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Spring 5-1-2009

### The Political Application of Humor

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#### Recommended Citation

Harris, Matthew K., "The Political Application of Humor" (2009). *Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects*. 497.

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### *Introduction*

In the closing weeks of the 2008 US Presidential Election, virtually all the major candidates appeared on several high profile comedy programs. The Republican nominee, Senator John McCain, sat down with David Letterman on *The Late Show*. He later appeared on *Saturday Night Live*, as did his running mate, Governor Sarah Palin. Barack Obama, himself a former guest of *Saturday Night Live*, appeared on Comedy Central's *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. In the wake of these appearances, pundits from MSNBC to Fox News debated the merits of such appearances, wondering whether each individual comedy program would help or hinder a campaign. Yet relatively few asked the much more complicated question: Why? Why do humorous comments and appearances on comedy programs help politicians win elections? Why would a man seeking to become the leader of the free world (such as McCain) feel it would benefit his candidacy to sit down with a man who once put on a suit covered in Alka-Seltzer and jumped into a swimming pool (such as Letterman)?

My study addresses these questions. I will argue that the use of humor provides huge benefits for political candidates, provided that humor is used wisely. While a joke by Barack Obama on the campaign trail may seem like a bit of innocent fun, humor is, in actuality, an important weapon for easing concerns about oneself, raising concerns about an opponent, or simply appearing as more appealing to the public.

First, a word on the scope of the following study. While the term “politician” will be used, examples and case studies will come almost exclusively

from those on the presidential level, either those running for the presidency of the United States or those who held the office. It is much easier to contextualize humor from a national level in the United States than it would be to contextualize jokes from local politicians or politicians from another nation. Additionally, humor on a presidential level is most widely disseminated through the media. Secondly, although there will be brief discussions of humor prior to the modern age, the purpose of this study is to reveal the ways contemporary politicians use humor to appeal to the electorate. Consequently, an emphasis will be placed on the television and internet eras, when nearly instant mass communication became possible. Furthermore, if the points at the end of this paper are to serve as any sort of guide for politicians in their use of humor, a focus on the present seems more relevant.

### *The Numbers Game*

Although I will focus on the psychological reasons for the use of humor, there is another, far less complicated reason for the appearance of politicians on comedy programs. These shows provide candidates with exposure and, more importantly, access to key demographics that cannot be reached through more mainstream sources, such as the network evening news. Studies show that only 10% of young adults aged 18-24 watch the evening news on any of the big three networks (ABC, NBC, and CBS) regularly. By contrast, 13% of young adults aged 18-25 watch *The Daily Show* regularly, which is just one of the many comedy programs which count young adults as their core audience (Shister, 2007). Consequently, a candidate appearing on *The Daily Show* reaches more

young people than a candidate appearing on all three major network newscasts. Moreover, young people are often watching these programs not purely for entertainment, but also for news. In 2000, 61% of young people said they regularly or sometimes learned campaign information from comedy programs (Compton 2008, 42). Of course, sometimes exposure comes in the form of reaching a certain group, while other times it simply comes in the form of huge television ratings. Such was the case when McCain appeared with Letterman. McCain and Letterman reached 6.5 million people, nearly double Letterman's usual audience (Carter, 2008). Sarah Palin's appearance on *Saturday Night Live* produced the show's largest audience in 14 years (Fisher and Marikar, 2008). Comedy audiences have been shown to be politically active, as well. Researchers Patricia Moy, Michael Xenos, and Verena Hess found a positive correlation between late night comedy viewing and political activity, including voting (Compton 2008, 43). In the aggregate, appearances on late night comedy shows offer politicians access to the young as well as the politically active, some of whom are likely to tune in looking for news and information. Politicians are well aware of the coveted demographics reached by late night comedy programs. Obama made sure that he stopped by *The Daily Show* on the same evening his paid infomercial aired on CBS, NBC, and Fox (Feller, 2008). In the words of Representative Jack Kingston (R-Georgia), "When people who are 25 who have never voted for you think you are funny because you did the show, that's instant validity" (Compton 2008, 47).

On a related note, politicians do not merely appear on comedy programs

when they are running for office. President Obama became the first sitting president to appear on *The Tonight Show* in any of its incarnations. Former White House press secretary Ari Fleischer thought the move to be a smart one saying, “I like the idea of presidents communicating through a variety of means” (Hall, 2009). He added that such interviews can make the president appear in a positive light and help garner public support (Hall, 2009), a sentiment which has been echoed by political scientist Matt Baum (Compton 2008, 45).

### *The History of Humor*

The use of humor by politicians at the presidential level has a history reaching back much further than the days of Obama and Palin or even Reagan and Mondale. A look at George Washington’s personal letters shows a keen sense of humor, which he used as a personal coping mechanism to deal with scrutiny from the press during his days as Commander-in-Chief (Moran, 2006). Of course, the study of humor used in private by presidents amongst friends is probably not all that pertinent. After all, it has been said George W. Bush loves fart jokes (“How Funny Should Politicians Be?”, 2007), yet one could gain little insight into his politics or campaign strategies from this fact. Abraham Lincoln used humor in a more political way than Washington, as he would often use humorous anecdotes to avoid difficult questions from reporters (“Lincoln’s Sense of Humor,” 2009). Lincoln was also gifted at using humorous short stories to illustrate points and distill policy points into anecdotes which people could remember and share (“Abraham Lincoln’s Stories and Humor,” 2009).

### *The Theory of Humor*

Before we can examine the ways politicians use humor, it is necessary to examine the general theory of humor and work down to the specific. First, it is important to realize there is no specific theory of humor which has been agreed upon by all scholars. However, theories from specific psychologists and researchers generally can be classified as falling under one of three more general categories: incongruity, superiority, and relief. These categories, while distinct, are also often linked together (Smuts, 2009). For example, Freud mentions all three at some point in his *Jokes and Their Relations to the Unconscious*.

