

# Laughing to Understand: An Investigation of Political Satire Affinity

Dylan D. Wojtkowski

Faculty Sponsor: Nicole Ploeger-Lyons, Communication Studies

## ABSTRACT

This study provides an investigation on individuals' political satire affinity and the underlying motivations and behaviors that may contribute to one's affinity. Past research has focused primarily on political satire and its effects on individual's political efficacy, as well as its relation to distrust in government and political engagement. This study builds upon past research by investigating political satire affinity in relation to political efficacy, political discussion, uses and gratifications, and need for cognition. The researcher surveyed 157 subjects. Results indicate that higher levels of reported political satire affinity are related to higher levels of reported political efficacy, gratifications sought, political discussion, and need for cognition. Additionally, subjects reported the following reasons for their consumption of political satire: entertainment, information seeking, diffusion of tension, and to aid understanding of complex ideas. Democrats were shown to have higher political satire affinity compared to republicans and those who did not identify.

## INTRODUCTION

An incongruity of what we expect and what we are presented with is typically what makes something funny (Eisend, 2009). Satire, or the use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize foolishness and corruption of an individual or a society, is no exception to this idea. Satire has taken a prominent role in our social and political culture. Although a form of comedy and entertainment, satire allows for more than just jokes. Satire generally uses laughter to discredit or delegitimize a subject and evoke emotions of amusement, disdain, and discontent (Eisend, 2009). For example, John Stewart became a cultural icon during his time at *The Daily Show* and eventually became a "check" on the government providing vital oversight and holding politicians accountable for their hypocrisies (Popkin, 2012).

Political satire has a large following. *The Daily Show* with Trevor Noah averages 1.6 million viewers a night and ranks as the number one late night talk show among millennials (Pederson, 2017). There is also evidence to suggest that exposure to sarcastic political humor cultivates individual participation in politics (Brewer & Cao, 2006). Traditional media formats like television and newspapers are offering most of their content in a digitized form, which aligns with the primary shift in media in recent years (Schulz, 2014). This shift has created a plethora of exposure and access to different forms of political satire and parody on social media sites in multiple forms: *Saturday Night Live* skits, *The Daily Show* segments, *The Onion* articles, professionally produced and independent user created YouTube videos, and many more (Becker, 2014).

The purpose of this study is to analyze individuals' political satire affinity levels and its relation to political efficacy, gratifications sought, political discussion, and need for cognition. As outlined in the literature, there are positive relationships between political satire affinity and political efficacy (Becker, 2014; Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Hoffman & Thomson, 2009), political efficacy and civic/political engagement (Polk, Young, & Holbert, 2009), political discussion and political efficacy (Gil de Zúñiga, Diehl, & Ardévol-Abreu, 2017), and political discussion and civic/political engagement (Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999; Klofstad, 2011). Although many of these relationships have been studied, there is very little research done regarding the relationship between political satire, gratifications and uses, need for cognition, and political discussion; this study will aim to build upon the existing research and bridge the gap between these variables. Political satire, which will be further outlined, has many underlying factors that make up an individual's reasons for consumption. An investigation into these communication variables will provide a deeper understanding into an individual's political satire affinity and their motivations and behaviors for consumption.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

To better understand political satire, a thorough review of past research is provided. The subsequent information will provide an understanding of the underlying themes, concepts, and relationships found from other scholars. Information is provided on satire and similar types of humor/entertainment, along with political efficacy, political discussion, uses and gratifications, need for cognition, and the elaboration likelihood model.

### *Satire and Effects*

Simply put, satire is the use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize foolishness and corruption of an individual or a society. Satire is long standing in history and has been prominent in most advanced civilizations. It should be noted that satire is “a full-fledged artistic mode (literary), not merely a symptom of ill humor or personal spite” (Bogel, 2001, p.1). Regardless of the form in which the satire is taking place, satire is always “pre-generic,” (Knight, 2004, p. 4) meaning all forms have a sense of familiarity to them. For example, *The Onion* uses a long form journalistic approach to appear like a traditional news media outlet. Similarly, *The Daily Show* encompasses the basic feel of a traditional television news show.

