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# Can't Take a Joke?: The Asymmetrical Nature of the Politicized Sense of Humor

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In an effort to tease out possible expressions of dispositional differences in people of different political ideologies, this study uses media preference and consumption data from the 2008 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES08-Online) to examine characteristics of audiences for a range of television shows and genres. The individual shows include two political satires, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, and *The Colbert Report*; a late-night comedy/variety show, *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*; a hospital-based ensemble situation comedy, *Scrubs*; two animated comedies, *The Simpsons*, and *The Family Guy*; and two action-oriented dramas, *24*, and *CSI: Miami*. The genres include comedies, dramas, sports and documentaries. The results of a series of one-way ANOVAs and regression analyses supported the hypotheses that conservatives do not enjoy humor as much as liberals, and that they enjoy political humor even less than non-political humor.

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## Introduction

Is it true that Republicans have no sense of humor, or does it just seem that way to Democrats? Is your enjoyment of humor simply a function of whether you are on the sending or receiving end of the joke, or does it reflect the basic nature of your personality? This study examines the politics of humor consumption through an analysis of the political ideologies and other demographic characteristics of audiences for a range of television shows and genres.

In a media environment in which humor in general and political humor in particular seem almost exclusively to “lean left” (Cowherd, 2014), impressions of Republican attempts at humor range from awkward, as exemplified by Presidential candidate Mitt Romney’s “I like to be able to fire people” (Rucker, 2012), to offensive, as exemplified by Senatorial incumbent George Allen’s “Macaca” statement during his 2006 campaign for re-election (Millican, 2006), to simply not funny, as suggested by About.com’s online list of the *Top Ten Political Comedians* (Bromley, n.d.). A quick scan of that list reveals just one practicing comedian who could be considered politically conservative, Dennis Miller, of whom the list’s compiler and author notes:

...as the only real conservative comic on the list ... [he’s] become the go-to comic for the conservative right and FOX News, but lost most of his edge in the process. It’s not just that I disagree with most of his politics; it’s that he simply isn’t as funny anymore. (Bromley, n.d.)

But as suggested by researcher Joanne Cantor (1976) and others (e.g., Lynch, 2002; Nabi, Moyer-Gusé, & Byrne, 2007; Zillmann & Cantor, 1972), disagreement with Miller’s politics may in fact be a major reason why Bromley (n.d.) no longer laughs at his

jokes—it's harder to laugh when the joke is on you. If most political jokes are, in fact, told at the expense of Republicans, it seems reasonable to suspect that Republicans might not find them funny.

On the other hand, the rating of the humor may be a reflection of the quality or nature of the humor. The last significant network-broadcast attempt at conservative political humor, Fox News's *Half Hour News Hour*, which featured Miller, survived for just 17 episodes in 2007. The show drew a rating average of 2.5 stars out of a possible 10 by 585 IMDb "users" (*The Half-Hour News Hour*, n.d.), and a preponderance of negative online reviews like "A sad travesty" and "Thank God it's only a half hour!" ("Reviews & Ratings for 'The Half Hour News Hour,'" n.d.)

In the interest of fair and balanced reporting, it should be noted that the show also drew a number of enthusiastic reviews from politically conservative IMDb "users," but it must also be noted that their ratings seemed to be based at least as much on the targets of the humor as on the quality of the show's humor, as evidenced by comments such as: "American television has too long been run by those with a liberal mindset. It's good to see the other side," and "Okay you Liberals, it's our turn! How's it feel?" ("Reviews & Ratings for 'The Half Hour News Hour,'" n.d.).

Since the demise of *The Half Hour News Hour*, political comedy on broadcast television has had no conservative representation except perhaps the Comedy Central send-up of conservative punditry, *The Colbert Report*, starring Stephen Colbert. It is open to question whether this reflects a world in which "reality has a well-known liberal bias" (Colbert, 2006), or that conservatives haven't had a lot to laugh about lately. When Colbert was named as the replacement for long-time host David Letterman on CBS's *Late Night with David Letterman* show, conservative pundit Bill O'Reilly predicted Colbert would "bomb" because he would fail to attract conservative viewers (Gold, 2014). Sports-talk host Colin Cowherd disagreed, however, suggesting that comedy is a liberal-dominated industry and that conservatives don't watch late night comedy shows anyway:

...I mean seriously, who watches TV at 1 in the morning? It's not the married conservative couple in Nebraska. They're not watching television at midnight. Vampires, bartenders and college kids, that's who's watching TV. I mean all those guys – By the way, all the hosts right now on late night TV are all liberal. That's fine. Seth Myers, Jimmy Fallon, they all lean left. The whole comedy industry leans left. All the writers on that show, 99% of them lean left. When I was working on a sitcom, you couldn't find a conservative in that room. That's fine. If you're going to be offended by who's writing stuff and you're a conservative, turn off your television.

Every sitcom, every show on every network, was written by liberals. Every stinking one of them. I mean every one of them. So I don't buy that. I think Colbert's going to do very well. (Cowherd, 2014, April 15: Excerpt of transcript from *The Herd with Colin Cowherd*, ESPN radio.)

The audience for Colbert’s political satire is strongly progressive, with just 12% identifying as Republican versus 39% as Independents and 45% identifying as Democrats (Gold, 2014). But is the audience short of conservatives because they don’t find jokes about conservatism funny, or because they just aren’t interested in comedy? Are there differences in the ways conservatives and progressives experience and react to humor that are unrelated to the politics of the humor?

