“Is this All a Joke to You?”:

Metacommunication, Advocacy, and the Serious Side of Satire during the 2020 Election

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For Katherine, who insists that “a pun is a *certain kind* of joke.”

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Introduction

"Some Kind of Comedy Hospice": Was Trump Good for Political Humor?

On the June 15, 2015 episode of *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart gleefully greeted viewers with news of a "gift from heaven" in the form of a new "far-fetched" contender in the presidential race. Before he could get into details, however, Stewart begrudgingly acknowledged the importance of having "something nutritional before dessert." In this case, the nutritional fare consisted of clips from Hillary Clinton and Jeb Bush rallies. Stewart mocked Clinton and Bush's stilted performances with a bemused resignation, contextualizing them as the sensible, if conventionally farcical, establishment candidates. Bored with the generic political rallies, Stewart interrupted several times to hurry them along so he could get to dessert: video of Donald Trump descending a Trump Tower escalator to announce his own bid for the presidency. At Trump's appearance, Stewart gestured upward and mouthed, "Thank you," feigning emotion before exclaiming, "I'm just really happy right now." He then reveled in several clips of "the most beautifully ridiculous jibber jabber" from Trump's announcement speech (Stewart 2015). Stewart's exuberant reaction demonstrates his belief that a Trump campaign for president would represent a boon for political humor.

But was Trump good for political humor? In quantitative terms, Trump inspired a huge amount of material from comedians (Farnsworth and Lichter 2020). Ratings, one of Trump's own favorite metrics, went up for *The Late Show* as it regularly beat the competition during Trump's presidency, due in part to Stephen Colbert's consistent, antagonistic ridicule of Trump (Morris 2018). John Lithgow, who penned a book of satirical poems about Trump, extolled the "warrior satirists" of the Trump era, crediting

"the wretched excesses of Mr. Trump's slapstick presidency" with "sharpen[ing] the wits of a whole new breed of entertainers . . . the daring TV comics who gleefully turn Mr. Trump's outrages against him every night of the week: Stephen Colbert, John Oliver, Seth Meyers and others" (Lithgow 2019). Lithgow's ovation for Trump-era satire presents the view that Trump's rise to the presidency perfected the possibilities of political humor. This line of thinking extends Stewart's assumption that Trump would provide a wealth of material for comedians.

But Trump's realization of entertainment politics created challenges for political humor. The entertainment acumen Trump developed from experience in reality television and years seeking media attention, including prominent appearances on late-night television, informed his approach to the presidency (Farnsworth and Lichter 2020). Drawing a parallel between Trump's presidency and the "curated chaos of reality TV," Lithgow argues that Trump's "crude performance art" created a B-movie version of reality (2019). Regardless of the quality of Trump's entertainment politics, his disruption to norms of presidential behavior in turn disrupted the traditional formula of political humor. The apparent chaos of the Trump administration resisted insightful parody, as did the insult-comic aesthetic of Trump's own brand (Weiss 2019). Perhaps more importantly, Trump's actions, particularly his more objectionable policies on issues like immigration, generated outrage among progressive comedians that made it more difficult to produce humor and for comedians themselves to laugh (Young 2020).

Despite political humor's focus on Trump and the assumptions that his particular foibles—the braggadocio, the voice, the gestures, the hair—would be clear targets for satire, his presidency did not necessarily make the humor side of political humor easier.

Asked whether "late-night wants what Trump provides," John Oliver retorted, "It's a complete myth and it's kind of genuinely insulting. [*Laughs*] Wow, how little do you think of me? Because partly it comes from 'oh, it must've written itself.' Really? You [*expletive*] think that? You try injecting poison into your body every week and get a joke out the other side that Twitter hasn't already come up with" (Zeitchik 2021). The comment gets at the outrage and weariness running through political humor after four years of Trump. In Oliver's telling, the poison of the Trump era preempted the ability to create original and insightful humor.

At a time when the 2016 campaign for the White House seemed likely to become another matchup between a Bush and a Clinton, Stewart's ecstatic reaction to Trump's candidacy failed to discern a deeper problem for humor. But even as he reveled in what he saw as the comedic potential of Trump's presidential bid, Stewart's reaction to Trump's announcement speech inadvertently previewed the challenge of creating original humor in response to Trump's disruption of norms. Clips from Trump's speech provoked laughter from Stewart's studio audience, but Stewart himself struggled to do much more than copy the most ridiculous statements from Trump's speech and mock Trump's appearance. Stewart and his audience laughed together at Trump's unpresidential antics, an obvious contrast from the staid political procedures of the Bush and Clinton rallies, without the need for Stewart to do much joke work of his own. The apparent ease of the process led Stewart to thank Trump "for making my last six weeks my best six weeks." Stewart had previously announced his retirement from *The Daily Show*, and as the audience groaned at the reminder of his going away, Stewart laughed and credited Trump with making the departure easier: "He is putting me in some kind of comedy hospice"

(Stewart 2015). Recognizing the pure entertainment value of Trump's campaign, Stewart appreciates that Trump will transition him away from humor. As Trump won the Republican nomination and then the presidency, the entertainment politics Stewart had recognized at the outset of Trump's campaign dominated the media landscape, creating a reversal for political humor.

