It May be Funny, But Is It True:
The Political Content of Late-Night Talk Show Monologues

or

Everything I Learned About Politics
I Learned From Jay Leno

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Abstract

As the influence of the media on political campaigns continues to grow, new media sources such as late-night talk shows have grown in importance and stature. We examined the content of the monologues for the three most popular late-night talk show hosts (Letterman, Leno, and Conan O'Brien) to see what political information was presented to the audience. We found that the vast majority of the humor was negative and targeted at the character of the candidates. There was an amazing lack of information about any of the substantive issues in the campaign with the exception of the death penalty. We also found that only one of the three hosts showed a consistent bias towards one party, while the other two remained ideologically neutral. Overall, the results indicate that the average late-night viewer would be likely to be uninformed and generally negative given the information provided by the three hosts.

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"When Gore accused Bush of being a tool of the big drug companies, Bush responded, 'I am not a tool of the pharmaceutical industry. In fact, for many years I have personally supported the small, independent, crack seller. I believe in supporting the dealer on the street, not some big corporate cartel.'" (Jay Leno, 11/1/01).

"Al Gore was widely criticized for his excessive sighing during the most recent presidential debate. Personally, I don't think they should criticize the guy--the sighing is actually just pressure being released from his hydraulics." (Conan O'Brien, 10/5/01).

Although funny, these comedic snippets are not simply frivolous antics. These jokes serve as an important source of information about American politics for millions of potential voters. According to the Pew Research Center, 47% of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 get at least some (if not most) of their political information from late night television shows (The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2000). Even when looking at the entire population, more than 25% of those surveyed get some political information via the same route. More interestingly, the number of people who regularly get their political information from late night television is the same as the number of people who regularly get their political information from C-SPAN. Although clearly an unconventional method of political communication, late-night talk shows are becoming a major player in the dissemination of political information to the general public. With so many people using Leno, Letterman, and Conan O'Brien to stay

informed about politics, the content of their comments becomes increasingly important in order to understand what Americans do (and do not) know about politics.

Previous research has shown conclusively that mass media significantly impacts Americans' political perceptions. The media influences the way consumers think about politics, as well as what they think (Ansolabehere, Behr, Iyengar 1993, 139). Researchers have identified four ways in which the media influences public opinion: by enabling viewers to keep up with current events, by defining what is important as far as issues and events, by influencing who is to blame for events and issues as well as who is rewarded, and by shaping preferences and opinions of viewers (Ansolabehere, Behr, Iyengar 1993, 139). One does not have to be a regular late night talk show viewer to know that all four elements of influence are present in the average late night monologue. Any of the late night guru's opening monologues will include some references to current events. They also mention some of the political issues of the day, as well as comment on whose fault it is. Although the hosts do a fair job at camouflaging their own political alignments, their monologues most certainly impact the perceptions and opinions their viewers may have.

Although it is hard to measure exactly how much influence late night television has on voters, research shows that when the news media concentrates on a specific issue or incident, viewers increasingly see the issue as more prominent and important than in the past (Ansolabehere, Behr, Iyengar 1993, 154). If a group of viewers gets most of their political information from late night television talk shows, they will likely see the issues raised by the hosts as being of increasing importance. Such influence is actually more likely with late-night

talk shows, where the hosts often focus on a particular issue or topic for days (if not weeks) in a row[1].

What is most often portrayed and packaged as a funny end to a hard day is not usually looked upon as a source for any substantial information. However, there is a substantial amount of political information in late-night monologues. Although the monologues are often sarcastic and satirical, their content does not much differ from that of network news broadcasts. A study conducted by the Center for Media and Public Affairs asserts that the virtues and vices most often covered by network news regarding political candidates in the 1992 presidential election included a candidates record in office, positions on policy issues, personal character, and the effectiveness on the campaign trail. We expect to find that late-night monologues significantly mirror the content of actual news broadcasts, albeit with an emphasis on humor and exaggeration, rather than hard facts.

