

When Political Comedy Turns Personal: Humor Types, Audience Evaluations, and Attitudes

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This study examines the impact of diverse comedy types on relevant political attitudes and what happens when the comedy content moves beyond the political to focus on personal attributes that are beyond a politician's control. Using a real political case study of David Paterson, New York's first blind and African American governor, the research measured the differential impact of exposure to self-directed and other-directed hostile humor on evaluations of comedy content, favorability ratings, perceptions of media portrayals of disability, and attitudes toward blindness. The results suggest that differential exposure to the comedy clips had an impact on attitudes toward blindness with those exposed to Paterson's humor exhibiting more positive attitudes toward blindness than those who were exposed to Saturday Night Live's other-directed hostile humor.

KEYTERMS: disability, comedy, media, stereotype/prejudice/bias

The proliferation of late-night political comedy has captured the interest of communication researchers over the course of the past decade. Recent investigations have focused on understanding how audience members process comedy, the impact of exposure on key democratic outcomes like knowledge, participation, and cynicism, and, more recently, the differential impact of exposure to varied comedy types or forms (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; Becker, 2011, 2013; Becker, Xenos, & Waisanen, 2010; Cao & Brewer, 2008; Feldman & Young, 2008; Hoffman & Thomson, 2009; Hoffman & Young, 2011; Holbert, Hmielowski, Jain, Lather, & Morey, 2011; Nabi, Moyer-Guse, & Byrne, 2007; Xenos & Becker, 2009; Young, 2008). In addition, recent work has emphasized a particular interest in understanding how networks treat political figures and, as such, careful analyses of available comedy content have documented the tendency to focus on questions of character and individual shortcomings as opposed to policy matters (Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2006; Niven, Lichter, & Amundson, 2003; Young, 2004, 2006).

The current study adds to this growing body of research on political comedy effects by considering the impact of diverse comedy types on relevant political attitudes and uniquely, what happens when the comedy content moves beyond the political to focus on personal attributes

that are beyond a politician's control. Moreover, the specific study relies on a real case study and uses video content that features a real political actor and comedian to explore the differential evaluation of comedy forms instead of relying on hypothetical text content (Bippus, 2007). Specifically, the current study focuses on the case study of David Paterson, New York's first blind and African American governor and the differential impact of exposure to other-directed hostile humor versus Paterson's own self-directed performance on Saturday Night Live (SNL) on favorability ratings, perceptions of media portrayals of disability, and attitudes toward blindness. In sum, the current study bridges current research on political comedy effects and types with recent work on attitudes toward disability and disability humor to investigate what happens when political comedy turns personal.

DAVID PATERSON: THE ACCIDENTAL GOVERNOR

David Paterson became the acting governor of New York in March of 2008 in the wake of Eliot Spitzer's resignation over a prostitution and sex scandal (Smith, 2009). From the start, Paterson's short-lived administration was plagued by political, sex, and drug scandals, a troubled state economy and budget crisis, and plummeting public approval ratings ("David A. Paterson," 2011). Although Paterson was eager to run for his own full term in 2010, he ultimately dropped out of the race after assessing his own political standing and in response to requests from President Barack Obama and others that he exit the race (Hernandez & Zeleny, 2009). In short, Paterson's accidental stint as Governor of New York was wrought with controversy and bad politicking giving comedy shows like SNL, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (TDS), and *The Colbert Report* (TCR) rich material to work with—ultimately making Paterson an easy target for a satirical political attack.

PARODY, PATERSON, AND SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE

Despite Paterson's clear political mistakes, SNL's parody of the governor, impersonated repeatedly by Fred Armisen, placed particular emphasis on Paterson's blindness and the physical humor that is often associated with portrayals of people with disabilities. The first SNL skit aired in December 2008 during a portion of the Weekend Update segment. In posing as Paterson, Armisen focused on the controversy over choosing a replacement to fill Hillary Clinton's vacant U.S. Senate seat. In the process of poking fun at Paterson, Armisen held a statistical chart upside down when discussing New York's unemployment statistics and later wandered back on screen in front of the camera in an apparent attempt to show that he had no idea where he was actually walking. Although Armisen and Weekend Update host Seth Meyers did manage to discuss a few political matters, both Paterson and members of the blindness community reacted negatively to the skit, taking issue with the significant amount of physical humor and the clear mockery of Paterson's blindness, a disability he has managed since he was a small child (Haberman, 2009). In discussing the skit Paterson told the NY Daily News, "I can take a joke. But only 37% of disabled people are working and I'm afraid that that kind of third-grade humor certainly adds to this atmosphere" (Gaskell, 2008, p. 4). In contrast, satirical news segments on TDS and TCR

focused almost exclusively on Paterson's missteps as Governor, drawing no reaction from Paterson or his administration.

