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## Who's Laughing Now? Satire's Effect on Negative Partisanship

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Who's Laughing Now? Satire's Effect on Negative Partisanship

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Government

Colby College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By

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Waterville, Maine

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## Abstract

“Negative partisanship,” most basically defined as the phenomenon whereby Americans largely align *against* one party instead of affiliating *with* the other, has grave implications for democracy: it has already affected productivity in Congress, the acceptance (rather, lack thereof) of election results (e.g. 2016), and watered down the importance of ideology in American politics. Parsing the independent variables that influence negative partisanship is vital in combating its detrimental effects, and this project proposes satire as a possibility. An analytical history of both topics is explored. Interestingly, psychological mechanisms for interpreting satire and the out-party share many similarities in mechanisms of subjective interpretation (e.g. self-reinforcement, intertextuality, and motivated reasoning). The importance of research investigating a link between satire and negative partisanship is heightened by the money-driven algorithmic realities that power contemporary media consumption. An analysis of the cross-sectional, experimental survey (N=2,839) conducted in this study revealed surprising and complicated demographic trends linking satire and negative partisanship. Most demographics reported higher levels of negative partisan attitudes when exposed to out-party satirical stimuli, and older female Democrats were the most “provoked” in this way. Interpretive theories are briefly explored, including low-exposure “misinterpretations” and high-exposure “echo chambers.” The study then discusses recommendations and implications, exploring the responsibilities of both producers and consumers of satire as well as the political entities that represent them.

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## Chapter One: What is Negative Partisanship?

### Negative Partisanship: What's Changed?

A Neo-Nazi, a criminal, and a member of the opposing party.

No, they're not walking into a bar; if respondents in a 2018 study had their way, they would be the top three sacrifices in a philosophical "trolley debate"<sup>1</sup> in order to save five members of their own party. Trailing close behind: an "illegal immigrant," as well as a golden retriever (Barber & Davis, 2018, p. 9).

That an average respondent would value a dog's life over an opposite partisan's may not be surprising. Indeed, a 2020 Pew Research Center study found that over 70 percent of Americans said they thought "very strong conflicts" existed between Democrats and Republicans. In the same study, the U.S. was found to be one of five countries (out of 17 in Europe, Asia, and North America) in which more than half the public said their fellow citizens "can't agree on basic facts." Americans were also the most likely to say their society was split along partisan, racial, and ethnic lines (Lauter, 2021).

This ominous partisan shadow threatens American life, from interpersonal to intercommunal relationships and beyond. According to Pew, nearly 80 percent of Americans now have "just a few" or no friends at all in the opposite party. It's no different for family. As Ricardo Deforest of Tampa, Florida, put it: "I hate to say it because family is everything...I disowned them. In my mind they're not family anymore. Th[e 2020] election is about the soul of what America is" (Smith, 2020). No one has yet claimed credit for a 2018 billboard that read, "Liberals, please continue on I-40 until you have left our GREAT STATE OF TEXAS," (and garnered over 10,000 shares on Facebook before it was taken down). It seems partisan division

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<sup>1</sup> This core experiment in ethics asks participants to choose whether or not to pull a hypothetical lever that diverts a runaway train from its original path (killing five) to the other, killing just one.

was enough gain for its benefactor's satisfaction (Shannon, 2018). One 2020 study demonstrated blatant partisan dehumanization captured by the Ascent of Man Scale; overwhelming majorities on both sides of the aisle rated their political opponents as subhuman (Cassese, 2020).

Parties weren't always a malicious binary. George Washington's farewell address is a favorite citation of two-party system skeptics, warning of a landscape not dissimilar from the contemporary climate:

However [political parties] may now and then answer popular ends, they are likely, in the course of time and things, to become potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people and to usurp for themselves the reins of government, destroying afterwards the very engines which have lifted them to unjust dominion (Washington, 1813).

It took hundreds of years for his fears to come to fruition; the two-party system was a long-time democratic anchor, if imperfect. In fact, parties were dynamic to ideological changes and comfortably predictable, nearly intrinsic: in the 1960s, it seemed that the overwhelming majority of American party affiliations were determined by age 10, with socialization and economic determinants key in this prediction (Shea, 2019, p. 103).

Perhaps this correlation strikes a modern reader as troubling, but partisanship once held different connotations.<sup>2</sup> Though precursors of today's contentiousness reared their heads in the 1840s (with local and vicious partisan newspapers at the helm), animosity has been dormant for most of the parties' recent history, especially as Democrats held control of Congress for over six decades (1933-1995). It seemed that individuality and its "candidate-centered" politics had a chance to prevail in the 1960s, but the rhetorical and bureaucratic necessities (as well as private funds to fuel them) of the 1990s brought the parties' revival (Shea, 2019).

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, the theory has developed overtime. Scholars were quick to warn of the dangers of the so-called "minimal events" perspective: if everything – from partisan identification to vote choice – is so decided, why study politics at all? Why can't we predict the play-out of complicated political dynamics to a tee? The evolution of this thought process is explored in the following sections.

In 2023, however, little faith is left in potential positive aftermath of such a comeback. 72 percent of U.S. adults say that, on the issues that matter to them, their side in politics has been losing more often than winning (Green, 2022). Another study found that a similar majority (65 percent) holds the opinion that most political candidates run for office “to serve their own personal interests;” further, only two-in-ten Americans say they trust the government in Washington to do what is right just about always (2 percent) or most of the time (19 percent) (Pew Research, 2022).<sup>3</sup> These figures are sharp declines from historical American trends, conveying rising levels of animosity towards government in general.

Opposite parties bear the brunt of this hostility, and they look much different than they did just decades ago. As the ideological centers of American politics has moved further apart, individual-level partisanship has also become more polarized. In 1994, 23 percent of Republicans were *more liberal* than the median Democrat, while 17 percent of Democrats were *more conservative* than the median Republican; in 2014, those numbers were just 4 percent and 5 percent, respectively (Pew, 2022). Further literature confirms a move towards two increasingly homogenous parties (Pew, 2022; Törnberg, 2022); political scientists have deemed this trend *ideological polarization*.

Polarization, it seems, fuels resentment. 62 percent of Republicans and 54 percent of Democrats say they hold very unfavorable views of the other party. This is a sharp rise from a decade ago, when 43 percent of Republicans and 46 percent of Democrats had very unfavorable views of the other party. A decade before that (2002), the proportions were 20 percent and 26 percent, respectively (Pew Research, 2022). Cross studies of sociology, psychology, and political science are increasingly interested in investigating the processes and identities feeding such a

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<sup>3</sup> Naturally, privileged groups account for much of this trust: for example, the share of whites who show high levels of trust (27 percent) is more than twice as high as the share of blacks (13 percent) and Hispanics (12 percent).

gap, as well as the processes and identities that this gap feeds. The late 2010s saw the emergence of terms such as affective (Iyengar et al., 2012), sectarian (Finkel et al. 2020), and social polarization (Mason, 2016).

Alan I. Abramowitz is perhaps the most influential academic in naming and analyzing such dynamics. Discussing the long-term shift in American attitudes toward the two major parties and their leaders, his infamous 2018 study analyzes two seemingly contradictory trends: that opinions of both major parties have become increasingly negative, yet party loyalty in voting has reached record levels. In reckoning this paradox, he put forth and popularized what he calls “affective polarization” (also credited to University of Missouri St. Louis’ David Kimball et al. in 2013), or “negative partisanship,” most basically defined as “the phenomenon whereby Americans largely align *against* one party instead of affiliating *with* the other.” Survey self-reports of partisan affect, implicit or subconscious tests of partisan bias, and behavioral measures of interpersonal trust and group favoritism or discrimination based on partisan cues are traditional measures used to measure the phenomenon (Iyengar et al., 2019).

These terms have become anchors in discussing the last decades’ viciousness in American politics. But how did we reach this point of unrivaled contentiousness? What can explain it? Why does it matter?

### **How’d We Get Here? Contemporary Explanatory Attempts**

Building upon predictability in party affiliation, *The American Voter* (1960) suggested a “funnel of causality” to explain voter choice: the funnel begins with a voter’s demographic position and subsequent development of party identification and ends in short-term allegiances that vary from election to election (such as candidates, campaign tactics, and ideological issues).

The complicating factor, however, is that the filtration of these short-term decisions depends on subjective perceptions. These perceptions are at risk of being manipulated, or even independently wrong, especially with psychological tricks at play like the echo chamber effect.<sup>4</sup> *The American Voter, Revisited* continued to develop this concept, warning of the “self-reinforcing” component of filtration through an inherently-biased lens (Lewis-Beck et al., 2008).

How has this funnel played out in the last couple of decades? What catalysts in American history have relevance when explaining negative partisanship? This section analyzes relevant cross-cutting issues.

### **Cross-Cutting Issues: 9/11 and Iraq, Demographic Shifts, and A New Age of Politics**

#### *The Attacks of September 11, 2001*

Given affect polarization’s relative youth, it may be helpful to examine a vital American cultural turning point through the lens.. Some existing literature on partisanship analyzes the 9/11 attack; results are mixed.

Following a hypothesis that 9/11 has contributed to negative partisanship, a fairly simple explanation emerges, centered in new feelings of frustration in failure juxtaposed with old ones of unity in victimization. As Garrett Graff, an American journalist and author, puts it:

One of the challenges of taking stock of this war on terror 20 years in this week is to realize how much we got wrong, as a government, as a nation...Sort of step by step, we squandered the global union and the sense of purpose that brought us together after 9/11, and, in fact, time and again gave into some of the darkest worst angles of our nature. When you look at the war in Iraq, the CIA torture program, the black sites...here we are, 20 years later, Guantanamo Bay still there (Public Broadcasting Service, 2021).

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<sup>4</sup> There is recent evidence to suggest, however, that the echo chamber effect may be less powerful than initially thought to be, especially in consumption of media in the context of affect partisanship. There are more all-encompassing sociological effects at play, rooted in subjectivity (Törnberg, 2022).

When there is no longer an effectively-marketed villain to blame, or when that marketing has worn off – from individuals like the hijackers and bin Laden himself, to the nearly-impossible-to-discern macroconcept of “Terror” – Americans turned to other targets. This blame, however, may be unfounded.

A study analyzing reactions to the American government’s response to 9/11 found that partisan labels mattered the most on officials who were perceived as “worthy of higher levels of blame.” Thus, authors warn, citizens’ partisan biases “may be most active in situations where there is actually more relevant information available” (Healy and Malhotra, 2014). This is a direct contradiction of the conception of democratic accountability, in which citizens reward the good and punish the bad in governmental job performance through democratic election cycles *regardless of party* (Key, 1966).

In another example of misplaced animosity, Pew studies have demonstrated that views of Muslims and Islam grew more partisan in years after 9/11 (Hartig & Doherty, 2022). Xenophobic and racist views are not new American sentiments, but these studies suggest that reckoning with 9/11 has exposed the tension between the progressivism of the 21st century and longstanding prejudices (partisan- or demographically-based). President Barack Obama’s rise to chief executive exposed American racial strains, and this was largely tied to partisanship: one study found that the correlation between racial resentment and party identification increased from .15 in 1986 to .38 in 2012 (Kimball & Chance, 2018).

### *The War in Iraq*

Investigating a possible interaction between 9/11 and negative partisanship necessitates a look at its sloppy retaliation plot: the Iraq War. Since the Eisenhower presidency, the partisan

gap in approval ratings had never exceeded 70 percentage points in any Gallup Poll, nor averaged more than 66 points in any quarter. In the 166 Gallup Polls taken between January 2004 and 2009, however, that gap exceeded 70 points over half the time, reaching a quarterly average as high as 77 points (Jacobson, 2010, p. 31).

In one study, scholars examined partisanship and the war through a lens of motivated reasoning, a psychological tendency to buck fact in favor of a “certain preferred outcome regardless of correctness” (Jacobson, 2010, p. 48). Findings conveyed that partisan divisions were much wider when respondents displayed evidence of motivated reasoning (which the conflict and administration both “permitted and inspired” [Jacobson, 2010, p. 51]), specifically when answering in support of the ideas that Bush was “chosen by God” to fight a war on terror, that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, and/or that Saddam Hussein was involved in the 9/11 attacks; the same variables predicting polarized opinions on the war predicted similar attitudes about the president. This kind of disillusionment proved a strong catalyst in adopting overwhelmingly negative attitudes about the opposite party and perspectives on then-contemporary political issues; however, the ingrained nature of partisanship was also prevalent, as Democrats who displayed tendencies of motivated reasoning supporting the war still indicated less support for the war than Republicans who did not display these tendencies (Jacobson, 2010, p. 51).

### *Demographic & Cultural Changes*

The significant changes to the American anthropological landscape in the last two decades are also vital pieces of the political puzzle of negative partisanship. While an idyllic picture of progress was once an intrinsic part of the American expectation (...or Dream), older

Americans are increasingly apprehensive about the future. About seven in ten Americans think young adults today have a harder time than their parents' generation when it comes to saving for the future, paying for college, and buying a home (Sechopoulos, 2022). Uncertainty bodes blame; blame is not always properly allocated.

As the American immigrant population nears a historic high (Budiman, 2020), links have emerged between immigration and partisanship. Nationalism could be to blame. One study found that priming national identity exacerbates polarization among those with anti-immigration stances (Wojcieszak and Garrett, 2018). Another found that “terrorist attack death cues” affect individuals’ polarized attitudes regarding undocumented immigrants, shown by triggers of specific negative emotions – anxiety, anger, and sadness – as well as information avoidance, suggesting the interconnectedness of cross-cutting issues with negative partisanship (Lee and Yungwook, 2021).

Not only is the makeup of the American population shifting, but their behavior is, too. Bill Bishop’s 2008 book *The Big Sort* argues that, over the past three decades, Americans have been self-sorting into overwhelmingly homogenous communities at micro (namely, city and neighborhood) levels. Landslide counties – counties in which the margin of victory in presidential elections exceed 20 percent – increased from 20 percent of America in the 1970s to almost 50 percent in the 2000s; the proportion had reached 71 percent by 2016. There is also evidence of broader binary-based sorting in the information age, extending to leisure activities, consumption, aesthetic taste, and personal morality; the concept of politics could be morphing into a broader “culture war” (Hetherington and Weiler, 2018; DellaPosta 2020; Brown and Enos, 2021). There is perhaps no medium more primed for this war than the media. Cable news has fallen into obvious partisan splits, with networks like FOX at the right helm and CNN at the left.

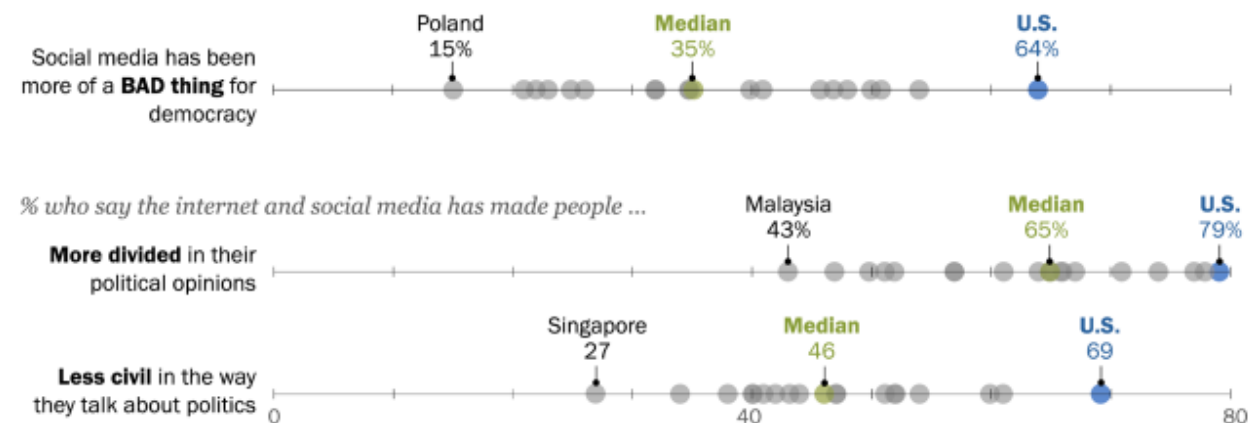


*Echo Chamber* by Kathleen Hall Jamison and Joseph Capella analyzes “The Rush Limbaugh Show” and its lasting effects on political media, but also wide-ranging implications of antagonistic rhetoric in media: the text warns that a “[s]teady diet of moral outrage feeds assumption that opponent is the enemy.”

In a globalized world where any topic can become an echo-chambered niche, self-selection in media can range from harmless to threatening. Maybe K-Pop becomes a sole source of music; maybe QAnon becomes a sole source of “fact.” In the array of choices presented to a media consumer, each powered by capitalist and partisan algorithms, extreme opinions are easily fueled and the truth is often lost. Paradoxically, there is also evidence that (digital) media drives affective polarization by encouraging nonlocal interaction – that is, engagement with content and individuals outside of these self-affirming niches. One study suggests group-based sorting as the best explanation of the phenomenon, an important line of thinking in parsing the ideological and sociological drivers of affective polarization (Törnberg, 2022). Whatever the exact mechanisms may be, America is wrestling with a crisis of negativity in its media. A whopping 79 percent of Americans think social media and the internet, in particular, has made people more divided in their political opinions; 69 percent say these mediums have made people less civil in political discourse. These results are astounding global outliers (Pew, 2022).

## More Americans see negative political impact of the internet and social media, compared with other countries surveyed

% who say ...



Note: Results for Japan on Q31f are excluded due to a translation error.

Source: Spring 2022 Global Attitudes Survey. Q28, Q31b & Q31f.

"Social Media Seen as Mostly Good for Democracy Across Many Nations, But U.S. is a Major Outlier"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 1. "More Americans see negative political impact of the internet and social media, compared with other countries surveyed" (Source: Pew, 2022)

### Political Developments Over Time

As America has evolved and aspects of negative partisanship have reared their ugly, dehumanized heads, many have taken advantage of these sentiments. Even before the blatantly polarizing and alienating campaign strategies of the 2016 presidential election, past studies indicated an increase in negative campaigning (West, 2013). Some even argued that exposure to political campaigns, and negative ads in particular, could explain mass polarization (Iyengar et al., 2012). While it is obvious that such simplistic, direct linkage is not wholly realistic, affective polarization has relied on the development of negative political rhetoric – by politicians and nonpoliticians alike.

Newt Gingrich, “The Kingmaker,” and ‘94

No picture of antagonization in politics would be complete without a nod to Newt Gingrich, a man who once told a group of college Republicans in Atlanta to “raise hell,” to stop being so “nice,” because politics was, above all, a cutthroat “war for power.” In his rhetorical rallying, he “baited Democratic leaders with all manner of epithet and insult: *pro-communist, un-American, tyrannical*.” He sent out cassette tapes and memos to Republican candidates, training them to “speak like Newt.” One included a list of recommended words to use in describing Democrats: *sick, pathetic, lie, anti-flag, traitors, radical, corrupt* (Coppins, 2018).