The impact of late-night talk shows should not be underestimated. Since the early 1980s, presidential candidates have found it increasingly difficult to get airtime on network television. While they can get coverage of their photo opportunities, they find it difficult to get airtime to talk to the public (Center for Media and Public Affairs 2000). In the 2000 election, George W. Bush's appearance on David Letterman was longer than his *combined* speaking time on *all three* network news shows combined for the month of October. Al Gore holds the same mark for the month of September, when he was on The Late Show (Center for Media and Public Affairs, 2000).

Just like the news focuses on the stories that are hot, late night focuses on the stories that are funny. The hilarity factor of Bush's mispronunciations is much higher than that of what is

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[1] For example, during our examination of late-night monologues, David Letterman mentioned Clinton's sexual indiscretions every night for nearly five weeks.

going on in Kosovo. Late night shows concentrate on what is funny to the American people, but that does not make what is said any less influential. The "accessibility bias" argument contends that the influential power television has over viewers is due to its ability to make information easily retrievable or accessible to viewers. The theory asserts that the most easily retrievable information will tend to dominate judgements, opinions and decisions (Iyengar 1991, 130-131). Information that is repetitive becomes more easily accessible. If you tell viewers that George Bush is stupid enough times, they will begin to put some degree of faith into what is being said. Similarly, if viewers are told by Jay Leno that Al Gore is boring, the repetition will begin to affect their perceptions of Al Gore.

"Cynicism is epidemic right now," wrote columnist David Broder in the *Washington Post*. Public distrust in government is one by-product of today's media, which tends to highlight and exploit these failures. An abundance of research clearly shows the impact of increasing distrust among citizens (Peterson & Wrighton, 1998; Miller, 1974, 1983, 1990; Howell & Fagan, 1988). Too often, the media appears to be interested in reporting in such a way that emphasizes controversy and conflict, much as political humor does. The result of this negativism is an increasing distrust among people towards each other and government. Very few of us have the opportunity to be in close contact with political leaders or their performance. Therefore, we learn about them through the media, and hence, some have come to refer to our knowledge on these subjects as "mediated reality". When people such as David Letterman or Jay Leno consistently criticize a political figure, we tend to take these criticisms as valid. Thomas Patterson notes that reporters have a variety of bad news messages, but none more prevalent than the suggestion that the candidates cannot be trusted.

John Michael Kittross, in <u>Controversies in Media Ethics</u>, holds that infotainment (news that is also entertainment) confuses the public because it offers entertainment at the expense of information. Infotainment is a very good example of a media Gresham's Law: With limited time and space, popular, often simplistic programs, articles, or arguments prevail. Therefore, one realizes that the "hot" subjects, presented in an entertaining manor, can easily become the dominant topics among the public rather than the actual topics of importance. Important news, therefore, is too often trivialized. Media decision makers and broadcast managers are fully aware that infotainment is profitable. This leads one to wonder if they really care whether the public can differentiate between the information and the entertainment being offered. Whether they do care and whether they should care are two debatable issues, but regardless, the audience/public should exercise caution when depending on infotainment for news. It is important to realize that stretching of the truth and false perceptions of reality characterize much of infotainment. News in general is not immune to these pitfalls, but infotainment capitalizes on them.

As one can see, the line between journalism and entertainment is a vague one, and it may, in fact, be growing more so. The popular press has long favored entertainment and now much of commercial media interjects entertainment into itself; this overlap would seem to be almost inevitable.

The concept of molding public opinion can be viewed in two ways: that the public is easily manipulated because it accepts what it is told; or that it sits in judgment of the information that it is given and uses it to form opinions. Note the important distinction; either, by way of one of these two theories, the audience is given ignorance or intelligence. In writing this essay, it is neither our intent nor desire to decide for the reader which point of view is correct. However, it is

important to recognize the distinction between conceptions of molding public opinion, and consider their implications.

The effects of this late night talk show phenomenon are not clear. It is plausible that these shows assist in determining how a viewer perceives a candidate or issue, and it is also reasonable to assume that regular viewers acquire a biased view of politics in that the institution as a whole is portrayed predominately negatively by late night. And it is also possible to assert that this may lead to an increase in voter apathy among the individuals who rely on this source for information.

