You're Joking Right? Elite Humor and its Effect on Congress, the Media, and Voters

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

(Political Science)

at the

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

2019

Date of final oral examination: 4/29/2019

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Dedicated to Stephanie, Adele, Jude, and Eliot

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Acknowledgements sections for dissertations are impossibly small. This project represents a journey of nearly nine years in which my intellectual, professional, and personal worlds have been expanded and redefined again and again. During that time, I have entirely transformed or abandoned the goals, interests, and ideas that drove the original conceptualization of my academic work. Armed with a series of research experiences as an undergraduate, I entered graduate school with what I considered a well-defined professional path. In no small part, this dissertation is the result of learning how wrong I was. I will forever be grateful for the many people who have helped me learn those lessons, both expected and otherwise.

The faculty at both Brigham Young University (BYU) and the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW) played a large part in that process. At BYU, Quin Monson and David Magleby gave me my first opportunities to teach and do research, helping me discover my passion for the social sciences as more than a platform from which to reach law school. From there, the department did a remarkable job fostering my nascent interest, as it has done for many others. Chris Karpowitz, Jeremy Pope, Kelly Patterson, Jay Goodliffe, and the other faculty affiliated with the Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy have my special thanks for the ways in which they empowered me at a remarkably early stage in my academic career to ask well-structured questions and conduct original empirical research. These scholars have routinely offered their time and experience to help lay the groundwork for many successful careers in social science research and teaching, including my own.

Since arriving at UW, I have been blessed to continue to work with accomplished, impressive faculty that care about my professional success. Faculty in both the Department of

Political Science and the School of Journalism and Mass Communication have created multiple research labs and other opportunities for graduate students, spaces in which my peers and I could flourish. My first interaction with one of these labs, the Mass Communication Research Center led by Dhavan Shah, came during my first campus visit, and was a major reason I wanted to attend UW. Research group and seminar experiences with Ken Mayer, Byron Shafer, Lew Friedland, Mike Wagner, Ryan Owens, and many others were essential in shaping my personal research questions and the methodological tools I would need. Similarly, I am grateful for the support, patience, and feedback of the members of my committee. Their insights and perspective have been vital to the development and successful completion of this dissertation.

Of all the faculty I have had the pleasure of working with, however, I am most indebted to Kathy Cramer. Her unwavering support and patient optimism have buoyed me time and again during this process. Her insight about and passion for understanding how all of us as members of the mass public experience politics on a regular basis demonstrated to me at key moments the value of my own instincts and ideas. More than anything else, though, I will forever be grateful for Kathy's unmistakable interest in my success as a professional and happiness as a person. When I began to question my career ambitions and plans (the plans that had brought me to UW and graduate school in the first place), Kathy was happy to help me work through what was at the time a confusing set of feelings and ideas. In those conversations, she always made it clear that connecting me with work that would serve both my community and my family was her top priority. It is, in large part, because of those conversations that this dissertation and my career have been successful thus far.

More than anyone else, however, my family deserves all the gratitude, appreciation, and love I can give. They have endured with good humor and love the late nights (that often became early mornings), personal uncertainty, and professional delay that so often accompany a graduate experience. Graduate school is a marathon, one I never could have finished without their unflagging support. My children have shown remarkable patience as I have had to delay or change activities and plans with them more often than I care to remember. Most of all, my wife deserves special praise. For more than twelve years she has listened patiently to my ideas, questions, doubts, hopes, fears, anxieties, and (many) professional plans. She has supported me quietly when possible and loudly when necessary, giving me the courage I have needed to finish this experience. I could not have done this without her. I would not have done this without her. I look forward to our next adventure together.

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ABSTRACT

Humor has been common in elite political discourse in the United States since at least its founding. Yet political scientists have had remarkably little to say about the form and consequences of congressional humor in any time or context. Existing studies suggest, however, that humor may be an effective tool with which to build and sustain policy- and electorally-relevant relationships. Actors with little unilateral power, elected officials must rely on the collective approval of others to enter Congress, gain institutional authority, and pass legislation (Fenno 1978). I contend that shared humor is an essential part of the ways that elected officials foster politically meaningful relationships. When laughing together, individuals often assume that they share a range of positive personality characteristics with a joke teller (Cann and Calhoun 2001). In this way, comedy can act as a powerful heuristic, foregrounding the familiar and fostering political attention and support. These effects may even cross partisan and ideological lines, presenting listeners with alternate characteristics with which to evaluate a member. I evaluate these possibilities in three contexts among members' peers, journalists, and voters, and find that member humor use likely exerts significant, prosocial effects. In public committee hearings, I find evidence that members are conservative in their humor use, focusing their jokes on non-policy topics and at the expense of themselves or co-partisans. These quips generally bore legislative, if not electoral fruit, with member humorists finding more legislative success and institutional influence. Among the media, I find that humorous officials should help journalists provide members of the public with both what they *need to know* and what they *want to know*, thereby empowering them to be competent, active citizens. Finally, I find that voters also respond positively to congressional humor. Consumers who find a member of Congress amusing are more likely to evaluate them positively and express interest in their non-comedic comments. My data also suggest that in some contexts likely to spur political learning (i.e., when experiencing anger about politics), individuals may look first to political comedy if given the option. I conclude with recommendations to develop an elite humor research agenda.

Chapter One

Congress Makes a Joke

On October 19, 2017, just over 800 people gathered in the ballroom of the Hilton hotel in New York City for the 72nd annual Al Smith Dinner. Dressed in white tie and gowns, each guest had paid more than $3,000 for a meal of lobster and black radish salad, with the proceeds benefitting Catholic Charities. For most attendees, however, the food was something of an afterthought. They had come for the rest of the menu, the chance to see members of the Washington elite skewer themselves and each other in the name of comedy. The evening's program described the event as an opportunity for politicians and other prominent figures to "poke fun at a political issue, an opponent, or themselves."[1] Since at least 1960, the event has been a mainstay of Washington politics, intended as a refreshing change of pace from the conflict and polarization that can dominate American political discourse. The dinner is meant to be a safe space where good-natured jokes can be made and enjoyed by a politically diverse crowd. To some, however, the 2017 dinner seemed to have a slightly sharper edge to it than many that had come before it.

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[1] Amber Phillips, "Paul Ryan's got Jokes about President Trump," *Washington Post*, October 20, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/10/20/add-paul-ryan-to-the-list-of-republicans-with-jokes-and-jabs-about-president trump/&usg=AOvVaw0yK1yHNT3nqe_YK5lUe0Nw.

The event that evening featured a keynote address by then-Speaker of the House, Paul Ryan. In the spirit of the event and like many before him, Ryan came armed with jokes about the issues and political actors of the day. It quickly became apparent, however, that most of the laughs that evening would come at the expense of one political actor in particular: Donald Trump. It is not uncommon for Al Smith dinners to include ribbing of a sitting president, yet Trump's relationship with comedy is complex. While he uses humor on a regular basis—often to the delight of supporters[2]—he has been described as "anti-funny," someone interested in jokes only to keep opponents off-balance.[3] Nonetheless, Ryan began his remarks with a riff on an episode earlier in 2017 where Trump appeared to expect members of his cabinet to individually and

[2] Andrew Restuuccia and Ben Schreckinger, "In MAGA World, Trump's Jokes Always Land," *Politico*, October 19, 2018, https://www.politico.com/story%2F2018/10/19/trump-rallies-comedy-916795&usg=AOvVaw2qRsL-7EPn73fBE31UfJEw.

[3] Bret Stephens, "A Presidency Without Humor," *New York Times*, December 7, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/07/opinion/trump-bush-memorial-humor-president.html. Veteran reporter Matthew Cooper has described Trump's brand of humor as a kind of "insult comedy" that is at odds with what public humor in the nation's capital is traditionally expected to be. (Cooper 2018).

extensively praise him in front of the press[4]: “Please, enough [applause]. You sound like the Cabinet when Donald Trump walks into the room.”[5]

During the next seventeen minutes, Ryan repeatedly took the president to task for comedic effect. “Cardinal Dolan gave a benediction at President Trump’s inaugural,” one joke began. “There was just this one kind of awkward moment when the cardinal talked about the infallible, enlightened supreme being. The president stood up and took a bow.” Later in his remarks, Ryan sarcastically referenced Trump’s widely criticized comments at the previous year’s Al Smith dinner: “I know last year that Donald Trump offended some people. I know his comments, according to critics, went too far. Some said it was unbecoming of a public figure and they said that his comments were offensive. Well, thank God he’s learned his lesson.” When the audience roared its approval, Ryan quipped that Trump would be likely to spin the laughter among the night’s 815 attendees[6] as “’300,000 cheer mention of my name.’” Trump was pervasive in Ryan’s routine. Many jokes targeting Democrats also managed to take the president

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[4] Chris Cillizza, “Donald Trump Just Held the Weirdest Cabinet Meeting Ever,” *CNN*, June 13, 2017, https://www.cnn.com/2017/06/12/politics/donald-trump-cabinet-meeting/index.html.

[5] “Full Transcript: Paul Ryan’s Remarks at the Al Smith Dinner,” *New York Times*, October 20, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/20/us/politics/transcript-paul-ryans-al-smith-dinner.html.

[6] “The 72nd Annual Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner Press Kit,” http://www.alsmithfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Al-Smith-Dinner_Press-Kit_2017.pdf.

down a peg. Ryan invoked Trump, for example, by saying that "a lot of people, they ask me, you know, a guy from Wisconsin, what's it like to work on a daily basis with an abrasive New Yorker with a loudmouth?" before teasing, "but you know once you get to know him, Chuck Schumer's not all that bad." Even some of Ryan's self-deprecating remarks began with Trump. "You know, at one point, the President actually insulted me. I know that sounds kind of surprising. He described me as a Boy Scout who was boring to talk to. It didn't hurt my feelings. What hurt my feelings was when my wife agreed with him."

Perhaps most compelling about the routine, however, was what came before it. Ryan had been more or less at odds with Trump since the 2016 campaign. During the election, Ryan had frequently criticized the eventual Republican nominee, declaring that the latter's policies were "not conservatism" and that his statements were at times "the textbook definition of a racist comment."[7] For his part, Trump repeatedly denounced Ryan as uninformed and out of touch with the Republican party.[8] Ryan's criticism was more muted after Trump's inauguration, a shift he would later justify by arguing that public critiques of the president were often counterproductive. Instead, Ryan would contend that public peace with Trump allowed him the leverage to move

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[7] Emmarie Huetteman, "The Rocky Relationship of Donald Trump and Paul Ryan, a History," *New York Times*, August 3, 2016, https://www.www.nytimes.com/2016/08/04/us/politics/paul-ryan-donald-trump.html&usg=AOvVaw05JSUyASWA5i97lWrMZl6x.

[8] Clare Foran and Sarah Westwood, "Trump Attacks Paul Ryan, Says He 'Knows Nothing' about Birthright Citizenship," *CNN*, October 31, 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/31/politics/trump-paul-ryan-birthright-citizenship-midterms/index.html.

policy in a positive direction behind the scenes. Ryan's focus on the president during his address was therefore striking in and of itself. Free to craft his own remarks and operating under only a loose expectation of political timeliness, Ryan could have continued his public detente with Trump but chose not to. Thus, while some journalists concluded that "Ryan's remarks were in no way intended to attack the president,"[9] many others argued that the jokes were "damning statements delivered behind the plausible deniability of a comedy routine."[10] The tenor of the widespread coverage of Ryan's comments suggest that many journalists' adopted the latter view.[11]

An informed observer of Ryan's performance might wonder why the Wisconsin Republican seemingly decided to at least for one night set aside his basic strategy of working with the president and instead make jokes at his expense. The answer is likely due at least in part to the

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[9] Amber Phillips, "Paul Ryan's got Jokes about President Trump," *Washington Post*, October 20, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/10/20/add-paul-ryan-to-the-list-of-republicans-with-jokes-and-jabs-about-president trump/&usg=AOvVaw0yK1yHNT3nqe_YK5lUe0Nw.

[10] Ezra Klein, "Paul Ryan Used a Comedy Routine to Say what he Really Thinks about Donald Trump," *Vox*, October 20, 2017, https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/10/20/16507646/paul-ryan-jokes-trump-al-smith.

[11] Sharon Otterman, "At Al Smith Dinner, Paul Ryan's Best Jokes are Aimed at Trump," *New York Times*, October 19, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/19/nyregion/al-smith-dinner-paul-ryan.html&usg=AOvVaw26szE65LJuoAWWcOD5jWkR.

ambiguous nature of humor. Current theories suggest that comedy is born at the intersection of multiple interpretations of the same message—often referred to as the “set up” of a joke. On first encounter, a set up suggests a specific, non-humorous interpretation. We perceive comedy when a second stimulus—often characterized as a joke’s punch line—makes an alternate, playful interpretation unexpectedly relevant (Martin 2010). A playful frame is often invoked by structuring a punch line as a benign violation of one or more social norms (McGraw and Warren 2010). One of Ryan’s jokes began, for example, with a call back to Trump’s unexpected electoral victory in 2016: “it’s been almost a year ago that on November the 8th, countless shocked Americans broke into tears over the election results.” On its own, this statement can be read as a condemnation of Trump, a reference to the size and commitment of the opposition movement. Ryan’s next line, however, turns that interpretation on its head—at least partially—when he quipped: “but enough about the press.” The punch line instantly transfers the negative, anti-Trump energy from voters to journalists, conforming with long-standing conservative critiques of liberal media bias and Trump’s own criticism of traditional news outlets. In the moment, though, the criticism is playful and intentionally exaggerated, blunting its effect and generating a laugh at the mental image of professional journalists weeping over election returns.

Still, this is not a complete accounting of the multiple fronts along which Ryan’s joke—like many told everyday across the world—succeeded. A wide range of social norms can be violated at any given time, including at least two in this joke. Some listening to Ryan may have found humor in his characterization as something over-the-top and clearly not true, a violation of expectations of precision and clarity in public speech. This portion of the audience perceives professional members of the media as unbiased reporters, conveying necessary information in a relatively

dispassionate way. While some individual reporters may have had a personal aversion to Trump as a candidate, it was nothing as severe as Ryan's joke suggests. Comedy is therefore found in the playful, incongruous comparison of the expectations of professional journalists' controlled decorum and the emotional devastation described. Other listeners may have considered Ryan's comments revelatory, finding humor in his willingness to reveal what they consider an unpopular truth: that the media systematically work to oppose conservative voices and policies. Individuals with this view may have found humorous relief in Ryan's willingness to break with social norms that require publicly categorizing reporters as unbiased. According to this view, Ryan's joke is "funny because it's true." Ryan's ultimate intent with any joke can therefore be difficult to pin down. The inherent ambiguity of humor may have allowed him to vent his frustrations with Trump, Democrats, the media, and others in an actively discounted, ambiguous manner, offering him subsequent political protection and potentially emboldening him to speak his actual opinions more directly than he otherwise might.

Of course, not all attempts at humor by members of Congress are as successful as Ryan's speech. Sixteen months after that night in New York, on March 26, 2019, Senator Mike Lee rose on the Senate floor to speak about climate change. Specifically, Lee was critical of a collection of progressive policy proposals—known as the Green New Deal—that called for a national effort to counter rising temperatures with an intensity and scope akin to the economic New Deal of the 1930's. Lee was not alone in his position against the legislation on the floor that day. In short

order, he would join 56 other Senate Republicans to vote against the bills.[12] If the substance of Lee's remarks were not especially noteworthy, however, their style was.

Lee began by noting that while he was not "immediately afraid" of the effects of climate change or of the Green New Deal passing, he was "mostly afraid of not being able to get through [his] speech with a straight face."[13] Saying that he would "speak about the Green New Deal with the seriousness it deserves," Lee began by displaying an image of former president Ronald Reagan riding a dinosaur while firing a machine gun and wearing what the senator described as a "rocket launcher." Lee argued that the "image has as much to do with overcoming Soviet communism in the 20th century as the Green New Deal has to do with overcoming climate change in the 21st." Over the next several minutes, Lee would expand this argument by presenting and discussing a series of absurdist images, including "the stirring unmistakable patriotism of a raptor holding up a tattered American flag," the "hairy bipedal species of space lizards" known as Tauntauns from Star Wars films, and the development of a fleet of cargo sea horses similar to the comic book character Aquaman. Lee concluded the comedic portion of his remarks with a fictionalized image of his own state's governor battling sharks with a tennis racket.

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[12] Lisa Friedman, "Senate Blocks Green New Deal but Expends Plenty of Carbon Talking about it," *New York Times*, March 26, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/26/us/politics/senate-green-new-deal.html.

[13] Mike Lee, "Remarks on the Green New Deal," March 26, 2019, https://www.lee.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2019/3/remarks-on-the-green-new-deal.

Coverage of Lee's remarks suggest that relatively few found his efforts amusing. The senator's home state paper expressed confusion. The editorial board of the Salt Lake Tribune wrote, "so what was that Mike Lee performance? Standup comedy? He wasn't exactly killing it on stage with his joke props to mock the Green New Deal resolution."[14] Other commentators were blunter. One labeled the jokes "extremely stupid and dishonest"[15] while another said Lee's comments were an indication that "the United States government is completely incapable of dealing with the climate crisis."[16] As Bell (2015) notes, such a response to failed humor is not uncommon: inadequate joke tellers are often socially penalized for their failure.

An informed observer may again question the reason a member of Congress would engage in public comedy. What was Lee trying to accomplish when he stepped away from a traditional floor speech? Why not restrict himself to only the portion of his remarks that addressed specific policy points in a serious manner? Why risk the potential ridicule of failed humor? Some observers of the rising polarization and declining comity in recent congresses may question the

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[14] "Tribune Editorial: Mike Lee gets Laughs, but the Joke is on Utah," *Salt Lake Tribune*, March 28, 2019, https://www.sltrib.com/news/2019/03/28/tribune-editorial-mike/.

[15] Jonathan Chait, "Republican Senator Mike Lee: Having Babies is the Only Solution to Climate Change," *New York Magazine*, March 26, 2019, http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/03/mike-lee-speech-babies-solution-climate-change-green-new-deal.html.

[16] Charles P. Pierce, "The United States Government is Completely Incapable of Dealing with the Climate Crisis," *Esquire*, March 26, 2019, https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/politics/a26950967/mike-lee-climate-change-green-new-deal-alexandria-ocasio-cortez/.

frequency and impact of modern congressional humor (Uslaner 1996; Mann and Ornstein 2006; Ahuja 2008). Lee's comedic cards do appear to have garnered an unusually large amount of attention for his speech, elevating his public profile at least temporarily. Lee's critique of the Green New Deal and his preferred policy alternative—increasing the birth rate in the United States in an effort to have more scientists in the future available to study climate change—were broadly discussed to an extent not seen for most floor speeches. But the ultimate consequences of Lee's humor are unclear. Some commentators came to his defense, arguing that he had been treated unfairly and that his perspective deserved more serious consideration,[17] but most comments expressed either confusion or contempt for both Lee's substance and style. Yet no systematic evidence exists on how his humor usage affected his treatment in the press, to say nothing of its potential consequences among voters and Lee's peers in government.

Political scientists in general have had remarkably little to say about the form and consequences of congressional humor in any time or context. The application of existing humor theory to studies of Congress has been infrequent at most. This is not to say that comedy as a general concept has escaped political scientists' purview. To be sure, a growing literature has developed around the consequences of consuming late night political satire. These studies have suggested that the kind of comedy employed by professional humorists like Stephen Colbert, John Oliver, Samantha Bee, and Jon Stewart can inform and at times shape public perceptions of

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[17] Robert Verbruggen, "Mike Lee Says Kids are Good for the Planet; *Washington Post* Pounces," *National Review*, March 26, 2019, https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/mike-lee-children-climate-change-washington-post-reaction/.

elected officials and systems (e.g., Young 2019). A burgeoning field, many empirical investigations on the effect of consuming late night political satire have yielded inconsistent and contradictory conclusions. As Gregorowicz (2013) notes, existing studies have variously argued that late night comedy:

> is informative (Baum, 2002, 2003a, 2003b; Brewer & Cao, 2006), but not on matters of political importance (Baek & Wojceszak, 2009; Prior, 2003, 2005). [Late night political satire] shrinks the political knowledge gap by reducing motivational and resource barriers to learning (Baum, 2002, 2003a, 2003b; Rottinghaus, Bird, Ridout & Self, 2008), but primarily attracts and disproportionately benefits sophisticated audiences (Cao, 2008; Landreville, Holbert & LaMarre, 2010; Morris, 2009; Young & Tisinger, 2007; Young, 2008). It encourages viewers to seek further information (Cao, 2010; Xenos & Becker, 2009) from media they come to view as biased and untrustworthy (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Holbert, Lambe, Dudo & Carlton, 2007). [Late night political satire] draws attention to politically relevant cues (Kim & Vishak, 2008; Xenos, Moy & Becker, 2011; Young, 2004, 2006), yet has no discernible influence on political attitudes. Viewers are more likely to vote (Cao & Brewer, 2008; Moy, Xenos & Hess, 2005a) in unfair elections (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006), and report warm feelings toward leaders (Baum, 2005; Moy, Xenos & Hess, 2005b) whom they view as incompetent and dishonest (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Guggenheim, Kwak & Campbell, 2011).

With few exceptions, however, these studies center on the effects of mass consumption of a specific type of political comedy: professional, televised political satire. In so doing, existing

studies have provided valuable insight into the most widely consumed form of political humor, yet have left important questions unaddressed.

Remarkably few studies, for example, have considered the nature and consequences of the comedy used by members of Congress. Elected officials in the United States have long claimed that humor is an essential tool in their communication repertoires (Yarwood 2004). In interviews and memoirs, many congressional elites have asserted that they frequently use humor in a variety of settings including meetings with constituents, interactions with journalists, and in debates on the floor of the House or Senate (e.g., MacNeil 1970; O'Neal and O'Neal 1964; Schutz 1977; Yarwood 2001). Comedy, the members say, helps shape short and long-term perceptions of their rhetoric and behavior. Well-placed jokes can ease tension, start conversations, and help build enduring relationships of policy or electoral significance. This is consistent with a growing literature that recognizes the prominent influence of elected officials' seemingly nonpolitical characteristics. These studies demonstrate individuals' inherent affinity for elites who look, act, and sound familiar (e.g., Enos 2017; Powell, Richmond, and Cantrell-Williams 2012; Lenz and Lawson 2011; Kam and Zechmeister 2013). Judgments of this kind can occur subconsciously, rapidly, and have enduring consequences (Verhulst, Lodge, and Lavine 2010; Olivola and Todorov 2010).

These studies also remind us of the critical role of relationships for members of Congress. As both candidates seeking the support of voters and officials seeking the support of their peers, members' electoral, policy, and institutional success hinges on public attention and displays of solidarity. Actors with little unilateral power, they must rely on the collective approval of others to enter Congress, gain institutional authority, and pass legislation (Fenno 1978). Yet as Lindstadt,

Wielen, and Green note, “while there is a substantial literature highlighting the presence of social dynamics in legislatures, we know very little about the precise *processes* that generate these social dynamics” (2017, p 511, emphasis in original). Better understanding the relationships that undergird and facilitate American politics therefore must include a more thorough examination of the processes that build and sustain them.

I contend that shared humor is an essential part of the ways that elected officials foster politically meaningful relationships. When laughing together, individuals often assume that they share a range of positive personality characteristics with a joke teller (Cann and Calhoun 2001). In this way, comedy can act as a powerful heuristic, foregrounding the familiar and fostering political attention and support. These effects may even cross partisan and ideological lines, presenting listeners with alternate characteristics with which to evaluate a member. A registered Democrat laughing along with Paul Ryan at the Al Smith dinner, for example, may begin to see the former speaker less as a Republican and more as someone they would like to spend time with—a potential “drinking buddy” (see Powell, Richmond, and Cantrell-Williams 2012). Individuals who make humorous comments are consistently perceived as more likeable, intelligent, and capable than their unfunny peers (Bressler and Balshine 2006; Nabi, Moyer-Guse, and Byrne 2007; Greengross and Miller 2011; Curry and Dunbar 2013; Kashdan et al. 2014; Wood and Niedenthal 2018; Gray, Parkinson, and Dunbar 2015). It is difficult to overstate the potential importance of such dynamics in an era defined by partisan and affective polarization. I argue that members of Congress who are relatively more successful in telling jokes should be better positioned to disseminate information consistent with their preferred party and policies, energizing supporters and moderating opponents (Mutz 2006, Garrett et al. 2014, Levendusky and Malhotra 2016).

A study of congressional comedy is also compelling because of the scope of the effects involved. While preferences for humor style, context, and frequency may vary, the prosocial effects of shared laughter appear to be universal. Current humor theory identifies humor as an emotion so central to the human condition that its absence is treated as a rare pathology (Martin 2010). Scholars have noted the roots of humor in sociological, psychological, and biological dimensions of the human experience (e.g., Manninen et al. 2017; Dennett, Hurley, and Adams 2011). Put simply: society, evolution, and our own physiology prompt us to spend time with and support those who make us laugh. Humor use by members of Congress should therefore promote the creation and maintenance of both temporary and lasting social bonds among substantial portions of the American public, prompting individuals to engage and affiliate with actors they may otherwise discount (Markiewicz 1975, Sternthal and Craig 1973). I argue that when a member of Congress tells a joke, it should—among other things—motivate a voter to consider listening to—or even voting for—them, a journalist to contemplate writing about them, and an elected official to explore opportunities for collaborating with them. In other words, when a member of Congress tells a joke, scholars should listen.

Plan of the Dissertation

In this dissertation, I draw on a range of theoretical perspectives and original empirical evidence of congressional humor use to paint a more detailed picture of the nature and consequences of congressional comedy. Each chapter begins with my core argument that humor can be a valuable tool with which members of Congress can foster positive relationships that help them acquire essential institutional, media, and electoral resources. I consider the effect of

congressional humor in three distinct contexts and among three different audiences in order to offer a broad overview of elite joking. The dissertation will proceed as follows.

Chapter Two explores the structure, motivations, and consequences of jokes made by members during public committee hearings of the 112th Congress. As regular, bipartisan interactions between members, committee hearings are an excellent collection of raw humor use by representatives and senators. One of the principal benefits of studying comments in committee is the possibility hearing transcripts offer of independent humor identification. Because a broadly accepted, rigorous humor identification system remains elusive, separating comedic messages from their serious counterparts is inherently challenging. I therefore use notations of audience laughter to mark content as humorous and playful. Shared laughter among a group is an effective—if inevitably imprecise—marker of a humorous experience, capturing nonserious[18] moments in which audience members express support for and a desire to connect with a speaker. Using this process, I identified 3,047 humorous statements made by members of Congress (as well as 910 jokes made by witnesses and other committee guests) in 2011-12. Jokes were distributed across partisan and gender lines, with relatively equal numbers of Republicans and Democrats, male and female members telling at least one joke—although male members told more jokes per-member than their female counterparts. The clearest distinction in joke production was institutional, with just over half of members of the House telling at least one joke while more than 9 in 10 Senators making humorous statements. I coded each humorous

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[18] Chafe (2007) uses the term "nonserious" to denote all forms of communication that precipitate laughter.

statement for a variety of features, including topic and target (i.e., the individual or group at whose expense the joke is made). I find clear evidence that members are conservative in their humor use, focusing their jokes on non-policy topics and at the expense of themselves or co-partisans. More than two-thirds of all jokes made by members during hearings of the 112th Congress were at the expense of one or more representatives or senators, including nearly 55 percent that targeted a member of the joke teller's own party and only 19 percent that targeted an individual from across the political aisle.

I also created a series of regression models to explore electoral and institutional correlates with member joking. Results indicate that members' humor use generally bore legislative, if not electoral fruit. While there was no apparent connection between patterns of member humor and their standing with voters, members of the House (but not the Senate) whose professional interactions more frequently featured laughter also more frequently found support from their colleagues. This is consistent with existing research on humor's effect on team dynamics. The intuition from this literature suggests that members' use of comedy positively shaped their institutional profile, likely encouraging others to see them as insightful, competent, and easy to work with. This effect was clearest in the House, where laughter was relatively less frequent than in the Senate. It therefore appears that humor usage in the 112th Congress had the most bearing on legislative relationships when it was perceived as a difference in kind and not frequency. Members in the House may have been better able to differentiate themselves as humorous because many of their immediate colleagues provided a starker, serious, less collegial contrast than existed in the Senate. It may have been easier for members to see others as a joke-teller or not rather than as a marginally more active (or even successful) joke-teller.

Chapter Three examines the consequences of member comedy among the media. Current theory suggests that elected officials' use of humor should significantly shape the volume and tone of the media's attention to them. When elites use humor, it should make them more appealing to both consumers—as topics of coverage—and journalists—as sources of coverage. When officials are humorous, both the public and reporters should want to spend time with them. In the abstract, humorous officials should help journalists provide members of the public with both what they *need to know* and what they *want to know*, thereby empowering them to be competent, active citizens. Yet while this argument is intuitive, the ways in which this dynamic plays out in member-journalist relationships defined by ethics, norms, and professional goals has not been rigorously explored. In this chapter, I therefore provide the first systematic examination of the connection between congressional humor and media attention.

In order to maximize external validity, I identified patterns of individual coverage for all members of Congress during the first six months of 2011 in 149 daily newspapers across the United States for which full-text content is accessible through a major online database. The resultant dataset includes more than 38,000 articles from a diverse set of locations and publications. Sampled outlets were published in 40 states and more than 200 House districts, covering the homes of more than 93 percent of American residents. Sampled papers were drawn from a diverse partisan environment. Selected articles were published in areas represented by nearly even numbers of Republicans and Democrats, including more than 40 percent of Republican-held House districts and 55 percent of Democratic-held House districts. Similarly, final content originated in a range of urban and rural settings, from Beaver County, Texas (population 4,378) to New York City (population 8,538,000). I then identified all references to each member of

Congress in each sampled article, including the location of each reference within the text. I then modeled coverage patterns on member humor usage (using the measure of member joking developed in Chapter Two).