Upside-Down Entertainment Politics

Satire's critique assumes the establishment of norms, including expectations of seriousness from politicians. When politicians and institutions function according to traditional expectations, laughter can provide a unique perspective that questions norms and clarifies thinking. Laughter as a corrective brings a temporary liberation from the prevailing order of things, allowing a more realistic approach to the world. Crucially, laughter does not actually overturn political institutions, but it provides a temporary reconsideration of norms (Bakhtin 1984). Comedians are not political agents and hold no political power over policy. Instead of changing policy, humor's ability lies in changing perspectives (Caron 2016). Humor traditionally stands as a counterweight to a politics-as-usual entrenchment of norms.

Trump used the entertainment aesthetic of his campaign and presidency to blatantly mock established norms of political behavior. One of the clearest examples is the impression of "acting presidential" that Trump performed at several rallies throughout his presidency. Approaching the podium with stiff movements and addressing the crowd in a staid monotone, Trump ridiculed the seriousness associated with presidential speeches, drawing laughter from his audience. Arguing that the subdued, serious style of

presidential behavior would be “too boring,” causing people to leave and ignore his rallies, Trump highlighted the importance of his own style of entertainment politics to his political fortunes (Baker 2019). And of course, the parody itself represents part of the entertainment. Even outside the context of his rallies, Trump used ridicule-based humor to build rapport with audiences and build a sense of authenticity for his base (Stewart, Dye, and Eubanks 2018; Weiss 2019).

President Trump’s parody of being presidential reversed the polarity of political humor. The absurd realities of Trump’s presidency outpaced the ability of parody to imitate and exaggerate with new perspective (Momen 2019). The Trump administration’s reliance on alternative facts realized the potential of truthiness, truth based in feeling and perception rather than reason and evidence (McKain and Lawson 2019). This creation of alternative reality, along with explanations from the administration and Republicans attributing Trump’s more offensive and outlandish statements to sarcasm and joking, highlighted the pitfalls of irony (Marsh 2018; Brooks 2020). And beneath Trump’s disruptive performance as president, he enacted policies that progressive comedians found hateful and harmful to the nature of the nation and to democracy itself. An underlying sense of outrage led comedians to earnestly advocate against Trump and his policies. The reversed dynamic of entertainment politics in the Trump era made television satire more difficult and more serious.

Laughter, Outrage, and Advocacy

The official website bio for Samantha Bee, host of TBS’s *Full Frontal*, begins with a quote from Senator Elizabeth Warren: “Sam has the rare ability to make you laugh

at the same time she's stoking your outrage. She's more than a comedian—she's an instigator and an advocate" (Full Frontal n.d.). In Warren's formulation, the combination of laughter and outrage make Bee "more than a comedian," including advocacy as an element beyond the scope of pure comedy. But laughter and outrage may not really be compatible. Where humor creates incongruities that allow audiences to piece together conclusions themselves, outrage directly states its own conclusions. This fundamental difference in format separates humor and outrage as different aesthetic approaches with different underlying logic (Young 2020).

In the polarizing Trump era, outrage at times displaced humor as comedians understood Trump as a threat to progressive values and democratic institutions. Immigration policy, the federal judiciary, and democratic participation all became flashpoints that television comedians had trouble laughing about. Young (2020) analyzes Samantha Bee's May 30, 2018 tirade against Trump administration immigration policy in which Bee uses the C-word in reference to Ivanka Trump. Backlash was swift, and Bee soon apologized (201). Young, responding to academic colleagues and journalists, "was less interested in Bee's use of the C-word than in the fact that Bee appeared to abandon humorous incongruities altogether . . . the structure of the statement that brought her to that insult wasn't formulated as a joke at all. There was no incongruity. No punchline. It wasn't humor. In fact, it looked an awful lot like outrage" (202). Though Young argues that outrage is typically the primary genre of the right, while the left prefers irony, she points out that comedy can seem like an inappropriate response to emotional events. Particularly during the Trump presidency, when comedians became emotionally invested

and felt that critical norms and values were threatened, it could have become more difficult to enter the "playful mode" necessary for humor (199).

