Is Laughter the Best Democratic Medicine?
Political Comedy and its Effect on Tolerance and Trust

By

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The influence of entertainment comedy on political attitudes is a new area of exploration within social science research. Political comedy is a historic form of entertainment created to reveal truth about political issues and illuminate hypocrisy on the part of politicians and government that would otherwise be avoided in a conventional news outlet (Esralew and Young, 2012). Political comedy allows marginalized groups to use their platform to expose hypocrisy through jokes to provoke thought about policy issues that are otherwise primed negatively (Ladd, 2011). The polarized nature of contemporary mainstream media is driving Americans to consult unconventional sources. Since, the 1970's this is happening more so than ever before because the polarization in American party politics has intensified causing the media to follow this trend. Additionally, the widely recognized standard within political comedy is to set aside political ideological views for the purpose of laughing at yourself and the other side. According to previous research, laughter is an instant form of emotional gratification, allowing audience members to enjoy what they are watching while internalizing the message (Becker and Haller, 2014).

Media as a whole has been shown to influence public opinion, such as influencing trust and tolerance in particular. These variables serve as essential motives in enhancing political participation and supporting democratic governance (Sullivan and Transue, 1999). A marginalized group in the United States affected by the media's influence is Muslims because they are particularly susceptible to stereotypes and the perpetuation of these stereotypes by media coverage as we have seen post 9/11(McQueeney, 2014).

Here, I explore two questions: whether political comedy affects tolerance towards Muslims, and trust in government and media. Social science research has focused primarily on mainstream media and its impact on the perpetuation of stereotypes (Bullock 2015, Becker and Haller, 2014);

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however, there is a lack of research in political comedy's function within media and its impact on American attitudes. Through utilizing a survey with an experimental manipulation, I find both conventional news and comedy television have the potential to increase tolerance for Muslims relative to the control. Additionally, political comedy exposure increases trust in government, while conventional news exposure increases trust in media and political engagement.

Literature Review

Media Effects

Despite Americans' negative feelings toward overstimulation of politics in the media, the news still persists as "an educator virtually without peer" (Iyengar and Kinder, 2010). Through experimental indication, Iyengar and Kinder (2010) concluded that priming[1], framing[2], and agenda-setting[3] is used by the media to shape our opinions. Adult viewers who are shown a standard news source are more likely to mention the emphasized issues as the nation's "most important problem" (Iyengar and Kinder, 2010). Priming also affected political parties; Democrats are especially susceptible to engagement when issues such as civil rights are emphasized in the newscast, whereas Republicans respond through political participation more when presented with issues involving inflation or defense (Chaffee, 1989).

Bialik (2018) also studied the effect of media on political parties and found media prompts views to change more among Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents (17%) than among Republicans and Republican-leaning independents (9%). Policies are not inherently attractive to citizens but are promoted and learned; Influence is one of the central components of

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[1] Media affects what you primarily think about when you make judgments.
[2] Media gives context which tells you how to think about something.
[3] This concept is known as the "lead story" effect; one pays more attention to issues discussed more frequently in the media

politics, and the media is the key to framing partisan policies that guide our engagement with policy and the government.

Media influence resulting from priming is not reserved to only the priming of policy topics or issues, but extends to the salience of image characteristics or personality traits as well (Esralew and Young, 2012). In a study on the popular television show, *The West Wing*, Holbert et al. (2003) found that the program's portrayal of the president primed a more positive image of the president in viewers' minds. Media's political impact can be discerned through its role in setting the agenda, or allocating coverage to certain issues at the expense of others.

Priming effects were further examined by Esralew and Young (2012) who studied political comedy specifically in the context of the sketch comedy show, *Saturday Night Live (SNL). SNL* debuted in 1975 following the Watergate scandal and has caricatured political figures from both political parties. None of these political impersonation sketches drew more attention than Tina Fey's impersonation of 2008 Vice-Presidential candidate, Sarah Palin. After this performance, Fey won Time Magazine's "People Who Mattered" award because, "Fey made smart sexy and nerdy cool, and she proved that comedy can still have serious political clout: her winking impression of Governor Sarah Palin defined the governor before she had a chance to define herself'' (Grossman, 2008, p. 16). Esralew and Young (2012) establish empirical data for the "Fey Effect", the name for the inverse relationship of the increase in *SNL* viewing and decrease in Sarah Palin's favorability rating and subsequent decline in the GOP ticket. Using a college-age sample, these findings confirm that comedy is a source of political influence within contemporary media.

Comedy has historically played an important role within media and politics as well, with comedy evolving alongside politics. The *History of Comedy* (2017) explores what makes people

laugh, why, and how that's influenced our social and political landscape (CNN, 2017). The comedy acts of earlier comedians, such as Richard Pryor and Mark Russell, were influential in using their role to direct criticism about corruption in the 1970's and 80's to political institutions. Pryor and Russell highlighted hypocrisy on the part of politicians and government to confront racial inequality directly. Jones and Thompson (2009) also found that satire and political comedy serve a crucial function in political media. Satire transforms human emotions into an artistic expression through allowing groups to ridicule in a playful way thus transforming an aggressive act into a, "socially acceptable act of rendering something ridiculous" (Jones and Thompson, 2009).