I find evidence of a positive, if limited, relationship between humor use by members of Congress and the frequency with which they are mentioned in newspapers. The effect is strongest among journalists at national and independent newspapers—reporters with more relatively more resources and discretion. I find no evidence, however, that members' humor use shapes the *nature* of the coverage they receive, suggesting an important, yet limited role for elite humor.

In Chapter Four, I examine the implications of elite humor for individual-level political information seeking and learning. I begin with the insight that political knowledge (and subsequent activity) is significantly rooted in voters' individual relationships with and attitudes about elite sources of information in the media (e.g., Ladd 2011, Ariely 2015) and on Capitol Hill (e.g., Fenno 1978, Lipinski 2001). Current theories of the psychology of humor and political learning suggest that humor—whether from a professional, late night host or member of Congress—may play a significant role in the timing and nature of voters' news gathering. I therefore conducted two original experiments to consider the conditions under which individuals will seek out political humor. The presence of humor in a message about politics provides an alternative, additional reason to attend to information individuals might otherwise avoid. Individuals seeking primarily to relax or be entertained—those for whom political learning is likely at most a secondary consideration—may therefore be incidentally exposed to and influenced by civic information when it is presented in or near a joke. Notwithstanding the secondary nature of its acquisition, political information presented in this manner can act as a gateway to further

engagement by enhancing recipients' perceptions of their own knowledge or learning capacities and altering the cost benefit calculus of additional exposure (Baum 2003). The results of both experiments suggest that elite political humor can motivate individuals to learn about current affairs, including from sources across the political aisle. Consumers who find a member of Congress amusing, for example, are more likely to evaluate them positively and express interest in their non-comedic comments. These data also suggest that in some contexts likely to spur political learning (i.e., when experiencing anger about politics), individuals may look first to political comedy if given the option.

In Chapter Five I conclude the dissertation by reviewing the major findings of each chapter and discussing implications for continued research in elite political humor. This includes both extensions of the work presented in chapters Two, Three, and Four, as well as additional dimensions of congressional joking.

Chapter Two

Congressional Humor in Committees

Members of the United States Congress are defined, in many ways, by the company they keep.[1] As both candidates seeking the support of voters and officials seeking the support of their peers, members' electoral, policy, and institutional success hinges on public displays of solidarity. As actors with little unilateral power, they must rely on the collective approval of others to enter Congress, gain institutional authority, and pass legislation (Fenno 1978). It is therefore unsurprising that representatives and senators are consistently strategic in their communication. In every public action, whether sending mail to constituents (Cover and Brumberg 1982), co-sponsoring legislation (Harward and Moffett 2010), or even decorating their offices on Capitol Hill (Doherty and Gerrity 2011), available evidence suggests that members consciously shape their language and behavior to appeal to specific groups. For at least four decades, scholars have noted these behaviors and explored their implications (e.g., Fenno 1978, Grimmer 2013, Geer 2006, Bratton and Rouse 2011).

Yet beyond partisan and policy appeals, comparatively little is known about the specific mechanisms by which members form relationships of electoral and institutional significance. Fenno's (1978) original work on home style, for example, emphasized members' efforts to gain constituents' trust by identifying and empathizing with them. Even as the concept of home style

[1] Put more broadly, "politics is, at its core, a network phenomenon" (McClurg and Lazer 2014, p 1).

has become firmly entrenched in the literature on American politics, however, scholars have been slower to explore the diverse ways in which candidates strive to connect with voters (e.g., Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson 2004; Erikson and Wlezien 2012; Grimmer 2013). Similarly, the literature on legislative cosponsorship in the House and Senate has largely focused on identifying and mapping the consequences of legislative collaboration (e.g., Bernhard and Sulkin 2013; Tam Cho and Fowler 2010), bypassing many questions about how members develop the interpersonal trust necessary to work together. In their study of the legislative implications of elite friendships, Arnold, Deen, and Patterson argue that "affective bonds hold a singular place in our conception of political institutions" (p 146, 2000; see also Brandenberger 2018). Indeed, as Lindstadt, Wielen, and Green assert: "while there is a substantial literature highlighting the presence of social dynamics in legislatures, we know very little about the precise *processes* that generate these social dynamics" (2017, p 511, emphasis in the original). Better understanding the relationships that undergird much of American politics therefore must include a more thorough examination of the processes that build and sustain them.

I contend that the nonpolitical aspects of elite messaging are a critical component of this examination. The affective and social characteristics of a member's communication can have a substantial impact on its implications. Recipients of political messages are often sensitive to elements that may appear to have little connection to politics. Studies of presidential and congressional debates have demonstrated that behavior as simple as a speaker's facial movements, voice tone, and politeness toward an opponent can significantly shape an audience's reception of the speaker's words and subsequent support of them (e.g., Shah et al. 2016; Mutz and Reeves 2005; Dailey, Hinck, and Hinck 2008). Broader research on the role of emotions and

social interaction in generalized political life has drawn similar conclusions (e.g., Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000; Enos 2017; Achen and Bartels 2017; Albertson and Gadarian 2015). Ryan (2012) showed evidence that interacting with even the image of a grimacing stranger can affect a voter's emotions and information seeking. These studies remind us that a message's context and packaging serve as "a tool for communication for listeners" (Meadow 1999, p 419). The broad strokes of this argument are not uncommon in the political science literature (e.g., Lenz and Lawson 2011; Baum 2003; Kam and Zechmeister 2013), but the basic intuition that the nonpolitical communication style of elites provides important cues for both each other and the public has rarely been explored directly.

In this chapter, I therefore examine the origins, nature, and consequences of one understudied aspect of congressional communication: humor. Members of Congress since at least 1800 have claimed that humor is an essential tool in their communication repertoires (Yarwood 2004). In interviews and memoirs, many members have asserted that they frequently use humor in a variety of settings including meetings with constituents and in debates on the floor of Congress (e.g., MacNeil 1970; O'Neal and O'Neal 1964; Schutz 1977; Yarwood 2001). Representative Morris Udall (D-AZ) argued that his use of humor was driven by a belief that "political humor leavens the public dialogue; it invigorates the body politic; it uplifts the national spirit" (Udall 1988, p xiii). Udall's comment is consistent with a major conclusion from the humor studies literature which suggests that in most moments members have good reason to look for laughs. Psychologists have found evidence indicating that humor can have a significant, positive effect on an individual's relationships and interpersonal influence (see Martin 2010 for a review)—valuable commodities in Congress.

A full account of congressional communication therefore requires an understanding of member humor. Yet no study that I am aware of has empirically explored the nature and contemporaneous consequences in Washington and at home of congressional humor production. This may be due in part to skepticism about the continued role of humor in American political life. Even taking Udall and others of earlier eras at face value, some observers of the rising polarization and declining comity in recent congresses may question the frequency and impact of modern congressional humor (Uslaner 1996; Mann and Ornstein 2006; Ahuja 2008). If members' jokes consistently reinforce partisan divisions, for example, Udall's optimism may have been misplaced. My analysis in this article of all the jokes told in congressional committee hearings during the 112th Congress shows evidence, however, not only that a majority of members in both the House and Senate regularly make jokes with and at the expense of co-partisans, but also that the consequences of their joking appear to have been largely sanguine.

Defining Interpersonal Humor

One of the challenges of unpacking the effects of congressional humor is the persistently thorny nature of humor itself as a concept. Though humor is a nearly universal[1] and consequential human emotion (Morreall 1983; Martin 2010), its exact nature has remained

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[1] Not all individuals enjoy humor. Some have a diagnosed predisposition to consider all laughter as being at their expense. This extreme suspicion of being the butt of every joke has been labeled gelotophobia and has been the subject of growing academic examination since it was first introduced in 2008 (Ruch and Proyer 2008).

elusive. As a result, scholars have generally placed the sensation of humor in three overlapping bins,[2] describing humor as an experience of *superiority* over others, *relief* from mental tension, or the resolution of *incongruity*. Each conceptualization has important implications for the social effects of joking.

Early students of humor noted that jokes are often made at the expense of others. Thomas Hobbes argued that laughter[3] was the feeling of "sudden glory" by a speaker recognizing their advantageous position over another individual or their own history (Hobbes 2017 [1651]). Laughter in this theory is the public expression of a speaker's *superiority*, establishing their higher status in comparison to the target or butt of their joke. This is consistent with Plato's criticisms of jokes as principally "a kind of mockery" (Morreall 2011). Other early western thinkers held a more sanguine view of humor. Aristotle identified personal and social benefit in moderate forms of shared humor that he termed "wittiness," while still rejecting jokes made primarily at the expense of others (Rowe and Broadie 2002). Lombardini connected Aristotelian wittiness to Connolly's (2002) conception of democratic laughter—

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[2] Admittedly, while common in the humor studies literature, taken together, these categories may not, themselves, insufficient. Depending on how superiority, relief, and incongruity theories are defined (especially the latter), some forms of humor, including absurdism, may neither establish an individual's superiority, facilitate release of nervous energy, or be fully resolved—yet still elicit (McGraw and Warren 2010).

[3] The word "humor" was not used in its modern sense of "funniness" until the 18th century. Thinkers prior to this time therefore wrote about laughter (Ruch 1998).

"laughter as an idealized, yet possible, outcome of our disagreements with others" (Lombardini 2013, p 204). In this conception, laughter is the result of a resolution or *relief* of nervous energy. Humor is a byproduct of individuals shedding social norms or individual inhibitions and thereby releasing the emotional tensions required to uphold such standards (Freud 1960 [1905]).[4]

Beginning in the late 20th century, scholars have increasingly used a broader framework that places humor at the resolution of *incongruity* (Morreall 2011). This theory establishes the pattern of jokes that is familiar to most modern audiences: a joke-teller creates an expectation through a set-up that is then violated in a punch-line. Comedian David Letterman, for example, once quipped: "Congress is pledging to work around the clock until they're absolutely certain they will get nothing done" (Letterman 2011).[5] Letterman's punch line violates the expectation of a productive Congress subconsciously established in his initial phrase. Yet resolving the incongruity created by juxtaposing seemingly incompatible concepts (e.g., Congress working hard to accomplish nothing) can be off-putting due to the significant mental energy required

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[4] Dewey (1894) and others described a similar process contained within a single joke. Laughter, according to Dewey, "marks the ending … of a period of suspense, or expectation … [It is a] sudden relaxation of strain, so far as occurring through the medium of the breathing and vocal apparatus … The laugh is thus a phenomenon of the same general kind as the sigh of relief" (p 558-559).

[5] David Letterman, "The Best of Late Nite Jokes," 2011, *Newsmax* July 13, https://www.newsmax.com/jokes/521/.

(see Young 2004; Holbert et al. 2011; Polk, Young, and Holbert 2009). Dennett, Hurley, and Adams (2011), however, argue that humans long ago evolved a humorous response as an emotional incentive to engage potentially informative incongruity. The inherently pleasurable nature of humor gives us a reason to consider deviations from our worldview and general patterns of behavior.[6] Still, humor is most successful when its audience agrees with the argument revealed at the end of the joke (see Greenwood and Isbell 2002). Letterman's quip may have elicited a more tepid response from the roughly 15 percent of Americans who approve of the job Congress is doing,[7] while those who agree with his criticism will likely find the joke significantly funnier.

McGraw and Warren (2010) remind us, however, that humor can be elusive. These authors bring together elements of superiority, relief, and incongruity theories to suggest that humor is the result of a "benign violation of norms." Jokes transgress expected standards but do so without posing a credible threat to their audience and lose their comedic appeal when they begin to constitute an actual violation and threat to others (see also Chafe 2007). Bell (2009) argues that failed jokes in this way constitute more than a missed opportunity, with

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[6] On this point, Marteinson refers to humor as an "unraveling of the seams … Laughter, then, is an instinctive reaction to an epistemological event, in particular an event which shatters and fragments perceptions" (2006, p 11) and allows us to reassemble for ourselves a more robust representation of reality.

[7] "Congress and the Public," *Gallup*, accessed June 12, 2019, http://news.gallup.com/poll/1600/congress-public.aspx.

listeners actively chastising the would-be comedian. To avoid alienating their audience, individuals may identify or manufacture psychological distance by placing social, temporal, or geographic distance between listeners and a joke's violation (McGraw et al. 2012, McGraw et al. 2014).[8] The common aphorism that "comedy is tragedy plus time" is evidence of the widespread acceptance of the need to effectively distance jokes in some way from their audience. Studies of humor production ability therefore suggest that an individual's capacity to make others laugh is rooted in their comedic skill as well as their knowledge of and relation to their audience (Ruch 1998, Merolla 2006, Martin 2010). Individuals in positions of direct authority over their listeners as well as those who engage in humor more frequently and consciously—e.g., professional comedians—unsurprisingly appear to have a comparatively heightened individual ability to make successful jokes (Greengross, Martin, and Miller 2012).

When successful, humor can have a variety of individual-level effects. Meyer (2000) categorizes humor's social implications by suggesting that it highlights the topics and traits on which individuals and groups either come together or diverge. The play frame and ambiguity that attend most jokes allow individuals to make social comparisons or commentary in a more direct and pointed way than they otherwise might, thereby legitimizing content that would be socially unacceptable if presented in a serious manner (Ford, Wentzel, and Lorion 2001; Cialdini, Kallgren, and Reno 1991). Comedy reminds us of what we hold in common or on what we disagree, including the disagreements that are rarely aired. Humor shared within a social

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[8] Comedian Mel Brooks exemplified this sentiment in his well-known quip: "Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall into an open sewer and die" (Berlant and Ngai 2017).

group is often relatively more successful given the potential to reference collective experiences, opinions, and standards of behavior. Fine and de Soucey argue that “group joking is embedded, interactive, and referential,” positively affecting its potential to persuade and inform by capturing the attention of its audience (2005, p 1). Individuals who make humorous comments are therefore often seen as more likeable, intelligent, and capable than their unfunny peers (Bressler and Balshine 2006; Nabi, Moyer-Guse, and Byrne 2007; Greengross and Miller 2011). Broadly speaking, many people use shared laughter as an indication that they and the speaker also share similar worldviews. Individuals therefore generally want to spend more time together with those they find funny.

Congressional Comedy

Many members of Congress have recognized and attempted to capitalize on the unique social space created through humor. In a review of dozens of member memoirs and biographies, Yarwood (2004) finds consistent evidence of members using humor in their official capacity as legislators. John Randolph of Roanoke, for example, who entered Congress in 1799, was speaking on the floor of the House in 1820 when, pausing to collect his thoughts, he was interrupted by Philemon Beecher of Ohio repeatedly calling for the previous question. Randolph responded:

> Mr. Speaker, in the Netherlands, a man of small capacity, with bits of wood and leather, will, in a few moments, construct a toy that, with the pressure of the finger and thumb, will cry “Cuckoo! Cuckoo!” With less ingenuity, and with inferior materials, the people of Ohio have made a toy that will, without much pressure, cry, “Previous question, Mr.

> Speaker! Previous question, Mr. Speaker!" at the same time pointing at his victim with his skeleton finger. (Cox 1969 [1880], p 150)

The other members in the chamber roared their delight at Randolph's comments. Randolph's criticisms may not have been as well received by his peers if not accompanied by the pleasure of comedy. By couching his condemnation of Beecher (as well as the residents of Ohio) in an unusual comparison to a child's toy, Randolph offered his audience an alternative emotional frame to approach his comment through. For other members in the chamber that day, Randolph's comment was not only a complaint about a peer but was simultaneously an enjoyable, momentary mental puzzle as well.

Yet telling jokes can be a risky proposition. Beecher and his supporters were likely put off by Randolph's jab. Because jokes are frequently at someone's expense, members may be wary of the unpredictability of humor and hesitate to joke at the expense of another. Even seemingly benign jokes that do not offend may not succeed. Despite humor's general popularity, differences in humor appreciation can be stark. Though some variation in stylistic preferences is attributable to individuals' social and political attitudes (Wilson 1990), much of what is commonly referred to as a person's "sense of humor" is idiosyncratic and difficult to define with precision (see Martin 2010). Some individuals, for example, consider jokes about politics to generally be in poor taste. These questions are compounded by the linguistic imprecision of comedy. Jokes based on the resolution of incongruity need first to establish an incongruous comparison, which may mean that a speaker must appear at least momentarily to assert something that they do not in fact support. Doing so can lead to shared moments of humor but can also leave unintended interpretations lingering in listeners' minds. A member

telling a joke therefore runs the risk of alienating at least some of their audience. We may therefore expect that:

H1: *Most members of Congress use humor but do so sparingly*.

Other members argue, however, that humor is a key tool to avoid confrontation and build relationships. Former Representative Henry Hyde (R-IL) argued that "diffusing a tense situation is one of the most effective uses of humor" (Yarwood 2004, p 105). As an illustration, Hyde noted that during his time in Congress, while speaking in support of a bill on the House floor, he found himself without "the foggiest idea of the answer" to another member's question. Noticing his questioner's "red knit tie," Hyde instead changed the subject by asking "the gentleman if that was a necktie or if he had open heart surgery. And everybody laughed and forgot what his question was" (Yarwood 2004, p 105). Most representatives and senators publicly claim to prefer self-deprecating humor (Yarwood 2004). Former representative W.G. "Bill" Hefner (D-NC) asserted that "the advantage [of humor] is that it kind of neutralizes any hostility that you might encounter. You know, most people like their politicians to poke a little fun at themselves and not take themselves too seriously" (Yarwood 2004, p 107). Similarly, Former Senator Dale Bumpers (D-AR) said: "I cannot remember in my twenty—almost twenty-seven years in politics, ever having made a speech without opening with a couple of good jokes and, as I say, preferably self-deprecating jokes" (Yarwood 2004, p 106). Members' assertions thus suggest that:

H2: *Most jokes made by members of Congress are self-deprecating humor told at the member's own expense.*

Members' use of comedy is consistent with the multi-faceted, persistently strategic ways they present themselves to voters and peers. Members are omnivorous in their communication practices, using a range of tools to achieve their electoral, institutional, and legislative goals. Those with relatively less access to other forms of public messaging, for example, engage in relatively more frequent nonlegislative debate (e.g., one-minute speeches on the House or Senate floor) (Rocca 2007). Similarly, members frequently use congressional perquisites such as franked mail to increase the amount and variety of their contact with voters. This includes capitalizing on nonpolitical events in voters' personal lives, including sending parenting materials to constituents who have just had a baby (Cover and Brumberg 1982). Maltzman and Sigelman (1996) note that members are also conscious of patterns in voters' schedules, giving more one-minute speeches during the portion of the day (accounting for differences in time zone) when their constituents are most likely to be home and attentive to coverage of congressional proceedings. In style and substance, members tailor their messaging to bolster their support among critical audiences, including voters. Again, however, the unpredictable consequences of humor may leave members wary of employing it in contexts of uncertain electoral support. Instead, members are likely to venture into comedy when their electoral prospects are relatively safer, giving them a broader margin for error. In other words:

H3: *Members who enjoy relatively greater electoral support tell more jokes when compared with their electorally insecure peers.*

At the same time, however, well-told jokes by members likely constitute a significant opportunity to bolster their electoral support. Grimmer and colleagues note that members' communication patterns take on particular importance given most constituents' low level of

information about federal government activities (Grimmer, Westwood, and Messing 2014). Most members of the public feel an obligation to evaluate the behavior of their elected officials yet struggle to have the relevant information to do so. This is due in large part to the complexity and scope of many federal policies and programs. Grimmer and colleagues show that members of Congress regularly step into this gap and claim credit for federal dollars in their district, including funds over which they had little influence. The number and timing of members' messages of this kind appear to directly shape constituent support even more than the amount of funding identified in the messages. Thus, members who communicate directly with the public can shape the basic materials from which those voters construct their opinions of the member (see also Zaller 1992, Chong and Druckman 2010). Members who signal their affinity for humor—especially through self-deprecating jokes—may therefore appear more accessible and attractive to many voters (Bippus 2007). This leads to the expectation that:

H4: *Members who tell relatively more jokes enjoy a comparatively greater level of electoral support than their otherwise similar peers.*

Members are also conscious of their relationships with one another. The support and information—both institutional and policy-specific—offered by a member's peers are important resources consciously cultivated over time (Kingdon 1973). These dynamics have most often been explored in the literature through patterns of cosponsorship (Fowler 2006), collaborative events (Desmarais et al. 2015), or caucus memberships (Victor and Ringe 2009). In each case, scholars have noted the added value members can accumulate through legislative relationships as well as the ways that homophily drives official collaboration. Shared moments of humor can allow members to foreground relevant similarities in memorable ways, enhancing the

foundation of their relationships with one another (Maki, Booth-Butterfield, and McMullen 2012). Studies of humor in professional settings and organizations, however, suggest that individuals in positions of higher status are more likely to engage in comedy (Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001). In addition to the incentives among their peers to appeal to individuals in positions of authority through shared laughter, higher social status may also bring with it the ability to define the nature of acceptable comedy (Ford, Wentzel, and Lorion 2001; Cialdini, Kallgren, and Reno 1991). I therefore expect that:

H5: *Members with greater institutional authority tell relatively more jokes when compared with their otherwise similar peers.*

Interpersonal relationships in Congress are often shaped by informal dynamics including personal friendships (Arnold, Deen, and Patterson 2000), spatial proximity in official meetings (Masket 2008), shared personality traits (Ramey, Klingler, and Hollibaugh 2017), and connections on social media (Peng et al. 2016). In each case, these shared experiences help facilitate positive interactions among peers, allowing them to forge, strengthen, and sustain bonds of personal affinity with one another. Studies of legislative effectiveness suggest that members who possess a cultivated legislative skill set are especially attractive to and likely to win the support of their peers (e.g., Volden and Wiseman 2014). Members' use of humor may enhance perceptions of their skills. Because processing jokes requires identifying unusual connections and discarding—at least in part—the typical meaning of a phrase or action, humor can facilitate abstract thinking, creativity, and cooperation (Bitterly et al. 2017, Lehmann-Willenbrock and Allen 2014). Members who use humor more frequently may therefore appear

to their peers as more capable, insightful, and effective policymakers and be rewarded as such (see Cann 2008).

H6: *Members who tell relatively more jokes enjoy greater institutional influence and legislative success than their otherwise similar peers.*

Quantifying Humor

To examine the frequency and manner in which members of Congress employ humor, I collected every statement made in open committee meetings during the 112th Congress (2011-12). Identifying members' use of humor in these meetings can be difficult. Lingering conceptual challenges in defining humor's cognitive and social mechanisms make it difficult for researchers to consistently and precisely identify humor in any setting. This limitation is most apparent in the slow progress among linguists and computer scientists in their efforts to automate humor detection with artificial intelligence (e.g., Ritchie 2004; Raskin, Hempelmann, and Taylor 2009; Kao, Levy, and Goodman 2016). Taylor notes that one of the enduring challenges in doing so is the need to remove "unnecessary ambiguity [in order to facilitate machine analysis] but preserve … vagueness and imprecision of natural language, which is how people understand the text" (2012, p 92). At the same time, many social scientists' hand coding of humor also leaves important questions unaddressed. In his evaluation of the comedy used in the 2008 presidential debates, Stewart says only that "humorous comments were selected on a prima facie basis" (2011, p 209). Common experience tells us, however, that humor is not always so explicit. I therefore use markers of humor generated contemporaneously by the original audience of members' messages: spontaneous audience laughter.

Still, using laughter to identify humor presents two potential challenges. First, laughter is not a foolproof marker of humor—indeed, nothing can be. While laughter is the most common response to humor, an individual may recognize and appreciate a joke without producing an audible response (Chafe 2007). Additionally, laughter may signal an experience other than humor. After studying more than 1,200 instances of naturally occurring laughter, Provine concluded that individuals often laugh for social reasons, including to indicate politeness or sociability (Provine 2001). It is therefore impossible to know what motivated the laughter noted in hearing transcripts. While some—even many—laughs may have been the result of shared humor, at least some were likely strategic signals from lobbyists or other actors attempting to foster a relationship with members of the committee. At the same time, however, both genuine and strategic laughs represent affiliative efforts by members of the audience (potentially including other committee members) seeking to build a professional rapport with members of the committee. While the total number of laughs received by an individual member may not be sufficient to identify them as reliably more humorous than their peers, public laughter is likely an indication of the total number of playful, “nonserious” (see Chafe 2007) comments attempted by a member. It is unlikely that even strategic actors such as lobbyists would laugh at clearly serious comments as doing so would seem discordant to all present, including the speaker with whom they sought to affiliate. Audience laughter in committee hearings may still therefore be considered “as marking (and thereby helping constitute) its referent as humorous and playful” (Glenn 2003, p 28), if not always reliably successful for all present—including those who laughed in response.

Second, the participants and audience members in committee hearings are not a consistent group. The number and identity of the members, witnesses, staff, reporters, and other attendees in hearings varies based on at least the committee holding the hearing, its topic and date. While some hearings attract large audiences (e.g., Attorney General Eric Holder's testimony before the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee in February 2012), attendance at other hearings can be sparser. My review of hearing transcripts indicates, however, that the presence of members, their staff, and reporters ensures that committee transcripts consistently reflect the discussion and spontaneous responses of at least 25-30 people, and often more. Groups of this size provide a heterogeneous mix of humor preferences, facilitating comparison of generalized humor response across groups. At the same time, members' humorous comments are stylistically similar, verbal jokes that are likely to elicit similar responses. Thus, the fact that laughter across hearing transcripts may not be generated from or received by the exact same mix of comic sensibilities is not a significant concern.

With a humor identification strategy in hand, I contend that three characteristics of the committee hearings of the 112th Congress make them an ideal setting in which to explore individual differences in congressional joke making. First, hearings facilitate a wide range of member statements. Congressional hearings are ostensibly called to address policy and administrative matters in order to convey necessary information to the full chamber (Brasher 2006), but committee conversations have few bounds other than the constraints negotiated among committee leadership. Members may therefore use their time in hearings to demonstrate technical knowledge or proficiency, project an ideological identity, or develop intra-institutional relationships. Similarly, because of committees' small size and frequent

meetings, they accommodate comments from a relatively wide range of members. Junior members from both parties have relatively similar opportunities to make on-the-record statements. Committee hearings therefore offer a relatively unencumbered space for members to use humor as they so choose.

Second, the 112th Congress was under divided partisan control. While Republicans held a majority of seats in the House, Democrats controlled the Senate. This difference facilitates independent explorations of the effects due to chamber and partisan control. The 113th Congress also had the same partisan control, with Democrats in the majority in the Senate and Republicans holding the House. This pattern makes the 112th Congress ideal for examining partisan and party control dynamics, facilitating analysis of the causes and consequences of both types of behavior.

Third, hearings have audiences. In addition to the participants and observers in the hearing room itself, members' comments are televised and redistributed in both print and video form to interested members of the public. This point is of particular interest for a study of humor. As noted above, one of the greatest challenges in any observational study of comedy is adequately identifying jokes. Because a broadly accepted, rigorous humor identification system remains elusive (much to the relief of professional comedians), separating comedic messages from their serious counterparts can reveal more about the humor preferences of the individual creating the classification than the messages themselves. Some scholars have therefore asked study participants to assign a humor rating (Braun and Preiser 2013) while others have assumed the comedic nature of statements based on their source (e.g., Young 2008). Instead, I use

audience members' spontaneous laughter responses to identify humorous statements as noted in official hearing transcripts.[9]

Data

Data for this chapter come from committee hearings held during the 112th Congress (2011-2012). Using official transcripts of each hearing, I collected all statements that were immediately followed by a notation of audience laughter. This resulted in 3,957 distinct humorous statements across House and Senate hearings made by 325 different elected officials. Table 2.1 reports jokes told by speaker characteristics. It is immediately apparent that most members of Congress are relatively moderate joke-tellers. While more than 75 percent of all members told at least one joke in committee, the median member told only one joke during all of 2011 and 2012. By contrast, during the same time, half of members made more than 400 distinct comments.[10] This pattern persists across groups as well, with most members of each chamber, party, and gender making no more than a handful of humorous statements in committee. Some members do emerge as distinct outliers, with a small group telling several

[9] I use committee hearing transcripts and not the congressional record (CR) in part due to the absence of audience response annotations in the CR. Though originally a part of the CR, audience responses have not been collected since 1941 when Speaker Sam Rayburn deemed that they "did not affect the course of debate and were therefore not germane to the official record" (Historical Highlights).

[10] Member comments are defined here as moments in which a member speaks continuously without interruption from another speaker.

dozen jokes (see Figure 2.1), yet those in the top quartile of joke-tellers still made as few as three total humorous statements.

A clearer distinction emerges between members of the House and Senate. While essentially all members of the Senate who spoke in committee also told at least one joke, a bare majority of members in the House did so. This may be due in part to the smaller number of members on each committee in the Senate compared to the House. With fewer members vying for speaking time, senators may feel free to explore potentially off-topic humor without sacrificing their opportunity to make important policy statements. To explore this potential, I captured whether each joke was topically related to the purpose of the hearing in which it was told. Nearly 75 percent of members' jokes bore no connection to the business before the committee. It may therefore be that humor is a secondary consideration for members, one they engage only after addressing more pressing policy and political matters. It may also be that members of the Senate feel a greater sense of collegiality. Individuals who feel a closer social connection are more likely to share humor with one another (Graham 1995).

In addition to having a higher proportion of joke tellers among their ranks, the most active joke-tellers were also in the Senate. Table 2.2 reports the ten members of Congress who told the most jokes across 2011 and 2012. Nine of the ten occupy seats in the Senate. The most active comedian in the 112th Congress was Senator Al Franken (D-MN). Franken told more than twice as many jokes as the next most active member, an unsurprising result given Franken's background as a professional comedian. Notably, however, a number of Franken's Senate colleagues also told more than twice as many jokes as the most active members of the House. Indeed, while Darrell Issa was the only representative to tell more than 30 jokes in committee,

18 senators exceeded that threshold. Thus, while the median number of jokes told in each chamber was the same, members of the Senate made nearly twice as many total humorous statements as their peers in the House. A similarly skewed distribution exists among joke tellers separated by party, but this is likely due to the Democratic majority in the Senate.

