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The DNC, GOP, and SNL

Abstract

This essay examines political polarization in the United States, focusing on late-night comedy shows as a contributing factor. While only one of many complex causes of increased political tension in America, these news commentary programs play a unique role in political life. The late-night show landscape has experienced a significant shift in content over the past five years and viewer demographics demonstrate how late-night show approval frequently coincides with partisan bias. After also taking into account the power and potential of humor as a tool of communication, we can evaluate the appropriate responsibilities of a late-night show in the United States today. Once we know what a late-night comedy should be doing, we must ask ourselves the question: is creating non-disparaging political humor suited for the late-night show format possible in today's era?

Political Polarization

Many Americans feel the presence of political tension on a daily basis. From consuming the news to endlessly scrolling through social media, politics typically finds a way to take center stage. Deep partisanship is “one of the defining aspects of our American society today” (Newport). The divide between red and blue has grown wider, putting pressure upon politicians to align consistently with their party and developing a stronger “us vs. them” narrative within

parties. With the approach of the 2020 election, the solidification of the two dominant presidential candidates, and the need for political leadership in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, political frustrations on all sides are surfacing more frequently.

This polarization can have incredibly harmful effects, such as inaction positioned to deter political opponents (Newport). An unwillingness to compromise pervades American politics. The political structures in the American state and the democratic nature of our nation require compromise. Yet, the political inaction within the United States prevents much needed governing processes from functioning appropriately. Another negative impact of increased polarization is a decreasing trust in social institutions. A healthy variety of social institutions, such as the government, mass media, and religious organizations, are one way to provide for and support individuals and their communities. However, these organizations, integral to a properly functioning society, are no longer trusted. “Partisans on both sides increasingly see institutions in the U.S. not as beneficial and necessary, but as a part of an effort by the other side to gain advantage... These skeptical views of institutions and social structures skew us toward distrust, anger and internal infighting – not actionable efforts to fix problems and address threats” (Newport). Polarization can create a mentality that prevents us from engaging with those who have differing political opinions, while also increasing our negative opinions of those outside of our inner circle. Within the United States, increasing political polarization is a serious and multifaceted problem that has negative consequences for the individual, the community, and American democracy.

American polarization is a complex issue and there are many causes and contributors. No one source can be named as the sole reason for such high political tensions, although Twitter comes pretty close. It is actually a wide variety of factors simultaneously at work, from decades-

old court decisions to fake news, from increasing party homogeneity to the speed, length, and immense reach of social media posts.

While there are many causes of polarization within the United States, as a student of communication I am drawn to the impact of rhetoric upon the political climate. Rhetoric used across varying mediums, from social media to news analysis, has the potential to strengthen polarizing opinions, destroying opportunities for political discourse. Research has shown that those who are ideologically consistent are less likely to see dissenting perspectives and more likely to see those who they agree with in the news and on social media (Mitchell). Even when consuming the news, Republicans and Democrats have significantly different preferences and regard the trustworthiness of news sources significantly differently (Mitchell). The content being consumed is not the same, and as a result, viewers of differing news channels view politics and current events through distinct lenses. These perspectives often in conflict with one another. As a result, the polarized perspectives lack common ground, are more prone to develop prejudices and adopt stereotypes of the other, and do not have an appropriate framework to approach beneficial political discourse.

While not a source of news, one format of news commentary that millions of Americans consume regularly is the late-night comedy show. The current nature of the programming is more politically charged than ever and many sources claim that late-night comedy is a contributing factor to the politically polarized climate in the United States (Suttie, “When Humor Widens the Political Divide”). Late-night shows are just one factor to consider in the American political climate. However, by examining the shift in late-night comedy and the power of humor, we are better suited to create comedic content that, rather than contribute to polarization, encourages political discourse and does not dehumanize those who are different from us.