Incongruity theory is the most recognized theory among scholars. Incongruity theory is based upon the premise that humor arises from a joke delivering something other than what is expected. Aristotle was one of the earliest proponents of the theory, defining humor as that which “gives a twist” (*Rhetoric* 350 B.C.E., III, 11). Aristotle went on to assert,

The effect is produced even by jokes depending upon changes of the letters of a word. This too is a surprise. You find this in verse as well as in prose. The word which comes is not what the hearer imagined (*Rhetoric* 350 B.C.E., III, 11).

Within incongruity theory there exist two schools of thought. Some, such as Kant and Schopenhauer, state that incongruity is all that is needed for humor to occur. Others, such as Freud, argue that there must be some resolution of the incongruity in the mind of the listener. The laughter, they argue, comes upon the discovery of the incongruity and the realization that the statement was a joke (Shultz 2008, 12-

13).

A second overarching theory of humor is superiority theory. Superiority theory, as its name would suggest, revolves around the idea that humor comes from a person being able to feel he is better than others or a former version of himself (Smuts, 2009). In the words of Thomas Hobbes,

The passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly (Hobbes, 1650).

As Henry Hazlitt states, “We grow tired of every thing but turning others into ridicule, and congratulating ourselves on their defects” (Cantor and Zillmann 1996, 93). Superiority theory works well in the realm of political humor, as laughs can easily be gained at the expense of another political party.

Relief theory relates less to what makes something funny and more to the purpose of laughter and the physiological effects of humor. Relief theories describe humor and laughter as being necessary to unleash excess energy and tension (Smuts, 2009). In Freud’s version of relief theory, he broke down various sources of laughter to correspond to the release of various energies, such as emotional, sexual or hostile, and emotional energy (Smuts, 2009). Marvin Minsky also writes of the physiological purposes of laughter. Minsky asserts that laughter is used to break an absurd line of thinking and keep it from going any further. At the same time, laughter which prevents further thinking forces a person to place the incongruity of the joke into sharp focus (Minsky, 1980). In

any event, relief theory does not serve much of a purpose in a study of political humor, because while it describes the process of laughter, it does not lend itself to the discussion of purposeful jokes that incongruity and superiority theories provide.

According to Sigmund Freud and other humor theorists, jokes can be divided into two basic categories based on the intent of the teller. Freud referred to these categories as “tendentious” jokes, jokes with a purpose, and “innocent” jokes, those which do not serve a particular purpose other than to make another party laugh (Freud 1960, 90). Theodor Vischer called the latter category “abstract” jokes (Freud 1960, 90). Charles Gruner refers to “innocent” jokes simply as “humour” (Gruner 1996, 288). In any event, jokes are divided into similar groups by most researchers. However, for a study of political humor, it is useful to subdivide “tendentious” jokes into those which are designed to take aim at an opponent versus those which are designed to poke fun at oneself.

#### *Innocent Humor*

Leaving jokes with a purpose aside for the moment, there are benefits to a candidate’s use of more innocent jokes. As George Mason University public policy professor Jeremy Mayer asserts, humor allows politicians to show some personality. He cites the examples of Al Gore and Bob Dole, politicians from opposite sides of the aisle who lost Presidential elections and never showed a sense of humor. Such a sense, according to Mayer, can allow politicians to appear more like real people and show some humanity (“How Funny Should Politicians Be?”, 2007).



There are also benefits to a candidate allowing himself to be the butt of innocent jokes. In fact, for many decades now, politicians have relied on comedians telling jokes which, while poking fun at the president, avoided politics altogether. The president would use comedians as a way to demonstrate his commonality with the average citizen (Wagg 1998, 245). Thus, from the 1920s to the 1960s, there emerged a tradition of comedians from the Marx Brothers to Bob Hope poking fun at the president, razzing him a bit, while at the same time never calling him out on any of his policies (Wagg 1998, 247-252). To this day, a relationship can be seen between presidents and comedians, from candidates' appearances with David Letterman and Jay Leno to the comedians who perform each year before the president at the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner. In an American society where, in theory, no one is above anybody else, politicians show that they can relate to the common man by allowing themselves to be the object of comedians' jokes. The comedian is seen as a representative of the people, as laughter is a democratic response and a comedian must be well aware of the public's taste and the current of the times in order to succeed. By appearing with the comedian, the politician shows he is a man of the people and the times, as well (Wagg 1998, 245).

In the modern political world, late night comedy programs provide the venue for politicians to submit to a gentle ribbing at the hands of a professional comedian. Bill Clinton's appearance on *The Arsenio Hall Show* is generally viewed as one of the first examples of campaigning through the late night talk show circuit. These late night appearances have great benefits for candidates.

Research from Matt Baum suggests that candidates on late night shows are almost always shown in a positive light, while Paul Brewer and Xiaoxia Cao's research points to a correlation between viewing candidates on late night shows and political knowledge. Overall, appearances on late night programs can allow a candidate to gain positive exposure and possibly some votes (Compton 2008, 45). In fact, Patricia Moy, Michael Xenos, and Verena Hess' research points to *The Late Show* contributing to the election of George W. Bush in 2000. According to their statistical analysis, Bush's sit-down with Letterman led viewers to take greater stock in Bush's "character" when considering for whom to vote. Viewers of Bush's appearance were more likely to believe the phrase "really cares about people like me" described Bush than those who had not seen the program (Hess, Moy and Xenos 2005, 205).

Statistical evidence backs the premise that late night talk shows can yield benefits for politicians. Following Sarah Palin's October 2008 appearance on *Saturday Night Live*, HCD Research and the Muhlenberg College Institute of Public Opinion conducted a poll to determine Palin's favorability ratings after the sketches as compared to before the program aired. The poll found that Palin's favorability ratings increased among Democrats, Republicans, and Independents ("Sarah Palin's Favorability Ratings," 2008).

