

## **Explaining Differing Tastes in the Humor of Liberals and Conservatives**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explains how liberals and conservatives differ in their tastes in humor. The primary contribution of this paper is the development of a theory that explains these differences by matching psychological theories of humor to political science theories that explain personality traits of liberalism and conservatism. The secondary contribution involves the empirical testing of hypotheses are then drawn from this theory using data from 400 humorous still images collected by the author and the Library of Congress during the 2016 election cycle. The results indicate that a Freudian explanation of the development of superego structures that prioritize law/crime, security, tradition, and progress, distinguish how liberals and conservatives differ in their tastes in humor. The paper concludes with a discussion of the ramifications of differing tastes in political humor for future political discourse and civility.

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## **Introduction**

On May 30, 2017, comedienne Kathy Griffin posted a video of a photoshoot in which she held up the ostensibly severed head of President Donald Trump. The head was obviously fake, and during the video, Griffin used Trump's own words to attempt to create irony—suggesting a caption for the shoot to read “There was blood coming out of his eyes, blood coming out of his... wherever” (a reference to Trump's quote about FOX News anchor Megyn Kelly's tenor as a Republican presidential debate moderator). Supporters of President Trump were outraged, and even many of Trump's opponents found the joke in poor taste. Griffin lost her gig as co-host of CNN's New Year's Eve show (alongside the staid CNN anchor Anderson Cooper). Griffin was forced to cancel tour dates, and Democratic U.S. Senators Al Franken and Catherine Cortez Masto distanced themselves from her.

Griffin's experience shows just how dangerous the game of political humor can be. Comedians such as Griffin, whose comic style—not to mention livelihood—depends upon walking along the knife edge of propriety and impropriety. Incidents such as this scream caution to those who would joke at the expense of politicians. But the advent of social media provides both a megaphone and anonymity for individual citizens to circulate their political sarcasm and screed. The digital revolution opens up new questions about the role of humor in our modern political discourse.

A defining feature of our contemporary politics in the United States is that ideological polarization has become so intense, it mimics tribalism (see Mason and Wronski 2018). Social media may tend to make this trend even more prevalent, as anonymity and lack of in-person social interaction serve to reduce political civility. With a social-media based information ecosystem, it is compelling to conclude that we are not only talking (and clicking) past one

another, we are often ignoring one another altogether. However, some recent research suggests that the phenomenon of closed-off political “information bubbles” (see Peterson, Goel and Iyengar, 2018) are less prevalent than one might expect—and only constitute a minor trend among the most politically engaged (see Guess et al. 2018). For better or worse, we certainly do get a chance to hear from “the other side” on occasion—ideas and discourse that may cause understanding and empathy at best, and (probably more often) offense and resentment at worst.

As the battle lines have been drawn among strong partisans, differences become magnified and offense is frequently taken (and given). What is offensive to some may be funny to others. For many conservatives, Rush Limbaugh’s invective fun-poking at Democratic politicians and celebrities seems lighthearted, while it is deemed offensive to many liberals. Alec Baldwin’s impressions of Donald Trump on *Saturday Night Live* have become viral sensations among liberals, and less so among conservatives. President Trump himself tweeted “Totally biased, not funny and the Baldwin impersonation just can’t get any worse. Sad” (December 3, 2016). While it is hardly surprising to find that the individual who is the butt of a joke or impression is offended, there does seem to be a qualitative difference in the tastes in humor of liberals and conservatives. What is the nature of this difference and can it be bridged in order to promote much-needed civility in contemporary political discourse?

### **Theoretical Orientation**

So what clues are there to tell us what contemporary liberals and conservatives in the U.S. find funny? Some recent scholarship indicates that liberals and conservatives respond differently to different styles of humor, with conservatives being less appreciative of irony and exaggeration than are liberals (Young et al 2017). This result is explained in terms of

conservatives' lower need for cognition and lower self-assessed sense of humor. While this intriguing result paints a picture of how and why conservatives respond differently to specific techniques of humor, it does not help to explain tastes in humor.

Looking to the broader media landscape for clues, a scan of the humor styles used within talk-radio and late-night comedy reveals nothing very promising. Some suggest that the style of humor used by conservative comics reflect a significant difference in the taste of humor, with conservatives favoring more visceral attacks and absurdism (see Warner and McGraw 2012, McGraw and Warner 2014). But conservatives are not alone in this regard. Certainly, much of the humor of late-night comics Samantha Bee and Jon Oliver can be considered part of this visceral and absurd ilk, punching down as much as punching up (degrading Trump supporters, for instance).

