Political Satire

Defining a Nebulous Construct

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Abstract
Political satire is a complex form of political discourse that is evident in democratic media systems across the globe. Its diversity has led many to argue that it is impossible to put forward a proper definition that encompasses all of its seemingly infinite permutations, and all extant attempts to define this unwieldy concept have been met with much criticism. Not one communicative act can be studied and understood properly without being well defined. Studies of political satire are on the rise and much knowledge has been generated over the last decade. However, these lines of research will fall into stagnation if the central communication construct driving these efforts is not explicated with the necessary precision. This essay offers a comprehensive definition of political satire in an effort to create a foundation from which this area of study can continue to flourish.

For as long as there has been democracy, there has been political satire (Knight, 2004). Democratic institutions and the individuals who lead and work within those institutions reflect our humanity, and, using the old adage, are both saints and sinners. While democratization has been codified as a fundamental component for the advancement of human rights (Mesquita, Chrif, Downs & Smith, 2005), there is also a recognition that the day-to-day actions performed by individuals and institutions functioning within a variety of democratic frameworks often do not live up to our ideals (Tully, 2002). Much of the political satire offered within a democracy focuses on political actors or institutions that do not meet what we have established as a set of normative standards (see Althaus, 2012). If democracy is government by the people and for the people, and all human beings are imperfect, then satirists will maintain a wealth of material to work with when offering their own unique perspectives on politics and government.

Political satire can be found across the globe (see Baym & Jones, 2012), but the subjects covered, messages offered, and roles performed by a diverse range of satirists vary both within and between countries. There are fully formed narratives like *The Hollowmen* in Australia (Staley, 2008), the sketch comedy of *Watun Ala Watar* in Palestine (Sienkiewicz, 2013), or "fake news" programs like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* in the United States (Baym, 2005), *Guignols de l'info* in France (Collovald & Neveu, 1999), and the *heute show* in Germany (Kleinen von Königslöw & Keel, 2013). Political communication researchers are gaining an understanding of the breadth, depth, and scope of political satire as message (e.g., Baym, 2005; Fox, Koloen & Sahin, 2007; Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009), working hard to better understand what is leading individuals to consume this material (e.g., Hmielowski, Holbert & Lee, 2011; Young & Tisinger, 2006), and denoting a broad set of individual-level effects that range from normatively positive to negative (e.g., Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Tsfati, Tuckachinsky & Peri, 2009; Xenos & Becker, 2009). However, what the field has failed to offer to date is a proper definition of this communicative act. This essay presents a formal definition of this often studied, poorly conceptualized form of political discourse.

Political Satire

Following previous explications of concepts containing multiple terms (see Price (1992) and public opinion), the concept of political satire will first be disaggregated, allowing for the clarification of each element. Focus will first be

given to the message component (i.e., satire) and then attention will be paid to the bounding of that concept within its peer element, political. Once re-aggregated, political satire will be addressed from a functional perspective (i.e., What does it do?) and a summary is offered of the unique set of objects and their attributes that are most likely to be the focus of any one piece of political satire. A necessary, but not sufficient condition (e.g., offering of judgment) is also presented, allowing for a clearer definition to be rendered.

Satire

Satire is often listed as one of a laundry list of different humor types (see Berger, 1993; Buijzen & Valkenberg, 2004), placed alongside and in the same classification level as imitation, absurdity, irony, slapstick, and sarcasm (to name just a few examples). However, it is important to recognize that satire is a more complex and multi-faceted message type than many other forms of humor. Satire's Latin root is *satura*, meaning "a mixed dish" (Braund, 1996).

So, what does a plate of satire contain? In short, a mixture of just about every other of the more elemental humor types (e.g., sarcasm, irony) has the potential to be nested within a single piece of satire. For example, one piece of satire could employ the use of exaggeration, transformation, and impersonation (all previously defined humor techniques), while another satirical piece could utilize irony, eccentricity, and repetition (also previously defined humor techniques; see Buijzen & Valkenberg, 2004). In short, satire is always an amalgam of multiple unique humor components, creating a seemingly infinite number of permutations. As a result, there has been some difficulty in providing a single definition. As argued recently by Condren (2012),

> „Neither the formal characteristics of satire nor its informing purposes, including its variable associations with humour and the provocation of amusement allow for a unifying definition" (p. 375)

The tossing up of the field's hands to the task of offering a formal definition of this message type is disconcerting. However, what is clear is that satire exists as a more complex message type than

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many other forms of humor, and nested within satire's big tent are the more fundamental humor techniques (e.g., sarcasm, irony, disparagement) that can be used as a satirist's tools.