Despite the reaction of Paterson and others to SNL's version of other-directed hostile humor, Armisen reprised the character twice in 2009 and in 2010, briefly mentioning Paterson's political mistakes, his distaste for New Jersey, and most significantly, emphasizing a series of physical blunders stereotypically associated with blind people. In part as a response, Paterson himself finally appeared alongside Armisen on the September 25, 2010 Weekend Update segment of the weekly SNL broadcast. Paterson began by chastising the SNL cast; he then went on to state his accomplishments as governor and then quickly started to engage with SNL's brand of humor. He 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). By the end of the skit, Paterson wandered in front of the camera with Armisen, a staple move from the earlier other-directed impersonations airing between 2008–2010. What began as a critical appearance ended with Paterson engaging with and participating in SNL's physical humor. Although it seemed that Paterson's primary purpose was to clear the air and criticize SNL for making fun of people with disabilities, he spent more time practicing the art of self-ridicule, engaging with the physical humor in a self-directed and playful manner, offering a direct contrast to Armisen's repeated impersonations or attempts at other-directed hostile humor.

CONTRASTING COMEDY TYPES: OTHER-DIRECTED HOSTILE HUMOR VERSUS SELF-DIRECTED HUMOR

In a recent article explicating historical forms of satire, Holbert et al. (2011) emphasized the need for a more nuanced understanding of two distinct traditional satirical forms, specifically: (1) Juvenalian satire that focuses on the key elements of aggression and judgment and (2) Horatian satire, a form that places greater emphasis on the elements of play and laughter (also see Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009, for a related discussion). Playing primarily on the harsher elements of satire (e.g., aggression and judgment), other-directed hostile humor presents a disparaging, often scathing take on everyday life (Gray et al., 2009). In taking an original text or event and offering up a satirical presentation, Stewart, Colbert, and others like the cast of SNL present a modern equivalent of Juvenalian satire, emphasizing aggression and judgment as the primary elements of each performance (Holbert et al., 2011).

Research on the psychology of humor effects has shown that viewers exposed to other-directed hostile humor tend to agree—at least in the short term—with the humor presented in the satire, spending the bulk of their cognitive energy working to understand the incongruity that exists between the comic representation and the original script (Young, 2008). In fact, the average viewer tends to lack the ability or motivation to closely inspect a satirist or comedian's claims (Nabi et al., 2007; Young, 2008). In addition, because viewers tend to like the comedic source, choosing to tune into programs like SNL for enjoyment and entertainment, it makes sense that viewers would also be more likely to simply agree with the hostile humor presented by the comedy content rather than expend energy to discredit the source or evaluate any critical

claims (Nabi et al., 2007). Recent research by Becker (2012), for example, showed that viewers evaluated John McCain more negatively after being exposed to Stephen Colbert's other-directed hostile humor, especially compared against those who viewed more traditional news content.

Although the cast of SNL has historically focused more on nailing the impersonation than on offering serious political critique (Jones, 2009), their classic parodies of key political figures still presented highly critical, aggressive, and judgmental satires (Smith & Voth, 2002). In fact, Tina Fey's 2008 portrayal of then Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin offers a recent example of a carefully constructed and yet highly critical political parody or impersonation (Baumgartner, Morris, & Walth, 2012; Esralew & Young, 2012). Although some politicians have eventually embraced the attention bestowed upon them by the cast of SNL and have even made appearances on the comic stage themselves (including Paterson and notably in 2008, Palin and McCain), the impersonations remain controversial and are still primarily seen as hostile—not friendly—attacks.

Self-directed humor, a more playful, laughter-rich form of Horatian satire is the more occasional of the two comedy types (Holbert et al., 2011). By definition, self-directed humor offers the politician the opportunity to act as the satirist in an effort to engage with the satiree or addressee (e.g., a TV audience or the American public) and ridicule his or her own behavior in a light-hearted and engaging way. Although these self-directed performances by politicians are more rare than commonplace (and viewed by some as inherently risky), self-directed humor has generally been shown to have a significant and positive effect on attitudes and perceptions (Becker, 2012; Bippus, 2007; Smith & Voth, 2002). In some cases, particularly Richard Nixon's 1968 appearance on the variety program, *Laugh In*, there has even been speculation that the willingness to engage with humor has translated into success on Election Day (Kolbert, 2004).

More broadly, research on the impact of soft news programming has suggested that personalized interviews on daytime talk shows (e.g., Oprah, Ellen) and late night comedy programs (e.g., *Late Night with David Letterman*) allow candidates to connect with the public in a more in-depth fashion on a more personal level, positively impacting "likeability" among a viewing audience that is very different from the traditional news audience (Moy et al., 2006; Young, 2006). Specifically, this politically inattentive entertainment talk show/soft news audience tends to be less educated, more liberal, younger, and female on average (Baum, 2005). It is not surprising that political candidates flock to these programs in the final days of the election cycle seeking last-minute opportunities to connect on a more personal level.

