

Public Engagement, Propaganda, or Both? Attitudes Toward Politicians on Political Satire and Comedy Programs

REBECCA HIGGIE
Brunel University London, UK

This article reports findings of a project that examined people's attitudes toward politicians who participate in political satire and comedy programs. It surveyed 489 participants on their attitudes about satire's political function and the politicians who play along or satirize themselves on those programs. The politicians' own communication skills were found to be important, but the key to their success was also related to factors such as the format of the performance, the type of humor used, the status of the satire program in broader political discourse, and the role of the satirist as either facilitator or combatant. It was found that satire is a complex practice that can endorse as it criticizes and create sympathy as it ridicules.

Keywords: satire, comedy, political communication, Barack Obama, Nick Clegg, Maxine McKew

Scholarship on satire has argued that it is a form of political communication that can engage young voters, provide useful political information and commentary, and call politicians and the media to account (Day, 2011; Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009; Hoffman & Young, 2011; Jones, 2010; McClennen & Maise, 2014; Xenos & Becker, 2009; Young & Hoffman, 2012). Despite growing scholarship on satire and politics, few studies have examined the phenomenon of politicians participating in satire. Most research has conducted textual analysis of satire or examined audience responses to satire that talks about politicians (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Morris, 2009). Little research has directly examined the implications of politicians participating in an art form that ridicules them, nor have there been many studies that examine audience attitudes toward politicians' appearances on satirical programs.

Notable exceptions in current scholarship include Basu (2014), who argued that when satire is taken up by that which it critiques, "its critical force is thereby neutralised" (p. 97). Parkin's (2014) research, which examined viewers' responses to Obama and McCain interviews on entertainment programs, including satire, during the 2008 U.S. presidential election, is another notable exception. He found that politicians were most persuasive when they combined the political and the personal, a finding echoed in van Zoonen's (2005) work on the appeal of "celebrity politicians" who participate in popular culture to "build on the impression that they are 'just like us' (a regular guy) and thus deserving to

Rebecca Higgie: <https://brunel.academia.edu/RebeccaHiggie>

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represent 'us'" (p. 82). This persona, like the most persuasive performances in Parkin's study, requires the politician to display authenticity in both political and private spheres.

In another important study that looked at politicians' motivations for going on satire programs, Coleman, Kuik, and van Zoonen (2009) interviewed British and Dutch politicians who went on satire panel shows *Have I Got News for You* and *Dit was het Nieuws*, respectively. Politicians said they went on these programs to increase their visibility, provide voters with more multifaceted images of politicians, and to be seen as antielitist and "ordinary human beings" (Coleman et al., p. 662). Colin Hay (2007) identified that politics has become a "dirty word" (p. 153), with politicians seen as ineffective and self-interested, an association that has also resulted in cynicism regarding the ability of representational politics to work in the interest of the people. This is in ironic contrast to the way in which democracy is held as the ideal form of politics, as Hay notes. Conversely, studies have suggested that satirists have gained cultural capital as political "truth tellers" (Higgie, 2014), with Jon Stewart considered one of the most trusted journalists in America (Pew Research Center, 2007) and viewers (particularly youth) using satire as a trusted form of news (Gettings, 2007; Heflin, 2006). The research of Coleman et al. demonstrates that politicians acknowledge the importance of appearing "ordinary" to voters and that satire and comedy may offer a useful tool in cultivating this more humanized public image.

My project was designed to start addressing gaps in current scholarship, namely, the lack of research on how viewers perceive politicians who participate in satire, skits, gimmicks, or games on satire and comedy programs. This is distinct from work that examines interviews on entertainment programs, focusing instead on instances in which politicians actively took part in the satire, playing along or self-satirizing. Given that Coleman et al. (2009) found that politicians saw satire as an avenue to cultivate a more affable public image, it was hoped that this research could gauge whether they were successful in doing so. I also sought to further investigate the role satirists and comedians played in facilitating or hijacking politicians' success on their programs, and whether the audience felt that satire was somehow being "neutralized" by politicians' participation.

Method and Survey Design

Given that little scholarship exists in this area, this project was designed as an exploratory study. An online questionnaire, featuring open and closed questions, was chosen as a useful method to survey the issues and get a broad picture of people's attitudes. It enabled the quick, anonymous gathering of data from participants all over the world, while allowing embedded videos to be shown, which would not be possible with e-mail or postal surveys (Blair, Czaja, & Blair, 2014; Phellas, Bloch, & Seale, 2012). Although the study was predominantly interested in participants from countries where politicians actively participate in satire and comedy programs (e.g., United States, United Kingdom, and Australia), it was open to anyone outside these countries under the acknowledgment that satire is widely shared online. Indeed, many participants were found to be consuming satire from places other than their country of residence and citizenship.

Given the exploratory nature of the research, the survey was open and, therefore, the responses were not collected through a random sample, nor can they be seen to be representative. It did, however,

generate a large number of responses, allowing me to make valuable conclusions. Responses were examined through thematic content analysis, grouping responses according to themes that appeared across the whole data set (Rivas, 2012).