While most studies of the interaction of humor and politics focus on humor that is explicitly political (e.g., Baym, 2005, 2007; Hmielowski, Holbert and Lee, 2011; Holbert, 2005; Holbert, Hmielowski, Lather & Morey, 2011; Holbert, Tchernev, Walther, Esralew & Benski, 2013; Nabi, Moyer-Gusé & Byrne, 2007; Schutz, 1977), the current study focuses on a broader range of humor consumption to examine whether people who harbor different political ideologies also harbor different preferences for humor in general, including that of a non-political nature. In addition to satisfying our curiosity about who laughs at what, this study may shed light on the role of dispositional differences in media preference and offer potentially useful insights into media selection and messaging strategies for commercial advertising as well as political purposes.

## Literature Review

### *Distinguishing Left From Right*

Before addressing potential differences between Republicans (or conservatives) and Democrats (or Progressives or liberals) in humor appreciation, it might be useful to establish an understanding of the characteristics of their differences in political ideology. Some scholars attribute differences between left and right to cognitive choices or communicative practices. Lakoff (1995), for instance, suggests that the reactions of conservatives and liberals to various situations are guided by metaphor, and that their prioritization of different metaphors leads them to different reactions to the same sets of data or circumstance. Tuschman (2013) asserts that their differences are largely innate—perhaps even their adherence to different metaphors—and that “*political orientations are natural dispositions that have been molded by evolutionary forces*” (p. 24). Hibbing, Smith and Alford (2014) agree with this dispositional viewpoint, suggesting that “liberals and conservatives experience the world differently” (p. 4). Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski and Sullaway (2003) posit the two “core aspects of conservative ideology” as “resistance to change and acceptance of inequality” (p. 342). Galloway and Chirico (2008) characterize conservatism as “a generalized fear of stimulus and response uncertainty” (p. 130). Verhulst, Eaves and Hatemi (2012) note that “political conservatism has been associated with dogmatism... intolerance for ambiguity or uncertainty, a personal need to achieve order... desire for structure or closure, integrative complexity, and fear of threat or loss” (p. 35-36). Hibbing et al. (2014) suggest conservatives tend to have a strong desire for “cognitive closure” (p. 105) and a distaste for uncertainty, while liberals tend to be more open to new experiences and alternative points of view. Tuschman (2013) suggests that conservatives “desire to keep what is good

and prevent it from deteriorating” while progressives believe “that human nature can evolve into something better” (p. 312).

### ***The Role of Personality***

A number of researchers cite two of the “Big 5” personality traits—openness to experience and conscientiousness—as significantly correlated with and reliably able to predict subjects’ political ideology (see, for example, Galloway & Chirico, 2008; Hibbing et al., 2014; Kahan, Jenkins-Smith & Braman, 2011; Lewis & Bates, 2011; Tuschman, 2013; Verhulst et al., 2012). Openness to experience has been identified as “the most common personality trait linked to politics” (Verhulst et al., 2012, p. 35), with high levels of the trait associated with more liberal positions on social and moral issues, and low levels associated with conservative attitudes, right-wing authoritarianism, and social dominance orientation (Verhulst et al., 2012). Research has found a highly consistent but moderate .3 correlation between high levels of openness and liberal political attitudes (Lewis & Bates, 2011). Based on the lexical derivation of the openness trait, this correlation seems quite modest since in some instruments participants are asked to rate themselves against descriptions that explicitly include words like “conservative, conventional... and progressive, favor social reform” (McCrae, 1994). Galloway and Chirico (2008) note that openness is “associated with a need for novelty, variety and complexity” (p. 130). Adjectives used to define openness include artistic, curious, imaginative, insightful, original, and wide interests (McCrae & John, 1992).

High degrees of conscientiousness have been positively associated with conservatism (e.g., Hibbing et al., 2014; Kahan et al., 2011; Tuschman, 2013), but to a lesser extent than the negative relationship with openness (Verhulst et al., 2012). Adjectives associated with conscientiousness include efficient, organized, planful, reliable, responsible and thorough (McCrae & John, 1992).

The tonal difference between the characteristics associated with low levels of openness (e.g., “right-wing authoritarianism”) and high levels of conscientiousness (“reliable,” “thorough”) is notable because of the liberal-academic temptation to interpret conservatism as a pathological condition (Hibbing et al., 2014). While a deficient sense of humor may not be pathological, low levels of openness—especially in the areas of tolerance for ambiguity, need for closure, and social dominance—seem to relate to trait-influenced differences in appreciation of humor. As may be seen from the following discussion of humor motivations, the “core aspects” of conservatism suggested by Jost et al. (2003)—e.g., resistance to change, and acceptance of inequality—may have a determinative dispositional influence on humor appreciation.

### ***Different Types of Humor***

Lynch (2002) has proposed that there are three prevailing theories of humor motivation: as an expression of superiority, as tension relief, and as an interpretation of incongruity. Of these, using humor as an expression of superiority seems most compatible with the social dominance orientation of conservative values and personality traits (Hibbing et al., 2014; Kahan et al., 2011; Tuschman, 2013). The need to establish and maintain superiority aligns with authoritarian personality traits, which personality theorists have

connected to conservatism (Hibbing et al., 2014). There is a long tradition of the use of humor as a weapon of the weak and powerless to diminish the strong and powerful (Lynch, 2002; Schutz, 1977). But when humor is used from a position of dominance to assert that dominance and diminish others, it reflects poorly on the character of those who deliver it, often coming across as cruel, mean-spirited or like bullying (Herzog et al., 2006; Schutz, 1977), qualities of which the most recent Republican candidate for President, Romney, has been broadly accused (e.g., Pexton, 2012). If there is a tendency among conservatives to use humor to express their superiority over others, this may be more of a reason for poor ratings of conservative humor than the politics of the target.

