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Laughing or Learning with the Chief Executive? The Impact of Exposure to Presidents' Jokes on Message Elaboration

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Abstract: Using the White House Correspondents Dinner (WHCD) and the State of the Union (SOTU) as stimuli, our experiment ($N = 403$) examines the differential effect of exposure to humorous vs. serious presidential speech on the likelihood of engaging in post-exposure message elaboration. The results suggest that viewers are more likely to engage in message elaboration when viewing serious presidential speech like the SOTU rather than the more humorous WHCD. Additionally, disposition toward the president fails to moderate the impact of varied speech exposure on message elaboration. Our results ultimately show that, while WHCD humor may be quickly discounted, it can also provide a strategic distraction from political content. We discuss the implications of these results and confirm our main findings across the two most recent U.S. presidential administrations.

Keywords: presidents, comedy, message elaboration, speech, humor

1 Introduction

For years, the popular press has been filled with claims about the effects of presidents' jokes on the voting public (Hell 2016; Rich 2004). Given the frequency of U.S. presidents' joke-telling as a strategic tool over the past century (Stanley 2014; Waisanen 2015), it seems reasonable to infer that such messages are a source of influence. After presidents deliver annual comedy monologues at events like the White House Correspondents' Dinner (hereafter, WHCD), journalists and pundits commonly explain that "these jokes are intended to do more than simply entertain you. They have an agenda" (Obeidallah 2013: Para. 3). We are often told that the Chief Executive's jokes create rapport for the politician

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since ultimately, "comedy knocks down walls between people – especially between the president and [citizens of] the United States" (Gelenter 2004: M1; Hell 2016).

Yet, more important than the media's claims, the White House has for years treated these WHCD speeches as unique and impactful in a way that deserves further inquiry. The first WHCD was in 1914 (Condon), but it took presidents like JFK and Reagan to elevate the stand-up style comedy of the event that is now a mainstay of the dinners (Hell 2016). One former White House speechwriter revealed that "each year, only two presidential speeches were rehearsed and polished... the White House Correspondents Dinner and the State of the Union" (Katz 2003: 353). Landon Parvin, who has written comic speeches at the WHCD for a number of Republican presidents, also believes that "the purpose of political humor for a politician" is "to be better liked" (Kolbert 2004: Para. 19). To achieve such effects, presidents now even hire professional joke writing staff from television programs like *The Daily Show* in preparation for their WHCD performances (Nichols 2012), underscoring how seriously the funny is taken.

Although the annual WHCD garners much media hype and reaches a considerable audience via live coverage (e. g., in 2014, CNN brought in over one million viewers for the dinner) and *YouTube* replays, we have little empirical evidence about the event's effects, especially in contrast with more serious presidential speeches like the annual State of the Union address (hereafter, SOTU) (Wilstein 2014). While the WHCD has historically focused on influencing the media and political elite, WHCD speeches now have a much broader public reach thanks in part to the viral spread of key WHCD moments like Stephen Colbert's 2006 critical roasting of George W. Bush, and the rehashing of both the presidential and comic speeches on late-night network and cable political satire programming (Cillizza 2015). Given the visibility of the WHCD, humor scholars should assess the impact of this presidential joke-telling on the U.S. public.

In our analysis of experimental data ($N = 403$; spring 2015), we shed light on the value of engaging in humor while serving as Commander-in-Chief, presenting a preliminary assessment of the effects of exposure to WHCD presidential speeches on message elaboration. This study is the first to measure the impact of exposure to WHCD presidential humor on behavior (i. e. message elaboration) and we confirm our findings across the two most recent U.S. administrations. We begin our review by highlighting previous work on presidential humor and the WHCDs and discuss the moderating role of disposition with respect to humor processing and appreciation. We conclude with a focus on the audience's willingness to engage in post-exposure message elaboration after viewing either a humorous or a serious presidential speech.