Of course, sometimes a politician's scheduled appearances with comedians can backfire. At the 2006 White House Correspondents' Association Dinner, Stephen Colbert started his remarks with a joke which followed the tradition of Hope and the Marx Brothers:

Wow, what an honor...to sit here, at the same table, with my hero, George W. Bush. To be this close to the man. I feel like I'm dreaming. Somebody pinch me... You know, I'm a pretty sound sleeper, that may not be enough. Somebody shoot me in the face (Baym 2008, 31).

Colbert's reference to Vice President Dick Cheney's hunting accident served as a classic presidential joke in that it kidded the president and lowered him to the level of the common man without critiquing policy. Moments later, however, Colbert launched a scathing, satirical attack on President Bush, seated just a few feet away. Colbert, taking up the conservative pundit role he assumes on *The Colbert Report*, used parody to lambaste President Bush on everything from the war in Iraq to Bush's claim that he uses his "gut" when making decisions. Following these remarks, Colbert turned his comedic eye toward Bush's assertion that he never reads polls:

Now, I know there are some polls out there saying that this man has a 32% approval rating. But guys like us, we don't pay attention to the polls. We know that polls are just a collection of statistics that reflect what people are thinking in "reality." And reality has a well-known liberal bias...Sir, pay no attention to the people who say the glass is half empty, because 32% means it's 2/3 empty. There's still some liquid in the glass is my point, but I wouldn't drink it. The last third is usually backwash (Colbert and Kurtzman, 2009).

Here again, though, we see the power of comedy in the political world. President Bush, a man who throughout his presidency was apt to ignore criticism, was forced to sit through a public undressing, not at the hands of a journalist or another politician but rather a comedian (Baym 2008, 21).

### *Self-Deprecation*

Colbert's example provides a natural segue from innocent jokes to those jokes that serve a purpose. One category of "tendentious" jokes is that of the self-deprecating variety. Self-deprecating jokes are frequently used by politicians, and, psychologically speaking, these jokes can be very effective. The apparent problem with self-deprecating humor, of course, is that it seems to point out a candidate's own flaws. Yet, in looking at the research Sigmund Freud undertook involving popular jokes among the Jewish community at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one can see the benefits of aiming a joke at oneself. Freud found that self-deprecating jokes by Jews would point to the positive attributes of the Jewish people at the same time they poked fun at perceived negatives (Freud 1960, 111). For example, one Jewish joke revolves around a Jew who does away with all the pretenses of proper behavior upon realizing the man he is sharing a train car with is a fellow Jew. In the joke, the boorish nature of the man's behavior is balanced by the notion that the Jews are a democratic people. The first man, upon realizing the second man is a Jew, adjusts his behavior regardless of what class or status the second man holds (Freud 1960, 112). All Jews are equal. In this and other self-deprecating jokes, an outwardly negative element of the joke's deliverer is emphasized, but that negative can be linked to a positive. When politicians joke

about their advanced age, they often structure their jokes in a manner similar to the Jewish jokes mentioned in the previous paragraph.

### *The Persuasive Value of Humor*

Of course, “tendentious” jokes may be used not only to comment on a candidate or his opponent, but to comment on policy issues during speeches on policy. However, most psychological research suggests that humor may not have a persuasive impact. A 1940 study asked students to rate speeches about “state medicine” in categories such as “humor,” “interestingness,” and “convincingness.” While the versions of the speeches that contained jokes were rated as being funnier, they were not seen as any more convincing than the serious speeches (Gruner 1996, 290).

Furthermore, there is not much evidence that humor will lead to learning or recall. Charles R. Gruner conducted a 1967 study in which groups of students listened to either a serious or a humorous speech on the same topic. Upon taking a multiple-choice exam to test what they had just heard, the students listening to the humorous speech apparently learned no more than did those listening to the serious speech (Gruner 1996, 302). Overall, then, it would seem the use of humor is not helpful for persuasion or audience recall. Given such research, the use of humor in policy speeches may not be terribly important. It is important to note, however, that humor that is pertinent to the topic of discussion has been shown to be more effective than non-germane humor. A 1966 study found that audience members generally thought germane humor to be more “worthwhile” than jokes which were off-topic (Gruner 1996, 305). So while humor in policy speeches

may not be persuasive, germane humor does appeal to an audience to some extent. Furthermore, Gruner himself points out a key methodological problem in tests for the persuasive or educational value of humor. According to Gruner, in these classroom experiments, “Universal attendance to the message was almost mandatory for the student subjects participating” (Gruner 1996, 303). In the real world, people probably would not pay equal attention to both humorous and non-humorous speeches (Gruner 1996, 303).

While most research has generally shown that humor does not have a persuasive impact, anecdotal evidence suggests otherwise, particularly in the area of commercials. Tremendous sales increases have been seen in items ranging from cigarettes to socks when humorous advertisements were put into play (Gruner 1996, 292). These statistics open up a whole new avenue in research of political use of humor, that of the presidential campaign commercial. After all, a commercial in a campaign is designed to sell a candidate in a similar manner to the way a commercial for a product is designed to sell that product. Additionally, one of the key elements to the success of humor in product advertising is repetition (Gruner 1996, 292), and campaign commercials are similarly repeated, both during commercial slots and during discussions of the advertisements during news programs.

Campaign advisors are aware of the fact that humor in advertising can lead to increased exposure for both their candidates and their candidates’ messages. Particularly in the internet era, humorous videos are more likely to be passed on virally from person to person (Kaid and Postelnicu 2008, 125). In the words of

Jonah Seiger, internet advertisements can have a “multiplier effect,” allowing messages to spread much further than campaign lists of e-mail addresses would normally permit. Furthermore, Seiger asserts, “The things that people forward to their friends generally are funny things” (“Cyber Ads, 2004”).

