Angeles Times*. October 9, 2016. <<http://www.latimes.com/nation/politics/trailguide/la-na-second-presidential-debate-live-donald-trump-has-the-sniffles-1476067868-htmlstory.html>>.

⁹ “Read the Transcript of Donald Trump’s Speech at the Al Smith Dinner.”

But as the speech went on, Trump lost the crowd. He got boos when he asked, “Hillary is so corrupt, she got kicked off the Watergate Commission. How corrupt do you have to be to get kicked off the Watergate Commission?”¹⁰ And again, when he heavy-handedly joked, “Hillary believes it’s vital to deceive the people by having one public policy and a totally different policy in private...Here she is tonight, in public, pretending not to hate Catholics.”¹¹ And again, when he quipped that Clinton’s “belief that it takes a village” made sense because she’d “taken a number of villages” in Haiti.¹² Trump ended what he considered the “humor” portion of his speech with, “Hillary has forgotten more things than most of us will never ever, ever, ever know” to a jeering crowd.¹³ In other words, Trump did Trump: neither light nor civil.

Next up was Clinton. She also began with a self-deprecating joke: “I took a break from my rigorous nap schedule to be here. And as all of you heard, it’s a treat for all of you, because usually I charge a lot for speeches like this.”¹⁴ Almost all of her jokes got at least a few laughs:

“People look at the Statue of Liberty, and they see a proud history of a nation of immigrants — a beacon of hope for people around the world. Donald looks at the Statue of Liberty and sees a 4. Maybe a 5 if she loses the torch and tablet and changes her hair.”

“You look so good in your tuxes — or as I call them, formal pantsuits.”

“They say Donald doesn’t have any policies...I’d actually like to defend him on this. Donald has issues, serious issues. Really, really serious issues.”¹⁵

Clinton stuck to safer jokes, noting she’d be the healthiest woman elected president in American history and calling the audience a “basket of adorables.”¹⁶ Unlike Trump, she followed convention to a T.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “Read the Transcript of Hillary Clinton's Speech at the Al Smith Dinner.” *Time*. October 21, 2016.

<<http://time.com/4539979/read-transcript-hillary-clinton-speech-al-smith-dinner/>>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Immediately after the dueling speeches ended, cable news pundits and party leaders began weighing in.¹⁷ Comedians were brought in for a fresh perspective.¹⁸ The following day, *The Daily Beast* ran a story titled, “Donald Trump, Son of a Catholic Hater, Disgraces Al Smith Dinner.”¹⁹ *Breitbart*’s headline read, “Wealthy New York Elite Boo Donald Trump.”²⁰ CBS called the humor “awkward”; *Slate* called Clinton’s address “ridiculously funny and beautifully poignant.”^{21,22} *Cosmo* made a list of the “nine best zingers.”²³ Clearly, the pundit class couldn’t figure out whether the candidates’ jokes—or their attempted jokes—fell flat, landed real punches, or simply resulted in a bit of transitory entertainment for those who tuned in to watch.

The 2016 election, which would turn into one of the biggest campaign upsets in American history, involved widespread media inquiry into whether the two candidates were funny. Articles about Clinton discussed her difficulty “show[ing] herself as warm and personable with a sense of humor,” bemoaned her “complete lack of funny bone,” and gathered, “For Hillary Clinton, funny is hard.”^{24,25,26} When Clinton participated in some physical comedy by “dabbing” on *Ellen*, one headline began, “Oh no.”²⁷ And an all-in-all positive story about her appearance on *Saturday Night Live* concluded, “Clinton is never going to be a natural performer.”²⁸ Meanwhile, reporters questioned whether statements made by Trump at rallies

¹⁷ Katz.

¹⁸ Henry Goldman and Jennifer Jacobs. “Trump’s Jokes Strike a Sour Tone at New York’s Al Smith Dinner.” *Bloomberg*. October 20, 2016. <<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-10-20/trump-s-jokes-strike-a-sour-tone-at-new-york-s-al-smith-dinner>>.

¹⁹ Michael Daly. “Donald Trump, Son of a Catholic Hater, Disgraces Al Smith Dinner.” *The Daily Beast*. October 21, 2016. <<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/10/21/donald-trump-son-of-a-catholic-hater-disgraces-al-smith-dinner.html>>.

²⁰ Charlie Spiering. “Wealthy New York Elite Boo Donald Trump at Al Smith Dinner.” *Breitbart*. October 21, 2016. <<http://www.breitbart.com/2016-presidential-race/2016/10/21/wealthy-new-york-elite-boo-donald-trump-al-smith-dinner/>>.

²¹ Emily Schultheis. “Clinton, Trump try awkward humor at Al Smith Dinner.” *CBS News*. October 20, 2016. <<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/clinton-trump-try-awkward-humor-at-al-smith-dinner/>>.

²² Mark Joseph Stern. “Hillary Clinton’s Al Smith Dinner Address Was Ridiculously Funny and Beautifully Poignant.” *Slate*. October 21, 2016. <<http://www.slate.com/articles/culture/2016/10/21/hillary-clinton-s-al-smith-dinner-address-was-ridiculously-funny-and-beautifully-poignant.html>>.

²³ Gina Mei. “Hillary Clinton’s 9 Best Zingers From the Al Smith Dinner.” *Cosmopolitan*. October 21, 2016. <<http://www.cosmopolitan.com/entertainment/2016/10/21/hillary-clinton-9-best-zingers-from-the-al-smith-dinner/>>.

²⁴ Associated Press. “Meet Val the bartender: Hillary Clinton does an ‘SNL’ skit.” *Chicago Tribune*. October 4, 2015. <<http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/ct-hillary-clinton-snl-skit-20151004-story.html>>.

²⁵ Ashe Schow. “Clinton’s Complete Lack of a Funny Bone Could Cost Her Monday’s Debate.” *Observer*. September 23, 2016. <<http://observer.com/2016/09/clintons-complete-lack-of-a-funny-bone-could-cost-her-mondays-debate/>>.

²⁶ Joanna Weiss. “For Hillary Clinton, funny is hard.” *The Boston Globe*. October 8, 2015. <<http://www.boston.com/news/local/2015/10/08/hillary-clinton-funny-is-hard/>>.

²⁷ Dave Holmes. “Oh No: Hillary Clinton Tried to Do a Viral Dance Again.” *Esquire*. January 11, 2016. <<http://www.esquire.com/entertainment/2016/01/11/oh-no-hillary-clinton-tried-to-do-a-viral-dance-again/>>.

²⁸ Will Leitch. “Hillary Clinton on SNL Tries to Show She’s In On the Joke.” *Bloomberg*. October 4, 2015. <<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-10-04/hillary-clinton-on-snl-tries-to-show-she-s-in-on-the-joke>>.

were meant as jokes, from his “Second Amendment” statement that seemed to suggest voters should shoot Clinton, to his message to Russia that seemed to urge Putin to hack Clinton’s emails.^{29,30} *Slate* even compiled a how-to guide: “How to tell when Donald Trump is joking.”³¹ When Trump’s lines were perceived as jokes, they were negatively reviewed in mainstream sources — one article said Trump “bombed pretty hard” at *SNL*, another compiled “5 Creepy Times Donald Trump Tried To Be Funny & It Came Out Disturbing Instead,” and *Vulture* called him “a black hole of comedic matter through which no humor could escape.”^{32,33,34}

But other than a few ruminations by late-night comedians, few systematic inquiries were made during the campaign as to how and why Clinton and Trump used humor – and what effect it had on their supporters. In the case of Trump, this was likely because he bewildered commentators and comedians alike. Mark Katz, a joke writer for presidential candidates from Michael Dukakis to Al Gore, reflected the prevailing attitude by concluding that with Trump, “The political playbook is thrown out the window. All the rules that usually apply don’t apply.”³⁵ In this thesis, I will examine that claim, determining that although Trump’s humor differs from the humor styles of past presidential candidates in the type and function of his jokes, Trump’s inclination to gain support through entertainment is a natural extension of American presidential politics since 1960. And I’ll argue that while Clinton’s style more closely followed precedent, Trump’s humor proved better adapted to the current age — making it more effective.

²⁹ Nick Corasaniti and Maggie Haberman. “Donald Trump Suggests ‘Second Amendment People’ Could Act Against Hillary Clinton.” *New York Times*. August 9, 2016. <goo.gl/6OJcsV>.

³⁰ Michael Crowley and Tyler Pager. “Trump urges Russia to hack Clinton’s email.” *Politico*. July 27, 2016. <<http://www.politico.com/story/2016/07/trump-putin-no-relationship-226282>>.

³¹ Andrew Kahn. “How to tell when Donald Trump is joking.” *Slate*. July 28, 2016. <goo.gl/0uz39x>.

³² Josh Hill. “SNL Review: Was Donald Trump funny?” *Fansided*. November 8, 2015. <<http://fansided.com/2015/11/08/snl-review-donald-trump-funny/>>.

³³ Josephine B. Yurcaba. “5 Creepy Times Donald Trump Tried To Be Funny & It Came Out Disturbing Instead.” *Bustle*. November 5, 2015. <<https://www.bustle.com/articles/121577-5-creepy-times-donald-trump-tried-to-be-funny-it-came-out-disturbing-instead>>.

³⁴ Joe Berkowitz. “Saturday Night Live Recap: Donald Trump Is a Black Hole of Comedic Antimatter.” *Vulture*. November 8, 2015. <<http://www.vulture.com/2015/11/saturday-night-live-recap-season-41-episode-4.html>>.

³⁵ Abramovitch.

Theories of Laughter

Arguably, the study of humor as a means of political persuasion can be traced all the way back to 55 BCE, when the Roman philosopher Cicero penned *De Oratore*, a guide of sorts to becoming the “Ideal Orator.”³⁶ In it, Cicero wrote that humor can be “tremendously useful” when “sprinkle[d], like a little salt, throughout all of our speech.”³⁷ He posed five central questions concerning laughter: “First, what is its nature? Second, what is its source? Third, should an orator want to stir up laughter? Fourth, to what extent? Fifth, into what categories can the humorous be divided?”³⁸ Most humor research today centers around these same questions. In this section, I will discuss answers put forward by past and present scholars.

I. “What is its nature?”

In 95 CE, Roman rhetorician Quintilian posited that the effect of a jest “depends not on the reason, but on an emotion which is difficult, if not impossible, to describe.”³⁹ Indeed, psychological studies on laughter since have found that jokes have a more emotional rather than logical effect on listeners, activating the mesolimbic reward system in the brain and inducing feelings of pleasure.⁴⁰ This has an important implication for humor as a means of political persuasion: since humor influences emotional variables like mood over cognitive ones like comprehension, it is an especially useful tool for politicians hoping to distract their audiences and render them less likely to disagree with the message or form counter-points.⁴¹

Research further shows that laughter has an inherently social nature. Laughter allows us to play with each other, explaining why people are more likely to laugh when in the company of

³⁶ John Morreall. “Humor and the Conduct of Politics.” In S. Lockyer et al. (Eds.), *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humor*. (Basingstroke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) P. 63.

³⁷ Cicero. “On the Ideal Orator.” Translated by James M. May & Jakob Wisse. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Quintilian. *Institutio Oratoria, Book 6*. Translated by Harold Edgeworth Butler. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1921)

⁴⁰ Rod A. Martin. *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*. (Oxford: Elsevier, 2007) P. 9

⁴¹ Ibid 137.

others than when alone.⁴² Even just hearing a laugh can induce positive emotional arousal — a response that evolutionary biologists cite as evidence that laughter was selectively advantageous in helping bind individuals into better-coordinated groups.⁴³ The impact of this social function of humor is easy to spot in presidential elections: evidence has been found that the addition of large live audiences at televised debates since 1980 has affected viewers’ perceptions at home.⁴⁴ In a 2007 study, researchers found that when laughter and applause were removed from a clip of Ronald Reagan’s famous line in his 1984 debate with Walter Mondale (“I want you to know that I will not make age an issue in this campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent’s youth and inexperience”), viewers rated Reagan’s favorability significantly less highly.⁴⁵ This shows an element of “groupthink” in perceptions of politicians’ humor: voters may find a candidate funny simply because they see others laughing at the candidate’s jokes.

II. “What is its source?”

There have been three theories proposed to explain what makes people laugh: incongruity theory, relief theory, and superiority (or “disparagement”) theory. *Incongruity Theory* postulates that humor stems from “a violation of an expectation” or “an association of two elements that...do not belong together.”⁴⁶ Originating with Kant’s observation that laughter “aris[es] from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing,” incongruity theory views laughter as coming from the resolution (or making sense) of a perceived incongruity.^{47,48} Two

⁴² Ibid 5.

⁴³ Ibid 10.

⁴⁴ Annenberg Debate Reform Working Group. “Democratizing the Debates.” *Annenberg Public Policy Center*. June 17, 2015. <goo.gl/HmkFNk>. P. 43.

⁴⁵ Steven Fein, George Goethals & Matthew Kugler. “Social Influence on Political Judgments: The Case of Presidential Debates.” *Political Psychology*, Vol. 28, No. 2. 2007.

⁴⁶ Annegret Braun and Siegfried Preiser. “The impact of disparaging humor content on the funniness of political jokes.” *International Journal of Humor Research*, Vol. 26, No. 2. May 2013. P. 250.

⁴⁷ Dannagal G. Young. “Theories and Effects of Political Humor: Discounting Cues, Gateways and the Impact of Incongruities.” *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*. September 2014.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

examples from presidential politics that highlight this source of laughter are Reagan's 1984 debate zinger, and another Ronald Reagan joke: at a campaign event in 1976, Reagan made fun of governmental bureaucracy by joking, "Government hires a rat-catcher and the first thing you know, he's become a rodent control officer."⁴⁹ Playing on incongruities, Reagan was able to portray the opposition as irrational without seeming overly negative.⁵⁰

Relief Theory posits that laughter comes from the release of tension – viewing humor as a "safety valve that expels excess energy."⁵¹ Relief theory originates with Freudian psychology, with the idea being that humor can let out energy that may otherwise become "sexual or aggressive energy."⁵² An example of this from presidential politics is John F. Kennedy's now-famous joke at the 1958 Gridiron Dinner in Washington: "I just received the following wire from my generous daddy: 'Dear Jack, Don't buy a single vote more than is necessary. I'll be damned if I'm going to pay for a landslide.'"⁵³ By building on well-known criticisms of himself in the press as being spoiled, and by building tension within the joke by referencing his "generous daddy," Kennedy uses self-deprecation to tackle criticisms head-on. Tension is dispelled through audience laughter, and voters are inoculated to resist similar attacks on Kennedy in the future.⁵⁴

Superiority (or Disparagement) Theory, first conceptualized by Thomas Hobbes, views laughter as "a triumphant expression of a suddenly perceived superiority" over others.⁵⁵ Disparaging humor attacking others not only enforces the laughing group's negative views of the disliked group, but enforces their positive views of and identification with their own group.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ Ronald Reagan. "To Restore America: Ronald Reagan's Campaign Address." *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum*. March 31, 1976. <<https://reaganlibrary.gov/major-speeches-index/10-archives/reference/7-3-31-76>>.

⁵⁰ John Meyer. "Ronald Reagan and Humor: A politician's velvet weapon." *Communication Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 1. 1990. P. 83.

⁵¹ Young.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ John F. Kennedy. "Gridiron Dinner Speech." 1958. <goo.gl/FVFc8u>.

⁵⁴ Jason Peifer and R. Lance Holbert. "Developing a Systematic Assessment of Humor in the Context of the 2012 U.S. General Election Debates." *Argumentation and Advocacy*, Vol. 49. Spring 2013. P. 286-300.

⁵⁵ Braun and Preiser.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Some have argued that the theory even applies to self-deprecating humor, in that by deriding oneself, the speaker shows enough social capital to afford to let others laugh at their expense.⁵⁷ A more traditional form of superiority-generated humor, though, is parody.⁵⁸ One example is the audience's response to Donald Trump throwing water over a stage at a Texas rally to mock Marco Rubio's sweating.⁵⁹ In laughing, the audience members align themselves with Trump and claim superiority over Rubio — and theoretically, avoid being made fun of next.

It is important to point out here that no one theory can explain all sources of laughter; as several academics have pointed out, the three theories can be seen as focusing on different aspects of amusement.^{60,61} Sheila Lintott, a philosophy professor at Bucknell University, put it best: “We might say that the incongruity theory focuses on the cognitive aspects, superiority the emotive, and relief the physical of comic amusement.”⁶² Thus, only when combined can they explain the psychological, emotional and physiological sources of laughter.