The questionnaire was split into two parts. Part 1 asked participants about their satire viewing habits and what function they thought satire served. Part 2, which was optional, saw participants watching videos of politicians on satire programs.¹ They were then asked what image and message the politician was trying to convey and whether he or she was successful. All participants who filled in Part 2 watched a clip of President Obama on *The Colbert Report*. Those who chose to watch another video could pick one from the United Kingdom (Nick Clegg on *The Last Leg*) or Australia (Maxine McKew on *Yes We Canberra!*). The videos were carefully selected. The Obama video showed a politician self-satirizing and performing a scripted skit without any intrusion from the satirist, a phenomenon that has yet to be studied. It was also assumed that most participants, regardless of location, would be more familiar with a figure like Obama, given the wide reporting of American politics in local media around the world. The Clegg and McKew videos differed considerably. They were both unscripted appearances in which the satirists and politicians interacted. Both skits contained a prop that was used to mock or challenge the politicians. By choosing these three clips, comparisons could be made between different formats and differing levels of the satirists' involvement.

Results

Demographics

In total, 489 participants completed Part 1 of the questionnaire on satire viewing habits and satire's political function; 260 participants viewed the Obama clip in Part 2. Of those 260 participants, 138 went on to the Clegg video and 84 to the McKew video. The majority of participants were young, highly educated, and left wing; 57.4% ($n = 281$) of the participants were "young people," with 37.0% ($n = 181$) between 18 and 25 years of age and 20.4% ($n = 100$) between 26 and 35 years of age, although the questionnaire received a good spread of participants aged 36–55 (29.9%, $n = 146$), 56–75 (11.3%, $n = 55$), and 76 and older (1.4%, $n = 7$). The majority of participants were women, with 60.3% ($n = 295$) identifying as female, 39.1% ($n = 191$) male, and 0.6% ($n = 3$) other or unspecified. Participants were also highly educated, with 75.3% ($n = 368$) achieving various levels of university education spread more or less evenly across bachelor, master, and doctoral levels. This left 18.8% ($n = 92$) whose highest level of education was secondary school, 4.7% ($n = 23$) technical college, and 1.2% ($n = 6$) other. Occupation-wise, 40.7% ($n = 199$) were students, followed closely by those working in education and training (33.9%, $n = 166$). Participants were asked their country of residence ("location") and citizenship. The majority of participants were living in the United Kingdom (55.4%, $n = 271$), followed by Australia (22.9%, $n = 112$) and the United States (8.2%, $n = 40$). Citizenship was similar with only a few deviations: United Kingdom 48.3% ($n = 236$), Australia 22.3% ($n = 109$), Europe (non-United Kingdom) 11.7% ($n = 57$), and the United States 8.2% ($n = 40$). When asked about political persuasion, 44.4% ($n = 217$) identified as left wing (going up to 58.9%, $n = 288$, when including those who identified as very

¹ A full copy of the survey instrument is available from the author by request.

left wing) and 30.1% ($n = 147$) identified as center/moderate. Only 6.9% ($n = 34$) identified as right wing and very right wing.

These variables were collected to provide an overall picture of the participants but also to gauge why certain participants may respond more favorably to particular politicians. For instance, it was hypothesized that university students in the United Kingdom would be less receptive to Clegg given his widely publicized U-turn on charging tuition fees. Political persuasion was also deemed an important factor. Stewart (2011) found that prior opinions about political issues and politicians influenced how political jokes were interpreted, a key example of which can be seen in LaMarre, Landreville, and Beam's (2009) research on Stephen Colbert's satirically right-wing character on *The Colbert Report*. In this research, right-wing viewers missed the irony behind Colbert's performance, believing him to be a comedic yet earnest conservative who "truly meant what he said about liberals" (LaMarre et al., 2009, pp. 222–223). For left-wing viewers, they believed Colbert spoke for them by mocking conservatives. In both sets of viewers, the satire "reinforc[ed] their own set of beliefs as valid and the opposing set of beliefs as laughable" (LaMarre et al., 2009, p. 226). Parkin (2014), however, found that politicians who combined the personal with policy when appearing on entertainment programs were more likely to be persuasive, even to voters from the "opposition party" (p. 149). This, as well as other studies, suggests that a politician's perceived character (not just his or her politics or the politics of viewers) is extremely important in how viewers respond to them (Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2006; Parkin, 2014; van Zoonen, 2005). Factors such as age and persuasion were therefore collected as a way of relating participants to the particular politicians, but it should be noted that, given the focus of the study, I have followed the aforementioned scholars who focus on the how the performance itself (and not just political persuasion) may persuade viewers.

Satire's Function

Before examining how participants responded to politicians in satire, it is important to understand satire's place in political discourse. Many scholars argue that satire serves a critical function in democracy and political media (Gray et al., 2009; Jones, 2010; McClennen & Maise, 2014), but I hoped that this study could evaluate whether audiences of satire felt the same way. Participants were asked, "What function, if any, do satire and political comedy serve?" The participants ranked statements about satire with a Likert scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree* with a *neither agree nor disagree* option. They were also given the option to add their own alternative, or "other," response. The results showed that participants overwhelmingly considered satire to have a political or critical function, as well as being a form of entertainment (see Table 1). Participants who opted to add their own answer overwhelmingly contributed to this narrative, saying that satire's function was "holding politicians to account," "an alternative topical news source," and "a way of uncovering hidden power operations."