However what has been shown conclusively in previous research done by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, is those who claim that they regularly are informed about elections via late night talk shows are the least informed group of individuals. Only 20% in this group know a great deal about the candidates. Nearly half of the respondents (45%) know little or nothing about whom was even seeking election (2000). These startling statistics can lead one to believe that those who do get their information from late night television are more likely to be less informed about politics than regular viewers of any other information source.

Methodology.

If information from late-night talk shows influences the attitudes of the viewers, it is important to consider the impact of repetition. In order to accurately gauge the type of information in the monologues as well as the consistency of presentation, we taped and coded all of the monologues from Jay Leno, David Letterman, and Conan O'Brien from October 2, 2000 through November 24, 2000. We had originally intended to stop taping a week after Election Day, but the re-count clearly added much fodder for the hosts to consider and we opted to continue taping for two additional weeks.

We chose the three shows based on two criteria. All three shows are broadcast on network television, rather than cable broadcasts, meaning that virtually all citizens had access to the shows and the information presented. In addition, we considered the Nielsen ratings for all late-night shows and the three in question clearly stood out as the most watched.

Over the course of the forty days (and forty nights) of taping, the networks broadcast a total of 120 monologues. Of these, nine were dropped from the pool: five because they were re-runs of old shows and four because of taping difficulties, leaving us with a pool of 111 total monologues for the data pool.

After the taping was completed, we coded all of the monologues for all of the nights. For our purposes, we created an original coding system (see Appendix I) to include all of the elements we expected to be important. The coding was done by all three authors, with multiple checks of inter-coder reliability throughout the process. The base unit of coding was the individual joke. In total, there were 728 jokes coded from the monologues. Each joke was coded in the following six categories:

Host: Who told the joke?

Time: When was the joke told?

Target: Who was the joke based around? (see Appendix I for a complete list)

Direction: Was the joke told to make the target look good, look bad, or is it neutral?

Type: Did the joke focus on policy questions, character/personal issues, or institutional characteristics?

Topic: What was the primary focus joke about? (see Appendix I for a complete list)

Using this detailed coding system, it is possible to get a remarkably detailed picture of the political information being presented in late-night talk show monologues during the eight weeks of taping.

Data Analysis.

Arguably the most important question is whether or not the three hosts show a particular bias towards any of the candidates in the 2000 presidential election. Previous research has shown that none of the three showed any particular bias in the 1996 election, but they did tend to favor Clinton over Bush in 1992 (Center for Media and Public Affairs, 2000). The results of our research show the hosts clearly told more jokes about the Bush/Cheney ticket (276) than the Gore/Liebermann ticket (158), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of Targets: Individuals

Target	Number of Jokes	Percentage of All Political Jokes
George Bush	249	34.2%
Al Gore	152	20.9%
Bill Clinton	100	13.7%
Dick Cheney	27	3.7%
Hillary Clinton	20	2.8%
Pat Buchanan	8	1.2%
Joe Liebermann	6	0.8%
Ralph Nader	6	0.8%
Gore + Liebermann +Bill Clinton	258	35.4%
Bush + Cheney	276	37.9%

While it is possible to argue that the hosts showed a bias against the Republican ticket, that argument is not entirely valid, as there are a surprisingly large number of jokes about Bill Clinton (100). If you add the Bill Clinton jokes to the Gore/Liebermann total, the number of jokes is very close to those for Bush/Cheney (258-276). Considering how closely Gore was connected to Clinton, it would appear that the hosts were, on the whole, equal in their insults.

Another interesting note is the lack of attention paid to third-party candidates. Buchanan and Nader barely registered on any of the shows. In fact, David Letterman made only one reference to either candidate during the entire eight-week span, while Leno and O'Brien only combined for thirteen references—barely one reference per week.

While the overall picture appears to be one of fairness, a further examination of the data shows that this is not completely accurate. If we consider the targets by host, we find that some of the hosts are less fair in their joke-telling. Table 2 shows a breakdown of the percentage of jokes told by each of the hosts.