In conjunction with the three media effects models previously discussed, media is also a significant source of political socialization. The Pew Research Center found that 14% of Americans have changed their mind about an issue because of something they saw on social media. Media can be defined as a medium "that controls and shapes the scale and form of human association and action" (McLuhan, 1964).

Political socialization has been influenced by the polarization in American party politics. Polarization has increased since the 1970s with the media following this trend. Fifty years ago, there were only a few news options so people did not have much to gain from criticizing news sources. However, in the contemporary media landscape, Americans are flooded with information by several different outlets such as bloggers, social media, newspapers, television stations, radio stations, individual reporters, etc. This has led the public to distrust the mainstream press's information about policies, thus driving Americans to consult alternative partisan media outlets (Ladd, 2011).

These partisan media outlets are following the lead of American political parties and are now in competition to draw in viewers, thus conforming to ideological polarization. Partisan predispositions are primarily defined by how our behavior in contemporary politics is shaped, and Americans tend to consume news that only reflects their ideologies (Ladd, 2011). Ladd (2011) further suggests the importance of finding new alternative ways to increase the public's unbiased knowledge and responsiveness to politics because excessive exposure to politics in the media is causing the majority of Americans to feel overwhelmed by political content. In a 2016 study regarding political engagement conducted by the Pew Research Center, more than one-third of social media users reported to be 'worn out' by the amount of political content they encounter, and 59% of users describe their interactions with those who disagree with them as 'stressful and frustrating' (Duggan and Smith, 2016).

Ladd (2011) suggests finding alternative ways to consume political content, such as tuning into unconventional news sources. Research has found that while political comedy is most popular among young viewers 18-25 (Becker, 2011), young audiences tend to tune into late-night comedy as a supplement to, rather than replacement for, traditional news (Young and Tisinger, 2006). Past research has connected exposure to late-night comedy programming with increased attention to more traditional network and cable news content during the course of both the primary and general election (Feldman and Young, 2008). In fact, Feldman and Young (2008) suggested that those who watch late-night comedy (and even more narrowly, network late-night comedy programs like Leno and Letterman), actually spend more time paying attention to traditional news during the course of an election cycle than those who do not watch any late-night comedy programming.

Additionally, young Americans turned toward more unconventional forms of media as a source of information for the 2012 campaign coverage, with some potentially learning more about politics and public affairs in the process (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2008). Of interest, according to a 2007 report by the Pew Research Center, 8% of Americans said they got information on campaigns and candidates from news satire websites like *The Onion* or *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.

Although a source for campaign coverage, political comedy can also be used to expose hypocrisy on the part of political candidates. Baumgartner and Morris (2006) tested the effects of *the Daily Show with Jon Stewart* on college age Americans and concluded that participants exposed to jokes about George Bush and John Kerry tended to rate both candidates negatively, even when partisanship and demographic variables were controlled. However, viewers of the *Daily Show with Jon Stewart* did report increased confidence in their ability to better understand politics. This study suggests that comedy news negatively impacts support for political institutions and leaders.

In retrospect, Becker and Haller (2014) analyzed governor of New York, David Paterson on *SNL, The Daily Show with Jon Stewart,* and the *Colbert Report.* Comedians used Paterson's bad politicking as a satirical attack, and after an *SNL* skit, Paterson later told Weekend Update co-host Amy Poehler that they made "so much fun of me for being blind that I forgot I was black" (SNL, Season 36: Episode 1, 2010). Through experimental methodology, Becker and Haller (2014) found viewers interpreted other-directed hostile humor to be significantly more negative than self-directed humor. Viewers in the study felt upset by the comedy that joked about Paterson's blindness, but did not find it offensive when Paterson joked about his own condition,

suggesting comedy has a more positive effect for politicians, such as Paterson, when self-directed humor is presented.

Politicians utilize comedy as a vehicle to humanize themselves and viewers watch it to get to know politicians as regular people, as evidenced by Bill Clinton playing the Saxophone on the Arsenio Hall Show. Exposure to politicians in ways you wouldn't normally see them in a professional environment, such as on *SNL*, makes them more relatable and has a positive impact on political trust (Becker, 2011). Political comedians also act as advocates to hold politicians accountable

Higgie (2017) exposed viewers to politicians directly participating in satire that ridicules them. Higgie's (2017) findings suggest that politicians participating in satire can actually, "Endorse as it criticizes and create sympathy as it ridicules". My research builds on this study because I am analyzing viewer's attitudes about Muslims after exposure to satire and political comedy. Additionally, stereotypes are often used in comedy as a way of establishing instantly recognizable character types and eliciting humor from the audience (Garbbadon, Park, Chernin, 2001). From a comedic industry perspective, stereotyping is derived from the need to quickly convey information about characters to instill audience's expectations about characters' action (Garbbadon, Park, and Chernin, 2001). With regard to the disruptive potential of comedy, comic representations of race, such as exaggerated portrayals of racial traits, can be identified as a parody of the stereotype and a strategy of subversion, thus opening the possibility of critiquing the racial norm and rejecting prejudice (Garbbadon, Park, Chernin, 2001). The conclusions for the study were that many Asian and Black participants found a positive source of pleasure in the negative portrayals of their own race in comedy.