Given the strong agreement that satire serves a critical function, it was assumed that participants would disagree when asked if satire functioned as a way for politicians to communicate various messages. This, surprisingly, was not the case. As can be seen in Table 1, the mean dipped and the standard deviation increased, but participants still agreed that satire functioned as "an opportunity for politicians to reach different audiences" and "an opportunity for politicians to present themselves as good-humored."

Although they disagreed to a stronger extent when asked if satire functioned as “an opportunity for politicians to present political messages or policy,” these results were still unexpected.

Table 1. What Function, If Any, Do Satire and Political Comedy Serve? (N = 489).

Function	Mean	SD
A way for viewers to laugh at politics	4.05	0.82
A way for viewers to engage with politics	4.01	0.91
A way for viewers to learn about politics	3.83	0.93
A way of mocking the powerful	3.94	0.99
An opportunity for politicians to reach different audiences	3.32	1.04
An opportunity for politicians to present themselves as good-humored	3.50	1.01
An opportunity for politicians to present political messages or policy	2.86	1.06
Entertainment/enjoyment for viewers	4.31	0.79

An explanation was provided when examining the open-ended responses. Some of the participants who said they agreed that satire worked as a communication tool for politicians openly stated that they did not like this or felt suspicious toward politicians who went on satire programs. Others added that satire was meant to offer critique and that this was being compromised by politicians playing along, a phenomenon that is discussed later. This suggests that many participants answered this question to express what function they thought satire was currently serving, not the function that it should serve. They considered satire to have a useful, critical function in contemporary politics, but they also recognized that politicians are increasingly using it.

Case Study: Obama

On December 8, 2014, Obama appeared on *The Colbert Report*, a satire famous for its satirically right-wing content. Its host, Stephen Colbert, satirically performed as a right-wing news anchor modeled on Fox News reporters such as Bill O'Reilly. Obama performed in a scripted skit called “The Decree,” a presidential version of Colbert’s long-running segment “The Word.” “The Word” was a segment in which Colbert delivered an impassioned monologue while the text on screen contradicted or added to the absurdity of his comic claims. This format was replicated when Obama delivered the skit. Initially, Obama “interrupts” as Colbert is about to start “The Word,” saying he is sure he can do the comedian’s job. Colbert leaves the frame entirely and Obama performs alone, delivering the sketch as if he is speaking the satirist’s words. He uses the opportunity to poke fun at himself while advocating for young people to sign up for health care insurance (Comedy Central, 2015).²

² For more textual analysis of the Obama and Clegg performances, please see Higgie (forthcoming).

Image

When participants were asked how Obama tried to present himself, the dominant narrative was that he wanted to be seen as a good-humored, relatable professional who understood youth issues, cared about the people, and was aware of his own shortcomings. He was trying to be intelligent, witty, and, importantly, in control. His humor was described as deadpan, self-aware, witty, and ironic. Although most participants identified that he was trying to present himself as "just like us" and "not just a part of the elite," this was almost always coupled with professionalism, authority, and being "statesmanlike."

Participants also identified that he presented himself as a parody of Colbert to craft this image, a kind of "part-statesman, part-Colbert." Some participants noted that this had certain advantages: "By keeping a straight face throughout the program, Obama manages to retain his presidential dignity while drawing on *The Colbert Report's* dry humor." The issue of dignity is key here, as many participants identified. The type of humor he used, especially his ironic deadpan channeling of Colbert, meant that he could come across as good-humored without becoming the clown.

Message

Participants identified two major messages in Obama's performance: personal image and health care. With health care, he was trying to communicate two things: (1) Obamacare is a good policy and (2) people should sign up. Many participants felt that he acknowledged that the policy was not perfect, but was determined to portray it as a good policy that benefited the young people who composed Colbert's audience. Overall, the responses to this question were quite specific, demonstrating that participants could identify multiple clear messages that Obama was trying to communicate. Participants felt that even though Obama did want to be portrayed as an approachable person, his main message was more about policy than image.

Motive

When asked why they thought Obama went on the show, participants said that his motive was to engage a wider audience, especially young people and people not normally engaged with traditional political media. There was a common assumption among participants that young people no longer access traditional news sources. The point of engaging this audience was often presented as policy-based rather than an attempt to boost his own ratings. More participants answered that his motive was to encourage young people to sign up for Obamacare than those who said he was trying to defend the policy or craft a particular image. Fewer still said that he was trying to win personal support.

The pedigree of *The Colbert Report* was also listed as a potential motive. Some participants stated that the show was popular and left leaning, so it offered a sympathetic platform for Obama. However, most felt that the show had a certain level of cultural capital beyond simply being popular or left wing. Participants often described the program as having an important place in the American political landscape, saying that it is "a very respected political-satire show" and "it is taken more seriously as providing sound political commentary, even though it is satire." Many participants believed that Obama

recognized Colbert's privileged place in political media, saying he knows "that's where a lot of young people go to get an appraisal of U.S. politics" and "it is a funny show that is also respected for telling the truth and informing people."