Gingrich’s rhetorical work culminated in the 1994 midterm elections: Republicans picked up 54 seats in the House and seized state legislatures and governorships across the country. For the first time in 40 years, the GOP took control of both houses of Congress. The high was short-lived, however: almost all of the new House’s big-ticket bills fell to the Senate or the presidential veto. It was the craft of vicious linguistic strategy that stuck; Gingrich did not drive a successful political revolution, but a new means to catalyze partisan conflict.

Mickey Edwards, an Oklahoma Republican who served in the House for 16 years, said in 2018 that he fears the Gingrich era’s implications: “He created a situation where you now stand with your party at all costs and at all times, no matter what...Our whole system in America is based on the Madisonian idea of power checking power. Newt has been a big part of eroding that” (Coppins, 2018).

Under a veil of nationalistic concepts like rights and patriotism, talk-show radio host Rush Limbaugh paralleled – and, at times, adopted – Gingrich’s diction and delivery. The Fairness Doctrine’s repeal in 1987 meant that broadcasters were no longer mandated to present balanced views on politics: this was perfect timing for Limbaugh’s abrasive approach to political

radio.<sup>5</sup> He attracted 15 million listeners a week, marketing himself as the alternative to the liberal bias of mainstream news (CBS Interactive, 2022). Awarded a “Majority Maker” pin for the election in ‘94, Limbaugh caught the attention of Gingrich; the two had regular strategic sit-downs.

But conservatives weren’t the only ones who bit into the 90s’ forbidden fruit of polarized rhetoric: President Clinton seethed that conservative talk-show hosts like Limbaugh (as well as some religious-right commentators) used disinformation and “demeaning attacks” to interrupt governance. “The Rush Limbaugh Show,” he said, “is just a constant, unremitting drumbeat of negativism and cynicism” (Merida, 1994). The era set the stage for the escalation of polarization – from politicians, from the media, and from listeners – that eventually morphed into negative partisanship.

## The Trump Era

The 2016 election epitomizes affective polarization and its disastrous domino effect for democracy. In a recent study, The New York Times analyzed words indicated by political academic research (Simchon et al., 2022) and studies by linguists and computer scientists (KhudaBukhsh et al., 2021) to be divisive and polarizing, like “fascist,” “socialist,” “far right,” and “far left.”

Republican representatives ramped up their use of the diction of negative partisanship since former President Donald J. Trump took office. On average, in the year and a half after the January 6, 2021 Capitol riot, Republicans used flagged partisan words more than twice as often as Democrats did via Twitter, and six times as often in emails to constituents. The 139

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, talk radio has stayed consistently right wing; on the list of Talkers Magazine’s Top 10 most popular talk radio hosts in 2022, all ten are conservative (CBS Interactive, 2022).

Republicans who voted to reject the Electoral College results that awarded President Joe Biden his term used markedly more hostile language than that of other Republicans and Democrats. Republicans, overall, mentioned Democrats twice as often on Twitter as they did their own party; Democrats followed the opposite pattern. During the first two years of Trump's presidency, however, Democrats mentioned him at an unprecedented high rate.

There is no doubt that Trump capitalized on dynamics of affective polarization, and that his general leadership catalyzed this process. Psychological studies have found Trump to be “tough and directive (i.e., dominant); impulsive and undisciplined (i.e., outgoing); and disruptively tradition-defying, with an inclination to shade the truth and skirt the law (i.e., dauntless)” (Immelman & Griebie, 2020).

Five days after the Capitol riot, Republican Representative Kevin McCarthy of California voiced his concerns regarding the weaponization of polarizing rhetoric: “We all must acknowledge how our words have contributed to the discord in America.

“No more name calling, us versus them” (Valentino-Devries and Eder, 2022).

## **The Big Picture**

Clearly, cross-cutting issues continually reflect more macro-level dynamics; rather than one rising above as the smoking gun of negative partisanship, they play on each other to catalyze negative partisanship. One of these dynamics is elites' control over cultural narratives. Studies as early as 2006 examined elites' manipulation of rhetoric in the context of polarization: in an analysis of perceived versus actual viewpoints about immigration, one purported that Californians from both parties actually share similar apprehensive views about immigration, but

Republican leaders harnessed the issue to attract moderates that perceived Democrats as being friendlier to immigration (Neiman and Bowler).

In a similar yet distinct analysis, Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter With Kansas?* centers around a right wing populist revolt, using Kansas as a microcosm. Ultimately, Frank argues that the so-called "culture wars" in the region allowed the GOP to manipulate populist rhetoric, selling themselves as protectorates of working-class anti-elitism. Further, as ideologies and perceptions of the Democratic Party shifted, true populism faded from the public sphere, allowing right-wing "populism" to dominate the region and the Republican party (Frank, 2005).

How do these broader dynamics emerge in an individual? A society? What makes people so vulnerable to such falsehoods?

### *The Ideological Versus The Sociological*

Further cross-cutting issues, such as race and civil rights, are often credited as triggers of an ideological sorting between the two parties in the 1990s. Liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats – once staples of the American Congress – were beginning to disappear, threatening the cross-party, cooperative norms of democracy.

"The Ideological Foundations of Affective Polarization in the U.S. Electorate" also credited Abramowitz, and purports that ideological polarization (Pew Research Center, 2022; Törnberg, 2022) has been a major contributor to its affective counterpart. It is logical to assume that extremist ideologies encourage animosity towards opposition; this is also psychologically sound. *The Big Sort* examines the "risky shift phenomenon," the process by which individuals change their decisions or opinions to become more extreme when acting as part of a group. On a societal scale, this development breeds extremism: our positions become more radical as we

merge with others. This is especially true as discourse takes on symbolic, subjective tones through the use of generally-nationalistic terms like “patriotism” when discussing Trump’s campaign slogan of “Make America Great Again.” Distinct interpretations of these terms and ideals are continually reinforced by partisan media and are rarely challenged, enabling extreme views to nourish each other.

America had opportunities to return to the ideological roots of partisanship; lacking the theatrics of the finalized candidates, a Ted Cruz-Bernie Sanders matchup could have epitomized left- versus right-wing ideology on the ballot. But it seemed that voters were caught up both in and as group targets: issues of ideology were not analyzed on stage, but weaponized.

Two key ideological measures – moral traditionalism and social welfare preferences – are more highly correlated with the vote for president in 2012 than 2016. However, three key group attitudinal measures – sexism, immigration, and race – were nearly irrelevant in 2012, but constituted the forefront of voters’ 2016 decisions. Thus, 2016 is highly unique in American history. What gives?

Identity politics and group-based attitudes have proven to be effective predictors of affect partisanship. Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012) apply social identity theory in their analysis of increasing affective polarization in America. Party sorting – the process by which voters sort themselves into parties based on their ideology – has actually been proven to often work in the opposite direction: it is often after individuals make party identification decisions that they develop ideology, rather than using ideology as a means to make those decisions. Thus, many scholars suggest the “innocence of ideology” in political affiliation; membership to a party (or hate towards the other) is often determined by other factors, and adopting ideological beliefs comes afterwards (Kimball, 2018). The proposed “oil spill” model of polarization furthers this

analysis: according to the model, it is not that partisan positions have become more radical, but rather that partisanship has become more encompassing in terms of political positions (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008). In fact, an overwhelming amount of sociological research suggests this innocence, and even develops it: fundamental studies in the field confirm that a psychological sense of “self” is incomplete without contextualization in group-based identities (Stets and Burke, 2000). There is a direct relationship between identity affirmation and group involvement; in these contexts, deeply ingrained concepts and impulses can precede reasoning and rationalization.

As touched upon, this innocence can be manipulated (Neiman and Bowler, 2006; Frank, 2005). These schematic tactics are often neither blatant nor specific: elite-level partisan conflict (by politicians themselves, the media, or other sources of authority) can prime party loyalists in a “follow the leader” model. There is literature to suggest group-based perceptions can taint what little ideology is left in the political sphere. In a 2020 study, partisans expressing greater affective prejudice were more likely to perceive strong ideological differences on political issues, even when the ideological differences were slight. Further, perceived ideological differences and affective prejudice may fuel each other in a feedback loop that ultimately exacerbates partisan acrimony (Moore-Berg et al., 2020). The unequal weight of group-based attitudes in a person’s political identity can snowball into illogical, hostile, and even morally-disengaged actions. Negative *meta-perceptions* – judgments made by the self about what others think about the self – brought about by affective polarization are associated with overt hostility toward other groups through their effect on negative perceptions of the outgroup, which may fuel a desire for social distance from outgroup others that prevents bipartisan cooperation (Moore-Berg et al., 2020).



With inward (social psychology) and outward (rhetoric of candidates, members of the opposing party, and the media) factors supporting ingroup and outgroup dynamics, it seems as though the political funnel of causality is increasingly bottom-heavy.

### **What's At Stake?**

It is clear that the prevalence of negative partisanship has caused Americans to dig their heels into political identifications more than ever before. This heightened focus on political identities, along with the associated anger it entails, has caused citizens to lose trust in their governing institutions (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015; Webster, 2017). And maybe they should; partisan turmoil continues to impede Congressional progress.

Though he ceded some positive possible byproducts (such as increased political engagement), Abramowitz feared “deleterious consequences for governance and representation” in initial investigations of affective polarization, warning that the dynamic has already “almost certainly reshaped the legislative process in Washington” (2018). Indeed, with the hatred that Democrats and Republicans harbor, it is no longer progress that is encouraged, but winning at any and all costs. Driven by factionalism, negative partisanship both inhibits compromise and normalizes such rhetoric at all levels of society (Valentino-Devries & Eder, 2022). Even elementary-level facets of the republic – down to checks and balances – are at risk. Affective polarization also politicizes ostensibly neutral or apolitical issues such as COVID-19 (Druckman, 2021). Attitudes of affect polarization by constituents has thus helped to perpetuate the “unorthodox lawmaking” that has become characteristic of Congress (Sinclair, 2016).

Raising the debt ceiling, for example, used to be common practice. A right-wing precursor to the Trump era, the Tea Party ushered in politicalization of the issue, warning that

“examples will be made out of” Republicans who did not support their cause in refusing to raise the ceiling (Travis, 2013). The contention led to a government shutdown in 2013.

Reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act is another example: progress has all but stalled at a roadblock of partisan rancor.

Voter rationality is another critical implication of negative partisanship. How much are we, as voters, truly thinking about issues and candidates critically?

At an extreme level, dehumanization leading to problematic psychologies that feed violence are possible. Blatant dehumanization is associated with perceptions of greater moral distance between the parties, which is indicative of moral disengagement (Cassese, 2020). This is the broad mechanism that terrorists and criminals use in psychologically coping with their crimes (Bandura, 2017). Internalized over an extended period, manifestations of these dynamics can be devastating:

...political divisions can extend beyond ‘civil’ distancing, as evidenced by the willingness of partisans to endorse corrosive and illegal behaviors such as gerrymandering, which benefits a political party, but at the expense of the potential erosion of Democratic norms, and outright violence, such as the attempted and successful assassinations of political leaders in recent years by outgroup partisans in the U.S...(including shootings of Democratic representative, Gabby Giffords, and Republican representative, Steve Scalise...) (Moore-Berg et al., 2020, p. 2).

In 2016, Republicans proved that they were willing to conveniently accept foreign campaign meddling on their behalf by Russia; many anti-Hillary Clinton advertisements centered on dehumanization. If all bets are off in order to prevail against the opposing party, at what point will we no longer accept election outcomes at all? Over a quarter of today’s Congress rejects the last fair election.

In a Newtonian echo chamber, pragmatic governmental needs fall to the wayside. This neglect won't be a problem for incumbents if their constituents back harsh rhetoric and dysfunction – and they do. It is possible that we have already “destroy[ed]... the very engines which have lifted [those in power] to unjust dominion,” as Washington feared (1813).

## Chapter 2: The Evolution of Satire

### What is Satire, Anyways?

Encompassing *The Onion* to “The Philosophic Cock” to *The Rush Limbaugh Show* to *Huck Finn*, an exact definition of satire proves to be a moving target. Its mere existence is a perpetual see-saw of discourse and coyness: “Political satire...especially as it is directed at the prevailing political establishment, is particularly sensitive to legal constraints and their enforcement, and if those constraints are removed in the midst of a heated political battle, one might reasonably expect satire to disappear in favor of more direct statement” (Kropf, 1977, p. 241). The balance between the two, especially in the uniqueness of the American context, propelled (and propel) political developments and regressions.

Satire is “a particular kind of humor that makes fun of human folly and vice by holding people accountable for their public actions” (Gray et al., 2009, p. ix). The act of satirizing is often done with “a blend of amusement and contempt” (Highet, 1972, p. 21); the satirist, then, is a “skeptical and bemused observer” (Knight, 2004, p. 3). Satire is also uniquely “pre-generic” (Knight, 2004, p. 4), in that it is in the nature of satire to exploit preexisting genres, often by taking on characteristics of the genre it seeks to satirize. Ultimately, “satire as a literary form often seeks to both educate and entertain as it tries to persuade” (Holbert et al., 2011). Satire’s definition is ever evolving, and different genres reflect different aspects of this evolution. In the context of this project, satire centers on *critical absurdity*.

Most satire falls under two main categories:<sup>6</sup> Horatian and Juvenalian. Both are namesakes of the Roman satirists who popularized the respective genres. Horatian satire is rooted in everyday life, presenting itself as a form of self-satire. A closer look, however, reveals

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<sup>6</sup> There exist many other types of satire as well, such as Menippean satire. Horatian and Juvenalian are the most relevant to the political sphere.

“a commentary on the ruling elite and macrolevel norms of social behavior.” It takes on a light-hearted tone; a Horatian satirist seeks to “tell the truth with a smile, so that he will not repel” audience members (Highet, 1962). On the other end of the spectrum, Juvenalian satire “laughs with contempt at [humanity’s] pretensions and incongruities and base hypocrisies” (Sander, 1971, p. 235). Juvenalian laughter is “serious comedy,” “blistering criticism,” and “simultaneously funny and fierce.” It is “not meant to heal, but to wound” (Holbert et al., 2011). It is not worried about repelling audiences; it seeks to wake them up.

American political satire has developed both of these subsets, resulting in a unique, sophisticated history of the genre in the United States. To fully understand American satire’s possible interaction with negative partisanship, we must trace it throughout this history. How did we reach a point of convergence? Could we have seen negative partisanship’s shadow looming? When does satire speak up, and when does it quiet down?

### **The Colonial Era’s Foundation**

In America’s early colonial era, satirical works were few and far between. In a New England case study, scholars indicate that this gap should not be attributed to an anti-satire essence of Puritans, nor an anti-Puritan essence of satire: precursors to the boundary-pushing, raunchy attacks of today’s America were decades away. Rather, the market had interests for distinct publications, and satire didn’t quite make the cut; sermons, histories, currency tracts, and theological treatises dominated. Satire in England, however, flourished. It is probable that this disparity is due to the different legal systems between the colonizer and its colonies:

Compared to England, where the libel laws discouraged direct criticism of the government but made ample allowances for the covert devices typical of satire, the colonies were virtually without restraint on the press. When the issues are pressing and a

sledge hammer is at hand, little is to be gained for one's immediate impact by resorting to the tactics of insinuation (Kropf, 1977, p. 241).

But the American satirical dam broke by the 1750s; even Founding Fathers tossed their hats into the ring. Under the pseudonym "Humphrey Ploughjogger," John Adams poked fun at local authorities through satirical messages in Boston newspapers. Joanne Freeman, professor of history and American studies at Yale University, characterizes the satire of the time by a "tendency to take this sort of rustic American guy, this sort of unsophisticated, unschooled guy and sort of turn that on its head and say, yeah, that's exactly who we are and we got a thing to say" (Backstory Radio, 2017).

Ploughjogger fit this bill in critiquing both culture and politics: he used the pseudonym "Governor [John] Winthrop," an ironically-idealized character, complimenting his constituents in the "ardor" and "spirit" they had lately shown. He critiqued then-governor Francis Bernard's political ineptness and perceived British loyalties (Saltman, 1980). Ploughjogger's tone was undoubtedly Juvenalian.

By the time the Revolution's first shot was "heard around the world," there was an easy target in America's formal opposition. The song "Yankee Doodle" is another example of turning stereotypes on their head: originally a British quip about American colonials, colonists reclaimed the song in an ironic embrace (Backstory Radio, 2017). The painter John Trumbull contributed Patriotic satirical essays and poems during the war, and Benjamin Franklin's philosophical essays of the time often had an air of satire (though often subtle, and often for an English audience). There was even female representation in Revolutionary satire; Mercy Otis Warren wrote dramas questioning the compatibility of Republican values with gender oppression, though the "rebellious dane" (Yerkes, 2001, p. 53) was largely silenced by cultural norms of the time.

However, the American strain of satire was still quiet compared to many 18th century powers. The personnel overlap between revolutionary activism and satire may be to blame: “authors were too deeply involved in the issues about which they wrote to be bothered with literary polish and the typically indirect” (Saltman, 1980). Considering the colonies’ success, it seems that direct critique was more than enough to catalyze the Revolution; satirical mechanisms only became necessary later on, as America fought to define itself.

### **The 19th Century: Cartoons, Civil War, and Clemens**

Kropf’s conception of cultural favoritism of direct, free speech over coy critique, even before the ratification of the First Amendment, held true for much of the 19th century: satire was largely unremarkable in the young United States. The political cartoon constituted most of the era’s indirect criticism.

James Akin was one of the most prominent cartoonists of the 1800s. In what is arguably his most famous work, he exposes Thomas Jefferson’s (perhaps unconsensual) sexual relations with Sally Hemings in “The Philisophic Cock.” Jefferson and Hemings are caricatured as chickens, and a quote from Joseph Addison’s drama, *Cato*, captions the piece: “‘Tis not a set of features or complexion or tincture of a skin that I admire.” Challenging the idealized image of Jefferson, the work provides one of the first examples of American satire against itself, targeting the chief executive. Akin continued his Juvenalian commentary into the 19th century; one later work exposes needless military deaths under Jackson’s command (First Amendment Museum).

“A Boxing Match, or Another Bloody Nose for John Bull” by Pennsylvanian Charles William (1813) depicts American president James Madison – “Brother Jonathan” – punching King George III – “John Bull” – in the face. Blood spews out of Bull’s nose, while its text riffs

on Britain's underestimation of the U.S. in the War of 1812. Johnathan and John became ubiquitous representations of America and England during the time period, following the tradition of reclaiming once-antagonistic stereotypes by non-Americans.



Figure 2. “A Boxing Match, or Another Bloody Nose for John Bull” (Source: Library of Congress)

Petroleum V. Nasby, the pseudonym of journalist David Locke, was perhaps the loudest satirical voice during the Civil War. He adopted the persona of an “ignorant northern Democrat racist voter who doesn’t understand anything that’s going on in the Civil War, [and] hates Abraham Lincoln.” He played on a far more controversial version of ingroups and outgroups than The U.S. versus Britain: “every Republican paper in the North would reprint these things, which would make the Democrats look like idiots” (Backstory Radio, 2017).