Since nothing in contemporary media screams out any obvious differences between liberals and conservatives for theoretical clues, it is necessary to build up from traditional psychological theories about humor and personality. The four main psychological explanations for why we find things humorous are incongruity, superiority, playfulness and relief (see Morreal 1987; Scheel and Gockel 2017, esp. ch. 2). Incongruity theory states that we are told a common state of affairs (premise), and then are presented with an unexpected resolution that violates an expected pattern or code of relationships (Meyer 2006). Incongruity theories also include incongruity-resolution models whereby humor is created out of the playful resolution of two seemingly incongruous premises. Does incongruity theory help explain differences in the humor tastes of liberals and conservatives?

There are some who suggest that when it comes to political humor, conservatives just “don't get it.” Anthony Atamanuik, a Donald Trump impersonator, once remarked that

conservatives don't understand political humor because in order to get the joke, "you have to know something" (Atamanuik 2016). In other words, you must first understand the premise to be amused by the incongruity of the punch line (Suls 1972). Some support for this proposition is evidenced by an experiment showing that conservatives viewing *The Colbert Report* (a show in which where Stephen Colbert satirically pretends to be a conservative commentator) were likely to think that Colbert was being serious—the irony was wasted on them (LeMarre, Landreville and Beam 2009). But public opinion polls refute the notion of conservatives having lower levels of information about politics. In fact, a 2012 study by the Pew Research Center found that Republicans had *higher* levels of political knowledge than Democrats (Pew Center 2012). The notion that liberals simply know more about politics and can therefore better identify humor created by incongruity does not stand up to this evidence.

The second predominant explanation for how humor is created is commonly termed the "superiority theory" (Morreal 1986). This theory dates back to Plato, Aristotle and Hobbes, and deals with the need for individuals to feel superior to others. As Hobbes describes it, the glory of telling a joke makes an individual feel superior to the butt of the joke (Ewin 2001). The devaluation of others (laughing at others' expense) in the superiority theory certainly opens the door to the darker side of human psychology. For Plato, the enjoyment of this type of humor was a reflection of malice (Morreal 2009). It is not clear that either liberals or conservatives would be more likely to engage in humor in this way, as no research on the personalities of each shows a need for dominance or superiority. Certainly, both sides use humor to poke fun at and to demean politicians on the other side. Since no distinguishing hypothesis can be drawn, this study will merely explore the data for patterns.

The third theory for explaining humor holds that humor results from the human need for playfulness, leisure, and amusement. This theoretical tradition dates back to Immanuel Kant, who asserted that laughter is a physical rather than an intellectual act (Morreal 2016), and is similar to the need for play found in many animals (Eastman 1936). Since the need for play is universal, it is impossible to posit whether conservatives or liberals would be more likely to engage in humor as an act of playfulness. As with the superiority theory, the play theory seemingly offers no discriminatory value by which to distinguish liberals from conservatives, so this study will merely investigate the data to see if patterns emerge.

The fourth, and final, theoretical tradition seems to offer more explanatory power. The basis of this theory come from Sigmund Freud's 1905 book *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten (Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious)*, which provides a theoretical structure for unpacking what we might expect in the differing tastes in humor of liberals and conservatives. The book explains how jokes work by relation to Freud's theory of the human psyche (of course) and its constituent elements of id, ego and superego. According to Freud, the id is the primitive, instinctual, and impulsive element of the human mind. The id holds our appetites and drives, and importantly, contains our hidden memories. It operates on the "pleasure principle" (Boa 2004) and remains unchanged throughout life, buried in the unconscious mind. The superego is the moral conscience, which is learned over time and is socially-specific. The moral conscience of the superego attempts to control the impulses and drives of the id through the ego, which lies between the superego and the id.

Freud argued that our enjoyment of humor is a manifestation of pent-up repression. Laughter releases the tension created by the ego as it governs the id with the social values that construct morality of the superego. Therefore, the humor that is enjoyed by an individual

reflects that which is temporarily repressed by the individual in serious interactions. For Freud, a successful joke helps an individual to overcome his or her inhibitions and repressed hostilities—jokes bring into the open things that might otherwise be considered taboo in a particular society or subset of society (and therefore warrant sanction or punishment). Thus, if we know what urges individuals are repressing, we know what they find funny, and *vice versa*.