Success

When asked whether Obama was successful in how he tried to present himself and his message, participants overwhelmingly answered that he was. In total, 86.2% ($n = 224$) said he was successful, with only 1.9% ($n = 5$) answering no and 11.9% ($n = 31$) answering that they did not know. His success was reinforced when participants were asked to select options on a Likert scale regarding whether he came across as having various traits. As can be seen in Table 2, he scored highly in all categories except foolish and elitist. He came across as overwhelmingly good-natured and able to take a joke, and although the mean dropped slightly and the standard deviation rose for qualities such as funny, clever, relaxed, honest, and genuine, participants still ranked him highly in these categories. The lower means for honest, genuine, and relaxed, coupled with the higher standard deviation, demonstrate that being good-natured did not always translate to sincerity.

Table 2. Obama's Traits (n = 260).

Trait	Mean	SD
Funny	4.05	0.77
Foolish	1.96	0.85
Relaxed	3.98	0.92
Clever	4.05	0.73
Good-natured	4.29	0.59
Able to take a joke	4.41	0.61
Honest	3.72	0.83
Genuine	3.75	0.86
Elitist	2.08	0.91

The comparatively low mean for elitist is especially interesting given participants' comments about the statesman figure. It reinforces one of the most thought-provoking narratives to come from these responses: the idea of the politician being both "statesman-like" and yet "unlike other politicians." In a sense, Obama came across as a statesman, but not a politician. This dichotomy suggests that skepticism toward politicians is quite complex. Although the figure of the politician (as distinct from the statesman) is viewed with considerable cynicism, a politician can operate within the discourse of "professional politician" and escape cynicism by carefully combining dignity and good humor.

There are many other factors to consider in explaining Obama's success. Although he is a skilled performer, as some participants noted, there are notable elements that ensured his success beyond his own abilities. As previously discussed, the type of humor used ensured that Obama did not come across as buffoonish. However, as many participants highlighted, this would not be possible without a sense of control. The script had been pre-prepared and Colbert did not intrude on the skit. Unlike the Clegg and McKew interview/skits, participants believed that Obama was

Obviously able to vet and amend what he was reading out, so he could completely control how he was portrayed. If he was on a political quiz show he wouldn't have been able to control what was said, or utilize his existing skill set.

As another participant noted, Obama "didn't just play the game and sit dutifully answering questions." The format of the skit meant that he was proactive rather than reactive.

It is difficult to ascertain whether participants' political persuasion impacted how they responded to Obama, as so few participants identified as right wing. Of the 260 participants who watched the Obama video, only 19 identified as right wing. Although 82 identified as center/moderate and 10 identified as other, this still meant that 149 participants were left wing. Of the few participants who felt Obama was unsuccessful, four were left wing and one was center/moderate. The right-wing participants tended to say that he was successful, with 13 answering yes and six answering that they did not know. This result cannot be considered conclusive given the small sample of right-wing participants, but it is nonetheless interesting to observe that participants who felt he was unsuccessful or were unsure tended to be left wing.

Given that many participants assumed that youth would be more receptive to Obama, I also examined age. Those who felt that he was not successful tended to be older (four of the five participants were aged 46 years or older), but again, this is hardly conclusive, given that—overwhelmingly—Obama did come across as successful. He was successful across all age groups and political persuasions, although a study with more right-wing participants might have produced different results.

The Satirist's Role

When factoring in participants' responses regarding the function of satire, these responses suggest that Colbert, in giving over the vehicle of satire, lent Obama his cultural capital and undermined the function of satire as critique. Given that Obama's performance was satiric, dignified, and did not have to endure challenges from a satirist, "the viewer could take it as an endorsement." Performing as Colbert allowed Obama to play, in the words of one participant, a "double bluff." He could demonstrate that he was aware of criticism (from Republicans, the media, the public, and even Colbert) and that he welcomed it, but at the same time rebuff that criticism: "By pretending to channel Colbert's satirical persona, he is able to use humor to undermine the conservative position," and it was a "demonstration of strength (your barbs don't hurt me; I can own them and repurpose them for my own political ends)." This was, as another participant put it, "an opportunity to both 'trade-on' and 'trade-off' the Colbert brand," one that these responses show succeeded in presenting Obama as a good-humored, in-control statesman with an important message.

Case Study: Clegg

On January 30, 2015, Deputy UK Prime Minister and Liberal Democrats Leader Nick Clegg appeared on Channel 4's *The Last Leg*, a comedy show on topical news events and issues. Clegg was interviewed by one of the cohosts Alex Brooker, who had declared that he was not voting in the upcoming

general election. The interview differed dramatically from standard interviews of politicians on entertainment programs, as its tone was significantly less light-hearted and Brooker had a "bullshit buzzer" that would proclaim the word *bullshit* whenever it was hit. Brooker used the buzzer every time he felt Clegg was "talking bullshit." In the interview, Clegg admitted he wanted to slap Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron multiple times during their years in coalition. At one point, Brooker asked, "On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being couldn't give a toss, 10 literally you cannot sleep at night, how shitty do you feel about what you did with tuition fees?" referring to Clegg reneging on his election promise to never raise university fees. Clegg stressed that he was not prime minister and he had only 9% of MPs in the coalition government, only to face the bullshit buzzer. Eventually, he admitted to 9.5 of 10.