Table 2.1
Jokes Told in Committee Hearings in 112 Congress

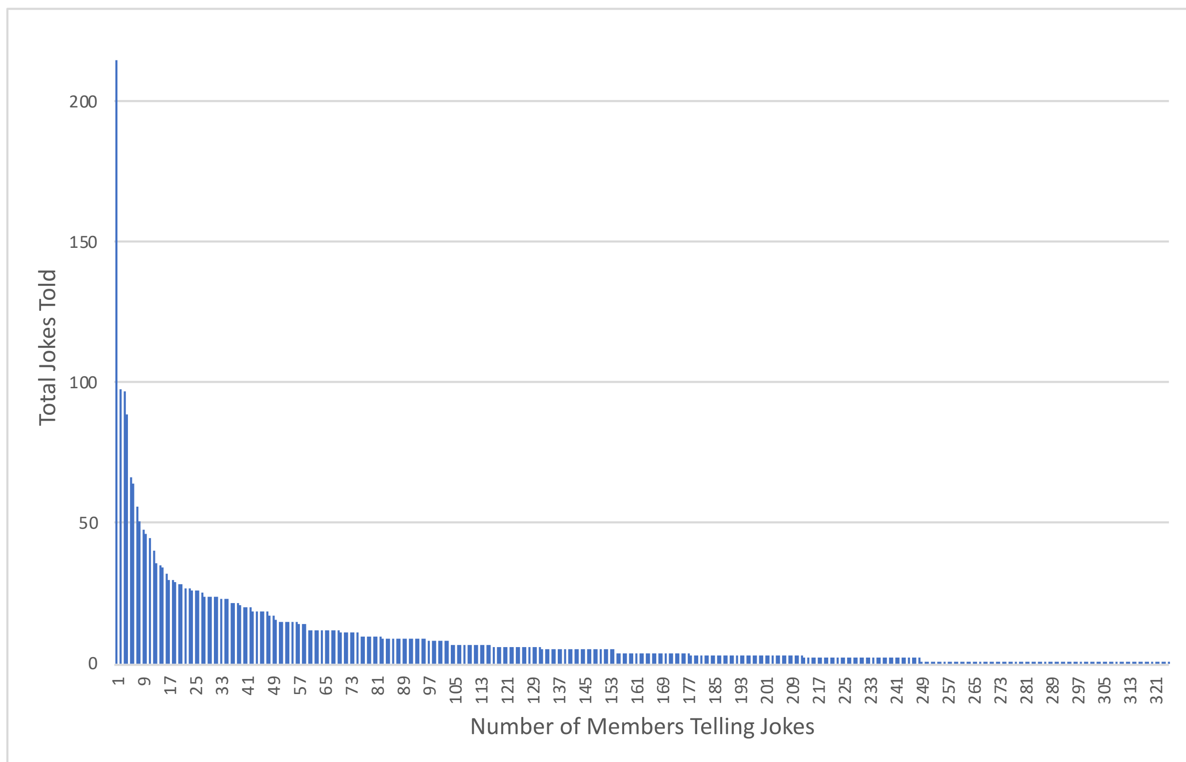
	Total Speakers	Individual Mean	Individual Median	Individual Maximum	Total Jokes Told
House Members	232 53.3%[1]	3.1	1	51	1,037 34.0%
Senate Members	93 94.9%[1]	5	1	215	2,010 66.0%
Republican	175 61.0%[2]	7.1	4	64	1,247 40.9%
Democrat	150 61.5%[2]	12.0	4	215	1,800 59.1%
Female Members	53 58.2%[3]	7.4	3	66	391 12.8%
Male Members	272 61.3%[3]	9.8	4	215	2,656 87.2%
Members	326 34.1%[4]	9.3	4	215	3,047 77.0%
Witnesses	630 65.9%[4]	1.4	1	10	910 23.0%

[1] Proportion of members in the listed chamber who told at least one joke and at least one comment in a committee hearing.
[2] Proportion of all members in the listed party who told at least one joke.
[3] Proportion of all members who identify as listed gender who told at least one joke.
[4] Proportion of all hearing participants (members and witnesses) who told at least one joke.

Beyond the raw total of members' comedic statements, I also captured the topic and target of each joke. Because of the limited nature of the existing literature on congressional humor use, I identified topic categories through an emergent coding procedure. This allowed

the data to more fully shape the number of codes used and their individual scale. I thus created codes individually as I encountered jokes that did not clearly fit into an existing topic category and therefore required an additional code. At the completion of coding all 3,957 humorous statements from members and witnesses, this process resulted in 13 distinct topic codes. To

Figure 2.1
Total Jokes Told by Member



increase usability and ease interpretation, I combined several rarely used codes (those applied to fewer than 3 percent of all jokes) that were thematically related to another code. This resulted in the eight codes reported in Table 2.3.

Table 2.3 demonstrates that members of the 112th Congress used humor in committee hearings to address a variety of issues but focused much of their humor on topics that had little to do with government policy. More than a third (33.2 percent) of members' jokes centered on

Table 2.2
Most Frequent Joke-Tellers in Congress

Total Jokes	Name	Party	State	Chamber
215	Al Franken	D	MN	Senate
98	Thomas Carper	D	DE	Senate
97	Joe Lieberman	D	CT	Senate
89	Jay Rockefeller	D	WV	Senate
66	Amy Klobuchar	D	MN	Senate
64	Pat Roberts	R	KS	Senate
56	Tom Harkin	D	IA	Senate
51	Darrell Issa	R	CA	House
48	John Kerry	D	MA	Senate
46	Mark Begich	D	AK	Senate

Cell values are total jokes told by in committee by the listed member during the 112 Congress

the personal attributes and relationships of members or witnesses in the hearing. In March 2012, for example, Representative Todd Platts (R-PA) referenced the ongoing steroid scandal in Major League Baseball when he told witnesses: "I always think about asking the three of you to admit to steroid usage so that we would have more media focus on these important issues. So, for a future hearing, we may ask you to start bulking up. [Laughter.]"[11] Platts' use of humor in this setting allowed his comment to both complain about the attention his work received while also developing his relationship with the witnesses. Similarly, Representative Peter King (R-NY) got laughs when he responded to a witness who had called him "very kind" by saying: "Oh, I

[11] U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, *The Status of Government Financial Management: A Look at the Fiscal Year 2011 Consolidated Financial Statements,* 112th Cong., 2nd sess., 2012.

know that. It is part of my personality. [Laughter.]"[12] Social convention would generally dictate that King at least attempt to deflect or deny the compliment. By instead exaggerating the

Table 2.3
Topics and Targets of Member Jokes

Joke Topic	Total Jokes	Joke Target	Total Jokes
Personal Attributes and Relationships	1,013 33.2%	Member(s) of Congress	2,016 66.2%
Hearing Procedure	861 28.3%	Nonmember	1,021 33.5%
Nongovernment Places and Groups	437 14.3%		
Government Action and Policy	286 9.4%	Speaker	1,225 40.2%
Public/Private Ethics	273 9.0%	Other Members	791 26.0%
Language Use	169 5.5%		
Obvious Statement	84 2.8%	Co-Partisans	1,664 54.6%
Partisanship/ Ideology	64 2.1%	Opposing Partisans	588 19.3%

Cell values indicate total number of member jokes with the relevant characteristic and percentage of all jokes told by members. Percentages in each column do not add to 100 because some jokes were assigned multiple codes.

[12] U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Homeland Security, *Understanding the Homeland Threat Landscape*, 112th Cong., 2nd sess., 2012.

arrogance and directness in his response, King avoided a potentially uncomfortable moment for the witness (by avoiding the appearance of correcting them) while reinforcing the compliment itself.

Many member jokes centered on the context in which they were told. More than a quarter of jokes (28.3 percent) riffed on topics related to hearing procedure, including relevant rules and members' adherence to them. Many of these comments mocked members' desire to speak at length even when they did not contribute to the business of the hearing. Senator Chuck Grassley (R-IA) asserted that "there is an old saying around the Senate: 'Everything that has been said on this subject has been said, but I have not said it and, by golly, I am going to say it.' [Laughter.]"[13]

Other jokes implicitly questioned members' commitment to committee work. After noting that Senator Olympia Snowe (R-ME) was introducing a bill, Senator Susan Collins (R-ME) said: "I would also note, Mr. Chairman, that she is the only member who is on time for our hearing and, thus, I believe that her bill deserves extra consideration. [Laughter.]"[14] In each of these cases, members received laughter by criticizing the behavior of their peers. In so doing, however, they also opened themselves up to reproach by intimating that they would be willing to engage in questionable behavior either by selfishly wasting committee time or giving

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[13] U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, *Confirmation Hearings on Federal Appointments*, 112th Cong., 1st sess., 2011.

[14] U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Federal Regulation: How Best to Advance the Public Interest?*, 112th Cong., 1st sess., 2011.

unwarranted preference to a bill. The validating presence of laughter suggests that their audience recognized the comic exaggeration intended in their comments, yet it remains possible that others who subsequently encounter the moment out of context—potentially in an opponent's television ad—could attribute more seriousness to each speaker's words than was originally intended.[15]

Other members leaned in to the comedic potential of feigned ethics violations. Senator Al Franken (D-MN), for example, teased a nominee for district court judge after she misspoke his name:

> Witness: Thank you, Senator Franklin—Franken—I'm sorry. Not a good start. Franken: I am going to vote against you. [Laughter.]
>
> Witness: I would like to very graciously thank you for chairing this hearing. Franken: Ok, then I will [vote to confirm you]. [Laughter.][16]

Similarly, in the middle of a hearing on homeland security, Senator John Kerry (D-MA) feigned a willingness to cut the process short in favor of some midday drinking:

> Witness: I think some of the issues you raised would take hours and a couple beers to really do justice to. But I would say ---

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[15] John McCain's 2008 presidential campaign famously attempted to do this in an online ad ("The One") by using footage of seemingly self-aggrandizing language by Barack Obama at a rally without the laughter that originally followed the statement (Beam 2008).

[16] U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, *Confirmation Hearings on Federal Appointments*, 112th Cong., 1st. sess., 2011.

Sen. Kerry: We are for that. We are adjourned. [Laughter.][17]

In each of these statements, members rely on their playfulness being self-evident. Listeners who receive Franken's and Kerry's words in a play frame thus perceive them as self-deprecating. The senators use humor to briefly build alternate versions of themselves, deeply imperfect doppelgangers that are selfish and vain but also in whom listeners—including other committee members—may more easily see themselves. The members then quickly abandon their pseudo-selves in order to resume their serious identities and work.

Franken and Kerry are not alone in their use of self-deprecating humor. As reviewed above, many members have asserted in memoirs and interviews their fondness for joking at their own expense. This pattern is born out in my data, with members telling more jokes about themselves (40.2 percent) than about other members (26.0 percent) or witnesses/audience members (33.5 percent). Yet I find that members' joke distributions are somewhat more complex, evincing a preference for the familiar at multiple levels. Table 2.3 reports the targets of member humor in three natural, pairwise comparisons. In each pair, members focus their joking relatively more often on the group with which they have a closer connection. Members were nearly twice as likely, for example, to target other representatives and senators (66.2 percent) than they were to joke at the expense of witnesses or others in the audience (33.5 percent). The starkest difference, however, is in the partisan disparity of members' comments.

[17] U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Intelligence Community Contractors: Are we Striking the Right Balance*, 112th Cong., 1st sess., 2011.

Members were more than 2.5 times as likely to target co-partisans (54.6 percent) with their humor than to focus their comedy on members of the opposing party (19.3 percent). This may indicate either circumspection or alienation on the part of members. In other words, members may make relatively fewer jokes at the expense of the opposing party out of an effort to avoid misunderstanding or because they have too little information about opposing partisans readily available with which to form an effective joke. As demonstrated above, members have a broad preference for jokes formed out of personal details about a peer, information that, in a polarized era, they may have less of for members across the aisle. Indeed, more than 70 percent of members' jokes in which the punchline drew on personal details about another member did so by focusing on co-partisans.

To further explore these dynamics, I created two sets of multivariate regression models. The first considers the electoral influences on and implications of members' jokes. Members' relationships with voters should have a direct bearing on both the frequency of member comedy as well as its consequences. Recognizing the ability of shared humor to foreground social dimensions along which they can connect with voters, members have a clear incentive to make jokes in public spaces such as committee hearings. The appeal of humor is likely tempered, however, by the risks associated with it. While humor can foster deeper interpersonal connections, it can also drive people apart, especially when jokes are unsuccessful. Comedy's inherent ambiguity, complexity, and resultant potential for misunderstanding and alienation may give members pause when considering subverting social practice in the pursuit of a laugh. Thus, I expect that members will more frequently indulge their desire to tell jokes when they enjoy a relatively greater level of electoral support.

Table 2.4 presents the results of three models that use electoral conditions to predict the total jokes told by members across the 112th Congress. Each model includes a variable designed to capture a distinct dimension of the electoral environment. To isolate and highlight the potential effect of each variable, they are presented in separate models, but the general pattern of results remains the same if they are estimated jointly. Model 1 includes the proportion of the two-party vote received by the representative or senator in their most recent election (coded 0 to 1).[18] Model 2 includes a measure of the member's ideological consistency with their district. This measure is the absolute value of the difference of each member's DW-Nominate score (coded 1 (conservative) to -1 (liberal)) and the two-party vote margin in their district (coded 1 (complete support for McCain) to -1 (complete support for Obama)). The resultant measure ranges from 0 to 1.13 (μ = 0.27, σ = 0.38). Model 3 includes an indicator of whether the member voluntarily retired from Congress and therefore did not stand for re-election in 2012. Because nearly four in ten members of Congress told no jokes in committee during 2011-12 and because the existing literature on humor production remains somewhat limited, I use a zero-inflated negative binomial regression model to separately estimate

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[18] Clearly, this influence is at a greater temporal distance for some members of the Senate than for those in the House. The results of an election in 2006 (the most recent outcome for some senators) may not have the same impact as the 2010 vote total for a member of the House. Alternative specifications of the models in Table 2.4 that account for these differences, however, produce the same pattern of results. The more inclusive models with the largest population are therefore presented here.

members' decisions to tell at least one joke (to become a joke-teller) and their aggregate decisions to tell a given number of jokes.

In each case, the results reported in Table 2.4 give no evidence that members based their public joke-telling on their electoral standing. While the models suggest a handful of unsurprising influences on members' humor use, they show no evidence that a member's previous vote share, ideological discrepancies, or future election plans had a discernible effect. Instead, the models consistently indicate that higher status individuals (e.g., those in the Senate, older members) and those who are more active in committee debate (e.g., those who make more comments overall) are most likely to tell at least one joke. At first glance, this is unsurprising—members who contribute more to congressional debate have more opportunities to make jokes. Counterintuitively, each of the models in Table 2.4 also indicates that members who were absent *more* frequently told *more* jokes, but the magnitude of this effect is negligible, with a one standard deviation increase in absenteeism resulting in an increase in the predicted total jokes told by a member increasing by less than 0.3. By contrast, a one standard deviation increase in the total number of comments told by a member results in an effect ten times larger (3.2 additional jokes). Again, however, the largest difference is due to each member's chamber. After controlling for a range of covariates, including total comments spoken, the models in Table 2.4 predict that the average senator will tell more than 17 additional jokes than their otherwise similar peers in the House. This is consistent with, but much larger than the original difference observed in the summary statistics presented in Table 2.1. These results do not support my expectation of electorally sensitive humor production among congressional elites (H3).

Table 2.4
Electoral Influences on Joke Frequency

	Model 1		**Model 2**		**Model 3**	
	Logit Coeff.	Neg. Bin. Coeff.	Logit Coeff.	Neg. Bin. Coeff.	Logit Coeff.	Neg. Bin. Coeff.
Senate	**1.71 (0.15)**	-5.23 (3.95)	**1.66 (0.16)**	-5.47 (4.41)	**1.72 (0.15)**	-5.52 (4.42)
Republican	-0.05 (0.14)	-0.78 (0.72)	0.14 (0.29)	-0.23 (1.74)	-0.07 (0.14)	-0.71 (0.72)
Female	**-0.36 (0.18)**	-0.14 (0.97)	**-0.36 (0.17)**	-0.13 (0.95)	**-0.36 (0.17)**	-0.04 (0.95)
Nonwhite	-0.10 (0.13)	-2.12 (1.45)	-0.07 (0.23)	-1.79 (1.64)	-0.16 (0.21)	-2.10 (1.69)
Graduate Degree	-0.10 (0.13)	0.89 (0.91)	-0.08 (0.14)	0.93 (0.93)	-0.09 (0.14)	1.02 (1.10)
Enter Congress	-0.02 (0.01)	0.08 (0.06)	-0.02 (0.01)	0.07 (0.06)	-0.02 (0.01)	0.08 (0.06)
Birth Year	**-0.02 (0.01)**	-0.01 (0.04)	**-0.02 (0.01)**	-0.01 (0.04)	**-0.02 (0.01)**	-0.01 (0.04)
Votes Missed	0.79 (2.37)	**18.63 (8.28)**	0.62 (2.38)	**18.79 (8.83)**	1.45 (2.37)	**19.08 (8.66)**
Total Comments (100's)	**0.10 (0.01)**	**0.93 (0.45)**	**0.01 (0.01)**	**-0.89 (0.45)**	**0.10 (0.01)**	**-0.91 (0.45)**
Two Party Vote	-0.13 (0.70)	2.33 (4.47)				
Ideology Consistency Score			-0.30 (0.37)	-0.62 (2.28)		
Retire in 2012					-0.46 (0.25)	-0.17 (1.48)
N	517		517		517	

Table 2.4
Electoral Influences on Joke Frequency (continued)

Likelihood Ratio Statistic	**269.7**	**270.6**	**273.1**

Cell values are zero-inflated negative binomial regression estimates for all individuals who held a seat in the House or Senate for the entire 112th Congress.
Bolded values are significant at p<0.05 or lower. Standard errors reported in parentheses.

Table 2.5 reports key results of a similarly specified set of models predicting the electoral consequences of member's public humor. These models use different aspects of members' jokes to predict their overall electoral support in 2012. Given the censored nature of electoral support (i.e., a member can receive no less than 0 percent of the vote) as well as the facts that some members either did not stand for re-election in 2012 or did not face a major party opponent in November, the results in Table 2.5 are drawn from Tobit regression models. The estimates again show no connection between members' humor and their electoral standing. Neither the overall total number nor the target of jokes told by senators and representatives appears to have had any influence on members' subsequent vote share. It may be that most voters had become familiar with their representatives' humor proclivities before deciding whom to vote for. Elite humor may have been baked into members' public personas (or, indeed, unknown to many members of the public) long before the 2012 election. Yet re-estimating the models in Table 2.5 for only the 97 members of Congress (90 members of the House and 7 members of the Senate) who entered their respective chamber after the 2010 election produces the same pattern of results. Humor usage appears to have minimally shaped public perception even for those individuals whom the public had limited time to come to know

as members of—and not simply candidates for—Congress. The models in Table 2.5 are therefore not consistent with my expectation of electorally meaningful humor among congressional elites (H4).

While these data show no evidence that members of Congress use humor in open committee hearings to—at least successfully—influence their constituents, it may still be that members do so to influence their peers. Indeed, as the more immediate audience of each

Table 2.5
Electoral Implications of Jokes in Committee

	Vote Share in 2012
Model 1	
Total Jokes (10's)	0.04 (0.09)
Model 2	
Jokes Targeting Speaker	0.10 (0.24)
Model 3	
Jokes Targeting Other Party	0.26 (0.31)
Model 4	
Jokes Targeting Own Party	0.06 (0.18)
N	390
Left-censored Obs.	0
Uncensored Obs.	383
Right-censored Obs.	7

Cell values are Tobit regression estimates with additional covariates as used in Table 2.3.
Full results are listed in Appendix A.
Bolded values are significant at p<0.05 or lower.
Standard errors reported in parentheses

other's jests, members may tell jokes to amuse and develop relationships with one another. I therefore created a series of zero-inflated negative binomial regression models similar to those

reported in Table 2.6 that each include a measure of members' place within their institution. Model 1 and Model 3 each include an indicator of a member's formal institutional authority as either the chair of a (sub)committee or part of the majority party. By contrast, Model 2 includes a measure of party unity.[19] This measure ranges from 0 to 1 ($\mu = 0.92$, $\sigma = 0.09$).[20]

Table 2.6
Institutional Influences on Joke Frequency

	Model 1		**Model 2**		**Model 3**	
	Logit Coeff.	Neg. Bin. Coeff.	Logit Coeff.	Neg. Bin. Coeff.	Logit Coeff.	Neg. Bin. Coeff.
Senate	**1.68** **(0.14)**	-7.69 (13.28)	**1.75** **(0.15)**	-5.26 (4.48)	**1.74** **(0.14)**	-10.01 (26.86)
Republican	-0.10 (0.14)	-0.39 (0.86)	-0.04 (0.14)	-0.43 (0.71)	-0.09 (0.14)	9.25 (26.88)
Female	**-0.35** **(0.17)**	-0.16 (1.00)	-0.33 (0.18)	0.25 (0.90)	**-0.38** **(0.17)**	-0.21 (0.91)
Nonwhite	0.02 (0.21)	-2.02 (1.57)	-0.11 (0.21)	-1.63 (1.42)	0.01 (0.21)	-1.56 (1.25)
Graduate Degree	-0.02 (0.13)	1.31 (1.35)	-0.11 (0.13)	0.89 (0.88)	-0.04 (0.13)	1.04 (0.90)
Enter Congress	-0.01 (0.01)	0.12 (0.14)	-0.02 (0.01)	0.07 (0.06)	**-0.02** **(0.01)**	0.02 (0.04)
Birth Year	**-0.02** **(0.01)**	-0.06 (0.13)	**-0.02** **(0.01)**	-0.01 (0.05)	**-0.02** **(0.01)**	0.01 (0.04)

[19] Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, "About the Project," voteview.com, accessed June 12, 2019, https://voteview.com/about.

[20] Party unity scores are derived from the proportion of votes cast for a member's own party wherein at least 50 percent of Democrats voted against at least 50 percent of Republicans.

Table 2.6
Institutional Influences on Joke Frequency (continued)

Votes Missed	1.81 (2.35)	28.35 (25.70)	0.56 (2.37)	17.62 (8.14)	-0.01 (2.48)	10.51 (6.40)
Total Comments (100's)	**0.09 (0.01)**	-0.01 (0.01)	**0.10 (0.01)**	**-0.83 (0.39)**	**0.09 (0.01)**	**-0.82 (0.38)**
Full/ Subcmmtee Chair	**0.45 (0.13)**	-1.19 (2.98)				
Party Unity Score			0.80 (0.85)	-3.62 (3.43)		
Majority Status					**0.29 (0.14)**	-9.42 (26.87)
N	517		517		517	
Likelihood Ratio Statistic	**282.6**		**271.4**		**276.0**	

Cell values are zero-inflated negative binomial regression estimates.
Bolded values are significant at $p<0.05$ or lower.
Standard errors reported in parentheses.

Consistent with the results reported in Table 2.6, indicators of institutional status again appear to be closely tied to members' use of humor in committee hearings. Members' institutional affiliation, gender, and age are each significant predictors of humor production. Similarly, the nearly third of members who occupied a (sub)committee chair during the 112th Congress told an average of three additional jokes than their peers, after controlling for general talkativeness. Majority party members also told significantly more jokes, but when estimated jointly, this effect is overwhelmed by that associated with being chair. At least two features of

interpersonal dynamics likely contribute to chairs' elevated number of jokes. First, as is the case in many workplaces, individuals with local authority may receive more laughter out of deference. Those on or working with a team (e.g., committee members and witnesses) can benefit directly from a leader's decisions and therefore have an incentive to bolster their relationship with the leader through shared laughter, especially at humor initiated by the leader. Second, it may also be that leaders actively use humor as a way to bolster their position within an organization. Schnurr notes that humor "not only constitutes a prime means for identity construction but also assists … leaders in achieving their various workplace objectives" (2009, p 1125). The dynamics of audience deference and leader strategy are likely interactive and self-reinforcing, with each joke contributing to an atmosphere in which humor is more consistently valued and influential. Robert and Wilbanks (2012) describe this spiral of humor creating a greater institutional space for its own production and effect as the "wheel model" of organizational humor. As the wheel turns, it creates a "cumulative and escalatory process through which individual humor events can impact individuals and groups over repeated cycles" (Robert and Wilbanks 2012, p 1071). These results support my expectation of institutionally sensitive humor production among congressional elites (H5).

To explore the institutional impacts of the repeated cycles of member humor, I created three models to predict aspects of members' professional relationships within their chamber. Because of the persistent differences between the House and Senate in humor production as well as in their respective size and structure, I estimated each model separately by chamber. The first model predicts the assignment of (sub)committee chairs in the 113th Congress (coded 1 for chair, 0 otherwise). After accounting for a member's relative tenure, their relationship

with leaders and others in their party should shape their selection to serve as a chair, relationships that may be affected, ceteris paribus, by their humor use. Thus, I expect members who make relatively more jokes during the 112th Congress—especially at the expense of the opposing party—to be more likely to receive a (sub)committee chair during the 113th Congress. The second model predicts members' individual legislative effectiveness during the 112th Congress. To capture this dynamic, I use the measure of effectiveness created by Hitt, Volden, and Wiseman (2017). This measure combines data on both the type of policies members promote, as well as their relative success in committee and on the floor of the House and/or Senate.[21] Members who more frequently joke with their peers may, in so doing, be able to form a greater number and intensity of collaborative relationships through which they can produce more successful legislation. The third model predicts members' bipartisan behavior. I estimate members' bipartisan behavior through a measure based in cosponsorship patterns: The Bipartisanship Index (BI). The BI[22] is a weighted combination of the frequency with which a given member signs on to bills sponsored by the opposing party as well as the frequency with

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[21] Scores for legislators in the 112th Congress range from 0 to 16.3 (m = 1.0, s = 1.5), with higher scores indicating a generally more effective legislator.

[22] Richard G. Lugar and Edward Montgomery. "Reviving the Lost Art of Bipartisanship," *Roll Call*, May 18, 2015, http://www.rollcall.com/news/reviving_the_lost_art_of_bipartisanship_ commentary-241877- 1.html.

which members of the opposing party sign on to bills sponsored by the member (Lugar and Montgomery 2015).[23]

The results reported in Table 2.7 again turn on chamber differences. While members of the Senate consistently told more jokes in 2011-12 than their otherwise similar colleagues in the House, doing so appears to have exerted no discernible influence on electoral or institutional outcomes of interest. Senators' fortunes do not appear to have changed based on the volume or nature of jokes they made in open committee. My models show no evidence that frequent joke-tellers in the Senate received more votes, passed more legislation, or developed more diverse policy coalitions. By contrast, however, humorous House members stand out. Representatives who told more jokes were also consistently more successful in moving legislation through Congress. In this model, a one standard deviation increase in the number of jokes told by a member of the House resulted in a 0.64 standard deviation increase in legislative efficacy. The effect is even greater for members who more frequently used self-deprecating humor. One standard deviation increases in a member's use of either jokes targeting themselves or their own party were associated with nearly a full standard deviation increase in legislative effectiveness. By contrast, making jokes at the opposing party's expense resulted in an effect less than half as large (0.3 sd increase) and making jokes about individuals not in Congress did not significantly affect legislative effectiveness scores.

[23] Scores for members of the 112th Congress range from -1.7 to 2.3 (m = -0.2, s = 0.7), with higher values indicating more bipartisan activity.

Table 2.7
Institutional Implications of Jokes in Committee

	Senate			House		
	Chair (113 Cong)[1]	**Legislative Effectiveness (112 Cong)[2]**	**Bipartisanship (113 Cong)[2]**	**Chair (113 Cong)[1]**	**Legislative Effectiveness (112 Cong)[2]**	**Bipartisanship (113 Cong)[2]**
Model 1						
Total Jokes	1.38 (1.66)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.03)	1.09 (0.61)	**0.67** **(0.17)**	0.02 (0.08)
Model 2						
Jokes Targeting Speaker	0.20 (1.04)	-0.01 (0.08)	-0.01 (0.01)	2.28 (1.51)	**1.79** **(0.50)**	0.03 (0.23)
Model 3						
Jokes Targeting Other Party	-17.62 (18.46)	0.26 (0.22)	-0.01 (0.02)	**5.72** **(2.68)**	**1.88** **(0.61)**	0.15 (0.27)
Model 4						
Jokes Targeting Own Party	-0.13 (0.69)	-0.01 (0.06)	-0.02 (0.04)	1.48 (1.04)	**1.45** **(0.35)**	0.13 (0.16)
N	45	98	82	214	417	329

Bolded values are significant at $p<0.05$ or lower
Cell values are the result of [1]logit and [2]OLS models with the same control variables used in Table 2.4. Full model results listed in Appendix A.
Standard errors reported in parentheses

Conclusion

Taken together, the data in this paper suggest that members of Congress are consistent, if judicious jokesters. The majority of members of the 112th Congress made at least one joke in committee, with higher status and more active speakers drawing more laughs than their colleagues. The clearest distinction in joke frequency was between chambers. Members of the Senate consistently used humor more than their peers across the Capitol. Nine of the ten most active congressional joke-tellers in 2011-12 held seats in the Senate. These comedic differences may be due to the structural and social contexts of the Senate and House. Serving longer terms in an institution with stronger norms for collegiality, senators may more frequently share comedy with each other because they enjoy closer social connections to start with. This is consistent with the lack of electoral motivations I find underlying members' humor. Instead, members appear to have been more concerned with the proximate relationships of their colleagues, telling more jokes when their institutional position and tenure afforded it.

When members did employ humor, the topics and targets of their comments evince a conservative approach to comedy focused on people, organizations, and issues where a joke's unavoidable ambiguity is less likely to cause lasting confusion. Listeners who hear a member attempt to be funny at their own expense, for example, are likely to quickly recognize the disconnect, deception, and humor intended. The relative rarity of members' serious self-criticism acts as a signal to audiences that seemingly self-critical comments deserve a closer look and potential re-interpretation. Yet the same member attempting a joke about their political opponents must be more deft. Member criticism across party and ideological lines is common and listeners may therefore not recognize the need to reconsider such critical

statements through a humor frame. Poorly constructed jabs at an opponent may therefore appear to some as serious criticisms. Similarly, members generally avoided joking about policy or other business before their committees. Doing so allowed them to avoid projecting—even momentarily—partial truths and mischaracterizations of themselves and their positions. Instead, with few exceptions, jokes in committee focused on the banalities of congressional life: misspoken words, overlooked minutiae in committee rules, and minor personal foibles.