Comedy in television shows also invert stereotypes to generate humor through the usage of minority comedians utilizing their own race to outwardly criticize inequalities. Although not a direct example of political comedy, the film *Rush Hour 2* portrays comedy and shows that overall it does have an effect on attitudes. Garbbadon, Park, and Chernin (2001) used a textual and audience analysis to analyze the film *Rush Hour 2*. This film was chosen by researchers because an African American and Asian took were paired for the lead roles, and the film ranked 45th in the all-time U.S. box office. The film's mainstream success suggests it appealed to both minority and white audiences. The authors suggest that the growing number of comedies starring racial minorities has subsequently facilitated racial tolerance of groups, such as Asians and African Americans, who have been marginalized from mainstream cultural representation in United States media. *Rush Hour 2* was a success and had potentially racist representations because the characters conformed to negative stereotypes throughout the movie. The authors explain, "[this movie is] an ideal example through which to explore the apparent paradox between potentially racist representations in comedy and its widespread popularity transcending racial boundaries" (Garbbadon, Park, and Chernin, 2001).

On the *Daily Show with Trevor Noah*, a 2016 episode denounced Southwest Airlines for stereotyping a college student and escorting him off the plane for speaking Arabic. A passenger heard the student say the phrase, "en shallah", which means god willing, and told the flight attendant that the man was using "jihadist language". Trevor Noah responded with Trump's speeches and Fox News clips to explain why everyone thinks that all terrorists are Muslims. Noah also said, "A language does not get owned by the worst people who use it". A later scene was a comedic preflight announcement for Muslim passengers teaching them how not to scare other passengers. The above *Daily Show with Trevor Noah* clips seem to support Duguid and

Thomas-Hunt's (2015) approach that condoning stereotypes (through comedy) could increase awareness of the prevalence of stereotyping in the hope of motivating individuals to resist natural predispositions.

In retrospect, stereotypes also affect the viewers that the specific stereotype is targeting. Bullock (2015) conducted a study in which she determines the differences between media representation and the subsequent effects on people's attitudes. She specifically studied the audience reactions to the 1960s U.S. sitcom, *I Dream of Jeannie*. This show has orientalist representations of Arabs as being represented as genies. This can be linked to the traditional stories from *The Arabian Nights: Tales from A Thousand and One Nights.* The author finds that only Muslims noticed and felt offended by the orientalist stereotyping in the show. However, non-Muslims were unable to see the negative stereotypes. This is noteworthy because it perpetuates Islamaphobia and discourages the integration of Muslims in America.

Trust and Tolerance

Trust in political institutions is paramount for democracies so that citizens can feel as though they can participate and influence policies. Becker (2011) defines political trust in this study as, "the degree to which people perceive the government is producing outcomes consistent with their expectations". It is apparent that media consumption, family, and school are equally important agents in the development in political trust (Marien, 2017). According to Marien (2017), political socialization research reveals adolescence is the prime period in which political attitudes, such as political trust, are shaped. Given adolescents' limited experience with political institutions, they rely on gathering information from media sources and their social environment (parents and school). Marien found that the frequency of watching television was found to be

unrelated to the development of political trust in adolescence, while news consumption was related to higher levels of political trust.

Trust in the government and media seems to be affected by how the information we're processing daily seemingly contradicts each other based on the source's political orientation or purpose. The Pew Research Center's study exemplifies this assertion when they found that consumers make "rapid-fire judgments about how to internalize news-related statements" making it a challenge to distinguish fact from opinion (Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel, Sumida, 2018). The study consisted of 5,035 U.S. adults who completed a survey that examined a basic step in recognizing news as factual or as an opinion. The findings from the survey revealed that a majority of Americans correctly identified at least three of the five statements in each set, but far more illuminating is that Americans with "high political awareness", those who are "very digitally savvy", and those who "place high levels of trust in the news media are better able than others to accurately identify news-related statements as factual or opinion" (Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel, Sumida, 2018).

Interestingly, almost four-in-ten Americans who have a lot of trust in the information from national news organizations (39%) were able to correctly identify all five factual statements, in comparison to 18% of those who do not trust national news organizations. However, another variable, the public's level of interest in news, did not show a significant difference.

In Becker's 2011 study, the effects of exposure to comedy and straight news on trust and efficacy are measured. This study suggested a positive relationship between exposure to network political comedy and political trust. My findings also concluded exposure to political comedy yielded higher trust in the government, which I will discuss later in this paper. A political

comedian in particular who has gained credibility as one of the trusted journalists in America is Jon Stewart (Pew Research Center, 2007). Because the news is getting darker, people seem to value comedy as a relaxed news source, ultimately giving comedians more responsibility because they are using their comedy for something more than just getting a laugh. The show also asserts that comedy can cross cultural barriers to unite people. Kumail Nanjiani is a Pakistani-American comedian who explained comedy, "if it makes you laugh, it's a racial joke but if you don't laugh it's a racist joke." This line can be crossed because it is not the words used to make a joke that are bad, but the intent behind the words. This is a relevant point for my research because I presented video clips that both discussed President Trump's Travel Ban policy in the experimental surveys to demonstrate the intent behind the words that differentiates one video as comedic from the other standard news source.