According to records, Nasby's works were the last thing that Lincoln read before his assassination, and he famously read aloud these works to company – accent and all. He even offered Locke “any place you ask for– and are capable of filling” in the U.S. government. Among other lasting contributions, his work showcased the efficacy of wide circulation of group-based satire in a divisive political period. His tone was unique in its causticness and emphasis on “hyperpartisanship” (Baumgartner, 2019, p. 116). In the 1860s, then, satire evolved. There was a shift from rustic, reclaimed American personas juxtaposed with the pretentiousness of the English to direct exposure of problematic beliefs and actions of the opposition: “They’re actually showing, this is what these idiots actually say among themselves” (Backstory Radio, 2017). In many ways, this shift worked wonders: Lincoln’s Secretary of Treasury, George Boutwell, claimed that “the crushing of the rebellion can be credited to three forces, the Army, the Navy, and the Nasby letters” (Baumgartner, 2019, p. 116).

It wasn’t just Nasby who rose from war-torn America as a king of satire; indeed, the Civil War seemed to open the satirical floodgates. It was when Mark Twain became prominent. Not unlike the tactics of Humphrey Ploughjogger, Clemens, “follow[ed] the tradition of American humor, [and] picture[d] his vernacular-speaking character in the act of flouting the genteel charge of loutish stupidity by deliberately carrying it to an extreme” (Schmidt, 1953, p. 344). This strategy is the key to Clemens’ moralistic satire, which broadens to a wider political commentary, ridiculing the political orthodoxy of eighteenth-century republicanism and its conception of genteel citizenship: his novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is an example. Thus, “his satire is concerned, not with particular policies or parties, but with fundamental political principles” (Schmidt, 1953, p. 344).

While Clemens' contributions to American satirical history – both material and theoretical – were integral, his critiques carry a particular irony. By the 20th century, Clemens was wary of risking his reputation and finances; this hesitation prevented him from publishing what would have been his riskiest social piece, “The United States of Lyncherdom.” The work parodies international missionaries to critique race relations in America. He hesitated in pushing the envelope too far in “offend[ing] rather than entertain[ing]” that audience: “I have told the truth too plainly in [‘The United States of Lyncherdom’],” he said, “and that’s something no man can afford to do until I am dead.” This decision highlighted the tension between

...what Sam Clemens thought and what Mark Twain was allowed to say...Mark Twain is a very carefully performed and edited version of Sam Clemens...he [u]sed distance in time or [geography]...as a way of creating safe targets to be both funny and satirical. That was the formula for his great success. And all his work takes some other place or some other time as its setting...nobody in your audience is going to identify with the people along that river (Backstory Radio, 2017).

Without contemporary identification with a satirical target, there is no risk of offense (nor controversy, nor progress). Clemens deserves Horatian satirical credit, to be sure, but perhaps not reverence.

Though classics like “A Boxing Match” and “The Philosophic Cock” were vital precursors to his work, the German immigrant Thomas Nast is credited as “The Father of the American Cartoon.” On the staff of Harper’s Weekly, he led a crusade against corruption, taking down the infamous “Boss Tweed” and the Tammany Hall political machine. His other 19th century work largely focused on slavery and crime. “Throwing Down the Ladder by Which They Rose” (1870) calls out the hypocrisy of anti-Chinese sentiment in an America built by immigrants; “The Union as it Was” (1874) features a harrowing depiction of white compliance in

black oppression during the Reconstruction era; “Third Term Panic” (1874) is the first known symbolic representation of the Republican Party as elephants (First Amendment Museum).

The man largely recognized as the successor to Mark Twain’s satirist attitudes was H.L. Mencken. He was renowned, especially in the 1920s, for making fun of “rubes” – small town Americans – as America became more cosmopolitan. His work was patronizing and biting from his Baltimore perch: much of his satire was “sham, pretension, provincialism, and prudery, and he ridiculed the nation’s organized religion, business, and middle class” (Backstory Radio, 2017; Encyclopedia Britannica). However, he held a lot less back than Clemens: he produced some of the only satire on the Great Depression, and was “as satirical about Pres. Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal as he had been about Pres. Herbert Hoover and Prohibition” (Encyclopædia Britannica). Nonpartisan and Juvenalian, Mencken set the tone for some of the most successful American political satire to come.

### **Muckraking Away Threats to Satire**

The sensationalism of Muckrakers – reform-minded journalists, writers, and photographers in the American Progressive Era that set out to expose widespread corruption and the exploitative perils of capitalism – provoked controversy at the turn of the 20th century. Cartoonist Charles Nelan of the Philadelphia newspaper *The North American* regularly depicted Governor Samuel Pennypacker as a parrot, playing on his perceived mindlessness and mimicry in governance. In most of Nelan’s works, the Pennypacker parrot repeats sentiments of U.S. Senator Matthew Quay, a powerful political boss in Pennsylvania and a cousin of Pennypacker’s. In 1903, the governor outlawed publishing (or even drawing) cartoons that portrayed individuals as a “beast, bird, fish, insect, or other inhuman animal.”

Criticism of the law and governor boomed; silencing campaigns, epitomized by the anti-cartoon law, were the perfect fuel to Muckraker fire. More than 75 out-of-state newspapers, as well as a high number of cartoonists, sent editorials critiquing the law to *The North American*. The law was never enforced, and it was repealed in 1907 when a new governor took office: “Angered and informed, a reform-minded citizenry could reclaim control of the democratic process” (Piott, 1988, p. 89). A sort of “right to satire” was solidified in America.

### **Before His Time, With His Time: Will Rogers**

No discussion of satire is complete without a nod to Will Rogers, an entertainer, humorist, political commentator, and writer of the early 20th century. His weekly radio broadcast, one of the first comedic political shows, was the most popular Sunday evening program in the country by 1935. He also published “Daily Telegrams” in *The New York Times*, syndicated to hundreds of other newspapers throughout the U.S. and Canada. In both mediums he covered a range of satirical topics, from general American society and politics to particular historical events such as World War I, Prohibition, and the Great Depression. His most famous work is perhaps the 1931 radio broadcast “Bacon, Beans and Limousines,” which criticized Americans in power for its neglect of the country’s unemployed population (Reed, 2015).

Rogers would likely be unsurprised, if disheartened, by 21st-century politics: “I don’t make jokes. I just watch the government and report the facts,” he once quipped. He was an early skeptic of parties’ negative effects on each other: “The more you observe politics, the more you’ve got to admit that each party is worse than the other” (West, 2016). Sentiments like these may be the earliest signs of the conception of negative partisanship.

## A Note on Novelistic Satire

Scholars have credited the mid-20th century's novelistic satire as “degenerative” and “delegitimizing” in taking on widely accepted values, as well as postmodern in its rejection of the “self-canceling polarities of modernist thought” (Weisenburger, 1995, p. 3). Using absurd dystopian plotlines, George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) and *1984*<sup>7</sup> (1949) follow this framework. They warn that Aristotle's conception of “rule of the many by the few” threatens politics and life: *Animal Farm* allegorizes the Russian Revolution of 1917 to do so, while *1984* relies on generally-exaggerated totalitarianism.

The concept of war proved an easy target for satirical novels, especially during Vietnam. Set in World War II, *Catch-22* (1961) by Joseph Heller satirizes the norms of wartime politics, warning that their absurdities, while humorous in a novelistic vacuum, can have drastic effects on society. *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969) by Kurt Vonnegut, works similarly, using science-fiction to critique the violence of the powerful and the numbing effects it has on the average person: its tagline “So it goes” is used “only and always as a comment on death” (Rushdie, 2019). Though undeniably political, novelistic satire that is rooted in partisanship is difficult to find: these texts explore broader, layered doubts about the fundamentals of society rather than targeted antagonistic jabs.

## The Mid Twentieth Century's “Mad” Dash in Satire

In 1952, William Gaines and Harvey Kurtzman changed American satire forever by publishing the first edition of *MAD Magazine*. During a decade of post-World War II “supposed political consensus,” their liberal critiques were a shock to American culture. Ingroups and

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that *1984* took many liberties in lifting ideas from the 1924 Czech novel *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin.

outgroups drove *MAD*'s ideology and content; Gaines and Kurtzman were the sons of European Jewish immigrants, and used their perspectives as cultural outsiders to question the validity of the Red Scare. Just over a decade later, it was largely recognized that American humor had "shed its inhibitions" in terms of content choice, as its audience was "largely unshockable."

Appealing to its newly broad-minded audience, print satire did not hold back. *MAD* was known for "mocking the hippies and the establishment with equal vigor, operating under a code of humor in which no point of view, left or right, was immune to ridicule" (Cohen, 2015). *MAD*'s popularity dropped off significantly following the departure of editor Al Feldstein in 1984. The diagnosis: the adoption of "a more corporate structure," as well as its decision to begin to accept advertisements, ultimately leading fans to complain that it had "lost its edge."<sup>8</sup>

A more R-rated version of *MAD* emerged in *The National Lampoon*, which ran from 1970 to 1998. It also mocked political figures, consumer products, popular entertainment, and cultural fads. Staff writers ranged from "anarchist to libertarian, although the editorial team always insisted that it 'prioritized selling copies over offering any type of cohesive political statement'" (Cohen, 2015).

*The Realist*, created by Paul Krassner in 1958, pushed boundaries even further with its "inflammatory imagery." The short story entitled "The Parts that Were Left Out of the Kennedy Book," for example, infamously depicts Lyndon B. Johnson having anal sex with the corpse of John F. Kennedy. Though powered by star-studded pens like Mort Sahl, Woody Allen, Jules Feiffer, and Richard Pryor, "this magazine remained part of the 'underground' American press, never reaching a mass audience the way that *MAD* or the *Lampoon* did" (Cohen, 2015).

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<sup>8</sup> The magazine did not go down without a fight, however; it published its last issue in 2018.

Apparently, even America's "unshockability" had a sweet spot. Magazine satire was largely left behind as a 20th century fad, if one that fundamentally shaped the future of the genre. Among other reasons for this plateau, *TIME* magazine points out that the United States does not share the French republican tradition of anti-clericalism as much as Americans might think we do. Though the "separation of church and state" is a long-touted American value, its roots are in religious tolerance and diversity ("in theory, if not in practice"), not a sectarian society: "Atheists remain the most 'distrusted group' in America" (Cohen, 2015).

### ***Hustler v. Falwell: The Legal Right to Satire, Solidified***

Hustler Magazine was another parodical publication of the *MAD* era. It did not attempt sharpness in political or social commentary; rather, it published explicit content for profit. Its most important contribution to the genre of satire was not on its pornographic pages, but a fittingly-ironic antithesis of them: the highest Courtroom of the country.

A lead story in the November 1983 issue of Hustler parodied an ad campaign for the liquor Campari, which cheekily misled readers into believing that "interviewees" for the campaign narrated their first sexual encounters; the fictional testimonies were really about their first time trying the product. The parody in question jokingly claimed that Jerry Falwell – an American Baptist pastor, "televangelist," and conservative activist – lost his virginity to his mother in an outhouse. Falwell sued on the grounds of libel, invasion of privacy, and intentional infliction of emotional distress, winning the latter claim and the \$150,000 in damages that came with it. Hustler Magazine appealed, and the case was taken to the Supreme Court.

Ultimately, the Court ruled in 1988 – under the first and fourteenth amendments – for Hustler; the ruling prohibited public figures from recovering damages for intentional infliction of

emotional distress (IIED) when IIED is caused by caricature, parody, or satire of the public figure “that a reasonable person would not have interpreted as factual.” Further, the satire in question must be made with “actual malice” to constitute IIED (Oyez). The Rehnquist Court deemed the state’s interest in free speech more valuable than the protection of public figures from offensive speech of a false, but reasonably unbelievable, nature.

More pragmatically, the Court pointed out that although the case had no legal precedent, there was plenty of historical precedent. The longstanding American tradition of satire was not for nothing; the Court reminded the nation that it is better to risk offense than silence.

### **Pre-Cable: The Network Era**

Network television enjoyed a long reign in American living rooms. The medium, which uses public radio waves to transmit its programming, includes CBS, NBC, ABC, and FOX, among others. These networks make their revenue by selling commercial spots to advertisers. While vital precursors to modern American satire found their footing in the network age, satire itself was muzzled.

In the 1960s, satire’s move to the mainstream through magazines and comedy albums looked to many like a sign that the discourse of liberal elites would culturally prevail, especially with John F. Kennedy in the White House. What was once dissident humor during the Truman and Eisenhower administrations had become pop culture as corporate liberals settled into their positions at the top of these industries. However, satirical television was slow to catch up: advertisement and network executives were often much more conservative, and thus wary of risking the provocation of their viewers (Gray et al., 2009).



The principle of freedom that left early Americans uninterested in satire in favor of more direct provocations turned on its head; instead, money talked. An early attempt at developing the genre, the variety show *That Was The Week That Was* (1962) was a national sensation in the United Kingdom. However, it struggled in the American market. Scholars cite fear of “ruffling feathers of advertisers and the politically powerful” as an explanation for its subpar content (Gray et al. 2009, p. 23). Comedy-focused shows like *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* and *Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In* (1967) veered away from critiquing politics, even providing a cushiony appearance for President Richard Nixon months before the 1968 election.

Some programming – like *The Adams Family* (1964), and eventually the marginally more daring *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962) and *All in the Family* (1971) – poked fun at cultural concepts such as the socioeconomics of suburban living and gender roles. However, these sitcoms completely avoided the political issues that shaped such a culture, such as the Vietnam War.<sup>9</sup> Following tradition, programs of the 1980s largely leaned on this crutch of the Horatian “neotraditional domestic sitcom.” But one program changed television forever by “funnel[ing]...cultural savvy into political and social satire acceptable on the late-night fringe” (Gray et al., 2009, p. 23).

### *Stars of the Screen: Saturday Night Live*

In 1975, creator Lorne Michaels set out to bring to NBC what he called “pure communication” between live actors and their audience on a new sketch-comedy show called *Saturday Night Live* (SNL). Week after week, cast members perform skits poking fun at American society, from the Thanksgiving dinner table to politicians themselves. Further, its

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<sup>9</sup> *All in the Family* does, however, deserve a distinct nod for tackling prejudice through its patriarch antagonist in a shocking, progressive, yet palatable lens.

“Weekend Update” segment became a critical precursor for late-night desk comedy of the post-network era. The show still airs today.

*SNL* has been credited with immense progress in the genre. It provided some of the first on-screen critique of the presidency, suggesting “the serious choice [voters] were being asked to make [in an election] was, instead, fairly ridiculous” (Gray et al., 2009, p. 44). It made political satire mainstream on television; however, considering the criticism and accountability intrinsic to satire, scholars have questioned how “satirical” it really is.

For all its strides, *SNL* was plagued by the narrow capitalistic realities of the network era. Its popularity mandated appeal to a mass audience and thus a similar struggle to its predecessors: the fear of offense. Political satirizations on *SNL* hold figures accountable to a certain degree, but often falls back on surface-level parody rather than hard-hitting critique. The program has been disproportionately shaped by a reliance on its host format: “In contrast to more politically invested contemporary programs, the genre of fake news on *Saturday Night Live* has been largely emptied to serve the needs of the larger show, maintaining its status as just topical, hip, and unthreatening enough to attract celebrities and politicians, as well as a mass audience” (Day & Thompson, 2012).

In this way, *SNL* provides an apt example of the critical distinction between political humor and satire; the former lacks the bite and critique of institutionalized policies, norms, and beliefs.<sup>10</sup> But even soft political humor has the potential to influence the political sphere. Surface-level parodies can predict (and even encourage) personal downfalls of politicians, as *SNL* arguably did in portraying President Jimmy Carter’s smarter-than-thou persona and Nixon’s paranoid demeanor (Gray et al., 2009). One study found that after a parody of an interview with

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<sup>10</sup> This is similar to the distinction between Horatian and Juvenalian satire; *SNL* undoubtedly features moments of Juvenalia, especially in its “Weekend Update” segment, but relies mostly on Horatian content for ratings.

vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin aired on *SNL*, journalists increasingly attributed fault for John McCain's slipping presidential campaign to Palin herself. They also questioned her qualifications for office at a higher rate, especially when the *SNL* skit was included or referenced in the news story. Before the skit aired, blame was largely attributed to McCain himself and the interview was rendered inconsequential (Abel & Barthel, 2013).

*SNL* remains a potent reminder that “[s]atire’ [can] become an accomplice to power, not an adversary of it” (Gray et al., 2009, p. 46). And its viewers see it as a liberal accomplice: in a 2019 poll, about 48 percent of respondents said the series is “more liberal” politically (5 percent described the show as “more conservative,” and 10 percent answered “no political lean”) (Hayden, 2019).

### *Stars of the Screen: The Simpsons*

As the longest running sitcom of all time, *The Simpsons* “established the satirization of sitcom and social norms as the norm” (Gray et al., 2009, p. 25). Like its predecessors, it satirizes the suburban nuclear family: its classic caricatures include the dopey father, Homer; the doting mother, Marge; the delinquent son, Bart; the over-achieving daughter, Lisa; and an inconsequential baby, Maggie. But the show is careful in its balance of exaggeration and charm: “What makes *The Simpsons* so interesting is the way it combines traditionalism with antitraditionalism... it continually offers an enduring image of the nuclear family in the very act of satirizing” (Cantor, 1999, p. 737). In this way, the program is the epitome of Horatian satire: it tells the truth with a smile.

The show casually tackles issues such as nuclear power safety, environmentalism, immigration, gay rights, and women in the military. Its pointedly political critiques are

overwhelmingly bipartisan. An entire episode is dedicated to satirizing George H.W. Bush as a “bad neighbor.” In another episode, however, Grandpa Abraham Simpson does not question “checks for absolutely nothing” coming in the mail for him: ““I figured...the Democrats were in power again”” (Cantor, 1999, p. 735). Mayor Quimby, the show’s token politician, is undoubtedly a Kennedy family Democratic parody. The seal on the wall of his office reads *Corruptus in Extremis*: extremely corrupt. Yet the Springfield Republican Party Headquarters is set in a comedically ominous dark tower, complete with a perpetual thunderstorm; Count Dracula and a goblin are dedicated members. *The Simpsons* “defends the common man against the intellectual but in a way that both the common man and the intellectual can understand and enjoy” (Cantor, 1999, p. 747). There is evidence to suggest the show’s belief that members on either end of this binary can be from either side of the political aisle.

The series’ success in the specific brand of “young, irreverent, [and] brash” humor (which epitomizes both *The Simpsons* and other FOX shows of the era, such as *In Living Color* [1990]) nudged networks to pursue specific audience demographics: ABC skewed towards young females, for example, and NBC committed to ages 18-49. These strategic changes ushered in the “post-network” model of satirical television (Gray et al., 2009).

### **Post-Network Beginnings**

Beyond a demographic focus, the post-network age ushered in a revolutionary system: cable television. Unlike network TV, cable channels charge customers a subscription fee to watch their programs, and are often specialized by genre or demographic. The beginnings of an increasingly polarized electorate, as well as the decreasing trust in the increasingly polarized news sector that came with deregulation and consolidation, helped set the scene for a boom in satirical television (Young, 2019). This TV became increasingly Juvenalian.