In addition to the anecdotal evidence for the persuasive value of humor, studies have shown that audiences react more favorably to speakers who use humor than those who do not (Gruner 1996, 304). Therefore, while humorous remarks during speeches may not persuade individuals on specific issues, they may lead to increased favorability for the speaker, which can be tremendously important during elections. In a 1970 study, Charles R. Gruner had sample groups of students listen to both humorous and non-humorous speeches. In a test taken four weeks later, the students rated the humorous speaker higher than the serious speaker in areas such as “dynamism,” “expertise,” and “trustworthiness” (Gruner 1996, 304). In examining public opinion data, it is clear that many of the aforementioned qualities that experimental groups associated with humor are the same qualities Americans want in a president. In an April 2007 Gallup poll, respondents were asked to name the most important quality they would look for in the next President of the United States. 33% of respondents said they wanted “honesty” in a president, a quality very similar to trustworthiness. 10% of those surveyed said they wanted a “competent” leader. A competent president would presumably have “expertise” in some area, another quality which the experimental subjects related to humor. Furthermore, research from Walter E. O’Connell links the use of humor to leadership skills (O’Connell 1996, 319).

16% of respondents said they wanted “leadership” from the next president. In combining these figures, close to 60% of those surveyed were looking for qualities which psychological research has linked to the use of humor (Jones, 2007). Clearly, while not necessarily persuasive, the use of humor can help candidates appear to possess the qualities Americans are looking for in a president.

### *Taking Aim at the Opposition*

Campaigning, however, is often as much about making the other side look bad as it is about making one’s own side look good. “Tendentious” jokes can also be used to take shots at a political opponent. Aristotle recognized the humor value in denigrating an outsider (*Poetics* 350 B.C.E., 1, V), which fits perfectly into political advertising and campaign strategy. Freud also saw the importance of humor as a way of attacking others, particularly if the message is not socially acceptable. Freud cites an example involving Herr N., a well respected public figure in Austrian society. Herr N. was incensed upon the appointment of a new Minister of Agriculture who was appointed to the position simply because he was a farmer. After the Minister was forced to resign his post and return to his farm, Herr. N responded with the following joke:

Like Cincinnatus, he has gone back to his place before the plough  
(Freud 1960, 27).

A study of Roman history, however, reveals that Cincinnatus was indeed *behind* the plough. In front of the plough, as was customary, was an ox (Freud 1960, 27). Herr. N. uses a joke to refer to the Ministry of Agriculture as a beast. Freud



contends that Herr N.'s high place in society makes it impossible for him to say what he wants to say in a straightforward manner. With a joke, however, it becomes conceivable for a thought or idea to find an audience it would not have been able to find in a more serious form (Freud 1960, 103).

The fact that “tendentious” jokes are incredibly useful would come as no surprise to politicians or their advisors. Although Beltway insiders may not have read Freud's thoughts on the subject, candidates consistently use humor in attack ads. In Karla Hunter's study of close to 400 humorous ads from 1952 to 1996, she found that 68% of these spots were negative commercials directed at a political opponent (Kaid and Postelnicu 2008, 118-119).

In his *Jokes and the Logic of the Cognitive Unconscious*, Marvin Minsky writes of the importance of humor as a tool with which to instruct the public. Furthermore, Minsky asserts that humor can be used to point out mistakes in a “conciliatory” manner (Minsky, 1980). In a similar way, jokes allow candidates to denigrate their opponents in a manner which does not seem as harsh. The use of humor is beneficial, given the large percentage of Americans who dislike negative campaigning. In a February 2004 poll, 81% of Americans said they were either “very much” or “somewhat” bothered by negative campaigning (“Pew News Interest Index Poll, Feb, 2004,” 2009). Humor allows candidates to seem less negative. While being implicitly negative, candidates gently instruct the public for whom to vote.

Much of humor in politics is a balancing act. As Aristotle asserts, those who use humor either too frequently or too little are discredited by society

(*Nichomachean Ethics* 350 B.C.E., IV, 8). As Jeremy Mayer points out, the real challenge of political humor is “being funny without being offensive” (“How Funny Should Politicians Be?”, 2007). The following are a few examples of failed political humor and an explanation of what went wrong.

*McCain’s “Bomb Iran” Song: A Study in Failed Humor*

While there are great benefits to a well-timed, well-executed joke, there can be consequences to failed humor. One of the most memorable failed political jokes on the presidential level was attempted by Senator John McCain during a campaign stop in South Carolina in April 2007. When asked a question about possible military action against Iran, McCain responded by singing, “Bomb Iran, bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb,” in an attempted parody of the Beach Boys’ “Barbara Ann.” While the joke was well received by those in attendance, his comments were attacked by liberal groups. The executive director of MoveOn.org called the comments “dangerous” (Miller, David L., 2007). Barack Obama would go on to use the quote against McCain in the second of their three debates, pulling McCain’s words out to refute a comment McCain had made about “walking softly” as his hero Teddy Roosevelt did (“Transcript of Second McCain, Obama Debate,” 2008).

The problem with McCain’s joke does not lie in the structure of the joke. Presumably, the humor lies in the aural similarities between “Barbara Ann” and “Bomb Iran.” In this sense, the joke is not dissimilar to one which Freud references in his *Jokes and Their Relations to the Unconscious*. Freud cites the following German verbal joke:

Und weil er Geld in Menge *hatte*,  
Lag stets er in der *Hängematte*.

Which roughly translates to:

And because he had money in quantities,  
He always lay in a hammock (Freud 1960, 91).

As one can tell from the English translation, the humor does not lie in the content of the words, but rather in the sounds the words form. Similarly, the humor in McCain's statement hopefully does not lie in the sentiment of launching an attack on Iran, but rather in the play on words.