Research on the impact of self-directed humor showcases a slightly different pattern of effects. Specifically, research in the field of psychology has suggested that self-ridicule is seen as "genuinely funny humor" because it is "largely self-directed and defensive" (Lefcourt, 2001, p. 72). As a result, self-directed humor encourages viewers to take matters less seriously, promotes group solidarity or identification with the comic source, and makes a removed, generally respected figure like a politician seem all the more human (Lefcourt, 2001). Experimental research on the impact of self-directed humor has shown that subjects exposed to self-ridicule were more likely to find the jokes to be good-natured rather than critical and were less likely to feel a need to adjust their opinions to agree with the negative sentiment of the jokes (Janes &

Olson, 2000). In contrast, those exposed to other-directed hostile humor were more likely to express attitudes that aligned with the negative content of the jokes and were inclined to simply bring their perspectives into line with the criticism presented in the jokes (Janes & Olson, 2000).

Moreover, recent research by Bippus (2007) has shown that audience members view self-directed humor to be a more effective tool for politicians (in this case, the study contrasted exposure to hypothetical sound bites offered by two fake candidates engaging in a political debate). Similarly, research on political comedy effects has shown that engaging in self-directed humor can actually have a positive impact on attitudes and encourage audience members to warm towards the comic target given their willingness to acknowledge and take ownership of their shortcomings (Baumgartner, 2007; Morris, 2009). Of course, much of this is dependent upon the ability of the politician to both deliver a funny and well-timed joke (Bippus, 2007).

Although the forums for self-directed humor are generally limited to programs like SNL and a selection of network and cable comedy outlets, and the appearances are often few and far between, candidates are recognizing an increasing need to engage with these types of humorous outlets to successfully connect with voters (Bippus, 2007). The SNL stage in particular has been a welcome forum for U.S. politicians. With each new appearance, politicians engage in the act of self-directed humor to gain credibility with key segments of the viewing public, improve their public image and favorability ratings, and ultimately send a message that they themselves have something to add to the world of political satire.

RECEPTION OF COMEDY TYPES AND THE IMPACT OF HUMOR ON EVALUATIONS OF PATERSON

Applying the foregoing discussion of other-directed hostile humor and self-directed humor and their respective emphasis on the satirical elements of aggression and judgment (e.g., Juvenalian satire) versus play and laughter (e.g., Horatian satire) to a discussion of the Paterson case, it seems logical to assume that subjects exposed to Armisen's parody of Paterson will view the content as more negative, especially when compared with subjects exposed to Paterson's own self-directed, more light-hearted performance (Holbert et al., 2011). A first hypothesis is put forth to empirically test this assumption:

H1: Viewers will perceive other-directed hostile humor to be significantly more negative than self-directed humor.

Moving beyond viewer perceptions or assessment of the humorous clips, it is also important to consider how varied exposure to the different humorous stimuli influences attitudes, or favorability toward Paterson, and whether favorability levels differ significantly depending upon humor type. In light of previous research suggesting that viewers tend to simply agree with the jokes and negative content presented by other-directed hostile humor but find self-directed humor to be less critical, more good-natured, and actually warm toward candidates after viewing a bit of self-mockery, it is hypothesized that viewers exposed to Paterson's own self-directed comic performance will express more favorable attitudes toward the governor than those exposed

to Armisen's other-directed hostile humor (Baumgartner, 2007; Becker, 2012; Bippus, 2007; Janes & Olson, 2000). Put more formally,

H2: Viewers exposed to a self-directed comic performance will view the comic target more favorably than those exposed to other-directed hostile humor.

PARTISAN POLITICS AND THE RECEPTION OF COMEDY FORMS

Given the political nature of the case study, it is also important to consider whether political affiliation has an impact on viewers' evaluation of these different comedy types. Previous research on comedy enjoyment has centered on the application of the disposition theory of humor, which suggests that an individual's affect toward the individual or group being targeted by comedy will influence the reception of relevant content (Zillmann, Bryant, & Cantor, 1974; Zillmann & Cantor, 1972, 1976). Specifically, the disposition theory posits that viewers are more likely to appreciate comedy that targets an individual or group toward which they feel a negative affect; in a political context this means that Republicans should show greater appreciation for humor that targets Democrats, whereas Democrats should show greater appreciation for humor that targets Republicans (Priest, 1966; Weise, 1996). Recent research on the impact of political comedy programming has suggested that partisan identification can moderate the impact of exposure to political jokes on related attitudes and that Democrats and Republicans evaluate comedy shows like TDS and TCR differentially (LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009; Young, 2004). At the same time, recent research by Becker (2012) found that the differential impact of exposure to self-directed versus other-directed hostile humor on political attitudes was impervious to moderation by political party. Moreover, Bippus's (2007) experimental study of the differences in reception between self-directed and other-directed hostile humor given a hypothetical debate context failed to offer evidence of a significant relationship between partisan identification and humor reception. Alternatively, recent research by Xenos, Moy, and Becker (2011) found that Republican viewers actually warmed toward Nancy Pelosi and the Congressional Democrats after watching critical content from *The Daily Show*, whereas the attitudes of Democrats and independents cooled toward the Speaker and her party after exposure to the same critical content.