Late-Night Comedy Shows

Since late-night comedy is a large genre, it is important to clarify what this kind of show is in order to have a better understanding of how its content has shifted in recent history, how it draws in specific demographics, and what its potential impact is. A late-night comedy show is television programming, usually taking the form of a talk show or variety show, which uses humor to entertain. This includes *Saturday Night Live*, *Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, and more.

Talk shows and variety shows differ significantly. Many talk shows like *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* tend to have a singular host with content like monologues, desk segments, games, and guest interviews, whereas variety shows like *Saturday Night Live* tend to have rotating hosts, musical guests, and sketch comedy. However, I have decided to group them all under the label of late-night comedy show. Some shows, like *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* and *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj* and, while not shown daily on cable or network television, are still considered part of this genre, given their purpose and content. Still, most of these programs are located in the late-night block of television. Despite differences in content, structure, and frequency, the purpose of these programs is to entertain audiences through the use of comedy and interaction with current events. The content of these shows classifies them as a news commentary program. While they focus a great deal on the news, their content is entertaining commentary instead of reporting. These programs, while they differ significantly, are all able to reach a large viewership and they employ similar communication strategies.

Historically, the genre of late-night talk and sketch has been politically active, but not distinctly partisan. The purpose of the late-night comedy show was primarily to entertain through developing humor about current events and news. “The job of a late-night comedian was once so straightforward: Give Americans something to laugh about so they can forget about their workday worries. Presidents always made for comedic fodder, as did the daily headlines. But it was all in good fun. And it generally hovered on the edge of the partisan divide” (Rutenberg). Now, this does not dismiss the presence of politics in comedy. In fact, most late-night comedy shows would use political figures and events as source material, and politics played a crucial role in these news commentary shows. These shows are naturally inclined to address politics in some manner.

Saturday Night Live was one of the first shows to employ political comedy in the 70s. This variety show has frequently featured political impersonations of presidents and large political events, in addition to their other comedic content. One of *Saturday Night Live*'s earlier sketches called “Debate '76” aired in 1976 and portrayed a debate between President Gerald Ford and Governor Jimmy Carter (“Debate '76”). This particular sketch used impersonations of both candidates to craft jokes. While Chase's impersonation of Ford receives a few more laughs than Aykroyd's Carter, the general tone of the humor remains consistent. By actively making fun of both participants, *Saturday Night Live* does not take a blatantly partisan stance and yet is still able to craft incisive political comedy through targeting some of their previous behaviors or statements. While this may have been the norm for late-night television for much of the genre's existence, “this sense of impartiality has vanished from the modern late-night landscape” (Whitten).

Throughout the past decade, late-night comedy shows have shifted focus. Particularly since the 2016 presidential election, President Trump and the Republican Party have come into focus as the target much more frequently. Bill Carter, an expert on late-night television, reports to the *New York Times* speaking about President Trump's interaction with the industry. "There's no example of any kind of sustained attack like this on a politician" (Rutenberg). The partisan bias is evident to most viewers. Impressions of Donald Trump are now a staple of late-night comedy shows, from Stephen Colbert's to Alec Baldwin's. Trump, and by extension the Republican Party, has become a constantly present topic, hovering on the periphery even when not the focus of humor. Conservative politics appears to be on the receiving end of most jokes and rarely receives any sympathy from comedic writers. Late-night comedy shows still poke fun at liberal politics, but the tone tends to be more favorable. While some late-night comedy hosts are more explicitly liberal-leaning, such as Stephen Colbert, even hosts like Jimmy Fallon, whose shows are renowned for their avoidance of partisan humor, have shifted towards the left in their content and the general tone (Rutenberg).