This strategy appears to have borne legislative, if not electoral, fruit for some members. Members of the House whose professional interactions more frequently featured laughter also more frequently found support from their colleagues. This pattern is familiar to anyone who has had cause to pursue professional collaboration: we tend to like, respect, and want to work with individuals we find funny. This is also consistent with existing research on humor's effect on team dynamics. The intuition from this literature suggests that members' use of comedy positively shaped their institutional profile, likely encouraging others to see them as insightful, competent, and easy to work with. This effect was clearest in the House, where laughter was relatively less frequent than in the Senate. It therefore appears that humor usage in the 112th Congress had the most bearing on legislative relationships when it was perceived as a difference in kind and not frequency. Members in the House may have been better able to differentiate themselves as humorous because many of their immediate colleagues provided a starker, serious, less collegial contrast than existed in the Senate. It may have been easier for members to see others as a joke-teller or not rather than as a marginally more active (or even successful) joke-teller.

Ultimately, therefore, members' humor usage appears to provide a window into the nature of their professional relationships, especially in contexts where jokes are relatively scarce. Members recognize and respond to their colleagues' use of comedy, displaying an increased interest in collaborating with those who more frequently make others laugh. Joking in committees can be an especially valuable source of insight because of its, public, observable nature. Transcripts of committee hearings offer both rare evidence of members' direct interaction with one another as well as independent, contemporaneous identification of members' jokes.

Chapter Three

Congressional Humor and the Mass Media

In January 2007, Al Franken announced that he would step away from his political talk radio show to become a candidate for the United States Senate from Minnesota.[1] A first-time candidate, Franken's campaign received relatively light attention from the national news. The outlets that did mention Franken generally did so in the context of his unique background as a professional comedian. While the press declared his campaign was "anything but a joke," the same articles would also note Franken's "odd balancing act between being the guy people expect to be hilarious and crassly partisan and being a candidate voters need to be convinced will be earnest and sedate enough to look right in a senate chamber."[2] Yet despite this unusual tension and the fact that Franken would go on to be elected with a razor's edge majority (less than 0.01 percent of the total votes cast), news organizations outside of Minnesota only rarely mentioned the race or Franken. Fewer than 50 articles mentioning Franken appeared in national newspapers[3] during the final three weeks of the election.

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[1] "Ex-SNL Comic Al Franken Running for Senate," CNN, accessed March 2, 2019, http://www.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/02/14/franken.senate/.

[2] Monica Davey, "Comedian Says Minnesota Run is a Serious One," *New York Times*, December 5, 2007.

[3] Throughout this article, I use the term "national newspapers" to refer to the Washington Post, New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today.

Ten years later, Franken would receive a surge in media attention when a series of women accused him of sexual misconduct. The first episode to be made public occurred during a 2006 USO tour during which Franken performed stand-up comedy. Franken's initial apology for the events used humor as a shield. “Coming from a world of comedy,” he wrote, “I’ve told and written a lot of jokes that I once thought were funny but later came to realize were just plain offensive.”[4] Less than a month after the first accusation was made public, Franken acceded to calls from his party and resigned. During the three weeks between the initial accusation and his resignation announcement, Franken appeared in more than 500 articles in national newspapers, a ten-fold increase over the same period in 2008.

These episodes and the prominent role of comedy in each raise an important question: what role did Franken’s use of humor play in shaping the volume and tone of media attention he received? As a candidate, his career as a comedy professional made him unique and of potential interest to national media, yet he received relatively little attention. As an embattled senator, coverage of his scandals began in his use of humor, yet also occurred during a time of national attention to sexual misconduct as part of the #MeToo movement. What independent role, then, did humor play in the media’s coverage of Franken? More broadly, what role does humor play in coverage of other elected officials?

Current theory suggests that elected officials’ use of humor should significantly shape the volume and tone of the media’s attention to them. When elites use humor, it should make

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[4] Nicholas Fandos, “Al Franken Issues Apology After Accusation of Forcible Kissing and Groping,” *New York Times*, November 16, 2017.

them more appealing to both consumers—as topics of coverage—and journalists—as sources of coverage. When officials are humorous, both the public and reporters should want to spend time with them. Yet while this argument is intuitive, the ways in which this dynamic plays out in member-journalist relationships defined by ethics, norms, and professional goals has not been rigorously explored. In this chapter, I therefore provide the first systematic examination of the connection between congressional humor and media attention. I find evidence of a positive, if limited, relationship between humor use by members of Congress and the frequency with which they are mentioned in newspapers. The effect is strongest among journalists at national and independent newspapers—reporters with more relatively more resources and discretion. I find no evidence, however, that members' humor use shapes the *nature* of the coverage they receive, suggesting an important, yet limited role for elite humor.

Theory

Observers and practitioners alike have examined the relationship between elected officials and journalists since at least the first Congress convened. One of the first acts of the newly constructed body in 1789 was to consider the role that newspapers should have in the Capitol (Ritchie 1991). Though some protested, most members of Congress and journalists quickly recognized their mutual dependence on one another and established close connections both formally and informally.[5] The resulting relationship between journalists and congressional

[5] The first congressional reporters mainly transcribed floor debates, adding details unavailable in the relatively sparse congressional record (Ritchie 1991). These rich transcripts were then published in newspapers around the country. Reporters were therefore often admitted to the

elites has therefore been described as “far more intimate than adversarial,” a “state of mutual benefit or mutual seduction” (Ritchie 1991, p 1).

Accordingly, scholars have given significant attention to ways in which members of Congress are represented by traditional news media (e.g., Boydstun 2013, Gans 2004, Graber 2001, Vinson 2003, Arnold 2004). The ongoing nature and durable findings of this literature remind us of the central role newspapers and television continue to play in modern democratic life. Even in an era of continuous online offerings and social media, television and newspapers provide essential information citizens need to know in order to assign responsibility for policy outcomes (Iyengar 1991), participate in informed discussions (Mondak 1995, Schaffner 2006), and make voting decisions rooted in candidates’ issue positions (Gronke 2000, Westlye 1991). In an unusually broad examination of media coverage, Hayes and Lawless considered television and newspaper content in every U.S. House district during the 2010 election, and concluded that “citizens exposed to a lower volume of coverage are less able to evaluate their member of Congress, less likely to express opinions about House candidates in their districts, and less likely to vote” (2015, p 447). This effect was not limited to individuals with low political awareness. Even the highly engaged need a steady diet of high-quality content to remain civically healthy and connected to their communities. Television and newspaper outlets provide this content.

House and Senate floor so they could better hear the proceedings (Eckman 2017). This close relationship extended outside of official activities as well, as early members “subsidized official party papers, fed information to favorite editors, rewarded journalists financially, and goaded them into attacks on the opposition” (Ritchie 1991, p 8).

Patterns of media coverage also shape power structures in Washington. Strategic members can use media stories to signal and influence other elites (Sellers 2000). In and beyond the Capitol, reporting confers legitimacy on the ideology and policy positions of those covered (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1989; Schudson 2003). Acting as gatekeepers, journalists define the boundaries and basic structure of the political world for most Americans (Schudson 2003). Thus, “patterns of who gets to be a news source lead to assumptions about who has power and who is powerless, who has authority, and who is subjugated, who is to be trusted and who is suspect, and who is acceptable and who is deviant” (Carlson 2009, p 527). Patterns of traditional news content matter.

Most studies of press coverage of Congress therefore center on journalists’ motivations surrounding one or more of three broad topics rooted in journalistic ethics, norms, and routines: what the public *needs to know*, what the public *wants to know*, and what content journalists can *effectively convey*. Many studies note, for example, that members with more prominent positions within Congress receive relatively more media mentions. Party leaders (Cook 1998, Kuklinski and Sigelman 1992), committee chairs (Cook 1998, Squire 1988), and senators (Fogarty 2013a, Sellers and Schaffner 2007) receive more coverage because of their larger influence on policy. Journalists thus provide the raw information the public *needs to know* to vote and consider public policy (Downie and Kaiser 2002). Schaffner and Sellers (2003) found that newspapers cover their local member of Congress relatively more frequently because local members were most relevant for local readers’ political action.

The commitment to provide useful information also orients journalists toward the politically unusual, toward providing information voters are least likely to accurately intuit.

Thus, coverage of controversy (Puglisi and Snyder 2011, Fogarty 2013b), candidates with uncommon identities (Terkilsden and Damore 1999), and intra-party conflict (Groeling 2010) occurs relatively more frequently. The focus on the politically unusual should, then, also result in distinct coverage of members who use humor relatively more frequently. While most elected officials claim to use humor in some form (Yarwood 2004), some use it more often than others. As one journalist noted after listing a series of impromptu jokes then-candidate Al Franken made about dogs during a 2007 campaign stop: "would-be senators do not usually meander into such lines of conversation. Nor do they make up silly songs incorporating the names [of] ... prospective donors [as Franken was prone to do]."[6] Elites who use more humor than their peers therefore communicate with voters in a unique, entertaining way, a distinction journalists have an incentive to note. Experience reminds us that readers respond well to well-placed humor, articles that discuss members' use of humor can therefore highlight an additional reason to attend to political coverage that some may find otherwise unpalatable. Still, many readers may be unfamiliar with an official's use of humor and need that aspect of the representative's or senator's behavior to be foregrounded by a journalist before they can respond to it. Reporters looking to capture the attention of potential readers should therefore be likely to make plain members' use of humor in an effort to increase readership.

Context Hypothesis: Articles in which more humorous members of Congress are mentioned are also more likely to include specific conceptual references to humor.

[6] Davey, 2007.

Conscious of the business dimension of journalism that requires attracting consumers, journalists' work is also driven by what the public *wants to know*. Many observers have suggested, for example, that public interest is a principal reason why the press produces a large amount of horse race coverage of congressional campaigns, at times at the expense of more detailed accounts of candidates' issue positions (e.g., Iyengar, Norpoth, and Hahn 2004). Wagner and Gruszczynski have shown evidence that journalists prefer quoting ideologically extreme members of Congress in part because "despite high-minded protestations to the contrary, the news audience likes a good fight" (2018, p 673). This sentiment is echoed in studies of individual media choice that show that media usage is a tool used to meet psychological and affective needs. For most consumers, information consumption is motivated by a combination of eudaimonic (truth-seeking) and hedonic (pleasure-seeking) interests (Bailey and Ivory 2016).

This suggests that given the option, most individuals are interested in learning about politics in an entertaining manner. As Delli Carpini and Williams remind us, "individuals are *simultaneously* citizens, consumers, audiences, family members, workers, and so forth" (2000, 161, emphasis in original). As multidimensional individuals, consumers seek media that authentically satisfies as many of their interests as possible. Journalists are therefore more likely to cover members of Congress who possess both influence on policy as well as broadly appealing traits that may have little to do with current events such as being physically attractive (Waismel-Manor and Tsfati 2011) or charismatic (Wolfsfeld and Sheafer 2006). Members with these traits may be able to simultaneously provide what the public *needs to know* in a way that

it *wants to know* it. By this logic, members' use of comedy should stimulate additional coverage as journalists recognize humorous members' broader public appeal.[7]

> *Volume Hypothesis*: Members of Congress who use humor more frequently than their peers are mentioned in relatively more newspaper articles than their less-comedic peers.

In addition to considerations of consumer value and interest, journalists must also consider news production processes, what they can *effectively convey* to their audience. Before constructing a story, journalists must first develop access to information sources that will provide necessary raw materials (Maurer and Beiler 2018, Blumler and Gurevitch 1981).[8] To maintain access to elected officials, many political reporters cover designated beats, producing regular, timely content indexed to elite opinion that simultaneously offers officials opportunities to message the public (Bennett 1990, Graber and Dunaway 2017, Ridout and

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[7] The tension between information and entertainment have been noted by many scholars. Bennett contends that "reconciling news content aimed at citizens in a democracy with traditional journalism standards and entertainment values has transformed the news itself. Increasingly sensationalistic narratives and dramatic production values both bridge and reflect the tensions among the various norms and practical rules that guide journalists in their daily representations of the political world" (1996, p 373).

[8] Fink (2014) likens journalist-member relationships to a business supply chain. The comparison is useful in that it reminds us that while elected officials may have substantial influence in early phases of the news production process, their control over final news products is limited.

Smith 2008). Member-journalist relationships become routine and cooperative, as each actor strives to achieve professional goals possible only with the assistance of the other (Gans 2004).[9] The resultant coverage of elite political behavior is negotiated and co-constructed, blurs boundaries between journalistic and political institutions, and represents a context of shared values (Lippmann 1922). Cook (1989) famously summarized this process as one where newsworthiness is negotiated.

Within these dynamics of negotiation and shared production, journalists must confront their own limited resources. Covering an institution with 535 principal players and a legion of supporting staff—almost all of whom have a perspective and policies to promote—reporters can never provide a comprehensive view of Congress and instead must choose a subset of content to report. Journalists are therefore sensitive to the costs of news gathering (Kaniss 1991). Reporters at local newspapers, for example, have indicated that they prefer writing about their local member of Congress because relevant sources (i.e., local partisans and officials) are more familiar and at hand (Pauly and Eckert 2002). Boydstun (2013) argues that media storms (i.e., sustained heavy coverage of a single individual or event) occur in part because of the lower marginal costs of each additional story. Each story a journalist writes about a given member more fully fashions a format or template the writer can easily return to. Members can thus affect the coverage they receive by making additional content about

[9] Gans (2004) reminds us that most reporters are trained as generalists and as such, lacking an independent expertise or supply of information, are reliant on sources.

themselves available.[10] This dynamic has been well explored (Cook 1989), especially as it relates to members' use of press releases and newsletters (e.g., Yiannakis 1982, Lipinski 2001), communications staff (e.g., Gershon 2012), and social media (e.g., Lassen and Bode 2016, Lipinski and Neddenriep 2004). Ritchie provides evidence of strategic media activity by members at least as far back as the Civil War era, noting that James G. Blaine, Speaker of the House during Reconstruction, was able to "manipulate the press into promoting [his] career" (1991, p 4).

Yet aspects of the member-journalist relationship remain under-examined. Relatively little attention, for example, has been paid to journalists' differential approach to the elite sources they mention. With few exceptions (e.g., Arnold 2004), existing studies paint media mentions with the same brush, no matter the mentions' position or purpose in a story. Journalists approach their work in a more layered fashion, differentiating between a story's central and secondary themes and actors. Secondary sources differ in form and intent from the primary elements of a story. Secondary sources generally appear later and are used to support, expand, contrast, or reinforce a story's main arguments. Members mentioned as secondary source material therefore possess a characteristic, position, or experience of use to the reporter and may be interchanged with other members who possess the same feature.

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[10] This dynamic may have become more pronounced in recent years as traditional news outlets' resources have declined, potentially leaving them more reliant on low-cost, readily available political content.

A brief story detailing an abortion policy proposal from a Democratic party leader, for example, may include a response from another member such as a Republican opposing the policy or a female Democrat expressing personal support. Either formulation of the story would require mention of the Democratic leader but the identity of the secondary source would likely be fungible. Given current partisan policy predilections and demographics, multiple Republicans and female Democrats would hold a position useful in creating the author's preferred frame. The journalist would therefore have significant discretion over who to quote as a secondary source. Such decisions are likely motivated in large part by members' relative accessibility (Cook 1989, Vinson 2003), but may also be driven by a member's personality or distinctiveness. Facing deadlines, journalists admit that backbench members of Congress can become indistinguishable from one another in behavior and even appearance,[11] raising the potential of misattribution. By contrast, journalists may be innately more interested in spending time with and writing about members with appealing characteristics such as a well-developed sense of humor. Members who are relatively funnier than their otherwise similar colleagues may become more accessible in a journalist's mind, especially when the journalist is searching for comment on a position or experience common to many members.

[11] Marin Cogan, "They All Look the Same!: A Hill Reporter's Guide to D.C.'s Most Indistinguishable Politicians," *The New Republic*, February 6, https://newrepublic.com/article/112332/how-tell-members-congress-apart.

Discretion Hypothesis: Articles written by journalists with relatively more authorial discretion are more likely to include references to members of Congress who are frequent humor users.

The logic behind this assertion is intuitive, yet subtly complex. Current humor theory identifies humor as a universal experience (Provine 2001), an emotion so central to the human condition that its absence is treated as a rare pathology (Martin 2010). Though the fundamental nature of humor continues to be debated, there is broad agreement in relevant literatures that humor is an emotion rooted in both social and cognitive dynamics (Martin 2010). One of the earliest approaches to the subject, for example, argued that humor is found in establishing social dominance over another individual (Hobbes 2017 [1651]). Using this approach, Gruner (1997) conceptualizes humor as a game, with a clear winner and loser, where the humorous individual increases their social standing with each successful jape. More recent studies have defined humor using incongruity theory. These theories suggest that humor is found in the unexpected, playful resolution of an incongruous juxtaposition of objects, people, or concepts (Martin 2010).[12] Most famously, Kant used this theory to describe humor as "the

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[12] The third major family of humor theories—relief theory—also centers on humor's social consequences. These theories (e.g., Freud 1960 [1905]) suggest that humor is a mechanism by which psychological energy—referred to as "nervous energy" by the theory's original proponents—can be released. In this conception, laughter has no purpose other than to relieve oneself of the burden of hewing to others' standards now seen to be superfluous. Over time,

sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" (1987 [1790]). McGraw and Warren (2010) further explore the social implications of comedy in their benign violation theory of humor. These authors argue that humor is possible only when incongruity is socially benign, when it resolves ambiguity in a way that does not pose actual, significant harm to those involved.[13] Yet these authors admit that jokes are often at the expense of another person. Instead, they restrict the universe of those potentially injured by comedy to individuals who are relatively distant from a joke-teller and their audience. Jokes become funnier when they focus on people and events that are more socially, geographically, or temporally removed. In politics, experience is consistent with this theory. Jokes told at the expense of an opposing partisan are generally considered funnier than a similarly structured jab at a co-partisan.[14]

Dennett and coauthors (2011) extend the logic of the benign violation theory to explore the cognitive implications of humor. Humans have developed a humorous response to some experiences, they argue, as an evolutionary incentive to engage with learning opportunities

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however, the basic tenets of these theories have been largely subsumed in incongruity theories.

[13] McGraw and Warren (2010) note that many moments of incongruity are not humorous. "For example, unintentionally killing a loved one," they write, "would be incongruous, assert superiority, and release repressed aggressive tension, but is unlikely to be funny" (p 1142).

[14] Jokes at the expense of a co-partisan may also reflect directly on the teller herself. As the social distance separating the target of a joke from its teller declines, humor becomes increasingly self-deprecating and potentially self-defeating (see Martin et al. 2003).

that we would otherwise reject as nonsensical or off-putting. Humor therefore becomes an opportunity for the human brain to take in new information and forge new connections among existing knowledge. Humor use can act as a powerful signal to revise our evaluations of other people, indicating that they may be more intelligent, creative, or influential than we might otherwise think (e.g., Bitterly and Schweitzer 2019, Kurtz and Algoe 2017, Cann and Calhoun 2001).

In the strategic hierarchy of modern American politics, we should therefore expect humor to significantly shape media and power dynamics. We should expect that members of Congress who successfully[15] use humor relatively more often than their peers should be mentioned in the media more frequently, be mentioned in articles that discuss humor, and that these dynamics should be especially pronounced among journalists with relatively more discretion about what they write.

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[15] Not all humor, of course, is successful. Everyone has experienced the cringe-inducing social thud of a joke gone wrong or simply ignored. Bell (2015) reviews the limited scholarly literature on failed humor, exploring the different ways comedy can fail. Dimensions of failure can include "performative inadequacy" (Palmer 1994) or disagreement with a joke's underlying argument (Hay 2001). Humor may also fail, however, because of its complexity. Priego-Valverde (2009) argues that humor's double-voicing inherently fosters ambiguity. This theory suggests that humor involves both creating and commenting on an utterance (see Bakhtin 1975), raising the possibility of misunderstanding related to a joke's commentary.

Data

Before systematically examining these hypotheses two methodological issues must be addressed. First, the relative use of humor by members of Congress must be quantified. Humor remains a challenging concept to appropriately measure, with most studies on the subject producing at least as many questions as answers. Humor scholars have argued that humor is a multidimensional concept that can be experienced in a variety of ways. Studies that attempt to characterize and measure an individual sense of humor, for example, note that the production, appreciation, and understanding of humor can be considered distinct—albeit interconnected—dimensions of an individual's approach to comedy (Ruch 1998). I therefore use humor production by members of Congress as a signal of their broader humorousness.

Specifically, I capture member humor usage by recording the number of times each members' comments in committee hearings during the 112th Congress were followed by laughter. Committee hearings offer an unusually accessible, well-documented, well-structured opportunity for almost every member of Congress[16] to make statements related to their work. Committee hearing transcripts are also one of the few public records of congressional action that include notations of audience response.[17] These transcripts allow me to note all instances

[16] The small handful of representatives and senators who serve as party leaders are a rare exception. They speak only rarely in committee hearings.

[17] Audience response notations such as laughter have not appeared in the Congressional Record, for example, since 1941 when Speaker Sam Rayburn declared that they were not germane to the course of debate.

of shared laughter in each hearing and identify the precipitating comment of each. In doing so, I assume that audience laughter is a response to humor. Individuals laugh for many reasons (see Provine 2001), yet collective laughter in a public forum such as a congressional hearing is unlikely to be motivated by an experience other than humor. Consistent with this assumption, no instance in which a member in a committee hearing labeled their own statement as a failed attempt at humor—using phrases such as "that was a joke"—was accompanied by audience laughter.

Details of the resultant humor-use indicator are reported in Table 3.1. More than 3,000 instances of member humor were identifiable in relevant transcripts.[18] Joking behavior was distributed across members, with a majority of representatives and nearly all senators engaging in some form of verbal humor. Similarly, most members of both the majority and minority party in each chamber made at least one joke, though members of the majority party told more jokes per capita, accounting for 72 percent of all quips. Comedic behavior was also not restricted to one gender, with similar proportions of male and female members making jokes. Again, however, one group told far more jokes than their counterparts. Male members collectively precipitated more than 87 percent of all instances of laughter in committee hearings. Ultimately, most members told relatively few jokes, with fewer than 10 percent of members making at least 20 jokes in two years (see Figure 3.1).

The second methodological challenge that must be addressed is the scope of the data used. Previous studies of media coverage of Congress have at times been limited by the

[18] An additional 910 moments of laughter appeared following comments from witnesses.

number of outlets and members they examine (Hayes and Lawless 2015). I therefore identified all references to members of Congress during the first six months of 2011[19] in 149 daily newspapers for which full-text content is accessible through a major online database. Details of the resultant sample of more than 38,000 articles are listed in Table 3.2a and Table 3.2b. Note the political and geographic diversity of sampled papers. Sampled outlets were published in 40 states and more than 200 House districts, covering the homes of more than 93 percent of

Table 3.1
Jokes Told in Committee Hearings of 112th Congress

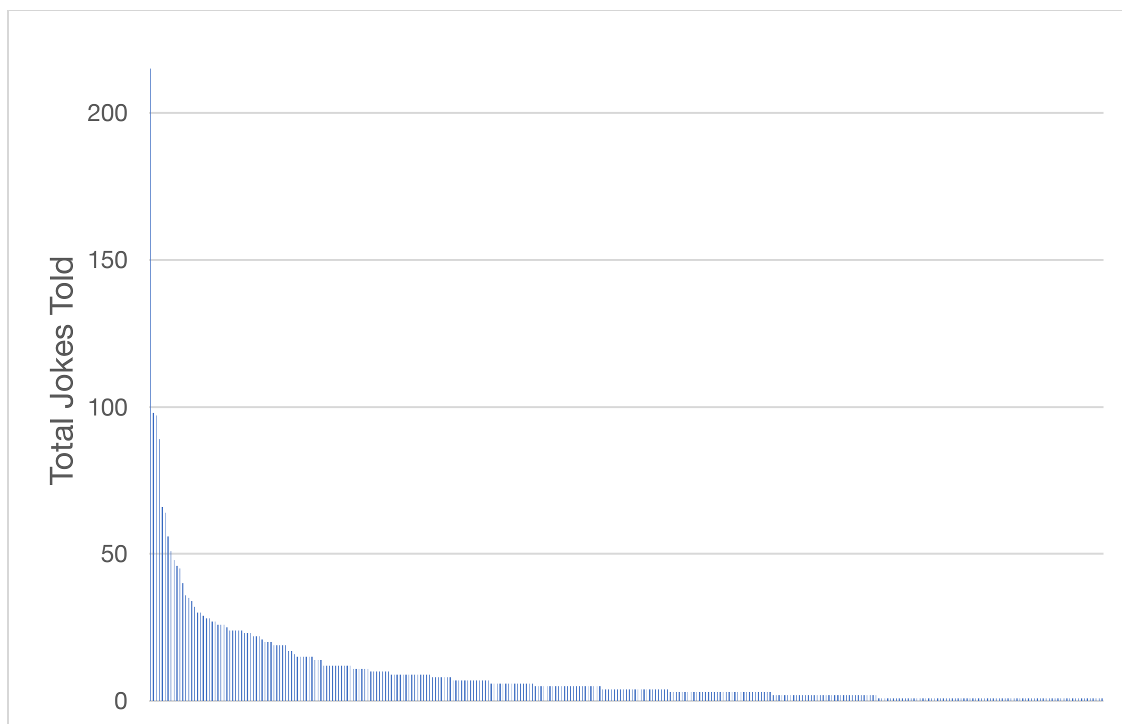
	Total Speakers	Individual Mean	Individual Median	Individual Maximum	Total Jokes Told
House Members	232 53.3%[1]	3.1	1	51	1,037 34.0%
Senate Members	93 93.0%[1]	5	1	215	2,010 66.0%
Majority Party	188 64.2%[2]	11.7	5	215	2,193 72.0%
Minority Party	137 56.6%[3]	6.2	3	64	854 28.0%
Female Members	53 58.2%[4]	7.4	3	66	391 12.8%
Male Members	272 61.3%[4]	9.8	4	215	2,656 87.2%

[1] Proportion of members in the listed chamber who told at least one joke.
[2] Proportion of all members in the majority party of the relevant chamber who told at least one joke.
[3] Proportion of all members in the minority party of the relevant chamber who told at least one joke.
[4] Proportion of all members who identify as listed gender who told at least one joke.

[19] This has the added benefit of making this study one of the few to examine media coverage of Congress in a non-election period (see Fogarty 2011).

American residents. Sampled papers were drawn from a diverse partisan environment. Selected articles were published in areas represented by nearly even numbers of Republicans and Democrats, including more than 40 percent of Republican-held House districts and 55 percent of Democratic-held House districts. Similarly, final content originated in a range of urban and rural settings, from Beaver County, Texas (population 4,378) to New York City (population 8,538,000).

Figure 3.1
Total Jokes Told by Member



In addition to variation in the number and type of media outlets considered, studies of congressional news coverage have focused on differentially granular presentations of Congress and its members. Some studies have considered references to Congress as an institution while others have examined mentions of individual members (e.g., Hayes and Lawless 2016). To better capture the full dynamics and context of member references, I identified the location (by

word count) of each reference to every member of the 112th Congress. References to individual members were identified by searching sampled newspapers for a series of more than 7,000 member-specific strings that combined officials' titles and names. These data allow me to make member-specific inferences that provide a fuller picture of the context in which journalists operate. As discussed above, the decision by a reporter of when and where to reference a member of Congress may be shaped by the reporter's discussion of other members in the same

Table 3.2a
Newspaper Sample Summary - Coverage

	Total	**Proportion**
Total Newspapers	149	
Total Articles	38,422	
Member Districts/States in Publication Area		
Senate Democrats	40	75.4%
Senate Republicans	40	85.2%
Senate Total	80	80.0%
House Democrats	105	54.9%
House Republicans	96	40.0%
House Total	201	46.2%
Total State Population	287,827,067	93.20%

Table 3.2b
Newspaper Sample Summary - Circulation

	Median	**Minimum**	**Maximum**
Community Population	115,733	4,378	8,538,000
Media Market Homes	710,050	28,050	7,387,810
Media Market Rank	45 of 210	206 of 210	1 of 210
Total Circulation	52,508	3,400	2,096,169

article. Understanding the network of member co-mentions in which an elected official appears may therefore provide valuable insight into the production process of political news.

Table 3.3 describes the total number, location, and outlet type of member mentions in my final dataset. Unsurprisingly, there is wide variation in the number of references each member received, with most members appearing in news stories relatively rarely (see Figure 3.2). Half of members received fewer than 82 references and more than 70 percent were mentioned by journalists fewer than 150 times in six months. Of these references, relatively few seem to have been the central focus of the stories they appeared in. Only 2 percent of all member mentions appeared in article titles and 28 percent appeared in the first one-third of an article's content. By contrast, more than 72 percent of references to a member of Congress appeared no earlier than the final two-thirds of a story. Members were therefore mentioned most frequently in supporting roles, in an effort to expand or enrich a story's central themes. More than half of the 14,599 sampled articles that mentioned the president of the United States, for example, included only late story (i.e., final two-thirds) references to members of Congress. Similarly, members were often mentioned in connection with one another. More than 40 percent of sampled articles that referenced one member of Congress mentioned at least one other as well. Nearly 4,000 articles mentioned at least five members. Yet fewer than 30 percent of stories that included multiple members mentioned more than one member in the first third of its content.