2 The value of going funny

Politicians have long recognized the importance of using jokes in speeches, debates, and media appearances as a way to connect with the average voter (Meyer 1990; Parkin 2009; Peifer and Holbert 2013). Recognizing that there are many discrete forms of humor worth engaging (irony, satire, self-mockery, etc.), a broad crop of politicians have recently been observed practicing self-deprecating humor, choosing to make fun of themselves via regular guest appearances on late-night comedy programs, in stump speeches, and via social media (Baumgartner et al. 2015; Becker 2012; Bippus 2007; Kolbert 2004; Shifman 2013). On the whole, a willingness to engage with comedy – whether poking fun at yourself or politics more broadly – has helped politicians gain support among voters of the opposite party (Baum 2005), encouraged key attributes to become more salient via accessibility priming including those that ultimately promote broader likeability and favorability (Moy et al. 2006), offered a last-ditch get-out-the-vote (GOTV) effort for those earnestly trying to win a close contest at the ballot box on Election Day (Kolbert 2004), and mobilized citizens to engage with key policy debates (Stanley 2014).

Scholars have shown that engagement with political comedy content is conditional or dependent upon a variety of factors, including political interest (Xenos and Becker 2009), source liking (Nabi et al. 2007), the motivation and/or ability to inspect comedic claims (LaMarre and Walther 2013; Young 2008), prior orientations toward and affinities for political humor (Feldman 2013; Hmielowski et al. 2011), partisanship (Baumgartner and Morris 2008), and one's disposition toward (or how much one likes or dislikes) both the comic source and the target of the joke (Boukes et al. 2015; Becker 2014). On the whole, however, recent work has suggested that viewers' attitudes warm toward politicians who are willing to make fun of themselves, often irrespective of party (Baumgartner et al. 2015). Ultimately, engaging in this type of self-deprecating presentation appears to make a politician seem more human, even if voters don't always agree with their policies.

In sum, two decades of political communication research has shown that engaging with comedy has the ability to positively impact viewer evaluations of politicians (Baum and Jamison 2011; Baumgartner 2007; Moy et al. 2006). What needs examination at this juncture are the types of humor that allow politicians to gain the most traction with voters, as well as the impact of discrete *official* events that encourage humor as the primary mode of communication. Since the WHCD has become one of the primary humor events that presidents and the media elite appear to put their comic stock in, we use these performances as

experimental stimuli, measuring the differential impact of exposure to WHCD vs. SOTU speeches on the key behavioral outcome of message elaboration.

3 Message elaboration and the WHCD

Although much research has considered the effects of exposure to humor on attitudes toward politicians and political institutions, a second and equally important strand of work has tried to measure the impact of comedy exposure on key democratic outcomes and behaviors like information-seeking and learning, feelings of political efficacy, and political participation (Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Hoffman and Thomson 2009; Xenos and Becker 2009; Becker 2011). While this work often presents mixed findings (e. g., comedy exposure positively impacts internal political efficacy yet dampens institutional trust or external efficacy), these studies have largely shown that exposure to political comedy content can result in modest gains for the broader public in terms of learning and knowledge acquisition and political participation and engagement (Baek and Wojcieszak 2009; Becker 2013; Cao 2008; Hoffman and Young 2011) These gains are conditional on individual differences, including prior political interest, comedy viewing motivations like one's need for humor (NFH) or an affinity for political humor (AfPH), the cognitive ability to process political comedy content, and the relatedness of the comic message (Becker 2014b; Hmielowski et al. 2011; LaMarre and Walther 2013; Matthes 2013; Young 2013).

Political learning is often predicted by an individual's likelihood of engaging in message elaboration, a process of thoughtful reflection that includes making connections between new content and what one already knows from another source or experience (Eveland 2005). Initial work by Matthes (2013) on the knowledge acquisition that can result from exposure to humorous political speech suggests that viewers are more likely to engage in message elaboration if the humor is related to the larger message context and if they express a greater need for humor (NFH) from the outset.

For the speechwriters penning the president's WHCD script, a primary focus is on enhancing the president's image and favorability. In our research, we consider whether exposure to these comic presentations can extend influence beyond attitudes and encourage behaviors like message elaboration. The jokes in the WHCD speeches generally revolve around a consistent theme – poking fun at politicians, the media, and political institutions. Given the political context of these WHCD comic presentations, individual-level differences in political interest and disposition toward the politician making the jokes may matter more than an intrinsic NFH or AfPH.