There are many forms of satire, but the two major forms used are Horatian and Juvenalian which exemplify the dichotomy between comedy and tragedy. Horatian best represents comedy and Juvenalian best represents tragedy (Sander, 1971). Both types tend to be humorous and aggressive to what is being satirized but have an ultimately different approach. Horatian satire was created by Quintus Horatius Flaccus, a poet in ancient Rome between 65BC to 8BC. Its arguments are grounded in everyday life and are used primarily as a broader social commentary; it aims to tell the truth while laughing (Highet, 1962). Conversely, Juvenalian satire came from the Roman satirist Juvenal between 60-140 AD. It is typically a more narrow and bitter approach; Juvenalian satire “laughs with contempt at [humanity’s] pretensions and incongruities and base hypocrisies” (Sander, 1971, p. 235). Both forms of satire offer a unique way to view and assess the world around us and the events that occur.

Gray, Jones, and Thompson (2008) argued that satire is the most politically overt form of humor, and that satirizing public discourse is to scrutinize the public, which encourages an audience to scrutinize the material at hand as well. Political satire is often framed in a similar matter to how viewers discuss and frame political matters in their own lives. Making jokes about politics is often how individuals engage with each other politically (Feldman, 2005). Political satire outlets like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* engage the public in ways that are similar to the viewers’ own interests and allow the format to make sense of issues out of humor. Faina (2013) argued that a more engaged public is a more concerned public. Therefore, it is essential to have a deeper understanding of viewers’ habits in regard to political satire and their underlying motives for consuming satire and the behaviors that may result from consumption.

According to Knight (2004), for effective satire to take place, there are a few requirements that need to be met. First, the satiree must believe that the subject of the satire is worth being satirized. Second, the satirist must be warranted in the tone and line of attack that have taken in the piece of satire. Satire asks a great deal of the audience member engaging in the message due to the constant message construction and deconstruction. A large cognitive effort is required during message processing to understand satire and humor; therefore, not every individual will interpret the message in the way it was intended. There are many underlying conditions that may address the different interpretations that take place. This study will further investigate those conditions, specifically the uses and gratifications sought from satire, and the individual’s personal need for cognition.

### *Political Humor and Political Efficacy*

The most recent research on political entertainment and humor does not specifically focus on satire and its effects. A consistency in research suggests that there is an inverse relationship between political efficacy and audiences’ cynicism towards government after being exposed to political humor (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). Research from Baumgartner and Morris found that exposure to *The Daily Show* increased viewers’ internal political efficacy, while the study also showed a decrease in viewers’ trust of government. Political efficacy is the belief in one’s own competency and the feeling that political and social change is possible (Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954). Baym (2006) argued that decreased trust in government is not necessarily harmful; it can help stimulate critical thinking and analysis of government that is essential to a well-functioning democracy. Similar research conducted on political entertainment and efficacy found a positive effect of viewing political humor on political efficacy and that political efficacy was the mediating variable between viewing and participation. Additionally, there is empirical evidence to support the notion that those with higher levels of internal political efficacy were more likely to take an interest in and engage within our system of

government (Polk, Young, & Holbert, 2009). Data also suggests that more psychological involvement with politics resulted in higher levels of political knowledge (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012).

There is a growing body of research that suggests political satire can influence the audience's knowledge, opinions, and beliefs. Xenos and Becker (2009) showed individuals with lower levels of self-reported political interest who watched *The Daily Show* covering foreign policy were more likely to actively seek out information on foreign policy than those watching a network news story. Baumgartner and Morris (2006) noted that college students exposed to *The Daily Show* reported having less favorable views of particular political candidates and the electoral system than those who were not exposed to *The Daily Show*. The same study suggested that the positive relationship of political efficacy and political satire viewership may be attributed to the simplification of turning politics into a joking dialogue that increases one's confidence in understanding information.