Just because the humor does not lie in the content, however, does not mean the content will not be analyzed by the receiver of the joke. When looking at the theory of humor as relayed by Kuno Fischer, one can see the problem with McCain's joke or why, at the very least, it was completely unnecessary. It was Fischer's belief that the role of the comic was to reveal perceived ugliness. In his words:

If it [what is ugly] is concealed, it must be uncovered in the light of the comic way of looking at things; if it is noticed only a little or scarcely at all, it must be brought forward and made obvious, so that it lies clear and open to the light of day (Freud 1960, 10).

McCain's age is an issue he joked about which was certainly noticed. The age of a presidential candidate is impossible to hide, so he brought it forward, joked about it, and in that way attempted to make it less of an issue. His "bomb Iran" remarks, however, made clear to the light of day a side of him which he did not

need to make public. He gave liberals and critics ammunition which they could use to convince independents not to support him. As opposed to dealing with a physical trait such as his age which he had no choice over, he dealt with delicate negotiations regarding Iran in a joking fashion, portraying himself as a war hawk when it was completely unnecessary. Furthermore, he portrayed himself as a brash leader with antagonistic words for America's enemies, which gave Obama and other liberals another similarity between McCain and George W. Bush.

Democrats could use these similarities to steer independents away from McCain's candidacy. Additionally, his comments may have further strained diplomatic relations between Iran and the United States. While Ali Larijani, Iran's parliamentary speaker, said in October 2008 that he had no problem with the singing of a song, he went on to promise that America would face a "nightmare" were an actual bomb to be dropped (Associated Press, 2008). Had McCain not sung his Beach Boys parody, Larijani would have had no need to address the possibility of America bombing Iran.

During the campaign, McCain's "bomb Iran" song was not the only example critics cited of his failed attempts at humor. Many of his past jokes which have drawn criticism were not necessarily poorly structured according to humor theory, rather they simply fell under the "offensive" category Jeremy Mayer warns against. Among the topics of McCain's other jokes have been rape, domestic violence, and the putative homeliness of Chelsea Clinton (Smith, 2008). Most of his jokes have a sound structure. However, they are simply offensive and provide openings for his opponents and critics. McCain once responded to a

question by saying, “And I stopped beating my wife just a couple of weeks ago” (Smith, 2008). McCain was referring to an old joke which is an example of a leading question with a nasty presupposition (Smith, 2008). The question, “Have you stopped beating your wife?” presupposes that the man in question had been beating his wife. The line uses incongruity to provide surprise and pleasure to the listener, which is the classic method of evoking a response to a humorous comment. It’s sometimes best to leave these types of jokes to professional comedians who have no higher office to seek, though, because however funny to some, the material is just not befitting of a man who wishes to be president, at least as said in public. Ronald Reagan did a much better job than McCain of utilizing humor in a strategic manner, as opposed to McCain’s apparently haphazard use of it.

There is, no doubt, value in a candidate appearing to be authentic. As Jeremy Mayer contends, it is beneficial for a candidate to appear as something other than a “stuffed shirt” (“How Funny Should Politicians Be?”, 2007). McCain campaign spokesman Brian Rogers had the following to say about his candidate’s use of humor:

He’s long said that he’s said and done things in the past that he regrets. You’ve just got to move on and be yourself -- that’s what people want. They want somebody who’s authentic, and this kind of stuff is a good example of McCain being McCain.

However, Rogers himself did not include an alleged rape joke told by Senator McCain in his description of McCain’s original brand of humor (Smith, 2008).

The rape joke, reported by the Tucson Citizen during McCain's 1986 Senate campaign, was told by McCain as follows:

Did you hear the one about the woman who is attacked on the street by a gorilla, beaten senseless, raped repeatedly and left to die? When she finally regains consciousness and tries to speak, her doctor leans over to hear her sigh contentedly and to feebly ask, 'Where is that marvelous ape?' (Smith, 2008).

The candidate's campaign said in 2008 that he didn't recall making the remark (Smith, 2008), despite the fact that it has been well documented. This is an indication that, even to McCain's own campaign, there is a point where his humor becomes offensive enough that it may hurt his chances of winning elections.

*John Kerry's "Stuck in Iraq" Remark: Joke Gone Wrong*

Speaking at a rally in October 2006, John Kerry advised a group of college students to study hard. "If you don't," he warned, "you get stuck in Iraq." Kerry was criticized heavily by Republicans. White House Press Secretary Tony Snow, among others, demanded he apologize to members of the military for offending them (Klein, 2006).

Kerry's problem arose from the fact that, according to him, he misspoke. Kerry claims he was trying to say something along the lines of "You get *us* stuck in Iraq," a reference to George W. Bush. Even as such, this joke has very little incongruity value. One would guess there is some incongruity in reconciling the idea that the President of the United States and an idiot could be the same person. There is a high superiority theory value here, as Kerry is placing himself and all

those who study in school above the president. Overall, though, his remark is similar to Lloyd Bentsen's remark to Dan Quayle, "You're no Jack Kennedy." It features superiority theory logic but little incongruity. The fact that Kerry butchered the line simply exacerbated his problem. Kerry, like McCain with his "bomb Iran" joke, provided ammunition for his critics, although, unlike McCain, he was not in the midst of a campaign.

Of course, not all jokes go as badly as McCain's and Kerry's did. Here are a few examples of the brilliant use of political humor.

*Ronald Reagan: Master of the Joke*

As mentioned earlier, Reagan's acting background and sense of timing made him an ideal candidate to use political humor. According to Doug Gamble, who wrote jokes for the former president, Reagan understood the value of humor in advancing his strategic goals. For example, Reagan understood that self-deprecation could take the sting out of an opponent's jab. When Democratic presidential candidate Walter Mondale referred to the Reagan administration as having "government by amnesia," Reagan responded that it was uncalled for but that he wished he "could remember who said it" (Gamble, 2004).