During the interview, Clegg tried to interrupt Brooker multiple times to address the comedian's insistence that he would not vote. When Brooker allowed Clegg 30 seconds to convince him to vote, he made various appeals, including a reference to the comedian's well-known love of fast-food chain Nando's: "It's like going to Nando's and asking someone else to put in your order and then you get something you don't want. If you don't vote, you'll get a kind of government you don't want" (Channel 4, 2015).

At the end of the interview, Brooker admitted that he would be voting, much to the delight of Clegg and the audience.

Image

When participants were asked how they thought Clegg tried to present himself, the same dominant narratives appeared. Most participants felt he was trying to come across as a good-humored, ordinary bloke who was genuine and able to take a joke. The concept of the antipolitician was regularly coupled with the idea of the "average Joe," presenting Clegg as "a decent guy trying to do a difficult job." The difficult job was the coalition government between the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives, with Clegg attempting to articulate that his party was trying to, as one participant described it, "rein in Tory extremism."

Although many participants felt that Clegg wanted to present an image of the everyman and the professional, the notion of the dignified statesman was never alluded to. Participants felt that, unlike Obama, Clegg was trying to come across as a "one of us" figure who just happened to be in politics. The image he was trying to cultivate relied on the idea that being "one of us" made one automatically more credible as a politician.

Message

Participants identified two major messages that they felt Clegg was trying to convey: his own personal image and the importance of voting. The narrative around image was the same as that in the previous section. In relation to voting, participants said his message was that "people should vote because politics is important" and "if you don't care enough to vote, you end up with a government that doesn't care about you or issues that matter to you." Similarly, however, many participants felt that his message was strategic. Participants either made the connection between his promotion of voting and a desire to

win votes (e.g., "He wants people to vote in the general election. Preferably, he would like them to vote for his party") or they saw his talk of voting as purely self-interested (e.g., "[The message is] a political one, vote for him!").

It is important to note that a number of participants felt that Clegg had no coherent message or was not given a chance to present the message he wanted to communicate. These participants often noted that he was trying to present a good image or talk about voting, but overall they felt that there was no clear message and that he jumped between topics.

Motive

The inclination toward seeing Clegg's message as strategic was further emphasized when participants were asked why they thought Clegg would go on *The Last Leg*. His perceived strategy was linked to a few key motives: "regain credibility" after his coalition with the Conservatives, appeal to students who felt betrayed by tuition fees, and reach voters who might otherwise feel alienated by traditional political media. Many participants talked about "damage control," particularly because "he lost his support from the young and student bases, and going on a young-audience aimed program will help to win them back."

Success

When asked whether Clegg was successful in how he tried to present himself and his message, just over half of participants answered no. In total, 51.4% ($n = 71$) answered no, with 27.5% ($n = 38$) answering yes and 21% ($n = 29$) answering that they did not know. As with Obama, participants were asked to say whether they agreed or disagreed that Clegg came across in various ways, as detailed in Table 3.

Table 3. Clegg's Traits ($n = 138$).

Trait	Mean	SD
Funny	2.92	0.99
Foolish	3.20	1.02
Relaxed	2.64	1.13
Clever	3.05	0.90
Good-natured	3.74	0.77
Able to take a joke	3.67	0.96
Honest	2.94	0.98
Genuine	2.96	1.01
Elitist	2.70	0.93

Considering Clegg's mixed success, the participants rated him quite highly. For many traits, such as funny, foolish, relaxed, clever, honest, and genuine, there was a more or less even spread of responses across agree, neither agree nor disagree, and disagree, as can be seen in the high standard deviations. When asked about elitism, there was an almost even split between participants who answered disagree

and neither agree nor disagree. He came across most poorly when it came to being relaxed, which reflects the lack of control he had over the performance. He did, however, have a majority of participants agree that he came across as good-natured and able to take a joke. This is reflected in participants' comments in the upcoming section on the satirist's role, with many feeling that Brooker was too harsh and that Clegg made a good effort to play along.

Political persuasion and age were also considered when examining who found Clegg successful. As with Obama, this was difficult to compare given the lack of right-wing participants. Only eight participants who watched the Clegg video identified as right wing. Across the political spectrum, participants who identified as left, center, and right found him to be successful or unsuccessful fairly equally. Age, however, was a different matter, with participants aged 18–35 years less likely to say that he was successful than their older counterparts. This could be reflective of the participants who either felt betrayal over tuition fees or identified that youth may have since become disenfranchised with the Liberal Democrats because of their coalition with the Conservatives.

The Satirist's Role

Some participants noted the difficulty that Clegg faced in doing such an interview, with one calling it an "uncontrollable situation." One participant added, "He is working hard here in a difficult scenario—he is being badgered and forced into simplistic statements. He works well—fighting for control by making his own jokes and takes hits on the chin in very good humour."