Applying the foregoing discussion to the current study, it is possible that Democrats may be more critical of the other-directed hostile humor targeting Paterson given his position as the Democratic Governor of New York, whereas Republican viewers may be more inclined to appreciate Armisen's attack. Alternatively, Democrats may show greater appreciation of Paterson's self-directed humor than Republican viewers. At the same time, given the physical nature of the humor and the focus on Paterson's blindness rather than on political matters, it is possible that party identification fails to influence reception of either the self-directed or other-directed hostile humor content. Given the mixed pattern of findings from previous research on the connections between partisanship and comedy exposure, a first set of research questions are considered:

RQ1: How does partisanship influence the reception of other-directed hostile humor?

RQ2: How does partisanship influence the reception of self-directed humor?

A Focus on The Study of Disability Humor

For Paterson and members of the blindness community, the Armisen impersonations were of great concern and represented a brand of humor that had gone too far. The negative reactions to the skit were chronicled by main-stream media outlets and both Paterson and advocacy groups expressed fears that exposure to the skits would negatively impact the general public's perceptions of the blindness community and promote negative attitudes toward blind people (Li, 2008; Peters, 2008). Interestingly, however, Paterson's willingness to engage with SNL's disability driven humor is not a new phenomenon. In fact, recent research has documented the various stages of disability humor and the willingness of members of the disability community to engage in and even create and produce humor that makes fun of people with disabilities (Haller, 2010). More specifically, Haller and Ralph (2003) documented the evolution of disability humor from a modified form of ethnic humor (e.g., Helen Keller jokes), to sick humor, and finally to a newer phase of disability humor in which disabled people take ownership of the production of disability humor and promote content that makes people laugh while emphasizing "normalcy, equality, and 'bold honesty'" (Haller & Ralph, 2003, para. 5).

Despite a fair amount of speculation in the media, it is unclear whether Armisen's portrayals of Paterson negatively and measurably influenced perceptions of disability or attitudes toward blindness. Similarly, it is unclear whether Paterson's own self-directed humor performance and his willingness to engage with SNL's disability humor positively influenced perceptions of disability or viewers' attitudes toward blindness and the disabled community. Ultimately, further investigation is needed to determine whether the Armisen parodies represent a step backward for disability humor and if, alternatively, Paterson's self-directed performance makes a significant contribution to this new phase of disability humor (Haller, 2010). To empirically assess the differential impact of exposure to Armisen's other-directed hostile humor and Paterson's self-directed performance on more macro-level variables of interest (e.g., perceptions of media representations of disability and attitudes toward blindness), a set of research questions are considered as final points of inquiry:

RQ3: Does varied exposure to self-directed versus other-directed hostile humor differentially influence perceptions of media representations of disability?

RQ4: Does varied exposure to self-directed versus other-directed hostile humor differentially influence attitudes toward blindness?

METHODS

An experiment was conducted at a public university in the mid-Atlantic United States using the MediaLab software platform. The experiment randomly assigned participants to one of four experimental groups or a control cell. Undergraduates (N = 241) enrolled in communication

courses were eligible to receive extra credit in return for their participation. The study was available from February 21 to March 11, 2011.

Sessions began with a consent form that described the study as an investigation of “video processing.” After random assignment to one of the treatment groups or the control, the subjects answered the same pretest questionnaire that included measures of political interest, issue importance, and media consumption. The four experimental conditions each then received a video focusing on Governor David Paterson. Subjects in the first condition ($n = 43$) viewed a video clip of Paterson appearing alongside Fred Armisen and Seth Meyers during the September 25, 2010 SNL episode, whereas subjects in the second condition ($n = 46$) viewed a video clip of Fred Armisen impersonating Paterson alongside Seth Meyers during the January 31, 2009 SNL episode. Subjects in the third and fourth conditions viewed straight news video clips. Those assigned to the third condition ($n = 50$) viewed a video clip from a July 2008 interview of Paterson by CBS anchor Katie Couric. Subjects assigned to the fourth condition ($n = 46$) viewed a video clip from a February 2010 report on Paterson’s performance by New York Times (NYT) Deputy Metropolitan Editor, Carolyn Ryan. All of the video content captured ran under 6 min in length and all of the video clips focused in part on Paterson’s leadership and effectiveness as Governor of New York. Subjects assigned to the control cell ($n = 56$) did not view any video content and simply answered the questions in the posttest portion of the experiment.

Overall, the four video clips made it possible to examine the differential impact of exposure to varied comedy (self-directed vs. other-directed hostile humor) and news (favorable human-interest coverage vs. objective news analysis) content on evaluations of Paterson and related attitudes toward the media, politics, disability, and blindness. The objective news analysis by Carolyn Ryan of the NYT served as a representation of more traditional or standard news fare—it was neither funny nor overly light-hearted and provided an objective, unbiased evaluation of the Paterson administration. The objective news analysis clip therefore served as a control or benchmark in the first set of the analyses that follow; the effects of exposure to the self-directed humor, other-directed hostile humor, and human interest coverage conditions were measured in reference to or against exposure to this standard news analysis clip.