Generally speaking, research on politically comedy processing has suggested (via the application of dual-processing models like the elaboration likelihood model [ELM]), that viewers process comedy peripherally and lack the ability or motivation to carefully inspect comedic claims, particularly if they like the source cracking the jokes (Boukes et al. 2015; Nabi et al. 2007; Young, 2008). In many cases, viewers simply *discount* the arguments present in political comedy content and heuristically label the presentation as something to be categorized as funny rather than serious (Young 2008). The prospects for careful engagement with the comic material and the potential for post-exposure learning and knowledge acquisition are therefore less likely. A willingness to engage in message elaboration after being exposed to a humorous presidential speech may therefore depend on one's prior disposition toward the politician and one's prior interest or engagement with politics.

4 Accounting for partisanship and disposition

To date, research connecting partisanship and political comedy effects presents mixed findings. For example, Xenos et al. (2011) found that political partisanship moderated the effects of exposure to critical content airing on *The Daily* Show, offering evidence of motivated bias influencing viewing behavior. Conversely, a related study found that viewing Stephen Colbert attack John McCain just prior to Election Day in 2008 cooled the attitudes of both Republicans and Democrats; in this case, partisanship failed to act as a perceptual filter influencing the processing of hostile political comedy content (Becker 2012). An experiment presented by LaMarre et al. (2009) argued against this trend, suggesting that while viewers who identify as Democrats correctly noted that Colbert's support of the Republican Party and conservative values was just a joke, Republicans were motivated to find Colbert's support for conservative values to be sincere, thus engaging in biased processing of the same comedy content. In a similar vein, a 2008 study by Baumgartner and Morris found that exposure to *The Colbert* Report actually increased support for Republican politicians and policies (Baumgartner and Morris 2008).

Young (2004) hypothesized that partisanship should encourage biased processing of political comedy content, with stronger partisans emerging as those more likely to negatively evaluate the candidate from the opposing party. However, her research ultimately suggested that the more important factor influencing the biased processing of comedy content was a viewer's prior volume of comedy exposure, with heavy comedy viewers evaluating candidates

more negatively irrespective of their prior partisan identification. Related experimental work has also suggested that exposure to critical comedy content has a larger effect on resulting attitudes toward politicians, holding partisanship constant (Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Morris 2009).

Recent work has suggested that moving beyond the dichotomous Democrat vs. Republican partisan distinction is helpful when evaluating the role of predispositions on political comedy processing (Becker 2014a). In fact, focusing on disposition toward both the victor and victim of the joke has reemerged as an important antecedent construct in recent political comedy effects research, since it offers a more nuanced perspective on political affiliation and liking (Boukes et al. 2015). First developed by Zillmann and colleagues in the 1970s, the disposition theory of humor was quickly applied to a whole range of media enjoyment contexts, including political cartoons and printed jokes (Zillmann 2000; Zillmann et al. 1974).

At its core, the disposition theory of humor suggests that humor appreciation depends on how much the viewer both likes and dislikes the person making the joke and the target of the humor. More specifically, disposition theory posits that humor appreciation will be greater if the viewer is positively disposed toward the comic source (Boukes et al. 2015). Conversely, viewers are less likely to appreciate humor if they dislike or are negatively disposed toward the humorous source (Zillmann 2000). In a similar vein, viewers show greater appreciation for humor that targets a foe rather than a friend (Priest 1966; Priest and Abrahams 1970). Applying the disposition theory of humor to study the reception of political parody videos popular during the 2012 election cycle, a recent study found support for the idea that the appreciation of videos attacking Obama and Romney varied in accordance with viewers' prior dispositions toward the two candidates (Becker 2014a). Additionally, Boukes et al. (2015) showed that viewing satirical content consistent with one's political views results in more positive attitudes toward the comic target.