Another felt that "Brooker appears to be much harsher than most U.S. comedians." The idea of Brooker being harsh or unfair was reinforced by participants who said that Clegg "was ambushed by the presenter" and "tricked," with one noting that "it doesn't seem like this is what [Clegg's] agreed to." Even participants who expressed little sympathy for Clegg noted that the interview was shambolic in comparison to Obama's performance, with Brooker forcing Clegg to jump between topics.

These responses encompass a major difference between the Obama and Clegg appearances. Although they were certainly different types of performances with different politicians, the satirist's role as facilitator (or combatant) is important. As mentioned previously, many participants felt that Clegg had no coherent message. This was coupled with participants commenting on Clegg's awkwardness and the chaotic nature of the interview. By comparison, only three of 260 participants felt that Obama failed to have a clear message. The complete lack of intrusion from Colbert allowed Obama to have much more control over his message than Clegg, who had to face Brooker's questioning and bullshit buzzer.

The status of *The Last Leg* was also important. It was described as a popular show that had the "ear" of young and left-wing people, that it was "a 'no-bollocks' political medium." Its status as a no-bollocks medium could have been used to help Clegg foster an antipolitician image. Other participants argued that "if he didn't go on, then there would have been time on the show, most likely, dedicated to lampooning him for not coming. It was more strategically beneficial to come." For some people, the risk paid off. Whereas the aforementioned participants felt that Brooker did not allow Clegg to gain control of

the interview, one felt that Brooker and *The Last Leg's* cultural capital helped Clegg present the antipolitician image:

The Last Leg is presented as a "down to earth" show (Brooker's questioning style, etc.) for cynical and quite well-informed people compared with other mainstream shows. Clegg is trying to appear to reveal more about himself, to show that he is cynical about the state of politics and the people in Westminster. Brooker appears to attack him but does ultimately facilitate this.

This was the only participant who considered that Brooker's approach might in fact have helped Clegg construct an antipolitician image. Such an explanation may explain why many participants felt that Clegg was unsuccessful and lacked a message, yet still came across as relatively good-humored. Brooker may have been combative, but Clegg's willingness to be berated did elicit some sympathy. The fact that so few participants commented on this suggests that audiences may automatically assume that if a satirist is combative, the politician is being held to account. If a politician appears to be good-humored when being held to account, then this can result in a situation in which they come across well despite failing to communicate a coherent message.

Case Study: McKew

On August 11, 2010, Labor MP and former journalist Maxine McKew appeared on *The Chaser's Yes We Canberra!*, a satirical series looking at the upcoming Australian federal election. The Chaser is a well-known satirical team in Australia and often features politicians on the programs. *Yes We Canberra!* was broadcast by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and was filmed in the studios of its well-respected news show *Lateline*, which McKew hosted when she was a journalist. The segment was a hybrid interview/game/skit in which McKew was hooked up to a "pollie-graph," a fake lie detector that flashed green when she supposedly told the truth and red when she supposedly lied. In the segment, she was quizzed on certain aspects of Labor policy, her opinion of Prime Minister and Labor Leader Julia Gillard, and her experience as a journalist (Chaser Broadcasting Pty Ltd., 2010). The pollie-graph functioned much like Brooker's bullshit buzzer and was consistently used to label McKew's answers untrue.³

Image

When asked how participants thought McKew was trying to present herself, similar narratives appeared as in the Obama and Clegg videos, but with notable differences. Being good-humored was as prevalent as in Obama and Clegg, and was often coupled with being nice, friendly, and modest. Her sense of humor was cast as softer, with one participant describing her as "ready to laugh at herself in a more gentle manner than Obama." Interestingly, the antipolitician narrative was not as strong. Predominantly, participants mentioned her friendly persona without linking it to an attempt to appear "different" from the political establishment. Terms such as "good sport" (the most common phrase used), "easy going," "genuine," and "laid back" were often used. Some participants linked this image to Australian culture and,

³ For more textual analysis of McKew's performance, see Higgie (2013).

in the words of one participant, being "a fairdinkum Aussie." For instance, "I think she tries to come across as relaxed, good humoured and able to take a joke, which is important for public respect in Australian culture (the Australian public typically don't like people—especially politicians—who are too uptight)."

Gender was mentioned only briefly by six participants. Participants argued that "as a woman this is a way for her to show she is laid back" and that she was trying to show she could "hang with the boys." These responses reflect the necessity for female politicians to appeal to certain ideals of masculine laid-back Australian culture. Whereas other participants linked to this idea of appealing to Australian culture, the majority did not link it to gender.

Message

McKew's message was seen to be more about image than policy. Only one participant linked her message to a specific policy, namely, that the "Citizens' Assembly is a good idea." Despite this, the same participant still noted that the "broader message is that she is a fun, relatable person." As another participant said, she was trying to present herself "generally much like Obama, but without the policy focus."

Motive

All of the above narratives were repeated when participants were asked why they thought that McKew went on the program. Few participants directly said she was trying to "win votes," but many believed her motive was strategic. The Chaser's popularity was a prominent theme, with participants arguing that they had influence over "thinking, politically aware Australians" and "young Australians, particularly those in the working class." These responses, like many others, cast The Chaser as influential with key Labor demographics, and McKew as able to gain access to these groups if she could be a good sport.