III. “Should an orator want to stir up laughter?”

In short, the answer is a fairly resounding *yes*. Already, examples from Reagan, JFK and Trump have shown how humor can be used as a political weapon: to attack opponents, inoculate oneself from criticism, establish one's good humor, and more.⁶³ Through comedy and wit, a politician can reduce audience scrutiny of arguments by appealing to their emotions and allowing them to discount any messages they might disagree with as “just a joke.”^{64,65} Further studies of

⁵⁷ Owen H. Lynch. “Humorous communication: Finding a place for humor in communication research.” *Communication Theory*, Vol. 12, No. 4. November 2002.

⁵⁸ Young.

⁵⁹ Tessa Berenson. “Watch Donald Trump Mock Marco Rubio by Spilling Water on Stage.” *Time*. Feb. 26, 2016. <<http://time.com/4239357/donald-trump-marco-rubio-water-bottle-texas/>>.

⁶⁰ Sheila Lintott. “Superiority in Humor Theory.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 74, No. 4. Fall 2016.

⁶¹ Morreall.

⁶² Lintott.

⁶³ Young.

⁶⁴ Martin 137.

⁶⁵ Robin Nabi, Emily Moyer-Gusé & Sahara Byrne. “All Joking Aside: A Serious Investigation into the Persuasive Effect of Funny Social Issue Messages.” *Communication Monographs*, Vol. 74, No. 1. March 2007. P. 29-54.

humor have shown that it can increase speakers' credibility, as well as increase voters' resistance to future attacks.^{66,67} For example, when Barack Obama joked in 2008, "We know what kind of campaign they're going to run. They're going to try to make you afraid of me. 'He's young and inexperienced and he's got a funny name. And did I mention he's black?'" it served as a weakened version of potential future attacks, training voters to ignore such criticisms later.^{68,69}

The question, then, is how we can think of the different *functions* of humor — the reasons for which an orator might want to deploy a joke. Some studies divide humor into "self-deprecatory" and "other-deprecatory" functions.⁷⁰ Self-deprecatory humor refers to when the orator laughs at himself or herself; other-deprecatory humor makes fun of another target through sarcasm, ridicule, or teasing.⁷¹ But while many jokes fit into this binary categorization, a division into "self-deprecatory" and "other-deprecatory" leaves out many jokes. For instance, take this joke by George H.W. Bush in a 1992 debate: "I would like the record to show the panelists that Ross Perot took the first shot at the press. My favorite bumper sticker, though, is 'Annoy the Media. Reelect President Bush.'"⁷² The joke is not so much self-deprecating as it is meant to reinforce Bush's persona to voters, solidifying his shtick with a memorable line.

In a 2000 paper titled, "Humor as a Double-Edged Sword," Professor John C. Meyer found a more encompassing framework.⁷³ He divided humor into two broad functions — Unification and Division — both housing two subcategories.⁷⁴ Under Unification (humor meant to

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Peifer and Holbert.

⁶⁸ Kurt Andersen. "The Humor Deficit: McCain and Obama seem like funny guys, so why are their campaigns anything but?" *New York Magazine*. August 18, 2008. <<http://nymag.com/news/imperialcity/49124/>>.

⁶⁹ Peifer and Holbert.

⁷⁰ Patrick A. Stewart. "The influence of self- and other-deprecatory humor on presidential candidate evaluation during the 2008 U.S. election." *Social Science Information*, Vol. 50, No. 2. 2011. P. 201-222.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² George H.W. Bush. "October 19, 1992 Debate Transcript." *Commission on Presidential Debates*. <goo.gl/wsGaHo>

⁷³ John C. Meyer. "Humor as a Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humor in Communication." *Communication Theory*, Vol. 10, No. 3. August 2000. P. 310-331.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

please a general audience, including members of the opposite party from the speaker) were the functions of “Identification” and “Clarification.”⁷⁵ Under Division (humor that serves to divide the audience, likely pleasing only members of the same party as the speaker along with some independents) were the functions of “Enforcement” and “Differentiation.”⁷⁶ My argument will delve further into the four functions, but I will briefly explain them here.

In *Identification*, speakers use humor to “build support by identifying with their audiences” and “enhancing [their] credibility.”⁷⁷ This includes self-deprecation, as well as humor that reduces tensions in a room in order to make audiences feel that they are on an equal level with the speaker and the speaker is “just like them.” In *Clarification*, speakers use humor to “encapsulate their views into memorable phrases” resulting in “the clarification of issues or positions.”⁷⁸ This involves seeking a sound bite that could get picked up in the media, or a positive line clarifying the speaker’s identity (think “Annoy the Media. Reelect President Bush”). In *Enforcement*, speakers “level criticism while maintaining some degree of identification with an audience.”⁷⁹ This involves a light, witty remark about the opposing party or some bad situation, à la Reagan’s “rodent control officer” line. Finally, in *Differentiation*, speakers “contrast themselves with their opponents” to make “alliances and distinctions.”⁸⁰ This is the harshest function, often only appealing to members of the speaker’s party.

Of course, Meyer’s categories can overlap, and as other scholars have argued, much of humor comes from a combination of unification and division.⁸¹ Meyer admits that differentiating humor also serves a unification purpose—to unify the side of the speaker making the disparaging

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Beth Innocenti and Elizabeth Miller. “The Persuasive Force of Political Humor.” *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 66. 2016.

joke.⁸² In a 2016 critique, two professors argued: “It is precisely in the ambiguity of unification and division – the unspecifiability of where one ends and the other begins – that there is an invitation to rhetoric.”⁸³ But for the purposes of examining presidential campaigns, Meyer’s framework is still useful, showing that humor can serve opposing ends and allowing rhetoric to be sorted into relatively clean-cut categories for analysis.

IV. “To what extent?”

Cicero believed that while humor could be helpful to orators, it could also be a detriment. For example, he advised rulers not to joke about “tyrants” as the audience “will expect something stronger.”⁸⁴ This idea has been explored more recently by the media. In a *Chicago Tribune* article, Brown University professor Darrell West spoke of a “danger in coming across as being too funny” as a candidate due to “a risk the voters won’t take you seriously.”⁸⁵ (Or won’t think you take the issues seriously.) Sarcasm has been historically viewed as ineffective by making candidates seem “mean-spirited”; the opposite problem occurs with over-use of self-deprecating jokes.^{86,87} This will be discussed more later.

V. “Into what categories can the humorous be divided?”

Though Meyer’s categories of humor’s four *functions* have already been laid out, there is one more important way “the humorous” can be divided: *types* of humor. This has been done differently across studies, but here I will use A. A. Berger’s typology of humor, used in many works after it appeared in 1993.^{88,89} Berger argued that humor has a “process aspect” which

⁸² Meyer (2000).

⁸³ Innocenti and Miller.

⁸⁴ Morreall.

⁸⁵ Christi Parsons. “Candidate comedy can be a risky proposition.” *Chicago Tribune*. March 6, 2002. <goo.gl/jK11TK>.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Charles R. Gruner. “Advice to the Beginning Speaker on Using Humor.” *Communication Education*, Vol. 34. April 1985.

⁸⁸ A.A. Berger. *An Anatomy of Humor*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1993)

⁸⁹ David M. Rhea. “There They Go Again: The Use of Humor in Presidential Debates 1960-2008.” *Argumentation and Advocacy*, Vol. 49. Fall 2012. P. 115-131.

could be “separated into various parts and analyzed,” eventually settling on 45 humor types organized into four broad categories.⁹⁰ The categories are: *Language* (where humor comes from “the wording of the comment,” like exaggeration, insults, irony, puns, sarcasm and satire); *Logic* (where humor comes from “the idea formed in the comment,” like absurdity and mistakes); *Identity* (where humor comes from “human experience,” like burlesque, caricature, parody, and impersonation); and finally *Action* (where humor comes from “physical or nonverbal action,” like slapstick comedy.)⁹¹ Again, these categories will be further elaborated on later.

A (Brief) History of Presidential Election Humor

In order to understand how Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton used humor (or attempted to do so) in the 2016 election, and in order to understand what influence their humor may have had on voters, it’s crucial to understand the context in which they were operating. On Election Day, Trump and Clinton were aged 70 and 69, respectively. They would both no doubt be able to remember iconic moments of political pop culture like Richard Nixon’s 1968 appearance on *Rowan & Martin’s Laugh-In* and Ronald Reagan’s “youth and inexperience” quip in his 1984 debate with Walter Mondale. In this section, I will examine just a few of the historical moments that likely influenced how Trump and Clinton see humor’s role in presidential politics.

In my short history of U.S. presidential election humor, I have chosen to begin with 1960. This is not because presidents before then weren’t funny — in fact, Abraham Lincoln is often cited as America’s funniest president.⁹² Books are full of his witticisms, and reporters in his time called his stories “side-splitting.”^{93,94} And Lincoln certainly used humor to his advantage in

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Bob Dole. *Great Presidential Wit (...I wish I was in this Book)*. (New York: Touchstone, 2001)

⁹³ Abraham Lincoln. *The Wit and Wisdom of Abraham Lincoln*. Bob Blaisdell, ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 2005).

⁹⁴ Benjamin P. Thomas, ed. *Three Years with Grant: As Recalled by War Correspondent Sylvanus Cadwallader*. (Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, 1996) P. 282

campaigns: once, in a debate with Stephen Douglas, he countered an attack alleging he was “two-faced” with the quip, “Ladies and gentlemen, I leave it to you. If I had two faces, would I be wearing this one?”⁹⁵ Franklin D. Roosevelt also used humor effectively, once dismissing criticisms that his dog Fala was pampered with taxpayer money as his “pet peeve.”⁹⁶ But I start with 1960 because it is well within Trump and Clinton’s memories — they were teenagers — and it was the year of the first televised presidential debate.⁹⁷ Because of that debate and many other factors, it was the year that would forever change what it takes to win the presidency.

John F. Kennedy and the Politics of Personality

Going into the election of 1960, John F. Kennedy faced some major issues. He was a relatively unknown senator from Massachusetts, up against a man who had served under Eisenhower and debated Khrushchev.⁹⁸ He was young, inexperienced, and the son of a wealthy (and resented) financier.⁹⁹ And he was Catholic, in a country that had only elected Protestant presidents.¹⁰⁰ Not a short list, but according to former speechwriter Gerald Gardner, “Kennedy methodically used humor to laugh away each.”¹⁰¹ As Gardner points out in his book on presidential humor, Kennedy’s weak spots were emotional issues, not able to be tackled with facts and figures, but with charm and wit. Luckily for Kennedy, he had plenty of both:

On his father’s ambassadorship to France: “Campaign contributions will not be regarded as a substitute for training and experience for diplomatic positions... Ever since I made that statement, I have not received one single cent from my father.”¹⁰²

On his youth: “[Republican Speaker of the House] Sam Rayburn may think I’m young, but then most of the population looks young to a man who’s seventy-eight.”¹⁰³

⁹⁵ Morreall.

⁹⁶ Marvin Alisky. “White House Wit: Presidential Humor to Sustain Policies, from Lincoln to Reagan.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 2. 1990. P. 378.

⁹⁷ “The Kennedy-Nixon Debates.” *History.com*. 2010. <<http://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/kennedy-nixon-debates>>.

⁹⁸ Gerald Gardner. *All the Presidents’ Wits: The Power of Presidential Humor*. (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1986) P. 209

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid* 210.

¹⁰² *Ibid* 211.

¹⁰³ *Ibid* 213.

On his inexperience: [Referencing Khrushchev debate] “Mr. Nixon may be very experienced in kitchen debate; so are a great many other married men I know.”¹⁰⁴

On religion: [After Truman said Nixon voters should “go to hell”] “Dear Mr. President: I have noted with interest your suggestion as to where those who vote for my opponent should go. While I understand and sympathize with your deep motivation, I think it is important that our side refrain from raising the religious issue.”¹⁰⁵

These jokes went particularly far in the new world of the 1960 campaign, when televised debates meant candidates suddenly had to seem youthful and energetic, and reporters began focusing not just on the basics of campaign events (what the candidate said, how big the crowd was, and what the weather was like) but on candidates’ personalities.^{106,107} As one CBS journalist put it, the 1960 campaign was the first to occur in “the age of appearances, when the wrapping seems more important than the contents.”¹⁰⁸

In this new TV world, Kennedy was adept not just at looking young next to Richard Nixon, but at identifying with voters through joking (yet “on-message”) sound bites.¹⁰⁹ When asked about his heroism in World War II, he joked, “It was involuntary. They sank my boat.”¹¹⁰ When someone called him the “potentially greatest president,” he said, “George Washington wasn’t a bad president and I do want to say a word for Thomas Jefferson.”¹¹¹ When asked if he was worried about getting into heaven if he disobeyed the Pope, he replied, “It’s not the hereafter that’s brothing me, but November 4th.”¹¹² He made fun of his accent, played off audiences at rallies, and (in a rare instance of *differentiating* humor) compared Nixon to a circus elephant

¹⁰⁴ Charles Osgood ed. *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the White House: Humor, Blunders, and Other Oddities from the Presidential Campaign Trail*. (New York: Hyperion, 2008). P. 56

¹⁰⁵ Gardner 210.

¹⁰⁶ Greg Botelho. “The day politics and TV changed forever.” *CNN*. March 14, 2016. <goo.gl/xxiUG1>.

¹⁰⁷ Timothy Crouse. *The Boys on the Bus*. (New York: Random House, 1972) P. 28.

¹⁰⁸ W. Gail Hudson. “The Role of Humor in John F. Kennedy’s 1960 Presidential Campaign” (Doctoral dissertation). *Southern Illinois University at Carbondale*. May 1979. P. 39.

¹⁰⁹ Osgood 45.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid* 57.

¹¹¹ *Ibid* 53.

¹¹² Peter M. Robinson. *The Dance of the Comedians: The People, the President, and the Performance of Political Standup Comedy in America*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010) P. 127.

grabbing Eisenhower's tail.¹¹³ With a father who spent much of his career acquiring production studios, it's not surprising he knew the value of personality-driven publicity.¹¹⁴ In fact, Kennedy was the first presidential candidate to send "advance men" before he traveled anywhere to "forward... possible jokes to customize his stump speech."¹¹⁵ His speechwriter, Ted Sorensen, kept an "extensive file of humor," and the localized jokes Kennedy delivered got huge laughs.¹¹⁶

Kennedy's humor worked not only on voters but also on members of the press corps. In an election where journalist Timothy Crouse argues that reporters turned from "superficial, formulaic and dull" reporting to covering "what makes the campaign tick" (exemplified by Theodore White's *The Making of the President*), Kennedy was adept at using humor to get better news coverage.¹¹⁷ He made time to joke with reporters — one reporter who shuttled between the Kennedy and Nixon campaigns remarked: "Traveling with Nixon was a chore, but traveling with Kennedy was fun!"¹¹⁸ Kennedy's banter made reporters feel like his good friends, to the point that writers who covered him cried as they said goodbye to him on Election Day.¹¹⁹

In the end, of course, Kennedy won on November 4th. According to historian Peter M. Robinson, "Humor played a large part in his victory."¹²⁰ With self-deprecating jokes and other mainly *identification* forms of humor, Kennedy could counter potential attacks, connect himself to voters and win over the media. He could contrast himself with a stoic Nixon. And he could prove his campaign motto correct: a young president had the power to "reinvigorate... a stagnant and dour nation" and "Get America moving again."¹²¹ At the very least, he got America to laugh.

¹¹³ Hudson 68, 76.

¹¹⁴ Robinson 126.

¹¹⁵ Ibid 127.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Crouse 31, 34.

¹¹⁸ Gardner 217.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Robinson 127.

¹²¹ Ibid.

Richard “Sock It to Me?” Nixon

In 1968, Richard Nixon was back. He was running for president, and this time his campaign claimed he was a “New Nixon” — mature, empathetic, likable, and even *funny*.¹²² It would be a feat of image repackaging to get him to the presidency, and at one point in the campaign, humor came out at the forefront of that rebranding effort.¹²³ From then on, a good sense of humor became something potentially *manufacturable*.