Freudian theory suggests that the differences in tastes in humor derive from how strictly the superego governs the id (through the ego) within different topic areas. The superego allows the ego to generate humor in order to relieve tension. But superegos are moral codes, and differ by individual. Therefore, the power of the superego may vary across different topic areas of social interaction. The strictness of the superego within different topic areas has to do with two factors: our idiosyncratic personal experience and our functioning within the constraints of our immediate social world. According to Freud, there are three levels of superego governance of the id that result in three relationships to humor. First, a benevolent superego (not worried about the social taboos of the subject) would allow a light and comforting type of humor and moderate enjoyment. In this sense, the superego tells the ego that it is OK to joke about this topic. Secondly, a harsh superego (concerned about the moral impropriety of the subject matter) would create a biting and sarcastic type of humor and great enjoyment due to the release of the pent up tension of the superego governing the id through the ego. Lastly, in more extreme cases, a very harsh superego will suppress humor altogether. In this final case, the superego governs the id to such an extent, that the topic area is far too sensitive to allow for the release of tension through laughter—it is completely repressed.

Applications of the relief theory demonstrate that different personality types are associated with different levels of affinity for humor along different topics of humor (Mindess et

al. 1985). For example, one type of humor is known as cringe comedy, and this style uses topics related to social awkwardness to generate humor (see Carroll 2014). Examples of this type of humor can be found in the movies created by Woody Allen, or in Larry David's television series *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. For someone whose superego guards this type of behavior and interaction moderately—someone concerned but not overly concerned about social propriety, this type of humor would be appear lighthearted and moderately enjoyable. For someone with a strict superego on matters pertaining to social awkwardness—someone for whom not appearing socially awkward is very important and very much to be avoided, this type of humor would be considered very funny. This person would gain the most pleasure from the humor due to the release of pent up tension caused by the superego strictly guarding the id. For someone with a very strict superego, who may have had a particularly traumatic experience of social awkwardness, a humorous response to this sort of cringe humor would be repressed altogether.

Thus, the relief theory of humor provides the best foundation of the four theories for distinguishing tastes in humor between political ideologues. In order to develop hypothetical clues for understanding diverging taste in humor, the next step is to match the relief theory of humor appreciation with research that demonstrates the personality differences of liberals and conservatives as related to different topics of political humor.

## **Hypotheses**

A long and rich tradition of social research is the attempt to distinguish exactly what makes people politically liberal (leftist) or conservative (rightist). Research to untangle these ideologies spans many academic disciplines, including not only political science, but also sociology, psychology, and neuroscience (Adorno et al. 1950; Lakoff 1996; Rokeach 1960;



Tomkins 1963; Westen et al. 2006; Wilson 1973). Central to many of the varied findings is the concept that that political ideology emerges as a result of differing psychological needs, such as needs for certainty and security (Jost and Amodio 2013). Through a meta-analysis of 88 leading studies on political ideology, Jost and his colleagues have identified the needs that motivate political ideologues (Jost et al. 2003). According to Jost and his colleagues: “The core ideology of conservatism stresses resistance to change and justification of inequality and is motivated by needs that vary situationally and dispositionally to manage uncertainty and threat” (Jost et al. 2003, p. 339). In this and subsequent work, Jost and his colleagues identify how these needs become manifested for conservatives (and inversely for liberals), such as a need for order, as support for political system stability, the fear of threat and loss, opposition to equality, and traditionalism (Jost et al. 2003; Jost et al. 2007; Jost and Amodio 2013).