Similarly, laughing at incongruity may require the ability to appreciate the juxtaposition of familiar and unfamiliar concepts, a characteristic of the “Big 5” personality trait of openness, which, as noted above, has been correlated with a high degree of significance to Liberalism (Hibbing et al., 2014; Tuschman, 2013). The laughter that comes from observing a violation of expectations is an example of a reaction to the incongruity of that situation (Lynch, 2002). This may explain the humor found in watching someone being caught on videotape in the act of violating social norms by lying or stealing, or of politicians giving conflicting testimonies to different audiences as is so often presented on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (Baym, 2005). People who rate low in the trait of openness may not find such incongruity as amusing as those who are high in the trait of openness.

In differentiating between two types of humor that involve incongruity, Galloway and Chirico (2008) suggest that people high in openness like nonsense humor and unresolved incongruity, while those who are high in conscientiousness dislike nonsense humor and prefer their comedic incongruities to be resolved. In incongruity-resolution humor, an incongruity is introduced and then resolved, producing a reaction that could be interpreted as tension relief (e.g., Lynch, 2002). In nonsense humor, on the other hand, the “incongruity is left unresolved, or only partially resolved” (Galloway and Chirico, 2008, p. 130), which must then be interpreted as absurdity. They present the following as examples of these different concepts of humor:

Resolved incongruity:

*It is better to keep your mouth shut and appear stupid, than to open it and remove all doubt.*

Unresolved incongruity:

*The two most abundant things in the universe are hydrogen and stupidity. (p. 132)*

According to Galloway and Chirico (2008), Republicans should favor the first joke, while Democrats should favor the second.

### ***Humor and Politics***

In recent years, much of the attention on political humor has focused on its role in providing political information to an increasingly fragmented media audience (e.g.,

Baym, 2005, 2007; Jones, 2005). Among some population segments, it may be a primary source. According to a 2004 Pew Research Survey, 21 percent of respondents aged 18 to 29 said they got at least some political information from comedians (“Cable and internet loom large in fragmented political news universe,” 2004). Clearly, humor has a growing role in the theater of political life, but what is much less clear is who decides what is funny, and who is getting the joke.

A number of researchers focus on the persuasive and informative influences of humor and other forms of mediated entertainment (e.g., Baum, 2003; Baym, 2005, 2007; Jones, 2005), including examination of interactions between individual attitudes, personality traits and cultivation effects (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010; Nabi & Krucmar, 2004; Nabi, Moyer-Gusé & Byrne, 2007; Nabi & Riddle, 2008). Holbert and his colleagues have conducted a number of studies on the consumption and influences of various kinds of entertainment programming, including satire, sitcoms, and drama (Hmielowski, Holbert & Lee, 2011; Holbert, Shah & Kwak, 2003; Holbert et al., 2013). Holbert (2005) provides an integrative overview of theoretical research into the connections between entertainment and politics and offers a typology for categorizing mediated entertainment that orients individual programs and program types along two main axes: (1) explicitly or implicitly political, and (2) primarily political or secondarily political. In his description of programming examples, he notes that the “fake news” satire of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* is primarily political, but because it is presented as satirical humor and therefore “fake,” it should be considered implicitly political and not overtly political. Similarly, while the animated satire, *The Simpsons*, carries politically oriented messages and implications, it is not primarily political. As a comedy, its politics are also implicit and not explicit. Holbert classifies Jay Leno (*The Tonight Show*) in the same general area as *The Daily Show* and *The Simpsons*, implicitly and not explicitly political, with an expectation that at least some of the nightly monologue will include political content.

The three major competing theories of humor motivation described by Lynch (2002) help to define the different roles humor is intended to play, but some researchers note that regardless of motivation, the effect of humor is likely to be different for different individuals (e.g., Cantor, 1976; Zillmann & Cantor, 1972). This dispositional approach seems compatible with a “uses and gratifications” approach to understanding the consumption of mediated entertainment (e.g. Cooper & Tang, 2009; Haridakis & Whitmore, 2006; Ruggiero, 2000). It seems reasonable to assume that people would seek out programming they find entertaining. When it comes to comedy shows, people would not watch shows they do not find funny.

## Research Hypotheses

The main purpose of this study is to try to tease out the possible influence of people’s dispositional differences, as reflected in their political identification and ideology, on their appreciation of humor. Do Republicans and Democrats appreciate humor differently? Can those differences be illuminated through analysis of their media consumption choices?

In reviewing research in the areas of political identity, personality, humor motivation, and dispositional differences in media consumption, several areas of influence seem to

intersect. Personality trait theory seems to suggest that people with personality traits associated with conservatism (e.g., dogmatism, intolerance for ambiguity or uncertainty, resistance to change, need for social dominance) will have difficulty appreciating incongruous humor and humor that diminishes those in power and therefore will find fewer comedic subjects funny than people who have personality traits associated with liberalism.

Hypothesis 1: Republicans will express less appreciation for humor than Democrats, and this will be reflected in their choices of television programming.