Polk et al. (2009) provided empirical data supporting the notion that greater complexity in types of humor (parody and satire being most complex) leads to more persuasive messages. As Baumgartner and Morris (2006) noted, it is likely that political efficacy serves as a moderating variable; thus, one with a low level of political efficacy will be less engaged and more likely to discount a message. It should also be noted that although viewers of programs like *The Daily Show* tend to have a high distrust in government, they also tend to be more politically interested, attentive, and participate in elections at higher rates than those who do not. Thus, it becomes apparent that these variables should be researched further to deepen the understanding of political satire affinity and political efficacy because of its potential effects on society at large. This leads to the first hypothesis:

### **H1: Political satire affinity and political efficacy are positively related.**

#### *Political Discussion*

It is essential to investigate political discussion and what could evoke this behavior. Guerrero, Andersen, and Afifi (2010) argued that the strategic approach to discussion suggests the reason people interact with one another is purposeful and leads to either: (a) persuasion, or (b) an outcome of exchanged information or opinions. There is a range of factors that help to determine an individual's likeliness to contribute to a political conversation. Those who have more interest, knowledge, stronger opinions, and those who view more news media are more likely to discuss a specific issue (Matthes, Rios Morrison, & Schemer, 2010). Political discussion is an essential key to understanding how and why people may participate civically. Research consistently finds a relationship between political discussion and political and civic engagement (Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999; Klofstad, 2011).

Understanding individual levels of political discussion is imperative since it is likely a determinant for political engagement. To allow for a better understanding of political discussion there needs to be more extensive research on what leads to political discussion. And, with such an emergence in social networking sites (SNS) it becomes more essential to study the behaviors of political discussion, including: face to face, online, text messaging, and so on. It is also imperative to understand the abundance of and exposure to political satire online specifically. Although limited, research has shown that there is a direct, positive relationship to the use of Facebook as a source of information on political issues and a willingness to discuss that issue on Facebook (Hampton, Shin, & Lu, 2016).

#### *Political Satire and Uses and Gratifications*

While there is extensive research in both political humor and political discussion, there is a gap in research connecting the two. Although traditional standards of journalism aim to follow objectivity (Ward, 2004), online news tends to be partisan and does not necessarily follow the same ethical standards of traditional journalism (Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012). This is important because there is empirical evidence to suggest that those who view partisan news are more likely to engage in discussion than those viewing a traditional, non-partisan news source (Abril, 2015). The suggestion that those who view partisan news are more likely to engage in discussion is an essential piece of evidence given that political satire is unique and is not a traditional type of journalism nor does it follow traditional standards. Thus, one could expect that individuals who have a higher political satire affinity are more likely to engage in political discussion as well.

Similar to Abril's (2015) studies on partisan news, political satire is not a traditional form of journalism, but it does have a rather large impact on its audiences. It has also been shown that people turn to media to provide them with information to further future discussion and that individuals tend to discuss news and political issues more frequently after being exposed to media content (Kim, et al. 1999). The uses and gratifications approach to mass media (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974) provides an understanding of the

underlying dimensions that make up the appreciation and consumption of political satire. The uses and gratifications approach conceptualizes the audience as active, selective, and mindful consumers who would be capable of articulating their reasons for media consumption. The approach suggests that audience members are motivated to fulfill certain needs including information acquisition, correlation of information, and social unity through exposure to mediated content. Young (2013) outlined many motivations that students reported for watching *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* including: fun/entertainment, learning, to make news fun, and for context/background. Additionally, individuals reported viewing *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* because they are perceived as “truthful, accurate, and unbiased” or because they provide “context, background or perspective,” suggesting that viewers satisfied multiple needs or gratifications simultaneously (Young, 2013). Given the conditions outlined for political satire affinity and political discussion to occur, as well as for gratifications sought from consuming media, two hypotheses and a research question are posed:

**H2: Political satire affinity and the uses and gratifications sought are positively related.**

**RQ1: What are the reported reasons and motivations as to why individuals consume political satire**

**H3: Political satire affinity and political discussion are positively related.**

#### *Elaboration Likelihood Model and Need for Cognition*

The elaboration likelihood model (ELM) provides a beneficial lens to better understand the nature of individual’s political satire affinity. The ELM states that there are two “routes” to persuasion: the central route and the peripheral route (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The peripheral route to persuasion occurs when a listener decides whether to agree with a message based on reasons other than the argument strength or main ideas. Examples of such may be agreeing with the message because the source appears to be an expert, or the viewers desire to agree or identify with a message. The peripheral route is also used when a receiver is persuaded by many arguments but lacks the ability to think about them on their own. These peripheral cues act as shortcuts in terms of message processing (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

The central route to persuasion consists of thoughtful cognitive consideration of the ideas and content of the message. The central route has two prerequisites: change in attitude can only occur if the receiver has both the motivation *and* the ability to carefully think about the message and its topic. If the receiver does not care about the topic of the persuasive message, they will likely lack the motivation for central processing to occur. Similarly, if the listener is distracted or cannot understand the message, it is unlikely central processing will occur (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

A concept that is grounded in the central route of the ELM is *need for cognition*. Need for cognition (NFC) is “an individual’s tendency to engage in and enjoy effortful cognitive activity” (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982, p. 116). Need for cognition is expected to influence one’s motivation to process messages through the central route, making it more likely that attitude and behavioral change occur (Harrington, Lane, Donohew, & Zimmerman, 2006). High NFC individuals show enjoyment for challenging cognitive tasks, increased motivation to engage in such tasks, and an increased cognitive effort to process messages (as compared to low NFC individuals; Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). This means that those with a high NFC enjoy thinking complexly about issues and messages and are more willing to endure a large cognitive effort of processing a message. Low NFC individuals do not enjoy the task of complex message processing and tend to show more disdain toward complex issue processing. In other words, NFC is not about an individual’s capacity to think, rather it is about an individual’s enjoyment of thinking; thus, those with high NFC will tend to engage in and enjoy arguments, ideas, and the analysis of problems and their solutions.

Using NFC as a lens to better understand the processing of messages, a strong argument by the satirist with high levels of cognition will likely lead to processing through the central route. In other words, those with a higher NFC will likely think more critically about the message that is being presented by the satirist, and the message will be more likely to change an attitude or belief in the individual. Comparatively, an individual who simply views the satirist as an expert or credible source, or an individual who is distracted or disinterested will likely process through the peripheral route. This theory acts as an important framework because of the processing of the message. A key predictor of the ELM is that messages that are processed through the central route will have different effects in change of behavior and attitude from those of the peripheral. Petty and Cacioppo argue, “Attitude changes that result mostly from processing issue-relevant arguments (central route) will show greater temporal persistence, greater prediction of behavior, and greater resistance to counter persuasion than attitude changes that result mostly from peripheral cues” (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986, p. 21). Therefore, to achieve successful processing through the central route, the recipient must be motivated. A large predictor of motivation in consumption of political messages depends on the audience member’s interest in

politics and the audiences' need for cognition. If a receiver is interested in politics and has a high NFC, they are more likely to analyze the satire a deeper level, increasing likelihood of processing through the central route and making an attitude or behavioral change.

Regarding ability, the most basic issue concerning the interpretation of what is being satirized is the level of knowledge the satirized has concerning an object that is the focus of the satirical message (Holbert, et al., 2011). Essentially, the audience member's basic level of knowledge on the satirical topic influences the overall persuasiveness of the message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In contrast, lower levels of political efficacy suggest a higher likelihood of discounting a persuasive message (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). This evidence may suggest that someone who is less interested in politics who is exposed to political satire may process the message through a peripheral route since they likely do not meet the prerequisites of motivation and/or ability. The ELM and NFC serve as a theoretical lens to better understand and interpret the various factors that contribute into political satire affinity; as such, the final hypothesis is posed:

**H4: Participants who report a higher affinity for political satire also report a high need for cognition.**

In addition, a final research question is asked in order to investigate political satire affinity among groups. With high amounts of left-leaning political satire in an often tense and divided political climate, an understanding of political party and political satire affinity may provide and insight to the nature of political satire:

**RQ2: Are there differences in reported political satire affinity between those who identify as democrats, republicans, and those who do not identify with a political party?**

## METHODS

### *Subjects*

Participants included 157 individuals who completed an online survey. In order to participate in the study, subjects were required to be between the ages of 18-25 and were required to be enrolled in a four-year university. Subject data was collected from 13 universities. The mean age for the subjects was 20.8 years old ( $SD = 1.35$ ). The gender representation within the sample included 29.2% male, 68.3% female, and 1.2% other. The political party identification of the sample included those who identified as belonging to the democratic party (41%), republican party (23%), not identifying with a political party (21.1%), and other (14.9%).