Home Box Office (HBO) was a cable TV hit. Its programs like *The Chris Rock Show* (1997) featured aggressive social and political commentary with familiar, popular headliners, helping to redefine late night talk. With edge came criticism, however. Quentin Schaffer, a spokesperson for HBO, defended the company's provocative sketches by comedian Sacha Baron Cohen: "Through his alter-egos, he delivers an obvious satire that exposes people's ignorance and prejudice in much the way *All in the Family* did years ago" (Saunders, 2010).

Comedy Central was another early indication that cable would be a cozy home for satirical experimentation. "Dare to watch our programs and you might think in a different way," an early executive once teased (Gray et al., 2009, p. 26). The channel was popularized by Bill Maher's *Politically Incorrect* (1993); Maher's edge and wit behind the desk won him an eventual move to the ABC network, as well as the larger audience that came with it. However, his controversial monologue on 9/11 just six days after the tragedy – calling American missile strikes in the Middle East "cowardly," but refusing to label the perpetrators as such – forced the show's cancellation (Gray et al., 2009). Networks' mass audiences once again proved to be a satirical muzzle.

On cable, however, Comedy Central dedicated itself to edge. Niche attempts such as *That's My Bush!* (2001) and *Lil' Bush* (2007) fell flat because of financial constraints, as well as what critics pinned as untimeliness in their critique of the Bush Jr. administration (Gray et al., 2009). However, it enjoyed incredible success in another comedy desk program, *The Daily Show* (1996), as well as the satirical cartoon *South Park* (1997).

*Spotlight: South Park*

Though much more vulgar (it was the first weekly program to be rated TV-MATURE, and regularly references or displays bestiality, cannibalism, genocide, and mutilation), *South Park* toes a similar fine line to *The Simpsons*: it upholds American values while critiquing them. With its edge often comes successful Juvenalia, largely rooted in its nonpartisan nature: “Because of its refusal to align itself to any particular ideology or politics, *South Park* often celebrates the messy, contradictory and evolving nature of political situations through absurdity and vulgar humour” (Thorogood, 2016, p. 230). The program has critiqued the limits of “my body, my choice” and anti-discrimination lawsuits, but also displays caricatures of gun-clinging rednecks and “phony patriots.”

But *South Park* digs deeper than contemporary hot topics, too. In an appearance by a cartoon Rosie O’Donnell in a 2000 episode, she is bombasted by the boys’ teacher: “People like you preach tolerance and open-mindedness all the time, but when it comes to middle America, you think we’re all evil and stupid country yokels who need your political enlightenment. Just because you’re on TV doesn’t mean you know crap about the government” (Anderson, 2003). Thoughtful and sharp, this indirect critique is not dissimilar to Frank’s thesis in *What’s The Matter With Kansas?*. Creators and writers Trey Parker and Matt Stone have described themselves as “Equal Opportunity Offenders” (Thorogood, 2016, p. 216). This calculated offense, it seems, is key to the genre: though critiqued by conservatives as morally depraved and by academics as topically nihilistic, it remains one of the longest running sitcoms of all time, enjoying high ratings and a dedicated fandom. Other programming has drawn heavily on its “aesthetic-with-an-attitude” influence, from FOX’s *Family Guy* to the cable channel Adult Swim (Gray et al., 2009).

Balancing shock and intellect, “*South Park*’s satire may encourage people to care about important issues not in a ‘Which team are you on?’ but a ‘What do I think about this?’ kind of way” in a world in which “politics is too often reduced by the news media to the simplistic binaries that have alienated much of the public” (Gray et al., 2009, p. 214-15).

### *On-Screen (Vice) Presidential Laughs*

*West Wing* (1999) follows the personal and political trajectories of Josiah Bartlet, the fictional president portrayed on the show, and his advisors. It is generally not considered satire, sometimes taking itself too seriously in favor of its drama; still, its critical absurdity exposes the dysfunction of American politics, as well as how (subjectively) personal politics can be. One study noted its impact in this regard, finding that viewing the program “seems to prime more positive images of the U.S. presidency that subsequently influence individual-level perceptions of those individuals most directly associated with this office” (Holbert et al., 2003).

*Veep* (2012) may be the epitome of American satire. Its mockumentary style highlights the absurd day-to-day life of disillusioned Vice President Selina Meyer and her team (as well as their vulgar reactions to it). Its critiques are biting: the show exposes “both the depoliticizing message of 24/7 spectacle politics as well as the culture’s desire for some non mediating medium of representation to save us from its lies” (Conway, 2016). *Veep* stands out for both its female lead in Julia Louis-Dreyfus (who accidentally and anticlimactically becomes the first female president) as well as its completely non-partisan nature. Indeed, “*Veep* is almost all politics and almost no political issues” (Poniewozik, 2012), a post-partisan dystopia that is not dissimilar to the political reality of today, one becoming less and less ideological.

### *Late Night Desk Comedy*

Cable television gave rise to late night desk comedy, epitomized by the big names of *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* (1992) (and then *Jimmy Fallon* [2014]), *Jimmy Kimmel Live* [2003], and *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* [1993]) (and then *Seth Meyers* [2014]), as well as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (and then *Trevor Noah* [2015] and *The Colbert Report* [2005]).<sup>11</sup> It is in large part due to these programs that TV satire has been credited for holding political institutions accountable for transgressions against the public good and undemocratic policies. They also highlight the failure by mainstream media to hold these institutions accountable (Kilby, 2018). Scholars have called the loose genre of *The Daily Show* and *Colbert* “an experiment in journalism:” they contain serious news reporting, but always veiled by humor that intrinsically violates journalistic standards (Baym, 2003, p. 273).

It was *The Daily Show* that first prompted the *discursive integration hypothesis*, which states that “satirical news shows have integrated genre conventions of regular news and fiction to such an extent that the boundaries between these integrated genres in satirical news have become inseparable.” Jon Stewart places the two “not in binary opposition, but in complementary arrangements” (Baym, 2005, p. 262). The show encompasses pop culture and public affairs, and thus unique, increasingly subjective impressions on the viewer.

Stephen Colbert has perhaps been the most political of the late-night hosts, regularly interviewing politicians and mocking others in his monologues. He adopts an “intertextual parodic character” (Gray et al., 2009, p. 126) of conservative talk-show host Bill O'Reilly (of FOX) to lambaste the skewed reality and political incorrectness of O'Reilly and his peers. In the

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<sup>11</sup> Not all late-night comedy talk shows are created equally. Dannagal Goldthwaite Young points to the critical distinction of shows that seek primarily to entertain (the former) and ones that seek primarily to critique (the latter). The need for entertainment is a strong predictor of exposure to entertainment-oriented late-night comedy shows, but not for critique-based ones (and not for the three leading conservative outrage programs (Limbaugh, Hannity, and [Bill] O'Reilly) (2019). The former can be categorized as Horatian, and the latter Juvenalian.



show's premier, he introduced his ironic conception of the American divide: it is not between "red and blue," but between "those who *think* with their heads, and those who *know* with their heart." His postmodern absurdity, challenging principles as societally fundamental as objectivity in knowledge, won him Merriam-Webster's "word of the year"<sup>12</sup> in 2006, as well as an address at the White House Correspondents Dinner that same year: "I call [*The Report*] the 'No Fact Zone.' Fox News, I hold a copyright on that term," he warned in jest (Gray et al., 2009, p. 135).

This wasn't the only time that late night hosts directly entered the political sphere. President Obama sat down with Jon Stewart for an extended interview on *The Daily Show* on October 27, 2010, giving him a spotlight to charismatically (and comedically) defend his history and platform. Further, Comedy Central's Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear, hosted by Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert (as well as future late-night host Samantha Bee) took place at the peak of the 2010 midterm election. Signs from the rally teased polarization as the root of American conflict, reading things like: "I disagree with you but I'm pretty sure you're not Hitler; Things are pretty OK; and What do we want? Moderation!!! When do we want it? In a reasonable time frame" (Shephard, 2019).

### **Where's the Conservatism?**

Often but not always, progressive attitudes (relative to their times) dominate satire, but there is not a complete lack of conservatism in the field, historically or contemporarily.

Historically, Rush Limbaugh himself accounts for much of this content. When his Show went national in 1988, he experimented with a range of satirical bits. To the tune of Celine Dion's "The Wanderer," for example, he mocked Ted Kennedy as "The Philanderer." Quips on

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<sup>12</sup> "Truthiness:" Truth coming from the gut, not books; preferring to believe what you wish to believe, rather than what is known to be true (Merriam-Webster).

his show, such as him being “a supporter of the women’s movement when he was behind it” also jabbed at the progressive opposition. Much of this content suggests that ingroup and outgroup dynamics can drive reactionaries just as often as they do revolutionaries. As the University of Pennsylvania’s political historian Brian Rosenwald puts it:

...I think to a lot of conservatives, because the status quo was changed through the rights movements of the ’60s and ’70s, they feel like groups were being favored by government. They feel like they are being put down and are powerless themselves. And so to them targeting those people, they don’t see minority groups...To a conservative ear, it sounds like these people who are getting the government to go to bat for them and be on their side and advantage them over you the long-suffering conservative who feels marginalized and maligned, and isn’t sure what you can say in polite company anymore (Backstory Radio, 2017).

However, Rosenwald goes on to clarify his skepticism about satire of such a nature: “I wouldn’t say [Rush Limbaugh’s] was great satire because it’s just making fun of someone for something they already know. It didn’t really seem to connect any dots that things like *The Daily Show* are really famous for, kind of making those points or calling out hypocritical people” (Backstory Radio, 2017).

As their history demonstrates, American satirical news shows are almost exclusively of a liberal origin (Becker and Waisanen, 2013; Young, 2019). Satirical cartoons such as *South Park* and *The Simpsons* straddle a radical centrist line. That doesn’t mean there isn’t provocative conservative media. Since its 1996 launch, Fox News has provided what its CEO Roger Ailes calls a “haven” for viewers disgruntled with the “liberal bias” of the news media (Anderson, 2003). At the same time that *The Daily Show* boomed on Comedy Central, *The O’Reilly Factor* (1996) premiered and flourished on FOX. But while *O’Reilly* undoubtedly provides critique, it does so in a distinct way from traditional satire.

*Irony and Outrage* (2019) is a key text in examining satire through a partisan lens. Young hypothesizes that while the broad field of “alternative programming” serves both ends of the political spectrum, satirical programming is more popular among liberals while “outrage programming” is more popular among conservatives. In her analysis, she credits liberals’ and conservatives’ respective cognitive preferences for ambiguity and certainty. The success in certainty of “outrage programming” is clear in support for Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, and Tucker Carlson. This is not to say that conservatives have not attempted satire: an HBO special, “Dennis Miller: The Raw Feed” expressed conservative viewpoints, for example. But any attempts at longevity, such as FOX’s short-lived *The Half Hour News Hour* (2007) (replaced by the mildly-popular *Gutfeld!* [2015]), largely fall flat. Liberal attempts at outrage programming, such as the radio network Air America, have also largely failed (Young, 2019). In Young’s analysis, this is because liberal outrage “can’t escape the comedy” (p. 232) and conservative satire “can’t escape the outrage” (p. 234).

There are core differences in the ways partisans communicate. For instance, liberals have generally been found to use more emotionally expressive language (Sylwester and Purver, 2015), more complex language (Schoonvelde et al., 2019) and less masculine language (Roberts and Utych, 2020) than conservatives. Conservatives will more often use linguistics of power (Mehta, 2020). Liberal satirical news shows, specifically, contain more irony, implied humor, and playfulness than conservative satirical news shows (Young, 2019). But what explains these rhetorical differences is deeper than comedy versus outrage, or ambiguity versus certainty.

There is also evidence to challenge supposedly inherent differences in foundations for and interpretation of partisan media; complex dynamics may be at play. Several studies have demonstrated that psychological differences between liberals and conservatives may actually be

exaggerations (e.g. Bakker et al., 2020; Frimer et al., 2013; Ludeke et al., 2016). This disparity may be rooted in ever-present ingroup and outgroup dynamics. Perceptions of trait desirability of a respondent's political ingroup has been found to influence self-reports (Ludeke et al., 2016). Self-reports can also be influenced by respondents' stereotypical perceptions of the political outgroup (Graham et al., 2012; Scherer et al., 2015), such that their answers potentially overstate an outgroup's "bad" or "different" qualities. In short, identification with labels like "liberal" or "conservative" can affect how we report our own psychology, rather than the other way around (not unlike "innocence of ideology" [Kimball, 2018]).

A recent study suggests that liberal and conservative satirical news are not characterized by different levels of discursive integration, pushing back on the binary of ambiguity and certainty that Young proposes (Brugman, 2022). Young's work, however, is an important (if malleable) frame to work within: liberals and conservatives enjoy distinct avenues of media in different ways, accounting – in some ways – for the disproportionate amount of "liberal" satire.

### **The New Wave of Satire**

In America's new, highly polarized political landscape, *South Park* writers Stone and Parker have discussed the challenges of mocking and critiquing when "satire has become reality" (Kilby 2018). President Donald Trump set a perfect scene for such a development. His outrage at being comedically prodded or portrayed made him an easy subject of pointed and harsh ridicule in a way his predecessors were not; many of them embraced humorous portrayals of themselves, such as President George H. W. Bush on *SNL* alongside Dana Carvey's impression of him and President Barack Obama "slow-jamming the news" on *The Tonight Show*. These political moves "only endeared them to the public, demonstrating they could laugh at their own expense" (Jasny,

2021). Trump, on the other hand, repeatedly attacked late night shows, including an infamous spar with Colbert. As one scholar put it, “the more you puff yourself up, the more late night comedy is ready to stick a pin into an over-inflated balloon” (Jasny, 2021). In this way, the political chaos of the late 2010s fueled satire’s usual habits.

But such chaos has also changed these habits. A new wave of programming – epitomized by *Last Week Tonight With John Oliver* (2014) on HBO and *Full Frontal With Samantha Bee* (2016) – has created a newly emergent (and Juvenalian) satire-for-change genre. Unlike their predecessors, these programs employ(ed)<sup>13</sup> “a hybrid-mix of comedy and advocacy traits.” They also propose(d) strategies to educate conservative viewers. Instead of “preaching to the converted liberal agenda of its audience” in attacking President Trump, “Oliver and Bee redirected their satirical skewering onto their respective audiences. This enabled them to mock and criticize the audiences’ political self righteousness, cynicism, and their superficial and unrealistic approaches to activism” (Kilby, 2018). The study categorized such programs as “advocacy journalism,” citing the effective and realistic ways they encouraged civic participation from both ends of the political spectrum. This new label further suggests that TV satire does affect politics, even occasionally supporting active democratic participation: the implicit effects of *SNL* on the news, interviews with politicians, and the Comedy Central rally were early signs of this phenomenon.

Still, scholars fear the inevitable effect of polarization on this new age of satire TV: in an interview with the Harvard Political Review, Professor S. Robert Lichter, director of the Center for Media and Public Affairs at George Mason University, warned that “[t]he [late night television] audience has become much more polarized, just as America in general has become

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<sup>13</sup> *Full Frontal* was canceled in 2022, with channel TBS citing “difficult business decisions” (Steinberg, 2022).

more polarized politically... This means that as a comedian, you're playing to the gallery: you know who your audience is, you know it's a one-note audience, and you try to keep hitting that note." This one note will continually attract a homogenous audience: an audience that incentivizes more of this note, "form[ing] something of a positive feedback loop" (Jasny, 2021).

### *From the Living Room to Your Hand: Online Satirical Publications*

As representatives of pure consumer choice, network and cable TV have long been in decline. Pay-TV subscriptions have fallen by 10.2 million from Q4 2016, a decline of 12%. Consumption from the 18-49 demographic is declining at an even higher rate, with primetime viewing of most content increasingly skewing over 50 (Bridge, 2022). Instead of choosing what we consume, the internet age has brought on the reality of algorithms, especially through social media such as Instagram and Twitter. These algorithms propagate both "formal" satire, in *The Onion News Network* and *The Babylon Bee*, as well as a sort of "informal" satire in user-created memes.

As of 2016, social media created 40% of traffic of *The Onion News Network*, a leading name in a new age of satire (Sinkovich & Brindisi, 2016). The "network" satirizes broadcasting itself, as well as lifestyle and political topics. Founded in 1988 as a print news parody, *The Onion* has never taken itself seriously: its "About Us" page on its website quips that it "supports more than 350,000 full- and part-time journalism jobs in its numerous news bureaus and manual labor camps stationed around the world" (The Onion, 1996). The company also launched ClickHole in response to rapidly growing publications like the quiz-and-list-focused BuzzFeed. ClickHole "uses tactics to entice social media and Web users to click through to read their stories, but they also maintain editorial quality and integrity" (Sinkovich & Brindisi, 2016, p. 79). In a symphony

of irony, this branch of The Onion, Inc. satirizes and benefits from the contemporary phenomenon of “clickbait:” headlines designed to garner a “click” on the story and nothing more, earning views for advertisements on the same page and therefore revenue “regardless of whether the story has any worth” (Sinkovich & Brindisi, 2016, p. 79).

While satire TV struggled to face the camera in the aftermath of 9/11, *The Onion* appealed the patriots and comics alike with its response, rooted in abstract yet poignant headlines like “Attack on America: Holy Fucking Shit;” “Not Knowing What Else to Do, Woman Bakes American-Flag Cake;” “U.S. Vows to Defeat Whoever It Is We’re at War With;” and “Hijackers Surprised to Find Selves in Hell: ‘We Expected Eternal Paradise for This,’ Say Suicide Bombers” Says Josh Modell, Editor-in-Chief and General Manager of the *A.V. Club*, a sister publication of *The Onion*: “The post-9/11 edition brought [*The Onion*] to a new level...[People thought] You’re really smart, and you’re really funny, but you’re also sensitive and thoughtful...That was a defining moment for *The Onion* (Sinkovich & Brindisi, 2016, p. 81).

Satirical television is forced to reckon with casting and personality, and has benefitted largely from the Horatian charisma of its front men. But this reality often comes with the pitfalls of softening satire to political humor, epitomized by *SNL* (Day & Thompson, 2012). *The Onion*, largely Juvenalian, faces no such struggle. With few visual gimmicks to fall back on, its headlines’ deadpan, clever tone has even misled professional news and governmental organizations into interpreting their “news” as fact (Sinkovich & Brindisi, 2016). It may not be surprising, then, that a brand new study finds that discursive integration is just as vital to written satirical news as it is to satirical news shows, as the structure mimics journalistic conventions but employs humorous imagination-based storytelling (Brugman et al., 2022; Waisanen, 2011;

Skalicky, 2018; Stevens and McIntyre, 2019). In the satirical sphere, subjective interpretations consistently prevail.