We can see this shift by examining some of *Saturday Night Live*'s work. While former presidents of political actors on both sides of the aisle have been subject to portrayal on Saturday Night Live, all pale in comparison to President Trump. Since 2015, three actors (Darrell Hammond, Taran Killam, and Alec Baldwin) have repeatedly impersonated Trump in at least 37 different cold opens, videos, and sketches, not to mention countless Weekend Update mentions, several one-off impersonations, and political references riddled throughout the show's content ("Alec Baldwin's Impersonations: Donald Trump," "Darrell Hammond's Impersonations: Donald Trump," and "Taran Killam's Impersonations: Donald Trump"). While Obama impersonations and references have appeared in over 40 videos and sketches since his 2008

presidential campaign, the tone of the humor was substantially different than the Trump impersonations presented (“Barack Obama Collection”).

By examining a piece of sketch comedy, we can glimpse the greater trends of late-night comedy’s new partisan behavior. The *Saturday Night Live* skit “Donald Trump vs. Hillary Clinton Town Hall Debate Cold Open” portrays the Town Hall which occurred before the show, highlighting the two presidential candidates, with Alec Baldwin as Donald Trump and Kate McKinnon as Hillary Clinton. The general tone of the comedy directed towards the hopefuls manifests very differently. The humor paints a picture of Clinton as an extremely awkward, yet tough and intelligent woman. Many of the jokes directed at her result in laughter that is approving of her awkward or goofy behavior. The cold open portrays Trump in a very different light. The jokes made at the expense of the candidate highlight his vulgarity and imply stupidity and predatory behavior.

While the content is clearly divisive, the audience’s reaction reinforces the partisan nature of the content. Throughout this cold open, there were over 40 distinct instances of laughter. While three jokes targeted both candidates, most of the laughter was aimed at Trump, who was laughed at roughly 18 times. Trump was also the subject of the longest period of sustained laughter, which was 29 seconds during his shark attack segment. Clinton, on the other hand, was laughed at roughly 13 times. She also received two cheers for her comedic behavior while Trump receives none. In sharp contrast to “Debate ’76,” one candidate is the clear superior and the other the obvious inferior. This cold open places the audience on the side of the superior, easily laughing at the fool of the pair, while feeling no blame or responsibility. The result of this comedy is the disparagement of Trump. This sketch is reflective of a larger trend within late-

night comedy to target President Trump and conservative policies, while demonstrating an obvious preference for liberal politics.

One theme throughout much of the late-night comedy I have consumed during the past few years that I noticed particularly in my analysis of the political impersonations was disparaging humor. Dr. Thomas Ford, a psychologist at Western Carolina University who has focused on the impact of humor upon human behavior, elaborates on what this kind of humor is and what it can do to participants. “Disparaging humor is paradoxical and communicates two conflicting messages: an explicit message with the denigration or belittlement of a target, along with an implicit message that the denigration is free of bad intentions or motives. It’s just a joke, and not to be taken seriously” (Suttie, “When Humor Widens the Political Divide”). This kind of humor bonds people together, while also strengthening their divisions from others and encouraging the development and entrenchment of prejudices. It develops an ingroup that views itself as blameless, which can actually encourage a mindset of superiority while dismissing the claims of the outgroup without sincere evaluation (Whitten). This kind of humor is frequently a “releaser of prejudice” and “can affect the ways people think about and respond to the target [of the humor]” (Suttie, “When Humor Widens the Political Divide”). The increased use of disparaging humor combined with the increased partisan bias has forced late-night hosts to take their seats on one side of the political aisle.

One worrying aspect of the presence of disparaging humor is the open arms that not only receive and encourage this style of humor; they demand it. One factor to consider while developing this comedy is “the rigid expectations of an anti-Trump audience that wants Resistance TV every night” (Rutenberg). Those who engage with conservative politicians are at

risk of criticism from the hard left. This becomes even more of an issue when taking into consideration the demographics of late-night comedy show audiences.