Oliver echoed the idea that humor at times seemed inadequate or inappropriate in response to distressing events. Answering the assumption that he watched the January 6 insurrection at the U.S. capitol wishing his show was on the air so he could discuss the event, Oliver clarified: "It was kind of the opposite of that, actually. I was really glad not to be on the air. Because sometimes it's nice not to have to fiddle while Rome burns" (Zeitchik 2021). Oliver suggests that serious or outrageous events can make jokes a mismatch for the moment.

The dynamic between humor, outrage, and advocacy hinges on earnestness. Satire paradoxically consists of serious and nonserious sides (Caron 2016). Traditionally, the nonserious side, through jokes and laughter, can work to make a serious point (Bakhtin 1984). Irony is not, as some critics have assumed, the opposite of earnestness (Day 2011). But the Trump era complicated the navigation of satire's serious and nonserious sides. Outrage only has a serious side. Unlike satire, which leaves its conclusions to audiences, outrage contains a direct and consistent call to action (Weiss 2019; Young 2020). As comedians leaned into outrage and advocacy, humor either disappeared, as Young (2020) notes in the case of Bee using the C-word, or played an incidental role to an overall serious story, as is often the case with Oliver's show—jokes are included, and they are often very funny, but they are also often non sequiturs (Weiss 2019). Earnest outrage and advocacy widen the distance between the serious and nonserious sides of satire.

How It Started . . . How It's Going

A few days before the 2020 election, Stewart interrupted a taping of *The Late Show,* calling in to wish Colbert a happy anniversary. As Colbert struggled to remember what they should be celebrating, Stewart, taking some offense, reminded him, "Stephen, ten years ago, we had the rally. We had a big rally on the Mall in Washington D.C. It was ten years ago" (TLS 10/30/20). Once Colbert remembered, he pulled out his poster for The Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear and reminisced with Stewart about the musical performances and crowd of 200,000 people:

> STEWART. Wow. What a day it was. We really showed Glenn Beck.
> COLBERT. Yes. I remember your part was to restore the sanity and I joined in for the March to Keep Fear Alive.
> STEWART. Yes, you won.
> COLBERT. Yes, I did.
> STEWART. It was a shutout.
> COLBERT. I'm sorry about that. I was hoping you would . . .
> STEWART. Shellacking
> COLBERT. I know.
> STEWART. I had no idea fear was that strong.
> COLBERT. I was hoping you would win. (TLS 10/30/20)

As the comedians reflected on their rally ten years later, they expressed disappointment at the apparent result. At the time of the rally, Colbert's ironic conservative character championed "truthiness," his concept for describing the truth of something based on perception and feeling rather than facts or reason. This persona positioned him to lead the fear half of the rally, pitting emotion against Stewart's more rational appeal to sanity. After almost four years of Trump's presidency, the comedians confronted the fact that Colbert's truthiness had prevailed.

When Stewart organized the 2010 rally, his experiment in earnestness drew backlash from journalists and pundits who argued that advocacy fell outside the

boundaries of a satirist's discursive responsibility (Carlson and Peifer 2013). As Stewart and Colbert reckoned with the Trump era in their reunion conversation, Stewart leaned even further into earnestness. When Colbert asked how he was, Stewart sincerely replied, "I'm not good, Stephen. I'm not good. I'm terrified. I'm anxious. I'm lonely. I'm wishing it was 2010 again" (TLS 10/30/20). Stewart attributed his fear and weariness to Trump's presidency, reminding Colbert that "I came on [*The Late Show*], it must have been eleven days after Trump's inauguration. It had already felt like he had always been president. I remember saying the presidency is supposed to age the president and not the people. Do you know how long ago that was? 271 years, Stephen" (TLS 10/30/20). Stewart's joke underlines his weariness. When Colbert suggested the approaching election as a source of hope, Stewart replied with angst, "I just want to know what is going to happen. I want to know how much longer we have to keep going through this, where we are in this marathon. Is it on election day? . . . The finish line for me is this man not being president anymore" (TLS 10/30/20). Stewart's initial elation at Trump's candidacy had reversed into the weary, earnest desire to see him out of office.

Stewart's trajectory from earnestness at his 2010 rally to delight at Trump's candidacy to fear and weariness before the 2020 election highlights Trump's disruption of political humor's norms and offers a comment on the limits of stand-alone seriousness in satire. The serious aesthetic of outrage and advocacy does allow for an unambiguous call to action (Weiss 2019; Young 2020). In the angst before the 2020 election, the unambiguous nature of outrage and advocacy became part of how comedians presented their perception of the stakes of the election. Young (2020) points out however, that sidelining humor in favor of a more outraged aesthetic could ultimately work against

comedians. If the ambiguous nature of humor and the unambiguous nature of outrage are more suited to liberal and conservative outlooks respectively, maybe progressive comedians "should proceed with caution before substituting funny with angry" (206). Satire that minimizes or ignores its nonserious side ultimately becomes something else entirely, losing the uniqueness of laughter (Caron 2016). The problem, as Stewart dejectedly illustrates, is that the triumph of truthiness makes it hard to laugh.