While previous research applying the disposition theory of humor to political comedy appreciation has focused primarily on liking versus disliking as a key moderator of overall comedy reception or attitudes toward the target of the humor (Boukes et al. 2015), work theorizing political comedy's effects more broadly suggests that it may be valuable to extend the concept of disposition beyond overall reception or liking (Holbert 2005; Holbert and Young 2013), which is more hedonic in nature, toward the evaluation of a set of more cognitive and understanding-driven processing behaviors that include core concepts like message elaboration and relevant information-seeking behaviors (Young 2008). Disposition certainly indicates whether a viewer will appreciate

or reject jokes depending upon their relationship with the comic victim and villain, but this individual-level difference characteristic should also serve as a marker for whether an individual may be more likely to heuristically label a text as either funny or serious from the outset, and be more or less likely to engage in message elaboration.

Given the cognitive disconnect and incongruity that occurs when seeing a president engage in a comic as opposed to a serious speech (Young 2008), it is likely that viewers may quickly discount a WHCD performance as something that is not to be taken seriously, particularly if they are positively disposed toward the president. In effect, the WHCD speech becomes a one-off diversion of sorts, while being exposed to a serious SOTU presentation should more naturally encourage message elaboration efforts. In contrast, viewers who are negatively disposed toward the president offering the comic speech may be less likely to automatically discount the humorous content or classify the material as funny. On balance, they should be more critical or at least more skeptical of the jokes and the comic performance given their negative disposition toward the speaker (Becker 2014a; Boukes et al. 2015; Nabi et al. 2007). We test this line of reasoning via a set of hypotheses, extending the application of the disposition theory of humor beyond general joke appreciation to consider the moderating role of disposition on the processing of humorous vs. serious presidential speech and the likelihood of engaging in post-exposure message elaboration:

*H*1: Viewers are less likely to engage in message elaboration when exposed to a humorous as opposed to a serious presidential speech.

*H*2: Disposition toward a president moderates the impact of exposure to humorous presidential speech on message elaboration. Those who like a president will be less likely to engage in message elaboration given exposure to a humorous speech than those who dislike a president.

4.1 Methods

A six condition experiment was created using the Qualtrics Survey Software platform. The first subject pool ($N = 197$) included undergraduates at two U.S. universities located in the Mid-Atlantic region: one large public university ($n = 86$) and a smaller private liberal arts college ($n = 111$). Data were collected among students in communication, business, and public affairs courses at both institutions between 5–28 February 2015. Amazon's Mechanical Turk Human Intelligence Tasks platform (mTurk) was used to collect responses from a second subject pool ($n = 206$ completes; 236 started the survey). Data for this second wave were collected on 5 March 2015. Student subjects were offered extra credit in a relevant course in

exchange for participation, while Amazon mTurk workers were compensated two dollars in exchange for their participation. The subject pools were combined ($N = 403$).[1]

The pre-test questionnaire included measures of political interest and disposition toward politicians. Subjects were randomly assigned to view one of six seven-minute videos. Subjects in the first condition ($n = 67$) viewed the first seven minutes of President George W. Bush's comic speech at the 2002 WHCD, while subjects in the second condition ($n = 68$) watched the first seven minutes of comedian Drew Carey's speech at the 2002 event. Subjects in condition three ($n = 70$) watched the first seven minutes of President George W. Bush's 2002 SOTU speech. Subjects in the fourth condition ($n = 63$) viewed President Barack Obama's comic speech at the 2010 WHCD, while subjects in condition five ($n = 65$) viewed comedian Jay Leno's speech at the 2010 event. Lastly, subjects in condition six ($n = 71$) watched the first seven minutes of President Barack Obama's 2010 SOTU.

All of the videos were captured via *YouTube* and edited to remove all background commentary, the scroll bar, and related video information. The edited videos were uploaded to a secure web site and inserted into the survey experiment; a validation mechanism was set so that each subject needed to remain on the video page for 420 sec and could not click forward or backward within the survey or scroll forward through sections of the video. A set of recall questions were also included after each video, along with a series of manipulation checks to confirm that viewers had paid attention to the content and interpreted the message of each video correctly.[2] A post-test questionnaire followed in all conditions, tapping items like message elaboration and key demographic considerations.