Table 2. Percentage of Jokes Told About Individuals By Host

Target	Letterman	Leno	O'Brien
George Bush	25.7%	32.6%	40.9%
Al Gore	17.1%	24.2%	18.7%
Bill Clinton	17.9%	14.2%	10.9%
Hillary Clinton	6.4%	1.5%	2.3%
Dick Cheney	7.9%	3.0%	2.3%
Joe Liebermann	0%	1.8%	0%
Ralph Nader	0.7%	0.9%	0.8%
Gore+Liebermann + Bill Clinton	35.0%	40.2%	29.6%
Bush + Cheney	33.6%	35.6%	43.2%

The results of the breakdown show several interesting things. It is worth noting that David Letterman actually told more jokes about Bill Clinton than Al Gore during the time period of the study. He also targeted Hillary Clinton and Dick Cheney far more than the other two hosts. It is also fairly clear that Conan O'Brien allowed his political bias (he is a registered Democrat) to show through more than the other two hosts. Over 43% of his political jokes were targeted at the Republican ticket, more than double the rate of jokes targeted at Gore and Liebermann.

While the targets of the jokes are certainly worthy of consideration, of more interest to us is the topic of the material. If we want to judge the impact of the jokes on the viewers, it is important to consider the types and specific topic areas covered by Letterman, Leno, and O'Brien.

A first pass at the data is simply to look at the general types of jokes. We defined three different categories of humor: policy jokes, which refer to specific policy issues; institutional jokes, which target any of the institutions of government; and personal jokes, which target the individual characteristics of the target. While we expected to find that personal jokes were the most popular, we were surprised at the overwhelming bias towards *ad hominem* attacks on the candidates and others involved. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the joke types.
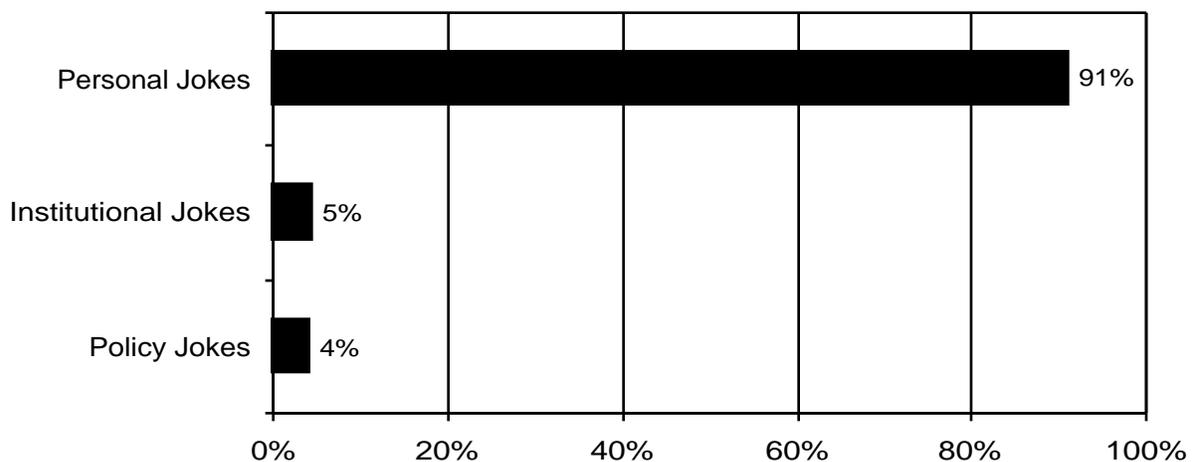

Figure 1. Distribution of Joke Types.

With over 9 out of every 10 jokes targeted at the individuals rather than addressing any policy or institutional questions, it would seem highly likely that viewers would feel that policy was not as important as personal character flaws. That said, this pattern is only somewhat

divergent from the tendency of network news to focus on horse-race and personality issues rather than policy areas.

This avoidance of policy issues becomes even more striking when we examine the few jokes that used policy as a foundation. Of the thirty policy jokes, fully 70% were jokes regarding George W. Bush and his exuberance for the use of the death penalty, and nearly half were death penalty jokes told by David Letterman. The remaining few jokes were scattered amongst several topics, including campaign finance reform and gun control, but no other topic registered more than two mentions during the entire eight-week period. It is also important to recognize that most of the major campaign issues, such as prescriptions for seniors and cutting taxes, did not merit a single joke from any of the hosts.