### *Procedure*

Subjects for the survey were recruited in a number of ways. First, participants were recruited by requesting a list of 1,000 random student emails from the researcher's university. An initial email containing the survey link was sent to all 1,000 email addresses. Two follow-up, reminder emails were sent. Additionally, subjects were recruited from the researcher's department's research pool. Finally, snowball sampling was also used to recruit participants. The link and requirements to participate were posted on the researcher's personal social media platforms. All surveys were completed online anonymously using Qualtrics. Each subject read and agreed to a consent statement before proceeding with the survey.

In the first section of the survey, subjects answered basic demographic questions and political demographic information including party identification and voting habits. Subjects then completed the following measures: political efficacy (Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991), political discussion (Morey & Eveland, 2016), political satire affinity (Rubin, 1982), uses and gratifications (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974), and need for cognition (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). Lastly, participants were also asked two-open ended questions about why they do or do not seek, consume, watch, or listen to political satire, and if applicable, what political satire they seek, consume, listen to, or watch.

### *Measures*

**Political satire affinity.** An individual's political satire affinity was measured using a modified version of the television affinity scale (Rubin, 1982). The measure consisted of five questions to measure one's affinity towards political satire (e.g., *Engaging in political satire is one of the most important things I do every day; If I couldn't view political satire I would really miss it; Viewing political satire is very important in my life*). The five-point Likert scale ranged from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Higher scores indicated higher levels of political satire affinity. The reliability of the scale was  $\alpha = .854$

**Political efficacy.** The political efficacy of an individual was measured using a three-item scale created by Niemi et al. (1991). The scale questions included: *Whether I vote or not has no influence on what politicians do; People like me don't have any say about what government does; and Sometimes government politics seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what is going on.* The measure used a five-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Higher scores indicated lower levels of political efficacy. The reliability for the political efficacy scale was  $\alpha = .634$ .

**Gratifications sought.** Uses and gratifications of political satire was measured using a modified version of Katz et al.'s (1974) gratifications sought scale. The measure combines four different categories to determine the individual's uses and gratifications of political satire (*general information seeking, decisional utility, entertainment, and interpersonal utility*); each category consisted of three questions. Participants responded using a five-point Likert scale that ranged from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). The scale reliability was  $\alpha = .918$ .

**Political discussion.** Political discussion was measured through a scale created by Morey and Eveland (2016). The scale measured one's individual tendency to engage in political discussion. The nine questions involved various areas of politics (e.g., *the president, national government, foreign affairs, the economy*) and the scale consisted of a five-point Likert scale that ranged from *never* (1) to *always* (5). The scale reliability was  $\alpha = .912$ .

**Need for cognition.** A modified version of the need for cognition scale (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982) was used to measure one's tendency to engage in and enjoy effortful cognitive activity. The measure consisted of nine questions (e.g., *I would prefer complex to simple problems; I usually end up engaged in long and careful consideration about issues even when they do not affect me personally; Thinking is not my idea of fun; Learning new ways to think doesn't excite me much*). Participants responded using a five-point Likert scale that ranged from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). The scale reliability was  $\alpha = .784$ .

## RESULTS

### *Political Satire Affinity and Political Efficacy*

The first hypothesis predicted that political satire affinity would be positively associated with political efficacy. After analysis of the Pearson correlation, results indicated that the subjects' levels of political satire affinity were positively associated with their reported political efficacy,  $r(157) = .27, p = .01$ . In other words, it was revealed that there is statistical evidence to support that political satire affinity and political efficacy hold a positive relationship, supporting the first hypothesis.