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1 While there were demographic differences between the college vs. Amazon mTurk subsamples, global F-test results for the analysis of message elaboration were consistent (and not significantly different) across the subsamples. Amazon mTurk participants were older ($M = 35.88$, $SD = 10.70$ vs. $M = 21.17$, $SD = 1.99$), more evenly split in terms of gender (54% male/46% female vs. 32% male/64% female,) slightly more likely to define themselves as Democrats (41.7% vs. 31.8%) or Independents (35.4% vs. 27.3%), and significantly less likely to affiliate with the Republican party (18.0% vs. 30.8%) than the college students. The subsamples were comparable in terms of levels of general political interest.
2 A measure of perceived humor was created by combining responses to the entertaining, funny, amusing, and humorous items (1 = "not at all," to 7 = "extremely;" Cronbach's alpha = 0.93). Perceived humor was higher and comparable across the WHCD conditions (Obama WHCD $M = 5.53$, $SD = 1.36$; Bush WHCD $M = 5.53$, $SD = 1.60$) yet significantly lower for the SOTU (Obama SOTU $M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.28$; Bush SOTU $M = 2.22$, $SD = 0.93$).

5 Key measures

5.1 Message elaboration

Message elaboration ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.07$; α = 0.87; 1 = "strongly disagree," to 5 = "strongly agree,") was based on four related items (Matthes 2013), including: (1) "During the video, I intensively thought about what the speaker said," (2) "I concentrated on the arguments of the speaker," (3) "During the video, I critically reflected on what the speaker said," and (4) "I didn't really think about the message of this speech" (reverse coded).

5.2 Demographics

The analyses controlled for *gender* (54.5% female; 45.5% male) and *age* ($M = 28.73$, $SD = 10.71$). Two items tapping *political predispositions* were included in the analyses: (1) *party identification*, with controls for those identifying as Democrats (36.9%) and Republicans (24.3%), and (2) *political ideology* ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.83$; 1 = "very liberal," to 7 = "very conservative"). Controls were also included for the sample subsections: (1) *public university* (21.3%), (2) *private college* (27.5%), and (3) Amazon mTurk (51.0%).

5.3 Political interest

A measure of *political interest* ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 1.12$; 1 = "never," to 5 = "most of the time"), or interest in "following what's going on in politics and government," was included in the analyses.

5.4 Dispositions

During the pretest, subjects were asked how much they "like or dislike" a set of individuals and groups. These items included a measure of *disposition toward President Barack Obama* ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 1.91$; 1 = "dislike," 7 = "like,") and a measure of *disposition toward former President George W. Bush* ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.67$). For analytical purposes, those who liked Obama or Bush gave the respective president a score of 5–7 on the disposition scale; those who expressed dislike gave them a score of 1–3 on the disposition scale.

5.5 Experimental conditions

Assignment to condition was also included as an independent variable. Controls were included for watching Bush at the WHCD ($n = 67$) or his SOTU address ($n = 70$) along with watching Obama at the WHCD ($n = 63$) or his SOTU address ($n = 71$). Viewing the comedians at the WHCD served as the controls and were left out of the models ($N = 133$; $n = 68$ for Carey in 2002 & $n = 65$ for Leno in 2010). These conditions were the focus of another related study; they were also useful for the manipulation check assessing perceived humor.

6 Analysis

An initial one-way ANOVA analysis was employed to test for a significant difference in message elaboration across conditions. A series of independent samples t-tests were then used to further tease out any significant differences in message elaboration between conditions.

Next, hierarchical ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was used to more fully explore the various factors that best explain variation in message elaboration. Hierarchical regression enters blocks of variables based on their presumed causal order, allowing researchers to assess the relative contribution of each variable block above and beyond previously entered blocks, as well as the relative contribution of the other variables entered within the same block. For both models, demographics were entered as block 1, followed by political interest (block 2), dispositions toward the politician (block 3), and assignment to experimental conditions (block 4). To be parsimonious, Table 1 displays the upon-entry and final regression coefficients for each of the independent variables entered into the models and the incremental R^2, or the contribution of each variable block toward explaining the variance in the dependent variable. The sum of these incremental R^2s is listed as the Final R^2, or the percentage of the variance in message elaboration that is explained by the models.