One of Reagan's most masterful uses of humor occurred during his October 21, 1984 debate with Mondale. His joke may be broken down to show a very effective use of political humor. After being asked a question about his age (he was already, in 1984, the oldest president in history), Reagan responded, "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" ("Second Reagan-

Mondale Debate,” 2009).

Firstly, Reagan’s joke is funny in that it follows two of Patricia Keith-Spiegel’s rules for why people laugh. Incongruity theory states that laughter results from two inconsistent thoughts or phrases being joined together (Rothbart 1996, 37). In Reagan’s joke, a feeling of surprise arises from the incongruity between what the audience thinks Reagan will say and what he actually says. After Reagan says, “I will not make age an issue of this campaign,” a listener expects him to say something about his advanced age and how he does not expect sympathy or to be treated any differently because he is so old. Instead, Reagan flips the expected remark and instead talks about his opponent’s “youth and inexperience.” As Marvin Minsky asserts,

The element that seems to me most common to all the different kinds of humor is that of unexpected frame-substitution, in which a scene is first described from one viewpoint and then suddenly -- typically by a single word -- one is made to view all the scene-elements in another, quite different way (Minsky, 1980).

Reagan forces the audience to view his comment from a completely different perspective when he uses the words “youth and inexperience.” The audience, which was viewing a debate over Reagan’s age, is now forced to examine Reagan’s record of service. Furthermore, Reagan, in keeping with the tradition of self-deprecating jokes used by Jews almost a century earlier, links a perceived negative trait, his advanced age and perhaps the senility people expect to accompany it, with a positive trait, his experience.



Reagan was also able to make use of humor which follows superiority theory. Reagan would say things such as, “I’ve been losing weight on something called the Democrat diet. The way it works is you only eat dessert on days when our opponents say something good about America” (Gamble, 2004). Following superiority theory, the laughter here comes from conservatives feeling superior to Democrats because they love America more than their inferior opponents. Furthermore, this joke is, like a Lincoln story, easy to remember and repeat, which would help spread conservative rhetoric. Research by Dolf Zillmann and Joanne Carter points to an increased amount of pleasure felt when joke listeners felt resentment or antipathy toward the protagonist of the joke (Cantor and Zillmann 1996, 93). Therefore, it is quite obvious that many of Reagan’s jokes such as the one listed above would go over quite well with conservatives who disliked the Democratic party.

#### *Where’s the Beef?*

In the 1984 Democratic presidential primaries, Walter Mondale found himself falling behind in the polls to a surging Senator Gary Hart. One senior aide had already begun drawing up Mondale’s withdrawal from the race. Campaign manager Bob Beckel, however, had other ideas. The campaign had been searching for a way to criticize Gary Hart’s platform of “new ideas” in a way that would resonate with the American people. At their next debate, Mondale followed Beckel’s advice and ridiculed Hart’s plans by uttering a slogan taken from a Wendy’s commercial, “Where’s the beef?” (Germond and others, 1985, 1).

Mondale's line fits perfectly within humor theory. From an incongruity theory standpoint, the listener is forced to reconcile the idea of a fast food slogan being thrown about in the middle of a presidential debate. From a superiority theory standpoint, he has allowed his supporters to feel a "sudden glory" of victory over a man who seemed to be destined to steal their nomination.

From a strategic standpoint, "Where's the Beef?" accomplished its mission, as well. It allowed Mondale to encapsulate his thoughts on Hart's "new ideas" in a simple, easy to remember way. Just as Lincoln was able to distill the major points from a policy issue into a story, Mondale was able to put his position on Hart's ideas into three words. Additionally, his comment allowed him to gain a thrust in media coverage (Germond and others, 1985, 2). As stated earlier, while studies have shown humor not to be persuasive, it can be when repeated. Media coverage of the debate allowed his remark to resonate in the minds of voters.

#### *The Alfred E. Smith Dinner: Humor From Both Sides*

On October 16, 2008, the annual Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner was held in New York City. The dinner is an annual event, but when the gathering falls in an election year, it is tradition for the major party candidates to get together and tell a few jokes (Schofield, 2008). The transcript of this event is useful for examining the ways in which politicians use humor, because it provides an opportunity to see politicians from both sides of the aisle operating within the same context.

John McCain took the podium first, and used his time to tell a few

innocent jokes as well as throw a few jabs at his opponent. One of McCain's more interesting remarks came when he told the audience,

We all know that Senator Obama is ready for any contingency -- even the possibility of a sudden and dramatic market rebound. I'm told that at the first sign of recovery, he will suspend his campaign and fly immediately to Washington to address this crisis (Schofield, 2008).

While McCain criticized Obama on the economy throughout the campaign, his joke here allows him to take a more pointed stance. During a more serious segment of the same Alfred E. Smith Dinner, McCain would call Obama an "impressive fellow" (Schofield, 2008). Yet in this joke, McCain is able to insinuate that his opponent would much rather see the economy of the United States tank than recover. He takes an extremely critical statement about his opponent and disguises it as just a bit of bipartisan fun at a charity dinner. Additionally, McCain is able to be self-effacing while attacking his opponent. While he goes after Obama, he also pokes fun at his own decision to suspend his campaign and fly to Washington to address the financial crisis.

Barack Obama started his portion of the evening with some rather innocent humor, remarking that he had "the politics of Alfred E. Smith and the ears of Alfred E. Neumann" (Schofield, 2008). Obama's zingers about McCain centered around the candidate's age, as the Senator took a page from humor theory and attacked his opponent with a joke. Obama remarked, "I obviously never knew your great grandfather [Alfred E. Smith], but from everything that

Senator McCain has told me, the two of them had a great time together before Prohibition” (Schofield, 2008). Throughout the campaign, Obama never explicitly said McCain was too old to be president, although late night comedians and sketch comedy programs had a field day with McCain’s advanced age. Obama himself, however, even went out of his way to remark that McCain’s age should not be considered a factor. When a supporter at a rally questioned McCain’s age, Obama responded, “No, no, that’s not the problem,” before blasting McCain for being too similar to George W. Bush (Miller, Sunlen, 2008). While Obama never attacked McCain for being too old, he was able to use humor at events such as the Alfred E. Smith Dinner to make McCain’s age an issue to the audience. Obama used humor just as Freud suggested individuals in a high position in society could use humor. He was able to say something about his opponent which he could never have said without the benefit of a joke.