Tolerance and trust are both influenced by media and these effects have been found in multiple contexts across all media sources. Political tolerance as a foundation to a functional democracy lacks research, while a focus in the literature has been placed on prejudice and negative attitudes (Freitag and Rapp, 2014). As a concept, tolerance "implies a willingness to 'put up with' those things one rejects or opposes. Politically, it implies a willingness to permit the expression of ideas or interests one opposes" (Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus, 1982). To sustain a democracy, the ability to tolerate groups and include them politically is necessary and far different than just holding internal negative attitudes.

Regardless of the depth of each individual's commitment to democratic values, the hope of pluralism is that rarely the same group will be disliked by multiple groups, and if two different groups form to act against a shared disliked group, they will naturally encounter grassroots differences while working together (Gibson 1988; Jelen and Wilcox, 1990). This will force the

groups to reevaluate their positions to either separate or come to an agreement. Although there is

a positive relationship between religiosity and intolerance, James Madison's Federalist #10

reminds us that the multiplicity of interests will curb the dangerous effect of intolerant factions.

In policy-making, the strict separation of church and state is necessary to sustain a functional

democracy (Randall, 1993).

Additionally, the degree to which people discern others as threatening is a psychological

factor of determining tolerance. Literature in political psychology demonstrates that emotions,

negative emotions in particular, demonstrate distinct impacts on political judgment. Uncertainty

is an emotional state that may impact political tolerance depending on situational context, such

as perceived threat (Haas and Cunningham, 2014). Past political science research on political

tolerance has shown that perceived threat leads to greater intolerance[4] (Haas and Cunningham,

2014). Uncertainty can lead people to become defensive, make quick judgments, and make

subsequent decisions to feel safe. Haas and Cunningham (2014) concluded that when safe,

uncertainty leads to greater tolerance, yet when threatened, uncertainty leads to reduced

tolerance. The interaction between perceived threat and uncertainty are therefore situational, and

can be framed accordingly by the media to intensify perceived threats.

A group that is particularly affected by media as being stereotyped as a perceive threat is

Muslims. Media assists in building a story through framing Muslims by means of convenience,

familiarity, or what is genuinely felt (Morey, Peter, Yaqin, Amina, 2011). I chose to examine

Muslims specifically as a test case for tolerance because of the media's focus on political

policies that represent the religion as inherently violent. The over-reporting of conflict in the

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[4] Haas and Cunningham make this claim citing: Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse, & Wood, 1995; Stouffer, 1955; Sullivan, Marcus, Feldman, & Piereson, 1981; Sullivan, Piereson, & Marcus, 1982

Middle East, as well as the recurring images of death resulting from 9/11 reinforced by media coverage, has caused an influx of Islamophobia and has perpetuated the association of Muslims with terrorism (McQueeny, 2014).

McQueeney (2014) proposes the questions at the beginning of her article, "How do every day Americans perceive "terrorists", where do these images come from? And what are the consequences for domestic and foreign policy?" The media ultimately frames events for us to interpret independently, discuss collaboratively, and then choose to (or not to) engage in political action. McQueeny (2014) asserts that mass media plays a prominent role in defining terrorism. Furthermore, broader ideological struggles involving politics are played out in the news thus muddling American's cultural awareness for groups, such as Muslims. For example, politicians during the Bush Administration began utilizing the fear American's felt post-9/11 by working to solve national security issues that contributed to this atrocity. The media coupled with the Bush Administration was responsible for perpetuating the defense of the Iraq War as a response to 9/11.

During a time of extreme political tension and sensitivity, comedian Shazia Mirza wore the hijab on stage as a powerful means of exposing and reflecting back to her predominantly white male audiences 'Western' stereotypes of Muslims (Morey, Peter, Yaqin, Amina, 2011). With her parodic performance, she used humor to address uncomfortable topics involving the marginalization of Muslims post 9/11 and confront audience expectations of Muslims.

On some measures, opinions about Muslims and Islam have become more positive in recent years (Pew Research Center, 2017). More Americans express 'warmer' feelings toward Muslims on a thermometer scale than they have in the past, and a simultaneous decline has occurred for those who say Islam is more likely than other religions to encourage violence

among its followers. Additionally, half of U.S. adults said Islam is not part of mainstream society, and 44% of those respondents said Islam's teachings are inconsistent with democracy (Pew Research Center, 2017). It is hopeful to assert that we are moving toward a more politically tolerant society, however, tolerance is dependent on each individual based on their depth of commitment to democratic values, their personality, and by the degree to which they perceive others as threatening (Sullivan and Transue, 1999)

Data and Methods

To analyze the influence of political comedy on trust and tolerance, I conducted a survey with an experimental manipulation. The survey experiment included three conditions: exposure to a political comedy source, exposure to a traditional news outlet, and a control group with no exposure to the news or comedy source. I conducted my survey using a random sample of 101 Hood College students between November 2018 and February 2019. All participation was voluntary, and all participants completed an informed consent form prior to participating in my study. My unit of analysis is Hood College students' attitudes. According to Higgie (2017), young (between 18-25), highly educated participants are most likely to be interested in satire and political comedy therefore my sample is well suited to my research question.