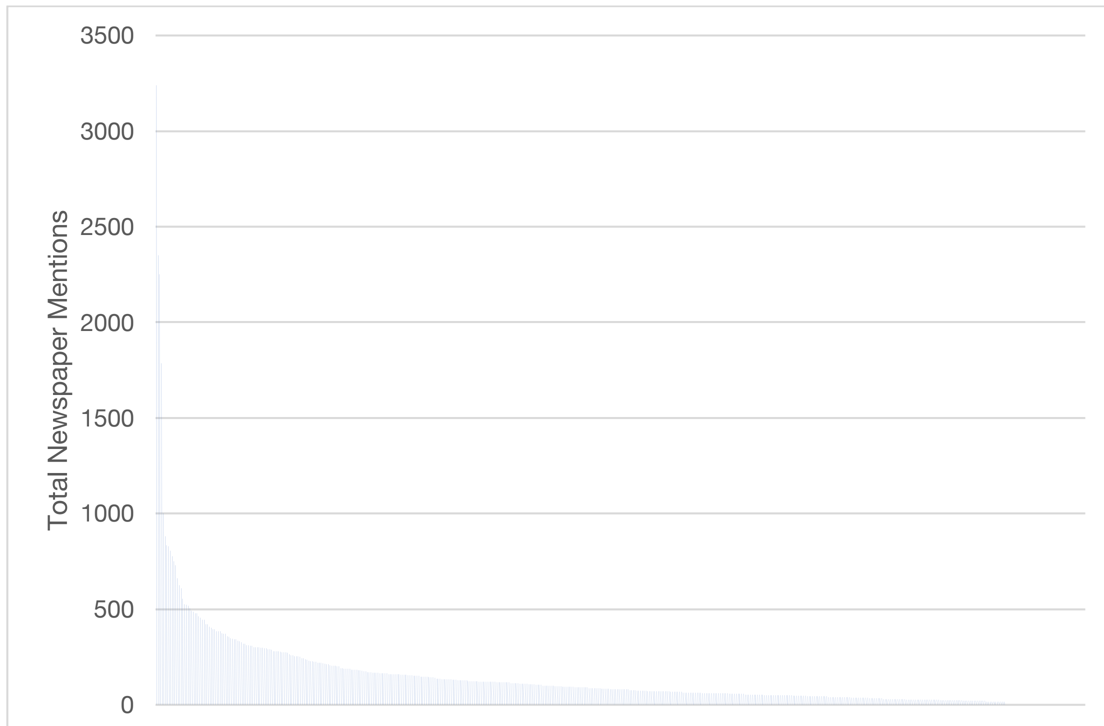
To examine humor's role in these patterns, I first modeled each member's total media mentions during the first six months of 2011 using a series of negative binomial regressions. Each model uses a combination of covariates identified in existing media studies, including member demographics, political characteristics, and institutional activity. Covariates whose structure or meaning may not be immediately apparent are discussed in more detail below.

Table 3.3
Total Newspaper Mentions by Member

	Median	Minimum	Maximum	SD
Total Mentions	82	1	3,240	347.2
Position of Mention				
Title Mentions	1	0	174	12.8
Early Mentions[1]	19	0	1,551	124.7
Late Mentions[2]	60	1	2,403	225.6
Outlet Type				
Local Paper[3]	17	0	423	61.1
National Paper[4]	23	0	1,842	158.8

[1] All mentions of a member that occur within the first one-third of an article by word-count.
[2] All mentions of a member that occur within the last two-thirds of an article by word count.
[3] Local papers include all outlets not classified as national papers.
[4] National papers include the New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today.

Figure 3.2
Total Newspaper Mentions by Member



Control Variables

Committee Assignment (*Prestige Committee Member* and *Committee Chair/Ranking*). As Cook (1998) and others (e.g., Hess 1986) have noted, committee assignments can act as a powerful signal of institutional and policy influence. Members who sit on relatively more prestigious committees are therefore more likely to be covered by the news media. I account for committee assignment through a dichotomous variable indicating member assignment to a prestige committee as identified in Fenno's (1973) (see also Smith and Deering 1997) committee classification framework. I also account for member's leadership positions on a committee through a dichotomous variable indicating a member's position as either a committee chair or ranking member depending on their party's chamber majority status.

Senior Delegation Member. I also account for each member's relative prominence within their home state by noting whether the individual was the senior member of their state's congressional delegation. The senior member was identified as the member of the House or Senate who had served the greatest number of consecutive years in either chamber of Congress. In 2011, the median senior member had served 28 years in Congress, on average 20 years longer than their home-state colleagues.

Recent Election Result. Attention to election dynamics is one of the defining characteristics of the modern political news media. A number of studies have noted, therefore, that members in competitive electoral environments receive more coverage than their colleagues in safe seats (e.g., Iyengar, Norpoth, and Hahn 2004, Vinson 2003). As a measure of a member's electoral vulnerability, I control for the percentage of the two-party vote they received in their most recent election (2010 for members of the House; 2010, 2008, or 2006 for

members of the Senate). Values range from 0.40 for Lisa Murkowski's successful write-in campaign to defeat two major-party challengers, to 1 for members that had run unopposed.

Political Standing. To capture the relative status of each member in comparison to their peers, I used Waismel-Manor and Tsfati's (2011) measure of political standing. This measure is based on Cook's (1986) measure of leadership status and committee prestige ratings. The highest score (5) is assigned to party leaders and whips, as well as the chair and ranking member of the Committees on Appropriations, Ways and Means, Foreign Affairs, Homeland Security, Armed Services, Energy and Commerce, Budget and Rules (4), Oversight and Government Reform, Judiciary, Science and Technology, Agriculture, Natural Resources and Small Business (3), Education and Labor, Financial Services, Transportation, Veterans' Affairs, House Administration, and all the chairpersons and ranking members of the appropriations subcommittees (2). All other members received a score of 1.

Media Market Congruence. As noted above, journalistic norms to provide the public with relevant, timely information motivate much of the variation in coverage of an outlet's local member of Congress. One of the most durable findings in the literature, therefore, is the effect of media market/electoral district boundary congruence on legislators' coverage in local media (e.g., Schaffner and Sellers 2003, Vinson 2003). Newspapers whose circulation areas more closely align with the boundaries of their local member's district are significantly more likely to report on the member. This matters for estimates of coverage at both the local and national level as national outlets will at times pick up and/or comment on local coverage. Members who receive more coverage in local newspapers may therefore also receive more coverage in national papers.

To account for this effect, I created a measure of boundary congruence for each member of the House and Senate based on Wasimel-Manor and Tsfati's (2011) similar measures. For members of the House, I first identified the total number of media markets that covered some portion of each congressional district as well as the total number of congressional districts at least partially contained in each media market. These data were then combined in the following manner:

$$Media\ Market\ Congruence\ (House) = \frac{1}{number\ of\ districts\ in\ market\ 1} + \frac{1}{number\ of\ districts\ in\ market\ 2} + \cdots \frac{1}{number\ of\ districts\ in\ market\ n}$$

The final measure assigned values ranging from 0.03 to 6.37 (μ=0.50, σ=0.65). The smallest values are given to districts such as New York 14 that are covered by a single media market shared with more than 30 other districts. In such an environment, members must compete for exceptionally scarce professional media resources and journalists must decide how to simultaneously cover several dozen congressional elites in the same chamber. By contrast, members such as Denny Rehberg (R-MT) enjoyed the attention of media outlets in 9 markets that, on average, covered fewer than one additional district.

Using a similar approach, I created a parallel congruence measure for members of the Senate that is based in the spatial correlation of media markets and states. These data were combined using the equation:

$$Media\ Market\ Congruence\ (Senate) = \frac{1}{number\ of\ states\ in\ market\ 1} + \frac{1}{number\ of\ states\ in\ market\ 2} + \cdots \frac{1}{number\ of\ states\ in\ market\ n}$$

Given the difference in geographic size between most states and House districts, the Senate congruence variable is unsurprisingly larger on average than its House counterpart (μ = 4.36, σ=3.04). Still, not all states received a uniformly high value. Senators from Texas, for example, were covered by 20 markets that overlapped with an average of fewer than one additional state and were assigned a congruence score of 16.33. Yet Senators Orrin Hatch and Mike Lee in Utah shared a single market with portions of two other states, receiving a congruence score of 0.33, smaller than 47 percent of House districts. Differences between House and Senate jurisdictions reflect the greater complexity of the media landscape in most states compared to individual House districts.

Legislative Activity (*Bills Sponsored*, *Legislative Effectiveness,* and *Party Unity*). Three measures collectively represent members' legislative activity. The first is the total number of bills each member sponsored during the 112th Congress. Second, I control for members' relative legislative efficacy using Hitt, Volden, and Wiseman's (2017) measure. Their score combines data on both the type of policies members promote as well as their relative success in committee and on the floor of the House and/or Senate.[20] Current studies (e.g., Arnold 2004, Cohen et al. 2008, Fogarty 2008) suggest that relatively more active members should receive additional attention from the media. Groeling (2013) also notes that members out-of-step or in conflict with members of their own party should also pique the interest of journalists in search

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[20] Scores for legislators in the 112th Congress range from 0 to 16.3 (μ = 1.0, σ = 1.5), with higher scores indicating a generally more effective legislator.

of compelling conflict to write about. I therefore also account for members' party unity in votes cast.[21] This measure ranges from 0 to 1 (μ = 0.92, σ = 0.09).[22]

Media-Seeking Behavior (*Total Tweets*). Finally, as noted above, I expect members who make information about themselves relatively more accessible—in other words, those who exhibit a greater amount of media-seeking behavior—to receive more coverage than their peers (e.g., Cohen et al. 2008, Vinson 2003). To capture this behavior, I include the total number of tweets posted by each member during 2011 and 2012. An essentially costless endeavor on a platform nearly universally frequented by congressional elites as well as journalists (Arceneaux and Weiss 2010, Lassen and Bode 2016), members' use of Twitter presents a dynamic measure of members' preferences for and engagement in media-seeking behavior (e.g., Lipinski and Neddenriep 2004). Unlike most other communication tools at their disposal, Representatives and Senators can independently post tweets at any moment without staff oversight or support. Total tweets posted by members in 2011 and 2012 range from 0 to 4,318 (μ = 553.7, σ = 554.1).

Results

With these data, I first consider the volume of newspaper references received by each member. The results of four initial models predicting total references to individual members in

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[21] Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, "About the Project," voteview.com, accessed June 12, 2019, https://voteview.com/about.

[22] Party unity scores are derived from the proportion of votes cast for a member's own party wherein at least 50 percent of Democrats voted against at least 50 percent of Republicans.

sampled papers are reported in Table 3.4a and Table 3.4b. A substantial, positive effect due to member humor use is apparent in the bivariate (Model 1) and simplified (Model 2) models, but disappears when other media-relevant member activity is controlled for in Model 3. This suggests that journalists may be aware of members' use of humor, but make content decisions first through the lens of traditional institutional activity. Indeed, the results of Model 3 are consistent with the broad themes of existing studies of congressional media coverage. From January through June 2011, members with relatively greater institutional influence over policy were routinely mentioned in sampled articles, while those that entered Congress relatively more recently and had been elected with less public support, for example, received less coverage. Additionally, even after controlling for these dynamics, more accessible representatives and senators also received additional coverage. Holding all else constant, members who tweeted more than their peers received a greater number of mentions in the press. This highlights the independent importance of member accessibility in journalist decision-making.

Yet journalists may adjust their decision-making processes depending on the specific nature of a reporting task. When reporters have achieved their professional goal to cover a day's most newsworthy members of Congress, for example, they may adopt a more personal decision calculus. The collective space devoted to congressional coverage in most newspapers generally far outstrips what is needed to discuss the most newsworthy and accessible members. The 38,422 articles in my data include 90,155 total references to a member of Congress, more than 600 references per outlet during the first six months of 2011. Many

articles referenced a significant number of members, with 5,746 articles referencing more than 10 members each. By contrast, fewer than 40 members of Congress held one of the prominent

Table 3.4a
General Newspaper Mentions by Member

	Model 1[1]	Marginal Effect[3]	Model 2[1]	Marginal Effect
Humor Use				
Joke Teller	**0.36 (0.09)**	53	**0.31 (0.1)**	45
Individual Demographics				
Nonwhite			-0.19 (0.14)	
Female			0.07 (0.13)	
Birth Year			**-0.02 (0.01)**	25
Republican			0.16 (0.1)	
N	525		525	
Likelihood Ratio Statistic	**14.3**		**34.7**	

Cell values are negative binomial regression estimates for individuals who held a seat in a committee of the U.S. House or Senate during the first six months of 2011.
Bolded values are significant at $p<0.05$ or lower. Standard errors reported in parentheses.
[1] Model of all members who held a committee seat during the relevant time period.
[2] Model of all members who held a committee seat during the relevant time period and posted fewer total tweets (414) than the median member of Congress during 2011 and 2012.
[3] Marginal effects are estimated with relevant variables set at 1 (for indicators) or one standard deviation above the mean.

Table 3.4b
General Newspaper Mentions by Member

	Model 3[1]	**Marginal Effect**	**Model 4**[2]	**Marginal Effect**
Humor Use				
Joke Teller	-0.01 (0.09)		**0.26** **(0.13)**	33
Individual Demographics				
Nonwhite	0.12 (0.14)		0.18 (0.18)	
Female	0.08 (0.12)		-0.29 (0.17)	
Birth Year	**0.01** **(0.01)**	26	**0.02** **(0.01)**	32
Republican	-0.36 (0.25)		0.07 (0.38)	
Political Identity				
Nominate Score	**0.51** **(0.23)**	51	-0.03 (0.37)	
Senior Delegation Member	**0.45** **(0.19)**	79	**0.53** **(0.24)**	83
Prestige Committee Member	**-0.29** **(0.09)**	-44	-0.20 (0.12)	
Year Entered Congress	**-0.02** **(0.01)**	-23	0.01 (0.01)	
Recent Election Result	**0.85** **(0.40)**	15	0.84 (0.55)	
Political Standing	**0.28** **(0.07)**	42	**0.40** **(0.10)**	50
Media Market Congruence	0.03 (0.03)		0.06 (0.05)	
Member of Senate	**0.91** **(0.18)**	172	**0.61** **(0.27)**	93
Committee Chair/Ranking	-0.33 (0.18)		**-0.51** **(0.23)**	-64
Institutional Activity				
Bills Sponsored (10's)	**0.01** **(0.01)**	19	0.01 (0.01)	

Table 3.4b
General Newspaper Mentions by Member (continued)

Total Tweets (100's)	**0.03**	25	-0.01
	(0.01)		(0.05)
Party Unity	-0.96		-0.26
	(0.49)		(0.66)
Legislative Effectiveness	0.04		0.05
	(0.03)		(0.04)
N	524		263
Likelihood Ratio Statistic	**214.8**		**98.9**

Cell values are negative binomial regression estimates for individuals who held a seat in a committee of the U.S. House or Senate during the first six months of 2011.
Bolded values are significant at p<0.05 or lower. Standard errors reported in parentheses.
[1] Model of all members who held a committee seat during the relevant time period.
[2] Model of all members who held a committee seat during the relevant time period and posted fewer total tweets (414) than the median member of Congress during 2011 and 2012.
[3] Marginal effects are estimated with relevant variables set at 1 (for indicators) or one standard deviation above the mean.

leadership positions identified in the two highest ratings in my measure of political standing. Clearly, journalists write about Congress significantly more than to cover only the most prominent figures. When their reporting takes them beyond members seen as most newsworthy in a given moment, journalists have significantly greater discretion to independently select their subjects. For these secondary sources, the appealing and memorable nature of a member's use of humor may make them more interesting to a journalist, a dynamic that may be sufficient to induce additional coverage.

To examine this possibility, Model 4 is estimated over the subset of members who posted to Twitter during 2011-2012 fewer times than the median member (median = 414). As

measured by information dissemination, these members did comparatively less than half of their peers to make themselves available to journalists. As indicated in Model 3, we should expect these members to receive significantly fewer overall mentions—after all, reporting on them may require additional news gathering resources. When these members are mentioned, their comparative humor use should play a significant motivating role. Indeed, the results of Model 4 indicate that less communicative members who used humor in committee hearings were significantly more likely to be mentioned by members of the press. Other institutional activity loses its statistical significance when moving from the full House and Senate to this subset, while the pattern of demographic and identity measures remains robust. When considering this less accessible group of members, reporters appear to have adjusted their criteria for newsworthiness in part, but not in full.

On their own, however, the results of Model 4 are inconclusive. The models presented in Table 3.4 do not account for the internal structure or timing of the articles analyzed. Consider, for example, the location in an article of the first reference to a given member. Traditional indicators of newsworthiness suggest that more prominent, well-known, and influential members should be mentioned more frequently by name in the title or beginning of a story. These members' connection to current events should be clearest and make them most attractive to readers. By contrast, members whose initial reference appears only later in an article may have a weaker connection to an issue or generate less public interest. These members may therefore be mentioned because of a journalist's greater personal interest in them. Table 3.5 reports the results of models predicting each type of mention. The results of these models are consistent with my arguments about secondary references. While there is no

effect due to humor for member mentions in the title and beginning of an article, officials who make jokes received 26 additional references in the final two-thirds of sampled articles—a 40 percent increase in overall mentions for the median member of the House and a 12 percent increase for the median member of the Senate.

Reporters may also adopt different frames through which to report on the relatively reticent in Congress. The effect of ideological extremity on the volume of member mentions, for example, is reversed among high and low media seekers. Among the subset of members who post relatively few online messages, comparatively more extreme members, as measured by the absolute value of their DW NOMINATE score, were no more likely to be mentioned in either the title, lead, or backend of a story. Yet among the most communicative half of members, ideology had a pronounced effect, especially in prominent places. The most ideologically extreme senators in this group received a 400 percent increase in title mentions, 111 percent increase in early mentions, and 72 percent increase in late mentions. More extreme members of the House enjoyed a similar benefit.[23] This may indicate that journalists who often discuss officials' behavior through partisan and ideological lenses, instead adopt

[23] Ideologically extreme members of the House received a 132 percent increase in early mentions and 79 percent increase in late mentions. Because the average House member received no title mentions in my data, an exact comparison with the Senate results is impossible, but when applied to more active communicators, the model in Table 3.5 does predict an additional 3 title mentions for extreme House members.

Table 3.5
Newspaper Mentions by Location in Article

	Title Mentions[1]		Early Mentions[2]		Late Mentions[3]	
	Model	*Marginal Effect*[4]	*Model*	*Marginal Effect*	*Model*	*Marginal Effect*
Humor Use						
Joke Teller	-0.36 (0.28)		0.19 (0.16)		**0.29 (0.12)**	+26
Individual Demographics						
Nonwhite	**1.61 (0.41)**	+10	0.41 (0.21)		0.10 (0.17)	
Female	**-1.22 (0.38)**	-3	-0.30 (0.21)		-0.28 (0.16)	
Birth Year	-0.02 (0.02)		**0.03 (0.01)**	+12	**0.02 (0.01)**	+20
Republican	-0.22 (0.77)		0.06 (0.46)		0.09 (0.37)	
Political Identity						
Senior Delegation Member	-0.36 (0.49)		**0.76 (0.29)**	+33	0.45 (0.23)	
Prestige Committee	-0.40 (0.26)		**-0.31 (0.14)**	-10	-0.16 (0.12)	
Political Standing	0.18 (0.23)		**0.39 (0.13)**	+13	**0.40 (0.10)**	+36
Member of Senate	**2.31 (0.63)**	+18	**0.66 (0.34)**	+27	**0.60 (0.26)**	+68
Committee Leader	0.44 (0.57)		-0.56 (0.29)		**-0.48 (0.23)**	-44
Institutional Activity						
Total Tweets (100's)	**-0.20 (0.10)**	-1	-0.05 (0.05)		0.01 (0.01)	
N			263			
Likelihood Ratio Statistic	**59.6**		**95.8**		**94.1**	

Cell values are negative binomial regression estimates for all individuals who held a seat in a committee of the U.S. House or Senate during the first six months of 2011 and posted fewer total tweets during 2011 and 2012 than the median member of Congress.
Bolded values are significant at p<0.05 or lower. Standard errors reported in parentheses. Additional covariates include those reported in Table 3.4. Full model reported in Appendix A.
[1] Total articles where the member's name appears in the title.

Table 3.5
Newspaper Mentions by Location in Article (continued)

[2] Total articles where the member's name appears in the first third of an article.
[3] Total articles where the member's name appears first in the final two thirds of an article.
[4] Marginal effects are estimated with relevant variables set at 1 (for indicators) or one standard deviation above the mean.

other narratives—such as a member's personality or sense of humor—when discussing less accessible members.

We can gain additional leverage on the question of members' appeal to journalists independent of their connection to current news events, by considering publication-specific patterns of coverage. To do so, I captured three characteristics of each of the 149 outlets in my sample. First, I identified the *National Outlets*, those sources with national circulation and recognition. This group includes the New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today. These papers are notable for the size and geographic scope of their circulation as well as the financial and human resources they can bring to bear on a given story. If journalists with greater discretion are truly more likely to write about humorous members, then it should appear most clearly in the reporting choices of those employed by a national outlet. Second, I identified the House and Senate members for which a given outlet is their *Local Paper*. The city of Los Angeles, for example, where the Los Angeles Daily News is published, intersects with 9 House districts, while the Bangor Daily News, in Bangor, Maine, intersects with just one. Recognizing the unique relevance of local members for local readers, newspapers are frequently said to employ a different newsworthiness threshold for their local members. Papers are likely to be familiar with and have reported frequently on their local members, thereby putting them in position to respond to members' use of humor. Third, I also identified all

Independent Papers. Independent papers are here defined as outlets not owned by an individual or entity that owns additional major news media assets. Without an external corporation supplying content and editorial standards, reporters at independent papers may also exhibit a greater amount of discretion and, therefore, willingness to cover members who make jokes.

I estimated the effect of humor on coverage in each of these types of outlets. Consistent with expectations, the total number of mentions of a member is significantly higher in national and independent papers (see Table 3.6). In the former, humorous members garnered a 70 percent increase over the median member, while in the latter, members who joke more than doubled their appearances. Members' coverage in their local papers, however, displays no effect due to their use of humor. Instead, this model suggests that members receive more attention from their local outlet when they have to compete for it less. Members whose electoral district boundary more closely aligns with the local media market receive significantly greater coverage from their local paper, an effect not seen in the other models in Table 3.6.
In addition to the structure and source of articles, the timing of member mentions may also play an important role in coverage patterns. Some weeks have a large number of newsworthy events that reporters can use to fill news holes, while in other weeks journalists may struggle to find enough content. As a proxy for the recent supply of potential news content, I assigned each week in my sample to one of three categories (high, medium, low) based on the total number of articles referencing members of Congress during that week. The median high content week in this formulation included 1,742 stories, while 1,445 were published during the median medium content week and 1,289 were published during the median low content week. I

estimated the effect of member humor use on media attention during each type of week. I expect to see a significant effect due to humor in low-content weeks as journalists should have relatively more flexibility and discretion to attend to humorous members during these periods. The results reported in Table 3.7, however, show no evidence of a humor effect during any category. Coefficients associated with member humor use approach neither statistical nor substantive interest. This may be due to the relatively consistent number of member mentions (and political events) in each week in my data. The period from which my data is drawn—the first several months of a new year following a federal election—will likely have fewer political events, stories, and upheaval to report on than at other times in the year. A stable news environment—even during periods with relatively fewer overall stories to report—may ultimately provide less discretion for reporters as outlets adapt to the needs of the time in an attempt to maximize journalists' efficiency.

Finally, in addition to the volume of member mentions, existing literature suggests that member humor use should also affect the content of the articles in which they are mentioned. Articles that mention humorous members, for example, should be more likely to include direct discussions of comedy as reporters foreground a potentially little-known characteristic of a member. An article in March 2011, for example, discussed the "unlikely Senate duo" of Al Franken (D-MN) and Rand Paul (R-KY).[24] The author argued that while the two senators had distinctly different political ideologies, they had struck up a friendship over a shared sense of humor. The article is consistently positive about both officials, praising them for finding

[24] Herb, Jeremy, "Franken, Paul Form Unlikely Senate Duo," *Star Tribune*, March 11, 2011, 1a.

Table 3.6
Newspaper Mentions by Outlet Type

	National Outlets[1]		**Local Paper**[2]		**Independent Paper**[3]	
	Model	*Marginal Effect*[4]	*Model*	*Marginal Effect*	*Model*	*Marginal Effect*
Humor Use						
Joke Teller	**0.39 (0.14)**	+16	0.02 (0.20)		**0.60 (0.17)**	+11
Individual Demographics						
Republican	-0.12 (0.42)		-0.21 (0.61)		-0.17 (0.51)	
Political Identity						
Senior Delegation Member	0.48 (0.27)		-0.20 (0.35)		0.43 (0.32)	
Prestige Committee	-0.20 (0.13)		-0.35 (0.19)		-0.23 (0.16)	
Political Standing	**0.41 (0.11)**	+17	**0.66 (0.20)**	+23	**0.51 (0.15)**	+11
Media Market Congruence	0.02 (0.05)		**0.22 (0.09)**	+14	0.07 (0.07)	
Member of Senate	**0.98 (0.29)**	+56	-0.14 (0.52)		**0.92 (0.37)**	+25
Committee Leader	**-0.53 (0.25)**	-23	**-1.04 (0.46)**	-28	**-0.87 (0.35)**	-17
Institutional Activity						
Party Unity	-0.30 (0.74)		0.02 (0.93)		-0.56 (0.84)	
N			263			
Likelihood Ratio Statistic	**135.6**		**36.8**		**80.8**	

Cell values are negative binomial regression estimates for all individuals who held a seat in a committee of the U.S. House or Senate during the first six months of 2011 and posted fewer total tweets than the median member of Congress during 2011 and 2012.

Bolded values are significant at $p<0.05$ or lower. Standard errors reported in parentheses.

Additional covariates include those reported in Table 3.4. Full model reported in Appendix A.

[1] Model predicts articles published in the New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, or USA Today.

[2] Model predicts articles in outlets published in the member's home district or state.

[3] Model predicts articles published in independently owned newspapers.

[4] Marginal effects are estimated with relevant variables set at 1 (for indicators) or one standard deviation above the mean.

Table 3.7
Newspaper Mentions by Pace of News

	High Content Weeks[1]	Medium Content Weeks[2]	Low Content Weeks[3]
Humor Use			
Joke Teller	0.05 (0.09)	0.04 (0.09)	0.06 (0.10)
N		263	
Likelihood Ratio Statistic	**350**	**270.1**	**259.3**

Cell values are negative binomial regression estimates for all individuals who held a seat in a committee of the U.S. House or Senate during the first six months of 2011 and posted fewer total tweets than the median member of Congress during 2011 and 2012.
Bolded values are significant at p<0.05 or lower. Standard errors reported in parentheses.
Additional covariates include those reported in Table 3.4. Full model reported in Appendix A.
[1] Content published during the one-third of weeks with the most total references to Congress.
[2] Content published during weeks with more total references to Congress than one-third of sampled weeks.
[3] Content published during the one-third of weeks with the fewest total references to Congress.

common ground, largely through their humor. Similarly, another journalist used a joke by Marco Rubio (R-FL) to introduce the first-term senator—who was broadly unknown at the time—as young and energetic.[25] Other mentions of member humor were less positive. Some journalists have noted the ways that member humor can reinforce partisan divisions. An article in The Daily Oklahoman noted that when James Lankford (R-OK) arrived at a rally with a bandaged wrist, he joked that "he suffered the injury struggling with Democrats over the

[25] Alex Leary "Marco Rubio Reclaims Spotlight," *Tampa Bay Times*, April 4, 2011, 1a.

federal budget."[26] By mentioning this specific quip, the author quickly established Lankford as a sharply partisan actor. An article in the Virginian-Pilot thoroughly condemned Anthony Weiner (D-NY) for his use of jokes to defend himself after explicit photos the representative took of himself came to light.[27] Prior to these articles, each of these members had joked in official settings and were therefore known to have a sense of humor.

In each of these articles, journalists used member humor to make a more or less explicit argument about an officials' behavior. These arguments could have been made in a variety of ways, but the fact that the reporters chose to couch their comments in humor may indicate that they considered members' joking an important characteristic to note. To test the extent of the relationship between member's use of humor and journalists' discussion of it, I identified all sampled articles that included at least one of 32 humor terms.[28] I then estimated the total number of these articles in which each member appeared (μ = 24.7, σ = 49.4). I also estimated a model based on the total number of humorous members mentioned in the same articles in which a given member appeared. The results reported in Table 3.8 indicate no evidence that members who used humor were more likely to be referenced in articles more likely to have directly discussed humor. For comparison, I also modeled the effect of humor on total co-

[26] Michael McNutt, "U.S. Rep. Lankford Gets Support of Oklahoma Crowd," *The Daily Oklahoman*, April 21, 2011.

[27] "EDITORIAL: The Congressman from Laughingstock," *The Virginian-Pilot*, June 8, 2011.

[28] These included "humor," "laugh," "witty," and "wisecrack." The full list is available in Appendix B.

mentions of female members and senators. These models also produce no evidence that a member's humor shapes the language of the articles in which they are mentioned. The latter articles do suggest, however, that journalists are likely to mention multiple members with shared identities in the same article. Member gender and chamber are each significant indicators of individuals' co-mentions with other members of the same gender or chamber.

Discussion

These results offer limited support for my hypotheses. I find partial evidence that members accrue additional attention as a result of their humor use. Consistent with my Volume Hypothesis, a subset of members who use humor in committee hearings receive significantly more media mentions when compared with otherwise similar peers. This effect is clearest among secondary references (i.e., those that appear late in an article) and members who engage in relatively less media-seeking behavior. Consistent with my Discretion Hypothesis, these additional articles appear to have generally been authored by journalists with greater resources and editorial discretion. Indeed, this is the clearest implication of these analyses—when given the option, reporters choose to write about humorous members of Congress. While principally motivated by traditional journalistic norms and conceptions of newsworthiness (indeed, I find no support for my Context Hypothesis), reporters often choose to supplement primary news gathering by attending to personally engaging and entertaining members. These findings have implications for members of the public, press corps, and Congress.