It follows that conservatives develop a superego structure that governs these topic areas rigidly. Therefore, the tension released when these topics are breached in humor would be stronger in conservatives than in liberals. We can therefore posit that these are the topics that conservatives would find more funny than liberals, and we can expect topics related to the defining needs of a conserve ideology to be most likely to appear in conservative humor. Topics related to the need for order, system support and fear of threat can be easily converted into hypotheses about topics frequently appearing in humorous media content:

*H1: Topics related to order will be more likely to appear in conservative humor than in liberal humor.*

*H2: Topics related to law and crime will be more likely to appear in conservative humor than in liberal humor.*

*H3: Topics related to security will be more likely to appear in conservative humor than in liberal humor.*

The concepts of equality and tradition may also be converted into hypotheses, but need to be formulated separately as they pertain to liberal versus conservative ideologies. The concept of equality can be broken down into different concepts favored by liberals and conservatives. Conservatives have been shown to eschew the idea of equality for deservedness, as the concept of equality seemingly (to conservatives) bestows benefits on those not worthy or receiving them (Skocpol and Williamson 2011). For liberals, fairness is a paramount conception of equality (Graham, Haidt and Nosek 2009; Sterling and Jost 2017).

*H4: Topics related to deservedness will be more likely to appear in conservative humor than in liberal humor.*

*H5: Topics related to fairness will be more likely to appear in liberal humor than in conservative humor.*

Finally, as the research cited above states, conservatives are more likely than liberals to be concerned about tradition. By contrast, liberals are more concerned with progress (Conover and Feldman 1981; Jost, Nosek and Gosling 2008). This leads to the final set of hypotheses:

*H6: Topics related to tradition will be more likely to appear in conservative humor than in liberal humor.*

*H5: Topics related to progress will be more likely to appear in liberal humor than in conservative humor.*

## **Data and Method**

Despite its apparent lack of seriousness, humor is a very important domain of our political information environment, and has been for some time. Laughing at the powerful and those who aspire to power is a tradition that dates back at least to ancient Greece (Cronin 2014). Alisky (1990) demonstrates that in the United States, presidents as far back as Lincoln have used humor to defuse resistance to their policy proposals as well as their re-election. Lately, political

humor is having an expanding role in American culture and politics (see Gray, Jones and Thompson 2009; Jones, Baym and Day 2012; Jones 2010; Lichter, Baumgartner and Morris 2015). With the proliferation of late-night television comedians taking on politicians and political issues as subject matter, political humor has been the subject of much scholarly scrutiny (see Baym 2005; Dagnes 2012; Feldman and Young 2008; LeMarre, Landreville and Beam 2009; Young 2013). While much scholarship exists on political humor propagated by professional comedians through commercial outlets, and their attendant effects (see Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Compton 2008; Hariman 2008; Lim and Golan 2011; Nilsen 1990), extraordinarily little exists on humor contributed to the wider political discourse by common citizens in our post-broadcast information environment (see Belt 2018; Rill and Cardiel 2013), which could help to explain differences in tastes.

A focus on citizen-produced humor instead of professionally produced humor provides two distinct theoretical advantages. First, there is a relative dearth of conservative comedians from which to pull material for analysis. While conservative comedians do exist, they are much fewer in number and stature. Some have attributed this to a Hollywood bias toward left-leaning political humor, while others have noted that success as a professional comedian requires a great deal of education and experience in the performing arts (Dagnes 2012). This risky and non-traditional career path does not appeal to individuals who are socially conservative.

A second theoretical benefit of focusing on citizen-generated humor has to do with the gate-keeping effect of producers and directors. Irrespective of the personal biases and predilections of this group, the profit motive homogenizes entertainment for mass consumption, sanding off the rough edges. Using data gleaned from citizen-generated humor allows one to expose political humor in all of its ugliness—things that would not make it past an editorial

gatekeeper do not become filtered out. The result is a more comprehensive picture of what might be considered humorous by both political sides.

In order to assess the differences in tastes in humor between liberals and conservatives, this paper uses still images culled from various social network sites during the 2016 presidential campaign (data were collected by the author and the Library of Congress). Images were culled from the social media sites Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr, as well as the social media discussion boards 4chan, Imgur, Reddit and FARK. On Facebook, three separate accounts were included to create different feeds—one conservative, one liberal, and one moderate. To be included in the sample, images must have been political in nature—referring to ideas or policy proposals that were prevalent during the campaign, attacking or promoting specific presidential candidates, commenting on candidates’ appearances, personal or professional backgrounds, personalities, character traits. The images collected included manipulated photographs, photos with text added (also known as “memes”), screenshots of tweets, and other circulated images. Commercial political cartoons and still images of commercial broadcasts (such as from *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*) that were shared on these sites were also collected.