I expect exposure to political comedy to be more likely to yield positive attitudes towards Muslims than a traditional news outlet. Additionally, political comedy is more likely to increase subject's trust in the media and the government. Prior research has led me to this hypothesis, such as the relationship between political comedy and other dependent variables. My independent variable is exposure to political comedy and my dependent variables are political tolerance, trust in media and government, and political engagement.

The political comedy source used in the experimental survey was a clip of Hasan Minhaj

explaining the travel ban derived from the *Daily Show with Trevor Noah*. The standard news

source clip that I used was derived from *CBS*,[5] *titled CBS News Poll: Americans Divided on*

Trump's Immigration Ban.[6] I chose these clips to control for discussion of the same policy issue

so that the focus was on the framework in which the issues were presented. My sample

predominantly consisted of whites, which made up 59.4% of the population. The ideologies

represented included predominantly liberals and moderates, with smaller populations of

conservatives. Data from the Pew Research Center indicates that the United States has an

ideological makeup of primarily moderates, which is 35% of the population. My sample is more

liberal than the general American population which could have some implications on my data

which will be discussed later in my study. Below is the breakdown of the description of my

sample and their ideologies in comparison with the American population's ideologies.

Table 1: Description of Sample

Gender	Ethnicity / Race	College Class	Political Party	Political Ideology
55% Female 45% Male	59.4% White 10.9% Hispanic 19.8% Black 10% Other	15% Freshman 22% Sophomore 31% Junior 29% Senior 4% Other	62% Independent leaning Democrat or Democrat 17% Independent 20% Independent leaning Republican or Republican	50% Liberal 38% Moderate 12% Conservative

[5] CBS was chosen because of its non-partisan nature.

[6] Both clips were approximately 5:00 minutes long and explained President Donald Trump's Travel Ban. Because of random assignment, those who had no prior knowledge about the 'Muslim ban' were evenly distributed across all conditions.

Table 2: Ideology of my Sample vs. The United States

Political Ideology	Hood College	Brookings Institute
Liberal	50%	20%
Moderate	38%	47%
Conservative	12%	33%

Additionally, the sample's media consumption was high, suggesting a fairly politically engaged group; 73% of students were likely or somewhat likely to seek out political information, 30% admitted to posting a political message on social media within the past month, and 77% of the sample "liked" a group or figure associated with a political cause on social media.[7]

Tolerance Towards Muslims

To begin, I examined political tolerance by asking subjects how they would feel if a Muslim was their child's teacher, and assuming professional conduct, to rate this tolerance from 1 (strongly disagree a Muslim should be allowed to teach) to 5 (strongly agree a Muslim should be allowed to teach). Because the sample is relatively tolerant to begin with, very few subjects' responded "strongly disagree" or "disagree", so I only examined ratings 3 (neutral) through 5 (strongly agree). The experimental effects on tolerance of a Muslim as your child's school teacher indicate a significant increase in tolerance for those who received the comedy clip relative to the control; 85.7% of the comedy group responded that they strongly agree that a

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[7]Findings may be unique and not generalizable to the general population. Gender and race were evenly distributed across conditions, however, Republicans were more likely to be found in the comedy group, therefore I restricted my analysis to Independents and Democrats to make certain that the full sample results matched when partisanship was controlled for. Additionally, it did not appear that religious identity affected the overall results.

Muslim should be allowed to teach, whereas 47.6% in the control group strongly agreed that a Muslim should be allowed to teach. This is nearly a 50% difference with the p-value equaling 0.026. This denotes statistical significance because it is less than the value of 0.1. This supports my hypothesis that the comedy group is more supportive of Muslims teaching, although the sample was relatively tolerant to begin with. The results are synthesized below:

Table 3: Experimental Effects on Attitudes Towards Muslims as a Teacher*

	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Comedy Video	4.8% (2)	9.5% (4)	85.7% (36)
Standard News Video	7.9% (3)	13.2% (5)	76.3% (29)
Control	4.8% (1)	42.9% (9)	47.6% (10)

*P< 0.026, data is statistically significant with a p-value of <0.1

I also examined tolerance by asking participants to rank different groups, which included Christians, Jews, Undocumented Immigrants, White Supremacists, and Muslims. Using a scale of 0-100 where 0 is "very cold or unfavorable feeling and 100 is "very warm or favorable feeling", participants responded how they felt media coverage treated certain groups. The experimental effects demonstrated a similar relationship to the findings in table 3. Although not enough to report statistical significance, students ranked Muslims higher when exposed to the comedy video relative to the control group. The control group of 21 students said media rated Muslims at an average of 26.33, whereas those who received the comedy source, 42 students, rated Muslims at an average of 36.43. Additionally, the standard news group, 38 people, said media treats Muslims at an average of 31.79. Participants rated Muslims fairly low, an average of 31.51, in comparison to how they rated groups like Christians, who were rated an average of 78.52. Additionally, respondents believed that media coverage treated white supremacists more fairly than Muslims, with an average rating of 43.74. This shows that participants feel the media

is bias towards certain groups, and could serve to explain why viewers can be cynical of the media.