First, these results suggest that members of the public may see only a marginal information benefit from their elected officials' use of humor. While the literature suggests that

Table 3.8
Content Features of Newspaper Mentions

	Article Language	Member Co-Mentions		
	Humor Terms	Joking Members	Female Members	Senate Members
Humor Use				
Joke Teller	-0.05 (0.12)	0.10 (0.11)	-0.01 (0.18)	-0.23 (0.13)
Individual Demographics				
Nonwhite	-0.12 (0.17)	-0.12 (0.15)	0.32 (0.23)	-0.24 (0.18)
Female	-0.17 (0.16)	**-0.32** **(0.15)**	**1.25** **(0.18)**	**-0.45** **(0.17)**
Political Identity				
Member of Senate	0.28 (0.24)	0.36 (0.23)	0.34 (0.44)	**1.30** **(0.26)**
Institutional Activity				
Total Media Mentions (10's)	**0.05** **(0.01)**	**0.05** **(0.01)**	-0.01 (0.01)	**0.06** **(0.01)**
Bills Sponsored (10's)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Total Tweets (100's)	0.07 (0.04)	**0.10** **(0.01)**	0.01 (0.01)	**0.10** **(0.01)**
Party Unity	0.10 (0.63)	0.09 (0.59)	-0.40 (0.99)	0.29 (0.66)
N				
Likelihood Ratio Statistic	**204.7**	**183.9**	**72.9**	**286.1**

Cell values are negative binomial regression estimates for all individuals who held a seat in a committee of the U.S. House or Senate during the first six months of 2011 and posted fewer total tweets than the median member of Congress during 2011 and 2012.
Bolded values are significant at $p<0.05$ or lower. Standard errors reported in parentheses. Additional covariates include those reported in Table 3.4. Full model reported in Appendix A.

comedic elites should be uniquely attractive as news subjects, the manner in which they appeared in newspaper stories during the first half of 2011 likely undercut this effect. Humorous members’ comparative increase in coverage was both limited and obscure.

Members received a boost due to their humor use only late in articles that did not clearly signal the private comedy journalists appear to have been responding to. Assuming that many readers employ generally nonstrategic news consumption habits, the secondary nature of the additional references due to elite joking may therefore have gone unnoticed for large portions of the American public that—for a variety of reasons—rarely reads beyond the headline and lede of political news stories. Even when readers did encounter the additional mentions predicted by my data, they would see no reason to approach a humorous member differently than they otherwise might. Articles in which humorous members were mentioned were no more likely to include references to comedy of any kind, giving no signal that readers should revise their likely non-humorous image of an elected official.

At the same time, however, elite humor use does appear to raise the public profile of some members that may otherwise appear relatively infrequently in public discourse. The effect of member joking was most prominent among those who were comparatively muted in their media-seeking efforts. The additional coverage these members received due to their humor use significantly lifted their public profile. Humorous members of the House who posted relatively less content received a 54 percent increase in total newspaper mentions while similar members of the Senate received a 19 percent increase. This is important given the minimal coverage most members receive. In many districts, even a modest increase in information could be an important resource for residents, especially given the ease with which voters may now reference and share professionally produced content. Journalists themselves can also easily refer to their own, previous work on social media. Future versions of this study will therefore consider the long-term implications of humor effects for members of Congress. It may be that

this initial increase in secondary mentions, for example, could over time lead to more prominent coverage as well.

Second, these dynamics raise questions about political journalism. Media observers and scholars have debated the merits of reporting on the personalities of elected officials. Many have criticized content of this kind, contending that it represents journalists' acquiescence to "people's thirst for the personal and irrelevant" (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002, p 196). Others have argued that congressional coverage often "smells of tabloid sensationalism" (Rozell 1994, 59) that highlights only members' worst tendencies and characteristics. Yet Morris and Clawson (2005) found relatively little coverage framed around individual members of Congress during the 1990s. More recently, Amsalem and coauthors (2018) have shown evidence that coverage motivated by members' personalities may not center on the trivial or sensational. Instead, they found a broad, positive relationship between members' extraversion and media mentions.

It is unsurprising that journalists are drawn to elites who are relatively more personally open, interesting, and engaging. Yet this observation does raise questions about how such dynamics should guide political reporting. To what extent, for example, should journalists foreground members' comedic efforts? Members profess to be humor enthusiasts, frequently telling jokes in public and private interactions (Yarwood 2004), moments that may be observed or conveyed to journalists. Many of these jokes, however, may be unrelated to the campaign or policy events of their time, leaving journalists disinclined to report them. Yet a well-placed piece of comedy in a news article may be able to attract otherwise inattentive readers and foster a sympathetic response to congressional elite, two vital responses in an era of mistrust, disengagement, and polarization.

As noted above, increases in coverage of humorous members may also shape future reporting patterns. Journalists are broad, deep consumers of political media, making them more likely than other members of the public to note shifts in secondary coverage (e.g., outside headlines and leads). Taking cues from one another, journalists may therefore adjust their attitudes about a member's newsworthiness after seeing her appear more frequently in the work of other reporters. Future versions of this study will consider the long-term implications of elite humor and journalists' responses.

Finally, for members of Congress, this study stands as a reminder of the power of individual relationships with members of the press. The results reported here highlight the discretion that reporters possess when gathering facts and writing about Washington elite, as well as their inclination to use this discretion to write about more personally engaging, entertaining elected officials. Members interested in enhancing their public profile, may therefore productively consider fostering a friendlier, positive, more open relationship with journalists. Members of both the House and the Senate frequently profess to enjoy humor and to be comfortable using it with voters and their peers on a regular basis. Former Senator Dale Bumpers (D-AR) once commented: "I cannot remember in my twenty—almost twenty-seven years in politics, ever having made a speech without opening with a couple of good jokes and, as I say, preferably self-deprecating jokes" (Yarwood 2004, p 106). My analyses suggest that members would benefit from more directly applying this approach when interacting with members of the media. This topic is especially timely given the tone and aggression of recent events and attitudes toward the free press.

Chapter Four

Elite Humor and Learning in the Mass Public

Information has been likened to the currency of politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Yet if this is true, many Americans appear to have dedicated themselves to a life of poverty. Indeed, "nothing strikes the student of public opinion and democracy more forcefully than the paucity of information most people possess about politics" (Ferejohn 1990, 3). A large portion of the public seems to not only be "awash in ignorance" (Kinder 1998, 75) but also uninterested in becoming anything else (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). The consequences of merely sporadic political attention by the American public are as pervasive as they are persistent. Representative government relies in large part on the quality of decision-making among its citizens, the American contingent of which Robert Dahl has characterized as "*occasional, intermittent,* or *part-time* citizens" (1992, 48, emphasis in original). By contrast, those we might refer to as *attentive citizens*—the minority of individuals who consistently seek out information about politics—generally outstrip their less engaged peers in a variety of democratic actions including voting (Verba, Brady, and Schlozman 1995), understanding current policy debates (Popkin and Dimock 1999), holding internally consistent opinions (Converse 1970), and rationally pursuing their own policy preferences (Zaller 1992). Regular surveyors of the political landscape, attentive citizens are sensitive to the appearance of personally consequential policies and opportunities for meaningful participation (Schudson 1998).

Political scientists have understandably devoted significant attention to the factors that drive the average citizen to engage with political content in a meaningful way. Scholars have

identified the general stability of individual political interest as well as the information, political, and social contexts in which learning is more likely to occur (e.g., Prior 2010; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Kam 2007; Prior 2010; Coleman and Manna 2000; Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen 2006; Barabas and Jerit 2009; Verba, Brady, and Schlozman 1995; Hayes and Lawless 2015). Studies have also considered a range of emotional, social, and psychological inducements to learn about current affairs, especially cross-cutting sources of information (e.g., Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000; Mutz 2006; Sinclair 2012; Hutchings 2003). This literature suggests, for example, that negative feelings of anger or anxiety may be especially effective in motivating individual learning (e.g., Ryan 2012, Albertson and Gadarian 2014, Valentino et al. 2011).

One of the core insights in these studies is that political knowledge is significantly rooted in voters' individual relationships with and attitudes about elite sources of information in the media (e.g., Ladd 2011, Ariely 2015) and on Capitol Hill (e.g., Fenno 1978, Lipinski 2001). Individuals who evaluate information sources more positively are more likely to attend to and learn from them. Positive engagement can come in many forms, including entertainment. A growing group of studies therefore considers the ways that elite political humor can foster the type of political interest and attention necessary for effective learning (e.g., Baum 2003a; Cao 2010; Xenos and Becker 2009; Feldman, Leiserwitz, and Maibach 2011). Yet, these studies have generally focused on professional political satire, using observational data to examine questions of information processing. By doing so, however, the logic of individual consumption decisions and the influence of non-professional sources of political comedy have been largely unaddressed. Current theories of the psychology of humor and political learning suggest that

humor—whether from a late night host or member of Congress—may play a significant role in the timing and nature of voters' news gathering. In this study, I examine the implications of elite humor for individual-level political information seeking and learning. The results of two original experiments suggest that elite political humor can motivate individuals to learn about current affairs, including from sources across the political aisle. Consumers who find a member of Congress amusing, for example, are more likely to evaluate them positively and express interest in their non-comedic comments. These data also suggest that in some contexts likely to spur political learning, individuals may look first to political comedy if given the option.

Theories of Political Learning

Existing models of political attention have largely centered on the cognitive or affective appeal of information seeking. Lupia and McCubbins exemplify the cognitive-centered approach when they argue that learning is goal oriented and therefore "beneficial only when it prevents a costly mistake" (1998, 27). This type of logic motivates a body of research highlighting the salutary effects of learning, among other things, about prior economic performance (Fiorina 1981, Key 1966), the arguments of like-minded partisans (Downs 1957), and informative cues such as party labels or elites' statements (Lupia 1994; Popkin 1994; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1993).

Studies of the affective motivations of political learning have generally focused on the ways in which additional information can resolve negative emotions. Consistent with the predictions of Affective Intelligence Theory (Marcus et al. 2000), scholars have concluded that emotions such as anger and anxiety generally activate information seeking in order to help individuals reduce the intensity of negative feelings by either correcting or justifying their

experience. The pursuit of knowledge may therefore come in a variety of forms and is influenced either explicitly or implicitly by individuals' informational and affective goals (e.g., Valentino et al. 2008). Gadarian and Albertson (2014), for example, find that individuals who are induced to feel anxious about immigration are more likely to seek out and agree with threatening information on the topic (see also Lavine, Lodge, and Freitas 2005). Similarly, most existing studies of politically motivated anxiety or anger portray people seeking more information on the source of their unease.

Yet the affective and topical range of the content offered to participants in most studies of political learning is highly constrained. Many studies place participants in an information environment artificially saturated with political content (e.g., Valentino et al. 2009). Studies that do provide nonpolitical information sources often do so only by including further serious, traditional news messages. When given the option, however, some individuals may seek to resolve personal anxiety about politics not by engaging with the object of their anxiety, but by avoiding politics and seeking out emotional relief from nonpolitical sources of positive emotion such as comedy (e.g., Eliasoph 1998, Hibbing and Theiss Morse 2002). Cognitive appraisal theories of emotion suggest that individuals act strategically in response to emotions (Folkman et al. 1986, Lazarus 1991), developing specific, personalized coping efforts to respond to negative emotions (Bartsch et al. 2008, Schmidt et al. 2010).

Communications scholars have developed extensive empirical and theoretical evidence of the mood regulating potential of media use. Pioneering work by Zillmann and colleagues on affect-driven selective exposure, for example, led to the development of mood management theory (Zillmann 1988, Zillmann and Bryant 1985). The theory assumes that individuals seek to

minimize negative states of arousal and enhance positive or pleasurable moods (Knobloch-Westerwick 2013). Self-selected media exposure is therefore driven by hedonic goals as individuals arrange their stimulus environments to achieve preferred emotional states (Knobloch 2003). This effort has been described as a desire to satisfy basic human needs (Tamborini et al. 2010). The core logic and assumptions of mood management theory have been supported both experimentally (e.g., Bryant and Zillmann 1984, Knobloch and Zillmann 2002) and observationally (e.g., Anderson, Collins, Schmitt, and Smith Jacobvitz 1996; Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990) in many studies that show individuals' persistent propensity to select media that is "excitationally right" for them (Zillmann 1991, p 111). These dynamics appear to operate at both conscious and subconscious levels (Forgas 2000).

More recently, scholars have expanded on hedonic (pleasure-seeking) elements to recognize eudaimonic (information-seeking) motivations as well (e.g., Oliver and Raney 2011). Oliver and Bartsch define eudaimonic appreciation as "an experiential state that is characterized by the perception of deeper meaning, the feeling of being moved, and the motivation to elaborate on thoughts and feelings inspired by the experience" (2010, p 76). The resultant dual-process model of entertainment has been linked to Kahneman's (2011) concept of two systems of cognitive processing. Vorderer and Reinecke (2012) argue that hedonic experiences are processed automatically, rapidly, and effortlessly (System 1), while eudaimonic experiences require more systematic, attentive, and effortful processing (System 2). Similarly, Bartsch and Oliver (2011) describe the relationship between hedonic and eudaimonic experiences using dual-process models of cognition that distinguish between peripheral and central processing (Petty and Cacioppo 1986), heuristic and systematic processing (Chen,

Duckworth, and Chaiken 1989), or automatic and controlled processing (Lang 2006). Individuals seeking to resolve negative emotions may therefore be motivated to seek either information (eudaimonic experiences) or pleasure (hedonic experiences) depending on personal cognitive resources, interests, and affective context. When facing politically-motivated anger or anxiety, individuals may seek content that satisfies both hedonic and eudaimonic goals: political comedy.

H1 (Emotion Regulation): Individuals who experience negative emotions related to political content will express a greater interest in political comedy than their otherwise similar peers.

In addition to messages from the professional news media, individuals may also learn about politics from their elected representatives. The volume and form of congressional communication has been shown to shape the public's political knowledge, especially when individuals have an incentive to pay attention (e.g., Fenno 1978, although see Hochschild and Einstein 2015). Congressional campaign advertising, for example, has been described as "information subsidies akin to multivitamins" (Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein 2004, p 726). Voters are more likely to accurately characterize the policy and voting positions of a member who regularly makes such information available through official messages (Lipinski 2001). Parker and Goodman (2009) find evidence that voters perceive and respond to their members' representational activities, including franked mail. Voters are also aware of their members' institutional characterizations. Majority party members whose constituents are relatively more disaffected with Congress are penalized when they express solidarity with the House and Senate (Lipinski, Bianco, and Work 2003). In their classic study, Cover and Brumberg (1982)

argue that these effects are not limited to overtly political messages. They show that new parents who received a free publication about caring for infants from their member of Congress were subsequently more likely to recall their member's name and evaluate them more positively. These effects appeared even though the original "baby book" mailing included no political content. Instead, these members engaged with constituents in ways that were meaningful for them, fostering a deeper relationship and enhancing their saliency in the voters' minds.

Theories of Political Comedy

These studies suggest that when faced with goals that are politically (e.g., casting an informed vote) or personally (e.g., resolving feelings of anxiety or anger) pressing, members of the public are motivated to learn about politics in general and their elected officials in particular. Yet beyond general considerations of message valence (e.g., Geer 2006) and topic (e.g., Grimmer 2013), the existing literature on congressional communication has not seriously considered the differential effect of the style of members' messages—including their use of humor. A literature on late night political comedy has suggested ways in which elite joking may influence the public. Combined with theories of the psychology of humor, these studies suggest that elite political joking—either by professional comedians or members of Congress—may exert significant influence in individual information-seeking decisions among members of the public.

The assertion that placing political information in a comedic context can have positive consequences for mass learning is largely intuitive. The presence of humor in a message about politics provides an alternative, additional reason to attend to information individuals might

otherwise avoid. Individuals seeking primarily to relax or be entertained—those for whom political learning is likely at most a secondary consideration—may therefore be incidentally exposed to and influenced by civic information when it is presented in or near a joke. Notwithstanding the secondary nature of its acquisition, political information presented in this manner can act as a gateway to further engagement by enhancing recipients' perceptions of their own knowledge or learning capacities and altering the cost benefit calculus of additional exposure (Baum 2003a). Studies of televised humor about government have supported this assertion, especially among young viewers and those with little interest in politics (e.g., Feldman and Young 2008; Cao 2010; Feldman, Leiserowitz, and Maibach 2011). In one of the most compelling studies on the topic, Xenos and Becker (2009) provide experimental evidence that viewing late night comedy can temporarily increase individual attention to traditional, serious news stories in a diverse information environment (see also Young and Tisinger 2006). Yet the actual role of humor in this study is unclear. The authors' comedy stimulus is a clip from *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart (TDS). While TDS contains a disproportionate amount of well-crafted political satire, not all portions of the program have a uniform appeal. Because of differences in political knowledge, comedy preferences, or partisanship, viewers of the same clip may laugh or be confused, unsatisfied, or offended.[1] Thus, while Xenos and Becker provide

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[1] A failure to be amused by a humor attempt has serious consequences for later consumption decisions. As Bell (2009) notes, many people deal harshly with the producers of failed humor, either subsequently ignoring the joke-teller or leveling direct personal chastisement at him as a consequence. Individuals may respond in such a distinctly negative fashion because of the

important insight into the effect of late night comedy programs, their data are less conclusive about the influence of political humor as an independent construct.

H2 (Humor Response): Individuals will express more positive evaluations of messages and sources intended to be humorous only when they find them funny.

Even when individuals authentically find humor in late night comedy programs, it may not be the primary reason they watch. Television programs are a bundle of features, any of which may or may not appeal to a given viewer. Not all members of TDS audience, for example, tune in to the show principally to laugh. While some surely watch for the comedy, others have reported that they do so to hear current host Trevor Noah loudly and profanely criticize Republicans, learn about underreported topics, make the news fun, or see a celebrity interview (Baym 2005, Young 2013). Still other late night viewers may simply be enamored of a program's host and tune in to watch him or her no matter the content they present. In short, people may consume late night political talk shows for entertainment, information, or some combination of the two.

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cognitive investment failed humor requires but does not reward. Most attempts at humor are readily identifiable as such to observers, who must first disentangle a joke's actual meaning before assessing its quality. In this way, failed attempts at humor require much of the same mental effort as their successful counterparts yet do little more than leave their audience confused, bored, offended, or even angry at the high processing cost they have just paid for a relatively meager return.

The relationship between political comedy and political knowledge is also unclear. To be sure, cross-sectional studies of the audience of shows like TDS have consistently found viewers to be relatively highly politically engaged. When compared with nonviewers, members of the audience of late night political satire on average participate in politics more frequently (Cao and Brewer 2008, Hoffman and Young 2011) and are more likely to discuss current affairs with friends, family, and coworkers (Young and Esralew 2011). Comedy viewers may also experience a steeper increase in knowledge (Feldman and Young 2008), sense of being informed (Hollander 2005), and political efficacy (Baumgartner and Morris 2006) when engaging with traditional political sources or events. Indeed, a basic knowledge of political actors, institutions, and current events would seem to be required to appreciate and be enticed by jokes about them. Yet there may be reasons to doubt the informational return individuals receive when engaging with humor.

Current evolutionary models of humor suggest that comedy captures our attention not only because it induces a pleasurable affective state (Martin 2010) but also because it demands a relatively larger amount of cognitive resources to comprehend (Young 2008; Polk, Young, and Holbert 2009; Dunbar, Launay, and Curry 2016). Moments of humor are often built on the unexpected, playful resolution of an incongruous juxtaposition of objects, people, or concepts that requires simultaneously holding in our minds multiple interpretations of the same information (Raskin 1985, Martin 2010). Young (2008) notes that the task of making sense of humor therefore leaves few cognitive resources available to process and store any associated political arguments. For this reason, scholars argue that political comedy may result in lower acquisition of detailed information about politics (Kim and Vishak 2008) especially when

individuals are primarily oriented to the content as entertainment (Feldman 2013). More broadly, Baumgartner and Morris (2006) find that young people who watch TDS are also more cynical and turned off to the political system, especially those with low levels of internal political efficacy. Consistent with the argument that a benign violation of social norms is often a necessary condition for humor (see McGraw and Warren 2010), they argue that comedy generally primes a negative schema by presenting elements of the political process in a negative, critical light, and thereby discourages further civic engagement (Baumgartner 2013).

The inherently ambiguous nature of most humor may also undermine its educational value. At its root, humor is play, a nonserious (Chafe 2007) "form of *wrongness*" (Hoicka et al. 2008, emphasis in original). Motivated individuals thus have a substantial ability to select their preferred version of a joke's meaning, leaving open the possibility for some to miss a joke teller's intended message. Early viewers of *The Colbert Report*, for example, appear to have evaluated host Stephen Colbert's arguments and ideology based more heavily on their own partisan preferences than Colbert's actual language (LaMarre, Landreville, and Beam 2009). While conservatives argued that Colbert was largely serious and only pretended to joke, liberals saw a satirical commentator who rarely directly divulged any of his true preferences. The same joke can therefore be perceived dramatically differently depending on an individual's relationship to its constituent components.

At the same time, however, Dennett, Hurley, and Adams (2011) contend that the effortful and pleasing nature of humor processing is the result of an evolutionarily developed incentive to attend to useful information that might otherwise appear nonsensical. In the same manner Marteinson (2006) argues that we perceive comedy in opportunities to expand our

understanding of the world we live in. As he puts it, humor "is an instinctive reaction to an epistemological event, in particular an event which shatters and fragments perceptions" and allows us to reassemble for ourselves a more robust representation of reality (Marteinson 2006, 11). Humor exists to draw our attention to more than a punchline.

Humor is therefore intimately bound up with individual learning in complex ways. We laugh at least in part to express pleasure at a cognitively expansive event that we may not have yet fully experienced. Exposure to humorous stimuli increases attention and cognitive arousal (e.g., Godkewitsch 1976; Goldstein, Harman, McGhee, and Karasik 1975; Jones and Harris 1971), that can directly foster subsequent learning (Davies and Apter 1980; Hauck and Thomas 1972; Kaplan and Pascoe 1977; Wanzer and Frymier 1999; Ziv 1988). Elevated levels of attention, marshaled to enjoy a joke, may be applied to a serious comment. The cognitive arousal invoked by humor may not immediately fade after laughter subsides and may therefore have direct implications for what follows. In this manner, even humor that is not directly about political matters may affect attention to politics. Evidence from classroom settings suggests that while serious messages are most memorable when following comedy on the same subject, an off-topic joke may still be influential (see Wanzer and Frymier 1999).[2]

H3 (Joint Interest): Individuals who express a relatively greater interest in political comedy will also express a relatively greater interest in traditional news content.

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[2] By contrast, Xenos and Becker (2009) find no evidence of an arousal priming effect, although their study suffers from many of the data complications described below and therefore may be premature.

Humor can also increase source likeability (Markiewicz 1975, Sternthal and Craig 1973), prompting an individual to engage with a speaker they may otherwise discount. A range of positive personality characteristics are often assumed to co-occur with a good sense of humor, rendering it a powerful heuristic (Cann and Calhoun 2001). Shared humor can therefore rapidly strengthen interpersonal bonds, intimacy, and altruism (Curry and Dunbar 2013; Kashdan et al. 2014; Wood and Niedenthal 2018; Gray, Parkinson, and Dunbar 2015). Manninen and coauthors (2017) identify a physiological basis for these effects, noting an increased flow of opioids in the bloodstream during shared laughter. Put simply: evolution, society, and our own physiology tell us that we should spend time with those who make us laugh. In part because of this, humor use affects the creation and maintenance of even temporary social bonds. Terrion and Ashforth (2002) explore the use of putdown humor among individuals brought together only for a six-week professional development course. While group members regularly made jokes at the expense of one another, their collective laughter refashioned the putdown humor into social bonds that signaled increasing trust and inclusion. The personal attraction of shared humor can cut across lines of interpersonal difference, potentially even overcoming partisan boundaries and stimulating crosscutting learning (although see Morriseau et al. 2017).

H4 (Source Effects): Individuals will respond in a unique manner to sources of information they find humorous. They will:

H4a (Positive Evaluation): Evaluate the source more positively,

H4b (Similarity): Identify greater similarities between themselves and the source, and

H4c (Future Interest): Express a greater interest in future messages from the source.

Taken collectively, existing theory and research suggest that the presence of humor in political messages should effectively spur attention to matters of government. Comedy signals that the message it conveys is one worthy of the effort it demands, and most Americans appear ready to pay the price. Though humor preferences vary by cultural background and experience (Ruch 1998, Martin 1996), appreciation of comedy is nearly universal in the United States, with individuals joining across partisan and geographic boundaries to declare their valuation of and desire for humor.[3] Indeed, current theory identifies humor as a universal experience (Provine 2001), an emotion so central to the human condition that its absence is treated as a rare pathology (Martin 2010). Political jokes may therefore represent an ideal method of fostering additional attention to general and crosscutting information about politics in an effective and broad manner by offering an alternative aspect to appeal to potential consumers. Because of its playful, generally relaxing nature, humor can act as a sweet candy coating around the sometimes bitter multivitamin of political knowledge, promising individuals a satisfaction they may otherwise miss when encountering political messages.

Data

To test these hypotheses, I conducted two online experiments of individual information consumption choices. Respondents for both studies were recruited using Amazon's Mechanical

[3] In 1961 94 percent of surveyed Americans reported that they had an above average sense of humor (Allport 1961). Forty years later that number had only increased to 98 percent (Cann and Calhoun 2001).

Turk (MTurk). Because of the ease with which it offers access to a large population[4] of inexpensive[5] subjects, MTurk has become a popular platform for social scientists from a variety of disciplines. Nevertheless, MTurk workers appear to differ in identifiable ways from the general population (e.g., Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012). MTurk workers are generally younger, more educated, and more Democratic compared to the American public as a whole. Clifford, Jewell, and Waggoner (2015), however, find few systematic differences in the personality and value-based motivations that underlie political ideology. Similarly, Levay, Freese, and Druckman (2016) contend that the distinctive characteristics of MTurk samples can be effectively reduced with the addition of common control variables. Based on these recommendations, I constructed expanded versions of each model reported below to account for the most commonly cited differences between MTurk workers and the mass public

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[4] While Amazon advertises that more than 500,000 workers from 190 countries are available through the service, Stewart et al. (2015) present evidence that the total number of potential workers at any given time may be closer to 7,300.

[5] The low cost-per-respondent of using MTurk is one of its most appealing, yet controversial features. While researchers with limited funds have been eager to take advantage of the fraction of $1 many MTurk workers expect and receive, this rate of payment has raised concerns among some of the ethics of the service (e.g., Jenny Marder and Mike Fritz, “The Internet’s Hidden Science Factory,” *PBS News Hour*, February 11, 2015, at https://www.pbs.org/newshour/science/inside-amazons-hidden-science-factory, accessed March 3, 2019).

(partisanship, age, education, and ideology). The addition of these variables changed neither the statistical nor substantive pattern of results, so I report only the reduced-form models for ease of interpretation.

Study 1

Stimuli

Instructions in Study 1 directed individuals to write about their thoughts and experiences related to politics. Half of respondents were instructed to write about what makes them angry about politics, while the other half were directed to write about whatever political content was at the top of their mind. Respondents were instructed to write as vividly and in as much detail as possible about real-world events, conversations, speeches, or anything else connected to politics.[6] Each prompt was modeled on those used by social psychologists (e.g., Fischhoff et al. 2003, Lerner and Keltner 2001) and political scientists (e.g., Valentino et al. 2009, Gadarian and Albertson 2014). This type of prompt allows participants to identify the aspect of politics they wish to write about, more effectively mirroring participants' pre-existing evaluations of political institutions, actors, and events. Valentino et al. describe prompts of this kind as "a 'purer' form of manipulation" (2011, p 162).

To accommodate differences in individual typing speed, respondents were asked to write for one to two minutes with no expected total amount of content. Each set of instructions was approximately the same length (angry = 93 words, neutral = 86 words) and varied only in the presence or absence of the request for emotional content. Respondents were also shown a

[6] The full text of each stimulus is listed in Appendix C.

photo of a face with either an angry or neutral expression that matched the language used in the prompt they received.[7] Each image centered on the same individual and held all other features (e.g., focal length, lighting, clothes) constant (Ebner, Riediger, and Lindenberger 2010). Images of this kind have been shown to be effective in arousing emotional states (e.g., Ryan 2012). Studies of emotional contagion and evolutionary psychology indicate that facial expressions are uniquely well-suited to capture our attention and elicit congruent emotional responses (e.g., Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson 1993; Laird et al. 1994; Cosmides and Tooby 2000; Schupp et al. 2004).

Following the free-writing exercise, respondents were asked to rank order nine genres of television content according to their interest in watching each at the given moment. The exercise is a modified version of Prior's (2005) Relative Entertainment Preference (REP) scale.[8] All respondents were given the same base-set of eight entertainment and news genres as well

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[7] Both images were created for research purposes by the Max Planck Institute for Human Development (see Ryan 2012). Each image is included in Appendix C.

[8] By listing a wide variety of entertainment and news genres but allowing participants to construct for themselves the specific content and relative availability of each, the REP scale facilitates an unusually realistic media environment in which participants express their attitudes.

as either a cooking program or a comedy news program.[9] The study focuses on mediated comedy in an order to provide a more reliable signal of humor quality.[10] To connect responses to realistic viewing options, one or two exemplar programs were listed for most genres. Recognizing the partisan implications of specific news programming such as MSNBC and Fox News, the category of "traditional cable/broadcast news shows" was listed without example content in order to avoid unnecessarily limiting the ideological range and format of news programming individuals considered when responding. Examples of comedy news content were offered in order to focus respondents on professional, primarily political comedy content such as The Daily Show and Last Week Tonight. Because respondents were simultaneously presented with all content genres, the availability of comedy news as a response option primed the concept of political comedy for all content ratings. Stimulus presentation therefore followed a 2 (Writing Prompt) x 2 (Political Comedy Genre) design.

Participants and Procedure

1,048 individuals enrolled in Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) completed the study. To ensure that each respondent followed all instructions, I embedded an instructed-response

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[9] Fantasy/science fiction, comedies/sitcoms, drama, soap operas, reality or game shows, sports, documentary, traditional cable/broadcast news. Full wording for all response options is listed in Appendix D.