In 1963, Nixon came on *The Jack Paar Show*, where he met Paul Keyes, a writer for the show who became his campaign joke consultant.¹²⁴ Nixon did not have the same approach to humor as JFK: he distrusted it, viewing it as unpredictable.¹²⁵ He once told an aide, “People react to fear, not love.”¹²⁶ But by 1963, with his electoral defeat behind him, Nixon began to see the value of entertainment to his political image. So, with Keyes’ help, he began to use humor — or as historian Peter Robinson calls it, a “meticulously regulated illusion performed as a means to a foreseeable end: winning the election.”¹²⁷ Indeed, Nixon’s entire 1968 campaign staff devoted themselves to marketing him like a consumer good. Harry Treleaven, an ad exec and consultant, wrote that Nixon’s humor “can be corrected to a degree, but let’s not be too obvious about it.”¹²⁸ Campaign memos asserted that advertising should “add a little warmth, a touch of humor,” and concluded, “Humor becomes vital; it cuts through the veils of logic, shows a human side.”^{129,130}

The true test came in September 1968. Both Nixon and his opponent Hubert Humphrey were invited to appear on *Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In*, a new NBC variety show.¹³¹ Keyes,

¹²² Dan Fastenberg. “Richard Nixon Goes on Laugh-In.” *Time*. July 29, 2010. <goo.gl/WU163E>.

¹²³ Robinson 180.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*.

¹²⁵ *Ibid* 181.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*.

¹²⁸ Joe McGinniss. *The Selling of the President*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1969). P. 28.

¹²⁹ *Ibid* 169.

¹³⁰ *Ibid* 203.

¹³¹ Robinson 182.

now *Laugh-In*'s head writer, convinced Nixon to go on.¹³² Nixon pre-taped his cameo, going through six takes before he could say his line jovially.¹³³ And on September 16, a shocked audience watched him exclaim one of the show's famous punch lines: "Sock it to *me*?"¹³⁴ America saw a New Nixon. Humphrey, the Vice President and former Senator who turned down the show because it was "beneath his dignity," later said not going on contributed to his loss.¹³⁵

Ronald Reagan and the Art of the One-Liner

In 1984, another revolution occurred in how humor was used in presidential campaigns. Four years earlier, America had elected its first "Entertainer-in-Chief" — Ronald Reagan, a Hollywood actor-turned-politician who remains the only U.S. President who could claim he once blew up a balloon on a game show using a trumpet.¹³⁶ Reagan, the "Great Communicator," was said to be more comfortable in front of a camera than not.¹³⁷ That skill had certainly been on display at Reagan's 1980 presidential debate with Jimmy Carter in Cleveland, the first general election debate held in front of a large on-site live audience that could applaud or laugh at lines like Reagan's "There you go again."¹³⁸ (For a complete list of candidate lines that, whether intentionally or not, have gotten laughs at debates from 1980 to present, see Appendix A.)

But in 1984, Reagan was 73 years old, facing mounting questions about his age. And his first debate against Walter Mondale was catastrophic. He got figures mixed up, lost his way in arguments and didn't seem mentally alert.¹³⁹ Instead of a punchy final statement like his 1980 line "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" Reagan ended his first 1984 debate with

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ "Ronald Reagan on *I've Got a Secret*." YouTube.com. 1961. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehL0GeHQaFg>>.

¹³⁷ Madeleine Brand and Jeremy Mayer. "How Funny Should Politicians Be?" *NPR*. January 29, 2007.

<<http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=7061245>>.

¹³⁸ Annenberg Debate Reform Working Group. P. 22

¹³⁹ James Reston. "Washington: The Age Issue." *New York Times*. October 10, 1984.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/1984/10/10/opinion/washington-the-age-issue.html>>.

a ramble.¹⁴⁰ He walked off stage and knew immediately that he had flopped.¹⁴¹ Media stations went into high gear, bringing mental health experts on after-debate coverage to ask what had happened.¹⁴² Satirist Mark Russell commented, “He’s an actor and he acted his age,” and Reagan’s own aides called his performance “tentative” to the press.^{143,144} In a Trump-like maneuver, Reagan attempted to defend himself by claiming Mondale seemed younger just because he had worn more make-up.¹⁴⁵ The chairman of the Republican National Committee actually held a press conference saying Reagan’s performance “wasn’t because of any physical or mental deficiency.”¹⁴⁶ By the second debate, Reagan had dropped seven points in the polls.¹⁴⁷

Reagan was good at joking about his age. In his 1980 campaign, he joked about Thomas Jefferson personally giving him advice, and during his second term when Halley’s comet appeared, he jested, “Oh, there it is again.”^{148,149} So he and his staff knew that a joke was the best way to confront the failure of the first debate. Citing research on aging would look rehearsed and unconvincing; as Robinson concludes, “the only possible weapon against the age issue was humor.”¹⁵⁰ So Reagan and his team prepared a line for the second debate, two weeks later: “I want you to know that I will not make age an issue in this campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent’s youth and inexperience.”¹⁵¹ And it worked. When Reagan used the joke at the second debate — in a moment the actor had no doubt rehearsed to ensure a

¹⁴⁰ “The First Reagan-Mondale Presidential Debate.” *Commission on Presidential Debates*. October 7, 1984.

<<http://www.debates.org/index.php?page=october-7-1984-debate-transcript>>.

¹⁴¹ David Weigel. “When Ronald Reagan Blew a Presidential Debate and Dropped Seven Points in the Polls.” *Slate*. October 10, 2012. <goo.gl/XjGRHq>.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ Robinson 21.

¹⁴⁴ Alex S. Jones. “Reagan’s Health: How Issue Emerged.” *New York Times*. October 11, 1984.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/1984/10/11/us/reagan-s-health-how-issue-emerged.html>>.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ Robinson 20.

¹⁴⁹ Alisky 380.

¹⁵⁰ Robinson 19.

¹⁵¹ Weigel.

delivery with maximum effect — the audience broke into raucous laughter and applause. Even Mondale laughed.¹⁵² (Later, he admitted to PBS host Jim Lehrer, “I could tell that one hurt.”¹⁵³)

The joke dominated the news for days afterward.¹⁵⁴ *The Today Show* began its broadcast the morning after the debate by replaying a clip of the line.¹⁵⁵ The way it traveled over the air waves exemplified Professor Michael Pfau’s theory of a “pass-along effect” in communication: a message initiated on one platform (e.g. a debate) can easily diffuse across many others (e.g. news programs, talk shows, and more).¹⁵⁶ From then on, Reagan’s age—once a pivotal concern—was no longer an issue.¹⁵⁷ In a single line, Reagan was able to “reinvigorate his public persona, reenergize his campaign and recapture the presidency.”¹⁵⁸ It wouldn’t have been possible without television, a medium that had increasingly begun to elevate “snappy one-liners” that could “win precious time on the evening news.”¹⁵⁹ And it wouldn’t have been possible without Reagan himself. As Robinson asserts, “More than any other president, Reagan was a born comedian, a natural.”¹⁶⁰ Meyer called Reagan’s humor a “velvet weapon” for the way he used jokes to attack opponents without turning off voters.¹⁶¹ After the success of the age joke, more and more candidates would attempt to use humorous one-liners at debates as a velvet weapon. Landon Parvin, Reagan’s joke writer during his administration, summarized it best: “Ronald Reagan has changed the landscape when it comes to humor. Because post-Reagan it’s going to be expected. I don’t think people realize how he has changed what is going to be expected of a politician.”¹⁶²

¹⁵² Rhea (2012) P. 115.

¹⁵³ David M. Rhea. “Seriously Funny: A Look at Humor in Televised Presidential Debates.” (Doctoral dissertation) *University of Missouri-Columbia*. December 2007. P. 121.

¹⁵⁴ Meyer 2000.

¹⁵⁵ Rhea (2012) P. 127.

¹⁵⁶ Michael Pfau. “The changing nature of presidential debate influence in the new age of mass media communication.” *Presented at the Annual Conference on Presidential Rhetoric, College Station, TX*. 2003. P. 19.

¹⁵⁷ Robinson 25.

¹⁵⁸ Patrick Stewart. “Presidential laugh lines.” *Politics and the Life Sciences, Vol. 29, No. 2*. September 2010.

¹⁵⁹ C. B. Crawford. “Analysis of Humor in the 1992 Presidential Debates.” *Perceptual and Motor Skills, Vol. 88*. 1999. P. 417.

¹⁶⁰ Robinson 204.

¹⁶¹ Meyer 1990.

¹⁶² Gardner 26.

Ross Perot and Bob Dole: Too Funny to Be President?

In 2012, David M. Rhea embarked on a study of humor in presidential debates.¹⁶³ Using content analysis by three coders, he found 242 cases of candidate humor in debates from 1960-2008 — meaning an average of 12.3 cases of humor per debate.¹⁶⁴ (His count included attempted jokes by candidates that got no audience laughter, which my Appendix A table does not count.) And Rhea found that when he placed all of the presidential candidates on a graph — a copy of which can be found in Appendix B — the top jester was not Ronald Reagan, but Ross Perot. Perot, a Texas billionaire and independent who won 18.9 percent of the popular vote in the 1992 race with Bill Clinton and George H. W. Bush, used humor 41 times across three debates.^{165,166} Rhea argued that Perot used “plainspoken” humor “to connect with voters and draw attention to his campaign,” and he said that it worked: support for Perot doubled from 7 percent to 14 percent after the first debate.¹⁶⁷ Communications professor C.B. Crawford agreed, concluding, “Mr. Perot was the clear winner for sheer entertainment value.”¹⁶⁸ Some classic Perot debate lines:

[Referencing his large ears] “If there’s a fairer way, I’m all ears.”

“Whose fault is that? Not the Democrats; not the Republicans. Somewhere out there there's an extraterrestrial that's doing this to us, I guess.”

“I don't have any spin doctors. I don't have any speechwriters. Probably shows. I make those charts you see on television even.”¹⁶⁹

In my research, I found that Perot used *identification* humor the most, more than all other functions combined. And yet, even though identification humor has worked successfully with other candidates, it was not enough to propel a third-party candidate to any electoral votes.

¹⁶³ Rhea (2012).

¹⁶⁴ Ibid 121.

¹⁶⁵ “Election of 1992.” *The American Presidency Project*. <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/showelection.php?year=1992>>.

¹⁶⁶ Rhea (2012) 124.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid 124, 127

¹⁶⁸ Crawford 1999.

¹⁶⁹ See Appendix A.

Rhea also found that Bob Dole, the establishment Republican Party candidate who faced Clinton in 1996, used humor frequently. Dole was known for his sense of humor when he served as Senate Majority Leader, and was often called “the Senate wit.”¹⁷⁰ Just a few of Dole’s lines:

“If you're hanging around with nothing to do and the zoo is closed, come over to the Senate. You'll get the same kind of feeling and you won't have to pay.”¹⁷¹

“History buffs probably noted the reunion at a Washington party a few weeks ago of three ex-presidents: Carter, Ford and Nixon — See No Evil, Hear No Evil and Evil.”¹⁷²

[At a 1996 debate in Hartford] “I remember one day on the floor, I said, ‘Now, gentlemen, let me tax your memories,’ and Kennedy jumped up and said, ‘Why haven't we thought of that before?’”¹⁷³

But again — even though his campaign pulled out Dole’s humor at the debates (and sent out a press release of “Dole Debate Zingers” afterwards) — it wasn’t enough for Dole to win.^{174,175} In fact, a survey of favorability ratings as the 1996 campaign came to a close found that Bob Dole ranked as “one of the least appealing major party presidential candidates in almost four decades.”¹⁷⁶ Some blamed this on Dole’s “deadpan delivery” and “biting, bone dry” joke style, saying it did not transfer well into out-of-context television soundbites.¹⁷⁷ At least in the debates, however, Dole’s jokes seemed to land just fine: he got more than double the laughs that Clinton got in the 1996 debates.¹⁷⁸ Thus a broader point must be made: humor cannot singlehandedly propel or save a candidate, especially one who doesn’t tug at voters’ hearts.

¹⁷⁰ David E. Johnson and Johnny R. Johnson. *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the White House: Foolhardiness, Folly and Fraud in Presidential Elections, from Andrew Jackson to George W. Bush*. (Lanham: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2004) P. 162.

¹⁷¹ Jesse Ventura. *Sh*t Politicians Say*. (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2016). P. 1.

¹⁷² Maureen Dowd. “Let Dole Be Dole.” *New York Times*. March 7, 1996.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/1996/03/07/opinion/liberties-let-dole-be-dole.html>>.

¹⁷³ “Presidential Debate in Hartford.” *The American Presidency Project*. October 6, 1996.

<<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=52060>>.

¹⁷⁴ Elizabeth Kolbert. “Dole Campaign Will Be Bringing Out Its Secret Weapon: The Candidate’s Sense of Humor.” *New York Times*. October 4, 1996. <goo.gl/LqZ8Gn>.

¹⁷⁵ Robert Dole. “Press Release – Dole Debate Zingers.” *The American Presidency Project*. October 7, 1996.

<<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=115788>>.

¹⁷⁶ “Dole Appeal Nearly Record Low.” *Pew Research Center*. November 1, 1996. <<http://www.people-press.org/1996/11/01/dole-appeal-nearly-record-low/>>.

¹⁷⁷ Kolbert.

¹⁷⁸ See Appendix A.

Bill Clinton reached new heights of candidate entertainment in both of his campaigns for the presidency. He played “Heartbreak Hotel” on saxophone on *The Arsenio Hall Show* in wayfarer sunglasses and a bright tie, sparking academics to label him the first candidate to “unabashedly embrace and effectively utilize the entertainment talk show strategy.”¹⁷⁹ He made commentators say, “Am I such an old fogey that I thought that was undignified?” and “Come on now, if you really want to be elected President, let’s get serious.”¹⁸⁰ But he also benefited from charm beyond being able to crack jokes, and he knew when to turn off the laughs and emotionally connect to voters with heart rather than wit. The reason Clinton beat Perot and Dole can be distilled into one moment from the 1992 race, when Perot was asked to respond to Clinton’s claim that his record as Governor of Arkansas showed his readiness for the presidency:

PEROT: “I grew up five blocks from Arkansas. [Laughter] Let's put it in perspective. [...] I think probably we're making a mistake night after night after night to cast the Nation's future on a unit that small.”

LEHRER: “Why is that a mistake?”

PEROT: “It's irrelevant. [Laughter] [...] I could say that I ran a small grocery store on the corner, therefore, I extrapolate that into the fact that I could run Wal-Mart. [Laughter] That's not true. I carefully picked an Arkansas company, you notice there, Governor.”

LEHRER: “Governor?”

CLINTON: “Mr. Perot, with all respect, I think it is highly relevant. [...] I'm frankly amazed that since you grew up five blocks from there you would think that what goes on in that State is irrelevant. [...] And the people who have jobs and educations and opportunities that didn't have them 10 years ago don't think it's irrelevant at all.”¹⁸¹

In this case, Perot got the laughs. But Clinton spoke to voters and identified with them in a serious and deeper way. Studies have shown that when voters watch debates, they look for

¹⁷⁹ Michael Parkin. *Talk Show Campaigns: Presidential Candidates on Daytime and Late Night Television*. (New York: Routledge, 2014) P. 1, 3.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid* 3.

¹⁸¹ “Presidential Debate in East Lansing.” *The American Presidency Project*. October 19, 1992. <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=21625>>.

candidates who aren't just smart or funny, but also exhibit traits like warmth, sincerity, caring and willingness to listen.¹⁸² Clinton won hands down.

Bush v. Gore and the Influence of Late Night Shows

The Election of 2000 was a war waged on late-night television. Candidates since Kennedy and Nixon had gone on entertainment shows during their campaigns, but the 2000 campaign marked the first presidential election in which *Saturday Night Live* may have had arguably as much of an impact on the election as either of the two candidates.¹⁸³ Studies mark the race between Texas Governor George W. Bush and Vice President Al Gore as the first election to occur in a true age of “politainment” — with rhetoric scholars Chris Smith and Ben Volt arguing that the “blending of entertainment and political news” created a completely new “political information paradigm.”^{184,185} And certainly, Bush and Gore’s appearances on daytime and late-night talk shows in 2000 reached an unprecedented level. Gore revealed his favorite cereal was Wheaties on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*; not to be outdone, Bush declared his love for PB&J sandwiches and tacos on *Oprah* a week later.^{186,187} Gore discussed Eminem and Napster at an MTV-led student forum.¹⁸⁸ On October 19, 2000, with just over two weeks left until Election Day, both candidates spent an entire day going on entertainment shows: Bush chatting with David Letterman, Gore filming interviews with Regis Philbin and Rosie O’Donnell, and both candidates pre-recording cameos for *Saturday Night Live*’s upcoming “Presidential Bash 2000.”¹⁸⁹ *Slate* concluded that the race had become a “joke off.”¹⁹⁰

¹⁸² Michael Pfau. “The Subtle Nature of Presidential Debate Influence.” *Argumentation and Advocacy*, Vol. 38. Spring 2002.