Success

When asked whether McKew was successful in how she tried to present herself, 58.3% ($n = 49$) answered yes, 19.0% ($n = 16$) answered no, and 22.6% ($n = 19$) answered that they did not know. When participants were asked to rank her traits, she excelled in coming across as good-natured and able to take a joke (see Table 4).

As with Clegg, her willingness to play along with The Chaser resulted in her coming across as more good-natured. In fact, when it came to being good-natured, no participants disagreed, with participants either agreeing or selecting neither agree nor disagree. She also scored favorably when it came to being funny and antielitist. In other traits, such as being relaxed, clever, and genuine, she also scored well. When it came to looking foolish, a large percentage disagreed that she looked foolish, but there was a much larger spread between those who agreed and were unsure, as can be seen in the larger standard deviation. This can also be seen when participants scored her less favorably when asked whether

she came across as honest, with an almost even spread of participants answering agree or neither agree nor disagree, but very few answering disagree. This seems to suggest that she was very good at presenting herself as good-natured, but that this did not translate as strongly into coming across as honest or genuine. The high neither agree nor disagree scores when it came to being honest and genuine suggest that participants were unsure of her sincerity.

Table 4. McKew's Traits (n = 84).

Trait	Mean	SD
Funny	3.49	0.80
Foolish	2.51	1.01
Relaxed	3.38	0.90
Clever	3.51	0.86
Good-natured	4.12	0.55
Able to take a joke	4.15	0.67
Honest	3.33	0.80
Genuine	3.52	0.80
Elitist	2.12	0.87

Participants sought to explain her success in a number of ways. Participants noted that, as a former journalist, she was "a savvy media performer." She was also seen as a safe bet for Labor. She was media-trained and well known, but she was not too high profile to be put under much scrutiny. The advantage of being a former Australian Broadcasting Corporation presenter, especially on *Lateline* whose set *The Chaser* were using, also meant that it was easier for her to be relatable: "She was one of them and happy to be back with her viewer audience." In all of these responses, her past experience put her at a certain advantage. However, it is worth noting that most participants saw her performance as more organic and genuine. They said that "she was good humoured and clever, and very legitimate" and that she "found it easy to play along."

To consider factors such as age and political persuasion on McKew's success is again difficult, as only seven participants identified as right wing. In addition, there were no major deviations between age and political persuasion in the responses, unlike the Clegg younger viewers, who were more likely to say that he had been unsuccessful.

The Satirists' Role

Some participants alluded to the advantages of going on the program as a way of neutralizing satirical critique. For instance, some participants said that she went on the program to "speak for herself rather than just letting *The Chaser* speak for [her]" and "being a good sport with *The Chasers* would help prevent them ever being super targeting of her in future." Despite many participants commenting on *The Chaser's* popularity and perceived sway with young left-wing voters, comments about neutralizing *The Chaser's* criticism were otherwise uncommon.

Furthermore, when it comes to how the satirists may have hampered McKew's attempt to appear affable, there were surprisingly few comments. Although the use of a fake lie detector was mentioned, it was only ever referenced as a way for her to show that she "tells the truth and is trust-worthy." No participants mentioned the fact that the lie detector was used multiple times to cast her as a liar. Some participants referenced when The Chaser asked her whether Labor politicians ever lie. She responded with mock surprise, asking how they could suggest such a thing. Participants felt this was ironic, that she was acknowledging that politicians do lie, but she could be trusted. Unlike Clegg, where many participants said Brooker was harsh, participants did not comment on how The Chaser treated McKew. In fact, one participant even said, "I'm sure she was pleased that one of the hosts declared that she's 'a good sport.'" Although the machine called her a liar, the satirists were not openly combative. At one point, the machine even answered "true" when McKew called Craig Reucassel, one of The Chaser, "really unkind." He then apologized and appeared embarrassed, granting McKew the moral high ground. No participants commented that she lacked control, as they did with Clegg. Although no participants said that she had control like Obama, overall she was able to come across as genuine despite The Chaser's attempts to ridicule her. This highlights the possibility that a politician may escape ridicule and criticism, even from satirists who use tools designed to mock them. Such an observation suggests that the satirist's role as facilitator or combatant is more complex.

Comparisons Between Obama, Clegg, and McKew

To further gauge the success of the politicians in comparison to one another, I conducted an analysis of variance and Bonferroni post hoc test. Results revealed significant differences⁴ between the politicians when it came to traits such as funny, foolish, relaxed, clever ($p < .001$ between all politicians), and honest ($p < .001$ between Obama and Clegg, $p < .001$ between Obama and McKew, and $p < .004$ between McKew and Clegg). Obama was the most successful when it came to being funny, relaxed, clever, and honest, and Clegg came across as the most foolish. When it came to being good-natured, there was a significant difference between Obama and Clegg and between Clegg and McKew ($p < .001$), but not between Obama and McKew ($p < .093$). This result was repeated when it came to being able to take a joke, with the only lack of a significant difference between Obama and McKew again, this time $p < .017$. This trend of a significant difference ($p < .001$) appearing between Obama and Clegg and between Clegg and McKew appeared again when it came to being genuine and elitist. There was no significant difference between Obama and McKew, with $p < .134$ for genuine and $p < 1.00$ for elitist. In all cases, Obama always came across the best when it came to positive traits. Clegg scored most highly with negative traits and lowest in all the positive traits, with McKew sitting in the middle for all traits.