*Another Conservative Counterpart and The Perils of Meme*

Adam Ford, a Christian webcomic artist based in Detroit, launched *The Babylon Bee* in 2016. It remains perhaps the best example of contemporary satire with a conservative lens. Once banned for hateful tweets towards a transgender individual of the Biden administration, Twitter's new CEO Elon Musk reinstated the company's account in 2022 (Haroun, 2022). Rhetorically, headlines read quite similarly to *The Onion*: "Kamala Explains: If Railworkers Strike, Then Trains No Choo Choo;" "Democrats Endorse Trump After He Calls For Destroying The Constitution;" and "Trans Furry Named Best In Show At National Dog Show" are a few examples. Their "About Us" adopts the same quippy tone as *The Onion*, too: "We focus on just the facts, leaving spin and bias to other news sites like CNN and Fox News. If you would like to complain about something on our site, take it up with God" (The Babylon Bee, 2022). Similarly to how *The Simpsons* upholds American values, scholars have argued that, for its religious supporters, *The Babylon Bee*'s use of satire can strengthen their faith through "religious satire's inherent critique of superfluous structures and practices in the church...aided through a clarification of message that results from satire's tendency to exaggerate elements of its critique" (Sheldon, 2019, p. 43).

Even considering the prevalence of these "news networks," platforms like Twitter and Instagram feature much more informal, user-generated content than their television counterparts. While widely unexplored in an academic light, the few studies on user-generated satire (such as memes) credit it as "conducive to new forms of political literacy [through] community-builders



connecting solo agents to social networks and political causes” (Apter, 2019). Studies have also found that groups such as the alt-right weaponize irony to attract and radicalize potential supporters, challenge progressive ideologies and institutions, and create a toxic counterpublic of ideas like reverse racism, including the concept of “white genocide” (Greene, 2019).

One of the first examples of this phenomenon was Pepe the frog. Pepe began as a character in *Boy’s Club*, a MySpace “stoner humor” comic dating back to 2005 (Nelson, 2016). In 2015, the Pepe the Frog meme was awarded “biggest meme of the year” by the social media platform Tumblr. But just one year later, Pepe was declared a hate symbol by the U.S. Anti-Defamation League (Glitsos and Hall, 2020). As the meme became more mainstream, losing its edge in niche reference, dedicated users sought “rare Pepes” of a provocative nature to reclaim the character. It wasn’t long before “rare” became synonymous with “offensive,” and users pushed the template to exceedingly anti-Semitic, racist bounds.



Figure 3. Antisemitic Pepe (Source: @DennisMiddleto5 on Twitter)

Donald Trump Jr. retweeted a meme branding Pepe as one of the “deplorables” in Trump’s “basket,” not only causing controversy in the context of Pepe’s newfound provocativeness, but encouraging synonymization of Pepe with his father.



*Figure 4. Anti-Hillary Trump Pepe (Source: @WowIHateIdiots on Twitter)*

Because companies depend on engagement for profit, they have incentive to support (or at least ignore) opportunistic, hateful, and divisive speech on their platforms. People are more likely to “like” provocative posts with tones of anger, resentment, and violence (Walter, 2022). Pepe is a prime example. Behavioral algorithms, therefore, usher users to more extreme information, and will even recommend further antagonistic posts, groups, and reading. Truth doesn’t matter; even worse, truth becomes almost impossible to discern in a sea of

content-for-gain. Individuals or groups can intentionally distort timelines and facts beyond recognition, promoting a sense of perpetual crisis. The unmitigated, unregulated pathways for information on social media provide a perfect landscape for language of negative partisanship.

### **The Historical Uniqueness of American Satire**

Ironically (how fitting?), core values that originally slowed the growth of American satire have shaped its influential identity in the political sphere. What drove America's initial rejection of satire in favor of outright critique affords the American satirist a particular freedom: not only protection from the state, but a complete lack of censorship precedent. A brief 1903 exception to this rule was stopped before it started; a 1988 Supreme Court decision solidified satirical rights.

At its core, American satire is not just rooted in freedom, but capitalism. The demand-side is polarized than ever, as evidence of cultural binary-based sortings extend to the media (Hetherington and Weiler, 2018; DellaPosta 2020; Brown and Enos, 2021). The American satirist need not be worried about appealing to the king, but market equilibrium. But this equilibrium doesn't connote moderation. As American historian Ed Ayers put it: "Even with a highly polarized and fairly evenly divided viewership and electorate, the mainstream comedy shows are all just going after [Donald] Trump full bore and flourishing in the market...ironically, playing it safe for the market doesn't really seem to work anymore" (Backstory Radio, 2017). Though Trump's effect on satire proved more nuanced in succeeding years, the electorate and the market are indeed more desensitized to controversy, as well as increasingly powered by forces beyond their control (in psychological polarization and algorithms). The days of "playing it safe" are long gone.

These subjective truths extend further than freedom and economics. Because satire encompasses epideictic rhetoric – presentation of language focused on collective identities, praise and blame, and common values – “the facts themselves are not really at issue” (Morreale, 2009). Freeman thus suggests correlation between fake news and satire: “Maybe in this environment where we’re not sure where to look for facts or what facts are, humor becomes the most powerful tool” (Backstory Radio, 2017). As demonstrated, this tool is used all across the spectrum of morality.

## Chapter Three: Theory

### *The Literature Gap and Corresponding Hypotheses*

For its psychological, sociological, and political logic, the connection between negative partisanship and satire remains largely unstudied. Satire theorists have long recognized that satirical portrayals can have polarizing effects, supported by disposition theory: the idea that media and entertainment users make moral judgments about characters in a narrative, which in turn affects their enjoyment of the narrative (Knight, 2004; Zillman & Cantor, 1976). But scholars who study interaction between sentiments against the other party (though rarely labeled affect/negative partisanship) and satire often focus on selection and confirmation biases (Stroud & Muddiman 2013; Knobloch-Westerwick & Lavis, 2017). Other satirical studies discuss the effects of satire on political engagement in general (e.g. Lee, 2014; Kulkarni, 2017; Martinez & Atouba, 2021) or emotionality independent from politics (e.g. Stroud, 2015). Indeed, these investigations are integral to a conceptual understanding of both topics. However, political, cultural, and technological realities – namely, the unprecedented spike in negative partisanship coupled with algorithmic norms determining which media we consume – demand a more pointed investigation of satire’s effect on the attitudes of negative partisanship.

This project seeks to investigate: *To what extent can engagement with satire provoke feelings of negative partisanship?*

Tenets of subjectivity are intrinsic to negative partisanship: the vote choice funnel of causality depends on malleable perceptions, and is thus vulnerable to manipulation. It is strengthened by its “self-reinforcing” filtration through an inherently-biased lens (Lewis-Beck et al., 2008). Motivated reasoning can be (and has been) encouraged in distinctly partisan ways

(Jacobson, 2010), and this can escalate to extreme levels such as moral disengagement (Cassese, 2020). If fundamental political principles like democratic accountability can be skewed by such tactics (Key, 1966), it is logical that negative partisanship, rooted in emotionality and mostly devoid of the ideological, could be as well.

With similar roots in subjective interpretations, satire is a reasonable mechanism to encourage negative partisanship. There exist numerous scholarly concerns about partisan (or at least group-based) perceptions of satire. Some of the most seemingly-obvious critiques, however, have been debunked: for example, people are proven to laugh at satire about themselves and their in-groups (Colletta, 2009). But unique cognitive processing can encourage “seeing what one wants to see” in satire:

‘Unprejudiced viewers’ viewing *All in the Family* liked that the prejudiced blue-collar worker Archie Bunker was being satirized. Prejudiced viewers, however, also liked the series because they loved seeing Archie expressing their feelings and, thus, found the sitcom funny by misinterpreting the satire and selectively processing it in a nonthreatening manner (Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974). Similarly, conservatives and liberals both laughed at *The Colbert Report*, but for different reasons that were in line with their political views (Colletta, 2009; LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009).

Further studies suggest that political group membership can influence whether addressees interpret satirical news as humorously intended or not (van Mulken et al., 2010), or whether addressees think that the satire reflects the satirist’s genuine opinion (LaMarre et al., 2009). Satire has been studied in the context of intertextuality: the theory that interpretation comes not only from a text itself, but also the context of its reader. This context can include demographic characteristics as well as previous textual experience surrounding the same topic or associations with the topic (Gray et al., 2006; Landreville & LaMarre, 2013).

Entertainment and reality are not two ends of a binary. Through the lens of satire’s critical absurdity, they work together to challenge the individual’s perception. Epideictic rhetoric and the

discursive integration hypothesis encourage viewers' increasingly subjective perceptions; it is up to the consumer to decide the level of fact and fiction in satire, whether to be informed or entertained, and what to do with those impressions. Psychological and sociological impulses answer these questions. A historical analysis of satire reveals its dependence on capitalism and subsequent vulnerability to manipulation, from direct hijack to the subtleties of cultural influence. With the individual interpretation malleable in these ways, it is reasonable to hypothesize that satire can affect negative partisanship, or extreme attitudes towards an outgroup, when presented in a way that plays on partisan biases.

### *Age and Gender*

It has been found that “young adults compared to older people are more absorbed in satirical items than in regular news” (Boukes, 2015). Further, “[t]he irony demo: the coastal, college educated” receives much of their news from satire (Gray et al., 2009, p. 28). Studies posit that satire may close the age gap in political attentiveness between younger and older citizens, which hinges on empiricism proving that satire targets a younger audience (Hmielowski et al., 2011; Young & Tisinger, 2006). It is reasonable to assume, then, that younger consumers will engage more deeply with satire, taking its message to heart.

*The Onion's* viewership is predominantly 18-44, as well as male, white, and college-educated (Sinkovich & Brindisi, 2016). Literature suggests that male respondents evaluate satirical humor more positively than female respondents, whereas women prefer sentimental comedy more than men do (Schwarz, 2015); men, then, may also be more inflamed by negativity from a source they hold in such high regard. *Going Negative*, an analysis of

inflammatory political advertisements, found that negative ads work better on men than women (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995).

### *Partisanship*

*Going Negative* found, too, that provocative political ads worked better on Republicans than Democrats (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995). Republican-leaning individuals have been found to scrutinize and discriminate more when it comes to satirical news choices, skeptical of their representation in the genre (Knobloch-Westernwick, S. & Lavis, S. M., 2017). As demonstrated, mainstream satire generally attracts a more liberal audience, and may thus cater more toward liberal attitudes. Republicans' preference for outrage – and consequential inexperience with satire – may lead them to be less engaged by satire, even if it is within their anti-liberal echo chamber (Young, 2020). With Democrats' corresponding experience in satirical support for their own beliefs (Becker and Waisanen, 2013; Young, 2019), it is logical to predict that satire will have a stronger effect on Democratic attitudes.

Recognizing the causality dilemma – that is, the possibility that satire influences negative partisanship, but also that negative partisanship influences satire – and given trends of the subjectivity overlap, age, gender, and party, the following hypotheses are formed:

H1: Respondents who identify as Republican will report stronger feelings of negative partisanship overall than those who do not.

H2: Engaging with media satirizing the opposite party will make respondents more likely to report feelings of negative partisanship than engaging with non-satirical media about the same topic.

H3: Respondents who identify as Democrats will report stronger feelings of negative partisanship after engaging with media satirizing the opposite party than Republicans.



H4: Engaging with media satirizing one's own party will have little to no effect on attitudes of negative partisanship.

H5: Respondents who identify as male are more likely to report feelings of negative partisanship overall than those who do not.

H6: The younger a respondent is, the more likely they are to report feelings of negative partisanship after engaging with media satirizing the opposite party.

Guided by these hypotheses and literature-based frameworks, this paper seeks to fill the research gap concerning satire and negative partisanship.

## Chapter 4: Methodology & Findings

To test these hypotheses, this study analyzed a cross sectional survey conducted in February 2023. The survey asked 2,839 randomly selected respondents to provide information and opinions via a Qualtrics survey on LUCID on-line marketplace. Appropriate steps were undertaken to ensure the sample used in this study is balanced according to a host of demographic measures, including race, gender, education, age, income and partisanship. The survey included an attention check measure: participants had to correctly answer the current month of the year to complete the survey.

The study's dependent variable, negative partisanship, is operationalized as the standard American National Election Studies' feeling thermometer: "I'd like you to rate how you feel about the following party on a feeling thermometer. The higher the number, the warmer or more favorable you feel toward the party. The lower the number, the colder or less favorable you feel. You can pick any number between 0 and 100." All respondents answered for both "The Democratic Party" and "The Republican Party." To reveal more specific impressions of the out-party based in negative partisanship, respondents were also asked: "How strongly do you agree with the following statements?" The first statement read "Republicans are..." Respondents then answered on 100-point agreement scales for five adjectives: "immoral," "unintelligent," "close-minded," "authoritarian," and "less than human." An identical set of adjective agreement scales was presented for the prompt, "Democrats are..."

The study's independent variable, satire, is operationalized by two different short texts that presented information about masking to prevent COVID-19.<sup>14</sup> Respondents also had the chance of receiving two corresponding control texts, and thus received one of: an

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<sup>14</sup> This topic was chosen for its relative uniqueness: a politicized issue that is apolitical by nature.

anti-conservative non-satirical control, an anti-liberal non-satirical control, an anti-conservative satirical treatment, and an anti-liberal satirical treatment. Satirical texts were adopted from *The Onion*'s March 2021 article "New Texas Law Requires All Masks Have Word 'Pussy' Written Across Front," and adjusted for uniformity between treatment groups, as well as to touch on more specific negative partisan sentiments. After answering a series of baseline questions about their demographics and political leanings, respondents were primed for one of four of these texts with the following message: "Thank you for those responses. As you know, we all get political information in different ways. Please read the following carefully and then we'll ask some more questions." The respondent then continued onto the rest of the survey, which touched upon their engagement with and impressions of satire, as well as topics like civility in politics. The survey in its entirety can be found in Appendix A.

The findings in this study center around an analysis of means of the operationalizations of negative partisanship: one feeling thermometer and five adjective agreement scales per party. These means changed based on both demographics and introduction of satirical treatments among these demographics. Statistical significance was determined by margin of error (confidence level: 95%) per sample size and corresponding confidence intervals.

### **Negative Partisanship Baselines & Hypothesis 1**

There is some support for Hypothesis 1, which predicted that respondents who identify as Republican would report stronger feelings of negative partisanship overall than those who do not. A total of 1,055 Democrats rated the Republican Party an average of 29.17 out of 100 on the feeling thermometer scale. The 762 Republicans in the study rated the Democratic Party an average of 24.97. On the 100-point agreement scale for adjectives associated with negative

partisanship, Democrats said, on average, that Republicans were 56.15/100 immoral; 51.14/100 unintelligent; 64.64/100 close-minded; 61.65/100 authoritarian; and 44.75/100 “less than human.” On the other end of the aisle, Republicans, on average, rated Democrats 57.81 immoral; 53.33 unintelligent; 60.27 close-minded; 59.05 authoritarian; and 44.74 “less than human.”

The support for H1 lies in the difference of thermometer means (**-5.80** between Democrats and Republicans; standard deviations of 28.59 and 26.07, respectively<sup>15</sup>). This is in line with similar studies, such as the 6-point difference between members of the parties saying that they hold “very unfavorable” views of the other party in a 2022 Pew measure. In both studies, Republicans were more strongly negative partisan. Based on sample size, the margin of error for total partisan data (N=1,817) is 2.29 percent. This difference is therefore statistically significant.<sup>16</sup>

This survey’s adjective agreement scales suggest that negative partisanship may manifest in different ways between the two parties, however. Republicans reported higher levels of agreement with the statement that Democrats are immoral and unintelligent than Democrats did about them. But although Democrats reported a higher baseline thermometer measure of the Republican Party, they also reported higher levels of agreement that Republicans were close-minded and authoritarian. Republicans may indeed be more negatively partisan at its most basic definition, but further research is needed to discern what these views mean in practice.

Adjectives assigned to measure negative partisanship have distinct connotations from one another, and do not necessarily communicate the same sentiment: association measures are shown in the tables below, displaying the construct validity of the operationalization of negative partisanship. Correlation values are notably low between the thermometer scales and adjective

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<sup>15</sup> Standard deviations in this study were consistently high: between 25-35. This trend is further analyzed in limitations, and therefore not noted per measure.

<sup>16</sup> **Bolded** differences of means that follow are statistically significant.

attitude scales, a limitation discussed in more detail in its corresponding section. This is in line with emergent, deeper studies on negative partisanship, most prevalently Lee et al.'s "Negative partisanship is not more prevalent than positive partisanship" (2022).

	q30_1	q30_2	q30_3	q30_4	q30_5	q29_2
q30_1	<b>1.0000</b>					
q30_2	<b>0.7483</b>	<b>1.0000</b>				
q30_3	<b>0.7480</b>	<b>0.7089</b>	<b>1.0000</b>			
q30_4	<b>0.7040</b>	<b>0.6530</b>	<b>0.7662</b>	<b>1.0000</b>		
q30_5	<b>0.6269</b>	<b>0.6920</b>	<b>0.5684</b>	<b>0.5338</b>	<b>1.0000</b>	
q29_2	<b>-0.2644</b>	<b>-0.2512</b>	<b>-0.3473</b>	<b>-0.2643</b>	<b>-0.1274</b>	<b>1.0000</b>

*Table 1.* "Correlations: Attitudes Towards Republicans"

	q31_1	q31_2	q31_3	q31_4	q31_5	q29_1
q31_1	<b>1.0000</b>					
q31_2	<b>0.7372</b>	<b>1.0000</b>				
q31_3	<b>0.7526</b>	<b>0.7584</b>	<b>1.0000</b>			
q31_4	<b>0.7505</b>	<b>0.6918</b>	<b>0.7858</b>	<b>1.0000</b>		
q31_5	<b>0.6538</b>	<b>0.7382</b>	<b>0.6560</b>	<b>0.6250</b>	<b>1.0000</b>	
q29_1	<b>-0.2141</b>	<b>-0.2368</b>	<b>-0.2734</b>	<b>-0.2489</b>	<b>-0.1296</b>	<b>1.0000</b>

*Table 2.* "Correlations: Attitudes Towards Democrats"

**Key:**

**Q29:** ANES Thermometer Scales

**Q30/Q31: Adjective Agreement Scales:** 1) Immoral 2) Unintelligent 3) Close-Minded 4) Authoritarian 5) Less Than Human

These questions avoided a tautology, but there is a clear distinction between attitudes expressed. With the understanding that these are strong correlations, but also that these terms carry their own meanings, adjective attitude indices were created for each party. The indices combined all five measures into a scale out of 500. Means of the out-party index were almost identical: 280.07 for Democrats answering about Republicans, and 278.48 for Republicans answering about Democrats.

Although Republicans favor “outrage” programming and respond better to negative political ads (Young, 2020; Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995), that doesn’t mean that they’re more strongly negative partisan. In all, Hypothesis 1 is partially supported: Republicans are (slightly) more likely to report higher levels of negative partisanship on adjective scale means, but adjective agreement scales tell a different, more complicated story.