¹⁸³ Chris Smith and Ben Voth. “The Role of Humor in Political Argument: How ‘Strategy’ and ‘Lockboxes’ Changed A Political Campaign.” *Argumentation and Advocacy*, Vol. 39. Fall 2002.

¹⁸⁴ Margaret Duffy and Janis Page. “Does Political Humor Matter? You Betcha!” *The Journal of Popular Culture*. 2013. P. 547.

¹⁸⁵ Smith and Voth 116.

¹⁸⁶ Kevin Sack. “Oprah Show Lets Gore Reach Out to Women.” *New York Times*. September 12, 2000. <goo.gl/AEfxls>.

¹⁸⁷ Alison Mitchell. “Full of Banter, Bush Goes On the Oprah Circuit.” *New York Times*. September 20, 2000. <goo.gl/dEIk9k>.

¹⁸⁸ James Gerstenzang. “Gore Rocks the Youth Vote on MTV.” *LA Times*. September 27, 2000. <goo.gl/kyLKEI>.

¹⁸⁹ Jacob Weisberg. “Campaign 2000’s Joke-Off.” *Slate*. October 20, 2000. <goo.gl/SoQ1A6>.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid*.

Bush and Gore weren't going on these shows for the fun of it. Between 1995 and 2000, the average American household saw an 80 percent increase in the number of channels on their TV sets, and a rapidly growing number of voters were picking entertainment over news shows.¹⁹¹ Before cable started offering more choices in the 1970s, Americans watching television couldn't avoid learning about politics on the few stations available—now they could choose not to hear about politics altogether.¹⁹² Political scientist Markus Prior argues this transformation of “politics by default” to “politics by choice” led to a division of the American public into “news buffs” and “entertainment buffs.”¹⁹³ And in 2000, the “entertainment buffs” began commanding politicians' attentions. Shortly before the 2000 election, Pew Research Center polls revealed that 47 percent of people aged 18 to 29 got most of their political information from entertainment shows.¹⁹⁴ *The Oprah Winfrey Show* alone boasted 22 million viewers a week, with an audience that was younger, less politically engaged, and more female than general audiences.^{195,196} Polling also demonstrated that the way talk shows tended to “paint any candidate in a positive light” boosted candidates' likability among such an audience, with one study showing that politically unaware voters who watched late-night talk shows were more likely to vote across party lines than ones who did not watch late-night shows.¹⁹⁷ Political consultants at the time agreed entertainment shows had the power to “set how a candidate is perceived in stone,” and Bush and Gore's teams both found them effective in reaching out to young voters.^{198,199}

¹⁹¹ Matthew A. Baum. “Talking the Vote: Why Presidential Candidates Hit the Talk Show Circuit.” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 49, No. 2. April 2005. P. 213.

¹⁹² Markus Prior. “Audience Fragmentation and Political Inequality in the Post-broadcast Media Environment.” *From Media Power in Politics*, Sixth Edition. Doris Graber, ed. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2011). P. 154

¹⁹³ Ibid 153.

¹⁹⁴ Smith and Voth 110.

¹⁹⁵ Sack.

¹⁹⁶ Baum 214.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid 215, 216.

¹⁹⁸ Bernard Weinraub. “Election's Barometer: Barbs of Late-Night TV.” *New York Times*. January 19, 2000.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/01/19/us/the-2000-campaign-the-comedians-election-s-barometer-barbs-of-late-night-tv.html>>.

¹⁹⁹ Smith and Voth 122.

In a 2002 study, Smith and Voth argued that in the 2000 election, “Humor mutated from a means of dealing with reality to actually defining reality.”²⁰⁰ What they mean by this is not only that the 2000 candidates went on more talk shows than ever, but also that shows like *SNL* actually helped define the race. This phenomenon can be seen clearly in the aftermath of an *SNL* parody of Bush and Gore’s first debate. In the parody, Will Ferrell plays a Bush who mispronounces simple words, and Darrell Hammond plays a condescending Gore who repeats the word “lockbox” over and over and tries to deliver two closing statements.²⁰¹ (In fact, Gore did spend a not insignificant amount of time in the first debate sighing at Bush’s statements, and he did say the word “lockbox” — part of a metaphor about his plan to protect Medicare — no less than seven times.²⁰²) At the end of the sketch, the *SNL* moderator has one final question:

MODERATOR: “We are almost out of time, so I will instead ask each candidate to sum up in a single word the best argument for his candidacy. Governor Bush?”

BUSH: “Strategery.” [Laughter.]

MODERATOR: “Vice President Gore?”

GORE: “Lockbox.” [Laughter.]

The parody was an instant hit. Clips of it replayed over and over on traditional news programs after it aired, taking the “pass-along effect” to a new level.²⁰³ Whereas initial news coverage of the debate had been neutral (one headline read, “In many voters’ minds, debate fails in the drama department”), after the parody the focus shifted to Gore’s “lockbox” usage and sighing.²⁰⁴ Before the spoof, Gore had a “solid lead”; afterwards, Bush gained an eight-point lead.²⁰⁵ Charlie Cook,

²⁰⁰ Ibid 124.

²⁰¹ Nelson W. Polsby and Aaron Wildavsky. *Presidential Elections: Strategies and Structures of American Politics*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008). P. 205.

²⁰² Patrick Healy. “Debate: What Al Gore’s First Debate Against George W. Bush Can Teach Hillary Clinton.” *New York Times*. September 25, 2016. <goo.gl/L72m0H>.

²⁰³ Smith and Voth 122.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

editor of the election analysis newsletter *The Cook Political Report*, compared the spoof to “onion dip – sometimes it develops more flavor on the second or third day.”²⁰⁶ One of Gore’s senior advisors later confirmed: “We had to try to laugh about it. But really, it hurt us.”²⁰⁷

What set apart Bush and Gore, Smith and Voth contend, was how they reacted to the parody. Bush, they argue, “accepted his role as the fool early and completely.”²⁰⁸ In television appearances he joked about the debate, “Well, a lot of folks don’t think I can string a sentence together. Expectations were low, all I had to do was say, ‘Hi, I’m George W. Bush.’”²⁰⁹ At the second debate, Bush employed self-deprecating humor when asked about a blunder Gore made: “We all make mistakes. I’ve been known to mangle a syllable or two myself.”²¹⁰ Gore, on the other hand, “act[ed] tragically by trying to cover up his foibles.”²¹¹ He didn’t make fun of himself much in post-debate interviews, instead having his staff compile a list of mistakes Bush made.²¹² Then, after his campaign staff made him watch the *SNL* skit, Gore “overcompensated,” creating a “disastrous change of personality for the second debate,” which likely made him seem even less genuine to voters.²¹³ Gore did try to use humor to regain his footing near the end of the election, appearing on all the major talk shows. But in the end, a *Pew* poll found voters thought Bush had higher charisma than Gore (47% to 31%) and a better sense of humor (48% to 34%).²¹⁴

While Bush’s reaction had made him seem foolish yet honest and well-meaning, Gore was judged by many as “robotic and not having much of a personality.”²¹⁵ And while Bush’s self-deprecating humor made audiences identify with him as a “common man” (thus contrasting

²⁰⁶ Healy.

²⁰⁷ Smith and Voth 118.

²⁰⁸ Ibid 119.

²⁰⁹ Ibid 123.

²¹⁰ Ibid 118.

²¹¹ Ibid 126.

²¹² Ibid 117.

²¹³ Ibid 123.

²¹⁴ “Voter Preferences Vacillate.” *Pew Research Center for The People & The Press*. May 11, 2000. <goo.gl/QAXACb>.

²¹⁵ Rhea (2012) P. 128.

him with what some saw as the “trickery” of the Clinton administration), Gore appeared, as one communications professor put it, “like a stuffed shirt prig.”^{216,217} Bush’s “strategery” — his effective use of humor — paid off, at least in the final vote, which he won after a protracted and much less funny contest: the Florida recount and the Supreme Court’s decision in *Bush v. Gore*.

The election of 2000 was just the beginning. Later studies showed voters’ increasing attention to comedy shows over hard news sources, and found that candidates’ appearances on late-night shows increased voter knowledge more than morning shows.^{218,219} Politicians appeared on entertainment shows more and more to reach out to voters, and consultants knew an effective parody could change the course of a campaign.^{220,221} Television critic Steve Johnson lamented:

“What America seems destined to get is a President who can: deliver a Top 10 list, get misty-eyed with Oprah, sit alongside a ‘Survivor’ contestant and Regis, and know enough not to mention Pat Boone in front of an audience of MTV kids...sauté crawfish with Emeril Lagasse, submit aged muskets for appraisal on ‘Antiques Roadshow’ and Guest star as the bickering gay couple down the block on ‘Everybody Loves Raymond.’”²²²

America had officially entered into the politainment era.

Election 2008: Humor in the Information Age

In his study of humor in presidential debates, David M. Rhea saw a notable decline in humor use during the 2008 election.²²³ It was a contest without precedent: a young, previously unknown African-American senator from Chicago up against an established 72-year-old Vietnam War veteran. Both Barack Obama and John McCain have been described as having

²¹⁶ Smith and Voth 127.

²¹⁷ Brand and Mayer.

²¹⁸ Michael Pfau, Jaeho Cho and Kirsten Chong. “Communication Forms in U.S. Presidential Campaigns: Influences on Candidate Perceptions and the Democratic Process.” *International Journal of Press/Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 4. 2001.

²¹⁹ Paul R. Brewer and Xiaoxia Cao. “Candidate Appearances on Soft News Shows and Public Knowledge About Primary Campaigns.” *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, Vol. 50, No. 1. March 2006.

²²⁰ Parkin 3.

²²¹ Ellen Jean Hirst. “Presidential challenge.” *Chicago Tribune*. September 22, 2012. <http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-09-22/news/ct-talk-snl-new-obama-0923-20120922_1_independent-voters-obama-and-biden-snl>.

²²² Smith and Voth 121.

²²³ Rhea (2012) P. 128.

good senses of humor.^{224,225} Obama is said to be “the first alt-comedy president” with a signature detached style and a willingness to appear on absurd shows like *Between Two Ferns*; McCain is known for his funny stories and since 2008 has faced off against a true pro, *SNL* alum Al Franken, in a humorous mock-debate.^{226,227} But Rhea has a possible explanation for the dearth of humor in the 2008 debates: negative press coverage of jokes during recent years and in the campaign.²²⁸ In looking into that claim, two broader factors emerge as well: increasing political polarization, and the lightning fast speed of the travel of information on the Internet.

At the time of the 2008 election, both McCain and Obama knew the danger of a joke gone wrong in the age of rapidly-circulated, viral videos on the Internet. In 2006, ex-presidential candidate John Kerry got in huge trouble for a bungled joke he made to a group of California students that was meant to poke fun at George W. Bush but seemed instead to insult the troops:

“If you make the most of it, you study hard, you do your homework and you make an effort to be smart, you can do well. If you don't, you get stuck in Iraq.”²²⁹

The line, which Kerry called a “botched joke,” caused a huge backlash. President Bush called it “shameful,” adding at a Georgia event that Kerry owed the military an apology.²³⁰ McCain said, “The suggestion that only the least educated Americans would agree to serve in the military and fight in Iraq is an insult to every soldier serving in combat today.”²³¹ Kerry ended up apologizing to “any service member, family member or American who was offended.”²³² It was an important

²²⁴ Adam Howard. “Comedian-in-chief: Obama’s Funniest Moments as President.” *NBC News*. December 26, 2016.

<<http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/president-obama-the-legacy/comedian-chief-obama-funniest-moments-president-n690166>>.

²²⁵ Steve Brusk. “McCain’s smokin’ sense of humor.” *CNN*. July 9, 2008. <goo.gl/HmHXIa>.

²²⁶ Emily Heil. “Barack Obama, the first alt-comedy president.” *The Washington Post*. April 25, 2016. <goo.gl/QcuXek>.

²²⁷ Cork Gaines. “John McCain and Al Franken face off in funny mock-NFL debate.” *December 11, 2015*.

<<http://www.businessinsider.com/john-mccain-al-franken-nfl-debate-2015-12>>.

²²⁸ Rhea (2012) P. 128.

²²⁹ *Ibid*.

²³⁰ Jennifer Loven. “Uproar over Kerry Iraq remarks.” *NBC News*. November 1, 2006.

<<http://www.nbcnews.com/id/15499174/ns/politics/t/uproar-over-kerry-iraq-remarks/#.WP3B9WXMzzI>>.

²³¹ *Ibid*.

²³² John Cochran. “Kerry Apologizes as ‘Stuck in Iraq’ Firestorm Rages.” *ABC News*. November 1, 2006.

<<http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/Story?id=2621654&page=1>>.

lesson: in an era of political polarization where opponents might use a poorly crafted joke against you to appeal to their increasingly partisan bases, candidates need to be careful.²³³

In the 2008 election itself, there were two notable examples of jokes gone bad. For Obama, it was his “You’re likable enough, Hillary” line in a primary debate with Hillary Clinton, a joke that brought no laughs but instead created days of media backlash.²³⁴ For McCain, it was a moment in April 2007 when a South Carolina voter asked if he had a plan to attack Iran. Before answering seriously, McCain began with a joke: “You know that old Beach Boys song, Bomb Iran?” and then sang, “Bomb bomb bomb, bomb bomb Iran” to the tune of “Barbara Ann.”²³⁵ Although initial press reports included how McCain went on to give a serious answer, amateur footage of the event taken by an audience member made its way to YouTube in the form of an out-of-context 43-second video that garnered almost a million views.^{236,237} It was an extreme version of Michael Pfau’s “pass-along effect”: in the age of the Internet, information diffusion had become a democratized free-for-all where any individual could easily circulate a clip with no help from the press. Democratic opponents called McCain’s joke “dangerous” and “cavalier about a new war.”²³⁸ Critics used it to try to portray McCain as a war-mongering “loose cannon,” including Obama, who later quoted it in one of the 2008 debates when McCain mentioned Teddy Roosevelt’s motto “speak softly, and carry a big stick”:

OBAMA: This is the guy who sang, “Bomb, bomb, bomb Iran,” who called for the annihilation of North Korea. That I don't think is an example of “speaking softly.”^{239,240}

²³³ “Political Polarization in the American Public.” *Pew Research Center*. June 12, 2014. <<http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>>.

²³⁴ David M. Rhea. “Humor in Campaign Messages.” *Praeger Handbook of Political Campaigning in the United States, Volume 2*. William L. Benoit, ed. (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2016). P. 31.

²³⁵ Don Gonyea. “Jesting, McCain Sings: ‘Bomb, Bomb, Bomb’ Iran.” *NPR*. April 20, 2007. <[goo.gl/5CnM73](http://www.npr.org/2007/04/20/5CnM73)>.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

²³⁷ Stephen Frantzich. *O.O.P.S.: Observing Our Politicians Stumble – The Worst Candidate Gaffes and Recoveries in Presidential Campaigns*. (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012). P. 143

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁰ “Presidential Debate at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee.” *The American Presidency Project*. October 7, 2008. <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=84482>>.

Thus, in the politically polarized world of the Information Age, where rivals hold no punches and out-of-context jokes can spread easily, humor can present larger risks to candidates. It would be a warning one candidate in the 2016 election would heed — and another would choose to ignore altogether.

Humor in the 2016 Presidential Election

In the Marx Brothers' 1933 movie *Duck Soup*, a thin-skinned jokester with no executive experience is asked to run a country suffering from an economic recession.²⁴¹ The country is “Freedonia,” a small fictional nation facing civilian revolt; the jokester is “Rufus T. Firefly,” expertly played by Groucho Marx. Firefly is asked to lead Freedonia by a wealthy, humorless widow named “Mrs. Teasdale,” played by Margaret Dumont — an actress who often acted as Groucho’s foil.²⁴² Groucho and Dumont’s first dialogue begins:

DUMONT: As chairwoman of the reception committee, I welcome you with open arms.

GROUCHO: Is that so? How late do you stay open?

DUMONT: [Looking at Groucho with wide eyes] I’ve spotted your appointment because I feel you are the most able statesman in all Freedonia.

GROUCHO: Well, that covers a lot of ground. Say, you cover a lot of ground yourself. You better beat it. I hear they’re going to tear you down and put up an office building where you’re standing. [...] You know you haven’t stopped talking since I came here? You must have been vaccinated with a phonograph needle.