Although these findings do not yield statistical significance, the 10-point difference between the control and comedy group, coupled with the dependent variable of those favoring Muslims as teachers, supports my hypothesis. The above evidence exemplifies that the comedy exposure made people more tolerant of Muslims, and further made them perceive the media to also be more favorable toward Muslims as well. Relative to the control, it is also important to note that both the comedy and standard news videos increased positive attitudes towards Muslims[8].

Additionally, I expected exposure to political comedy to affect perception of the likelihood in respondents' eyes of an attack in the United States by ISIS. On a 5-point scale ranked from "very unlikely" to "very likely", the comedy group was the lowest (36.6%) in responding "very likely". Additionally, 38.2 % of the standard news group responded an attack was "very likely". Finally, the control group was the highest (58.8%) in responding that an attack in the United States by ISIS was very likely. The p-value was .119 which was note-worthy but not statistically significant. This finding tells a similar story to the above variables, and further denotes that both comedy and standard news had a similar effect of increasing tolerance on the sample relative to the control group. Below is a chart displaying the above-referenced data.

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[8] Making subject's more favorably disposed towards Muslims is the short-term effect of my research, as is most research, we are unable to say how long this effect will last.

Table 4: Experimental Effects on the Perception of the Likelihood of an Attack in the United States by ISIS

	Unlikely	Neutral	Likely
Comedy Video	26.9% (11)	2.4% (1)	70.7% (29)
Standard News Video	11.8% (4)	14.7% (5)	73.5% (25)
Control	0.0% (0)	5.9% (9)	94.1% (16)

P= 0.119

Next, subjects were given a list of religious groups and asked to read over the list and place an X next to any group they thought conflicted with democracy or encouraged violence. These two dependent variables allowed me to analyze if people were affected differently by the media conditions relative to the control. A moderating variable here is religious identity, which I restricted to only Christians after analyzing my full sample.[9] Overall, this variable was not affected by the experimental conditions. Table 5 shows the results on whether or not subjects thought Muslims encouraged violence.

Table 5: Experimental Effects on Attitudes Towards Muslims Encouraging Violence (Full Sample)

	Yes	No
Comedy Video	21.4% (9)	78.6% (33)
Standard News Video	5.7% (2)	94.3% (33)
Control	15.8% (3)	84.2% (16)

However, the variable of whether or not subjects thought Muslims conflicted with democracy supports my hypothesis, with a p-value of .034, relative to the control. Table 6 displays the results:

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[9] Christians are more likely to think Muslims encourage violence and conflict with democracy (Pew Research Center, 2017).

Table 6: Experimental Effects on Attitudes Towards Muslims Conflicting with Democracy (Full Sample)*

	Yes	No
Comedy Video	9.5% (4)	90.5% (38)
Standard News Video	8.3% (3)	91.7% (33)
Control	31.6% (6)	68.4% (13)

P< 0.034, data is statistically significant with a p-value of <0.1

When the sample was restricted to only Christians for both variables, attitudes towards Muslims encouraging violence yielded similar mixed results to Table 5. However, the experimental effects on attitudes towards Muslims conflicting with democracy resulted in a p-value of 0.008 which yields statistical significance and still supports my hypothesis relative to the control.

Table 7: Experimental Effects on Attitudes Towards Muslims Conflicting with Democracy (Christians Only) *

	Yes	No
Comedy Video	6.9% (2)	93.1% (27)
Standard News Video	8.7% (2)	91.3% (21)
Control	40.0% (6)	60.0% (9)

P< 0.008, data is statistically significant with a p-value of <0.1

In conclusion, when restricting the sample to those who affiliate with Christianity, both the comedy and standard news variables made students significantly less likely to perceive Muslims as conflicting with democracy, but did not have an equal effect on attitudes towards Muslims encouraging violence. This could potentially be a function of Republicanism within the comedy group, and not just Christianity.

Political Trust Findings

Interestingly, my research resulted in conflicting findings for trust in the government and trust in the media. On a 4-point scale ranging from "never" to "just about always", respondents were asked how often they trust the government to do what is right and how often they felt they

could trust the media to report the news fairly. Of those exposed to the comedy video, 19.1% responded that they trust the government most of the time or just about always in comparison to 10.5% of the standard news group. Contradictory of these findings, 19% of the comedy group said they never trust the media relative to the standard news group where only 5.3% said they never trust the media. Additionally, no one in the standard news group responded that they trusted government nor media just about always. The results were not statistically significant, but nevertheless presented an interesting puzzle that did not support my hypothesis.

The comedy group's trust in the government and distrust in the media is contradictory to the standard news group's trust in the media and distrust of the government. Previous literature found that an increased level of trust in the media correlates with the ability to correctly identify news as fact or opinion (Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel, Sumida, 2018). My findings suggest that this could be applied inversely as well. The ability to identify news as fact or opinion increases trust in the media. Therefore, the standard news group trusted this source as delivering explicitly factual information, thus allowing them to assess the government's ability to produce outcomes consistent with the expectations framed by the media (Becker, 2011). This lack of trust in the government displayed by the standard news group could point to a more thorough assessment of whether or not the policies framed by the conventional news source were consistent with government action (or inaction).