An added layer of satire's complexity is noted by Test (1991), who states "no classification by genre or kind has ever succeeded in fully integrating these diverse forms [of satire] into a system" (as quoted by Caufield, 2008, p. 7). This barrier to lexical development stems from satire being pre-generic (Knight, 2004); Satire is not a distinct genre, but a message form that utilizes existing genres as a means to communicate. Within the context of politics, newspaper articles (e.g., *The Onion*), traditional television news broadcasts (e.g., *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*), opinion-based political television talk shows (e.g., *The Colbert Report*), political debates (e.g., *Saturday Night Live)*, political commercials (e.g., *Funny or Die*), situation comedies (e.g., *That's My Bush*), full-length feature films (e.g., *Bob Roberts*), and just about any other mass media vehicle used for political discourse is available to the satirist for offering his/her own brand of political perspective. As a result, satire can take on a multitude of forms, adding to the difficulty of articulating a proper definition.

Based on work in this area, what we are left with at the moment are a very general set of bullet points or descriptors denoting the basic qualities of a piece of satire. Feinberg (1967) states that all forms of satire are "a critically playful distortion of the familiar" (p. 86), and Highet (1962) describes satire as "a blend of amusement and contempt" (p. 21). In looking to summarize extant literature on the concept, Test (1991) argues that every piece of satire retains four elements: Aggression, play, laughter, and judgment. While all forms of satire contain some elements of aggression and play, it is important to recognize that some forms of satire are more aggressive than playful (e.g., Juvenalian) and others that are more playful than aggressive (e.g., Horatian) (see Holbert, Hmielowski, Jain, Lather & Morey, 2011).

When it comes to laughter, there is near universal agreement that a piece of satire, no matter how biting, intends to be humorous (Highet, 1962; Knight, 2004; Sander, 1971). Humor is deemed a fundamental component of satire's message

strategy (Baym, 2010; Day, 2011; Fox, 2011). Finally, Bogel (2001) argues that all forms of satire offer some element of judgment, but stresses the nature of satire's judgments, ranging along an implicit-explicit continuum, can vary as widely as its message elements. Although it has proven difficult to define satire in general, these summary assessments offer the building blocks needed to develop a proper definition and the task at hand becomes more manageable when we bound the discussion to the realm of politics.

What is Political?

Building on the statements of Wilson, Dilulio & Bose (2009), the following is offered as an overview of what is deemed political: (1) Anyone or anything involved in the art or science of government and conducting the affairs of state; (2) Anyone or anything involved in the struggle for power within organizations or informal groups that can grant and withhold benefits or privileges; and, (3) anyone or anything involved in the management of conflict over who will run the government and to what ends. These three statements allow for the bounding of *political* satire to a specific class of objects. However, the objects can range by level from individuals (e.g., political candidates, celebrities with political causes) to political organizations (e.g., National Rifle Association), branches of government (e.g., The United States Supreme Court), governmental agencies (e.g., Environmental Protection Agency), news organizations (e.g., CNN), states (e.g., State of Idaho), nations (e.g., The United States of America), transnational bodies (e.g., The European Union), and international organizations (e.g., The United Nations). All are potential subjects for *political* satirists.

What is the Function of Political Satire?

Of central importance to offering a definition of political satire is an addressing of its purpose. If we treat political satire as a unique type of political discourse (i.e., Day, 2011; Jones, 2010), then Benoit's Functional Theory of Political Discourse (see Benoit, Pier, Brazeal, McHale, Klyukovski & Airne, 2002; Benoit & Wells, 1996) can serve to aid us in better understanding this research agenda's core message element. Benoit (2007) details three functions of political discourse: (1) to acclaim, (2) to attack, and (3) to

defend. There is near universal agreement that the modus operandi of political satire is to *attack* (see Knight, 2004; Holbert, Hmielowski, Jain, Lather & Morey, 2011), and, building on previous characterizations of this message type, any one satirical attack will reflect a mixture of aggression and play (Test, 1991).

What is the Focus of Political Satire?

The general parameters established above for what falls within the bounds of being "political" is helpful, but does not lend the degree of specificity valued by empirical communication scholarship (see Berger, Roloff & Ewoldsen, 2010). In order to begin to isolate properly the exact nature by which political satire generates the ability to affect democratic outcomes requires a better sense of what messages of this kind focus upon, in terms of specific political objects and the attributes of those objects.