Furthermore, Obama was able to use humor to appear comfortable with his own background. He first joked that his middle name was given to him “by someone who didn’t think I’d ever run for president,” and later said that his middle name was actually “Steve” (Schofield, 2008). In the same way candidates such as Reagan made their age less of an issue by appearing clearly comfortable with it and joking about it, Obama used a few jokes to appear perfectly at ease with his personal life story. Obama also joked about his celebrity status, saying he was surprised people would ask who he truly was because, “The answer is right there on my Facebook page” (Schofield, 2008). Here, he is able to use a joke to link a negative and a positive. On the one hand, he admits to being an

over-exposed, media-hyped candidate whose campaign is perceived by critics as being as focused on light-weight technology as it is on hard issues. On the other hand, he addresses a connection to young voters which, in some capacity, helped him win the election. After all, voters in the 18-24 year old demographic preferred Obama by over two-to-one (Quinley and Von Kanel, 2008).

### *The Rules of the Game*

After examining the theory of humor as well as some examples of political humor both successful and unsuccessful, there appear to be a few general rules which should be followed for the successful use of humor by politicians.

1. Be funny. In her research on the use of humor in political debates, Amy Bippus of California State University-Long Beach looked at many factors in determining the effectiveness of political humor as perceived by the audience. The biggest factor in determining whether audience members found the humor to be effective, however, was the quality of the joke in terms of its timing and humor value (“Political Science: Bippus’s Breakthrough,” 2008).
2. Know your audience. This is a cardinal rule for comedians and remains so for politicians using humor. Of course, in today’s media landscape, a politician’s audience is everybody with access to a television or computer. While John McCain’s immediate audience was laughing at his “Bomb Iran” crack, the video and text of his remarks spread quickly. Additionally, every remark a politician makes in public is recorded and becomes a matter of record. Such a record made it possible for Barack Obama to pull out McCain’s remarks almost two years later and use them against him in their second debate.

3. Don't provide fodder for your opponents. If a politician is old, it's perfectly acceptable for him to joke about this because everybody knows he is old. If a politician is black, it's perfectly acceptable for him to joke about this because everybody knows he is black. If a politician wants to bomb another country in the midst of two wars which have cost trillions of dollars and thousands of lives (or at least laugh about doing so), it is not acceptable for him to joke about this because, while possibly garnering a few laughs, it will provide his opponents talking points later in the campaign season.

4. Prepare. As one can see from Senator Kerry's remarks, a botched joke can be as bad as a tasteless one. While it will never be known if Kerry's joke, if properly worded, would have been met with more laughter, it probably would have been met with less outrage. While the public may not expect as much from their politicians as they would from comedians, a polished performance helps. Jeremy Mayer of George Mason University asserts that Ronald Reagan was able to use humor effectively because he had "near perfect timing," citing his background as an actor as "a real advantage" ("How Funny Should Politicians Be?", 2007).

While nobody would expect that type of timing from Kerry, at the very least, jokes should be written and rehearsed well enough to avoid blunders such as his "stuck in Iraq" remark. Additionally, unprepared, off-the-cuff remarks can provide fodder for one's opponents, which, as stated earlier, should be avoided.

5. Use humor to address your own weaknesses, if unavoidable. Once again, if a politician is elderly, he should joke about this fact because he cannot hide it. A politician's age is a matter of public record. Successful candidates over the years

have found a way to assuage public doubts by appearing very comfortable with themselves. From Ronald Reagan's jokes about his age to Barack Obama's jokes about his heritage, politicians have won elections by joking about that which they cannot hide. Of course, John McCain also frequently joked about his age and wound up losing the general election, but exit polling suggests the election was lost more because of the state of the economy than any personal issue relating to John McCain ("Pew Research Center...Nov, 2008," 2009).

### *Conclusion*

The fact that McCain was a frequent user of humor yet still lost the presidential election leads to a final key point about the use of humor by politicians. While a sense of humor is important, it is certainly not the most important quality for a candidate to possess. Studies point to some candidates who use humor having success, while other candidates who use humor have failed miserably. Dr. Patrick Stewart conducted a study calculating the amount of laughter elicited by jokes from candidates during the primary season leading up to the 2008 US Presidential Election. On the Republican side, Mike Huckabee and John McCain gained the most laughs from the audience. McCain, of course, won the nomination, while Huckabee won the Iowa caucuses. On the Democratic side, while Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama were also able to draw laughter from the audience, more laughter per debate was garnered by Bill Richardson and marginal candidate Mike Gravel (Stewart 2008, 16). Therefore, while telling a joke or two was important to campaigns of successful candidates such as Huckabee, McCain, Clinton, and Obama, humor alone could not carry the day.

Similarly, humor could not rescue Sarah Palin. While her likeability may have increased following her comedic appearance on *Saturday Night Live*, likeability was never her real problem. As Bob Thompson asserts, Palin's real problem with the electorate was her appearance as a lightweight who did not know anything substantive about current affairs (Fisher and Marikar, 2008). Her use of humor did not really address a weakness in her candidacy. If anything, appearing alongside her comedic doppelganger in Tina Fey may have only reinforced the public's image of her as an airhead. In contrast, Richard Nixon's appearance on *Laugh In* may have earned him some votes because the program helped him address the likeability issues he had and allowed him to relate to the American people (Fisher and Marikar, 2008). If anything, then, humor is probably not the most important factor in presidential elections, and if it is not used effectively to address a candidate's specific problems with the electorate, it may not be beneficial at all. Additionally, like anything in politics and especially on the campaign trail, humor should be planned thoroughly.