A total sampling frame of 1120 images was collected, from which 400 humorous images were selected for inclusion into the content analysis. Because conservative-leaning images were underrepresented in the sampling frame (much to the same degree they are underrepresented in mainstream media), all 121 conservative-leaning images were selected for analysis. Stratified random sampling was used to select the remaining 279 images from the subset of left-leaning images in the sampling frame, bringing the total sample to 400. There were very few images that qualified as moderate, and these were excluded from collection in order to perform a strict

analysis comparing conservative-leaning images to liberal-leaning images. This sampling procedure is justified in that the purpose of this research is not to provide an accurate portrait of the media landscape available to the common voter, but to scrutinize differences between liberal and conservative humor.

Each image was coded for ideological slant (one to seven measure borrowed from American National Election Studies). Seriousness versus playfulness was coded as a one to five Likert-type scale (one = very serious, two = somewhat serious, three = a balanced mix of seriousness and playfulness, four = somewhat playful, five = very playful, zero = not applicable). The sense of superiority gained by the audience over the target of the humor was coded with a one to five intensity scale: one for minimal superiority, five for very intense superiority, zero if not applicable. Each image was also coded for the absence or presence of the following topics of humor: order, law/crime, security, deservedness, fairness, tradition, and progress (all dummy variables of zero to one for absence/presence).

Two individuals were employed to code the images. Because of much of the content was latent, and therefore more difficult to code than manifest content (and impossible to code with computer software), two intensive training sessions and an exhaustive codebook were necessary. In order to code the material, coders were instructed to eschew Justice Potter Stewart's dictum "I know it when I see it" (*Jacobellis v. Ohio* 1964, 378 U.S. 184). Rather we borrow the perspective of the Burger Court's obscenity test from *Miller v. California*—"whether the average person, applying contemporary community standards, would find that the work, taken as a whole," (*Miller v. California* 1973, 413 U.S. 15) exhibits the various qualities coded for in the content analysis. Following the first round of training, the coders achieved a good level of agreement ( $Kappa = .841, p < .001$ ). To resolve unsettled coding concerns, a second training

session was undertaken. Following the second round of training, agreement improved to an even higher level ( $Kappa = .960, p < .001$ ).

An example of a still image used for coding may illustrate and clarify the variable coding for the content analysis (see Appendix to view example). The example image shows a photo of former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton testifying before Congress regarding the terrorist attack on two U.S. diplomatic compounds in Benghazi, Libya. The text accompanying the image contains a bastardization of a children's nursery rhyme, reading: "I'm a little teapot short and stout, open my mouth and shit comes out." The text is accompanied by musical notation to inform the viewer that the text is to be read as a musical jingle. This image was obviously a conservative attack on Clinton, and was coded with a seven for ideological bent (strongly conservative). This image was coded with a four (somewhat playful) on the one to five Likert scale for seriousness versus playfulness, edging towards playfulness because of the children's nursery rhyme theme, but not completely playful due to the seriousness of the subject matter. The image was coded with a three for superiority of the audience on the one to five intensity scale, because it somewhat diminished the character of Clinton and her supporters, but not overly so. This image was coded as a zero for presence/absence of order (order may have been implied, but it was not an explicit topic and coders were instructed to err the side of caution in reading too much into the images), it was coded with a one for law/crime, a one for security, a zero for deservedness, a zero for fairness, a zero for tradition and a zero for progress.

## **Results**

In order to compare images with an ideological slant in order to ascertain differences in humor, it was necessary to create two distinct groupings. Most liberal-leaning images scored

**Table 1. Ideological Slant of Images**

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
1 = Strongly Liberal	210	52.5
2	57	14.3
3	12	3.0
5	17	4.3
6	28	7.0
7 = Strongly Conservative	76	19.0
Total	400	100.0

very low on the ideology scale and most conservative-leaning images scored very highly, reflecting strong polarization of content (see Table 1). To facilitate comparison, all conservative-leaning images (ideology = five to seven) were combined into one group as were all liberal-leaning images (ideology = one to three).

In order to investigate the play theory of humor, liberal and conservative images were compared along the one (serious) to five (playful) measure. While no specific hypotheses could be drawn from the literature regarding this variable, exploratory analysis shows that playfulness in humor is more the province of liberals than conservatives. Liberal images averaged a score of 3.616 while conservative images averaged a score of 2.463 ( $F(1, 399) = 47.458, p < .001$ ). Since a score of three was the dividing line between seriousness and playfulness, liberal images tended to be playful and conservative memes tended to be more serious.