The data displayed in Table 2 present possible interaction effects that further explain variation in message elaboration. Two sets of interaction variables were created by multiplying the standardized values of key main effects variables (e. g., disposition and assignment to experimental condition): (1) the interaction between liking Bush or Obama and the presidential speech conditions (e. g., Like_Bush*BushWHCD), and (2) the interaction between disliking Bush or Obama and the speech conditions (e. g., DislikeObama*ObamaSOTU). Standardized values of the main effects variables were used to prevent possible multicollinearity

problems between the interaction terms and the component variable elements. The before-entry standardized regression coefficients are listed for all of the new interaction variables, along with the contribution that this fifth and final block offers in explaining additional variation in message elaboration. A series of final R^2 s are displayed as well, combining the amount of variation in the dependent variable that is explained by both direct and interaction effects.

By running the same regression models across the two sets of presidential speeches, we tested the ability of our analysis to reproduce key relationships underlying the evaluation of humorous vs. serious presidential speech across the two administrations. We compared the relevant effects sizes across the two models by using Cohen et al.'s (1983) z-score test, which divides the difference between the unstandardized beta coefficients being compared by the square root of the sum of the squared standard errors associated with the respective unstandardized beta coefficients (Holbert and Benoit 2009). A z-score value of less than 1.96 for each comparison signals consistency across the two datasets and indicates these relationships hold irrespective of the politician giving the public address.

7 Results

ANOVA analyses confirmed that there was significant variation in message elaboration $F(5, 398) = 32.84$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.29$ across the conditions featured in the experiment. Message elaboration was significantly higher when the presidents were delivering their SOTU's than when joking at the WHCD [for Obama $t(132) = 7.57$, $p < 0.001$; $M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.81$ for Obama SOTU vs. $M = 2.72$, $SD = 0.90$ for Obama WHCD; for Bush $t(135) = 9.60$, $p < 0.001$; $M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.85$ for Bush SOTU vs. $M = 2.44$, $SD = 0.88$ for Bush WHCD]. In essence, according to the data, viewers were more likely to engage with and try to learn from the SOTU as opposed to the WHCD speeches. This pattern of findings offers support for $H1$.

We turn next to our hierarchical OLS regression analyses. As discussed, we ran our regression models across two subsets of the data (Bush vs. Obama conditions) to ascertain whether our findings applied to a broader case of humorous vs. serious presidential speech as opposed to the speeches culled from one particular administration.

As the data in Table 1 show, demographics explained a significant amount of the variation in message elaboration for the Bush and Obama models (inc. $R^2 = 8.5\%$ for Bush; inc. $R^2 = 7.0\%$ for Obama). Of note is the significant relationship between gender and message elaboration (female $\beta = -0.18$, $p < 0.01$) in the final Obama model as well as age in the initial Bush model ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < 0.001$) and in the initial and final Obama models (initial $\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.05$; final $\beta = 0.20$,

$p < 0.05$). Political interest was a significant factor explaining variation in message elaboration for the Obama model ($\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.05$) and was also approaching significance in the final Bush model ($\beta = 0.11$, $p < 0.10$).

Disposition toward Bush was a significant factor with respect to message elaboration ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.001$); yet this block only explained an additional 1.3 % of the incremental variance in message elaboration. Similarly, disposition toward Obama $\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.05$) was a significant factor explaining variation in message elaboration, however this block only explained an additional 1.6 % of the variation in message elaboration.