In terms of the comedy group's trust in the government but distrust in media, the distrust could arise from the unconventionality of the comedy source causing the factual information to become blurred by the satirical nature of the source. From this arises the inability to discern the comedic source as fact or opinion leading to overall distrust in the media. Additionally, the comedy source directs criticism at mainstream media, thereby causing cynicism for subject's

when presented with the question of how much they trusted the media as a whole. In regard to government trust, my study is consistent with Becker's (2011) findings that an increase in comedy exposure correlates with an increase in political trust. Table 8 and 9 display these findings:

Table 8: Trust in the Government

	Never	Sometimes	Most of the Time	Just About Always
Comedy Video	11.9% (5)	69.0% (29)	14.3% (6)	4.8% (2)
Standard News Video	7.9% (3)	81.6% (31)	10.5% (4)	0.0% (0)

Table 9: Trust in the Media

	Never	Sometimes	Most of the Time	Just About Always
Comedy Video	19.0% (8)	64.3% (27)	14.3% (6)	2.4% (1)
Standard News Video	5.3% (2)	71.1% (27)	23.7% (9)	0.0% (0)

Political Engagement Findings

The final part of the survey asked subjects questions to better understand their media use and political activity. Although an unanticipated finding, my results concluded that news makes people more interested in politics, and this is particularly true for those who are not socially engaged.[10] Both videos had a positive effect on political interest, particularly so to those less politically engaged. To measure political engagement, I asked subjects if in the past month, they had posted a political message on social media. Only those who responded they did not post a

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[10] Referring to subjects that responded "no" to question 18 on the appendix

political message on social media in the past month were more likely to seek out information in the coming week when exposed to the comedy or standard news condition.

Additionally, the standard news source yielded more engagement; relative to the control and comedy source, the standard news source caused students to become significantly more likely to seek out information. Perhaps, we can assert here that standard news elicits more interest than political comedy. Below, table 10 displays the cross tabulation between those likely to seek out information in the coming week and the independent variables. Although the p-value was .126, with a small sample size, it is still worthy of reporting.

Table 10: Respondents Seeking Information in the Coming Week

	Very Unlikely	Somewhat Unlikely	Neutral	Somewhat Likely	Very Likely
Comedy Video	2.4% (1)	11.9% (5)	11.9% (5)	28.6% (12)	45.2% (19)
Standard News Video	2.6% (1)	0.0% (0	18.4% (7)	39.5% (15)	39.5% (15)
Control	5.0% (1)	10.0% (2)	25.0% (5)	30.0% (6)	30.0% (6)

P= .126

Similar to previous literature, there is a positive correlation between network-late night news consumption and national network new consumption, which provides some confirmation that my sample is similar to the general population. This could have some effect on political comedy's entertainment image of drawing people in to tune in for enjoyment, but simultaneously interesting them in tuning into conventional news as well. This supports that people use comedy as a supplement to, rather than a replacement for, the generic news sources (Young and Tisinger, 2006). Both the standard news and comedy conditions mattered in my research relative to the control, but my results exhibited that there was not a huge difference in effects on subjects between comedy and standard news on the sample.

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Conclusion

My findings suggest that comedy's effects are similar to conventional news effects however, differences were noted; both news sources increased tolerance, trust, and political engagement. Comedy and standard news had a similar effect of increasing tolerance on the sample relative to the control group. Trust in government and media yielded mixed results which could have resulted from subjects' predisposed notions of identifying media as 'mainstream'. Finally, the conventional news influenced future political engagement of respondents more so than the other conditions.

The limitations of my research were administering the survey instrument to a college-aged convenience sample at a primarily liberal school. Future research into this subject has a wide range of opportunity to utilize a more ideologically representative sample of the general population. Additionally, future work could examine the effects of different marginalized groups within the United States. I chose Muslims as a test case, but examining how comedy effects other groups as well using my experimental survey framework could allow scholars to compare and contrast similarities and differences.

Finally, and I believe the major opportunity for future research, is a reassessment of the media landscape. The media landscape is quickly changing due to social media platforms, independent reporters, a vast array of news networks, and bloggers, to name only a few. In my study, I inquired about specific media outlets students used[11] through categorizing media into: cable late night comedy shows, national network news programs, network late-night comedy programs, political humor websites, and social media. However, future work should formulate

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[11] See appendix for question number 17.

more distinct categories of media outlets to first determine what specific media sources subjects use, then how they are different from each other in terms of influencing trust and tolerance.

To close, comedian Sarah Silverman used other-directed hostile humor in 2001 to refer to Asians as "chinks" in a TV interview with Conan O'Brien. On the show, *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher*, Guy Aoki publicly condemned Sarah Silverman for her racial slur on national television. Silverman defended herself by saying, "comedy reflects society because it illuminates racism and provokes thought" and Aoki responded that he, "understands and enjoys satire but you [Silverman] do not know how to use satire correctly" because her racial slur ultimately offended the Asian community. Aoki pointed out that Silverman could have made a joke about the Jewish community because she is Jewish, but once people begin making jokes about other ethnic groups, it becomes inappropriate because it subjugates minorities and perpetuates stereotypes. This is an example of how the line between what is humorous and what appears as racial/ethnic intolerance can become blurry within comedic discourse. This is also true of conventional news, but particularly so for the improper nature of comedy. In terms of my project, I found that the line between satire and conventional news is blurred, and I believe that it will become even more obfuscated as the media landscape continues to evolve.