Similarly, no hypotheses could be drawn from the superiority theory of humor in order to distinguish the difference between liberals and conservatives. But here again, exploration of the data revealed a significant pattern. Liberals were much more likely to use humor to express superiority over other groups (predominantly Trump voters). Along the one to five intensity

measure for audience superiority, the mean score for liberals was 3.305 compared to 1.860 for conservatives ( $F(1, 399) = 46.283, p < .001$ ).

Testing of the seven hypotheses drawn from the relief theory provide evidence of its validity and help to distinguish between the tastes of liberals and conservatives. The first hypothesis asserted that topics related to explicitly to social order would be more likely to be found in conservative rather than liberal images. This was not the case, as liberal images averaged 0.165 on the zero to one absence/presence measure, while conservative images averaged 0.178 ( $F(1, 399) = 0.120, n.s.,$  see Table 2).

The two more concrete topics related to the abstract idea of social order were more prominent in conservative images. Conservative-leaning images were more likely to invoke topics of law and criminality than liberal-leaning images. On the zero to one absence/presence dummy variable, conservative images scored 0.240 compared to 0.111 for liberal images ( $F(1, 399) = 12.041, p < .001$ ). A common topic for conservative images was attacking Hillary Clinton for alleged perjury related to the Benghazi scandal.

A similar pattern was founded for topics related to security. On average, conservative images scored 0.165 compared to 0.039 for liberal images on the security presence/absence variable ( $F(1, 399) = 22.395, p < .001$ ). The almost complete absence of the topic of security for liberal images is striking.

As mentioned earlier, liberal and conservatives differ in their conceptions of social equality. Conservatives generally eschew equality for the concept of deservedness, while liberals are more akin to focus on aspects of fairness. In testing for differences in the hypothesis that conservative images would be more likely to contain topics relating to deservedness was not



**Table 2. Topics of Liberal vs. Conservative Humor**

<i>Topic</i>		<i>Conservative</i>	<i>Liberal</i>	<i>F</i>
Order	mean	0.178	0.165	0.120
	st. dev.	0.328	0.344	
Law/Crime	mean	0.240	0.111	12.041***
	st. dev.	0.409	0.306	
Security	mean	0.165	0.039	22.395***
	st. dev.	0.350	0.186	
Deservedness	mean	0.302	0.237	2.059
	st. dev.	0.435	0.408	
Fairness	mean	0.070	0.127	3.040 <sup>†</sup>
	st. dev.	0.244	0.321	
Tradition	mean	0.211	0.038	36.299***
	st. dev.	0.391	0.183	
Progress	mean	0.087	0.163	4.236*
	st. dev.	0.271	0.366	

Notes: All tests: d.f. = 1, 399; <sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

borne out by the data. Conservative images were only slightly, but not significantly likely to contain the topic of deservedness (0.302 for conservative versus 0.237 for liberal,  $F(1,399) = 2.059$ , n.s.). Liberal images were slightly more likely than conservative images to contain humor relating to the topic of fairness (0.070 for conservative versus 0.127 for liberal,  $F(1,399) = 3.040$ ,  $p < .10$ ). Therefore, the data in this study do not lend strong support for the hypothesis that tastes in humor for liberals and conservatives would diverge on the topics of deservedness and fairness.

The last set of hypotheses deal with the topics of tradition and progress. As expected, conservative images contained more humor on the topic of tradition than did liberal-leaning images. On the zero to one score for the absence or presence of topics related to tradition, conservative images scored 0.211 while liberal images scored 0.038 ( $F(1,399) = 36.299, p < .001$ ). As with the topic of security, it is remarkable that there were very few liberal leaning images relating to the topic of tradition in the creation of humor.

Finally, the hypothesis that liberal-leaning images would be more likely to invoke topics of progress in creating humor was also supported by the data. On average, conservative-leaning images scored 0.087 on the topic of progress, while liberal images scored 0.163 ( $F(1,399) = 4.236, p < .05$ ). In total, five of the hypotheses drawn from the relief theory were supported, with only the hypotheses relating explicitly to order and deservedness failing to be supported.