The directional nature of Disposition Theory (e.g., Cantor, 1976; Zillmann & Cantor, 1972) suggests that those who perceive themselves to be the butt of someone else's jokes will not find those jokes as funny as those who are not the targets. Since there is a perception that most politically oriented humor in the major media is directed toward conservatives (Bromley, n.d.; Gold, 2014), conservatives are unlikely to find this humor as entertaining as liberals.

Hypothesis 2: Republicans will express much less preference for political comedy programming than Democrats.

Hypothesis 3: Republicans will express less preference for non-political comedy programming than Democrats, but not as much less as for political comedy programming.

## **Method**

Statistical data for this survey were derived from Wave 5 of the 2008 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES08-Online), which was conducted online from November 5, 2008, through January 31, 2009, with respondents drawn randomly from a Knowledge Networks panel. This wave of the Annenberg survey was chosen because it is the only one that questioned respondents on their entertainment television viewing behavior as well as the standard demographic measures. In total, 19,234 respondents were included in the Wave 5 sample, of whom 10,886 were female (56.6%) and 8,348 were male (43.4%). Average age of the participants was 50.46 years. (A summary of descriptive statistics is presented in Table 1, below.)

## **Measures**

The Annenberg study collected a wide range of demographic, attitudinal and behavioral information from its respondents. The following measures were used as control variables in the current study: age, gender, education (a six-point scale ranging from "did not complete high school" to "graduate degree or higher"), household income (a 16-level scale based on annual income ranges), urban or non-urban place of residence, political party identification (a seven-point scale ranging from "strong Democrat" to "strong Republican," which will be discussed later), and political ideology (a seven-point scale ranging from "extremely liberal" to "extremely conservative").



Two sets of dependent variables were derived from the television viewership responses to the Annenberg survey: individual preferences for general types of programming, and regular viewing of specific programs. Those included in the current study include:

General type of programming preference (ascending scale of 0 to 4):

- Like Comedy: “Comedies/sitcoms like *Two and a Half Men* or *The Simpsons*”
- Like Drama: “Drama shows like *Grey's Anatomy* or *Law and Order*”
- Like Sports: “Sports programs”
- Like Documentaries: “Documentary programs on channels like the History Channel or the Discovery Channel” (NAES08-Online Codebook, p. 128)

(Respondents were asked to rate their top four preferences on a 1 = most preferred, 2 = next most preferred, etc., basis. These scores were recoded to provide an ascending scale.)

Regular viewing (i.e., at least once a month) of specific programs (yes = 1, no = 0):

- *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*: political satire
- *The Colbert Report*: political satire
- *The Simpsons*: animated social satire
- *The Family Guy*: animated situation comedy
- *Scrubs*: hospital-based ensemble situation comedy
- *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*: late night comedy-variety
- *24*: Action-thriller with an international political context
- *CSI: Miami*: Police procedural drama

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of key variables

|                            | N     | $\bar{x}$ | s.d.  |
|----------------------------|-------|-----------|-------|
| Age                        | 19041 | 50.46     | 14.69 |
| Party Identification (1-7) | 19234 | 4.20      | 2.23  |
| Political Ideology (1-7)   | 19041 | 3.86      | 1.52  |
| Education Level (1-6)      | 19041 | 2.69      | 0.90  |
| Household Income (1-16)    | 19041 | 11.66     | 4.02  |
| Live in Metro Area (0-1)   | 19041 | .86       | .34   |
| Gender (0=M, 1=F)          | 19041 | .56       | .50   |
| Like Comedies (0-4)        | 19041 | 1.30      | 1.46  |
| Like Dramas (0-4)          | 19041 | 1.85      | 1.63  |
| Like Sports (0-4)          | 19041 | 0.28      | 0.45  |
| Like Documentaries (0-4)   | 19041 | 1.55      | 1.50  |

Household income rating of 11= \$40,000 – 49,999; 12 = \$50,000 – 59,999.

### ***Analyses: One-way ANOVAs and regressions***

The data on audience characteristics were analyzed using two different varieties of statistical analysis. To examine potential differences in the demographic make-up of the audiences for the individual television shows and genres, a series of one-way ANOVAs compared the mean values of political ideology and other variables for regular viewers and non-viewers of the show audiences. To include general programming preferences (e.g., Like Comedy) in the one-way ANOVA analyses, respondents who rated a particular type of programming highly (e.g., 2, 3 or 4 on the 4-point scale) were identified as regular viewers for that type of programming. A summary of the results of these analyses are presented in Table 2 and discussed in the Results section, below.

To examine contributing factors to media choices for the consumption of humor and other entertainment programming, a regression analysis was conducted with “Like Comedy” as the dependent variable, and with age, gender, education, household income, urban/non-urban residency and political ideology as predictor variables. To provide context for interpreting this analysis, additional regression analyses using the same independent variables were conducted with “Like Drama,” “Like Sports,” and “Like Documentaries” as the dependent variables. Summaries of these regression analyses are presented in Tables 3 – 6 and discussed in the Results section, below.

### ***Examination of Assumptions***

While large sample sizes such as those obtained in this study tend to eliminate problems with normality, examination of graphic representations of distributions of the predictor variables identified potential normality issues. Because there were so few cases at the extremes in the original 1 through 8 coding of the education variable, this variable was recoded into a 6-point scale in which the two values representing less than high school graduation were combined, and the two values representing levels of post-graduate degree were also combined.