Policy/Character

Benoit (2014) argues that any one act of acclaiming, attacking, or defending focuses on policy or character. Policy breaks down into *past deeds* (e.g., actions taken or policies enacted), *future plans* (e.g., policy proposals), and *general goals* (e.g., desirable policy ends), while character includes *personal qualities* (e.g., honesty, determination, compassion), *leadership abilities* (e.g., competence, experience), and *ideals* (e.g., principles, values) (see Benoit, 2000). These matters of policy and character can be associated with individual political actors as well as larger political organizations, third parties associated with the functioning of democracy, or states. Just as former U.S. President George W. Bush could be criticized for his lack of curiosity, so too could the Marine Corps be saddled with the characterization of being overly dogmatic. Just as a specific political candidate can be assaulted for a desire to squelch workers' rights, so too can a country (e.g., France) be assailed for embodying an overly embellished coveting of workers' rights. Clear statements have been offered for what counts as political, and greater specificity has been provided concerning the most likely focus of a piece of political satire on different elements of policy or character. This specificity aids us in better understanding the focus of political satire, but does not yet lend to the separation of political satire from several other types of political discourse

like political advertising, debate argumentation, or political speeches, all of which can offer attacks on these same policy and character elements. So, what is it that makes political satire a unique form of political discourse?

Human Folly/Vice/Sin

In their summation of what is political satire, Gray, Jones & Thompson (2009) note that political satire focuses most squarely on "human folly and vice" (p. IX). This same point has been stressed by Highet (1962) and Holbert, Tchernev, Esralew, Walther & Benski (2013). It is the more specific focus on "human folly and vice"

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It is common to link human folly and vice to the seven deadly sins (see Lyman, 1989). As most of us know (all too well), the seven deadly sins are as follows: Lust, gluttony, greed, wrath, envy, hubris, and sloth. While it is the case that political satire focuses on policy and character, what satire is attacking most directly is the folly, vice, or sinful elements of political action and the flawed character traits which play a central role in how various individuals, institutions, or nations engage in political activities that can range from being counterproductive to nefarious. A piece of *political* satire will focus on a specific policy or character element, but it is this form of political discourse's unique humorous attack on the human folly, vice, or sin of human political activities that allows satire to begin to stand out as unique to other forms of political discourse.

Judgment

Not only is an attack present within a piece of satire, but building on this attack is the final component of satire, the offering of judgment. The judgment component of a piece of satire should be thought of in parallel to the offering of a conclusion in an argument-based persuasive message. There has been much empirical research conducted on the varied effectiveness of implicit versus explicit conclusions in a rhetorical argument (see O'Keefe, 1997), with certain conditions creating unique opportunities for each message type to be more versus less influential (e.g., explicit conclusions work best in low likelihood of elaboration scenarios; Areni & Lutz, 1988). The judgments offered in a piece of satire will vary along the same implicit-explicit continuum as the conclusions offered in a traditional persuasive act (see Test, 1991). There are examples of political satirists being explicit in their judgments (e.g., Jon Stewart eviscerating Senator Harry Reid (D-NV) for arguing during the 2012 U.S. presidential election that former Governor Mitt Romney's (R-MA) long deceased father is ashamed over his son's lack of reporting tax returns; see Schneider, 2012), while many of satire's judgments are only implied (e.g., Stephen Colbert using a June 19, 2008 segment, entitled, "Sean Hannity Loves America", to satirized the evidence-free logic of Sean Hannity, while only implying that Hannity may be off base in his claims)[1]. The general effectiveness of implicit versus explicit judgments within a piece of satire has not been explored empirically, but what is most important for the task at hand is a recognition that some type of judgment, even if only implied remotely, must exist for a piece of political discourse to be labeled as political satire.

Political Satire: A Definition

Now that the major foci, function, and necessary, but not sufficient conditions of political satire have been presented, the following definition is offered: Political satire is *a pre-generic form of political discourse containing multiple humor elements that are utilized to attack and judge the flawed nature of human political activities.* This definition addresses Gray, Jones & Thompson (2009) chief concern with previous attempts loosing relevance due to

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[1] See http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/174546/june-19-2008/sean-hannity-loves-america

political satire's continued evolution within an ever-changing media environment, provides adequate explanatory power to encompass a wide range of political satire message types (c.f., Condren, 2012), and includes all four of Test's (1991) components (aggression, play, laughter, judgment). The attack will be a mix of aggression and play, but, once again, different satirical forms will vary proportionately in these elements. Political satire is also pre-generic, allowing it to assume any existing format or genre within which political discourse can be offered. In addition, it is defined as a humorous message and is a form of political discourse that communicates judgment, either explicitly or implicitly. All of these communicative elements are necessary, but not sufficient conditions for the formation of the unique form of discourse that is political satire.