## **Conclusion**

The differing preferences of liberals and conservatives are largely the result of the differing levels of the need for order and security in the face of uncertainty and ambiguity (Jost and Amodio 2012). Research in neuroscience confirms this pattern, demonstrating that conservatives have more activity in the right amygdala—the part of the brain associated with fear—when engaging in risk taking than do liberals (Schreiber et al. 2013). Because of this, it is true to some extent that liberals and conservatives live very different lives. Liberals are more likely to appreciate jazz, poetry, foreign films, and modern art (Jost, Nosek and Gosling 2013). Conservatives are more favorable to fishing, sports, marriage, and sport utility vehicles (Jost, Nosek and Gosling 2013). It is not surprising, then, that ideologues diverge in their sense of humor.

Previous research has delved into how liberals and conservatives differentially process different styles of humor (LeMarre, Landreville, and Beam 2009; Young et al. 2017). And in the psychological literature, different personality types have been matched to appreciation for different styles of humor (see Cann, Silwell and Taku 2010; Ford, Lappi and Holden 2016). These approaches make sense, because oftentimes, humor is categorized by the technique used to create it (see Berger 1993 and Carroll 2014). But responses to technique are insufficient to explain differing tastes of liberals and conservatives. If we want to distinguish what people like (not just how they respond), the relief theory dictates that we need to look at the topics upon which superegos are based in order to make distinctions.

Using the relief theory of humor, this study demonstrates the differing topics that liberals and conservatives find humorous. The things that people joke about are the things they have in common, for which they can share a common frame of reference and get enjoyment from the release of tension with respect to the topic area. For conservatives, these topics are related to the implicit need for order: law/crime, security and tradition. For liberals, topics relating to fairness and progress were the most common topics of humor.

For a full accounting of the results attained here, it is important to evaluate topics as either implicit or explicit. For implicit topics, superego structures may be so strict as to fully repress humor, which may be reserved for explicit topics. This explains the lack of a result for topics related to order (a more basal, implicit variable) as compared to the results attained for appreciation of the topics of law/crime and security (more explicit and instrumental) in conservative humor. People tend to think in terms of law and security without being conscious of the undergirding function they play—providing order. In statistical modeling terms, the need

for order should be conceived of as a latent variable, undergirding the more manifest priorities of law, security, and tradition.

The differing results achieved for order versus law/crime and security may also be explained by the relief theory. In Freudian terms, some people may develop superego structures that find certain topics too sensitive to joke about. For example, people who dislike sexual humor are “prim and proper... [and] may be severely repressed and easily embarrassed... maintain[ing] conventional moral standards” (Mindess et al. 1985, p. 37). For these people, sexuality is a topic so repressed by their superegos that they find no humor in jokes about sex. It may be that for conservatives, concerns about social order are so deeply rooted in the subconscious, and so strictly guarded by the superego as to preclude humor on the topic. Certainly, this pattern may also exist on the liberal side as well, which often finds no humor in topics of sexism and racism (particularly once individuals become “woke”—in the parlance of our times—to sexualized and racialized consciousness).

This concept of topics being too sensitive for some people to perceive humor has been underscored by the internet shorthand known as “Poe’s Law,” named after its originator, Nathan Poe. According to Poe’s Law: “Without a winking smiley or other blatant display of humor, it is utterly impossible to parody a Creationist in such a way that someone won’t mistake for the genuine article” (Ellis 2017). Poe’s law has been expanded to other “fundamentalist” areas of intense religious and political belief structures (Lewinski 2017; Phillips and Milner 2016). The law indicates that for some dearly held topics we need to be *told* that something is a joke, otherwise, we find no humor in the joke or we just don’t get it (full repression by the superego). Not coincidentally, Poe’s Law is what allows the social media phenomenon of “trolling” to be so successful. Trolls create humor by joking about topics for which people find no humor, and

respond with offense (Ellis 2017). For example, a troll would deliberately tell a racist or sexist joke to provoke offense by individuals for whom racial or sexual equality are dearly held (if not self-defining) belief structures.

The other ambiguous result obtained in this study dealt with issues pertaining to the concept of equality. No definitive pattern was uncovered to suggest that conservatives prioritize the conception of deservedness. Only a slight pattern emerged to support the hypothesis of liberals favoring fairness as a topic of humor. Jost et al. (2003) find that the development of conservative ideology is a response to having to explain and rationalize social inequalities. It is possible that, like order, equality is a more basal and less specific manifestation of political discourse, not lending itself to easily to political humor. It is also possible that the topic becomes completely repressed. The topic area of equality in political humor deserves more attention and perhaps more valid measures.