If late-night viewers are not learning about the central policy debates, what are they learning about the candidates and the campaign in general? Rather than detailing all of the topic areas (we included more than forty), we opted to present the ten most common joke topics overall, before the election, and after the election. Table 3 shows the top ten topics in each time period—the number in parentheses is the percentage of all jokes told during that time.

Table 3. Distribution of Joke Topics.

Overall	Before the Election	After the Election
Bush's Intelligence (20.1)	Bush's Intelligence (21.7)	Bush's Intelligence (17.8)
Clinton Sex Scandals (12.1)	Clinton Sex Scandals (13.6)	Clinton Sex Scandals (9.9)
Gore Is Boring/Wooden (6.7)	Gore is Boring/Wooden (7.2)	Frustration With Recount (8.2)
Bush's Addiction Issues (5.8)	Bush's Addiction Issues (7.2)	Length of Recount (6.8)
Frustration With Recount (4.4)	Bush & Gore's Dislike For Each Other (5.3)	Recount Is A Fraud/Unfair (6.8)
Bush & Gore's Dislike For Each Other (4.2)	Voter Apathy (4.8)	Gore is Boring/Wooden (6.1)
Bush & Death Penalty (3.4)	Gore's Clothes/Makeup (4.1)	Old People In Florida Incompetent To Vote (5.8)
Gore's Exaggerations (3.4)	Bush & Death Penalty (3.1)	Butterfly Ballots (4.1)
Voter Apathy (3.2)	Bush as Prejudiced (2.6)	Florida Voters and Recount (4.1)
Gore's Clothes/Makeup (3.0)	Hillary As Carpetbagger (2.4)	Bush's Addiction Issues (3.8)

Not surprisingly, the recount became a major focus of the jokes after the election was over. According to our count, recount jokes of one kind or another accounted for 29.1% of all of the political jokes told after the election. While that seems like a fairly high number, it is only slightly higher than the combined number of jokes about Bush's intelligence and Clinton's dalliances (28.7%). Consistent with our previous findings, the vast majority of the jokes are personality/character issues rather than policy or institutional issues.

It is again well worth noting that jokes about Bill Clinton were more common than any single category about Gore, yet jokes about Bush's intelligence dominated all of the categories. If repetition is the key to influencing viewer opinion, it seems likely this would be the one message viewers would take away from the hosts.

While it is clear the three hosts focused on Bush's intelligence more than any other topic, that is not true for each host individually. In fact, there are some striking disparities among the hosts. Table 4 shows the top five joke topics for each of the hosts over the eight-week period. The number in parentheses is the percentage based on all of the political jokes told by the host in question.

Letterman	Leno	O'Brien
Clinton Sex Scandals (16.4)	Clinton Sex Scandals (13.7)	Bush's Intelligence (33.5)
Bush's Intelligence (12.9)	Bush's Intelligence (12.4)	Gore is Boring/Wooden (9.3)
Gore as Boring/Wooden (8.6)	Bush's Addictions (10.5)	Clinton Sex Scandals (7.8)
Length of Recount (6.4)	Bush & Gore's Dislike For Each Other (6.4)	Voter Apathy (7.0)
Bush and Death Penalty (5.0)	Gore's Clothes/Makeup (6.4)	Frustration With Recount (7.0)

Again, O'Brien's Democratic tendencies show through much more than the ideologies of his fellow hosts. While the other hosts actually spent more time talking about the outgoing Democrat than the potential incoming Republican, O'Brien clearly targeted Bush. Much of his

humor regarding Bush was particularly strident, often portraying Bush as a lumbering

Neanderthal.

Given the topic material, it should not come as a surprise to anyone that the vast majority

of the jokes were negative. While there were occasional attempts to portray the candidates and

issues in a positive light through humor, the enormous majority of the jokes tore down the target,

rather than attempting to elevate them or even treat them neutrally. Figure 2 shows the

breakdown of the jokes based on direction.