The reality of this shift in content is that it does not draw in viewers of all political leanings. A study conducted by *The Hollywood Reporter* and Morning Consult, a brand intelligence firm, demonstrates that “Democrats and Republicans [are] almost diametrically opposed on their views of late-night political content” (Shevenock). Who is watching late-night shows is a rather divisive issue as “fifty-four percent of Democrats said they watch late-night talk shows, compared to twenty-six percent of Republicans” (Shevenock). However, regardless of political party, one thing remained consistent across the board: more than half of Republicans and Democrats “thought late-night talk shows hosts tended to lean more liberal” (Shevenock). The awareness of the bias present in late-night shows, while well-informed, creates a problem. The human tendency to shift towards those like us extends into the media we consume. We trust those we are more likely to agree with and are more likely to engage with similar perspectives (Mitchell). Conservatives are not watching because they disagree with much of the liberal content and because they tend to think late-night shows verge on too political (Shevenock) and do not accurately depict them or even attempt to empathize with their views (Berr). The punchline of the joke is usually their party, their representatives, or their beliefs, and as a result there is little promise of enjoyable entertainment. However, this can often develop a prejudice against the use of political humor or strengthen a bias against liberal-leaning media. On the opposite end of the spectrum, liberal Americans are consuming this content because they agree with it. The presence of disparaging humor, while a joke, can be the externalization of their prejudice against those they disagree with.

A Pew Research study on partisan antipathy revealed that “the level of division and animosity – including negative sentiments among partisans toward the members of the opposing party – has only deepened” (“Partisan Antipathy: More Intense, More Personal”). With the partisan divide already wide, this kind of disparaging humor impacts both viewers and nonviewers. Viewers of the disparaging humor, upon receiving that comedy repeatedly, think about and respond to that humor accordingly. Dr. Thomas Ford explains that “disparagement humor can affect the ways people think about and respond to the target” (Suttie, “When Humor Widens the Political Divide”). Viewers are exposed to repeated rhetoric which “infantilizes those with whom the comedian might not agree and positions himself and his fans as intellectual superiors” (Whitten). It can be damaging to political discourse, encouraging the political inaction which lacks any desire to compromise. On the other hand, these patterns demonstrate that conservative nonviewers understand the ridicule of the red is frequent and do not wish to subject themselves to it. It has the potential to harden conservative nonviewers to liberal-leaning individuals, also encouraging political inaction and heightening distrust for media networks.

The divide between red and blue grows wider, especially upon examining the potential impact of late-night comedy’s evident political bias. This glimpse into the potential leads us to examine humor in general to better understand how it functions, its power, and how it can be harnessed in political dialogue.

Humor as a Tool of Communication

Throughout my undergraduate studies, I have been attracted to the use of humor as a tool of communication. From writing comedy for extracurricular activities to laughing alongside peers while bonding, I have seen first-hand how humor can bring people together, as well as

damage relationships. The terms humor and comedy are typically synonymous, but to provide more specificity I will differentiate them. Humor is “the quality of being amusing or comic, especially as expressed in literature or speech; the ability to express humor or make other people laugh” (“Humor”). It is the tool of communication used to amuse and entertain others. Comedy, on the other hand, is defined as “professional entertainment consisting of jokes and satirical sketches, intended to make an audience laugh” (“Comedy”). This term is generally descriptive about a performance. Comedy is a genre identifier and is the professional application of humor. A friend’s off-handed remark might be humorous, but unless they are a professional comedian or it was incredibly funny, you probably wouldn’t label their comment as comedy. Likewise, the reason “late-night comedy show” contains the word comedy rather than humor is likely due to the professional nature of the programming.

Humor and comedy can appear in a variety of forms: sarcasm, satire, anecdotes, impressions, parodies, puns and wordplay, 4th wall breaks, absurdism, and comparisons, to name a few strategies. The result of all of these forms, when used effectively, is laughter. While it can appear in many different ways, humor at its core is a powerful way to communicate with others. The use of “humor is a serious tool that creates connection between people, enhances charisma of communicators, engages attention, enhances memory, leverages people’s willingness to shift attitudes and behaviors, and increases the resilience of communicators and their audiences” (Reece). There are a great deal of benefits and humor as a tool of communication has the power to impact our lives in a variety of ways. The process of laughing is emotional and encourages retention with regards to the subject of the joke. It is also a powerful way to connect people. In fact, “a new study explores when laughter works as a social glue... shared laughter may communicate to others that we have a similar worldview, which strengthens our relationships”

(Suttie, “How Laughter Brings Us Together”). It can increase our loyalty and improve our perception of a relationship.