As I have argued throughout the article, Obama's significant success had a lot to do with the fact that his performance was scripted, lacked any intrusion from the satirist, and involved a careful mixture of dignity and humor. The Bonferroni post hoc test demonstrated that there was no significant difference between Obama and McKew when it came to being good-natured, able to take a joke, genuine, and elitist. This is despite the fact that McKew faced very different conditions than Obama. One key factor is that The Chaser, despite using a prop to mock her, were not hostile to her. As mentioned previously, there were

⁴ A significant difference appears between the means at $p < .005$.

times when McKew was even able to gain the moral high ground on the satirists. Again, this demonstrates the complexity of the satirist's role.

Politicians on Satire: Public Engagement, Propaganda, or Both?

Throughout the survey, participants voluntarily used the open-ended questions to say whether they thought politicians' participation in satire was positive or negative. A number of participants commented that they enjoyed seeing politicians on satire programs, that it offered political information "from a different view," and they appreciated politicians "show[ing] a bit more of who they really are which makes the choice for whether or not to vote for them easier." Some participants felt that politicians' willingness to play along truly distanced them from the political elite, that it "set them aside from those who have their heads up where the sun don't shine."

The word *respect* came up multiple times, with participants saying that they respected politicians who were able to take a joke even if, as one participant noted, that did not translate to "accepting [the politician's] views." Others felt it was a useful way for politicians to communicate with the public. One participant argued that "satire often treats politics with more intelligence and complexity, thereby making it a better place to go for guests and audiences alike." The issue of satire being a critical, intelligent medium often translated to added respect: "A politician who goes on a show like *The Daily Show* where there's an element of debate earns a bit of respect from me."

Other participants were nervous or vehemently against politicians' participation in satire. Some felt that politicians were compromising the dignity of politics and simplifying complex issues by playing along; others felt that politicians were compromising the critical function of satire and that allowing them to participate "dampens the point of satire, which is to ridicule the powerful," and that satire "doesn't really work when those in power are complicit; it becomes more propaganda." This sentiment was expressed by many participants, including one who made a link between satire and voters being less likely to separate personality from policy:

Boris Johnson is a Conservative and probably agrees with many current party policies that the public disagree with (such as tax credit cuts), but presents himself on HIGNFY [*Have I Got News for You*] as funny, bumbling, harmless, disorganised . . . an "alright bloke." . . . The show does not highlight his political views or attack them as it might have done in the past. I think this confuses voters when it comes to separating policy from personality.

Participants also recognized that even when they generally did not like or were suspicious of politicians' appearances on satire, they could also be surprised. One participant noted how they normally found politicians on satire programs "cringe-worthy" and yet, they found Obama's performance "genuine and relaxed." This research found that various factors resulted in politicians coming across favorably, even to skeptical or critical viewers. While the politician's own skill at performance is important, the key to their success is also related to the format of the performance (scripted/nonscripted), the type of humor used, the status of the satire in broader political media, and the role of the satirist as either facilitator or

combatant. Interestingly, the satirist as combatant can have complicated results. Although Clegg failed to communicate a coherent message and many participants felt that he was unsuccessful, he still scored well in coming across as good-humored and able to take a joke. Similarly, although The Chaser used their prop to call McKew a liar, she was a good sport about it and was even able to use it to gain the moral high ground. The findings suggest that if politicians can take a satirist's abuse (whether it is direct or through a prop), they may garner sympathy.

Summary and Avenues for Further Research

This study highlights the various factors at play in how audiences perceive politicians who participate on satire and comedy programs, showing that the role of satire in contemporary political communication has become significantly more complex than just providing critique or political commentary. Coleman et al. (2009) demonstrated that politicians value the opportunity that satire provides them to reach wider audiences and come across as more human, one that many participants in this survey also recognized. Satire is seen by politicians and audiences alike as having an influential role to play in how politicians fashion a more affable public image.

These findings also offer a useful starting point for further research. Although this research found that factors around control, format, and type of humor impacted how politicians were perceived, it would be valuable to explore how participants' biases factored into their responses, especially in relation to political persuasion, political knowledge, feelings on specific policies, feelings on specific satirists, and so on. Although political persuasion may seem like an obvious bias, responses in the survey indicated that the participants' attitudes toward satire and high-profile satirists also influence how they perceive politicians who are able to play along. Although the cultural capital of satire was examined in the survey, further research may seek to examine how skeptical audiences may feel more favorably toward politicians who seemingly gain the endorsement of a satirist they respect. Similarly, do popular satirists lose the trust of audiences when they are seen as too friendly toward politicians? Satire is often celebrated as critique by both scholars and audiences alike, but it functions in a much more complex way. It is a practice that can endorse as it criticizes and create sympathy as it ridicules. For that reason, further research is needed to examine how it manages to function in this seemingly contradictory way.

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