As can be seen Figure 1, below, the values for political party identification exhibited almost a perfect reverse of a normal distribution. This may have been a function of the survey question, which asked respondents to identify themselves as one of the following: “Strong Democrat,” “Not Strong Democrat,” “Lean Democrat,” “Independent/other/undecided,” “Lean Republican,” “Not Strong Republican,” or “Strong Republican.” Apparently, respondents did not seem to want to characterize themselves as “Not Strong” or “other/undecided.”

The Party Identification variable was included in the one-way ANOVA analyses that follow, but because of the normality issue it was not used in the regression analyses. The Political Ideology variable (see Figure 2, below) was used as the predictor variable for the regression analyses. While the Party Identification and Political Ideology variables are highly correlated ( $r = .671$ ,  $p < .001$ ), the difference in their midpoint and extreme values is striking.

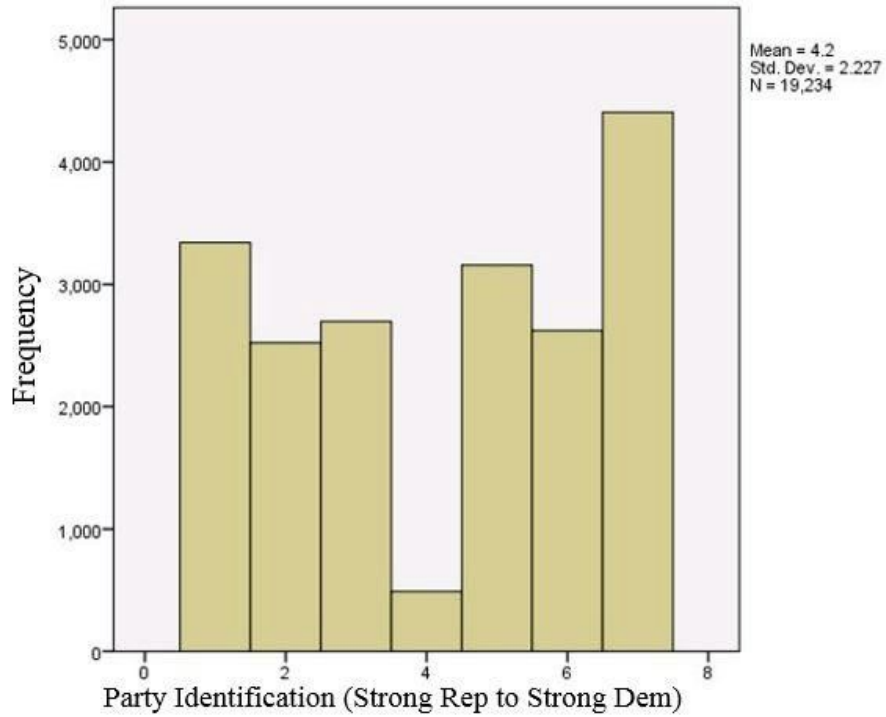


Figure 1: *Frequency distribution of Party Identification variable.*

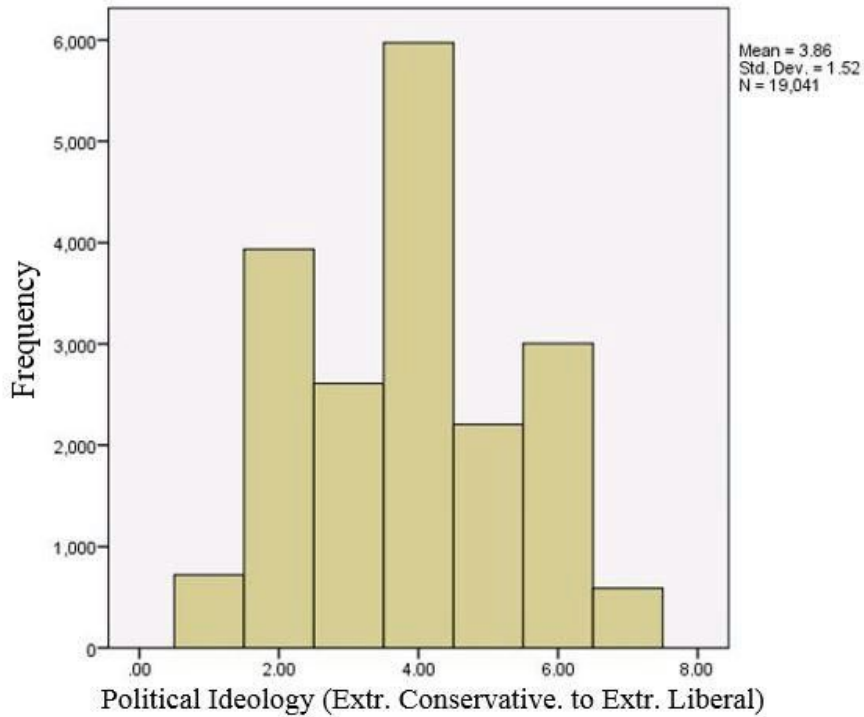


Figure 2: *Frequency distribution of Political Ideology variable.*

## Results

To test a series of hypotheses considering the role of political ideology in the consumption of televised comedy programming, audiences self-identifying as frequent viewers of eight representative television shows and four programming genres were examined. The demographic characteristics of the audiences, as well as those of the Wave 5 sample as a whole (i.e., Grand Mean) are presented in Table 2, below. One-way ANOVA analyses were conducted for several demographic variables, and the results of these analyses are represented graphically by the red, blue and black colors of the values.

