

Can Comedy Be Convincing?

PRE-ANALYSIS PLAN

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1 Introduction

One of the canonical questions in social psychology, political science, and political communication is how persuasion operates. Since the original studies on the effectiveness of mass propaganda (e.g., Lasswell 1938; Smith, Lasswell and Casey 1946), scholars have sought to understand the components of successful persuasive appeals: the identity of the messenger, the contents of the message, and how it is delivered. In the latter category reside all of the classical tools of rhetoric—figurative language, logical structure, satire—as well as more recent factors such as the type of medium employed. In this study, we hope to inaugurate a new line of research that returns to these fundamental concerns using cutting-edge methods.

Our observation is that one of the most commonly used rhetorical tools, both in political discourse and in everyday discussion, has hardly ever been studied in a systematic manner. That tool is humor. “Humor is the affectionate communication of insight,” said Leo Rosten, and anyone who has sought to convince others of their point of view has likely stumbled upon the disarming power of a well-delivered joke. Yet this proverbial arrow in the rhetorical quiver has rarely been subjected to the sort of rigorous scrutiny that other components of the persuasive process have undergone in the research literature. We seek to remedy this oversight with a research program that merges the concerns of political theorists in the deliberative tradition and more recent quantitative research in political communication.

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2 Literature Review

2.1 Rhetoric and Deliberation

Democratic theory today links the legitimacy of government to proper flows of communication (or deliberation) between citizens and the government. Influential recent work suggests that democracies should be viewed as “deliberative systems” with a variety of deliberative inputs—from media elites, interest groups, political parties, citizens, etc.—and outputs in the form of democratic decisions (Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012). But is political humor a proper part of such a system of democratic deliberation? To our knowledge, this question has been entirely neglected despite the rise of high-profile political humor in shows like *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart* and its offspring.

One of the largest questions in this literature is what kinds of communication count as contributing to public deliberation. The debate has focused on whether non-discursive, rhetorical, or religious types of expression ought to be taken seriously as vectors of democratic deliberation. Our research opens up a new line of inquiry regarding the potential of political humor to contribute to deliberation. Political humor could, for instance, play an important deliberative role by persuading mass audiences to consider new political ideas or reject objectionable ones. It is also possible that political humor has no persuasive effects and so should be viewed as pure entertainment and a distraction from the serious business of political deliberation. The only way to adjudicate between these possibilities, and so to cast light on the normative question of humor’s deliberative role, is through empirical testing of humor’s persuasive power. It requires not just normative speculation but also empirical investigation.

Recent years have also seen a renaissance in the study of political rhetoric (Chambers 2009; Garsten 2011). This research has considered the role of humor more carefully yet there is considerable disagreement regarding its usefulness in political persuasion. Some consider humor too unpredictable in its effects and urge speakers to avoid it. This study helps to resolve whether a widely used rhetorical tool has real persuasive value when discussing divisive public issues like gun control.

2.2 Political Communication

Our study also fills a large void in the quantitative literatures on persuasion and political humor. The former, based mostly in social and political psychology, focuses mainly on the

effects of particular messages on recipients' attitudes and beliefs, and how those effects are moderated by characteristics such as ideology and attention. The latter is a subfield within political communication which focuses almost exclusively on the effects of humor on system-level dependent variables such as trust and efficacy. Recent work in this area is mostly concerned with political satire, in particular shows such as *The Daily Show*, which are aimed toward younger citizens, gained popularity after 9/11, and have a left-leaning orientation.

The most thorough treatment of the effect of news satire on American politics is by McClellan and Maisel (2014). The authors trace the recent history of satire and connect it to the decline in trust of traditional news media and the ability of the practice to connect with otherwise disengaged citizens. While the book focuses—like most studies—mainly on satire's prospects for political engagement and trust, it raises the possibility of a persuasive effect: "Today satire is a key part of the attitudes and understanding of the 'entertained' citizen" (11). Yet this "key" component goes unexplored. In a recent review of communication research on the effects of political comedy on attitudes and opinion (Becker and Waisanen 2013), every cited study focused on either evaluations of targeted politicians or perceptions of satirical shows' bias as the dependent variables of interest. We do not know of any studies that conduct an examination of the effect of comedy on attitudes or opinions about a particular political issue.

One of the most theoretically interesting features of political humor is its tendency to encourage or discourage consideration of views different from one's own, providing a key connection with the deliberative democracy literature. Our hypothesis is that humor can "disarm"—both figuratively and, given our choice of gun control as the issue under study, literally. This is the proposed mechanism that would drive the persuasive process of humorous appeals. One study has explored the effect of political news sources on selective exposure, or the tendency to choose information that is congenial to one's partisan or ideological predispositions (Stroud and Muddiman 2013). The authors find that humorous news sites make people *less* likely to select information that challenges their own views, although they do not investigate whether there were persuasive effects on issue positions. We hope our proposed project will shed more light on this finding and understand whether it is a general phenomenon or rather a quirk of the authors' particular research design.

3 Design

Our design is modeled on experimental studies of media effects and persuasion (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Iyengar 2010; Guess and Coppock 2015). First, we gather a sample using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online marketplace for modular tasks that has become a popular subject recruitment tool for social scientists (Berinsky, Huber and Lenz 2012). After asking a standard set of demographic and political questions—including pre-treatment attitudes toward gun control—we randomly assign subjects to be shown one of four different videos, each approximately 5-6 minutes in length. Two of the videos contain humorous pro-gun-control content, one is a more straightforward, non-humorous version of the gun-control arguments, and finally there is a placebo video about recycling. To measure the dependent variables, subjects are then asked a series of questions about their views on gun policy. We will return to the same set of subjects approximately one week later to test for the persistence of any persuasive effects.