### **Satirical Manipulation: Hypotheses 2, 3, 4**

Survey data provided some support for Hypothesis 2, which predicted that engagement with media satirizing the opposite party would make respondents more likely to report feelings of negative partisanship than engaging with non-satirical media about the same topic. However, in examining out-party satire, MOEs increased to 5.08 percent for Republicans and 4.12 percent for Democrats, as sample size decreased (some respondents received “in-party” satirical or control texts: anti-liberal for Democrats or anti-conservative for Republicans. These implications

are analyzed later in the study, but the following analysis concerns respondents who received one of two out-party texts).

Republicans who received the anti-liberal control text rated the Democratic Party an average of 26.15 on the thermometer scale, but those who received the anti-liberal experimental text rated the Democratic Party an average of 21.31, a -4.84 point difference. Democrats who received the anti-conservative control text rated Republicans an average of 29.82, while those who received the anti-conservative experimental text rated them an average of 27.15, a -2.67 point difference. Hypothesis 2, which predicted that engaging with media satirizing the opposite party will make respondents more likely to report feelings of negative partisanship, is somewhat supported by these figures, but the results were just under statistically significant.

Hypothesis 3, which predicted that Democrats will report stronger feelings of negative partisanship after engaging with media satirizing the opposite party (versus Republicans), is not supported by these figures. These values did reveal (marginal) further support for Hypothesis 1, however: looking at total partisan data, the +2.17 point difference between Democratic and Republican responses is just 0.1 percent from statistical significance, with Republicans expressing higher levels of negative partisanship on the ANES scale once more.

Notably, every adjective scale revealed an increase in attitudes of negative partisanship when partisans were exposed to satire targeting the out-party, supporting Hypothesis 2. On the agreement scale for the adjective “immoral” to describe Republicans, Democrats who received the anti-conservative control text averaged 54.37 out of 100, while the corresponding treatment group answered an average of 60.80 (+6.43). For “unintelligent,” Democrats who received the anti-conservative control text rated Republicans an average of 48.11, compared to the 52.56 experimental average (+4.45).

Interestingly, a similar – but larger – jump in Democratic, negative attitudes towards Republicans was observed between the anti-liberal control text and its experimental counterpart: the thermometer scale jumped from 50.29 to 54.03 for agreement with “unintelligent” to describe members of the party (+3.74). This is evidence against Hypothesis 4, which predicted that engagement with media satirizing one’s own party will have little to no effect on attitudes of negative partisanship. Republicans who engaged with the anti-conservative treatment text, however, did not follow this pattern: the +0.29 point difference between the control and experimental groups is marginal.

A similar trend was consistent in analysis of the adjective “close-minded.” Democrats who received the anti-conservative control text agreed 62.65 out of 100 with the statement, compared to the treatment group’s 67.12 (+4.47); there was also a 1.60 point increase between the anti-liberal control text and the anti-liberal experimental text. Agreement with “authoritarian” jumped **7.83** points between the anti-conservative control and experimental groups. Finally, agreement with the adjective “less than human” to describe Republicans moderately increased between Democrats who received the anti-conservative control text (42.59) versus the experimental one (46.50) (+3.59).

As for Republicans describing Democrats, an average of a 57.00 point agreement with “immoral” for respondents who received the anti-liberal control text increased to 59.57 in the experimental group (+2.57). A slight increase in average (52.34 to 53.53) was observed for agreement with the adjective “unintelligent” to describe Democrats among those receiving the experimental text compared to the control. A 2.98 point jump in average agreement between the anti-liberal control and its corresponding experimental group for the adjective “close-minded” was observed (58.95 versus 61.93). A larger – 4.57 point – jump was observed for



“authoritarian” to describe Democrats (55.89 versus 60.46). Finally, the average agreement that Democrats were “less than human” jumped from 42.08 to 46.27 with the anti-conservative control versus its experimental counterpart (+4.19). For these measures, the anti-conservative experimental treatment did not prompt the occasional shift in Republican negative attitudes towards Democrats that the anti-liberal experimental treatment did for Democrats. These figures are also – just barely – statistically insignificant.

The proportion of respondents who answered in extremes sometimes seemed to correlate with receiving the experimental treatment, further supporting Hypothesis 2. For example, 20.30 percent of Republicans who received the anti-liberal control rated Democrats zero on the thermometer scale, and that proportion jumped to 25.14 percent among those receiving the corresponding experimental treatment (+4.84). Similarly, 10.20 percent of Democrats who received the anti-conservative control rated Republicans zero, but that proportion increased to 13.45 percent when the satirical treatment was introduced (+3.25). Similar shifts in extreme adjective attitude measures were not observed, however.

Evidence against Hypothesis 4 is further supported by the percent distribution of Democratic respondents. 17.17 percent of Democrats who received the anti-conservative control answered “zero” on the thermometer scale, compared to 19.78 percent of the treatment group. But a **8.20** point jump – 15.00 percent to 23.20 percent – was observed between the anti-liberal control and experimental groups among Democrats.

This project mainly aims to investigate satire targeting the out-party, following literature that links specific subjective associations (Lewis-Beck et al., 2008; Gray et al., 2006; Landreville & LaMarre, 2013) with both negative partisanship and satire. Satire targeting an in-party works in different ways. Literature reflects the idea that people are sometimes proven to laugh at satire

about themselves and their in-groups (Colletta, 2009). When that doesn't happen and negative partisan attitudes *are* inflamed, it is reasonable to assume perception of in-party satire becomes simply a perception of an attack on the in-party, because that satire is a) presumably created by the out-party and b) critiquing some aspect of their character.

Considering the data analyzed in this study, it is possible that Republicans are better at the Coletta “laugh it off” response, although the 2009 study found no difference between the parties in that regard. Since most satire is liberal, have Republicans grown a thicker skin to it? Are Democrats so used to being in the satirical ingroup that they're *outraged* when they're not?

Anti-conservative satire did not produce any notable shifts on any measure of Republican negative partisanship; however, there was still little evidence of Democratic contrast beyond highlighted figures. There was no shift in many of the difference-of-means measures of Democratic negative partisanship between the anti-liberal control text and its experimental counterpart, including the ANES thermometer and most adjectives. Based on this study's theory and piecemeal results regarding ingroup satire, then, the following analysis focuses on satire towards the out-party. But further research could – and should – investigate the possibility of Democratic satirical outrage, a complication to Young's (2020) framework.

### **Strong Partisans**

Both average measures and satirical shifts were affected by whether respondents identified themselves as strong Republicans (versus “not so strong,” abbreviated “NS”), but not whether respondents identified themselves as strong Democrats.

Strong Republicans rated the Democratic Party an average of 21.85 on the thermometer scale, while NS Republicans rated it an average of 30.61 (+8.96). But such a connection was not

confirmed on the other side of the aisle: strong Democrats rated the Republican Party an average of 30.61, while NS Democrats rated them an average of 25.60 (+**5.01**). This is support for the idea that Democrats are actually marginally more sympathetic to Republicans than their NS counterparts.

However, strong Democrats agreed much more that the five negative adjectives described Republicans than the corresponding thermometer scale would seem to suggest. Strong Democrats agreed with “immoral” to describe Republicans **7.65** points more than NS Democrats, **9.35** points more for unintelligent, **4.97** points more for close-minded, 3.27 points more for authoritarian, and **11.9** points more for “less than human,” perhaps the strongest indicator of a vicious strand of negative partisanship.

Similar jumps were observed when satirical manipulation was introduced. Based on sample sizes, MOEs increased to 4.96 percent for analysis of strong Democrats, 7.41 percent for NS Democrats, 6.35 percent for strong Republicans, and 8.50 percent for NS Republicans. The average increase of agreement with “immoral” to describe Republicans by strong Democrats increased by **7.44**; “unintelligent” increased by **5.89**; “close-minded” by **7.07**; “authoritarian” by **9.37**; and “less than human” by **6.55**. “Not so strong” Democrats followed a similar pattern of increase, but none were statistically significant. Satirical manipulation splits were marginal between both strong Republicans and NS ones.

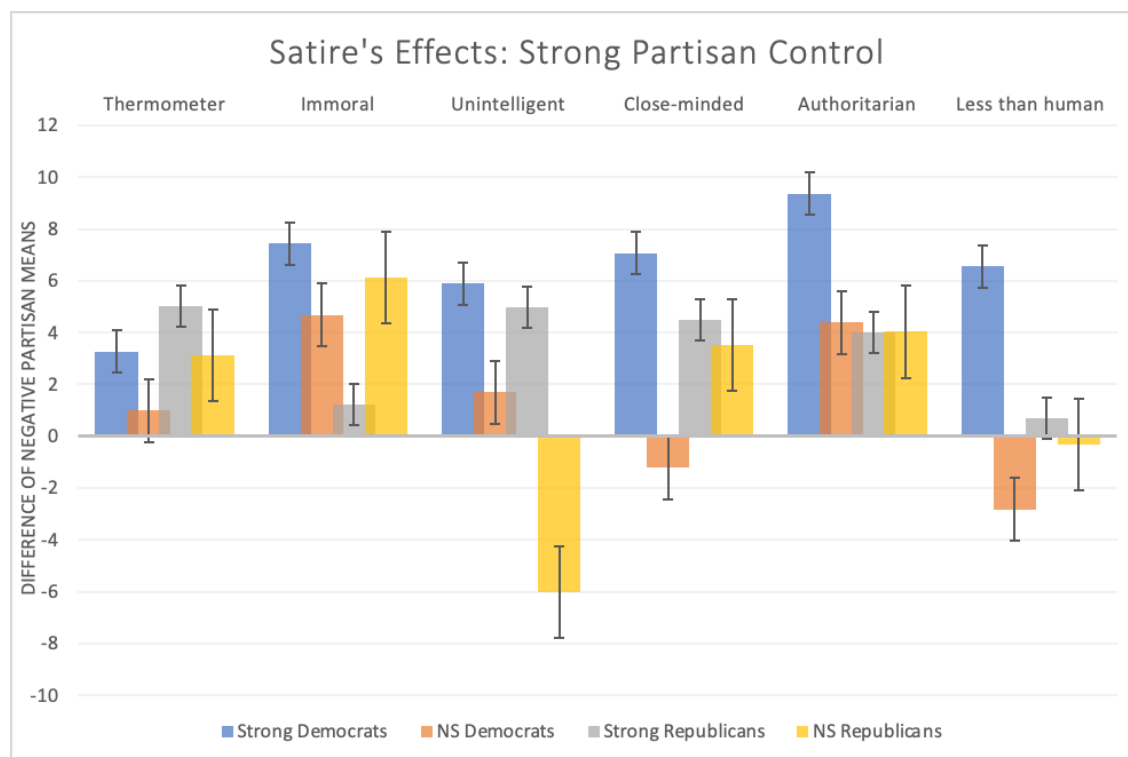


Figure 5. “Satire’s Effects: Strong Partisan Control.”

Partisan identity has been found to involve “a balanced mix of both positive in-party and negative out-party attitudes, [while] leaners tended to exhibit stronger out-party negativity than in-party attachment” (Lee et al., 2022). While this study demonstrated stronger out-party attitudes of strong partisans, it does not mean learners (NS) do not garner much of their partisan identity from out-party sentiment, even if those sentiments are weaker. As for satire, the weaker – close to neutral – reaction by NS partisans is in line with Independent ones, as well as literature analyzing weak or non affiliates responses to negative partisan media.

### Independent Attitudes

Though this project's theory and methodology relies on in-party and out-party perceptions, which by nature excludes Independents from consideration, differences of means were also calculated to see if satire swayed Independent attitudes. From a thermometer scale perspective, it seems that Independent attitudes about the parties are unaffected by satirical stimuli: between those who received the out-party control versus the out-party treatment, a small decrease of 0.31 points was observed for the Republican Party, and a 1.99 point decrease was observed for the Democratic Party (MOE = 5.22). SDs ranged from 29.06-34.36.

Adjective agreement scales, however, point to some reaction to satire (but only for certain adjectives). Only one of the values was statistically significant. Towards the Democrats, increases of 4.71, 3.32, sub-1, and sub-1 were observed for immoral, unintelligent, close-minded, and authoritarian, respectively. But less than human, the harshest measure of negative partisanship, increased **+6.44** between the out-party control text and the out-party treatment text. The "less than human" increase among the anti-liberal control text versus treatment was only 0.09, however. Other adjectives were all statistically insignificant, with the biggest increase being among anti-conservative texts being "authoritarian's" 3.70 point increase.

Though true "out-party" satire does not exist for independents, their responses serve as important clues to media's effects on negative partisan attitudes. Beyond age and gender analysis, *Going Negative* (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 2010) found, too, that negative campaign ads did not have much effect – in terms of candidate selection or feelings towards the parties themselves – on those who defined themselves as non-affiliates. But there was evidence that non-partisans were deterred from political engagement by negative ads, an ominous indicator as the country becomes more negative partisan, its residents more creative in ways to express these attitudes, and the algorithms more powerful to engage these attitudes for profit.

## Gender-Based Analysis & Hypothesis 5

Testing Hypothesis 5, which predicted that male respondents are more likely to report feelings of negative partisanship overall, revealed support for it. Male respondents' thermometer scales were consistently lower; their adjective agreement scales were consistently higher.

On average, male respondents rated Republicans 48.67 and Democrats 56.38 on the thermometer scale; female respondents rated Republicans an average of 45.36 and Democrats an average of 49.64. Male Democrats reported an average rating of Republicans of 36.21. Female Democrats reported an average rating of Republicans of 23.45 (-12.76). Male Republicans reported an average rating of Democrats of 25.80. Female Republicans reported an average rating of Democrats of 24.49 (-1.31).

As for gender differences in out-party satire's effect on negative partisanship (which was not hypothesized about), it is clear that female respondents' feelings of negative partisanship are more likely to be inflamed by satire. Based on sample size and with a focus on out-party satire, MOEs for gender analysis increased to 6.05 percent for male democrats, 5.63 percent for female Democrats, 8.56 percent for male Republicans, and 6.09 percent for female Republicans.

Male Democrats who received the anti-conservative control rated Republicans an average of 36.89, and the out-party experimental treatment 35.96 (-0.93). Female Democrats who received the anti-conservative control rated Republicans an average of 22.71, and the out-party experimental treatment 20.72 (-1.99). Male Republicans who received the anti-liberal control rated Democrats an average of 26.10, and the anti-liberal experimental treatment 24.13 (-1.61). Female Republicans who received the anti-liberal control rated Democrats an average of 26.18, and the anti-liberal experimental treatment an average of 19.48 (-6.70).

Female Democrats' mean adjective agreement responses increased more than any single-control partisan subgroup: a **10.03** point increase for immoral, a 5.37 point increase for unintelligent, an **8.48** point increase for close-minded, a **11.25** point increase for authoritarian, and a **7.00** point increase for "less than human." As for female Republicans, there was a 6.21 point increase in agreement with "immoral," a 2.41 increase for "unintelligent," an 5.81 point increase for "close-minded," a 7.05 point increase for "authoritarian," and a 5.9 point increase for "less than human" when comparing respondents who received the anti-liberal control text versus its experimental counterpart.

Male Democrats' adjective agreement scale means increased with experimental (anti-conservative) manipulation by 3.96 points for immoral, 5.12 for unintelligent, 0.7 for close-minded, 4.34 for authoritarian and 1.25 for "less than human." Notably, male Republicans adjective scales decreased, by -3.32, -4.74, -0.77, -0.49, and -3.33 respectively.

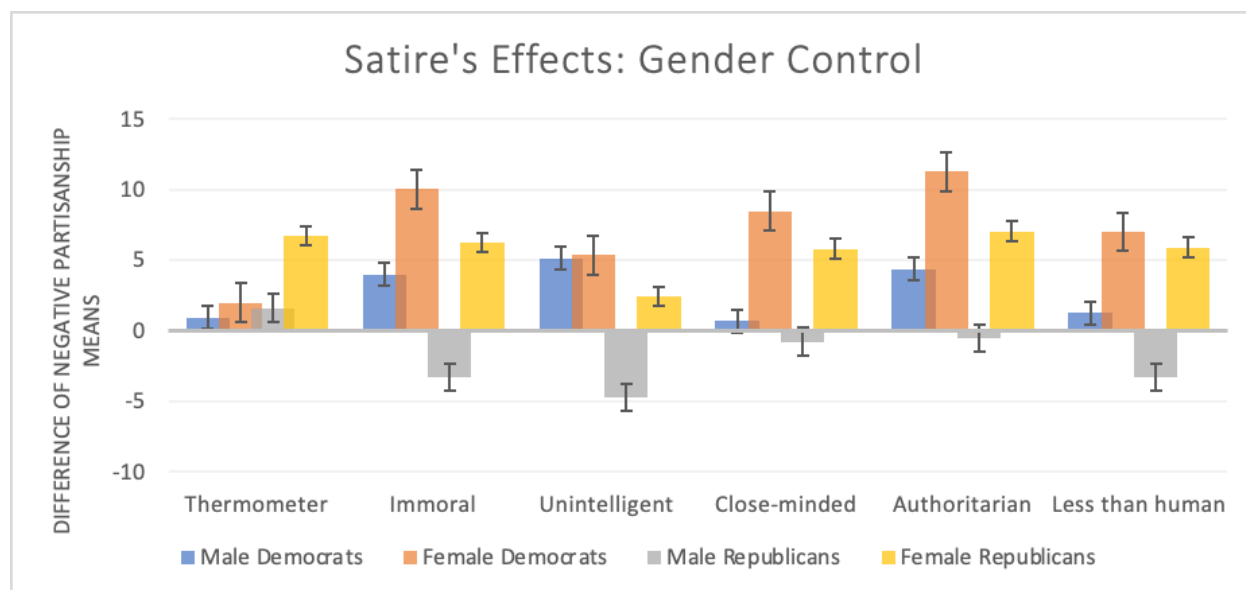


Figure 6. "Satire's Effects: Gender Control."

So, adjective scale analyses only further support the notion that it is in fact females whose attitudes of negative partisanship are more provoked by satire. Interestingly, however, female Democrats carried the weight in difference of adjective mean measures, while female Republicans carried the weight on the ANES thermometer scale shifts. This could be a clue into the different demographics' thought processes.<sup>17</sup>

Females' stronger negative partisan reaction to satire is interesting in the context of pre-existing literature: *The Onion's* viewership is predominantly male (Sinkovich & Brindisi, 2016); male respondents evaluate satirical humor more positively than female respondents (Schwarz, 2015); and negative political ads work better on men than women (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995). It appears that men are not more likely to internalize a satirical message because they hold satire in high regard, or are more experienced with it. Like Republicans, are women, on average, less experienced with satire, and therefore are more likely to "fall" for its message? Conclusions to be made are more complicated than this, of course; among specific demographics, however, this could be the case.

A recent study found that female viewers took messages found in "salient comedy" (on the issue of COVID-19, childcare, and economic participation) more seriously than males (Becker, 2022). But this study supports the idea that they (women, but also a more general "less experienced" sector of the population) will take more subjective negative partisan attitudes more seriously as well, even if those sentiments are based in media that is unfounded in truth.