After the video clips, subjects assigned to the experimental conditions answered a series of posttest questions measuring familiarity with and favorability toward Paterson along with a series of questions about the video clips (e.g., manipulation checks and measures of message discounting). All participants concluded the study by answering a series of posttest questions measuring attitudes toward people with disabilities, experience with persons with disabilities, attitudes toward blindness, perceptions of media representation of disability, and key demographic items. The relevant measures used in the analyses are outlined below.

Key Measures

MANIPULATION CHECKS

All subjects assigned to the experimental conditions were asked to answer a series of questions evaluating the video content to test the reception and effectiveness of the manipulations. Subjects were asked to indicate how entertaining, informative, funny, negative, amusing, memorable, and humorous the video content was using a 7-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely). A discussion of these items by condition follows in the Results section.

PERCEIVED HUMOR

A perceived humor index ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.68$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$) was created by combining responses to four of these manipulation check questions:

(a) entertaining, (b) funny, (c) amusing, and (d) humorous; these are the same four perceived humor items used as a scale in analysis by Nabi et al. (2007). The other three manipulation check variables were treated as single-item measures and are discussed in the analyses that follow.

MESSAGE DISCOUNTING

A series of questions assessing message discounting (Nabi et al., 2007) also followed the video portion of the experiment. Subjects were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a series of six statements from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) including (a) "The character in the video was just joking," (b) "The video was intended more to entertain than persuade," (c) "The character was serious about advancing his views in the message," (d) "It would be easy to dismiss the video as simply a joke," (e) "The way in which the source expressed his views was simply improper," and (f) "There was nothing about the tone of the message that was inappropriate." Given the varying nature of the video stimuli, the mean level of agreement with each of these individual statements by experimental condition is discussed in the analyses that follow.

FAVORABILITY TOWARD PATERSON

Subjects were asked to rate their overall impression of David Paterson ($M = 2.17$, $SD = 1.44$) on a 4-point scale from 1 (not at all favorable) to 4 (very favorable). Subjects who indicated that they "don't know enough about David Paterson to have an impression" were treated as missing values in the dataset for the purposes of the first analysis of variance (ANOVA) and the regression analysis (approximately 17% of the dataset).

MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS

Subjects were asked to indicate their agreement on a 7-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) with a series of six statements regarding the media's representation of disability issues. These statements were combined to form a mean index of perceptions of media representation ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.07$, $Cronbach's \alpha = .88$). The original six statements were

- (a) "Entertainment media portrayals are doing a good job of helping the general public understand the experiences of people with disabilities,"
- (b) News media portrayals are doing a good job of helping the general public understand the social issues that face people with disabilities,"
- (c) "In general, mass media accurately portray the lives of people with disabilities,"
- (d) "In general, mass media provide objective information for the public to learn about people with disabilities,"
- (e) "In general, mass media give enough coverage about disability issues,"
- and
- (f) "In general, mass media's representation of people with disabilities reflects how they are in real life."

ATTITUDES TOWARD BLINDNESS

Subjects were asked to indicate their agreement on a 4-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) with a series of 10 statements taken from the Cowen, Underberg, and Verrillo (1958) Attitude Toward Blindness Scale. Items were first recoded so that all statements were oriented in a positive direction. After reviewing the substance of the statements and the results of the factor analysis, the six similarly themed items were combined to form a mean attitude toward blindness index ($M = 1.76$, $SD = .49$, $Cronbach's \alpha = .67$). The six original statements included (a) "A blind person is not afraid to express his/her feelings," (b) "One can live in a competitive society and still compete successfully without sight," (c) "Many blind people are economically independent," (d) "Acceptance of blindness is the same thing as acceptance of anything in life," (e) "Blindness does not change the person any more than any other disability," and (f) "The blind have as many interests as the sighted have."

POLITICAL PREDISPOSITIONS

Two measures of political partisanship were used in the analyses: party identification (e.g., Democrat vs. Republican) and political ideology. Subjects were asked to select their party identification based on the following scale: 1 (Democrat), 2 (Republican), 3 (independent), and 4 (something else/none of these). This measure was then re-coded for use in the analyses that follow 1 (Democrat), 0 (independent/something else/none of these), and \square 1 (Republican). The final sample was 52% Democrat, 21% independent or other, and 27% Republican. Political ideology ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 2.02$) was based on a single-item measure of self-reported political ideology. Responses ranged from 1 (strong liberal) to 7 (strong conservative).

POLITICAL ORIENTATION

Political interest or interest in following matters related to politics and government ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.02$) was measured on a 5-point scale from 0 (never) to 4 (most of the time). Prior familiarity with David Paterson ($M = 1.85$, $SD = 1.36$) was measured on a 7-point scale from 1 (not at all familiar) to 7 (very familiar).

DEMOGRAPHICS

Key measures used in the analyses include gender (17% male; 83% female), age ($M = 21.55$, $SD = 2.58$), race/ethnicity (84% white or Caucasian, 11% black/African American, 3% Hispanic, and 3% more than one race), and home state (17% of subjects were from New York and 18% were from Connecticut/ New Jersey, states that share the New York media market).