Table 2. Comparison of Means for Selected Television Audiences, Nov. 2008 - Jan. 2009

|                       |          | N     | Age<br>(Ave) | Sex<br>(F=1<br>) | Educ<br>1-6 | Income<br>1-18 | Party<br>ID<br>1-7 | Pol<br>Ideol<br>1-7 |
|-----------------------|----------|-------|--------------|------------------|-------------|----------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| <i>Daily Show</i>     | Viewers  | 2369  | <b>48.39</b> | <b>.517</b>      | <b>3.75</b> | <b>12.59</b>   | <b>5.47</b>        | <b>4.84</b>         |
|                       | Non-Vwrs | 15029 | 51.43        | .570             | 3.25        | 11.56          | 4.04               | 3.72                |
| <i>Colbert Report</i> | Viewers  | 2210  | <b>48.40</b> | <b>.501</b>      | <b>3.71</b> | <b>12.47</b>   | <b>5.19</b>        | <b>4.66</b>         |
|                       | Non-Vwrs | 15188 | 51.40        | .572             | 3.26        | 11.59          | 4.09               | 3.76                |
| <i>Scrubs</i>         | Viewers  | 2105  | <b>43.39</b> | .555             | 3.31        | 11.69          | <b>4.46</b>        | <b>4.15</b>         |
|                       | Non-Vwrs | 15293 | 52.07        | .564             | 3.32        | 11.70          | 4.20               | 3.83                |
| <i>Simpsons</i>       | Viewers  | 2084  | <b>42.24</b> | <b>.410</b>      | 3.30        | <b>11.25</b>   | <b>4.59</b>        | <b>4.25</b>         |
|                       | Non-Vwrs | 15314 | 52.21        | .584             | 3.32        | 11.76          | 4.18               | 3.82                |
| <i>Family Guy</i>     | Viewers  | 2376  | <b>40.22</b> | <b>.468</b>      | <b>3.19</b> | <b>11.32</b>   | <b>4.59</b>        | <b>4.25</b>         |
|                       | Non-Vwrs | 15022 | 52.73        | .578             | 3.34        | 11.76          | 4.18               | 3.82                |
| <i>Leno</i>           | Viewers  | 3715  | <b>52.95</b> | <b>.542</b>      | 3.35        | <b>11.88</b>   | <b>4.34</b>        | 3.91                |
|                       | Non-Vwrs | 13683 | 50.50        | .569             | 3.31        | 11.65          | 4.20               | 3.86                |
| 24                    | Viewers  | 1879  | 50.08        | <b>.518</b>      | 3.37        | <b>12.29</b>   | <b>4.10</b>        | <b>3.77</b>         |
|                       | Non-Vwrs | 15519 | 51.13        | .569             | 3.31        | 11.63          | 4.25               | 3.89                |
| <i>CSI: Miami</i>     | Viewers  | 4953  | <b>52.97</b> | <b>.607</b>      | <b>3.17</b> | <b>11.33</b>   | 4.22               | <b>3.81</b>         |
|                       | Non-Vwrs | 12445 | 50.24        | .545             | 3.38        | 11.84          | 4.24               | <b>3.90</b>         |
| Like Comedy           | Viewers  | 7700  | <b>45.69</b> | <b>.581</b>      | <b>3.26</b> | <b>11.76</b>   | <b>4.28</b>        | <b>3.99</b>         |
|                       | Non-Vwrs | 11341 | 53.69        | .546             | 3.35        | 11.59          | 4.14               | 3.77                |
| Like Drama            | Viewers  | 10283 | 49.44        | <b>.684</b>      | <b>3.36</b> | <b>11.84</b>   | <b>4.29</b>        | <b>3.97</b>         |
|                       | Non-Vwrs | 8758  | 51.65        | .415             | 3.25        | 11.45          | 4.09               | 3.73                |
| Like Sports           | Viewers  | 5364  | <b>52.73</b> | <b>.277</b>      | <b>3.41</b> | <b>12.33</b>   | <b>3.98</b>        | <b>3.68</b>         |
|                       | Non-Vwrs | 13677 | 49.56        | .671             | 3.27        | 11.40          | 4.29               | 3.93                |
| Like Documentaries    | Viewers  | 9037  | <b>51.70</b> | <b>.485</b>      | <b>3.41</b> | <b>11.78</b>   | <b>4.08</b>        | <b>3.80</b>         |
|                       | Non-Vwrs | 10004 | 49.34        | .628             | 3.22        | 11.56          | 4.31               | 3.92                |
| Grand Mean            | All      | 19041 | 50.46        | .560             | 3.31        | 11.66          | 4.20               | 3.86                |

Figures in Red: Less than non-viewers,  $p < .01$

Figures in Blue: Greater than non-viewers,  $p < .01$

Figures in Black: Not significantly different than non-viewers

As can be seen by the preponderance of blue numbers in the columns relating to political identity for all the comedy shows in the sample, audiences for the individual comedy shows and for comedy programming in general tend to skew Democratic and liberal. By far, the largest differences in Party Identification and Political Ideology between viewers and non-viewers are found in the data for *The Daily Show* (Party ID:  $F = 869.50$ ;  $df = 1$ , 17396;  $p < .001$ ; Political Ideology:  $F = 1195.51$ ;  $df = 1$ , 17396;  $p < .001$ ). *The Colbert Report*, the other primarily political comedy show in this analysis, also yielded large differences in political leanings between viewers and non-viewers (Party ID:  $F = 470.25$ ;  $df = 1$ , 17396;  $p < .001$ ; Political Ideology:  $F = 704.10$ ;  $df = 1$ , 17396;  $p < .001$ ). The

greatest differences in a non-political comedy, with *The Family Guy*, were not nearly as marked as with the political comedy shows, but were still highly significant (Party ID:  $F = 69.42$ ;  $df = 1, 17396$ ;  $p < .001$ ; Political Ideology:  $F = 171.94$ ;  $df = 1, 17396$ ;  $p < .001$ ). For all the individual comedy shows, the regular viewers were significantly ( $p < .001$ ) more Democratic and liberal than the non-viewers. The same held true for the genre of comedy in general (Party ID:  $F = 17.18$ ;  $df = 1, 19039$ ;  $p < .001$ ; Political Ideology:  $F = 94.43$ ;  $df = 1, 19039$ ;  $p < .001$ ). These findings support H1, H2 and H3.