However, humor is not always used for good. According to Dr. Thomas Ford “researchers have distinguished between positive uses of humor that serve a bonding function from negative, aggressive uses of humor that can be injurious” (Suttie, “When Humor Widens the Political Divide”). While humor can build strong and positive relationships, that strength can also manifest in unhealthy ways. It can isolate groups and divide others based on the target or punchline. With disparaging humor in particular, it can actually strengthen the resolve against the target and decrease tolerance towards them. Disparaging humor destroys willingness to engage (Suttie, “When Humor Widens the Political Divide”), which in turn leads to inaction. At work politically, this inaction is one of the harmful side effects of polarization.

Humor is also rooted in experience and perspective. A joke to one person might come across as offensive to another. Without knowing the recipient of the humor’s specific mindset and worldview, it is often difficult to predict the outcome of the humor being employed.

Humor is a complex tool and harnessing it to accomplish a particular outcome is a rather difficult task. “Despite its vast cultural imprint, comedy is a little-understood vehicle for serious public engagement in urgent social problem” (Chattoo 5). However, that should not deter us from exploring the use of comedy to create positive change. It is possible to accomplish good through comedy, whether it be building relationships with those around us, raising awareness for a cause, or making an audience smile.

The Responsibilities of a Late-Night Comedy Show

While late-night comedy has turned into a polarizing form of media consumption, we must return to the purpose of a late-night comedy show to better understand how this genre of programming should act moving forward and fulfill its responsibilities to society. Neo-Calvinism's concept of sphere sovereignty is a theory of civil society that attempts to understand the responsibilities of institutions within society. It claims every institution has a sphere of sovereignty, or particular territory they are responsible for, and this is derived from their purpose. As I have previously stated, the purpose of a late-night comedy show is to entertain audiences through the use of comedy and interaction with current events.

From this purpose and my research on late-night comedy shows, three responsibilities emerged, giving form to the ideal execution of this genre of television programming. The primary responsibility was to entertain, typically through the use of comedy. Late-night shows, as previously stated, "give Americans something to laugh about so they can forget about their workday worries." (Rutenberg). Employing humor as a constant part of the show's format indicates the desire to entertain. Comedy is developed with the purpose of making people laugh. This can be accomplished through the varying formats presented by late-night comedy shows: monologues, guests, games, sketch comedy, etc.

The second responsibility, which can be implied from the first, is to acquire and increase viewership. The underlying reason may vary, from enticing people to purchase a streaming service to increasing ad revenue on a network, but all late-night comedy shows seek to increase their viewers for the network or producers.

The third responsibility I identified was news commentary that speaks truth to power and encourages citizen engagement. While more of a mouthful than the first two responsibilities, it still rings true. Late-night shows are deeply connected to politics and current events. They are a

source of material that is easily understood by a wide audience. Arguing against all political commentary in late-night shows would be denying part of the genre's essence. These shows should be commenting upon the news to serve the first responsibility, but also to address injustice and motivate people to act. Now, this responsibility focuses in particular upon news commentary, or the political commentary present in these shows. Jimmy Fallon's game with Harry Styles does not need to motivate people to go vote, but if he's going to attack specific policies or the actions of politicians, the comedy should, to some degree, be substantive and encourage political dialogue rather than dismantle it.

Examples of this responsibility in effect are prevalent throughout late-night comedy's history. In 2015 *Last Week Tonight* addressed New York's bail bond system in a lengthy, yet comedic, segment. Within several weeks, the piece had gained immense traction and eventually led New York City to improve the system (Chattoo 4). Oliver used his commentary and comedy to highlight injustice in an engaging way, which drew in viewers and thereby drew attention to a serious political issue. Comedy is a rather unique tool of communication in that it can focus on a difficult topic or tense situation and make it easier to take about. Laughter makes topics more approachable.