### *Political Satire Affinity and Gratifications Sought*

The second hypothesis predicted a positive relationship between political satire affinity and gratifications sought. After analysis of the Pearson correlation, results found that participants' levels of political satire affinity were positively associated with gratifications sought,  $r(157) = .634, p < .01$ . These results show evidence of a strong positive relationship between the two variables, which supports the second hypothesis.

### *Motivations for Consuming Political Satire.*

A research question was presented and analyzed two open-ended questions posed to the subjects on why they do or not consume political satire. Responses were coded in a qualitative manner to discover consistent themes in data. The majority of subjects responded to the open-ended questions regarding why they do or do not seek, consume, watch, or listen to political satire. After coding the data, four prominent themes emerged about reasons subjects consume political satire: entertainment, diffusion of tension, information seeking, and an easier understanding of complex issues. These themes are described in more detail in the discussion section

### *Political Satire Affinity and Political Discussion*

The third hypothesis predicted a positive relationship between political satire affinity and political discussion. After analysis of the Pearson correlation, results indicated that participants' levels of political satire affinity were positively associated with their reported levels of political discussion,  $r(157) = .372, p < .01$ . In other words, it was revealed that there is a statistically significant relationship between political satire affinity and political discussion, which supports the third hypothesis.

### *Political Satire Affinity and Need for Cognition*

The fourth hypothesis predicted those who report higher levels of political satire affinity will have a high need for cognition. To test this hypothesis, the political satire affinity variable was converted into a nominal variable by splitting the scale into two groups: those with a high political satire affinity and those with a low political satire affinity. This split political satire affinity variable was used in this independent samples *t*-test. The results of the *t*-test were statistically significant  $t(153) = -2.48, p < .05$ . Those with a low affinity for political satire ( $M = 3.43, SD = .58$ ) were shown to have a lower need for cognition than those with high political satire affinity ( $M = 3.65, SD = .51$ ). Restated, there is a statistically significant difference in need for cognition means between those with a lower political satire affinity and those with higher political satire affinity.

### *Political Satire Affinity and Political Party*

A second research question was posed to explore whether there were differences in political satire affinity levels among those with different political party affiliations. An ANOVA was run to test political satire affinity differences amongst three groups: democrats, republicans, and those who did not identify with a political party. The overall model was significant,  $F(2, 133) = 6.64, p < .01$ . Tukey's post hoc analyses revealed a statistically significant difference in political satire affinity levels between democrats ( $M = 2.57, SD = .80$ ) and republicans ( $M = 2.06, SD = .73$ ) and also between democrats and those who did not identify with a political party ( $M = 2.12, SD = .79$ ). There was not a statistically significant difference in means between republicans and those who did not identify with a political party. In other words, democrats reported higher political satire affinity than republicans and those who did not identify with a party, but republicans and those who did not identify with a party did not differ significantly in their reported levels of political satire affinity.

## DISCUSSION

The goals of this study were to achieve a deeper understanding of individuals' motives for consumption of political satire as well as the underlying factors that may be associated with high levels of political satire affinity. The findings indicate that political satire affinity is related to a variety of communication variables and concepts including political efficacy, political discussion, gratifications sought, and need for cognition. The study revealed a number of relationships and motivations that help to provide a more nuanced understanding of political satire.

The first hypothesis—which stated that political satire affinity and political efficacy are positively related—was supported. In other words, higher reported levels of political satire affinity were associated with higher reported levels of political efficacy. As noted by Baumgartner and Morris (2006), exposure to *The Daily Show* resulted not only in higher cynicism towards government, but higher levels of political efficacy as well. The present study's findings regarding political efficacy are consistent with Baumgartner and Morris (2006) and could suggest that those who have a higher political satire affinity may also show a higher cynicism towards government. The relationship of political satire affinity and political efficacy may also suggest those individuals will be more politically involved and politically knowledgeable, as political efficacy is a key predictor in both political involvement and political knowledge (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012). Additionally, those with a higher political satire affinity may be inclined to further research something that has been satirized; as noted by Xenos & Becker (2009), an individual who is engaged in political satire is more likely to research a presented topic than if they were to see it on a traditional news outlet.