In closing, while humor may not be the most important factor in a presidential race, it may have been a deciding factor in at least one. As discussed earlier, George W. Bush's appearance with David Letterman caused viewers to see him in a more positive light. Furthermore, a 2000 survey showed that 48% of Americans believed George W. Bush to have a better sense of humor than Al Gore, while just 34% believed Gore had the better funny bone ("Pew Research Center...May, 2000," 2009). Ben Voth believes Gore's path to victory in 2000 may have been side-tracked by his campaign's attempts to react to criticisms of



his debate performances as delivered by *Saturday Night Live*. Voth asserts that Gore's wild attempts to adjust his debate strategy in order to combat Darrell Hammond's impression of him made Gore's behavior seem artificial and incredibly inconsistent (Voth 2008, 234-235). In a race which came down to a few hundred votes in Florida, almost any singular factor could have swayed the vote in either direction. In any event, the circumstances surrounding the election of George W. Bush in 2000 are enough to merit a careful use of humor by politicians. A bad joke could very well cost a man his place as the leader of the free world.

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*Written Capstone Summary*

In American politics, humor is an important tool. One can use it with great success, as Ronald Reagan did when he used a joke in his 1984 debate with Walter Mondale to ward off suggestions he was too old to be president. Of course, humor can also be damaging to a political figure. Recently, President Barack Obama was forced to apologize for comparing his bowling skills to those of participants in the Special Olympics. Politicians have been using humor for years, from the days of Lincoln's humorous anecdotes right up to the present. There is no doubt, additionally, that politicians believe humor serves some purpose in campaigns. Why else would candidates appear on humorous programs such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*? The 2008 US Presidential Election was one in which humor took the foreground, headlined by Tina Fey's portrayal of Sarah Palin on *Saturday Night Live*. President Obama recently became the first sitting president to appear on *The Tonight Show* in any of its incarnations, proving that he believes humorous programs to be an effective avenue for communicating with the American people.

My Capstone Project attempted to answer the following question: Why? Why is humor an effective weapon for politicians in order to appeal to the electorate? Furthermore, under what conditions has the use of humor by politicians been successful? Under what conditions has the use of humor by politicians failed? In looking at research on humor, it becomes clear that no unified theory has been found. Therefore, in my research, I attempted to, at the very least, find a theory of political humor. That is to say, is there a set of

theoretical rules which may guide the use of humor by politicians, especially those looking to appeal to the electorate?

My project essentially took the form of an in-depth study of the theory of humor and how it might relate to politics. My research took several forms. Firstly, I wanted to gain an understanding of the basics of humor theory. After reading the works of Freud, MIT cognitive scientist Marvin Minsky, and several others, I came up with a list of basic elements common to most humor theories. Many scholars on the subject agree that incongruity, superiority, and relief theory are the three main subsets of humor theory. Basically, incongruity theory states that humor stems from a difference between what the receiver of humor expects and what is delivered. Superiority theory states that humor stems from the receiver being made to feel more powerful or greater than another party. Relief theory suggests that humor stems from a release of energy.

After researching theory, I began to hypothesize how each of these theories would relate to the use of humor by politicians. For example, although incongruity theory does not bear much relation to political competition, superiority theory is entirely based upon the notion of putting another party down, and therefore politics would probably be rife with examples of superiority theory put to use. In addition to theories which speculate as to why we laugh, humor theorists have also speculated as to the brain mechanisms involved in humor, which once again relate to politics. Both Freud and Minsky hypothesize that humor allows the brain to think forbidden thoughts, and that through humor it is possible to say things which would otherwise be rejected by the brain. There are



examples in which humor by politicians is used in such a fashion. For example, Barack Obama made several jokes about John McCain's age during the 2008 election cycle, whereas he did not actually make a straightforward statement that McCain was too old to be president. On the other hand, Freud makes reference to the use of humor in a manner which is both self-deprecating and self-promotional. His work cites self-deprecating humor which, while pointing to a perceived negative, also points to a positive quality. In the political sphere, Ronald Reagan would use jokes in such a fashion, laughing at his own advanced age while at the same time emphasizing his experience.

In the second step of my project, I began looking for examples of the use of humor by politicians which would show the effective use of various humor theories. I tried to focus on humorous remarks which were famous, such as Walter Mondale's "Where's the Beef?" remark. I also presented an extensive focus on Ronald Reagan, as many scholars regard him as one of the most influential presidents in terms of humor, particularly in the age of cable television.

I did not just want to focus on the good, however. I took to analyzing John McCain's joke in which he attempted to sing "Bomb Iran" as if it were a Beach Boys song as well as John Kerry's joke about getting stuck in Iraq. In looking for both the similarities between failed jokes as well as the differences between failed and successful jokes, I was able to get a sense of the characteristics of successful political humor.

In terms of the significance of my project, I would like to think that, if read by a political figure seeking higher office, he would gain some insight into

what types of humor work on the campaign trail and, perhaps more importantly, which types of humor to avoid. While I, like every scholar before me, have not come up with a unified humor theory, I would like to think I have laid a fairly thorough groundwork for the use of humor by politicians themselves. Granted, some of my points are quite obvious. Of course politicians should not be offensive, for example. However, my project provides examples of the ways in which politicians can use humor to ease fears about themselves, bring up fears about their opponents, or simply come across as more likeable or hold the public's attention. From a more selfish standpoint, this project helped me personally to understand humor theory and why certain things appear funny. As an aspiring stand-up comedian, this was a great help to me, although while working on my thesis I found it difficult to write jokes myself, as I was constantly asking myself why what I was writing was funny.