DUMONT: [Ignoring Groucho’s jokes] The future of Fredonia rests on you. Promise me you’ll follow in the footsteps of my husband.

GROUCHO: [Looking directly at the camera] How do you like that? I haven’t been on the job five minutes and already she’s making advances to me.²⁴³

²⁴¹ Luke Epplin. “What the Marx Brothers’ *Duck Soup* Can Teach Us About Trump.” *Slate*. August 21, 2016. <http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2016/08/31/what_the_marx_brothers_duck_soup_can_teach_us_about_trump.html>.

²⁴² *Ibid*.

²⁴³ Leo McCarey, Bert Kalmar, Harry Ruby, Arthur Sheekman and Nat Perrin. *Duck Soup*. (Los Angeles, CA: Paramount Productions, 1933). <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qSabiG8q8-k>>.

It's a masterful dialogue, incorporating all of A. A. Berger's humor types: *Language* ("You must have been vaccinated with a phonograph needle"), *Logic* (the absurdity of Groucho's wisecracks as response to Dumont's solemnity), *Identity* (the caricature of a rich, pompous widow with Mrs. Teasdale, who speaks with an operatic voice and clutches at a string of pearls around her neck), and *Action* (Groucho "breaking the fourth wall" by turning directly toward the camera). But beyond that, as several writers have now observed, the dynamic between Groucho and Dumont seems strikingly similar to that of another duo: Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton.^{244,245}

Taking Trump (Jokes) Seriously, Not Literally

Almost no one predicted that Donald J. Trump — the real estate mogul and ex-reality TV star who somehow found himself the Republican Party nominee for president — would win the 2016 election. Before Election Day, every major news poll forecasted a Hillary Clinton win. *Reuters* gave Clinton a 90 percent chance of victory, the *New York Times* gave her an 85 percent chance, and *The Huffington Post* put her at an overconfident 98.2 percent.^{246,247,248} *The Washington Post* reported on the day before the election, "The overall map still clearly favors Hillary Clinton."²⁴⁹ Pollsters on both sides of the aisle tweeted that Clinton would sweep, with one polling site predicting she would win in every swing state except Iowa and Ohio.^{250,251} Nate Silver, editor-in-chief of the statistical analysis site *FiveThirtyEight*, gave Clinton one of her

²⁴⁴ Epplin.

²⁴⁵ Emily Nussbaum. "How Jokes Won the Election." *The New Yorker*. January 23, 2017. <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/23/how-jokes-won-the-election>>.

²⁴⁶ Maurice Tamman. "Clinton has a 90 percent chance of winning." *Reuters*. November 8, 2016. <<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-poll-idUSKBN1322J1>>.

²⁴⁷ Josh Katz. "Who Will Be President?" *New York Times: The Upshot*. November 8, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/upshot/presidential-polls-forecast.html?_r=0>.

²⁴⁸ Natalie Jackson. "HuffPost Forecasts Hillary Clinton Will Win With 323 Electoral Votes." *The Huffington Post*. November 8, 2016. <http://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/polls-hillary-clinton-win_us_5821074ce4b0e80b02cc2a94>.

²⁴⁹ Chris Cillizza and Aaron Blake. "Hillary Clinton has enough electoral votes to win the White House in final Fix map." *The Washington Post*. November 7, 2016. <goo.gl/Fe7uWF>.

²⁵⁰ Jahnvi Sen. "Not One Major Poll or Analyst Predicted Trump Defeating Clinton." *The Wire*. November 9, 2016. <<https://thewire.in/78839/not-one-major-poll-analyst-predicted-trump-defeating-clinton/>>.

²⁵¹ Jessie Hellmann. "Emerson College Polling predicts electoral landslide for Clinton." *The Hill*. November 7, 2016. <<http://thehill.com/blogs/ballot-box/presidential-races/304663-emerson-college-polling-predicts-electoral-landslide-for>>.

most “conservative” chances of winning: 71 percent.²⁵² And one op-ed went so far as to say, “Hillary Clinton will win. But what kind of president will she be?”²⁵³

And, perhaps relatedly, very few in the mainstream media or the Republican establishment found Donald Trump to be funny. Some called Trump “entertaining” or “shocking” at his rallies, or discussed the “insult comedy” he used when saying things like “Hillary Clinton got schlanged.”²⁵⁴ Others mentioned briefly the laughter Trump got from his crowds, discussed his mean tweets or quoted rally attendees who remarked, “He’s very exciting, it’ll be very entertaining.”^{255,256} But often what Trump supporters considered jokes were covered much more literally (and negatively) in the media. A prime example of this was when Trump said of a crying baby at an Ashburn, Virginia rally, “You can get the baby out of here.”²⁵⁷ At the rally, the audience laughed. But later that day, headlines read: “Watch Donald Trump Throw Crying Baby Out of Rally” and “Donald Trump Asked That A Mother Take Her Crying Baby Out Of His Rally.”^{258,259} The story became so blown up that Devan Ebert, the baby’s mother, came forward on *Fox News* to clarify: “I knew [Trump] was joking right from the beginning. It was great he provided that comic relief for me.” She added: “Don’t trust what you hear the media reporting.”²⁶⁰ The polarization across partisan lines in what Americans think constitutes humor, seen previously in the aftermath of McCain’s “Bomb Iran” joke, had only grown wider.

²⁵² “Who will win the presidency?” *FiveThirtyEight*. November 8, 2016.

<<https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/2016-election-forecast/#plus>>.

²⁵³ Martin Kettle. “Hillary Clinton will win. But what kind of president will she be?” *The Guardian*. October 27, 2016.

<<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/oct/27/hillary-clinton-will-win-what-kind-of-president-white-house-obama>>

²⁵⁴ Tessa Berenson. “The 5 Essential Elements of a Donald Trump Stump Speech.” *Time*. January 13, 2016.

<<http://time.com/4178881/donald-trump-campaign-speeches/>>.

²⁵⁵ Ben Gittleman and John Santucci. “Donald Trump Jokes He Could ‘Shoot Somebody’ Without Losing Support.” *ABC News*. January 23, 2016. <<http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/donald-trump-jokes-shoot-losing-support/story?id=36474145>>.

²⁵⁶ Jamelle Bouie. “The good, the Bad, and the Donald.” *Slate*. September 15, 2015. <[goo.gl/dPc7pe](http://go.gl/dPc7pe)>.

²⁵⁷ Lisa Hagen. “Mom of baby ejected from Trump rally: Don’t trust the media reports.” *The Hill*. August 8, 2016.

<<http://thehill.com/blogs/ballot-box/presidential-races/290814-mom-of-baby-ejected-from-trump-rally-dont-trust-the-media>>.

²⁵⁸ “Watch Donald Trump Throw Crying Baby Out of Rally.” *Rolling Stone*. August 2, 2016. <[goo.gl/f8o411](http://go.gl/f8o411)>.

²⁵⁹ Meg Anderson. “Donald Trump Asked That A Mother Take Her Crying Baby Out Of His Rally.” *NPR*. August 2, 2016.

<<http://www.npr.org/2016/08/02/488395073/trump-kicks-baby-out-of-rally>>. [Headline has since been changed.]

²⁶⁰ Hagen.

Now that the election is over, though, it has become apparent even to liberal critics: Donald Trump used humor as a means of persuasion.²⁶¹ Beyond making obligatory appearances on late-night TV (which he did), Trump’s rallies were full of comedy meant to entertain his supporters and attack his opponents.²⁶² He teased Chris Christie, “You’re not eating Oreos anymore.”²⁶³ He said of Rand Paul, “I never attacked him on his look, and believe me there’s plenty of subject matter there.”²⁶⁴ He flipped his belt buckle back and forth to ridicule Ben Carson for saying he once tried to stab someone through a belt.²⁶⁵ He repeated back an audience member’s interrupting shout that Ted Cruz was a “pussy.”²⁶⁶ And from the start, Trump coined catchy mocking nicknames for all of his opponents: Lyin’ Ted, Little Marco, Low-Energy Jeb, Crooked Hillary, Crazy Bernie, Goofy Elizabeth Warren.²⁶⁷ (In response, Bernie Sanders called Trump “Mr. Macho,” which, as *Politico* pointed out, was “sort of a compliment.”²⁶⁸)

It’s telling that prior to Election Day, the main people to spot Trump’s use of humor were comedians and comedy writers. Anthony Atamanuik, a comic who impersonated Trump in his sets, told *Esquire* in April 2016, “If he was an alt-comic, Donald Trump would be a funny guy. You could argue that his rallies are sort of semi-improvised stand-up routines. He’s an open mic’er who somehow made it to the top.”²⁶⁹ Jason Zinoman, a writer who covers comedy for the *New York Times*, called Trump “flamboyantly performative.”²⁷⁰ Trevor Noah observed most succinctly in an August 10, 2016 episode of *The Daily Show*: “Donald Trump is a stand-up

²⁶¹ Nussbaum.

²⁶² Joe Allen. “Jimmy Fallon Ruffles Trump’s Hair, Angers the World.” *Paste Magazine*. Sept. 16, 2016. <goo.gl/OGDeY6>.

²⁶³ “Did Donald Trump call for Hillary Clinton’s Assassination?” *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*. August 10, 2016. <https://tinyurl.com/m9zfd2g>.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁶ Ben Mathis-Lilley. “OK, Yeah, Donald Trump Referred to Ted Cruz as a ‘Pussy’ on Monday.” *Slate*. February 9, 2016. <http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2016/02/09/donald_trump_repeats_claim_about_cruz_he_s_a_pussy.html>.

²⁶⁷ Paola Chavez and Veronica Stracqualursi. “From ‘Crooked Hillary’ to ‘Little Marco,’ Donald Trump’s Many Nicknames.” *ABC News*. May 11, 2016. <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/crooked-hillary-marco-donald-trumps-nicknames/story?id=39035114>.

²⁶⁸ Joseph Cummins. “Donald Trump and the Art of the Nasty Political Nickname.” *Politico*. June 19, 2016. <goo.gl/11BvNI>.

²⁶⁹ Matt Miller. “Comedy vs. Donald Trump: The Great, Hilarious Battle For America.” *Esquire*. April 27, 2016. <goo.gl/xiFJyH>.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

comedian. You see it every single time he's on the stage. He riffs, he roasts, he does some impersonations. He's a stand-up comedian."²⁷¹

Atlantic writer Salena Zito got it right when she observed during the election: "The press takes [Trump] literally, but not seriously; his supporters take him seriously, but not literally."²⁷² Although the quote was originally referring to Trump's use of wildly incorrect statistics in his speeches, it applies well to his jokes too. When members of the press heard a Trump joke, they often considered its *literal* meaning (i.e. Trump wanted to kick a baby out of his rally) rather than taking the power of Trump's appeal *seriously* (i.e. that the joke could be funny to his audience, or even be effective at making him seem more likable to voters). In the next section, I will attempt to do the opposite: take Trump's jokes seriously but not literally, so as to better understand how his humor may have influenced the over 62 million Americans who voted for him. Part of the reason Trump's jokes were so overlooked as an effective means of persuasion, I will argue, is that much of his humor — and especially the lines that got him the most press attention — differed in function and type from the humor of past presidential candidates. But, I'll argue, Trump's style was effective, and his use of comedy was a natural extension of past practice in terms of using entertainment as a campaign strategy.

Donald Trump's Stand-Up Comedy

In a 2016 study of Donald Trump's use of humor — aptly titled "The Hands of Donald Trump" — three linguistic and sociology professors examined the "words, gestures, repetitions and interactive style" of Trump that defined him as "comedic, if also crude and bawdy."²⁷³ The paper, conducted by Kira Hall, Donna Goldstein and Matthew Ingram, supports the same

²⁷¹ "Did Donald Trump call for Hillary Clinton's Assassination?" *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*.

²⁷² Salena Zito. "Taking Trump Seriously, Not Literally." *The Atlantic*. September 23, 2016.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/09/trump-makes-his-case-in-pittsburgh/501335/>.

²⁷³ Kira Hall, Donna Goldstein and Matthew Ingram. "The hands of Donald Trump: Entertainment, gesture, spectacle." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, Vol. 6, No. 2. 2016. P. 77.

conclusion Trevor Noah came to, just re-phrased in slightly more academic prose: “To watch Trump perform a stump speech is to experience something like stand-up comedy.”²⁷⁴ The paper exhibits how Trump differs from presidential candidates of the past: using more *differentiation*-than *identification*-functioning humor, as well as using much more *identity*- and *action*-type jokes in the form of caricature and slap-stick.

As seen in my history of presidential humor — and in a study by David Rhea looking at the distribution of the functions and types of humor across presidential debates since 1960 — presidential candidates through history most frequently use *identification*-functioning humor (such as self-deprecation) and *language*-type jokes.²⁷⁵ Rhea found that in presidential debates, the distribution of types of humor was relatively stable across time, and distributed as follows.²⁷⁶

Language humor – 71.9% (e.g. the vast majority of jokes discussed in history section)
Logic humor – 18.6%
Identification humor – 7.9%
Action humor – 1.6%

He also found a stable distribution of functions of humor across time, which was:²⁷⁷

Identification – 45.9% (e.g. Perot’s “If there's a fairer way, I'm all ears.”)
Clarification – 18.5% (e.g. Kerry’s line about his tax plan)
Enforcement – 17.8% (e.g. Dole’s “let me tax your memories” joke about Ted Kennedy)
Differentiation – 17.8% (e.g. Perot’s quip about Arkansas)

Of course, these statistics were just considering presidential debates, where candidates are likely to be more serious and therefore may be slightly less caustic and perform less caricature or physical comedy than on a rally stage. But after examining 56 years of presidential campaigns, I feel confident that this distribution generally mirrors the use of humor in campaigns at large.

Although politicians have certainly used physical comedy (Goldwater, for example, would

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Rhea (2012) P. 121-122.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

sometimes poke his fingers through a pair of glasses with no lenses and tell audiences, “These glasses are like President Johnson’s programs. They look good, but they don’t work.”²⁷⁸), *language* humor accounts for most jokes mentioned in any book of political humor. And while politicians have certainly used *differentiation* humor (one of Michael Dukakis’ lines in a debate with George H. W. Bush comes to mind: “If I had a dollar, George, for every time you used that label [‘Liberal’], I’d qualify for one of those tax breaks for the rich that you want to give away.”²⁷⁹), *identification* humor has dominated presidential campaigns since John F. Kennedy.

As Hall, Goldstein and Ingram show, Trump instead used more *differentiation*-functioning humor that pitted his audiences against his opponents (and against the media, the government and the world at large). Trump made his rally audiences feel superior to people like Marco Rubio or Chris Christie, and by laughing with him, “supporters are empowered” and “their differences with respect to social class or economic interests appear trifling.”²⁸⁰ Indeed, a personal trainer from Texas who supported Trump once told *Slate*: “I love that he’s talking in everybody else’s language. He’s not trying to be politically correct—he’s just speaking to us like how we’re talking here, or how you talk to your friends.”²⁸¹

In *Duck Soup*, when Groucho makes fun of Dumont’s weight, age or looks, the audience is compelled to laugh along — after all, Dumont *does* seem ridiculous. So, he gets away with:

GROUCHO: Why don't you marry me?

DUMONT: Why, marry you?

GROUCHO: You take me, and I'll take a vacation. I'll *need* a vacation if we're going to get married. Married! I can see you right now in the kitchen, bending over a hot stove. *But I can't see the stove.*²⁸²

²⁷⁸ Arthur A. Sloane. *Humor in the White House: The Wit of Five American Presidents*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2001) P. 173.

²⁷⁹ See *Appendix A*.

²⁸⁰ Hall, Goldstein and Ingram 79.

²⁸¹ Bouie.

²⁸² *Duck Soup*.

It's a joke that caricatures Dumont by reducing her to a grotesque, overweight body, and it's just the kind of joke Trump would enjoy. Trump frequently made jokes about the bodily functions of his opponents during the election, as any good stand-up comic would: from his call-and-response at a Michigan rally about Hillary Clinton's bathroom use before a debate ("Where did she go? I thought she quit, I thought she gave up! I know where she went and it's too disgusting. Wasn't this a weird deal?") to his sneering comment on CNN that Megyn Kelly had "blood coming out of her wherever."^{283,284} And Trump didn't just talk about bodily functions, he acted them out and made caricatures of them: whether it was flailing his wrists to mock a disabled reporter, slumping his torso with closed eyes to make fun of Jeb Bush, or waving water over a stage to mimic Marco Rubio's sweating.²⁸⁵ (For photos of just a few of these caricatures, as well as key photos from the history of presidential campaign humor, see Appendix C.)