Second, a statistically significant relationship was uncovered between uses and gratifications of political satire and one's affinity for political satire. Given the four categories that make up the gratifications sought scale (*general information seeking, decisional utility, entertainment, and interpersonal utility*) and the strength of the relationship, individuals may be seeking political satire for more than a laugh. Individuals' responses have shown that in addition to entertainment purposes, those with a higher political satire affinity consume political satire as a way to gather political information, formulate their own opinions, understand differing opinions and ideas that may be presented, as well as to discuss further in their interpersonal relationships. As noted by Katz et al. (1974), the uses and gratifications approach conceptualizes the audience as active, selective, and mindful consumers who would be capable of articulating their reasons for media consumption. These ideas were demonstrated in the open-ended question analyses which asked participants to explain why they consume political satire.

There were four prominent themes presented in the open-ended question analysis of motivations for consumption of political satire. The themes uncovered were *entertainment, diffusion of tension, information seeking, and an easier understanding of complex issues*, while *entertainment* was the most commonly listed

theme for consumption. Responses for entertainment included phrases such as: it's funny, it's enjoyable to watch with family and friends, it's current and topical humor that makes me laugh. *Entertainment* was the most dominant theme and was included in every response that listed an additional reason for consumption (*diffusion of tension, information seeking, and an easier understanding of complex issues*).

Another prominent theme was that political satire acts as a way to *diffuse or neutralize the tensions* that are felt in serious political rhetoric. One subject wrote:

Especially in American politics, I find that humor is a good way to bring light to some very heavy situations we face daily. Some people struggle with fear and disdain of politics over the isle and political satire provides a nice outlet to see that other people think that some things are worth poking a little fun at. Another participant noted "humor takes situations and puts them in an innocent, and less serious perspective which can take away from the severity and reality of the situation." This acknowledgement of diffusion of tension suggests that individuals may be actively searching for and consuming political satire as a way to be informed politically in a less stressful way while still being entertained. A similar idea was also noted by Feldman (2005) when he described satire's ability to frame important political and social issues in ways that are akin to how individual viewers discuss them in their own lives. Political satire is a powerful format because making jokes and humorous remarks about politics is how individuals often engage politically with each other.

Another major theme in the open-ended data indicated people consume political satire as a *source of political information*. Fania (2013) argues that political satire enables a characterization as an extension of public journalism that is anchored in humor. One individual wrote "I find it humorous and it's a main source of how I know what's going on politically". In addition to consumption for entertainment purposes, individuals with a higher political satire affinity are able to separate the jokes from the ideas and take political information away from the satire.

The final theme of the open-ended data was that political satire made it easier for the individual to *understand complex ideas and concepts*. As noted by one subject "I feel that political satire not only uses humor to make it more entertaining, but they also make it more applicable to the everyday citizen - it's more relatable/easier to understand sometimes than coming from the news or a politician" Again, this is consistent with Baumgartner and Morris (2008) and their claim that the simplification of complex ideas through a joking manner allows the viewer to more easily understand the message that is presented. This finding suggests that if an individual with higher political satire affinity consumes political satire, the concept presented may be easier for the individual to understand than if it were presented in a traditional news outlet.

The third hypothesis—which stated that political satire affinity and political discussion are positively related—was supported. Higher reported levels of political satire affinity were associated with higher reported levels of political discussion. Although there is not much research done specifically on political satire in relation to political discussion, there are parallels that should be looked toward to inform this finding, specifically other political media. As noted by Abril (2015), those who view partisan or non-traditional news outlets have been shown to be more engaged in political discussion than those who view non-partisan or traditional news outlets. It is not entirely surprising that this relationship exists. As explained by Matthes, Rios Morrison, and Schemer (2010), those who have more interest, knowledge, stronger opinions, and those who view more news media are more likely to discuss a specific issue. Drawing from these inferences, along with the multiple factors that make up one's political satire affinity, a reason for the relationship is rather clear. As the other statistical relationships have shown, as well as the thematic analysis, those who report a higher level of political satire affinity are interested in politics and the information presented through political satire; thus, they are more likely to discuss politics because of their interest.