[10] While not everyone will agree with or appreciate their comedy, the quality of the humor produced by professionals at programs like TDS, Last Week Tonight, or The Late Show with Stephen Colbert is high and consistent—especially compared to an elected official.

attention check question midway through the survey. A non-intuitive response was instructed at the end of the question wording. To respond correctly, participants were therefore required to have read the question in its entirety. Questions of this kind help correct for careless responses (see Kung, Kwok, and Brown 2018) and are especially valuable in studies employing MTurk workers who may be prone to rapid responses in an effort to increase their hourly compensation. Respondents who listed anything other than the instructed response were excluded from my final analysis.[11] The final dataset included responses from 801 individuals. Participants were randomly assigned by an automated script to a stimulus condition.

Measures

After completing the assigned free writing exercise, participants were asked to provide demographic information, answer political knowledge questions, and indicate their attitudes about a set of entertainment and news media. Demographic information was collected primarily to account for the distinctive characteristics of MTurk workers.

Demographics

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[11] Kane and Barabas (2019) have recently suggested that "instructional manipulation checks" of this kind may be less effective than often thought among researchers, especially when participants complete surveys on a regular basis—as many MTurk workers do. I therefore created versions of all models presented here that included and identified individuals who failed this manipulation check. The results do not meaningfully vary from the traditional models that exclude participants who failed the manipulation check. For the sake of simplicity, I therefore present only the latter models here.

Five participant demographics were collected. Individuals were asked to indicate their age (μ = 40.5, σ = 12.4), gender (356 males, 445 females), and level of education by indicating the highest degree they had obtained (1 = *high school diploma or equivalency*, 5 = *PhD*). Participants also listed their partisanship (1 = *strong Democrat*, 4 = *Independent*, 7 = *strong Republican*) and general political ideology (1 = *extremely liberal*, 7 = *extremely conservative*).

Political Knowledge

Participants' knowledge of political events was measured using a battery of five questions that varied in recency and generality, and had specific, verifiably correct answers (see Barabas et al. 2014). The questions addressed issues related to Congress, the Supreme Court, and elite partisanship, and offered either multiple-choice or open-ended response options. The accuracy of each open-ended response was coded by hand. An aggregate knowledge battery was created using the total number of questions for which the participant provided the correct response (μ = 4.2, σ = 1.1).

Media Attitudes

In addition to ranking news and entertainment media genres as described above, participants were also asked to evaluate the comedy programming they ranked in the modified-REP measure. Participants in conditions that listed comedy news were asked to evaluate the "comedy news program you would be mostly to watch now if given the opportunity" while other participants were asked to do the same for the comedy/sitcom they would be most likely to watch. Participants were asked to evaluate their assigned comedy programming along four dimensions, identifying the extent to which they anticipated the content to be funny, offensive, mostly focused on politics, and consistent with their own political preferences. Response

options were listed on a five-point scale (1 = *not well at all*, 5 = *extremely well*). Finally, participants were asked to indicate how likely they would be to share the information from the entertainment or news comedy programming they anticipated viewing. Responses were again recorded on a five-point scale (1 = *very unlikely*, 5 = *very likely*) (μ = 3.4, σ = 1.2).

Manipulation Check

To ensure that respondents complied with the stimulus writing prompt, I hand coded each open response to verify that it discussed politics as instructed. While the vast majority of responses centered on politics and policy, approximately 4 percent did not and were excluded.[12] I also conducted a preliminary balance test to ensure that the randomization script had performed properly. Table 4.1 reports demographic characteristics for respondents separated by treatment condition. These comparisons indicate that the final groups assigned to each stimulus condition were comparable in all observable respects. No difference across groups is substantively significant. This includes a comparison of the total words written by participants in each condition, which varied on average by no more than 9 words between any two groups. The results of a series of logit regression models (not reported here) predicting whether an individual was assigned to a given condition also indicate no statistically significant differences across demographic groups in each treatment condition.

[12] Kane and Barabas (2019) suggest that "factual manipulation checks" of this kind are more effective and preferable to instructional and subjective manipulation checks.

Main Analysis

Study 1 was designed to address the Emotion Regulation and Joint Interest hypotheses. To evaluate these expectations, I first created a series of basic OLS regression models to estimate participants' relative ranking of comedy and traditional news programming based on their political anger experience. Recognizing that comedy news may appeal more to individuals

Table 4.1
Balance Test – Study 1

		Anger/ No Comic News	Neutral/ No Comic News	Anger/ Comic News	Neutral/ Comic News
Age	Mean	40.5	40.5	41	39.8
	SD	12.4	12.8	12.1	12.5
Proportion Female	Mean	0.55	0.56	0.53	0.57
	SD	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
Education	Mean	2.7	2.7	2.6	2.6
	SD	0.93	0.86	0.93	0.95
Party ID	Mean	3.3	3.3	3.4	3.2
	SD	1.9	1.9	2	2
Political Knowledge	Mean	4.3	4.2	4.2	4.1
	SD	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.2
Word Count	Mean	68.7	59.7	64.4	68.7
	SD	49.1	38.7	41.3	51.7
N		192	207	216	190

with a relatively more expansive base of political knowledge, each model accounts for participants' self-reported interest in and knowledge about politics. The results of each model are reported in Table 4.2. Model 1 estimates the relative ranking participants assigned to comedy news, reverse-coded so that larger values indicate a greater interest in the genre. The Emotion Regulation Hypothesis suggests that participants who experienced anger during the experiment should rank comedy news significantly higher than their peers who did not. The

results show no support for this assertion. Instead, the model suggests that participants' politically motivated anger had no discernible effect on their expressed interest in comedy news. The coefficient associated with the treatment variable is both substantively and statistically uninteresting. It may be, however, that participants devote a relatively stable amount of attention to news programming in general. If so, individuals may have responded to their anger by deflating their ranking of traditional news content in order to accommodate their consideration of comedy news. Model 2 extends the logic of the Emotion Regulation Hypothesis to test this possibility. The model estimates the difference between the rankings an individual assigned to traditional news programs and comedy news programs, with larger values indicating a greater comparative interest in comedy news. The results of Model 2 mirror those of Model 1 in that they show no evidence that participant anger affected their relative comparisons of traditional and comic news programs. Model 3 estimates individual rankings of traditional news as predicted by the availability of comic news in the REP. The Joint Interest hypothesis suggests that the two news rankings (traditional and comedy) should be positively correlated. As negative emotions spur interest in one form of information gathering, existing studies suggest the other should follow. Again, however, Model 3 yields no significant results.

The state of late night political satire in the United States, however, is decidedly partisan. Successful late political comedy shows, including The Daily Show, The Colbert Report, Last Week Tonight, and The Late Show have reputations as being comparatively more hostile to Republicans. More conservative political comedy shows may gain traction with audiences in the future, but to date have not done so. When asked to consider their preference for comedy news, participants may have therefore responded in a partisan fashion. Indeed, an exploratory

t-test suggests that Democratic participants in my sample expressed a significantly higher rating for comedy news than their Republican peers, no matter their exposure to political anger. Table 4.3a reports the same three models from Table 4.2 separated by participant partisanship. Anger again shows no clear effect in any model among any participants, regardless of partisanship.

Table 4.2
Interest in Comedy and Traditional News

	Model 1 (Comic News Ranking)	Model 2 (News Ranking Difference)	Model 3 (Traditional News Ranking)
Anger Treatment	0.05 (0.24)	-0.04 (0.36)	0.03 (0.17)
N		408	

Cell values are OLS regression estimates.
Bolded values are significant at $p<0.05$ or lower. Standard errors are reported in parentheses.

There is reason to suspect, however, that the assignment mechanism may not have functioned as intended. The ultimate stimulus of interest in this study is not the words written by each participant, but the affective state their writing exercise was designed to spur. Because respondents in the neutral condition were given few constraints on their writing, a significant minority independently expressed anger related to political institutions, actors, and/or policies. I therefore coded the affective state of all responses among individuals assigned to the neutral condition. Approximately 20 percent of these respondents used language expressing anger about one or more aspects of current politics. Their responses are therefore largely indecipherable from those assigned to the anger condition. “I despise politics” one respondent in the neutral condition wrote, for example, while their peer in the anger condition reported

that they were “appalled at the current state of politics.” Each of these comments indicates that the author was experiencing anger related to politics and may be functionally equivalent for the purposes of this study. It is perhaps unsurprising that participants were either unwilling or unable to check their emotional attachments at the proverbial door and approach a discussion of politics free of pre-existing sentiment.

To more fully explore the consequences of the voluntary differences in participants’ responses, I re-created the models used in Table 4.3a using only the expressed affective state of participants assigned to the neutral condition. The results of these exploratory models are reported in Table 4.3b. The models for Democratic and Independent participants again contained no results of interest, consistent with those reported in Table 4.3a. Among Republicans assigned to the neutral condition, however, individuals who expressed political anger rated comedy news significantly higher, placing it more than 2 positions higher on average. The resultant comparative difference in participant ratings of comic and traditional news is especially stark, with an average significant increase of 3 positions between the two types of current event programming. While independently angry Republicans appear to have been more likely to express a greater interest in political comedy news, they especially reported a declining interest in traditional news. The implications of this result in a polarized era are compelling, if mixed, especially because they are drawn from ad hoc models. Given the right circumstances, however, they may suggest that a cross-party draw due to comedy, incentivizing individuals at a moment primed for political learning to spend time with and learn about people with a different point of view. Yet this change may come, at least temporarily, at the expense of attention to traditional news sources. There is no evidence that interest in comedy news

positively buoys interest in traditional news. Instead, rankings of traditional news were unchanged by the availability of comedy news in the ranking exercise.

To the extent that comedy is able to draw individuals into counter-attitudinal, crosscutting interactions, it would elevate a privileged, yet elusive form of political learning. Existing evidence suggests, for example, that even attentive citizens may not be regularly

Table 4.3a
Interest in Comedy and Traditional News by Participant Partisanship

	Participant Partisanship		
	Democrats	Independents	Republicans
Model 1 (Comic News Ranking)			
Anger Treatment	-0.01 (0.35)	-0.25 (0.41)	0.64 (0.49)
Political Knowledge	**0.44** **(0.16)**	0.20 (0.16)	**-0.50** **(0.23)**
N	183	133	92
Model 2 (News Ranking Difference)			
Anger Treatment	0.56 (0.50)	-0.23 (0.59)	-1.02 (0.82)
Political Knowledge	-0.16 (0.23)	-0.34 (0.24)	**1.30** **(0.39)**
N	183	133	92
Model 3 (Traditional News Ranking)			
Anger Treatment	-0.02 (0.24)	-0.07 (0.27)	0.08 (0.37)
Political Knowledge	**0.35** **(0.11)**	0.03 (0.13)	**0.67** **(0.17)**
N	359	272	164

Cell values are OLS regression estimates.
Bolded values are significant at $p<0.05$ or lower. Standard errors are reported in parentheses.

exposed to crosscutting information. Instead, encounters with diverse viewpoints may be most likely to occur incidentally in settings where politics is at most a secondary consideration

(Wojcieszak and Mutz 2009, Mutz and Mondak 2006). This specific pattern of exposure is meaningful because the time individuals spend with counter-attitudinal opinions may in turn foster increased tolerance of others (Mutz 2002), a critical element of successful democracy (Mill 1848, Barber 1984, Guttman and Thompson 1996). As Arendt argues, "the more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue,

Table 4.3b
Interest in Comedy and Traditional News among Republicans by Affective State

	Random Assignment	Voluntary Expression of Anger
Model 1 (Comic News Ranking)		
Anger Treatment/Expression	0.64 (0.49)	**2.08** **(0.74)**
Political Knowledge	**-0.50** **(0.23)**	-0.43 (0.27)
N	92	41
Model 2 (News Ranking Difference)		
Anger Treatment/Expression	-1.02 (0.82)	**-3.51** **(1.06)**
Political Knowledge	**1.30** **(0.39)**	**1.30** **(0.39)**
N	92	41
Model 3 (Traditional News Ranking)		
Anger Treatment/Expression	0.08 (0.37)	0.28 (0.53)
Political Knowledge	**0.67** **(0.17)**	**0.65** **(0.21)**
N	164	79

Cell values are OLS regression estimates.
Bolded values are significant at p<0.05 or lower. Standard errors are reported in parentheses.

and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion" (1968, 241).

These data also allow a preliminary exploration of the late night political comedy audience. Each participant who ranked comedy news was asked to evaluate several features of the genre, including its general appeal and future utility. Table 4.4 reports the results of models estimating participants' views over individual preferences for comedy news and political knowledge. The results suggest that individuals with an affinity for late night talk shows expect the experience to be positive and useful. Participants who rated the genre relatively more highly (regardless of anger exposure) also reported more consistent expectations that the comedy would be humorous and consistent with their own political attitudes. Perhaps as a result, these participants also indicated a greater anticipated likelihood of sharing the information they would next receive from a comedy news show. Comedy may therefore draw people into both mediated consumption and interpersonal interactions about politics.

Table 4.4
Expectations of Political Comedy by Comedy Preferences

	Statements Consistent with Preferences	Statements Humorous	Likelihood to Share Statements
Comic News Ranking	**0.13** **(0.02)**	**0.11** **(0.02)**	**0.17** **(0.02)**
Political Knowledge	**0.13** **(0.05)**	-0.01 (0.05)	-0.08 (0.05)
N		407	

Cell values are OLS regression estimates.
Bolded values are significant at $p<0.05$ or lower. Standard errors are reported in parentheses.

Study 2

Stimuli

Study 2 was designed to evaluate Humor Response and Source Effects hypotheses. This study focuses on a separate major source of information about politics for members of the public: elected officials. The stimulus for Study 2 was a press release about a fictional member of Congress (Thomas E. Clark) giving either serious or humorous remarks about partisan gridlock at a political event. The jokes used in the texts are modeled after similar quips from late night talk show hosts on the same subject. The texts center on gridlock because of the general bipartisan frustration on the subject expressed by many Republicans and Democrats at both the mass and elite level. Participants of both parties and ideologies were therefore likely to agree with the general theme of the member's comments at about the same rate. Similarly, during a time of low congressional approval, Clark's comments in each text were consistently critical of the productivity and work ethic of members of Congress as a whole, calling for change at both the member and institutional level. The bipartisan, accessible nature of this criticism also decreases the likelihood of ideological or knowledge-based variation in participant response. The challenges motivating the member should be familiar to readers.

The description of the event in which the member's remarks were given as well as the audience's reception were adjusted in each condition to make the comments consistent with the context in which they were delivered. In neither case was the member portrayed as violating his audience's expectations by using (or avoiding) comedy. The traditional, serious version of the press release described the member's remarks as given at a dinner for the political elite to talk about "issues of the day." This condition described the member as being

“warmly received” by his audience. The humorous version described the same dinner as an event for politicos to “let down their hair” and the member’s comments as keeping “his audience laughing.”

Each press release was the same length (250 words for the humorous version and 249 words for the serious version) and contained four distinct quotations from the member. The topic and implication of each argument (that members of Congress should be more active in lawmaking) were preserved across conditions. The beginning of each quotation in the serious version was treated as the set-up for a joke in the humorous version. Approximately 30 percent of the text varied between conditions. The fictional Congressman Clark was also presented as either a Republican or Democrat. The member’s party identification was featured prominently in the text. It was the first characteristic mentioned—preceding even the member’s name—and was reinforced later in the text. The bipartisan nature of the member’s criticism also minimizes the textual changes necessary to make his assignment to either the Democratic or Republican party more believable. Stimulus presentation followed a 2 (Text Humor) x 2 (Partisanship Agreement) design, with half of participants assigned a text where Clark was a co-partisan and half assigned a text where Clark belonged to the party opposite to the one they identified with.

Participants and Procedures

1,035 MTurk workers completed Study 2. As in Study 1, I included an instructed-response attention check question midway through the survey completed by Study 2 participants. A non-intuitive response was instructed at the end of the question wording. To respond correctly, respondents must have therefore read it in its entirety. Respondents who

listed anything other than the instructed response were excluded from my final analysis.[13] The final dataset included responses from 877 individuals. Participants were randomly assigned by an automated script to a stimulus condition based on the partisan identification they provided at the beginning of the study. Half of individuals who identified as a strong, not so strong, or leaning partisan were presented with a text where Clark was a member of the same party and half were assigned a text where the member was from across the aisle. Individuals who identified as true independents were randomly assigned either the Democratic or Republican version of the stimulus.

Measures

After providing basic demographic information (including partisan identification), participants evaluated the member and his comments, answered basic political knowledge questions, and completed Holbert et al.'s (2013) Affinity for Political Humor scale. Demographic information was collected primarily to account for the distinctive characteristics of the MTurk worker population.

Demographics

Five participant demographics were collected. Individuals were asked to indicate their age ($\mu = 39.8$, $\sigma = 12.8$), gender (391 males, 486 females), and level of education by indicating

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[13] As in Study 1, I created versions of all Study 2 models that included participants who failed this instructional manipulation check. Finding no meaningful differences between models that included these participants and those that do not, I report the latter models for the sake of simplicity.

the highest degree they had obtained (1 = *high school diploma or equivalency*, 5 = *PhD*). Participants also listed their partisanship (1 = *strong Democrat*, 4 = *Independent*, 7 = *strong Republican*) and general political ideology (1 = *extremely liberal*, 7 = *extremely conservative*).

Political Knowledge

Participants' knowledge of political events was measured using the same battery of five questions included in Study 1. Questions addressed issues related to Congress, the Supreme Court, and elite partisanship using either multiple-choice or open-ended response options. The accuracy of each open-ended response was coded by hand. An aggregate knowledge battery was created using the total number of questions for which the participant provided the correct response (μ = 4.1, σ = 1.2).

Affinity for Political Humor

Recognizing the limited research that had been conducted on the audience of entertainment media and politics, Holbert and coauthors (2013) created a task-specific individual-difference measure of political humor appreciation. Their Affinity for Political Humor (AFPH) variable is designed to capture appreciation of political comedy in its many forms. The measure captures affinity for humor about politics along four dimensions of comedy: (1) identifying incongruent information, (2) contributing to a sense of superiority, (3) relieving stress or anxiety, and (4) facilitating interpersonal relationships.[14] The measure has been used to improve models of individual consumption of political satire (Hmielowski, Holbert, and Lee

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[14] These dimensions are based on the major theoretical categories generally used in humor research (see Meyer 2000, Martin 2010).

2011), response to hostile vs. playful humor (Becker 2012), and humor's relationship to political efficacy (Becker 2014).

AFPH is constructed from responses to eleven statements designed to reflect the four theorized dimensions of humor: incongruity, superiority, anxiety relief, and social cohesion (see Appendix E). Agreement with each statement was recorded on a five-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*), with the higher end of each scale indicating a greater affinity for that aspect of political humor. The combined AFPH score is constructed by averaging a participant's responses over all 11 statements. The resultant measure has a minimum value of 1 and a maximum value of 5 ($\mu = 3.4$, $\sigma = 0.7$).

Manipulation Check

The most important feature of the stimuli in Study 2 is the relative humor they convey to participants. The experiment is predicated on a perception by participants that Congressman Clark's comments are—depending on the condition to which a participant has been assigned—either funny or not. This is a relatively novel feature in the existing literature on political humor. Many studies of political humor, especially of late night humor, do not account for subjects' perception of the actual humorousness of provided stimuli (although see Boukes et al. 2015). Instead, researchers implicitly assume a high degree of uniformity among their subjects' attitudes toward the content they have received. Recognizing the potentially varied response to the texts in this study, I conducted a manipulation check by asking each participant to rate the humor and entertainment value, respectively, of the quotations in their assigned text. Responses to two statements that the provided quotations were "funny" or "entertaining"

were recorded on a five-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*), where higher values indicate that the text was more humorous/entertaining.

Participants rated the humorousness of the comedic press release significantly higher than its serious counterpart. Nearly 60 percent of individuals assigned to the humor condition rated the comments in the press release as funny and fewer than one quarter either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that the comments were funny. By contrast, less than 7 percent of participants found the serious version of the press release funny. Participants responded in similar ways when evaluating the entertainment value of the member's comments. These relationships were consistent across multivariate models as well. I estimated two multivariate regression models (not reported here) predicting participant evaluations of stimuli humor and entertainment controlling for both humor and partisan treatment assignments as well as each participants' affinity for political humor. In each case, assignment to the humorous press release was significantly and positively associated with participants' humor and entertainment ratings. The results indicate that the stimuli successfully spurred the intended response among most participants.

As in Study 1, however, the stimulus of interest in Study 2 is each participant's actual experience. I therefore created an alternate stimulus measure to indicate the participants who reported clearly finding the member quotations they read funny,[15] regardless of whether it had

[15] Respondents were considered to have found their assigned stimulus text to be funny if they agreed or strongly agreed with the following description about the fictional member's comments: "They were funny."

originally been intended to be so—or included contextual cues that the comments were intended to be humorous. 151 participants were therefore re-assigned from the humorous condition to the serious condition. To ensure that this change did not materially affect my results, I compared the distribution of participant demographics using the alternate stimulus assignment. As in Table 4.1, Table 4.5 reports demographic characteristics for Study 2 respondents separated by treatment condition using the measure of comedy experienced. The results of these comparisons indicate that the final groups assigned to each stimulus condition were comparable in all observable respects. No difference across groups is either statistically or substantively significant.

Main Analysis

Consider first the argument that participants will exhibit enhanced evaluations of messages and sources framed as humorous only when they find them to be authentically funny (H2: Humor Response). To evaluate this hypothesis, I created a series of models estimating participants' evaluations of the fictional member and his comments. The key variable in each model is the indicator of whether participants found the comments they read from Clark to be funny. To fully foreground and compare the influence of comedic evaluation with other key aspects of the experimental setting, each model also controls for each participant's partisan treatment condition, AFPH, and political knowledge. The first set of models (reported in Table 4.6) predicted participant's attitudes about the comments they read. In each case, participant views of the comments' humorousness were significantly predictive. Individuals who found the member's comments to be funny were significantly less likely to consider them offensive or in poor taste, and were significantly more likely to see them as consistent with their own political

Table 4.5
Balance Test – Study 2

		Perceived Humor/ Cross-Partisan	Perceived Humor/ Co-Partisan	Perceived Serious/ Cross-Partisan	Perceived Serious/ Co-Partisan
Age	Mean	40.8	41	39.2	39.5
	SD	12.6	12.6	12.6	13
Proportion Female	Mean	0.59	0.52	0.56	0.55
	SD	0.49	0.5	0.5	0.5
Education	Mean	2.63	2.58	2.76	2.73
	SD	0.97	0.98	0.93	0.91
Party ID	Mean	3.48	3.34	3.34	3.33
	SD	2.16	2.17	2.08	2.13
Political Knowledge	Mean	4.06	4.1	4.14	4.07
	SD	1.23	1.16	1.15	1.24
N		127	131	320	299

beliefs. The substantive effect of these dynamics was modest, however, with a shift of approximately one-half of a response option in each case.[16] This may be reflective of the overall quality of the comedy included in the texts, however. The humor ratings provided by participants constitute a minimal humor condition that may not fully capture the extent to

[16] The effect of perceived humor was larger among some subgroups. Among participants assigned the humor stimulus, for example, the effect of perceived humor on the offensiveness/poor taste of the member's comments was nearly twice as large as the overall effect reported here. In other words, people who were told that Clark was trying to be funny but did not find him humorous were likely to sanction him for his failure, a common response to failed humor (see Bell 2009).

which each individual enjoyed reading the stimulus text. While the texts were funny enough to indicate the presence of a humor effect, a more appealing set of jokes may also result in more movement along the response scale.

Table 4.6
Perceptions of Elite Statements

	Statements Offensive	Statements in Poor Taste	Statements Politically Consistent
Perceived Humor	**-0.35**	**-0.32**	**0.61**
	(0.08)	**(0.08)**	**(0.07)**
Partisan Treatment	0.07	0.08	**-0.17**
	(0.07)	(0.07)	**(0.07)**
Political Knowledge	**-0.11**	**-0.27**	**0.42**
	(0.03)	**(0.05)**	**(0.05)**
Affinity for Pol. Humor	**-0.17**	**-0.11**	0.04
	(0.05)	**(0.03)**	(0.03)
N		869	

Cell values are OLS regression estimates.
Bolded values are significant at $p<0.05$ or lower. Standard errors are reported in parentheses.

I next considered individual responses to the humor source—the fictional Congressman Clark. I first estimated the effect of perceived humor on participants' overall evaluations of Clark as expressed through individual feeling thermometer ratings (from 0 to 100). As indicated in Table 4.7, individuals who perceived the member as humorous rated him on average 13 points higher than those who did not (μ(humorous) = 64, μ(non-humorous) = 51). Perceptions of humor usage elevated individual evaluations enough that the cross-party, humorous version of Clark (μ = 59) was rated on average more highly than the serious, co-partisan version (μ = 56). Unsurprisingly, Clark was rated most highly on average when presented as a comedic co-partisan (μ = 68). Participants were also asked to estimate the likelihood that they would repeat

the comments they read and the likelihood that they would read or watch his comments in the future. The results of models predicting these responses are also reported in Table 4.7. Again, perceived humor played a significant role in participant responses. Mirroring the results in Table 4.6, individuals who found Clark funny moved approximately one-half of a response option, becoming somewhat more likely to show interest in the member's current and future comments. Again, the substantive size of these effects may have been constrained in part by the degree of the appeal of the comedy presented. The presence of any cross-party effect here is notable in an era of polarization, however.

Taken together, the models presented in Table 4.6 and Table 4.7 are consistent with my Humor Response and Source Effects hypotheses. Participants were significantly more likely to evaluate both Clark and his comments positively when they perceived them as funny. This result was not confined to the initial experience of reading about the Congressman. Participants who perceived humor in the assigned text were also more likely to express interest in sharing the comments they read as well as reading more about the congressman in the future.

Conclusion

These data advance our understanding of the role of comedy in individual information-seeking and learning. By using stimuli and measures of participants' perceptions of assigned comedy that are more direct than most other studies of political comedy, my analyses isolate a direct effect of elite humor on individual information-seeking. I find that humor from professional comedians and members of Congress can motivate individuals to learn about current affairs. I also find clear evidence that humor can motivate interest in sources across the

Table 4.7
Perceptions of Elite Speakers

	Feeling Temperature	Share Comments	Listen to Speaker Again in Future
Perceived Humor	**12.46**	**0.20**	**0.52**
	(1.67)	**(0.09)**	**(0.08)**
Partisan Treatment	**-9.15**	-0.03	**-0.21**
	(1.52)	(0.08)	**(0.07)**
Political Knowledge	**-1.99**	-0.05	0.01
	(0.64)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Affinity for Political Humor	**9.30**	**0.56**	**0.62**
	(1.11)	**(0.06)**	**(0.05)**
N		868	

Cell values are OLS regression estimates.
Bolded values are significant at p<0.05 or lower. Standard errors are reported in parentheses.

political aisle. The implications of this finding in an era of polarization and concerns over informational echo chambers (Jamieson and Cappella 2008) are substantial. These data remind us of the multidimensional nature of politics and the ongoing importance of individual relationships between members of the public and congressional/media elites.

Chapter Five

Developing an Elite Humor Research Agenda

On December 28, 1926, Charles E. Merriam delivered the annual presidential address before the twenty-first meeting of the American Political Science Association. Merriam encouraged his colleagues that day to broaden their view of political scholarship. “It sometimes seems that we political scientists take ourselves and our subject too soberly,” he admonished before pointing out that “no one of us has ever even written a dissertation on the important function of humor in political affairs” (Merriam 1926, 5). Nearly 80 years later, Yarwood would argue that little had changed and that Merriam “could as well have saved his breath” (2004, 1). This dissertation is part of the effort to respond to Merriam’s insight about the importance of humor in American politics. The research presented here shows evidence that elite humor can play a significant role in shaping political interactions among elites (both elected and not) and voters. The argument of this dissertation is that it matters when Congress makes a joke.

Yet political humor among elected officials has received scant attention in the professional political science literature. To be sure, a robust literature has developed during the last 15 years around one form of political comedy: televised late-night political satire. These studies have important, direct implications for our understanding of information processing (e.g., Gregorowicz 2013, Lee 2012, Young 2008) and political behavior (e.g., Hoffman and Young 2011, Baumgartner and Morris 2006, Becker 2011). Young (2018), for example, recently explored compelling questions about whether satire and irony should be considered misinformation. She notes the important and nuanced role of comedy cues, verbal and

behavioral indicators that signal to a consumer that a statement is meant as a joke and therefore should not be taken at face value. Young's argument is an important reminder that people approach comedy with different resources and sensibilities, differences that can significantly shape the social consequences of political comedy. Projects of this kind have helped establish political humor as an important concept for study, thereby laying essential groundwork for the type of broader consideration suggested by Merriam. At the same time, however, because they center on the effects of exposure to professional satire, the vast majority of existing studies may not capture many of the implications of political humor as strategically employed and experienced in modern American politics.

In this dissertation, I have therefore explored three distinct settings in which humor by elected officials may be meaningful. In Chapter Two, I argued that in addition to fostering political learning, humor can offer a mechanism through which individuals and groups can express politically relevant emotions and form relationships that may be meaningful for subsequent political action. I found evidence of such effects in the jokes made by members of Congress during public committee hearings during 2011-12. These effects appeared even when the shared humor was only periodically political. Nearly 9 in 10 of the jokes made by members in this setting had no explicit political content. Indeed, more than 60 percent focused on interpersonal relationships or hearing procedure, more closely resembling the kind of good-natured banter one might expect to encounter among colleagues in a workplace. Yet they appear to have had a direct effect on members' interactions with and perceptions of one another. Members who made relatively more jokes in committee were also more likely to advance legislation and receive leadership positions in future congresses.