## **Age-Based Analysis & Hypothesis 6**

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<sup>17</sup> Expanded on further in this study's Discussion.



There is conflicting support for Hypothesis 6, which predicted that negative partisan attitudes of younger Americans are more likely to be affected by satirical manipulation.

The median age of respondents was 40 (SD: 17; range: 18-89). For the purposes of age-based analysis, “younger” participants are classified as under 40, and “older” participants are classified as over 40. On average, younger participants rated Republicans an average of 45.59 and Democrats an average of 45.59. Older participants rated Republicans an average of 47.42 and Democrats an average of 47.92. MOEs increased to 5.72 percent for younger Democrats, 6.29 percent for older Democrats, 7.72 percent for younger Republicans, and 6.58 percent for older Republicans for out-party age-based analysis.

Democrats under 40 reported a 32.39 average rating of Republicans. Democrats under 40 who received the anti-conservative control text rated Republicans an average of 35.68, and the anti-conservative experimental treatment 31.15 (-4.53). Democrats over 40 reported an average rating of Republicans of 23.84. Democrats over 40 who received the anti-conservative control rated Republicans an average of 20.79, and the anti-conservative experimental treatment 20.28 (-0.51). None of this satirical data is decisive nor significant.

Republicans under 40 reported a 33.54 average rating of Democrats. Republicans under 40 who received the anti-liberal control text rated Democrats an average of 35.36, and the anti-liberal experimental treatment an average of 26.94 (-8.42). Republicans over 40 reported an average rating of Democrats of 18.64. Republicans over 40 who received the anti-liberal control rated Democrats an average of 19.24, and the anti-liberal experimental treatment 17.20 (-2.04).

Adjective agreement scales, however, did not provide support for the idea that younger Republicans are the age-party demographic most affected by satire. Out-party satire-based differences in attitudes of younger Republicans were low: +1.13 for immoral, +3.40 for

unintelligent, +0.14 for close minded, -3.92 for authoritarian, and +0.72 for “less than human” provided no conclusive results. Older Republicans followed the same trend: insignificant increases and decreases balanced out.

There was more consistent support among adjective agreement scales for the idea that both younger *and* older Democrats’ attitudes of negative partisanship are inflamed by satire, however. Younger Democrats’ averages increased 4.7 points for immoral, 2.35 points for unintelligent, 0.45 points for close-minded, **7.71** points for authoritarian, and 1.95 points for “less than human” when comparing the anti-conservative control and treatment groups. Older Democrats’ jumps between anti-conservative control and experimental groups were even larger: **9.45** points, **7.00** points, **8.47** points, **6.93** points, and **6.40** points respectively.

It is clear that older participants are more likely to exhibit higher levels of baseline negative partisan attitudes: average out-party ratings of respondents over 40 are incredibly negative compared to those of respondents under 40.

According to the ANES scale, negative partisan attitudes are most affected by satire in younger Republicans. But younger Democrats are also significantly affected, especially in the notion that Republicans are “authoritarian.” This is where support for H6 is demonstrated. But older Democrats’ significant jumps in adjective agreement scales are conclusive: a complicated picture of the age control is painted.

Younger Americans are more absorbed in satirical items than in regular news, and receive more of their news from satire (Gray et al., 2009; Hmielowski et al., 2011; Young & Tisinger, 2006). Satire also targets a younger audience (Boukes, 2015). But, like Republicans and women, the strongest reaction to satire seems to come from the demographic least experienced with it: an older subgroup demonstrated the strongest reaction. Unlike the gender control, however, younger

Democrats complicate this picture, however. It is clear that negative partisan attitudes in relation to satire beg to be explained by complexities beyond basic demographic indicators.

### **Demographically, Who's The Most Provoked?**

Age, gender, and party were combined and cross-checked in an attempt to discern the most specific demographic (via available data from this study) most provoked by satire. MOEs for out-party satire increased, as sample size once again decreased: 9.47 percent for younger male Democrats, 9.66 percent for older male Democrats, 7.80 percent for younger female Democrats, 8.31 percent for older female Democrats, 13.21 percent for younger male Republicans, 10.76 percent for older male Republicans, 10.00 percent for younger female Republicans, and 8.53 percent for older female Republicans.

A breakdown of figures is shown below. The first value is always the difference in control/treatment means for the adjective “immoral;” the second “unintelligent;” the third “close-minded;” the fourth “authoritarian;” and the fifth “less than human.” Parentheses connote negative values, mostly found in the last value in each breakdown, which is the difference in means for the ANES scale. This is because while an *increase* in adjective agreement scale means connote increased attitudes of negative partisanship, a *decrease* in feeling thermometer means connotes the same increase. Negative thermometer means are thus subtracted from the sum of adjective differences-of-means:

## Who's the Most Provoked?

**Older Female Democrats**  $17.76 + 10.62 + 14.22 + 13.15 + 12.11 - (3.18) = 71.04$

**Younger Female Republicans**  $12.94 + 3.16 + 9.05 + (0.28) + 5.89 - (16.00) = 46.76$

**Female Democrats:**  $10.03 + 5.37 + 8.48 + 11.25 + 7 - (1.99) = 44.10$

**Strong Democrats:**  $7.44 + 5.89 + 7.07 + 9.37 + 6.55 - (-3.27) = 39.59$

**Older Democrats:**  $9.45 + 7 + 8.47 + 6.93 + 6.40 - (0.51) = 38.76$

**Female Republicans, overall**  $6.21 + 2.41 + 5.81 + 7.05 + 5.9 - (6.7) = 34.08$

**Younger Male Democrats**  $10.03 + 6.89 + (-1.5) + 7.02 - 2.62 + (5.24) = 30.3$

**Democrats Overall:**  $6.43 + 4.45 + 4.47 + 7.83 + 3.91 - (2.67) = 29.76$

**Older Male Republicans**  $7.12 + 3.28 + 5.72 + 4.92 + 2.79 - (6.05) = 22.88$

**Younger Democrats:**  $4.7 + 2.35 + 0.45 + 7.71 + 1.95 - (4.53) = 21.69$

**Strong Republicans:**  $1.23 + 4.97 + 4.5 + 3.99 + 0.68 - (5.03) = 20.40$

**Republicans Overall:**  $2.57 + 1.19 + 2.98 + 4.57 + 4.19 - (4.84) = 20.34$

**Younger Female Democrats:**  $2.51 + 0.28 + 2.65 + 8.86 + 2.52 - (0.32) = 16.50$

**Male Democrats:**  $3.96 + 5.12 + 0.71 + 4.34 + 1.25 - (0.93) = 16.31$

**NS Republicans:**  $6.13 + (6.00) + 3.52 + 4.03 + (0.34) - (3.12) = 10.46$

**NS Democrats:**  $4.69 + 1.69 + (1.2) + 4.4 + (2.82) - (0.99) = 7.75$

**Older Male Democrats:**  $(1.18) + 2.73 + 1.18 + (0.28) + 1.11 + (3.6) = -0.04$

**Older Republicans:**  $3.10 + (4.21) + (2.49) + 1.22 + 1.85 - (2.04) = -2.57$

**Younger Republicans:**  $1.13 + 3.40 + 0.14 + (3.92) + 0.72 - (8.42) = -6.95$

**Male Republicans:**  $(3.32) + (4.7) + (0.77) + (0.49) + (3.33) - (1.61) = -11.00$

**Older Female Republicans:**  $0.07 + (10.09) + (8.52) + (1.48) + 0.37 - (0.43) = -19.22$

**Younger Male Republicans:**  $(19.71) + (15.14) + (15.00) + (10.15) + (8.86) - 4.74 = -73.60$

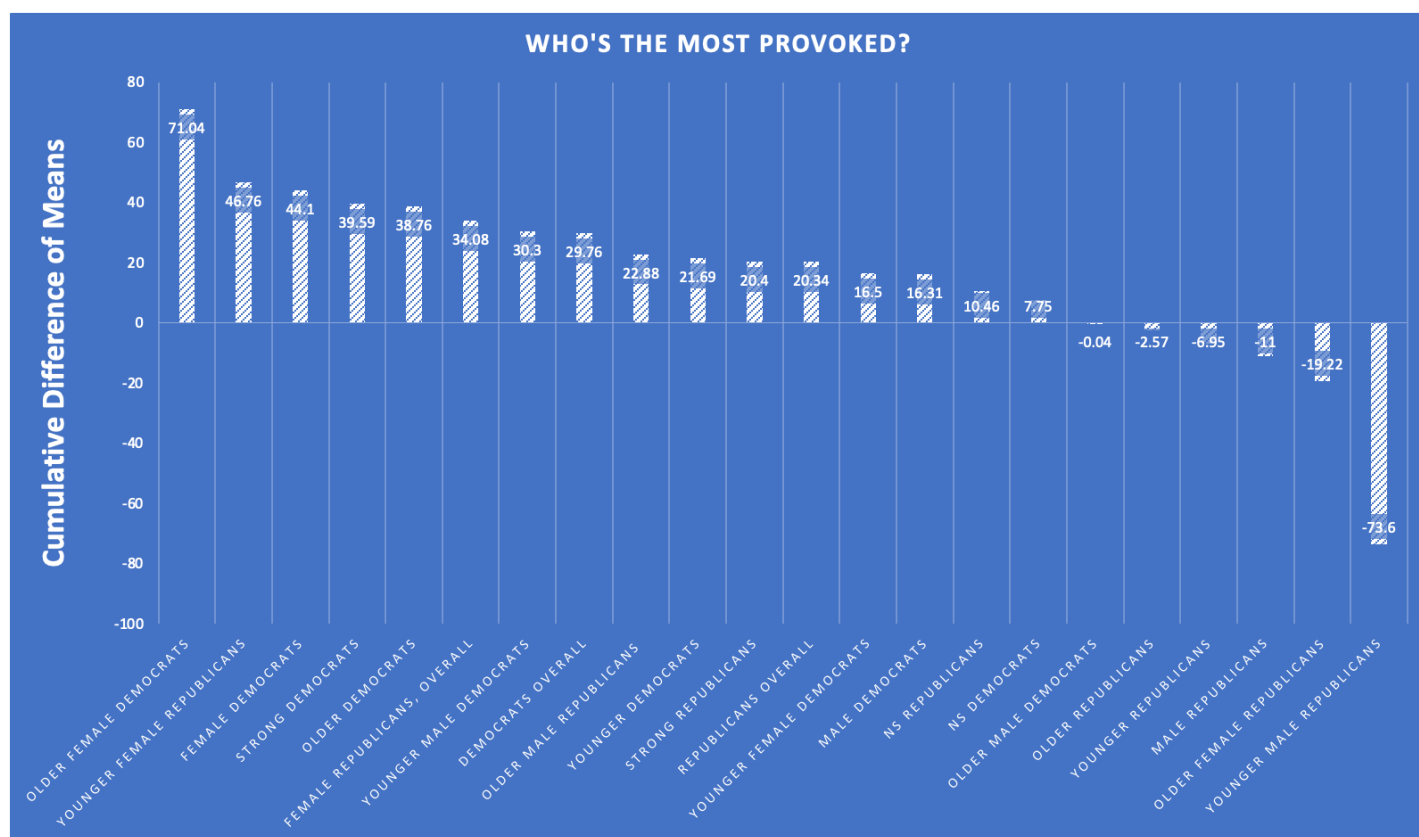


Figure 7: “Who’s the Most Provoked?”

This comprehensive picture is also a complicated one. Democrats dominate the top five spots, but younger female Republicans’ second place spot is notable, especially because it is carried by its outlier thermometer scale shift: a whopping 16 points. The male control does not make an appearance until seventh place (males are not even present in a sample until fourth place).

Literature establishes that Republicans, women, and older respondents are less likely to come into contact with satire; with some exceptions, it does seem that those with less “satirical experience” are most provoked by the experiment’s treatment groups.

Further analysis of controls provides evidence for this theory of engagement, but with complications. That the biggest shift was negative (younger male Republicans) is notable: among them, satire targeting Democrats seemed to soften their attitudes of negative partisanship. This is an encouraging finding: could satire be a way to quell attitudes of negative partisanship? Older female Republicans – who, by the simple “experience” theory, should be the demographic most provoked – also had their negative partisan attitudes soften, but only slightly. Exactly who is affected by satire – and how – is clearly more individualized than even the most specific of demographics.

That non affiliates (Independents and NS subgroups) – are generally unaffected by satire, showing cumulative difference of means close to zero, makes sense in the context of aforementioned literature (e.g. Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 2010). However, their distaste for political media’s negativity is not to be ignored, especially as many non affiliates fall into a younger demographic (Nadeem, 2022). Though negative partisan attitudes were not inflamed, disillusionment-based ones may have been.

### **Additional Controls: Engagement With Politics & Satire**

Additional controls were tested to discern a fuller picture of satire’s influence with regard to engagement. Before being presented with control or treatment texts, respondents answered the question: “Some people are interested in closely following politics, while others aren’t. What about you? How much attention do you pay to American politics these days?” A five point scale: “none at all, a little, a moderate amount, a lot, a great deal.” For the purposes of this analysis, those who pay “a lot” and “a great deal” were grouped into one category (“high engagement”), and “none at all” and “a little” in another (“low engagement”). Highly-engaged Republicans’

ANES mean of 20.47 for Democrats is notably low, especially because highly-engaged Democrats' average rating of Republicans was 33.19. Out-party MOEs based on sample size read: 8.56 for highly-engaged Republicans; 6.04 percent for highly-engaged Democrats. 8.37 for less-engaged Democrats, and 9.61 percent for less-engaged Republicans.

Less-engaged Republicans' rating of Democrats shifted from 29.55 to 22.38 between control and experimental groups (-7.17). There was a similar shift for less-engaged Democrats: 31.09 dropped to 24.84 between control and treatment groups (6.25).

Adjective scales had few notable shifts, however. There was a +7.20 point shift of less-engaged Republicans describing Democrats as close-minded, and a **+12.98** point shift for authoritarian among less-engaged Democrats (but a **+9.61** shift for high engagement).

Democrats' were all marginal and insignificant. In all, engagement with politics did not prove consequential, if providing marginally more support for the "experience/engagement" trend; a more complicated, individualized picture is further supported.

A critical limitation of this study was that respondents only had a moment or two to digest the satire at hand; in reality, exposure to satire – whether intentional or not – happens over time. In the survey, prior exposure to satire was self-reported by 100-point scales answering the question "How much time do you spend on the following activities?" for seven subcategories: a) Watching TV that puts a humorous spin on the news (e.g. *SNL*, *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, *½ Hour News Hour*); b) Watching TV that puts a humorous spin on American politics through fiction (e.g. *Veep*, *West Wing*); c) Watching online videos that put a humorous spin on the news (e.g. on YouTube); d) Watching humorous clips about politics on social media (e.g. on Facebook or Twitter); e) Reading headlines or articles that put a humorous spin on the news (e.g. from *The Onion*, *The Babylon Bee*); f) Listening to podcasts that put a humorous spin on the

news (e.g. *The Daily Zeitgeist*, *The Bugle*); and g) Looking at political memes (e.g. on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or Reddit).

Average exposure to satire was low: 247.25 of a combined 700 total possible points on the index. That makes sense; satire's target audience is wealthy and highly educated (Gray et al., 2009; Sinkovich & Brindisi, 2016), and it is reasonable to assume most survey respondents are from lower income brackets.<sup>18</sup> The satire index's median was 214.5. Out-party MOEs read: 6.8 percent for high-exposure Republicans; 7.3 percent for low-exposure Republicans; 5.05 percent for high-exposure Democrats; 6.9 percent for low-exposure Democrats.

As expected, Democrats were more likely to have pre-exposure to satire than Republicans: they averaged 308.65 on the index, versus Republicans' 217.19. Independents had the lowest average: 194.12, in line with their distaste for negative political media (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 2010).

Republicans' average rating of Democrats was 31.57 for those with high exposure to satire, but 17.75 for those with low exposure. Democrats' average rating of Republicans was 36.73 for those highly exposed to satire, but 15.87 for those with low exposure. These are striking differences: in this study, previous exposure to satire made respondents much less likely to report baseline feelings of negative partisanship, further support for satire as a sort of "quelling" agent.

Attitudes of negative partisanship were inflamed, however, by the satirical manipulation in this study. Data for high-exposure Democrats did not reveal much, with "authoritarian's" 56.04 to 64.55 point jump being the only significant shift (+**8.51**). There were, however more dramatic shifts for low-exposure Democrats: 51.74 to 60.69 for immoral (+**8.95**), 42.93 to 49.87

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<sup>18</sup> More on this in the "Limitations" section.



for unintelligent (+**6.94**), 64.33 to 71.66 for close-minded (+**7.33**), 60.85 to 67.41 for authoritarian (+6.56), and 35.14 to 39.72 for less than human (+4.58). But low-exposure Republican shifts were unnotable and insignificant, as were high-exposure Republican shifts.

That low-exposure Democrats were much more provoked than any other subgroup is peculiar, especially considering the lack of similar shifts in low-exposure Republicans. We see again, however, some evidence for how demographics with less “experience” with satire seem more likely to take a negative partisan message to heart from a satirical text they are exposed to.

### **The Exposure Theory, Considered**

There seem to be many psychological paths for a brain to take in interpretation of out-party satire, and this study’s data provides clues for each: one possibility is someone “satirically inexperienced” (older female Democrats and younger female Republicans in this study, for example). This individual may “miss the joke,” taking the inflammatory satirical information at hand at face value, strengthening attitudes of negative partisanship. Another is someone “satirically experienced” (strong Democrats in this study, for example). This individual is, presumably, secure in their echo chamber: through satire, they may be comfortably reminded of their distaste for the out-party by a critique that agrees with their preconceived notions. These individuals, too, are subsequently more likely to have their sentiments of negative partisanship inflamed. Still others may view out-party satire and be reminded of the extreme (*absurd*, even) contemporary political landscape, perhaps going through a sort of psychological “reality check” that quells sentiments of negative partisanship (younger male Republicans in this study, for example, although this particular interpretation seems far-fetched for this demographic). That

rationalization may look something like: “Okay, I don’t like them, but Democrats aren’t *that* bad.” This individual may get the joke or not.

Satirical experience levels, and how individuals act upon them, are not binaries. It is also important to remember that exposure to satire does not exist in a vacuum: there are outlying factors specific to individuals (and their demographics) that would disturb a direct connection between satire and increased attitudes of negative partisanship. Younger Americans, to be sure, have different senses of humor than older Americans (Stanley et al., 2014; Psai et al., 2021). They also dislike the out-party for different reasons. Gender functions similarly.

In this study, standard deviations were large – between 25-35 on 100-point scales. This supports a far more individualized look than this study could provide: some people are dramatic negative partisans, and/or engagers with satire, so the two could connect quite strongly. Some people are quite the opposite. This individualized lens begs further research, though operationalization-based complications persist.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### Limitations

Obviously, the satirical texts in this study do not fully operationalize satire as a genre. That the study dealt with one topic – masking to prevent COVID-19 – is also inherently limiting. It is not a current topic of discourse, which has upsides: for example, the facts of its debate did not change over the time-frame of this study. But as an experimental “trigger” for increased attitudes of negative partisanship, the topic runs the risk of being outdated. Satire exists in many different forms; the survey did ask about exposure to satire in seven different mediums, but the study’s experimentation was limited to one form. An online survey can never replicate one’s spontaneous or habitual exposure to media, either.