According to Hall, Goldstein and Ingram, Trump's use of such bodily humor and caricature (i.e. *action* and *identity* humor) put him in the position of a "Rabelaisian clown":

"In Trump, we find a Rabelaisian character that deploys bawdy humor to entertain his audience. He provides carnivalesque moments as he pokes fun at other candidates, at their bodies, at their fluids, at their stiffness. Like Rabelais, Trump understands that crude humor has the power to bring down the princely classes—aka, the political establishment—as well as anyone who opposes him."²⁸⁶

Trump thus understood the power of humor not just to make his listeners like him or attack his opponents, but to bring down an entire social order. Arguably no presidential candidate before him — and definitely not Hillary Clinton — had espoused that mission. It explains why Trump was so different in his humor's function and type: he sought different ends.

²⁸³ Hall, Goldstein and Ingram 77.

²⁸⁴ Nussbaum.

²⁸⁵ Hall, Goldstein and Ingram 73, 82.

²⁸⁶ Ibid 82.

The Traditional Humor of Hillary Clinton

Hillary Clinton went a more traditional route in her use of humor in the 2016 election. And that should surprise no one — Clinton, a First Lady turned U.S. Senator turned Secretary of State, has always been known for her caution, and she knew the risks of a joke gone wrong.²⁸⁷ Not only would she have paid close attention to the backlash against Kerry and McCain for their botched jokes, but she experienced a similar situation first-hand in 2008 when she misjudged her audience and chose too mean of a joke against Obama in a debate: “Lifting whole passages from someone else's speeches is not change you can believe in, it's change you can Xerox.”²⁸⁸ (The audience booed.) And unlike Trump or her husband, Clinton has never been known for having particularly good timing or joke-telling skills.²⁸⁹

So, in 2016, Clinton did not attempt to be a stand-up comic. She followed the script set by past candidates: appearing on *Ellen* to “dab,” going on *SNL* to poke fun at herself in a sketch, making appearances on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* and *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*.²⁹⁰ She used humor effectively after a fainting incident, opening a jar of pickles on *Jimmy Kimmel* to prove she was in good health and telling reporters, “The advice, of course, is just don't talk for a day or two. Yeah, that's not going to happen.”^{291,292} She had a few good attack lines, like: “[Trump]'s written a lot of books about business. They all seem to end at Chapter 11.”²⁹³ Clinton certainly didn't make any jokes about bodyweight or sweat.

²⁸⁷ Dana Milbank. “Hillary Clinton, too cautious for her own good.” *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/hillary-clintons-debilitating-caution/2015/03/06/e3225638-c411-11e4-9ec2-b418f57a4a99_story.html?utm_term=.6875c91e597e>.

²⁸⁸ M.J. Stephey. “Hillary's Botched Line.” *Time*. August 13, 2013. <goo.gl/GjEzaw>.

²⁸⁹ Miller.

²⁹⁰ Ted Johnson. “Should Late-Night TV Hosts Grill Presidential Candidates?” *Variety*. September 16, 2016.

<<http://variety.com/2016/biz/news/donald-trump-jimmy-fallon-ellen-degeneres-1201862888/>>.

²⁹¹ Lisa de Moraes. “Jimmy Kimmel Has Hillary Clinton Open Jar Of Pickles To Demonstrate Her State Of Health.” *Deadline*. August 23, 2016. <<http://deadline.com/2016/08/jimmy-kimmel-hillary-clinton-donald-trump-open-jar-emails-1201807027/>>.

²⁹² Amy Chozick. “Hillary Clinton Treats Theories About Coughing Attack With Dose of Humor.” *New York Times*. September 6, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/07/us/politics/hillary-clinton-health.html?_r=0>.

²⁹³ Ben Kamisar. “Clinton: All of Trump's books 'end at Chapter 11.'” *The Hill*. June 21, 2016. <<http://thehill.com/blogs/ballot-box/presidential-races/284287-clinton-all-of-trumps-books-end-at-chapter-11>>.

Clinton's most supposedly "daring" moment of humor on the campaign trail occurred on September 22, 2016, when she went on Zach Galifianakis' absurdist fake talk show *Between Two Ferns*.²⁹⁴ On the show, Galifianakis asked Clinton questions like, "What's the best way to reach you, email?" and "Does Ivanka ever call Chelsea?"²⁹⁵ He joked, "I'd love to meet the person who makes your pantsuits, because for Halloween, I wanted to go as a librarian from outer space." And Clinton responded with some funny lines of her own, though mostly played the "straight woman: the low-key, earnest, unflashy foil who lets the other guy make all the blatant jokes."²⁹⁶ The video was a success, getting over 30 million views in 24 hours — a record for *Funny or Die*.²⁹⁷ But Clinton still got flack. *The Atlantic* published a piece titled, "Hillary Clinton's Appearance on *Between Two Ferns* Wasn't Brave."²⁹⁸ It pointed out that the appearance was entirely scripted and preapproved, and that Clinton wasn't even the first to go on the show — President Obama had tested the waters in 2014.²⁹⁹ With a cynical media that was much less receptive than it had been when her husband played sax on *Arsenio Hall*, and with the fast-paced turnover of news on the Internet, the appearance was soon swept under the rug.

If Donald Trump was Groucho Marx, Hillary Clinton was Margaret Dumont. As *New Yorker* TV critic Emily Nussbaum observed, "Hillary matched the look and the feel of Margaret Dumont: the rich bitch, Nurse Ratched, the buzzkill, the no-fun mom, the one who shut the joke down."³⁰⁰ In a fight between "rude, rule-breaking Groucho Marx—destroyer of elites!" and Dumont, "pop culture's primal pearl-clutcher," Groucho was the clear comedic winner.³⁰¹

²⁹⁴ Abby Hamblin. "Just how funny was Hillary Clinton 'Between Two Ferns'?" *San Diego Union-Tribune*. September 22, 2016. <goo.gl/oHjnXz>.

²⁹⁵ "Hillary Clinton: Between Two Ferns with Zach Galifianakis." *Funny or Die*. September 22, 2016. <goo.gl/jeJT6a>.

²⁹⁶ Jeet Heer. "The Invisible Woman." *New Republic*. September 23, 2016. <goo.gl/hdvlv4>.

²⁹⁷ Hamblin.

²⁹⁸ Clare Foran. "Hillary Clinton's Appearance on *Between Two Ferns* Wasn't Brave." *The Atlantic*. Sept. 23, 2016. <<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/09/hillary-clinton-between-two-ferns-zach-galifianakis/501383/>>.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁰ Nussbaum.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*

Why Trump's Jokes Won Out

In *Duck Soup*, Margaret Dumont's character asks Groucho if he could say a few words about how he plans to run the country.³⁰² Groucho immediately bursts into song, joyously bragging about the authoritarian policies he'll institute — which include prohibitions against chewing gum, whistling, and “any form of pleasure.” He sings: “The last man nearly ruined this place, he didn't know what to do with it. If you think this country's bad off now, just wait 'til I get through with it.” And rather than objecting, the crowd seems amused. They cheer Groucho on as he dips women in the audience, uses a trumpet to mime a firing squad, and boasts about how much their taxes will go up while playing a jingle on a flute.

Donald Trump's humor was politically persuasive in the 2016 campaign in the same way Groucho Marx's humor was in that scene: by entertaining audiences and grabbing viewers' attention. Benefiting from changes in the way voters consume information on the Internet and aided by his outsider status, Trump took the “politainment” perspective presidential candidates have shown since 1960 to its logical extreme: a campaign fostered by and sustained on entertainment. And, adapting his humor to fit Americans' increasing cynicism, Trump's comedy style proved more effective than Clinton's.

Trump's humor entertained audiences, decreasing his listeners' ability to scrutinize his arguments and allowing them to dismiss any questionable points he made as “just jokes.” Trump made sure to leave “wiggle room,” both for himself to later claim something was a joke and for his audience to discount it if they disagreed.³⁰³ And unlike Kerry or McCain, who got in trouble for the few instances of humor some found controversial, Trump's rapid rate of telling jokes that got some sort of press backlash meant opponents couldn't hold him down for any one. Here,

³⁰² *Duck Soup*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=127&v=uSsUoxlSADk>.

³⁰³ Innocenti and Miller.

Trump also benefited from his outsider status, since he felt no qualms about destroying his Republican opponents with nicknames or ruining his political future over one gaffe.³⁰⁴ A career in reality TV had prepared him to heighten the drama as much as possible. Ezra Klein, one of the few journalists who admitted it was “undeniably enjoyable to watch Trump” and called Trump “America’s most skilled entertainer” before his victory, explains:

“[Trump] has the reality television star's ability to operate entirely without shame, and that permits him to operate entirely without restraint [...] Trump lives by the reality television trope that he's not here to make friends.”³⁰⁵

Trump’s clear lack of restraint in making jokes and his much more divisive approach to humor (through *differentiation*-functioning and *identity*- and *action*-type jokes) made him all the more persuasive, because his supporters sensed he was forthright and plain-speaking. According to Hall, Goldstein and Ingram, Trump’s followers liked that he seemed truly “spontaneous and real instead of scripted. [Trump was] an unplanned man, even an honest man, who tells it how he sees it.”³⁰⁶ And in a time of great cynicism about politics, when politicians (like Hillary Clinton) are frequently seen as scripted and calculating, this was a huge advantage.

Trump’s humor was also effective in grabbing voters’ — and the media’s — attention. As Hall, Goldstein and Ingram concluded, “Trump makes people laugh, even if they’re not laughing at the same thing.”³⁰⁷ Some laughed at Trump’s rally jokes because they found him funny; others laughed at him or in disbelief. But either way, both sides were watching. As *The Washington Post* reported, while Hillary Clinton’s campaign attracted 386 minutes of screen time on ABC, CBS and NBC broadcasts from January 1 to Labor Day 2016, Trump’s campaign

³⁰⁴ Peter Weber. “Stephen Colbert dissects Donald Trump's nickname strategy with Trump's 'chief nickname strategist.’” *The Week*. May 12, 2016. <<http://theweek.com/speedreads/623903/stephen-colbert-dissects-donald-trumps-nickname-strategy-trumps-chief-nickname-strategist>>.

³⁰⁵ Ezra Klein. “The rise of Donald Trump is a terrifying moment in American politics.” *Vox*. February 10, 2016. <<http://www.vox.com/2016/2/10/10956978/donald-trump-terrifying>>.

³⁰⁶ Hall, Goldstein and Ingram 83.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid* 79.

got 822 minutes.³⁰⁸ Andrew Tyndall, head of an organization that has tracked broadcast news since 1987, said it's "unlikely that another presidential candidate in history has ever gotten more" on-air coverage than Trump.³⁰⁹ The gap in coverage makes sense — news organizations knew Trump drew viewers in much better than Hillary. As Jack Fuller explains in a neuroscientific analysis of media in the Information Age titled *What is Happening to News*, when voters are being inundated not just by TV news but also a constant deluge of potential stories on Facebook to click on, any news story that can strike an emotional chord gets priority in the brain.³¹⁰ Fuller writes: "Emotion makes you pay attention. Emotion makes you remember."³¹¹ Trump's ability to make voters pay attention through any and all emotional means could be spotted early on: one study of the 2016 Republican primary debates found that of all the candidates, Trump got the most boos *and* the most laughs.³¹² And if there's one thing Trump did better than Clinton in the general election, it was inspiring the emotion in voters necessary to get them to pay attention.

Looking back over the span of presidential candidate humor since 1960 — from the importance of personality in the Kennedy-Nixon campaign to the impact of one-liners in the Reagan-Mondale race, to the rise of candidates needing to appear on entertainment shows in the Bush-Gore election — Trump's heavy reliance on entertainment to sustain his campaign seems unsurprising. While Trump used self-deprecating (and other *identification*-functioning) humor much less than previous candidates, this reflected not so much a change in the framework of

³⁰⁸ Paul Farhi. "Trump gets way more TV news time than Clinton. So what?" *The Washington Post*. September 21, 2016. <goo.gl/4sZpKt>.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ Jack Fuller. *What is Happening to News: The Information Explosion and the Crisis in Journalism*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010)

³¹¹ Ibid 71.

³¹² Patrick Stewart, Austin Eubanks and Jason Miller. "'Please Clap': Applause, Laughter and Booing during the 2016 GOP Presidential Primary Debates." *Political Science & Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 4. October 2016.

political humor as it showed how Trump was able to (like so many politicians before him) respond to his audience. Just as Bill Clinton recognized the need to set humor aside in his “Arkansas” debate moment with Perot, Trump in 2016 saw an angry and disillusioned populace and adapted his entertainment style to that emotion. As journalist Molly Ball wrote: “All the other candidates say, ‘Americans are angry, and I understand.’ Trump says, ‘I’M angry.’”³¹³ We saw Trump’s ability to adjust to his audience in his debates with Hillary Clinton, as well: Trump was much more serious at the debates than at his rallies.³¹⁴ This was smart, as studies have shown that humor works best for candidates trying to win over supporters and undecided voters, while *fear* works best for candidates trying to win over an audience that doesn’t like them.³¹⁵ Trump’s adaptation of tone to match the emotions of his audiences shows a level of manipulation and savvy not typically credited to him by the media — or even by his own voters.

Conclusion

In a lengthy piece on Donald Trump’s 2016 win titled “How Jokes Won the Election,” Emily Nussbaum asks: “How do you fight an enemy who’s just kidding?”³¹⁶ That is the question political scientists, and the American public at large, must ask ourselves now. Of course, Trump’s win cannot be attributed solely to his powers of entertainment — economic factors, anger at Barack Obama’s presidency, sexism, racism, and a genuine fear among rural voters of job loss to immigrants and “clean energy” certainly played a part — but Trump’s ability to use humor to rise out of a pack of seventeen Republican candidates via increased news coverage and then sustain that momentum through the general election shows how easily candidates can now use comedy for political gain.

³¹³ Klein.

³¹⁴ See *Appendix A*.

³¹⁵ Sonia Capelli, William Sabadie, and Olivier Trendel. “Using Humor or Fear Appeal.” *Recherche et Applications en Marketing*, Vol. 27, No. 2. 2012.

³¹⁶ Nussbaum.

A big part of the trend toward “politainment” since 1960 has been fueled by technology, with the “pass-along” effect growing stronger and stronger each decade. First, information disseminated past its original source via TV news shows replaying footage of one-liners in presidential debates. Then, shows started replaying footage of *SNL* parodies of debates. Then, YouTube allowed anyone to upload videos of candidates online. Now, Donald Trump can send out a Tweet and see it read instantly by his 20 million followers, circulate widely on news sites and blogs of all political leanings, and get shared by hundreds of thousands of Americans to their own online circles. In other words, as the spread of political information has become more and more democratized, politicians’ ability to get their messages out directly to voters has increased as well. Without the check of a strong press or party system, and given that candidates know information with the strongest emotional pull (like entertainment) gets the most shares, that ability comes with a real danger for abuse.

At the end of *Duck Soup*, Groucho Marx’s character Rufus T. Firefly creates so much mayhem — hiring a hot dog and peanut vendor to be his Secretary of War and slapping an ambassador not once but twice — that a “Great War” breaks out in Freedonia. In the final scene, Firefly’s army is successful at last, and Dumont’s character begins to sing the Freedonia national anthem...only to be pelted by oranges thrown at her by members of her own side. It is an absurdist scene, but one that seems vaguely foreboding in the time of President Trump: in the age of Groucho, all stories end humorously but not one ends in peace.