Concerning citizen engagement, late-night comedy shows have the power to motivate viewers in a variety of ways. Several studies have demonstrated that late-night shows can impact viewers by improving their perceptions of public figures and increasing their political efficacy. Late-night shows can even stir frustration in audiences with regards to politics, which invites political action (Whitten). While not a guarantee, the commentary nature of these programs frames the world in a particular way and shares that frame with their audience. The right frame can position individuals to engage in a variety of ways.

When it comes to frequency of late-night comedy's success in this responsibility, these examples are not necessarily the rule or the exception. They simply happened. As it has been highlighted, comedy is difficult to harness to accomplish specific goals. However, that does not mean we should stray from using humor as a tool of communication. The responsibility of the late-night comedy show is to entertain, to acquire viewers, and when relevant, to comment on the news in ways that speak truth to power and encourage citizen engagement.

In discussing the responsibilities of late-night shows, a necessary clarification must be made. These programs are considered news commentary formats, which means they are not sources of news. They are shows designed to comment upon the news, and as such should not be treated the same as a news report (Forgette). While no news source is completely unbiased, the content of late-night shows strays directly into bias, skewing current events and molding them for entertainment value. As a result, they should not be considered a legitimate source of news and statements should not be immediately taken at face value. Instead, these programs should encourage viewers to pursue the news, current events, and politics on their own time and become informed.

What is Next? Content Creation

So... what do we do now? While late-night comedy is not the ultimate or even largest contributing factor to political polarization, the effects of its humor can be seen in increasing the divide between political parties. However, I believe the solution to this predicament lies in the problem. By returning to these key responsibilities of a late-night comedy show and employing humor through comedy that is not disparaging, we can enter a new era of late-night comedy. The creation of content that is political, yet still contributes positively to the American political

climate, is possible, but it walks a fine line. Dr. Ford states “perhaps humor could help conservatives and liberals make light of the things that divide them in ways that don’t threaten or insult either” (Suttie, “When Humor Widens the Political Divide”). By developing humor that is not disparaging and fulfills the responsibilities of late-night comedy, writers can contribute to a positive political environment and encourage discourse.

It is easy to say let’s make better content and then wipe our hands of the situation. Given my constraints, rather than develop and produce a piece of comedy, I will explore some key aspects of content creation to be aware of and present some ideas for future comedy that falls within the boundaries previously laid out.

While developing humor for a late-night comedy show, we must evaluate the attitudes of both writers and audiences. A writer whose attitude seeks laughter will likely be different than a writer whose purpose is to disparage. A positive attitude will encourage creativity, enabling writers to explore new ideas and applications for their comedy. They will not feel boxed in by the need to attack or dismantle those they find different than themselves. Audiences on the other hand must place themselves in a mindset of openness. They should approach the humor they are consuming with a grain of salt, recognizing it is not the absolute facts, and be open to being on the receiving end of some humor. By approaching comedy with a positive attitude, rather than a desire to dismantle and disparage those who are different, writers and audiences can contribute to an environment that engages people of many beliefs and encourages political action.

We can also examine the purpose of the jokes being generated. Is the joke seeking to entertain or inspire people to action? Or is the purpose of a joke to mock and anger a group of people? When it comes to humor, purpose translates clearly through the tone of the joke. A joke

told in a goofy manner may resonate positively with audiences, while the same joke executed in a rude or mocking manner will likely resonate negatively.