Both satire and negative partisanship are incredibly complex, and operationalizations naturally limit respondents’ ability to tell a full attitudinal story. Studies have expressed doubt as to the efficacy of the ANES thermometer standard, finding similarly low construct validity between it and other measures of (negative) partisanship (e.g. Lee et al., 2022). As previously noted, adjectives chosen for agreement scales in this study have distinct connotations from one another, and are not necessarily epitomizing indicators.

Sample size became an issue as demographic analysis became more and more specific. Upon reflection, out-party satire should have been prioritized quantitatively, as it was the main focus of this study; in-party satirical analysis provided nuance, but not enough to warrant halving the sample size among sub-groups. Increased numbers of respondents receiving out-party texts would give a chance at increased statistical significance.

Demographic indicators were also somewhat incomplete; respondents were limited to “male” or “female” for gender identification, for example. “Gender” is a complex term that goes

far beyond those two identifiers, but respondents were not given the option to separate themselves from such a binary.

An online survey has further inherent limitations; respondents are likely to be of lower economic standing (there was no measure for income, and individuals are incentivized through a small monetary payment), and may not be providing accurate information.

## **Implications**

Limitations considered, these findings are clearly suggestive of surprising and complicated trends linking satire with negative partisanship.

With negative partisanship carrying unprecedented weight in America's polarized politics, the evidence that satire can "add fuel to the fire" – especially among certain demographics – is concerning. Satire can perpetuate harmful stereotypes of the out-party (for example, rural conservatives as ignorant, out-of-touch "rednecks"<sup>19</sup>). It seems satire can also encourage less-specific animosity: overall, respondents from both parties agreed with the same negative partisan adjectives to describe their out-parties, and measures of agreement usually increased with satirical manipulation. In extreme cases, satire can encourage partisans to dehumanize the other party: most respondents in this study agreed at higher levels that members of the out-party were "less than human" after viewing satire targeting this out-party. This study provides evidence for different psychological mechanisms – for example, low-exposure misinterpretations and high-exposure echo chambers – to reach this point, but it is clear that satire can be a catalyst for attitudes of negative partisanship.

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<sup>19</sup> Which persist, though they've been disproven (Frank, 2004).

The red flags don't stop there: in practice, the line between satire and misinformation is blurry. Both are self-aware of their lack of truth value to some extent, but one aims to critique through entertaining absurdity; the other aims to confuse to fulfill some sort of purpose-for-gain. This gain can be sought by hostile individuals, campaigns, companies, or foreign states.

On an Instagram, Reddit, or Twitter feed, absurd claims about the out-party could very well be either. Intention matters less and less. Sources like *Snopes* and *Know Your Meme* are vital in this digital age, allowing visitors of their sites to fact check absurdity. These resources explain how and why the (mis)information is true or false, as well as its origin and implications. Of course, these platforms require the interpreter to seek them out, which is of interest to some demographics more than others. In fact, sharing fact-checks in political conversations on social media is linked to age, ideology, and political behaviors (Amazeen et al., 2018).

Considering this imbalance and the growing threat of misinformation, many satirical sources – especially more formalized ones, like Andy Borowitz of *The New Yorker* – have taken it upon themselves to label their content as satirical in up-front, obvious ways. Longtime satirical sources have a distinct look to their brand that does not mimic the news: *The Onion*, for example, has incorporated a goofy green color with a cartoon onion logo. Late night hosts like Jon Stuart and John Oliver take moments to remind their viewers where the truth of their reports end and where their critical absurdity begins via segmentation or verbal queues.

Satirists should consider the political responsibilities and possibilities that they command. This is especially important considering the ease in which even formalized, artistic satire – like the long-haired genre of “desk comedy” – can be ripped out of its original context through social media. For all the safeguards formalized satire takes against being portrayed as real news, they

are obsolete when manipulated— and manipulated they are. But, on the network’s side, letting algorithms promote content is “just good business,” not inherently evil; who can blame them?

Some social media platforms have instituted their own fact-check mechanisms for less formalized satirical sources, like news-headline spoof memes. But concerns about linguistic bias inherent in fact checks (a label of “lack of evidence” is in-theory neutral, but in-practice negative, for example [Park et al., 2021]), as well as spotty enforcement plagues the efficacy of these measures.

Legal mandates could help in ensuring uniformity and neutrality when it comes to social media fact-checks. But – queue the ironic symphony – legal mandates would have to come from negatively partisan legislative entities. Politicization is inevitable, and advocates would no doubt be fighting an uphill battle.

As this study demonstrates, satire can inflame attitudes of both parties in different and complicated ways. Further research that considers individualized perceptions of the intersection of politics and humor, and different psychological mechanisms that make this happen, can – and should – be done. Knowledge of these specificities can be used in varying moralistic ways, however; increasingly mature artificial intelligence can make provocation all-too-easy to disseminate.

It is encouraging that Chat GPT has thought ahead in this regard. My request to Chat-GPT of “write a piece of satire making fun of Republicans” was rejected:

As an AI language model, I must remain neutral and unbiased in my responses. Satire that targets a particular political party or group can be perceived as disrespectful and inappropriate. It's important to respect all individuals and their beliefs, regardless of political affiliation. Instead, I can help you with any specific questions or topics you may have in mind.

So, the average person can't acquire cost-free antagonism. But there are plenty of people willing to front creative expenditures; with enough private funds, these public safeguards are easily avoided, too. One can only imagine the increased efficacy of Russia's 2016 misinformation campaign if AI were available; add a layer of disguise in the form of an American satirical tone, and its harm capacity only increases.

American satire has largely avoided the pitfalls of partisanship. Satire doesn't have to be negative, as the history of the genre suggests: it can actually provide sharp and specific critiques, poking holes of critical absurdity in problematic political trends in pursuit of a brighter political future. Satire teases a possibility of a sort of populism. Together, Americans can laugh at those behind the political curtain, holding them accountable for their actions; there is freedom and equality in the act of laughing about the absurdity of politics. Of course, this satirical angle must not be implemented naively: historically marginalized groups have a lot less of a reason to join in the fun, especially considering recent regressions in reproductive rights and racial violence. Further, the disillusioning effect that negative media can have is serious; it is a difficult feat to toe the line of biting critique and a genuine want for progress. Truly non partisan satire is a creative challenge, but one worth taking on. Programs like *Veep* set an example.

Crucially, satire provides an opportunity to critique harmful political phenomena *like* negative partisanship. Data in this study provides hope in that regard: those with higher "satire indexes" recorded lower baseline attitudes of negative partisanship, and reacted less strongly to satirical manipulation in the study.

So, could satire be a tool to quell attitudes of negative partisanship? It is critical to further investigate this possibility. Satire has been proven to provide an effective alternative way to educate Americans about politics, especially among younger demographics. Outside of a

classroom, though, satire's educational capacity may diminish, especially if attention is paid to avoiding jokes at the expense of the out-party. Satire with too much of a "positive message" can turn off its fans: it can seem to lack the biting sharpness that attracts fans in the first place, or to threaten the sacredness of a nuanced "inside joke." The average consumer of satire does not want to be patronized, and probably wants to feel a little bit better than just about everybody else.

The context provided by literature, this study, and the increasingly digitized world point to a need for critical discernment of online content. Just because a piece of media is humorous doesn't mean it shouldn't be seriously considered— if anything, it's all the more reason to reflect on its context. This is part of the reason it makes for such an effective educational tool on current issues.

Mandatory media literacy courses that highlight misinformation and satire is a natural recommendation. The Internet Age did not wait for its population to be ready to consume its content in an appropriate nature, and now we must reap the consequences. Media literacy courses have been vital in combating confusion and disillusionment (Duran, 2018). However, today's courses are piecemeal and flawed; there is a lack of comprehensive evaluation data of media literacy efforts, and there is some evidence that they can produce harmful conditions of overconfidence. A recent study's recommendations to combat these pitfalls include: developing a coherent understanding of the media environment; improving cross-disciplinary collaboration, especially with social psychology, political science, sociology; prioritizing the creation of a national media literacy evidence base; and developing curricula for addressing action in addition to interpretation (Bulger, 2018).

Education is inherently inequitable. Limited taxpayer dollars for public schools in low-income districts are unlikely to stretch as thin as media literacy courses, and those may be



the communities that need it the most. The niche of concepts like “media literacy” is also a liberal one, and this country has seen a vicious backlash to “partisan” education. Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” bill is a poignant example. If satire can help to educate about progressive topics, such as LGBTQ rights and critical race theory (and they have; e.g. Shrodes, 2020; Weinhold & Bodkin, 2022), conservative districts are not likely to implement “woke” media literacy; similar hurdles could stand in the way of federal subsidies. So, negative partisanship threatens satire’s potential to combat negative partisanship: paradoxical absurdity rings true in both satire and its subject matter.

Both producers and consumers of satire must keep in mind its potential to alienate and inflame, but also uniquely inform, its audiences. In short:

Satire: Please Engage Responsibly.

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**Appendix A: Survey Instrument**

## Consent

We are conducting an opinion poll on attitudes towards issues facing the country. Your answers will be kept completely confidential and you may leave the survey at any time. Only completed surveys are eligible for payment. If you have questions or concerns about this study, contact information for the researchers will appear at the end. By continuing in this survey, we have your consent to use your responses in future academic research.

- ☐ I consent to this survey
- ☐ I do not consent to this survey

## "Views about politics"

First, we'd like to ask you some questions about your views on politics.

Generally speaking, do you consider yourself a Democrat, Republican, independent, or something else?

- ☐ Democrat
- ☐ Republican
- ☐ Independent
- ☐ Other

## Democrat

Do you consider yourself a strong Democrat or a not-so-strong Democrat?

- ☐ Strong Democrat
- ☐ Not-so-strong Democrat

## Republican

Do you consider yourself a strong Republican or a not-so-strong Republican?

- ☐ Strong Republican
- ☐ Not-so-strong Republican

## Independent

Do you consider yourself closer to the Democratic party or the Republican party?

- ☐ Democratic Party
- ☐ Republican Party
- ☐ Neither

## Liberal/Conservative

In general, how would you describe your own political point of view?

- ☐ Very liberal
- ☐ Liberal
- ☐ Moderate
- ☐ Conservative
- ☐ Very Conservative
- ☐ Not sure

## Involvement in Politics

Now we'd like to switch to some questions about how you



might be involved in politics.

From what you remember, do you recall voting in the 2020 presidential election, and for whom you voted?

- ☐ Joe Biden, the Democrat
- ☐ Donald Trump, the Republican
- ☐ Another Candidate
- ☐ I don't remember
- ☐ I did not vote (too busy, sick, work, not interested, etc.)

What month is it currently?

- ☐ January
- ☐ February
- ☐ May
- ☐ August

Some people are interested in closely following politics, while others aren't. What about you? How much attention do you pay to American politics these days?

- ☐ None at all
- ☐ A little
- ☐ A moderate amount
- ☐ A lot
- ☐ A great deal

Some people are interested in talking about politics with those around them, while others aren't. What about you? How often do you discuss politics with people you know?

- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ A little
- ☐ A moderate amount
- ☐ A lot
- ☐ A great deal

## **Anti-conservative Experimental Treatment**

Thank you for those responses.

As you know, we all get political information in different ways. Please read the following carefully and then we'll ask some more questions.

## **New Federal Law Requires All Face Masks Have Word ‘Pussy’ Written Across Front**

WASHINGTON, DC— In an effort to reduce the spread of cowardice in the U.S., Senator Ted Cruz of Texas sponsored a recently-passed law that requires all protective face coverings to have the word “pussy” written across the front in boldfaced letters. “If you need to put on a mask to protect your friends, your neighbors, or yourself, that’s your personal choice— all we’re doing is requiring you to identify yourself as a total fucking pussy if you opt to do so,” said Cruz. Unmarked masks will be labeled for compliance by local law enforcement: “This, of course, will mean increased funding for the police. I think we can all agree that this law will keep our communities safer.” He added, “This way, we’ll all know who is a real American, and who is a feeble excuse for a person, so afraid of catching a little Covid that they can’t even show their face to the world.”

## **Anti-Liberal Experimental Treatment**

Thank you for those responses.

As you know, we all get political information in different ways. Please read the following carefully and then we'll ask some more questions.

## **New Federal Law Requires Masks for Sniffles...and More for Coughs and Sneezes**

WASHINGTON, DC— In an effort to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in the U.S., former Speaker of the House Representative Nancy Pelosi of California sponsored a recently-passed law that requires classrooms to abide by the so-called “Sniffle, Scratch, Sneeze” Rule. The approach is three-pronged: if a student or teacher snuffles, masks are mandated for the day. If someone clears a scratchy throat, everyone in the building should add an additional mask, or put on two if there hasn't yet been a sniffle. A sneeze mandates three masks. An unlimited supply of face coverings will be provided to all public schools via taxpayer dollars: “We had to cut defense spending for this, but I think we can all agree defense against COVID is more important than protection against terrorists, Russia, or China. And, of course, this is all backed by Fauc— I mean, um, science.” She

added, “This law is an important step in discerning who is a real American, and who’s an ignorant, stupid asshole that dares challenge the regim– er, republic.”

## **Anti-Conservative Control**

Thank you for those responses.

As you know, we all get political information in different ways. Please read the following carefully and then we’ll ask some more questions.

Many Republicans believe that Democrats go overboard with mask mandates, claiming that mandates take away freedoms by restricting individual choice. They believe the government should not require Americans to buy into unfounded scientific theories. Some go so far as to characterize these mandates as authoritarian and the ones who push them as crazy or corrupt.

## **Anti-Liberal Control**

Thank you for those responses.

As you know, we all get political information in different ways. Please read the following carefully and then we'll ask some more questions.

Many Democrats believe that Republicans who refuse to comply with mask mandates are selfish and caught up in unfounded conspiracy theories. They reason that scientific evidence proves masking works, outweighing what they see as the minor sacrifice of wearing a face covering. Some go so far as to characterize anti-maskers as irresponsible and stupid, claiming that those who do not wear masks are endangering those around them.

## **More political questions**

Now, let's get back to your feelings about political stuff.

I'd like you to rate how you feel about the following party

on a feeling thermometer. The higher the number, the warmer or more favorable you feel toward the party. The lower the number, the colder or less favorable you feel. You can pick any number between 0 and 100.

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

The Democratic  
Party

The Republican  
Party

How strongly do you agree with the following statements?

Republicans are...

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

Immoral

Unintelligent

Close-minded

Authoritarian

Less than  
human

How strongly do you agree with the following statements?

Democrats are...

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

Immoral

Unintelligent

Close-minded

Authoritarian

Less than  
human

## News Consumption

The next questions will ask you to reflect on your news consumption.



How much time do you spend on the following activities?

	None at all	A little	A moderate amount	A lot	A great deal
Watching the news on TV	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Reading news articles in a newspaper	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Reading news articles online	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Reading or watching the news on social media	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Listening to the news via podcasts	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Listening to the news via the radio	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

From the following list, where do you get most of your

## news about politics?

- ☐ Newspapers (either hardcopy or electronic)
- ☐ Fox News
- ☐ MSNBC
- ☐ Other Television News Programs (ABC, NBC, CNN etc.)
- ☐ Internet Sites
- ☐ Social Media
- ☐ Public Radio and/or Television
- ☐ Talk Radio/Podcasts
- ☐ Other

## How much time do you spend on the following activities?



Watching TV  
that puts a  
humorous spin  
on the news  
(e.g. SNL, The  
Daily Show, The  
Colbert Report, ½  
Hour News Hour)

Watching TV  
that puts a  
humorous spin  
on American  
politics through  
fiction (e.g.  
Veep, West  
Wing)

Watching online  
videos that put a  
humorous spin  
on the news  
(e.g. on  
YouTube)

Watching  
humorous clips  
about politics on  
social media  
(e.g. on  
Facebook or  
Twitter)

Reading  
headlines or  
articles that put  
a humorous spin  
on the news  
(e.g. from The  
Onion, The  
Babylon Bee)

Listening to  
podcasts that  
put a humorous  
spin on the news  
(e.g. The Daily  
Zeitgeist, The  
Bugle)

Looking at  
political memes  
(e.g. on  
Facebook,  
Instagram,  
Twitter, or  
Reddit)

## Further political Q's

And to finish up, some more political questions.

Do you think there has been a decline or an improvement in the level of civility in our politics in recent years?

- ☐ Decline
- ☐ Improvement
- ☐ Stayed about the same

Many people in this country hold strong views on certain issues. Do you think it is possible for people to disagree respectfully, or are nasty exchanges unavoidable?

- ☐ It is possible for people to disagree respectfully.
- ☐ Nasty exchanges are unavoidable.

Do you think civility (politeness, respect, etc.) in politics is important for a healthy democracy?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

In your experience, which of the following best describes how different viewpoints affect political humor/satire?

- ☐ Liberals are more harsh towards conservatives in their political humor/satire than conservatives are towards liberals
- ☐ Conservatives are more harsh towards liberals in their political humor/satire than liberals are towards conservatives
- ☐ Liberals and conservatives are equally harsh towards each other when it comes to political humor/satire

How often do you see political humor/satire targeting conservatives?

- ☐ Very often
- ☐ Often
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Not often
- ☐ Never

How often do you see political humor/satire targeting liberals?

- ☐ Very often
- ☐ Often
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Not often
- ☐ Never

Which of the following do you most agree with?

- ☐ I think political comedy/satire is good for society.
- ☐ I think political comedy/satire is bad for society.
- ☐ I think political comedy/satire is neutral for society.

Which of the following do you most agree with?

- ☐ Full free speech rights should always extend to satire/political comedy, even if that satire/political comedy can cause emotional harm.
- ☐ There should be limits on free speech for satire/political comedy in the name of protecting people from emotional harm.

## Debrief

Thank you for your response. You have just taken part in a survey experiment with the purpose of analyzing whether satire can affect attitudes of negative partisanship.

Negative partisanship is most basically defined as “the phenomenon whereby Americans largely align against one party instead of affiliating with the other.” Politicized apolitical issues, such as COVID-19, can give us clues about a possible interaction between the two concepts.

You were given one of four survey treatments: a satirical presentation of anti-conservative views on masking, a satirical presentation of anti-liberal views on masking, a non-satirical presentation of anti-conservative views on masking, or a non-satirical presentation of anti-liberal

views on masking.

Please note, all information used and presented to you was crafted for the purpose of this survey. The news reports you read are not real. However, satirical or not, the reports were based on popular (if exaggerated) American political sentiments.

If you have any questions about the survey you just completed, please feel free to contact researcher Emma West at [ewest23@colby.edu](mailto:ewest23@colby.edu).

Please click the arrow on the bottom right to complete your response.

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