The final hypothesis suggested that participants who report a higher affinity for political satire also report a high need for cognition. This hypothesis was supported. As outlined by Knight (2004), a large cognitive effort is required during message processing to understand satire and humor. The constant construction and deconstruction of messages makes consumption of political satire a difficult task. Satire and parody are the most complex types of humor (Polk et al., 2009); therefore, they require more cognitive processing effort for the message to be effective. The *t*-test revealed that those with high political satire affinity also reported having a higher need for cognition. These findings suggest that those who enjoy political satire are processing political satire messages at a deeper level (through the central route of persuasion), which in turn creates a greater likelihood of attitude and behavioral change on behalf of the individual. An individual's basic level of knowledge and interest in the topic being satirized influences the overall persuasiveness of the topic as well (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Taken together, it can be inferred that those with a lower affinity for political satire and a lower NFC are less likely to process and be persuaded by political satire.



Lastly, this research explored differences in reported political satire affinity levels between those who identified as democrats, as republicans, and those who did not identify with a political party. Interestingly, the only significant mean differences in political satire affinity levels were between democrats and republicans and between democrats and those who did not identify with a political party. A potential reason behind this finding could be that the most popular political satire shows tend to be more left-leaning and more critical of moderate and conservative viewpoints (e.g., *The Daily Show*, *Last Week Tonight*, *Real Time with Bill Maher*). Another likely explanation for the difference in means is the individual's inherent interest—when political satire is framed in a way that is inconsistent with an individual's point of view, they will be less likely to enjoy the content. Additionally, for effective satire to take place, the individual must believe that the subject of the satire is worth being satirized, and the satirist must be warranted in the tone and line of attack that have taken in the piece of satire (Knight, 2004). If an individual's viewpoints and political beliefs are under constant scrutiny, the individual will not identify with the content and the satire will be ineffective. Therefore, the individual will be less likely to actively consume satire by choice.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

As is the case with all studies, this study had a few limitations. The goal of the study was to understand the complicated nature of individuals' political satire affinity as related to a number of other communication variables, but these are challenging variables to measure accurately, each potentially consisting of many factors. Political satire comes in endless forms and the testing involved here was not specific to any form, but rather the individual's interpretation of what satire is, as they were presented with a broad definition of satire. Although the study did yield significant results, a deeper and more comprehensive study into specific types of political satire should be done. Lastly, while scales used in this study were reliable, a measure more specific to political satire affinity may yield more fruitful results.

There are a few suggestions for where political satire research should go in the future. One suggestion would be to implement an experiment in which participants consume either political satire or a traditional form of news media. Such a study could provide an understanding of the effectiveness of the satirical message and individuals' processing routes in direct contrast with traditional news media. Additionally, it would be interesting to sample from a population that identifies as politically interested, and to analyze satire preference within that population. Lastly, it would be beneficial to study subgroups within specific political parties in order to conduct a finer analysis of the relationship between political party, political satire affinity, and NFC.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to understand college students' political satire affinity levels, as well as their reasons for consumption of political satire. The study yielded numerous interesting findings: higher reported levels of political satire affinity was related to higher levels of political efficacy, gratifications sought, political discussion, and need for cognition. Also, participants reported actively seeking and consuming political satire for entertainment, to diffuse tension, information, and to ease their understanding of complex issues. It was also uncovered that democrats reported significantly higher affinity for political satire compared to republicans and those who did not identify with a political party. Additionally, most of the satire that was reported as being consumed by participants was left-leaning on the political spectrum.

The nature of political satire is complex and requires great cognitive effort on behalf of the individual for effective satire to take place. Therefore, the elaboration likelihood model and the need for cognition provide a fitting lens to better understand the nature of political satire and the relationships uncovered in this study. It is clear that political satire is consumed for more than for entertainment purposes, and that studying and understanding individuals' motivations for consuming political satire will help to navigate the current political media landscape.

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