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Appendix A: Audience Laughter in Debates Since 1980

*Note: The 1960 and 1976 televised debates are not included here, since they were filmed in a small TV studio rather than in front of a large live audience. The list may be incomplete, as laughs were found via a combination of transcripts and footage.³¹⁷

I = Identification, C = Clarification, E = Enforcement, D = Differentiation

<u>Year</u>	<u>Debate</u>	<u>Speaker</u> <i>*Winner italicized</i>	<u>Humorous Remark</u>	<u>Function of Humor</u>	<u>Total Laughs</u>
<u>Election of 1980</u>	Oct. 28 Cleveland, OH	Jimmy Carter (D)	“Barbara, reluctant as I am to say anything critical about Governor Reagan, I will try to answer your question.”	E – Playful acknowledgement of debate norms	Carter = 1 (1E)
		<i>Ronald Reagan (R)</i>	“Well, Barbara, you’ve asked that question twice. I think you ought to have at least one answer to it.”	D – Attacking Carter’s evasion of Iran question	
			“There you go again.”	D – Undermining Carter’s attacks	Reagan = 3 (1E, 2D)
			“But when I have quoted a Democrat President, as the President says, I was a Democrat. I said many foolish things back in those days.”	E – Playfully enforcing identity as a Republican, separate from past	
<u>Election of 1984</u>	Oct. 7 Louisville, KY	Walter Mondale (D)	“... What did you do right after the election? You went out and tried to cut \$20 billion out of Medicare. And so, when you say, “There you go again,” people remember this, you know.”	D – Undermining Reagan’s line	Mondale = 5 (1E, 4D)
			“Do you want to give me some suggestions?”	E – Playful answer to question of what most the outrageous thing Reagan said was	
			“Well, we’ve just finished almost the whole debate. And the American people don’t have the slightest clue about what Pres. Reagan will do about these deficits.”	D – attacking Reagan’s answers	
			“Well, I guess I’m reminded a little bit of what Will Rogers once said about Hoover. He said, ‘It’s not what he doesn’t know that bothers me; it’s what he knows for sure that just ain’t so.’”	D – attacking opponent as a liar through quote	
		<i>Ronald Reagan (R)</i>	“I wasn’t going to say this at all, but I can’t help it. There you go again.”	D – Undermining Mondale’s attacks	Reagan = 6 (1I, 2C, 1E, 2D)
			“I gave you back some of that time.”	I – To moderator, jovial attitude toward rules, releasing tension	
	Oct. 21 Kansas City, MO	Walter Mondale (D)	“That’s what a President’s supposed to know: where those weapons are going to be. If they’re space weapons, I assume they’ll be in space.”	D – showing difference in reasoning	

³¹⁷ Transcripts/footage obtained from the American Presidency Project, the Commission on Presidential Debates, and C-SPAN.

<u>Election of 1984</u> (con.)	Oct. 21 Kansas City, MO (con.)	<i>Ronald Reagan (R)</i>	“How anyone could think that any sane person would believe you could call back a nuclear missile...So, thank you for giving me a chance to straighten the record. I'm sure that you appreciate that.”	C – Clarifying position on issue	<i>See previous page.</i>
			“...commercial out where [Mondale]'s appearing on the deck of the Nimitz and watching the F-14's take off. That's an image of strength—except if he had had his way when the Nimitz was being planned, he would have been deep in the water out there because there wouldn't have been any Nimitz to stand on. He was against it.”	D – Showing falsehood of opponent's ad campaign	
			“I want you to know that also I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent's youth and inexperience.”	C – Clarifying with deflection in memorable line	
			“Well, my rebuttal is I've heard the national debt blamed for a lot of things, but not for illegal immigration across our border.”	E – Enforcing incongruity in reasoning	
<u>Election of 1988</u>	Sept. 25 Winston-Salem, NC	<i>Michael Dukakis (D)</i>	“He also wants to spend a lot of money on additional programs. If he keeps this up, he's going to be the Joe Isuzu of American politics.”	D – Linking opponent to fantastical salesman	Dukakis = 10 (1I, 1C, 5E, 3D) Bush = 15 (10I, 4E, 1D)
			“25th of December, Mr. Vice President.”	E – Joke call-back enforcing earlier Bush mess up	
			“Did I sense a desire that maybe Lloyd Bentsen ought to be your running mate when you said there are three people on your ticket?”	E – Joking about Bush's running mate	
		<i>George H. W. Bush (R)</i>	“Is this the time to unleash our one-liners? That answer was about as clear as Boston harbor.”	E – Exposing “Joe Isuzu” line as prepared, then ironically using one-liner to attack argument	
			“...nuclear deployment on the Midgetman missile, or on the Minuteman, whatever it is. We're going to have to—the MX. We're going to have to do that. It's Christmas.”	I – Showing good humor after mess-up	
			“Wouldn't it be nice to be the iceman and never make a mistake?”	I – Self-deprecating	
			“It's only on yellow here. Wait a minute.”	I – To moderator, releasing tension after called out for speaking over	
			“We'll have an opportunity to see the two of them in action in a friendly forum, wonderful friendly fashion like this.”	I – joking about VP debate	
			“I had hoped this had been a little friendlier evening. I wanted to hitchhike a ride home in his tank with him.”	E – Teasing at image of Dukakis in tank	

<u>Election of 1988</u> (con.)	Oct. 13 Los Angeles, CA (con.)	Michael Dukakis (D)	"I won the Democratic nomination in fifty-one separate contests. I think I'm a reasonably likable guy."	C – Defending record/likability	<i>See previous page.</i>
			"I certainly hope I will be liked by [the people] on the 8th of November."	I – Releasing tension over question	
			"You know, Mr. Bush has never appointed a judge. I've appointed over 130, so I have a record."	D – Differentiating record from Bush	
			"I can understand, after the vice-presidential debate, why Mr. Bush would want no more debates."	E – Light joking about Quayle	
			I think Mr. Bush has used the label "liberal" at least ten times if I had a dollar, George, for every time you used that label, I'd qualify for one of those tax breaks for the rich that you want to give away."	D – Attacking Bush's policies directly	
			"I didn't hear the word 'liberal' or 'left' one time. I thank you for that."	E – Joking with Bush, enforcing earlier criticism	
			[On Bush's policies] "The flexible freeze, somebody described it the other day as a kind of economic slurpee..."	E – Making fun of Bush's policy	
		George H. W. Bush (R)	"I mean, he's against most defense matters, and now he wants to get an army of JRS auditors going out there."	E – Revealing ridiculous nature of Dukakis proposal through funny language	
			"I don't have a [Supreme Court nominee] list yet. I feel pretty confident tonight, but not that confident."	I – Reminder how win is uncertain/at voters' mercy	
			[Smiling] "Just a minute."	I – To moderator, releasing tension after bad question	
			"That boo was excessively loud. Can you give me five seconds, Bernie, out of fairness? Give me five."	I - To moderator, releasing tension after boos	
			"You're stealing my close. I had something very nice to say in there."	I - To moderator, showing joviality	
			"Can we start the clock over? I held off for the applause."	I - To moderator, showing humor	
			"Sam Rayburn had a great expression on this. He said here were all these intellectuals out there griping and complaining and saying it was negative coverage. Rayburn says, yeah, and that guy never ran for sheriff either."	I – Showing he's trying to be unaffected by negative coverage	
			"I was not out there when that stock market dropped wringing my hands and saying this was the end of the world as <i>some</i> political leaders were."	D – Differentiating himself from opponent	
"Do you remember the Senator from Boston chanting out there and the ridicule factor from that lady from Texas that was on there?"	E – Enforcing audience memory of Democratic convention				

<u>Election of 1992</u>	Oct. 11 St. Louis, MO	<i>Bill Clinton (D)</i>	“Ross, that's a great speech, but it's not quite that simple.”	D- Undermining Perot's intelligence	Clinton = 6 (1I, 2E, 3D) Bush = 13 (7I, 2C, 3E, 1D) Perot = 29 (15I, 3C, 7E, 4D)
		George H. W. Bush (R)	“Governor Clinton, he talks about the reaction to the markets. There was a momentary fear that he might win, and the markets went ‘phwee.’”	D – Attacking Clinton's economic plan	
		Ross Perot (I)	“Well, they've got a point. I don't have any experience in running up a \$4 trillion debt.”	D- Setting self apart from Bush	
			“If there's a fairer way, I'm all ears. Ah.”	I – Self-deprecating about large ears	
			“We ought to get along with one another. If you can't get there, just recognize we're all stuck with one another, because nobody's going anywhere.”	C – Clarifying his political position on bipartisanship	
			“Number one, if I get there [to White House], it will be a very unusual and historical event...”	I – Self-deprecating (unintentional)	
			“All these fellows with thousand-dollar suits and alligator shoes running up and down the Halls of Congress that make policy now, the lobbyists, the PAC guys, the foreign lobbyists, what have you, they'll be over there in the Smithsonian.”	E – Enforcing absurdity of Washington D.C.	
			“Everybody will faint in Washington. They've never seen anything happen in that town.”	E – Enforcing what would happen if elected	
			“When they get off by themselves, they said, ‘Nobody did it.’”	D –Attacking opponents	
	Oct. 15 Richmond VA	<i>Bill Clinton (D)</i>	“I think I remember the question.”	E – Making fun of Perot for taking long time	
			“I don't want you to read my lips, and I sure don't want you to read his.”	D – Using Bush line against him	
			“According to my mother and my wife and my daughter, this world would be a lot better place if women were running it most of the time.”	I – Identifying with common man joke	
		George H. W. Bush (R)	“I don't know if you saw the debate the other night, suffered through that.”	I – Identifying with public	
			“I don't want anybody to stampede to cut the President's salary off altogether. Barbara is sitting over here.”	I – Ubiquitous wife joke; identify with middle class	
			“Please don't say anything by the Washington Post.”	E – Undermining Clinton's argument	
			“What's happening up there?”	I – Relieves tension by acknowledging noise in audience	
			“I think if Barbara Bush were running this year she'd be elected.”	I – Self-deprecating	
			“I don't know. Starting after 4 years.”	C – Clarifying opinion of when	

<u>Election of 1992</u> (con.)	Oct. 15 Richmond VA (con.)	George H. W. Bush (R) (con.)	<i>See previous page.</i>	minority could be elected president	<i>See previous page.</i>
			“Good Republicans.”	I – Identifying self in group	
			““I think we owe Carole Simpson a -- anybody who can stand in between these three characters here and get the job done -- we owe her a round of applause. Just don’t take it out of my time.”	I – Showing jovial mood joking with moderator (Simpson)	
		Ross Perot (I)	“Whose fault is that? Not the Democrats; not the Republicans. Somewhere out there there's an extraterrestrial that's doing this to us, I guess.”	E – Enforcing absurdity of no one taking blame	
			“We'll be on again Saturday night 8 to 9 o'clock on ABC.”	I – Common man self-advertising	
			“I don't have any spin doctors. I don't have any speechwriters. Probably shows. I make those charts you see on television even.”	I – Self-deprecating	
			“It is a long subject; you wouldn't let me finish tonight. If you want to hear it, you can get it tomorrow night.”	I – Showing awareness of how he talks long	
			“If you want to have a high-risk experience comparable to bungee jumping -- go into Congress sometime when they're working on this kind of legislation, when the lobbyists are running up and down the halls. Wear your safety-toe shoes when you go.”	E – Enforcing absurdity of D.C.	
			“You get the job, give your relatives the janitor's job at \$57,000 a year, more than the teachers make. And with luck, they clean the cafeteria once a week.”	E – Enforcing downside of current situation	
	“Finally had to come back to school, the chicken lost his feathers. That's the only way we got him back.”		I – Telling farm story to seem relatable		
	“I'll see you tomorrow night on NBC, 10:30 p.m., 11 p.m., eastern.”		I – Common man self-advertising		
	Oct. 19 East Lansing, MI	<i>Bill Clinton (D)</i>	[To Bush] “You think it’s relevant!”	E – Allying himself with Bush to show absurdity of Perot	
			“He said trickle-down economics was voodoo economics; now he's it's biggest practitioner.”	D – Attacking Bush	
		George H. W. Bush (R)	“I would like the record to show the panelists that Ross Perot took the first shot at the press. My favorite bumper sticker, though, is ‘Annoy the Media. Reelect President Bush.’”	C – Clarifying identity to voters	
			“Jim Baker's a man. Yes, I plead guilty to that.”	E – Undermining question about diversity of cabinet	

<u>Election of 1992</u> (con.)	Oct. 19 East Lansing, MI (con.)	George H. W. Bush (R) (con.)	“...Lot of women running for office. As I said the other night, I hope a lot of them lose because they're liberal Democrats.”	E – Enforcing party lines in jovial way	<i>See previous pages.</i>
			“When I make a mistake, I say I’m sorry.”	I – About time, showing himself as good person	
		Ross Perot (I)	“I grew up five blocks from Arkansas.”	I – Identifying as common man	
			“It's irrelevant.”	D – Disagreeing with Clinton, undermining Arkansas record	
			“I could say that I ran a small grocery store on the corner, therefore, I extrapolate that into the fact that I could run Wal-Mart. That's not true.”	D – Comparing Clinton to small grocery store owner	
			“I thought you’d forgotten I was here.”	I – To moderator, Self-deprecating	
			“I've lived the American dream; I'd like for your children to be able to live it, too.”	I – Establishing personality	
			“Everybody now knows the terrible price they're paying by waiting until it's obvious to the brain dead that they have problems.”	C- Clarifying position simply	
			“And as soon as I found it out, he went out the door.” [Employee w/foreign accounts]	C – Countering attack	
			“Jim, let me net it out.”	I – Establishing personality	
			“I have to do it, and nobody's called me yet to come up, I might mention.”	I- Self-deprecating	
			“I just love the fact that everybody, particularly in the media, goes bonkers over the town hall. I guess it's because you will lose your right to tell them what to think.”	E – Enforcing bad view of media	
			“I just have one son. So he and I are surrounded by women telling us what to do all the time.”	I – Self-deprecating, common man	
			“I’m sure I’ll do it before it’s over.”	I – Joking about debate rules	
			“If you've been on television about it, you think you did it.”	E – Absurdity of politicians	
“We'll be down in the trenches, under the hood, working on fixing the old car to get it back on the road.”	I – Like common man, fixing car				
<u>Election of 1996</u>	Oct. 6 Hartford, CT	<i>Bill Clinton (D)</i>	“His running mate, Jack Kemp, once said Bob Dole never met a tax he didn't hike.”	D – Attacking opponent	<i>Clinton = 6 (4I, 1E, 1D)</i> <i>Dole = 16 (6I, 5C, 5E)</i>
			““It's sort of their golden oldie, you know, it's a record they think they can play that everybody loves to hear.”	E – Undermining “liberal elite” argument	
			“We cut the deficit 4 years in a row for the first time since before the Civil War—I mean, before World War II— and maybe before the Civil War, too.”	I – Showing good humor about mess-up	

<u>Election of 1996</u> (con.)	Oct. 6 Hartford, CT (con.)	<i>Bill Clinton</i> (D) (con.)	“He’s arranged for me to spend a lot more time with Senator D’Amato in the last couple of years, and so I’m more familiar with his comments than I used to be.”	I – Self-deprecating about Whitewater investigation	<i>See previous page.</i>
			“No comment.”	I – Playing along with Dole’s joke	
		Bob Dole (R)	“Well, he’s better off than he was 4 years ago.” [Referring to Clinton]	I – Good humor about Clinton	
			“...And I may be better off 4 years from now.”	I – Joke about winning	
			“Oh, yes, and you’ll be eligible.”	C – Clarifying tax plan with joke to moderator	
			“And so will the former President, yes.”	I – Good-natured joke, release of tension	
			“In fact, when I fell off that podium in Chico, before I hit the ground I had a call on my cell phone from a trial lawyer saying, ‘I think we’ve got a case here.’”	C – Making past falling blunder seem funny	
			“My wife’s a lawyer. We’re the only two lawyers in Washington that trust each other.”	E – Critiquing Washington lawyers	
			[Finishing sentence after interruption.] “Food.”	I – Establishing funny rapport, acknowledges ridiculousness of debate	
			“Well, my blood pressure is lower and my weight, my cholesterol. But I will not make health an issue in this campaign.”	E – Joking about health in campaign	
			“Well, I’m really encouraged to know of your renewed friendship with Al D’Amato, and I know he appreciates it.”	E – Joking about Whitewater	
			“And again, I know Senator D’Amato I think may have had a hearing or two on Whitewater; I can’t remember.”	E – Jokingly bringing up Whitewater	
			“I remember one day on the floor, I said, ‘Now, gentlemen, let me tax your memories,’ and Kennedy jumped up and said, ‘Why haven’t we thought of that before?’”	E – Lighthearted joke enforcing difference between him and liberals	
			“What’s the subject matter?”	I – Acknowledges forgetting place	
	Oct. 16 San Diego, CA	<i>Bill Clinton</i> (D)	“I was going to applaud, too.” [For Dole]	I – Self-deprecating, to audience	
Bob Dole (R)		“I’ve got lots of relatives, and they’re good, average, middle class, hard-working Americans. They live all across the country. They’re not all Republicans... maybe all but one.”	I – Establishing himself as like the audience		