Figure 2. Distribution of Jokes Based On Direction.

Negative
95%

Positive
2%

Neutral
3%

■ Negative □ Positive ■ Neutral
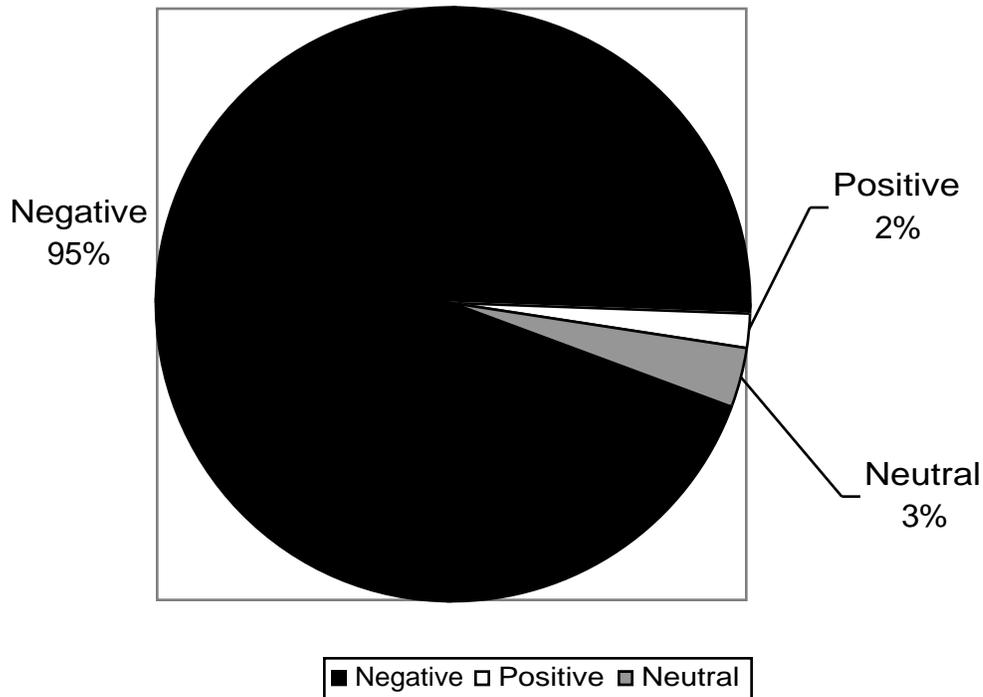
Overall, the results of the analysis are both informative and disturbing. The overwhelming number of negative jokes compared to positive or even neutral ones is a strong statement on the content of late-night humor. It certainly appears that the odds of hearing anything but negative jokes on a given night are actually very low.

Conclusions.

After all of this analysis, what do we actually know about the information presented in late-night talk show monologues? Perhaps the most informative way to look at this question is to consider what someone would (and would not) learn if late-night television was truly their sole source of political information. Let us interview a fictional voter, Jane Citizen.

Ms. Citizen got all of her political information about the 2000 election from the late-night talk shows. For her, the race was all about character. Bush was clearly not the brightest bulb in the pack, and his addiction problems were obvious, despite his denials. For Jane, Gore was stiff, boring, and spent too much time working on his image. An important third player in all of this was the lecherous yet popular outgoing president, Bill Clinton. Together with his carpetbagger wife who ran for the Senate in New York, they received almost as much attention as either of the presidential candidates. Jane knew that Gore and Bush disliked each other intensely, but she did not know why. As far as Jane could tell, there were no third party candidates of any importance, and she certainly did not expect Nader to play any role whatsoever in the outcome of the election. Finally, she knew that most voters were generally apathetic about the election and felt that both candidates were inadequate.

When asked about the important issues in 2000, the only one that came to mind was Bush's overly strong endorsement of the death penalty. When asked about income tax cuts, Social Security reform, HMO reform, or prescription drug coverage for seniors, Jane knew nothing.