RESULTS

First, a series of manipulation check items were tested to make sure that viewers appropriately interpreted the varied video stimuli. As Table 1 shows, viewers correctly perceived the humorous nature of Paterson's own self-directed comic performance ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.17$) and Armisen's other-directed hostile humor ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 1.79$) and correctly noted that both news clips were less humorous. As a second point of investigation directly relevant to H1, Table 1 also displays viewer evaluations of the negativity of the video content. Interestingly, Armisen's parody of Paterson was viewed as the most negative video clip ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 1.44$) followed by the NYT report on Paterson's tenure as governor ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.37$), Paterson's self-directed humorous appearance on SNL ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 1.23$), and finally the human interest news piece with Katie Couric ($M = 1.44$, $SD = .93$). An independent samples t-test comparing perceived negativity of the two different humor clips was significant, $t(87) = 5.16$, $p < .001$ and confirmed that viewers were more likely to see Armisen's other-directed hostile humor as more negative than Paterson's own self-directed performance. This offers direct support for H1.

Table 1 also displays a comparison of the message discounting items by condition. The data suggests yet again that viewers correctly evaluated the video content and understood the unique nature of the messages in each of the varied video clips. A series of independent sample t-tests were run to determine whether any of the message discounting items differed significantly across the two comedy conditions. Interestingly, a significant result emerged for the statement, "The character was serious about advancing his views in the message," where $t(87) = 2.98$, $p < .01$, and a comparison of the mean values across the two humor conditions ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.23$, for the self-directed humor; $M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.60$, for the other-directed hostile humor) showed that viewers took Paterson and his message more seriously overall and understood the self-directed nature of his appearance and the hostile focus of the Armisen impersonation.

A second set of analyses looked at the differential influence of exposure to the varied video stimuli on favorability toward Paterson in an effort to further empirically test H2 and whether viewers exposed to Paterson's self-directed humor would rate Paterson more favorably than those exposed to Armisen's other-directed hostile humor. As a first step, an ANOVA analysis was run to see if favorability toward Paterson did in fact differ significantly across all four conditions. The results, $F(3, 141) = 93.36, p < .001, \eta^2 = .67$ suggest significant variation in favorability toward Paterson across all conditions. An independent samples t-test reveals a significant difference in favorability ratings across the two humor conditions, $t(66) = 6.78, p < .001$, with those exposed to Paterson's self-directed humor evaluating the governor more favorably ($M = 2.94, SD = .68$) than those exposed to Armisen's other-directed hostile humor ($M = 1.78, SD = .71$). This set of findings offers support for H2. To more fully assess the various factors that help to explain variation in favorability ratings toward Paterson, a hierarchical ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model was constructed. Table 2 displays the upon-entry and final standardized regression coefficients for the hierarchical OLS regression examining what factors best predict variation in favorability toward Paterson. As Table 2 shows, demographic variables were entered into the model initially and only explain 1.3% of the variance in the dependent variable, favorability toward Paterson. The second block of the regression model incorporates political predispositions into the analysis. This block explains an additional 3.4% of the variance in the dependent variable and offers evidence of an initial significant positive relationship between identifying as a Democrat and favorability toward Paterson. It is important to note that partisan identification was not a significant predictor of favorability toward Paterson in the full model. In other words, favorability toward Paterson appears to be independent of political orientation—at least when evaluating the direct effects of partisan identification. The third variable block incorporates measures of general political interest and prior familiarity with Paterson. Together, these political engagement variables only explain 0.2% of the variance in favorability toward Paterson.

The fourth block of the regression model incorporates dummy variables for three of the experimental stimuli conditions into the analysis (self-directed humor, other-directed hostile humor, and the CBS News human interest story), using the objective news report from the NYT as the benchmark, or control in the analysis, given its representativeness as standard news fare. Inserting these dummy variables for the conditions into the model explains 62.7% of the variation in favorability toward Paterson, or the vast majority of the variance explained by the model. Significant positive relationships emerge for those exposed to Paterson's self-directed humor performance ($\beta = .29, p < .001$) and those who viewed Couric's human-interest piece/interview with Paterson ($\beta = .74, p < .001$). Exposure to Armisen's other-directed hostile humor was a significant negative predictor of favorability toward Paterson ($\beta = -.18, p < .01$).

A set of interaction terms were created in the last block of the model to assess whether partisan identification influenced viewers' evaluation of the various stimuli and in turn had an indirect effect on the dependent variable. The interaction terms were created by multiplying the standardized values of key main effect variables: (a) partisan identification and (b) experimental condition. As Table 2 shows, none of the interaction terms entered in Block 5 of the model were significant and adding the interaction terms only accounted for a 0.9% incremental increase

in explained variance. The lack of significant partisan effects (both direct and indirect) offers interesting insight with respect to RQ1 and RQ2 and ultimately suggests that partisanship did not moderate viewers' evaluation of the comedy types. In this case, both Democrats and Republicans who viewed Paterson's performance were subsequently more likely to evaluate the politician favorably, whereas both Democratic and Republican viewers of Armisen's humor were significantly less likely to positively evaluate Paterson.