<u>Election of 1996</u> (con.)	Oct. 16 San Diego, CA (con.)	Bob Dole (R) (con.)	"I think age is very—you know, wisdom comes from age, experience, and intelligence. And if you have some of each — and I have some age, some experience, some intelligence, that adds up to wisdom."	C – Clarifying position on age issue	<i>See previous pages.</i>
			"I'm disabled. I shouldn't have a preference. I would like to have one in this race, come to think of it. But I don't get one. Maybe we can work that out. I get a 10-point spot."	C – Clarifying position on affirmative action	
			"I fell off a platform out in California...a while back. Before I hit the ground, my cell phone rang, and this trial lawyer says, 'I think we've got a case here.'"	C – Making past falling blunder seem funny; repeating joke!	
<u>Election of 2000</u>	Oct. 3 Boston, MA	Al Gore (D)	"Suits me."	D – Joking Bush won't want to go into details on policies	<i>Gore = 7 (3I, 1C, 2E, 1D) Bush = 18 (10I, 2C, 2E, 4D)</i>
		<i>George W. Bush</i> (R)	"Look, this is the man who's got great numbers. He talks about numbers. I'm beginning to think, not only did he invent the Internet, but he invented the calculator."	E – Poking fun at Gore playfully	
			"I've been standing up to big Hollywood, big trial lawyers--what was the question? It was about emergencies, wasn't it?"	I – Self-deprecating	
	Oct. 11 Winston-Salem, NC	Al Gore (D)	"For be it from me to suggest otherwise."	E – Moderator moving on from Bush, enforce division	
			"I don't want to jump in."	I – Not breaking rules	
			"I've been trying so hard not to."	E – After Bush breaks rules	
		<i>George W. Bush</i> (R)	"Some of them I got a conflict of interest on, if you know what I mean."	C – When asked about dad's foreign policy	
			"Twice." [On Gore interruptions]	E – Keeping track of rules	
			"Oh, you mean the rules."	I – Good rapport with moderator	
			"Well, we all make mistakes. I've been known to mangle a syllable or two myself, you know."	I – Self-deprecating	
			"That's the kind of exaggeration I was just talking about"	D – Attacking Gore	
			"Wait a minute."	I – Releasing tension after mean question	
	Oct. 17 St. Louis, MO	Al Gore (D)	"High school."	I – Breaking rules to ask questions of audience	
			"You know, some parents are worried about those filters, that you'll have to ask your kids how to put them on there."	C – Joking about Internet	

<u>Election of 2000</u> (con.)	Oct. 17 St. Louis, MO (con.)	Al Gore (D) (con.)	“Yes.”	I – In response to 6 th grade class asking if he’ll keep promises	<i>See previous page.</i>
		<i>George W. Bush</i> (R)	“Well, the difference is that I can get it done.”	D – Attacking opponent	
			“It’s not only what your philosophy and what your position on issues, but can you get things done.” [Smiles, nods at Gore who was approaching from behind]	D – Attacking opponent	
			“Here you go. I’ve got...”	I – Offers glasses to audience member who can’t read card	
			“Well, he’s wrong.”	D – Attacking opponent	
			[To moderator] “My turn?”	I – Humble	
			“Jim, is this...”	C – Trying to clarify position but didn’t understand issue (unintentional)	
			“Thank you for your question.”	I – Thankful to 6 th grade class	
			<i>George W. Bush</i> (R) (con.)	“When I campaigned in a race, a lot of folks didn’t think I could win anything, including, by the way, my mother.”	
		“Could I answer that? One reason people are skeptical is because people don’t answer the questions they’ve been asked.”		I – Voicing how audience feels	
<u>Election of 2004</u>	Sept. 30 Coral Gables, FL	John Kerry (D)	“Well, where do you want me to begin?”	E – Joking about Bush faults	Kerry = 8 (5I, 1C, 1E, 1D) Bush = 20 (12I, 5C, 3E)
			“I’ve chuckled a few times at some of their comments.”	I – Good humor about Bush daughters	
			“Well, I know, I’ve learned not to do that.”	I – On questioning own daughters	
		<i>George W. Bush</i> (R)	“Whew, that’s a loaded question.”	I – Getting audience on side of tough question	
			“I won’t hold it against him that he went to Yale. There’s nothing wrong with that.”	I – Self-deprecating	
			“I’m trying to put a leash on them.”	I – On daughters	
			“Oh, I’m a pretty calm guy.”	I – Establishing ethos	
	Oct. 8 St. Louis, MO	John Kerry (D)	“Yes, I certainly do.”	I – Providing relief after hard question	
			“Looking around here at this group here, I suspect there are only three people who are going to be affected [by tax]: the President, me, and Charlie, I’m sorry, you too.”	C – Clarifying his tax plan	

<u>Election of 2004</u> (con.)	Oct. 8 St. Louis, MO (con.)	<i>George W. Bush</i> (R)	“That answer almost made me want to scowl.”	I – Establishing calm ethos	<i>See previous page.</i>
			“Keep going, good.”	I – Joking with moderator	
			“You looked at me like my clock was up.”	I – Joking with moderator	
			“I own a timber company? That’s news to me.”	C – Defending attack humorously	
			“Need some wood?”	C – Showing how ridiculous Kerry attack was	
			“I’m not telling.” [About VP pick]	C – Punchy line	
			“I...haven’t picked anybody yet. Plus, I want them all voting for me.”	C – Explaining lack of VP pick with humor line	
			“Trying to decipher that.”	E – Undermine Kerry’s argument	
			“Either way.”	I – Calm ethos	
			“Put a head fake on us.” [When couldn’t find woman asking question]	I – Bush joking with audience	
	Oct. 13 Tempe, AZ	John Kerry (D)	“Being lectured by the President on fiscal responsibility is a little bit like Tony Soprano talking to me about law and order in this country.”	D – Attack on Bush	
			“Well, I guess the President and you and I are three examples of lucky people who married up. And some would say maybe me more so than others.”	I – Self-deprecating	
			“But I can take it.”	I – Good humor	
		<i>George W. Bush</i> (R)	“Your record is such that Ted Kennedy, your colleague, is the conservative senator from Massachusetts!”	E – Making fun of Kerry record jovially	
			“Gosh, I sure hope it’s not the administration.”	C – One-liner response to tough question	
			“In all due respect, I’m not so sure it’s credible to quote leading news organizations about—well, never mind.”	E – Enfor2cing doubt about Kerry’s sources	
			“To listen to them.”	I – Jokingly powerless in face of wife/daughters	
	“To stand up straight and not scowl.”	I – Self-deprecating			
	“Fortunately, [Barbara] didn’t hold me to that deal, and she’s out campaigning, along with our girls, and she speaks English a lot better than I do.”	I – Self-deprecating			
<u>Election of 2008</u>	Sept. 26 Oxford, MI	<i>Barack Obama</i> (D)	“John, 10 days ago, you said that the fundamentals of the economy are sound.” [After Lehrer makes him say second time]	I – Showing relatable sense of humor	<i>See next page.</i>
		John McCain (R)	“Are you afraid I couldn’t hear him?”	I – Joking with moderator	
	“I’m not going to set the White House visitors schedule before I’m president of the United States. I don’t even have a seal yet.”		C – Clever avoiding question		

<u>Election of 2008</u> (con.)	Oct. 7 Nashville, TN	<i>Barack Obama</i> (D)	“My wife, Michelle, is there, and she could give you a much longer list than I do.” [On what he doesn’t know	I – Self-deprecating	<i>Obama</i> = 4 (3I, 1E) <i>McCain</i> = 5 (1I, 2C, 1E, 1D)
		John McCain (R)	“Not you, Tom.”	C – Avoiding tough question on treasury appointment, joke with moderator	
			“Maybe.”	E – Casting doubt on Obama’s argument	
	Oct. 15 Hempstead, NY	<i>Barack Obama</i> (D)	“Even Fox News disputes it, and—that doesn’t happen very often when it comes to accusations about me.”	E – Enforcing attack on McCain humorously	
		John McCain (R)	“Congratulations.” [To McCain]	I – Ethos	
			“Because there’s not enough vouchers, therefore, even though it’s working, we shouldn’t do it. I got it.”	D – Attacking Obama’s logic	
<u>Election of 2012</u>	Oct. 3 Denver, CO	<i>Barack Obama</i> (D)	“...20 years ago, I became the luckiest man on Earth because Michelle Obama agreed to marry me.”	I – Self-deprecating	<i>Obama</i> = 16 (9I, 1C, 2E, 4D) <i>Romney</i> = 4 (2I, 1E, 1D)
			“I just want to wish, sweetie, you happy anniversary and let you know that a year from now we will not be celebrating it in front of 40 million people.”	I – Establishing himself as normal guy	
			“He can have them, he can have them. Go ahead.”	I – About time, jovial ethos	
			“Go ahead.”	I – Jovial ethos	
			“If you repeal Obamacare—and I have become fond of this term, Obamacare...”	C – Appropriating term as own	
			“I had 5 seconds before you interrupted me”	I – Joking with moderator	
			“That I admit.” [About breaking rules]	I – Self-deprecating	
			“Please elaborate.”	E – Sarcastically joking with Romney	
			“I think Governor Romney is going to have a busy first day, because he's also going to repeal Obamacare, which will not be very popular among Democrats as you're sitting down with them.”	D – Attacking Romney	
		Mitt Romney (R)	“Four years ago, I said that I'm not a perfect man and I wouldn't be a perfect President. And that's probably a promise that Governor Romney thinks I've kept.”	I – Self-deprecating	
			“Congratulations to you, Mr. President, on your anniversary. I'm sure this was the most romantic place you could imagine, here with me.”	I – Self-deprecating	
			“I've got five boys. I'm used to people saying something that's not always true, but just keep on repeating it and ultimately hoping I'll believe it.”	E – Enforcing light attack on Obama	

<u>Election of 2012</u> (con.)	Oct. 3 Denver, CO (con.)	Mitt Romney (R) (con.)	Mr. President, you're entitled, as the President, to your own airplane and to your own house, but not to your own facts."	D – Attacking Obama	<i>See previous page.</i>		
	Oct. 16 Hempstead, NY	<i>Barack Obama</i> (D)	"It's conceivable that Governor Romney could bring down gas prices, because with his policies we might be back in that same mess."	D – Attacking Romney plan			
			"You know, I don't look at my pension. It's not as big as yours, so it doesn't take as long."	D – Differentiating self with Romney			
			"I'm here."	I – Connecting with moderator			
	Oct. 22 Boca Raton, FL	<i>Barack Obama</i> (D)	"You mentioned the Navy, for example, and that we have fewer ships than we did in 1916. Well, Governor, we also have fewer horses and bayonets."	D – Attacking Romney			
			"And we visited the web site quite a bit, and it still doesn't work."	E – Attacking Romney lightly			
			"You've now heard three debates, months of campaigning, and way too many TV commercials."	I – Showing he's a normal guy			
		Mitt Romney (R)	"Well, that's probably true." [About talking too long]	I – Self-deprecating			
	<u>Election of 2016</u>	Sept. 26 Hempstead, NY	Hillary Clinton (D)	"Why not? Yeah, why not?"		E – Joking about Trump blaming everything on her	Clinton = 5 (5E) Trump = 7 (1I, 2C, 2E, 2D)
				"Well, just listen to what you heard."		E – Enforcing negative view of Trump	
"Whew, OK."				E – Undermining Trump's statements			
"It's a good one, though. It well describes the problem."				E – Undermining Trump attack			
Oct. 9 St. Louis, MO		<i>Donald Trump</i> (R)	"I also have a much better temperament than she has, you know?"	D – Showing differences, unintentional			
			"Oh really?"	E – Undermining attack			
			"No, I'm a gentleman, Hillary. Go ahead."	C – Showing calm (unintentional)			
			"Now she's blaming the lie on the late, great Abraham Lincoln. That's one I haven't...Ok, Honest Abe never lied."	D – Showing Clinton not like Lincoln			
Oct. 19 Las Vegas, NV		Hillary Clinton (D)	"I'm shocked to hear that." [After Clinton says he wouldn't be good leader]	E – Undermining Clinton statement			
			"Made with Chinese steel."	E – Joking about Trump's hotel			
	<i>Donald Trump</i> (R)	"Nobody has more respect for women than I do. Nobody."	C – Defending attack, unintentional.				
"Should have gotten it." [On Emmy]		I – Ethos					

Appendix B: Average Cases of Candidate Humor Per Presidential Debate, 1960-2008³¹⁸

*Note: Rhea's "Cases of Humor" include candidate humor that did not get any laughter from the audience, unlike my compilation in Appendix A.

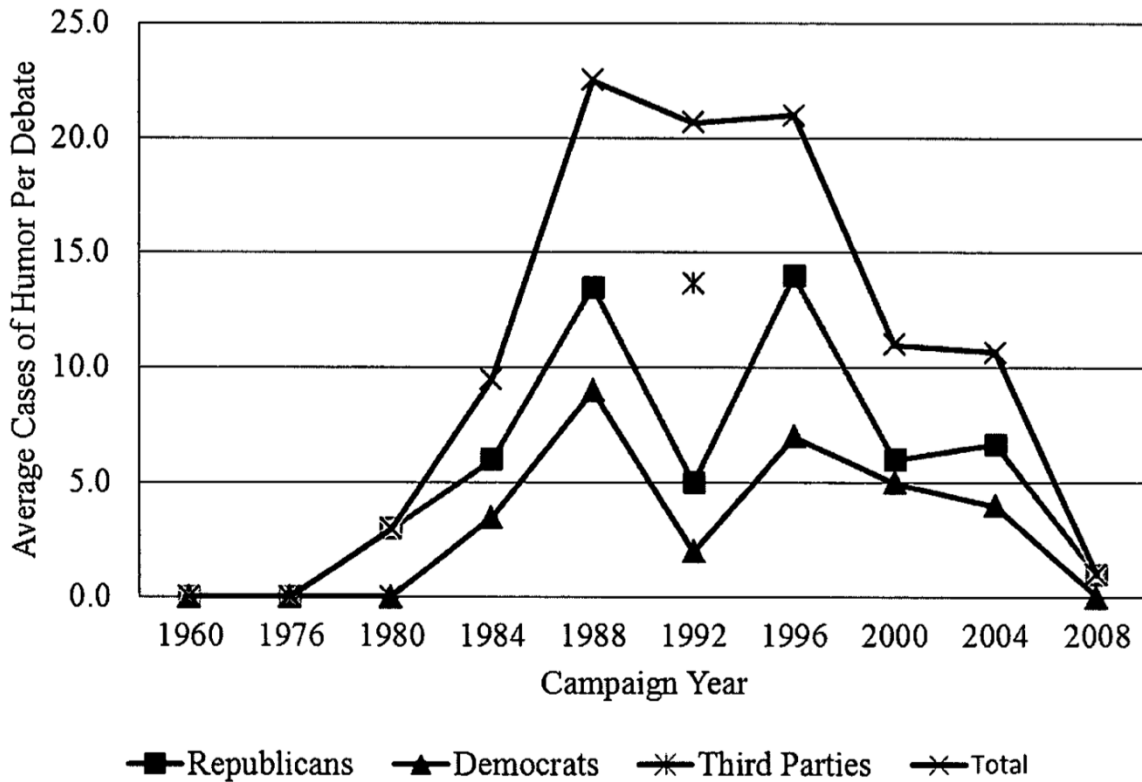


Figure 1: Historical trend of humor use in presidential debates. No line for third party candidates was drawn because they only had debate appearances in 1980 and 1992.

³¹⁸ David M. Rhea. "There They Go Again: The Use of Humor in Presidential Debates 1960-2008." *Argumentation and Advocacy*, Vol. 49, Fall 2012.

Appendix C: Pictures of Key Moments in Presidential Campaign Humor



*John F. Kennedy goes on the Jack Paar Show
(1959)*



*Richard Nixon says "Sock it to me?"
on Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In
(1968)*



*Ronald Reagan addresses the age issue
(1984)*



*Ross Perot laughs during a debate
(1992)*



*Bill Clinton plays sax on Arsenio Hall
(1992)*



*George W. Bush goes on Oprah
(2000)*



*SNL parodies the first Bush-Gore debate
(2000)*



*John McCain makes "Bomb Iran" joke
(2007)*



*Donald Trump mocks a disabled reporter
(2015)*



*Donald Trump makes fun of Marco Rubio
(2016)*



*Jimmy Fallon ruffles Donald Trump's hair
(2016)*



*Hillary Clinton goes on Between Two Ferns
(2016)*



*Hillary Clinton makes a cameo on SNL
(2016)*



*Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump
attend the Al Smith Dinner
(2016)*