Being exposed to both of the SOTU speeches was positively related to message elaboration ($\beta = 0.49$, $p < 0.001$ for Bush; $\beta = 0.45$, $p < 0.001$ for Obama), while viewing Bush give his WHCD speech was negatively related to message elaboration ($\beta = -0.17$, $p < 0.05$). Although the model shows a negative relationship between viewing Obama's WHCD speech and message elaboration, this regression coefficient did not emerge as significant. This last block yielded the largest incremental increase in R^2 across both models (inc. $R^2 = 33.5$ % for Bush; inc. $R^2 = 23.7$ % for Obama) and suggests, especially with respect to $H1$, that while SOTU speeches are seen as serious experiences worth learning from, the comic speeches of the WHCD are heuristically labeled as funny and discounted. The direct effects models for message elaboration explained 44.1 % of the variance in message elaboration for those exposed to Bush's speeches and 33.6 % of the variance in message elaboration for those viewing Obama's speeches.

Table 2 considers whether disposition toward the speaker in the video moderates the influence of exposure to humorous vs. serious presidential speech on message elaboration. As Table 2 shows, with the exception of the marginally significant interaction between those who like Obama and were exposed to his WHCD speech ($\beta = -0.11$, $p < 0.10$), disposition fails to moderate the influence of exposure to humorous vs. serious presidential speech on message elaboration. Overall this interaction effects block only explains an additional 0.3 % of the variance in message elaboration for the Bush model and 1.3 % of the variance in message elaboration for the Obama model. As a result, the data fail to offer support for $H2$ and ultimately suggest that when it comes to message elaboration, the type of speech one is exposed to (serious vs. humorous) matters more than how much an individual may like or dislike the speaker (total $R^2 = 44.4$ % for Bush; 35.1 % for Obama).

With respect to reproducing our main findings across the two most recent presidential administrations, we focused on comparing the significant hypothesized relationships that emerged from the Bush and Obama message elaboration regression models to confirm that the patterns we were seeing with WHCD processing were consistent across the two halves of the sample and not unique

Table 1: Hierarchical OLS regressions predicting message elaboration (Direct effects).

	Bush		Obama	
	Upon-entry	**Final B**	**Upon-entry**	**Final B**
Block 1: Demographics				
Female	−0.11	−0.08	−0.16*	−0.18**
Age	0.27***	0.13	0.22*	0.20*
Democrat	−0.02	0.07	0.05	0.03
Republican	0.11	0.03	−0.04	0.01
Conservative	0.01	0.06	−0.13	−0.07
Public campus	0.23**	0.19*	0.05	0.06
Private campus	0.06	−0.07	0.06	0.11
Inc. R^2	8.5 %		7.0 %	
Block 2: Political interest				
Interest	0.10	0.11#	0.12	0.15*
Inc. R^2	0.8 %		1.3 %	
Block 3: Dispositions				
Disposition: Obama			0.17#	0.17*
Disposition: Bush	0.14#	0.21**		
Inc. R^2	1.3 %		1.6 %	
Block 4: Experimental conditions				
BushWHCD	−0.16*	−0.17*		
BushSOTU	0.50***	0.49***		
ObaWHCD			−0.08	−0.08
ObaSOTU			0.45***	0.45***
Inc. R^2	33.5 %		23.7 %	
Final R^2		44.1 %		33.6 %

Notes: $N = 202$ for Bush conditions; $N = 196$ for Obama conditions. [#]$p < 0.10$; *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

Table 2: Hierarchical OLS regressions predicting message elaboration (Interaction effects).

Block 5: Interactions	**Bush**	**Obama**
LikeBush × BushWHCD	0.01	
LikeBush × BushSOTU	−0.03	
DislikeBush × BushWHCD	−0.04	
DislikeBush × BushSOTU	0.03	
LikeObama × ObamaWHCD		0.11#
LikeObama × ObamaSOTU		−0.04
DislikeObama × ObamaWHCD		−0.02
DislikeObama × ObamaSOTU		0.02
Incremental R^2	0.3 %	1.3 %
Final R^2	44.4 %	34.9 %

Notes: $N = 202$ for Bush conditions; $N = 196$ for Obama conditions. [#]$p < 0.10$; *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

to a particular set of presidential speech stimuli. Using Cohen et al.'s (1983) z-score test, we calculated z-scores that were well below the 1.96 significance threshold for all of the hypothesized relationships: *e. g.*, for disposition ($z = 0.17$), WHCD exposure ($z = 0.36$), and SOTU exposure ($z = 0.23$). In sum, the significant relationships we saw in the Bush models were consistent with the Obama models, suggesting that the relationships between disposition, type of speech exposure, and message elaboration are not tied to one particular presidential administration, but indicative of a larger pattern of WHCD evaluation and processing.