Finally, strong evidence was found to support the hypotheses of tradition and progress. Tradition is strongly related to conservatives' taste in humor, and this maps nicely onto the conservative preference for order. The hypothesis that progress would be more likely to be found in liberal humor was also found, and maps nicely onto the finding that liberal positions are essentially defined by advocacy for social change (Jost, Nosek and Gosling 2008).

In addition to the hypotheses relating to the relief theory, two other theories of humor—play and superiority—were explored by this study. Liberals were found to be more playful in their use of humor and to exhibit a higher degree of superiority with respect to the butts of their jokes. It is difficult to explain these two results based upon psychological theories of differences between liberals and conservatives. These differences may have more to do with the nature of the times in which the data were collected. The data were collected during the 2016 U.S.

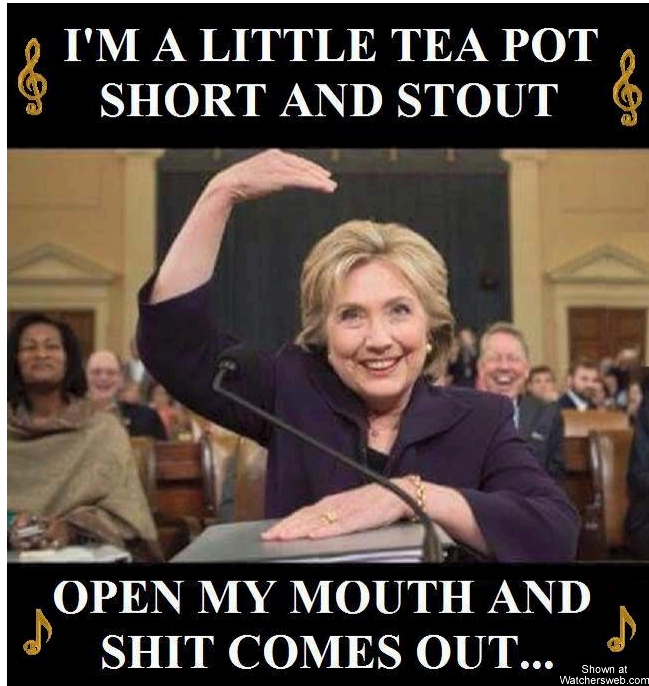
presidential election, and the candidates running may have something to do with the playfulness and superiority in the humor. Hillary Clinton was an intelligent, experience, polished, and well-packaged candidate. Donald Trump, on the other hand, offered plenty of material for lampooning (playfulness and superiority) when it came to his appearance, mannerisms, diction, and failed business ventures. After all, in creating humor, you can only go so far as the material with which you have to work.

The results garnered here have ramifications for the future of political discourse. The data analyzed reflect the current trend toward imagery and brevity in public conversation via social media (Milner 2016). And the results of this study of still images comports with a study of liberal and conservative legislators' tweets, which shows that conservative legislators stress values of tradition and national security, whereas liberal legislators stress values of benevolence, and universalism (Jones et al. 2017). If we understand that we differ fundamentally in our social predispositions, we must first look for areas of common ground in order to stop talking and clicking past one another and to regain civility in political conversation. Since tastes in humor diverge so much, and since conservatives and liberals approach it with differing levels of playfulness and superiority, humor does not appear to be a fertile area for bridging the divide.

Some limitations of this study are important to note. The election of 2016 was probably not the best test case for the theory developed in this study. During the nomination phase of the campaign, Bernie Sanders outflanked Clinton on the left, and Donald Trump did not present a platform of policy stances that could be considered strictly conservative (particularly his stance on trade). So, many pieces of political humor from 2016 were difficult to categorize ideologically. This calls for replication in campaigns where candidates are more ideologically identifiable.

Other limitations relate to individuals. For example, statist and libertarians exist in ideological space beyond our standard liberal versus conservative continuum, so preferences for humor among those groups cannot be distinguished. Finally, since superego structures are built upon idiosyncratic and socially developed belief structures, it is extraordinarily difficult to export the results achieved here beyond liberals and conservatives in the United States. Much work is left to be done.

**Appendix. Example of Still Image for Coding**





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