The analysis presented in Chapter Two also raises compelling additional questions about how members interact with one another in public settings. The increasingly partisan nature of Congress as an institution, combined with the persistence of the permanent campaign, have dramatically limited the number of public interactions members have with one another, especially across party lines. Committee hearings remain one of the best sources for studying congressional interaction and members contend that humor is an essential element of those experiences. I have shown evidence that members' intuitions are broadly accurate—members who use humor more often during legislative work are rewarded by their peers. Yet comedy may also matter for smaller moments of the legislative process. At times, humor may be seen as a violation of norms of committee behavior. Members often make jokes by interrupting a witness or another member. The immediate consequences of such norm violations have not been systematically explored. It may be that member comedy can arouse censure in the short run even while accumulating praise in the long run. It will also be important to more closely consider the extent to which members are able to guide the topic and tone of a hearing through humor. Chapter Two, for example, includes moments in which members wrapped partisan criticism in comedy, yet it is currently unclear if those remarks were more or less likely than serious critiques to elicit a direct response.

In Chapter Three, I explored the relationship between member joking and contemporaneous media coverage in 149 daily newspapers in the United States. Existing theories of humor suggest that elected officials who use comedy should be more appealing to both consumers—as topics of coverage—and journalists—as sources of coverage. When officials are humorous, both the public and reporters should want to spend more time with

them. Yet journalists' norms, ethics, and professional rhythms appear to affect how the incentive of member comedy ultimately plays out. I find evidence that suggests that journalists do evince a preference for humorous members of Congress, but generally only when they have the resources and discretion to do so. In other words, journalists at national and independent papers appear to be more likely to shape their coverage because of an interest in covering comedic officials, while reporters at papers owned by a larger corporation do not. This absence of an effect among chain papers extends to outlets that are the paper of record in a congressional district, with no significant effect due to joking by the area's local member. At the same time, I find no evidence that members' humor use shapes the *nature* of the coverage they receive, suggesting an important, yet potentially limited role for elite humor.

Many features of the coverage motivated by congressional comedy remain unclear, however. My analysis in Chapter Three provides only initial insight into *article-level* dynamics of stories that mention members of Congress. My models indicate the general presence of suggestive language related to the context in which members are discussed, but does not connect such language to the individual treatment of specific members. My data does allow for the development of such analyses in the future, however, and the value of such work would be difficult to overstate. After all, readers generally experience political news coverage one article at a time, noting the ways in which members of Congress are presented. A more detailed understanding of not only when but how humorous members of Congress are discussed in the media is therefore a critical component of understanding the impact of such coverage.

This is likely especially true for other types of news media, including television and news websites. These sources may offer consumers different cues to members' comedic intentions.

Television coverage of members more often includes interviews where an elected official may both tell jokes directly to the public and signal their humorous intent with a smile or laugh after an attempted jape. In this manner, television news therefore offers an opportunity to consider the impact of the same comedic content on both journalists and the public, spanning the analyses of both Chapter Three and Chapter Four. Similarly, the ability to continuously post content on a news website (including those maintained by traditional news organizations) may shape the nature of coverage of member humor. While I found little evidence of newspapers specifically discussing members' use of humor, news websites may be more willing to post brief mentions of a member's jokes, especially when they fail or are controversial. While Senator Mike Lee's floor speech about climate change discussed in Chapter One was poorly received by almost every news outlet, it was more extensively discussed by journalists in professional sources that exist primarily online. The wider scope of opinion expressed by news websites when compared with traditional outlets such as newspapers, also suggests that primarily online sources may be more willing to use a member's failed humor as a point of departure for critical coverage of their non-humorous work.

Finally, in Chapter Four, I used two original survey experiments to explore voters' reactions to congressional humor. Current theories of the psychology of humor and political learning suggest that comedy may play a significant role in the timing and nature of voters' news gathering. In this chapter, I find evidence that elite political humor has an important place in individuals' political information seeking and learning. Experimental data indicate that political humor can motivate individuals to learn about current affairs, including from sources across the political aisle. Consumers who find a member of Congress amusing are more likely to

evaluate them positively and express interest in their non-comedic contents. These data also suggest that in some contexts where an individual's affective state is likely to spur political learning, individuals may look first to comedy if given the option, as a way to topically address both their hedonic (pleasure seeking) and eudaimonic (information seeking) desires. Crucially, these data account for participants' evaluations of the humorousness of member comments, creating an unusually direct measure of the effect of the political comedy experience.

This raises questions about the ways in which individuals subsequently use information they receive in humorous contexts. Scholars have identified informal interpersonal conversation as an important site of political action and learning. Such interactions also frequently include shared moments of comedy and may therefore also be moments in which recently acquired political jokes may be told. As discussed in Chapter Two and Chapter Four, humor usage can foster and strengthen relationships, foregrounding shared ideas, marking the boundaries of acceptable conversation, and reinforcing boundaries of group identities. Humor is inherently attractive in most settings and may therefore provide a failsafe of sorts for individuals unsure whether a political comment will be positively received by their companions. A successful joke whose underlying political position is rejected by a joke-teller's audience allows an individual to save face and if necessary may allow them to distance themselves from the political position as "just a joke."

High quality comedic content can be difficult to come by, however. The ability to consistently make others laugh is a distinct skill that we all struggle with at times, failing at a not insignificant rate. Elite comedy can therefore constitute a valuable source of reliable content—jokes that an individual knows have made at least them laugh in the past. Sharing

jokes originally made by someone else can also provide an additional layer of social insulation, allowing an individual the ability to disclaim a joke's content if it is not well received. Elite humor may therefore provide a valuable resource in informal political talk, facilitating conversation and boundary exploration that may otherwise have been difficult. This potential deserves further research.

Conclusion

As I write this in 2019, it will soon be 100 years since Charles Merriam challenged the political science community to think more systematically about the experience of American politics and humor. It is time for a re-evaluation. No longer is it accurate to say that no one has written a dissertation (indeed this project is not the first to examine political humor), article, or book "about the important function of humor in political affairs." A foundation of theory and data now exists on which a robust literature is being built. Yet some aspects of political humor remain understudied. Put more another way, this dissertation has identified areas ripe for further development and exploration. The data, theory, and results presented here suggest that humor use by political elites plays an important role in modern political life. They also suggest that congressional humor represents an important new horizon for the study of American government.

Appendix A
Full Model Results

Table A.2.5
Electoral Implications of Jokes in Committee – Full Model

	Vote Share in 2012			
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Senate	**-5.93 (-2.95)**	-5.64 (2.97)	**-6.33 (2.66)**	-5.70 (2.93)
Female	-2.33 (1.52)	-2.34 (1.52)	-2.38 (1.51)	-2.34 (1.52)
Nonwhite	**6.59 (1.62)**	**6.61 (1.62)**	**6.62 (1.62)**	**6.61 (1.62)**
Graduate Degree	-0.35 (1.17)	-0.35 (1.67)	-0.37 (1.16)	-0.35 (1.17)
Enter Congress	-0.09(0.08)	-0.09 (0.08)	-0.08 (0.08)	-0.09 (0.08)
Birth Year	0.01 (0.07)	0.01 (0.07)	0.01 (0.07)	0.01 (0.07)
Votes Missed	5.83 (19.39)	5.88 (19.40)	5.54 (19.37)	5.90 (19.39)
Total Comments (100's)	-0.17 (0.13)	-0.16 (0.13)	-0.19 (0.12)	-0.16 (0.13)
Full/Subcmte Chair	2.16 (1.46)	2.18 (1.46)	2.04 (1.46)	2.17 (1.46)
Party Unity Score	**48.39 (7.34)**	**48.37 (7.34)**	**48.61 (7.33)**	**48.37 (7.34)**
Ideology Consistency Score	**-14.03 (2.38)**	**-14.04 (2.39)**	**-13.96 (2.38)**	**-14.04 (2.38)**
Total Jokes	0.28 (0.87)			
Jokes Targeting Speaker		0.03 (0.23)		
Jokes Targeting Other Party			0.32 (0.35)	
Jokes Targeting Own Party				0.03 (0.17)
N	390			
Left-censored Obs.	0			
Uncensored Obs.	383			
Right-censored Obs.	7			

Cell values are Tobit regression estimates.
Bolded values are significant at $p<0.05$ or lower.
Standard errors reported in parentheses.

Table A.2.7a
Institutional Implications of Jokes in Committee – Full Model (Senate)

	Chair (113 Congress)			
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Total Comments (100's)	1.24	0.41	1.76	0.41
	(1.38)	(0.23)	(1.81)	(0.22)
Votes Missed	-194.75	1.59	187.43	12.98
	(251.83)	(38.26)	(189.05)	(42.72)
Full/Subcmte Chair	-0.24	0.11	3.41	0.24
	(5.86)	(1.57)	(6.83)	(1.55)
Party Unity Score	199.06	4.37	168.34	4.43
	(244.82)	(13.07)	(262.37)	(12.87)
Total Jokes (10s)	1.38			
	(1.66)			
Jokes Targeting Speaker (10s)		0.20		
		(1.04)		
Jokes Targeting Other Party (10s)			-17.62	
			(18.46)	
Jokes Targeting Own Party (10s)				-0.13
				(0.69)
N	45			

Bolded values are significant at p<0.05 or lower.
Cell values are the result of logit models.
Standard errors reported in parentheses.

Table A.2.7b
Institutional Implications of Jokes in Committee – Full Model (Senate)

	Legislative Effectiveness (112 Congress)			
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Total Comments (100's)	0.04 (0.02)	0.04 (0.02)	0.01 (0.01)	0.04 (0.02)
Republican	-0.54 (0.38)	-0.53 (0.38)	-0.54 (0.37)	-0.53 (0.38)
Female	0.29 (0.24)	0.28 (0.24)	0.31 (0.23)	0.28 (0.24)
Nonwhite	0.05 (0.51)	0.04 (0.51)	0.14 (0.51)	0.04 (0.51)
Graduate Degree	-0.30 (0.21)	-0.31 (0.21)	-0.30 (0.21)	-0.31 (0.21)
Enter Congress	**-0.05** **(0.01)**	**-0.05** **(0.01)**	**-0.05** **(0.01)**	**-0.05** **(0.01)**
Birth Year	0.02 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)
Votes Missed	0.59 (1.57)	0.61 (1.57)	0.41 (1.56)	0.61 (1.57)
Full/Subcmte Chair	0.22 (0.37)	0.23 (0.37)	0.17 (0.37)	0.23 (0.37)
Party Unity Score	0.43 (0.95)	0.44 (0.95)	0.44 (0.95)	0.44 (0.96)
Total Jokes (10s)	0.01 (0.01)			
Jokes Targeting Speaker (10s)		-0.01 (0.08)		
Jokes Targeting Other Party (10s)			0.26 (0.22)	
Jokes Targeting Own Party (10s)				-0.01 (0.06)
N	97			

Bolded values are significant at p<0.05 or lower.
Cell values are the result of OLS models.
Standard errors reported in parentheses.

Table A.2.7c
Institutional Implications of Jokes in Committee – Full Model (Senate)

	Bipartisanship (113 Congress)			
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Total Comments (100's)	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.03
	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.02)
Republican	-0.44	-0.43	-0.44	-0.44
	(0.25)	(0.25)	(0.25)	(0.25)
Female	-0.05	-0.05	-0.04	-0.05
	(0.16)	(0.16)	(0.16)	(0.16)
Nonwhite	-0.15	-0.16	-0.16	-0.16
	(0.39)	(0.39)	(0.39)	(0.39)
Graduate Degree	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.04
	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.14)
Enter Congress	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Birth Year	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Votes Missed	1.02	1.01	1.00	1.02
	(0.99)	(0.99)	(0.99)	(0.99)
Full/Subcmte Chair	-0.09	-0.09	-0.10	-0.09
	(0.26)	(0.26)	(0.25)	(0.25)
Party Unity Score	**-6.36**	**-6.36**	**-6.37**	**-6.35**
	(0.76)	**(0.76)**	**(0.76)**	**(0.76)**
Total Jokes (10s)	-0.01			
	(0.03)			
Jokes Targeting Speaker (10s)		-0.01		
		(0.01)		
Jokes Targeting Other Party (10s)			-0.01	
			(0.02)	
Jokes Targeting Own Party (10s)				-0.02
				(0.04)
N	81			

Bolded values are significant at $p<0.05$ or lower.
Cell values are the result of OLS models.
Standard errors reported in parentheses.

Table A.2.7d
Institutional Implications of Jokes in Committee – Full Model (House)

	Chair (113 Congress)			
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Total Comments (100's)	0.03 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)
Female	-0.85 (0.58)	-0.88 (0.58)	-0.96 (0.60)	-0.85 (0.58)
Nonwhite	-0.19 (0.90)	-0.17 (0.89)	-0.24 (0.91)	-0.23 (0.90)
Graduate Degree	-0.18 (0.35)	-0.18 (0.35)	-0.20 (0.35)	-0.17 (0.35)
Enter Congress	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)
Birth Year	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)
Votes Missed	-12.61 (7.96)	-12.08 (7.91)	-13.69 (8.28)	-11.56 (7.79)
Full/Subcmte Chair	**1.78** **(0.41)**	**1.84** **(0.41)**	**1.69** **(0.41)**	**1.83** **(0.41)**
Party Unity Score	2.53 (3.88)	2.36 (3.85)	3.07 (3.59)	2.45 (3.87)
Total Jokes (10s)	1.09 (0.61)			
Jokes Targeting Speaker (10s)		2.28 (1.51)		
Jokes Targeting Other Party (10s)			**5.72** **(2.68)**	
Jokes Targeting Own Party (10s)				1.48 (1.04)
N	214			

Bolded values are significant at $p<0.05$ or lower.
Cell values are the result of logit models.
Standard errors reported in parentheses.

Table A.2.7e
Institutional Implications of Jokes in Committee – Full Model (House)

	Legislative Effectiveness (112 Congress)			
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Total Comments (100's)	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.01
	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.01)
Republican	**0.74**	**0.75**	**0.76**	**0.73**
	(0.20)	**-0.20**	**(0.20)**	**(0.20)**
Female	0.07	0.06	0.04	0.07
	(0.20)	(0.20)	(0.20)	(0.20)
Nonwhite	0.13	0.13	0.15	0.13
	(0.21)	(0.21)	(0.22)	(0.21)
Graduate Degree	-0.01	-0.02	-0.03	-0.01
	(0.15)	(0.15)	(0.15)	(0.15)
Enter Congress	**-0.03**	**-0.04**	**-0.03**	**-0.03**
	(0.01)	**(0.01)**	**(0.01)**	**(0.01)**
Birth Year	0.01	-0.01	0.01	0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Votes Missed	-2.43	-2.63	-2.25	-2.43
	(1.86)	(1.86)	(1.87)	(1.85)
Full/Subcmte Chair	**0.56**	**0.59**	**0.53**	**0.56**
	(0.21)	**(0.21)**	**(0.22)**	**(0.21)**
Party Unity Score	-1.16	-1.23	-1.14	-1.21
	(0.87)	(0.87)	(0.88)	(0.87)
Total Jokes (10s)	**0.67**			
	(0.17)			
Jokes Targeting Speaker (10s)		**1.79**		
		(0.50)		
Jokes Targeting Other Party (10s)			**1.88**	
			(0.61)	
Jokes Targeting Own Party (10s)				**1.45**
				(0.35)
N	417			

Bolded values are significant at $p<0.05$ or lower.
Cell values are the result of OLS models.
Standard errors reported in parentheses.

Table A.2.7f
Institutional Implications of Jokes in Committee – Full Model (House)

	Bipartisanship (113 Congress)			
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
Total Comments (100's)	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Republican	0.11	-0.01	0.11	0.11
	(0.10)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)
Female	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)
Nonwhite	-0.19	-0.19	-0.19	-0.20
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)
Graduate Degree	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.07
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Enter Congress	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Birth Year	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Votes Missed	-0.39	-0.38	-0.39	-0.43
	(1.13)	(1.12)	(1.12)	(1.12)
Full/Subcmte Chair	0.14	0.14	0.14	0.14
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)
Party Unity Score	**-5.74**	**-5.74**	**-5.74**	**-5.75**
	(0.50)	**0.50)**	**(0.50)**	**(0.50)**
Total Jokes (10s)	0.02			
	(0.08)			
Jokes Targeting Speaker (10s)		0.03		
		(0.23)		
Jokes Targeting Other Party (10s)			0.15	
			(0.27)	
Jokes Targeting Own Party (10s)				0.13
				(0.16)
N	329			

Bolded values are significant at p<0.05 or lower.
Cell values are the result of OLS models.
Standard errors reported in parentheses.

Table A.3.5
Newspaper Mentions by Location in Article – Full Model

	Title Mentions		**Early Mentions**		**Late Mentions**	
	Model	*Marginal Effect*	*Model*	*Marginal Effect*	*Model*	*Marginal Effect*
Humor Use						
Joke Teller	-0.36 (0.28)		0.19 (0.16)		**0.29** **(0.12)**	+26
Individual Demographics						
Nonwhite	**1.61** **(0.41)**	+10	0.41 (0.21)		0.10 (0.17)	
Female	**-1.22** **(0.38)**	-3	-0.30 (0.21)		-0.28 (0.16)	
Birth Year	-0.02 (0.02)		**0.03** **(0.01)**	+12	**0.02** **(0.01)**	+20
Republican	-0.22 (0.77)		0.06 (0.46)		0.09 (0.37)	
Political Identity						
Nominate Score	0.49 (0.78)		0.12 (0.46)		-0.08 (0.36)	
Senior Delegation Member	-0.36 (0.49)		**0.76** **(0.29)**	+33	0.45 (0.23)	
Prestige Committee	-0.40 (0.26)		**-0.31** **(0.14)**	-10	-0.16 (0.12)	
Enter Congress	0.04 (0.02)		-0.02 (0.01)		-0.01 (0.01)	
Two Party Vote	-0.81 (1.26)		0.97 (0.65)		0.77 (0.54)	
Political Standing	0.18 (0.23)		**0.39** **(0.13)**	+13	**0.40** **(0.10)**	+36
Media Market Congruence	-0.09 (0.12)		0.10 (0.06)		0.05 (0.05)	
Member of Senate	**2.31** **(0.63)**	+18	**0.66** **(0.34)**	+27	**0.60** **(0.26)**	+68
Committee Leader	0.44 (0.57)		-0.56 (0.29)		**-0.48** **(0.23)**	-44
Institutional Activity						
Bills Sponsored (10's)	0.02 (0.01)		0.01 (0.01)		0.01 (0.01)	
Total Tweets (100's)	**-0.20** **(0.10)**	-1	-0.05 (0.05)		0.01 (0.01)	

Table A.3.5
Newspaper Mentions by Location in Article – Full Model (continued)

Party Unity	-0.77 (1.21)	-0.61 (0.79)	-0.11 (0.64)
Legislative Effectiveness	-0.03 (0.07)	0.04 (0.05)	0.06 (0.04)
N		263	
Likelihood Ratio Statistic	**59.6**	**95.8**	**94.1**

Bolded values are significant at p<0.05 or lower.
Standard errors reported in parentheses.

Table A.3.6
Newspaper Mentions by Outlet Type – Full Model

	National Outlets		**Local Paper**		**Independent Paper**	
	Model	*Marginal Effect*	*Model*	*Marginal Effect*	*Model*	*Marginal Effect*
Humor Use						
Joke Teller	**0.39**		0.02		**0.60**	
	(0.14)	+16	(0.20)		**(0.17)**	+11
Individual Demographics						
Nonwhite	0.01		-0.15		**0.46**	
	(0.19)		(0.28)		**(0.23)**	+12
Female	-0.32		0.22		-0.11	
	(0.18)		(0.28)		(0.24)	
Birth Year	**0.03**		0.01		**0.04**	
	(0.01)	+17	(0.01)		**(0.01)**	+11
Republican	-0.12		-0.21		-0.17	
	(0.42)		(0.61)		(0.51)	
Political Identity						
Nominate Score	0.23		-0.01		0.11	
	(0.40)		(0.62)		(0.47)	
Senior Delegation	0.48		-0.20		0.43	
Member	(0.27)		(0.35)		(0.32)	
Prestige	-0.20		-0.35		-0.23	
Committee	(0.13)		(0.19)		(0.16)	
Enter Congress	**-0.03**		0.01		-0.02	
	(0.01)	-11	(0.02)		(0.01)	
Two Party Vote	0.98		0.29		0.82	
	(0.60)		(0.84)		(0.75)	
Political Standing	**0.41**		**0.66**	+23	**0.51**	
	(0.11)	+17	**(0.20)**		**(0.15)**	+11
Media Market	0.02		**0.22**	+14	0.07	
Congruence	(0.05)		**(0.09)**		(0.07)	
Member of Senate	**0.98**		-0.14		**0.92**	
	(0.29)	+56	(0.52)		**(0.37)**	+25
Committee Leader	**-0.53**		**-1.04**	-28	**-0.87**	
	(0.25)	-23	**(0.46)**		**(0.35)**	-17
Institutional Activity						
Bills Sponsored	0.01		0.01		**0.03**	
(10's)	(0.01)		(0.01)		**(0.01)**	+8
Total Tweets	0.04		-0.01		-0.06	
(100's)	(0.05)		(0.01)		(0.06)	

Table A.3.6
Newspaper Mentions by Outlet Type – Full Model (continued)

Party Unity	-0.30 (0.74)	0.02 (0.93)	-0.56 (0.84)
Legislative Effectiveness	0.06 (0.05)	0.03 (0.05)	0.07 (0.05)
N		263	
Likelihood Ratio Statistic	**135.6**	**36.8**	**80.8**

Bolded values are significant at p<0.05 or lower.
Standard errors reported in parentheses.

Table A.3.7
Newspaper Mentions by Pace of News

	High Content Weeks	Medium Content Weeks	Low Content Weeks
Humor Use			
Joke Teller	0.06 (0.10)	0.04 (0.09)	0.05 (0.09)
Individual Demographics			
Nonwhite	-0.01 (0.14)	-0.17 (0.13)	-0.19 (0.12)
Female	-0.14 (0.13)	0.01 (0.12)	-0.09 (0.12)
Birth Year	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Republican	-0.11 (0.30)	-0.44 (0.28)	-0.22 (0.26)
Political Identity			
Nominate Score	0.10 (0.30)	0.38 (0.27)	0.18 (0.25)
Senior Delegation Member	0.13 (0.18)	0.01 (0.16)	0.03 (0.15)
Prestige Committee	0.02 (0.10)	0.01 (0.09)	0.04 (0.08)
Enter Congress	0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Two Party Vote	0.35 (0.42)	0.26 (0.39)	0.15 (0.37)
Political Standing	0.06 (0.09)	0.11 (0.08)	0.08 (0.07)
Media Market Congruence	0.04 (0.04)	0.01 (0.03)	0.05 (0.03)
Member of Senate	0.08 (0.21)	0.07 (0.19)	0.01 (0.18)
Committee Leader	0.05 (0.20)	-0.07 (0.18)	0.01 (0.16)
Institutional Activity			
Bills Sponsored (10's)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Total Tweets (100's)	0.06 (0.03)	0.06 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)
Party Unity	0.31 (0.52)	-0.05 (0.47)	-0.04 (0.44)
Legislative Effectiveness	0.02 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)
N		263	
Likelihood Ratio Statistic	**259**	**270**	**349**

Bolded values are significant at $p<0.05$ or lower.
Standard errors reported in parentheses.

Table A.3.8
Content Features of Newspaper Mentions

	Language Use Models		Co-Mention Models		
	Humor Terms	Partisanship Terms	Funny Members	Female Members	Senate Members
Humor Use					
Joke Teller	-0.05 (0.12)	-0.01 (0.10)	0.10 (0.11)	-0.01 (0.18)	-0.23 (0.13)
Individual Demographics					
Nonwhite	-0.12 (0.17)	**-0.33** **(0.14)**	-0.12 (0.15)	0.32 (0.23)	-0.24 (0.18)
Female	-0.17 (0.16)	-0.04 (0.13)	**-0.32** **(0.15)**	**1.25** **(0.18)**	**-0.45** **(0.17)**
Birth Year	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Republican	0.19 (0.37)	-0.49 (0.30)	-0.12 (0.35)	-0.19 (0.61)	0.22 (0.39)
Political Identity					
Nominate Score	-0.44 (0.35)	0.50 (0.29)	0.03 (0.34)	0.29 (0.58)	-0.39 (0.36)
Senior Delegation Member	0.06 (0.21)	0.03 (0.17)	0.21 (0.20)	0.36 (0.32)	0.23 (0.22)
Prestige Committee	0.08 (0.12)	0.07 (0.09)	0.09 (0.11)	-0.02 (0.18)	0.07 (0.12)
Enter Congress	0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.01)
Two Party Vote	0.70 (0.53)	0.12 (0.41)	-0.13 (0.48)	-0.78 (0.90)	0.10 (0.56)
Political Standing	0.12 (0.10)	0.14 (0.08)	0.18 (0.10)	-0.02 (0.20)	0.10 (0.10)
Media Market Congruence	-0.03 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.06 (0.08)	0.03 (0.05)
Member of Senate	0.28 (0.24)	0.34 (0.21)	0.36 (0.23)	0.34 (0.44)	**1.30** **(0.26)**
Committee Leader	-0.22 (0.21)	-0.23 (0.20)	-0.34 (0.22)	-0.25 (0.43)	-0.29 (0.25)
Institutional Activity					
Total Media Mentions (10's)	**0.05** **(0.01)**	**0.04** **(0.01)**	**0.05** **(0.01)**	-0.01 (0.01)	**0.06** **(0.01)**
Bills Sponsored (10's)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)

Table A.3.8
Content Features of Newspaper Mentions (continued)

Total Tweets (100's)	0.07 (0.04)	0.06 (0.03)	**0.10** **(0.01)**	0.01 (0.01)	**0.10** **(0.01)**
Party Unity	0.10 (0.63)	-0.24 (0.50)	0.09 (0.59)	-0.40 (0.99)	0.29 (0.66)
Legislative Effectiveness	**0.09** **(0.03)**	0.01 (0.03)	0.05 (0.03)	0.01 (0.07)	0.06 (0.04)
N			263		
Likelihood Ratio Statistic	**204.7**	**325.6**	**183.9**	69.7	**286.1**

Bolded values are significant at $p<0.05$ or lower.
Standard errors reported in parentheses.

Appendix B
Coding References to Humor

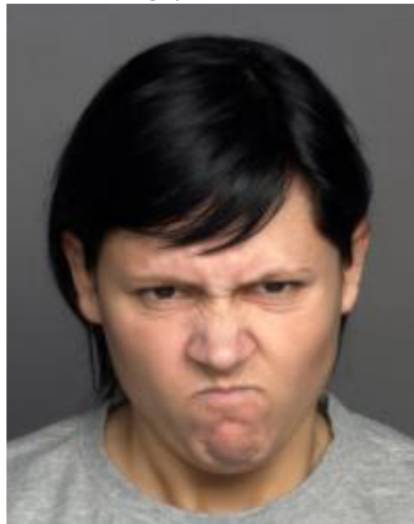
To identify conceptual discussions of humor in sampled newspaper articles, each article was coded for the presence of one or more of the following humor words or its variants:

Humor	Laugh	Wit	Witty
Wisecrack	Joke	Joking	Whimsy
Whimsical	Wisecrack	Jest	Levity
Jocular	Droll	Comic	Comedic
Amuse	Amusing	Satire	Satirical
Tomfoolery	Parody	Prank	Gambol
Jape	Zany	Quip	Punch line
Witticism	Comedy	Comedian	Hilarious

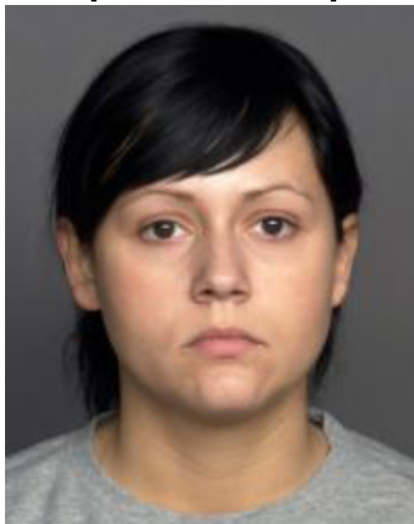
Appendix C
Study 1 Experimental Stimuli

To start with, we'd like you to take a moment to think about politics in the United States today. When you think about politics, [what makes you angry/what comes first to mind]? Please describe how you feel as vividly and in as much detail as possible. Think about real world events, conversations you have had with others, speeches or comments from candidates running for office, or anything else connected to politics today. It is okay if you don't remember all the details, just be specific about what you remember [and what it feels like to be angry].

[Angry condition]



[Neutral Condition]



Please take one to two minutes to write down everything that comes to mind.

Appendix D
Modified Relative Entertainment Preference (REP) Scale

If given the opportunity right now, which of the following types of television programming would you be most likely to watch? Please rate each of the following options according to your interest in viewing them now, using a 1 rating for the show you are most likely to watch:

- Fantasy or science fiction shows like Game of Thrones or Doctor Who
- Comedies/sitcoms like The Simpsons or The Big Bang Theory
- Drama shows like NCIS or Mad Men
- Soap operas like General Hospital or One Life to Live
- Reality or game shows like Survivor or Jeopardy
- Sports games or related programs
- Documentary programs on channels like History Channel or Discovery Channel
- Traditional cable/broadcast news shows
- [No Comedy Condition] Cooking programs on channels like the Food Network
- [Political Comedy Condition] Comedy news shows like The Daily Show or Last Week Tonight

Appendix E
Affinity for Political Humor (AFPH) Scale

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements. I appreciate political humor...

[Response options for each item include: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree.]

- Because it can reveal the weaknesses of our political leaders and institutions
- Because it can make me feel more knowledgeable about politics
- Because it can aid me in reinforcing my political beliefs
- When it makes me aware that our political system is dysfunctional
- Because it helps me express my opinions
- Because it can reduce the anxiety I feel toward politics
- When it helps me make better sense of why our political system is dysfunctional
- Because it can help me better cope with awkward situations
- Because it can help me effectively criticize politics and politicians
- Because it allows me to be friendly with people who hold political views that are different from my own
- Because it allows me to form stronger bonds with people who hold similar political views as my own

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