Overall, the full model explained 68.5% of the variation in favorability toward Paterson and highlighted the significant contribution of exposure to the varied stimuli even after controlling for demographic variables, political predispositions, and political orientation. The significant positive relationship between exposure to self-directed humor and favorability toward Paterson present in the regression model offers definitive support for H2 as does the presence of a significant negative relationship between exposure to the other-directed hostile humor and evaluations of Paterson. The considerable impact of these varied stimuli on favorability toward Paterson—over and above any other variable blocks—is considered at length in the Discussion section that follows.

To directly address RQ3 and RQ4 and consider the more macrolevel impact of the varied humorous stimuli, a series of ANOVA analyses first explored variation in perceptions of media representation of disability and attitudes toward blindness across all four conditions (plus the control). As a follow-up, a series of independent sample t-tests considered whether variation in perceptions of media representation of disability and attitudes toward blindness differed significantly across the two humorous message types. The first ANOVA analysis suggested a significant difference in perceptions of media representation of disability across the four experimental conditions and the control. Specifically, the overall result of the ANOVA analysis was significant, $F(4, 236) = 2.67$, $p < .05$, $h^2 = .043$, and a comparison of means across conditions suggested that those who viewed the CBS story ($M = 3.49$, $SD = .97$) and Paterson's self-directed humor performance ($M = 3.05$, $SD = .88$) had the most positive perceptions of media representation of disability. The first independent samples t-test did not yield a significant result, suggesting that there was no significant difference in perceptions of media representation of disability for those exposed to the other-directed hostile humor versus the self-directed humor clip. As a result, this first set of macro-level analyses fail to offer significant insight with respect to RQ3; the research is unable to document a differential effect of exposure to self-directed versus other-directed hostile humor on perceptions of media representation of disability.

The second ANOVA analysis suggested a marginally significant difference in attitudes toward blindness across the four experimental conditions and the control, $F(4, 236) = 2.11$, $p = .08$, $h^2 = .03$, and pointed toward more positive attitudes toward blindness for those assigned to the self-directed humor condition ($M = 3.39$, $SD = .38$), the control cell ($M = 3.27$, $SD = .56$), and the CBS clip ($M = 3.26$, $SD = .45$). The second independent samples t-test yielded a marginally significant result, $t(87) = 2.62$, $p < .10$, and a comparison of means scores across the two humor conditions suggested that those who viewed Paterson's performance had more

positive attitudes toward blindness than those exposed to Armisen's humor ($M = 3.39$, $SD = .38$, for self-directed humor vs. $M = 3.14$, $SD = .50$, for the other-directed hostile humor).

Taken together, the results of this second set of analyses offer some interesting insight with respect to RQ4 and suggest that attitudes toward blindness do differ based on exposure to the varied stimuli. Although the results of the t-test are only marginally significant, the data does offer some evidence to support the claims of Paterson and the blindness community that exposure to Armisen's SNL parodies had a negative impact on attitudes toward blind people. Alternatively, it is also likely that Paterson's willingness to appear on SNL and engage with disability humor pushed the state of disability humor forward, resulting in more positive attitudes toward blindness.

DISCUSSION

The current study set out to bring together current research on political comedy types and effects with the study of attitudes toward disability and disability humor in an effort to better understand what happens when political comedy turns personal. Using David Paterson as a case study, the research measured the differential impact of exposure to self-directed and other-directed hostile humor on evaluations of comedy content, favorability ratings, perceptions of media portrayals of disability, and attitudes toward blindness using real rather than hypothetical content.

On the whole, the results suggest that viewers correctly receive and interpret diverse types of political comedy, finding the other-directed hostile humor of SNL's Armisen (and his mockery of Paterson's blindness) to be significantly more negative than Paterson's own self-directed performance. In addition, viewers felt that Paterson was more serious about advancing his views in the video clip, giving more credibility to his performance than to Armisen's series of impersonations. An independent samples t-test showed a significant difference in favorability toward Paterson depending upon which comedy type subjects were randomly exposed to and a hierarchical OLS regression analysis confirmed that those exposed to Paterson's self-ridicule were significantly more likely to view the governor in a favorable light than those exposed to a traditional news clip or Armisen's other-directed hostile humor. In addition, political partisanship failed to moderate the impact of exposure to the varied humorous stimuli. Both Democrats and Republicans who viewed Armisen's other-directed hostile humor were more likely to evaluate Paterson less favorably, whereas Democrats and Republicans who viewed Paterson's self-directed performance were significantly more likely to subsequently evaluate Paterson more favorably. Finally, although the analyses fail to offer evidence of the comedy clips' significant yet differential influence on perceptions of media disability, the results do suggest that differential exposure to the comedy clips had a marginally significant impact on attitudes toward blindness with those exposed to Paterson's humor exhibiting more positive attitudes toward blindness than those who were exposed to Armisen's humor.