While this fiction is clearly an exaggeration, the core accurately reflects the content of late-night talk show monologues. The lack of cogent discussion of any of the relevant issues was remarkable, as was the intensely negative portrayal of all of the major figures involved the campaign. There is no way to judge the strength of the impact of such concentrated and consistent negativity on voters' perceptions, but it does not take a scholar to realize that the effect does exist. Leno, Letterman, and O'Brien may simply be reflecting the negativity they see in the general public regarding politics, but it is also clear they are doing nothing to stem the tide.

Coding Sheet For Late-Night Monologues

Host

1	Letterman	2	Leno	3	O'Brien

Timeframe

1	Before Election	2	After Election	9	Timeframe Unknown

Coder

1	Duerst	2	Koloen	3	Peterson

Target

1	Bush	2	Al Gore	3	Tipper Gore
4	Bill Clinton	5	Hillary Clinton	6	Ralph Nader
7	Dick Cheney	8	Joe Liebermann	9	Buchanan
10	The Media	11	The Recount	12	Florida
13	Florida Voters	14	Congress	15	Supreme Court
16	FL Supreme Court	17	Jeb Bush	18	K. Harris
19	Debates	20	Ballots/Absentee	21	Chads
22	Election	23	Voters	24	Republicans
25	Democrats	26	Reform party	27	Carter
28	McCain	29	Janet Reno	30	Albright

Direction

1	Positive	2	Negative	3	Neutral

Type

1	Policy	2	Personal	3	Institutional

Topic

1	Bush's IQ	2	Bush's Syntax	3	Clinton & Sex
4	Hillary=Carpetbagger	5	Gore's Speaking	6	Confusing Ballots
7	Length of recount	8	Bush as Executioner	9	Recount As Fraud
10	Bush Family Helping	11	Old People in FL	12	Gore is Boring
13	Cheney Heart Problems	14	Closeness of Election	15	Partisan Courts
16	Gore Exaggeration	17	Bush's Addiction	18	Gore's Makeup
19	Voter Apathy	20	Liebermann's Senate	21	Liebermann Jew
22	Campaign Spending	23	Clinton Marriage	24	Gore Interruption
25	Election Frustration	26	Bush/Gore Dislike	27	Policy Waffling
28	Aggressive	29	Gore Wooden	30	Other Sex Scandal
31	Hillary's Personality	32	Rich Candidates	33	Crazy
34	FL Voters	35	Prejudiced	36	Other Addictions
37	Chads	38	Bad Candidates	39	Liar
40	Media Hype				
99	Other				

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Why are these shows becoming political? Well, they really have been since about the Reagan administration. Using the monologue segment to riff on the news of the day is a long standing tradition. What you are actually describing falls under the category of "Late Night", which have opening monologues, a comedy segment, and then interviews with guests. Why are these shows becoming political? What happened to late night TV like Johnny Carson funny, unlike the political cut people up shows of today? Is there a comedy show that handled a serious topic better than a drama show? Why have most late night talk shows gone away from humor for all and toward political humor for one group of people? Who is the best late-night talkshow host on US television? John Seeley. In their monologue jokes, late-night talk show hosts often comment on politicians. and political current events, such as in the jokes above. Whether satirizing the. Late Show, often find humor in American politics. Late-night talk shows, which air after 1 1pm on weeknights, have become. increasingly. important in the realm of politics. the audience may still be. their opinions. Social importance may be found in this study as well. Many. of the viewers of. late-night talk shows are considered younger viewers, which the Pew Research Center. classifies as ages 18-29. Of this group of younger viewers, 61% say they regularly or sometimes learn about political campaigns from comedy and/or late-night talk shows ("Cable and Internet Loom," 2004). Nearly half of Americans said they want late-night shows without politics. But giving viewers some space from the political humor that's defined the last four years may not only keep them watching, but could lead to a renaissance of form and content in the late-night space. "We had two terms of George W. Bush and people kind of said the same thing when Obama came into office, where it's like, 'Here's this great charismatic leader. There's nothing that's going to be funny anymore,'" said Alison Camillo, executive producer of "Full Frontal with Samantha Bee." Late-night programs are looking for a reprieve, though. After telling nightly jokes about Trump and his cabinet, some hosts are looking forward to delving into topics that have been largely sidelined since 2016.