We use simple random assignment on a target sample of 2,000 subjects.

4 Treatments

In this design, the “treatments” are three pro-gun-control videos, either humorous or “serious.” The control group sees the placebo video but is asked the same set of questions for the dependent variables. The first treatment video, denoted “humorous treatment,” is nearly 6 minutes long, and features one of the authors, Elliott, reciting key moments from a popular standup routine by Jim Jefferies in which the Australian comedian delivers an extended argument for gun control. The second treatment video, denoted “serious treatment,” is a “serious” version of precisely the same arguments, in the same order, by the same performer, Elliott. The third treatment, denoted “original humorous,” is composed of clips from the original Jefferies routine, containing the same arguments reproduced in the treatment videos and arranged in the same order as the other two videos. The inclusion of this treatment arm is intended to help benchmark the effects of the original



Figure 1: Screen shot of main humorous treatment video.

content (in terms of magnitude, persistence, and generalizability) compared to the more controlled versions that we produced.

The Jefferies routine is frequently shared on social media following mass shooting incidents in the United States, suggesting at least that those who post it believe it to be an effective pro-gun control message.¹ According to pretests that we conducted on MTurk, respondents found the humorous treatment video to be funnier, on average, than the serious treatment version. Based on response times, subjects also seemed willing to “comply” with treatment by watching the videos in their entirety.

5 Hypotheses

- **H1:** The humorous treatment video will cause subjects to be more supportive of gun control, on average, than the serious treatment video.
- **H2:** The serious treatment video will cause subjects to be more supportive of gun control, on average, than the placebo video.
- **H3:** We are agnostic as to whether the effect of the videos will vary significantly between those initially supportive of or opposed to gun control.
- **H4:** The original humorous video will have a greater persuasive effect, and last longer, than the humorous treatment video.
- **H5:** The effects of the humorous treatment video will be more likely to persist than the effects of the serious treatment video.

6 Analytic Strategy

We will combine our 4 dichotomous dependent variables (see Section 7) into a single additive index, coded so that more positive corresponds to greater support of gun control (Y_i). Since we will have several pre-treatment covariates that are prognostic of the outcome, we will estimate Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) models regressing gun policy attitudes Y_i on treatment dummies (with placebo as base case) and demographic/political characteristics

¹E.g., <http://zap2it.com/2015/10/jim-jefferies-gun-control-stand-up-video-viral-oregon-shooting/>. According to this article, the author Stephen King was one of dozens who shared a link to the video on Twitter after a mass shooting in Oregon in October 2015.

\mathbf{X}_i : age, race, gender, income, education, 7-point party identification, and pre-treatment gun policy attitudes. We will use HC2 robust standard errors. Specifically, we will estimate the equation:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_{humorous} \cdot Z_i^{humorous} + \beta_{serious} \cdot Z_i^{serious} + \beta_{original} \cdot Z_i^{original} + \gamma \cdot \mathbf{X}_i + \epsilon_i. \quad (1)$$

In order to directly test whether one treatment is more effective than another, we will run F -tests on the null hypotheses that $\beta_{humorous} = \beta_{serious}$ (**H1**), $\beta_{serious} = \beta_{placebo}$ (**H2**), and $\beta_{original} = \beta_{humorous}$ (**H4**).

For completeness, we will also report simple models with (1) only treatment dummies and pre-treatment gun policy attitudes; and (2) only treatment dummies.

Additionally, we will run the above analyses using the response to the single question “Do you support or oppose stricter gun control laws in the United States?” as Y_i . This is the same as the pre-treatment question.

6.1 Testing for heterogeneous effects and persistence

Our covariates will also allow us to test whether the effects of treatment vary across different subgroups. In particular, we are interested in whether gun control supporters and opponents respond to both types of video (humorous and serious) in roughly the same way or if there is a “backlash” effect among opponents (e.g., Nyhan and Reifler 2010). We will do this by re-estimating the OLS model above with the inclusion of interaction terms between pre-treatment gun control support and treatment dummies (**H3**). We will also repeat this analysis with party ID interactions.

Finally, we will rerun Equation 1 with the follow-up versions of Y_i (but otherwise identical) to test persistence of the effects. As above, we will again use F -tests for the null hypotheses $\beta_{humorous} = \beta_{serious}$ (**H5**) and $\beta_{original} = \beta_{humorous}$ (**H4**).

7 Survey Questionnaire (main and follow-up)

4 main DV questions:

1. What do you think is more important—to protect the right of Americans to own guns, or to regulate gun ownership?
2. Do you support or oppose a nationwide ban on the sale of assault weapons?

3. Do you support or oppose a nationwide ban on the possession of handguns, except by the police and other authorized persons?
4. Suppose more Americans were allowed to carry concealed weapons if they passed a criminal background check and training course. If more Americans carried concealed weapons, would the United States be safer or less safe?
 - Do you support or oppose stricter gun control laws in the United States? [also asked pre-treatment]
 1. I support stricter gun control laws
 2. I oppose stricter gun control laws

These wordings are based on standard questions asked by Gallup, CBS/*New York Times*, and other major polls.

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