<u>**Appendix**</u>

Political Attitudes Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions by circling or marking the response that comes closest to your views. Please answer the questions in the order in which they are presented. You may skip any questions you do not feel comfortable answering. Thank you for your assistance.

Now, please answer the questions about what you have just watched.

1.   **How trustworthy did you find this media source to be? (circle one)**

Untrustworthy	Not very trustworthy	Neutral	Slightly trustworthy	Trustworthy

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

2. **Gender: ( ) Male**
               ( ) Female
               ( ) Other_____

3. **Please circle your ethnicity/race.**

        a) White
        b) Hispanic/ Latino
        c) Black/ African-American
        d) Native American/ American Indian
        e) Asian Pacific Islander
        f) Biracial/Multiracial
        g) Other

4. **Year of birth_____**
5. **Education: What is your college class?**

        a) Freshman
        b) Sophomore
        c) Junior
        d) Senior
        e) Other: _____

6. **The political views people might hold are arranged from strongly liberal to strongly conservative. Generally speaking, where would you place yourself? (Circle one)**

Strongly   Liberal   Moderate   Conservative   Strongly Conservative
Liberal

7. **Generally speaking, do you consider yourself to be a: (Circle one)**
   a. Strong Democrat
   b. Weak Democrat
   c. Independent Leaning Democrat
   d. Independent
   e. Independent Leaning Republican
   f. Weak Republican
   g. Strong Republican

8. **Here is a list of religious groups. Please read over the list and place an X next to any term(s) that describes <u>your religious identity.</u>**

	I do not affiliate myself with this group (1)	I occasionally affiliate myself with this group (2)	I fairly often affiliate myself with this group (3)	I very often affiliate myself with this group (4)
Jews				
Atheists				
Muslims				
Christians				
Other religion_____				

9. **Here is a list of religious groups. Think of all the close friends you had contact with in the past month, whether the contact was in person, by phone, by email, or through social media. Of all these people, about how many of them are:**

	None that I know of	A Few	Some	Many
Jews				
Atheists				
Muslims				
Christians				
Other religious group_____				

10. **Circle how often you <u>trust the government to do what is right.</u>**

Never	Sometimes	Most of the time	Just about always

11. **Circle how often you feel you can <u>trust the media to report the news fairly.</u>**

Never	Sometimes	Most of the time	Just about always

12. **Using a scale of 0-100 where <u>0 is "very cold or unfavorable feeling"</u> and <u>100 is "very warm or favorable feeling",</u> rate how you think media coverage treats certain groups.**

Christians_____   Muslims_____   Jews_____

Undocumented Immigrants_____   White Supremacists_____

13. **Assuming professional conduct, should members of the following groups be allowed <u>to be a teacher in your community's public schools?</u>**

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
A Christian should be allowed to teach.					
A Muslim should be allowed to teach.					
A Jew should be allowed to teach.					
An undocumented immigrant should be allowed to teach.					
A white supremacist should be allowed to teach.					

14. **Here is a list of religious groups. Please read over the list and place an X next to any group (s) that you think <u>conflict with democracy.</u>**

Christians		Muslims		Other religious group_____	
Atheists		Jews		None of these groups	

15. **Here is a list of religious groups. Please read over the list and place an X next to any group(s) that you think <u>encourage violence.</u>**

Christians		Muslims		Other religious group_____	
Atheists		Jews		None of these groups	

16. **Please rank the likelihood (in your eyes) of an attack in the United States by the following groups.** *If you have no knowledge or opinion of the group, leave the row blank.*

	Very unlikely (1)	Somewhat unlikely (2)	Neutral (3)	Somewhat likely (4)	Very likely (5)
Westboro Baptist Church					
Boko Haram					
Muslim Extremists					
Al Qaeda					
White Supremacists					
ISIS					

Now I am going to ask you a few questions about your media use and political activity.

17. **Here is a list of media outlets. In the past month, place an X under the frequency in which you have watched these programs be it live or recorded.**

	Not at all	1-4 times	5-10 times	More than 10 times
Cable late night comedy shows, such as The Daily Show with Trevor Noah or Last Week Tonight with John Oliver				
News from a cable station, such as CNN, Fox News or MSNBC				
National network news programs, such as ABC World News with Diane Sawyer, NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams, Today, or Good Morning America				
Network late-night comedy programs, such as Saturday Night Live, Jimmy Kimmel Live!, The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon, or Real Time with Bill Maher				
Political Humor Websites, such as The Onion, or Funny or Die				
Social Media, such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn, Redd it, YouTube				
Other Not Listed Above_____				

18. **In the past month, did you post a political message on social media?**

      Yes   No

19. **Have you ever "liked" a group or figure that is associated with a political cause?**

      Yes   No

20. **How likely are you to seek out political information or commentary from the internet, television, or friends in the coming week? (circle one)**

Very unlikely	Somewhat unlikely	Neutral	Somewhat likely	Very likely
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)

Thank you for your participation.

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