Taken together, the findings suggest that humor types matter and that it is important for researchers to incorporate the unique properties of varying comedy types into the study of political comedy effects rather than continue to treat comedy as one monolithic form (Becker, 2012; Becker & Waisanen, 2013; Holbert et al., 2011). As the results show, viewers interpret varied types of comedy differentially, responding more positively to attempts at self-directed humor, yet embracing the negativity of other-directed hostile humor. Although possible factors contributing to this differential interpretation (e.g., credibility, likeability, negativity, message discounting, etc.) are discussed briefly in the earlier sections of this article, it is important that future research work to tease out the precise mechanisms that encourage viewers to engage in differential processing of varied comedy types, paying particular attention to the impact of message discounting and negativity on audience evaluations. Although the impact of the differential comedy types on perceptions of media disability and attitudes toward blindness was modest at best, the results do suggest that Paterson and members of the blindness community had good reason for their concern over the impact of the Armisen impersonations. Moreover, the results suggest that Paterson's willingness to engage with the SNL cast and the physical jokes of disability humor was a success—viewers took Paterson's message seriously and exhibited more positive evaluations of Paterson and attitudes toward the blindness community. In sum, Paterson's self-directed humor performance represented a step forward, rather than a step backwards, for disability humor.

Before concluding, it is important to point out some of the limitations of the current study. Although the study was conducted at a public university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States, and the analyses controlled for student's home state carefully noting any impact that geography might have on evaluations of Paterson, the subject pool as a whole still exhibited low levels of familiarity with Paterson. This low level of familiarity may also explain the significant impact of the stimuli in the hierarchical OLS regression model and the corresponding lack of significant findings for other variables entered earlier like party identification or political ideology. Simply put, many viewers may not have been fully aware that Paterson was the Democratic Governor of New York, thus explaining the corresponding lack of significant direct and indirect effects for political partisanship. It is certainly possible that replacing the Paterson case with humor connected to a national, more well-known politician could result in a different pattern of significant relationships with political predispositions (party identification, political ideology) exerting greater direct and indirect influence over key outcome variables like favorability. At the same time, the uniqueness of the Paterson case and the sizable influence of the experimental stimuli on evaluations of Paterson and related attitudes speaks toward the importance of understanding the differential impact of comedy types for a variety of political actors and across a range of personal traits and characteristics. Moreover, the distinctiveness of the Paterson case allows for the consideration of a set of research questions that sit at the intersection of research on political comedy effects and disability humor that would otherwise be unable to be explored given a different context.

Despite these limitations, the results of the current study suggest that understanding the differential impact of diverse comedy types is an important matter for political communication researchers to consider. This is especially true given the personal rather than policy focus of

political comedy content (Moy et al., 2006; Young, 2006) and the increasing significance and impact of political comedy and soft news content with each new election cycle. Although Paterson's self-directed performance helped to address his own personal disability in this particular case, it seems logical to suggest that engaging with humor can allow other politicians to address a whole range of personal issues deemed important by political satirists, comedy programs, and soft news personalities. Specifically, the results of this study suggest that engaging with personal humor and responding to the attacks of other-directed hostile humor is an important task for politicians to master. In fact, failing to engage with and respond to SNL impersonations and political satire can perhaps do more harm than good. In sum, self-directed humor performances may work beyond personal issues like disability and represent an increasingly important political activity for today's media savvy candidate (Bippus, 2007).

The results also point toward the importance of understanding the different stages of disability humor, considering both the varied impact of sick jokes and physical humor along with the effect of self-directed performance and engagement with and ownership over content production on attitudes toward blindness, perpetuation of stereotypes, and judgments of normalcy (Haller, 2010; Haller & Ralph, 2003). In connecting disability humor with research on political comedy effects, the current study bridges a gap that has heretofore been unexplored by previous research efforts. Collectively, the results of the study are encouraging on both fronts and offer interesting insight for those interested in the study of disability humor and those concerned with the impact of more traditional political comedy programming. Viewers clearly identify Armisen's other-directed hostile humor as more negative than Paterson's self-directed performance and attitudes toward blindness are more positive among those exposed to the self-directed humor than among those who view the other-directed hostile humor clip. At the same time, favorability toward Paterson was more positive among those who viewed the self-directed clip versus those who were randomly selected to view the other-directed hostile humor presented by Armisen.

In conclusion, the current study adds a new dimension—disability humor—to current research on political comedy effects and broadens the scope of current research on the differential impact of political comedy types by privileging video content from a real political case study. In truth, the Paterson case study represents just one example of what can happen when political comedy turns personal. Future research will need to continue to examine the differential impact of diverse comedy types like self-directed and other-directed hostile humor on related attitudes—for matters both political and personal—to better understand the impact of political comedy on key indicators of democratic citizenship (e.g., knowledge, learning, engagement), perceptions and acceptance of stereotypes, and electoral fortunes.

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