With the exception of *The Tonight Show*, the comedy audiences also tend to skew significantly younger than for other kinds of programming. Interestingly, comedy audiences also tend to skew more male than female. Among the programs and genres studied here, the programming types most preferred by conservatives and Republicans appear to be sports and documentaries, and to a lesser extent, the “official operative” programs represented by *24* and *CSI: Miami*.

To examine the dispositional influence of political ideology on programming choices, regression analyses were conducted on four different programming types with political ideology as a predictor variable along with a selection of other often-studied demographic variables. The results of these analyses are summarized in Tables 3 – 6, below. As can be seen in Table 3, age is the strongest predictor of comedy preference among the variables studied, with political ideology (“Cons-to-Lib”) also a highly reliable predictor but to much less effect, accounting for less than one-half of 1% of the variance. These findings may act to confirm the expectations of those who expect comedy audiences to be young and liberal.

Table 3. *Summary of Regression Analysis Predicting “Like Comedy”*

|                    | <i>B</i> | <i>SE(B)</i> | $\beta$ | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> |
|--------------------|----------|--------------|---------|----------|----------|
| Intercept          | 2.516    | 0.064        |         | 39.40    | .000     |
| Age                | -0.028   | 0.001        | -.279   | -39.94   | .000     |
| Education          | -0.071   | 0.009        | -.057   | -7.69    | .000     |
| Household Income   | 0.009    | 0.003        | .026    | 3.54     | .000     |
| Live in Metro Area | 0.074    | 0.030        | .017    | 2.46     | .014     |
| Gender             | 0.015    | 0.021        | .005    | 0.72     | .474     |
| Cons-to-Lib        | 0.061    | 0.007        | .063    | 9.01     | .000     |

$R^2 = .088$ ;  $F = 306.42$ ;  $df = 6, 19034$ ;  $p < .001$

Political ideology is also a reliable predictor of preference for drama programming, as can be seen from an analysis of Table 4. Gender, age and income are also reliable predictors of drama preference, with gender far and away the most powerful. While the effect, again, is not strong, it appears that not only are liberals more likely to prefer comedy than conservatives, they are also more likely to prefer drama.

Table 4. *Summary of Regression Analysis Predicting "Like Dramas"*

|                    | <i>B</i> | <i>SE(B)</i> | $\beta$ | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> |
|--------------------|----------|--------------|---------|----------|----------|
| Intercept          | 0.847    | 0.071        |         | 12.00    | .000     |
| Age                | -0.006   | 0.001        | -.056   | -8.05    | .000     |
| Education          | 0.067    | 0.010        | .048    | 6.65     | .000     |
| Household Income   | 0.026    | 0.003        | .064    | 8.78     | .000     |
| Live in Metro Area | 0.014    | 0.033        | .003    | 0.42     | .672     |
| Gender             | 1.007    | 0.023        | .306    | 44.09    | .000     |
| Cons-to-Lib        | 0.051    | 0.007        | .048    | 6.88     | .000     |

$R^2 = .108$ ;  $F = 384.82$ ;  $df = 6, 19034$ ;  $p < .001$

Table 5. *Summary of Regression Analysis Predicting "Like Sports"*

|                    | <i>B</i> | <i>SE(B)</i> | $\beta$ | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> |
|--------------------|----------|--------------|---------|----------|----------|
| Intercept          | 0.275    | 0.019        |         | 14.40    | .000     |
| Age                | 0.002    | 0.000        | .072    | 10.56    | .000     |
| Education          | 0.004    | 0.003        | .010    | 1.35     | .178     |
| Household Income   | 0.008    | 0.001        | .072    | 10.11    | .000     |
| Live in Metro Area | 0.006    | 0.028        | .004    | 0.65     | .513     |
| Gender             | -0.309   | 0.019        | -.341   | -50.00   | .000     |
| Cons-to-Lib        | -0.011   | 0.002        | -.037   | -5.40    | .000     |

$R^2 = .140$ ;  $F = 515.56$ ;  $df = 6, 19034$ ;  $p < .001$

Table 6. *Summary of Regression Analysis Predicting "Like Documentaries"*

|                    | <i>B</i> | <i>SE(B)</i> | $\beta$ | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> |
|--------------------|----------|--------------|---------|----------|----------|
| Intercept          | 1.333    | 0.068        |         | 19.72    | .000     |
| Age                | 0.006    | 0.001        | .062    | 8.63     | .000     |
| Education          | 0.096    | 0.010        | .074    | 9.78     | .000     |
| Household Income   | -0.002   | 0.003        | -.006   | -0.81    | .421     |
| Live in Metro Area | -0.004   | 0.032        | -.001   | -0.13    | .886     |
| Gender             | -0.436   | 0.022        | -.144   | -19.92   | .000     |
| Cons-to-Lib        | -0.037   | 0.007        | -.038   | -5.20    | .000     |

$R^2 = .035$ ;  $F = 115.54$ ;  $df = 6, 19034$ ;  $p < .001$

As indicated by the negative slopes and t-values in Tables 5 and 6, conservative political ideology seems to reliably predict preference for sports and documentary programming, although being of the male gender is a much stronger predictor in both cases.