Discussion

This essay puts forward a comprehensive definition of political satire that will remain relevant as this form of political discourse continues to evolve within an ever-changing media environment. The development of a definition for political satire has proven difficult in the past, but the offering of a clearer understanding of this type of political discourse is necessary in order to move the field forward. If the field fails to come to a shared understanding of that which it is studying, then it is keeping in place an artificial boundary condition that will inhibit its ability to generate new knowledge. With this being stated, the offering of a formal definition in this essay does not mean we can lay this issue to rest. There will be a need to constantly revisit the definition, gain a sense of whether it is holding up well or poorly over time, and solid work must be done to constantly shore up what has been offered in order for the study of political satire to remain "interpretable, cumulative, and socially significant" (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008, p. 709).

Proper explications of core communicative constructs are few and far between in the literature, and this deficiency is to the detriment

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of the field. There are few quality works devoted solely to the task of concept explication, especially in the field's top journals (with a few notable exceptions, e.g., Kohring & Matthes, 2007). There is work of late on the creation of concepts specific to the study of political humor (e.g., Holbert, Lee, Esralew, Walther, Hmielowski & Landreville, 2013), but continued effort needs to be undertaken if lines of research in the area of political entertainment media (broadly defined) are to push forward in any meaningful way. The creation of new concepts that best reflect what we wish to study are the building blocks for a strong research agenda.

The process of concept explication consists of two stages, conceptual analysis and empirical analysis (Chaffee, 1991). The latter operationalizes the former. This essay reflects the conceptual analysis portion of the explication process and now work must begin on how this definition will impact formal operationalizations of various aspects of political satire. Researchers who begin to take on this type of work need to be salient of what impacts the proposed definition may have on what is to be studied. First, what type of political discourse does and does not match well with the proposed definition? It could easily be the case that several messages previously defined as "political satire" by various researchers may not match well with what has been outlined in this essay, and there is also a distinct possibility that other messages labeled as other types of humor (e.g., political parody) may now fall within the bounds of what is being newly identified as political satire. In short, one immediate impact of the offering of the definition of a concept is a reshaping of the boundaries of that concept. Now that a definition has been offered, debate should ensue as to the validity of that concept relative to the boundaries it establishes. Second, can the various elements of the definition be translated into measures that can be used for empirical research purposes? For example, can a judgment (one essential element for a piece of discourse to be defined as political satire) offered in a satirical attack be identified by coders in a valid and reliable fashion? Do various types of judgments need to be assessed? Are there

different dimensions of a judgment that need to be identified? This is but one element from which to build a well-developed coding scheme.

It is clear the proposed definition can impact future content analytic work focused on better understanding political satire as message. However, it is important to recognize this work can also impact the growing body of work devoted to studying political satire effects experimentally. One, there should be a revisiting of existing experimental studies on "political satire" to determine (1) are the messages being utilized as stimuli representative of political satire and (2) how do the messages vary in terms of some of the major elements outlined in the proposed definition (e.g., types of humor, nature of judgment, type of attack)? Extant political satire effects research is riddled with contrary and mixed findings. Better identifying how the various stimuli used by a diverse group of researchers addressing a broad range of questions may allow for greater organizational power to emerge from what good work has already been undertaken. Two, specific manipulations of various elements of a piece of political satire become more manageable and warranted by the presentation of a formal definition. What is needed most is well-founded, theoretical argumentation concerning why varied outcomes may emerge from the use

of different types of humor, attack, judgment, or any of the other core elements of a political satire message. Once these types of arguments are put forward, hypotheses are posited and tested, and assessments are made concerning what is or is not supported, then we can make progress in earnest toward understanding the role of political satire in a variety of democratic frameworks.

The study of political satire has grown exponentially since the turn of the century (see Compton, 2011). Much good work has been undertaken by scholars who are asking quality questions as we seek to expand the study of political communication beyond the traditional message structures of news, debates, 30-second advertisements (see Holbert, Garrett & Gleason, 2010), but significant roadblocks are in place if researchers in this area can't come to some agreement about what they are studying and how the work of one research agenda functions in coordination with others lines of research. The goal of all solid communication research is theory building, but no theoretical underpinning can make up for the lack of proper definitions of core concepts. It is the author's hope the proposed definition will bring greater organizational power to this important area of political communication research and properly set the explanatory power of what types of phenomenon fall within the study of political satire.

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