Finally, writing comedy is extremely difficult. Being able to write a successful joke should be considered an impressive accomplishment, but we must ask ourselves: is it actually funny? Is the joke genuinely relevant, or is this impersonation something audiences see over and over again? Keeping an audience on their toes is a large part of what makes humor so entertaining; audiences don't know what will happen next and the punchline creates excitement. By choosing to fall back on old material, writers aren't exploring their creative and comedic potential to the fullest. While some may think Trump is an endless source of material for writers (Rutenberg), many think impressions are overused.

Given these aspects which should be adopted by creators and consumers of late-night comedy, we can explore some ideas for what this content might look like. Sketches are among the most popular formats employed by late-night comedy shows and they provide a great deal of flexibility. Especially when they are videos, the contexts can be anywhere and anytime. One format frequently employed in sketches is the mock commercial. One idea I propose is an ad that talks about two experiences simultaneously: voting for the first time and riding a rollercoaster for the first time. It creates a lot of opportunity for comedy. There may be several excited responses, such as "That was so exciting! I feel so empowered!" to "I can't wait until next time!" It can also present several terrified responses like "I can't believe I had to do that [leave position X blank]. I'm gonna be sick." Explored through backing images and advertised thanks to the support of the SFEC, the Six Flags Election Commission, this sketch could invite people to vote for the first time while recognizing the good and bad in our political system.

Another sketch I have been interested in creating is a parody of the Schoolhouse Rock video “I’m Just a Bill” which, instead of exploring how a bill becomes a law, explores how debt works. “I’m Just a Loan” could highlight how student debt and other kinds of loans from the government work. Especially in light of the current pandemic and the loans being offered by the federal government to support businesses, the parody could make fun of how large corporations like Shake Shack are receiving funding instead of small businesses. This sort of news commentary can be entertaining, make dense information more accessible, and cause real change.

Plenty of humor that meets the responsibilities of a late-night comedy show exists and there is “an abundance of incisive political satire” (Rutenberg). The challenge for writers lies in avoiding disparaging humor while also generating entertaining and inciteful commentary.

Conclusions

Late-night comedy has great power. With the great power of laughter, comedians in turn have a responsibility. Dr. Ford reiterates this principle. “People who have an audience... should use humor responsibly, because it does have consequences” (Suttie, “When Humor Widens the Political Divide”). When disparaging humor is used in political contexts where ingroup activity reinforces a mentality of superiority and encourages repetition of the humor, it can have detrimental consequences. Comedians and writers must choose their words wisely. By crafting jokes which are political yet not overly disparaging, they have the power to expand their audience and encourage political engagement. In turn, viewers must be aware of what they are consuming. More than most, I am guilty of clicking through YouTube and watching one *Saturday Night Live* cold open after another. However, recognizing that humor may impact your

prejudices and your behaviors gives you the power to identify bias, alter how you view the target of the humor, or even consume something different.

The presence of political polarization makes it easy to point fingers in one direction and place greater blame upon those we politically disagree with. The actions of individuals all across the political spectrum contribute to the tense political climate Americans live in. That is to say, liberal late-night hosts are not entirely at fault and conservative politicians are not entirely at fault. The complex and harmful nature of political polarization demands we take steps, no matter how small, to address the political climate in the United States. Steps like humor that do not identify the genre of comedy with a political party is one way we can improve the political health of our society.

As the 2020 General Election approaches, Americans must politically engage with those around them despite the deep partisan divides which pervade our society. The presence of polarization can be felt throughout the United States and has negative consequences for the proper functioning of democracy, the social institutions in communities, and the ability to engage in political discourse. However, humor is an incredibly effective communication strategy that we must consider when addressing political polarization. It can be used to create bonds or to dehumanize and disparage. Late-night comedy shows are certainly a reflection of the political climate, while also exerting political influence. What kind of humor will our screens, and our hearts and minds, be filled with in the next few months? Will we laugh alongside those with differing political opinions? The narratives of American comedy and democracy are deeply intertwined. Let's hope these stories don't end with a punchline.

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*Unable to cite specific pages or quotes because the book was located at Gordon and I was unable to access it. However, the general concepts and themes referenced were from this book.