Taken in total, these analyses suggest that people who identify as Republicans and conservative tend to choose considerably less humor programming than people who identify as Democrats and liberal.

## **Discussion**

Results of the statistical analyses demonstrate a small but reliably significant ability of political ideology to predict preference for comedy programming, to the effect that conservatives seem to avoid comedy programming while liberals seem to seek it. From a uses-and-gratifications perspective, it can be assumed that conservatives do not enjoy humor as much as liberals—at least the humor that is presented on television. The research cited in the literature review above suggests that dispositional differences may be influencing these divergent choices of programming consumption.

The tendency of humor to have a target that is diminished by the humorous attention, e.g., dominance-related humor (Lynch, 2002), may be an area of differential appreciation by liberals and conservatives. When the humor is directed at conservative political figures or beliefs, people who identify as conservative are likely to feel assailed rather than amused (Cantor, 1976; Zillman & Cantor, 1972). When the humor seems focused on diminishing the powerful and thereby changing or equalizing the existing social order, it might conflict with the “core aspects” of conservatism suggested by Jost et al. (2003), e.g., resistance to change, and acceptance of inequality. As people who tend to value social dominance and the maintenance of the existing social order, conservatives would seem more likely than liberals to engage in humor that maintains social dominance, i.e., by directing the diminishing effects of humor at targets with less power and prestige. To many, however, making fun of the less fortunate seems more like bullying than joking around (Lynch, 2002; Schutz, 1977). This may account for low ratings of conservative-oriented attempts at humor (“Reviews & Ratings for ‘The Half Hour News Hour,’” n.d.), and the perception that conservatives are simply not funny (Bromley, n.d.).

As people who tend to rate low on the personality trait of openness, conservatives also may have less of a tendency to appreciate the humor of incongruity and nonsense (Galloway and Chirico, 2008). Taken together, these factors would serve to reduce the breadth of situations, topics and types of humor that conservatives find funny. Viewed from this perspective, it is not surprising that conservatives would gravitate away from comedy and toward other kinds of programming.

## **Limitations and Implications for Future Research**

Any study of humor must cope with the inevitable impression that it is just not serious, and therefore not worthy of significant effort or attention. The results of recent elections, however, suggest that humor can sometimes tip the precarious balance of power. The 2006 senatorial re-election hopes of Virginia’s George Allen took a serious blow when his attempt at humor on the campaign trail was widely interpreted as racist (Millican, 2006). Mitt Romney’s awkward attempts at humor in the 2012 election (Rucker, 2012) also did not help his chances. While the analyses in this study produced results with extremely high degrees of statistical significance and reliability, the effect sizes—at least in terms of predictive ability—were fairly small. Predicting behaviors such as

programming choices from a dispositional variable like political ideology leaves a great deal unaccounted for. In the current study, age was a much more powerful predictor of preference for comedy than was political ideology, as was gender for predicting preferences for drama, sports and documentaries, yet political ideology did have a consistent and significantly measurable effect on all of those choices.

In rebutting the critique that personality traits and such small effect sizes provide limited utility in predicting behavior, some personality-trait researchers note that:

It is sobering to see that the effect sizes for many medical interventions—like consuming aspirin to treat heart disease or using chemotherapy to treat breast cancer—translate into correlations of .02 or .03.

...even relatively small effects can be important because of their pragmatic effects and because of their cumulative effects across a person's life. (Roberts, Kuneel, Shiner, Caspi & Goldberg, 2007, p.314)

Indeed, in a nation in which the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon margin of victory was just two-tenths of 1% (49.7% to 49.5%), and Obama's 2012 3.8% margin of victory over Romney was the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest since 1996 ("US Elections," n.d.), it is clear that small effect sizes can have large consequences.

While the current study identified significant differences in the humor-related media consumption choices between conservatives and liberals, its use of an already-extant dataset precluded any experimental exploration of those differences. Future studies that could explore these differences might include those in which people of different political ideologies describe and express what they find funny, or rate the funniness of different jokes and other humorous situations, or watch the same humorous films while their physical and neurological reactions are recorded and analyzed.

Finally, if humor can be used to subvert or support the balance of power in the existing social structure, it suggests possible differences in expression and appreciation of humor depending on which political party holds power. Liberal comedians seem to prefer conservative office holders as their targets. Do Republicans tell more jokes and laugh harder when Democrats are in office?

## Conclusion

Through analysis of the audiences for different genres of television programming, this study provides confirmation for the impression that comedy audiences tend to be young and liberal. The analyses provide clear evidence that conservatives are significantly less likely than liberals to watch comedies, and that conservatives are even less likely to watch political comedy than non-political comedy.

In providing empirical support for the existence of consistent and predictable dispositional differences between people of different political ideologies in their consumption of mediated entertainment, this study may suggest areas of exploration for media selection and messaging strategies in the fields of commercial advertising and



public relations as well as politics. Whether you are trying to sell a candidate or a convertible, it can be important to understand that not everyone is going to get the joke.

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