8 Discussion

Our study offers an empirical analysis of the differential effects of exposure to humorous vs. serious presidential speech on message elaboration. Our focus on message elaboration as the dependent variable extends the disposition theory of humor, moving beyond hedonic liking or general humor appreciation to study the relationship between disposition, type of message exposure, and a key behavioral outcome of interest in political communication research. A confirmation of our findings across stimuli drawn from the two most recent presidential administrations speaks to the theoretical applicability of this project for broader research on patterns of humorous presidential speech processing.

Overall, subjects were more likely to engage in message elaboration when viewing the serious SOTU addresses than when watching the presidents at the WHCD. This pattern of findings held true for both Obama and Bush and suggests that viewers may heuristically classify the WHCD performances as speeches that are not to be taken seriously or relied upon for political information or learning. This dynamic was consistent irrespective of the viewer's prior disposition toward the president telling the jokes, with the exception of the marginally significant interaction effect for those who liked Obama and viewed his WHCD speech. At this point, additional research may be warranted to further tease out the precise moderating impact of disposition on humor processing and key behavioral outcomes like message elaboration.

Our research ultimately suggests that the influence of comic WHCD presentations is quite limited. Viewers quickly discount these humorous presentations as something not to be taken seriously; the speeches do not lead to further message elaboration. This stands opposite anecdotal claims made by speechwriters and members of the media elite about the far-reaching impact of these

comic performances. In sum, even though the speaker may be the Commander-in-Chief, viewers tend to discount any messages in WHCD speeches. Viewers instead engage in message elaboration when viewing the serious SOTU speeches, irrespective of disposition toward the sitting president. In some ways, this lack of a significant relationship between exposure to humorous speech and message elaboration runs counter to previous research on political comedy and message elaboration (LaMarre and Walther 2013; Matthes 2013).

This study uniquely presented video content of the real president delivering a comic performance rather than humor labeled as written by a politician (as is the case in the Matthes [2013] experiment). Using video content from the real WHCD speeches better approximates the way that citizens engage with humorous presidential speech via the Internet and social media. Yet the experimental design only featured content connected with Bush and Obama, or the most recent president elected by each party. Had we not been able to show evidence of the study's main findings across the two administrations, concerns about a potential case category confound may have arisen.

To minimize these concerns from the outset, in each case we pulled content from the second year of each president's first term, contrasting the WHCD speeches with the SOTU addresses given just a few months prior. We also made sure that the comedians featured in 2002 and 2010 were comparable in terms of style of presentation, demographic makeup, tone of the humor, and the balance of hostile vs. playful jokes targeting the president and his respective administration. In addition, all stimuli were consistent in terms of length and the viewing environments were controlled as much as possible. We chose to pool our subsamples together to feature a broader subject pool than what is usually used in experimental political comedy effects research. As noted earlier, while there were some demographic differences across the two data sources, we controlled for these factors in our regression analyses. As a final note, our message elaboration measure, while highly reliable, robust, and verified by previous research (Matthes 2013) relies on subjects to self-report their own attention to and engagement with the messages in the WHCD and SOTU speeches. Future research might benefit from adding a thought-listing exercise or task-driven measure of message elaboration (LaMarre and Walther 2013).

Overall, our findings suggest a *limited effects model* with respect to the impact of presidents' strategic joke telling at the WHCD on viewer behavior. WHCD humor does not appear to be as much a tool of outreach and conversion as many have claimed. Messages embedded within WHCD humor appear to be discounted by the distracting tendencies of jokes as a rhetorical appeal. At the same time, strengthening ties with one's supporters and distracting audience attention from ideological content could certainly serve as conscious goals of

presidential messaging. In this spirit, telling jokes at the WHCD may be a useful strategy, but one presidents should best apply and align with the specific audiences, mentalities, and circumstances at hand.

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