Political Humor and the 2020 Election

This study analyzes segments from five television satire shows to examine how political comedians balanced seriousness and nonseriousness in the weeks before the 2020 election. The five shows under consideration are *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, and *Saturday Night Live*. The date range for segments in the sample runs from September 30 to November 16, starting with responses to the first presidential debate on September 29 and ending by capturing responses to the election results from all five comedians. The chapters of this study take a closer look at Trump's reversal of political humor's traditional formula, the challenges comedians confronted, and how they approached their work as the election loomed.

The first chapter, "'Beyond Satire': How Trump Reversed the Formula of Political Humor," lays out a conceptual framework for the analysis. The chapter overviews foundational concepts and theories of political humor before discussing how Trump disrupted not only norms of political discourse and behavior but specifically norms and assumptions of political humor. The chapter also previews two central

concepts, metacommunication and advocacy, that political comedians employ frequently in examples from the weeks before the election. Chapter 2 describes the method of this study, detailing the processes of sample collection and textual analysis.

Three findings chapters offer an interpretive reading of the most salient examples from the analysis. Chapter 3, "'Like We're in that George Orwell Novel': Trump-era Challenges for Satire," features examples of comedians describing and confronting Trump's alternative reality, absurdity that outpaced satire, and their own emotional response to Trump's disruption of norms. Comedians in the sample respond to Trump administration claims with fact checks as well as more comprehensive reality checks, pointing out Trump's construction of an alternative reality. Several examples demonstrate humor and parody struggling to keep up with absurd statements and actions from Trump and others in his orbit. Several more examples display expressions of emotions—outrage, worry, grief, and others—from comedians, highlighting the difficulty of entering the playful mode of humor simultaneously with these other emotions (Young 2020).

Chapter 4, "'I Don't Have a Joke for That': Metacommunication in Political Humor," features examples of comedians directly commenting on their work during their shows as one way of assessing their role in the Trump era. Metacommunication can serve several purposes, including explaining an absence of humor, clarifying ironic humor, and even becoming part of the humor itself (Nichols 2016). Metacommunication represents one central way comedians responded to the challenges of Trump-era humor in the weeks before the 2020 election.

Chapter 5, "'PLEASE VOTE': Earnest Advocacy and the 2020 Election" looks at political humor and the potential for social change in the context of the 2020 election.

Naturally, much of the advocacy from comedians through October focused on voting. Comedians presented in-depth instructions for voting under unique pandemic circumstances. Colbert provided specific information for each state. Comedians also amplified the work of activists, encouraged political engagement, and above all, advocated against Trump. The traditional relationship between comedy and activism centers on humor's distinctive abilities to enhance the message of activists, provide a unique perspective, and inspire further discussion of important issues (Borum Chattoo and Feldman 2020). In a more earnest shift to this formula, however, several examples of advocacy in the weeks before the 2020 election portray humor getting left behind or at least playing an incidental role to a more serious advocacy based in outrage and worry over Trump and the election.

In analyzing five prominent television satire shows in the weeks before the 2020 presidential election, this study contributes an interpretive reading of an important case for understanding political humor's role in U.S. political culture. Political humor scholars have often viewed elections as crucial political moments or even inflection points that warrant assessments of political humor's role (Fox and Steinberg 2020). The story of Trump-era satire is still being written, and the 2020 election is a critical piece of that story. The 2020 election also represents an essential case for updating research on political humor. Stewart and Colbert's shows on *Comedy Central* in the first decade of the 2000s drew a broad range of academic attention. Those shows represented a first generation of television satire, but around 2015, the political humor landscape started shifting. Stewart left, Colbert moved, and Oliver and Bee started their own shows, beginning a second generation of political humor that coincided with Trump's rise to

political prominence. This shift in the television satire landscape brought qualitative changes to political humor, including more reliance on serious explication of policy and advocacy (Fox 2018; Waisanen 2018). An interpretive look at political humor texts can provide an essential piece of understanding these changes in the content of television satire (Young 2014). With a focus on Trump's disruption of norms, this study examines earnestness in political humor in the weeks before the 2020 election.

Earnestness from comedians raises the question of their responsibility. Is satirical responsibility achieved through ironic detachment or increased earnestness? (Carlson and Peifer 2013). Trump and his administration engaged in actions that had the potential to encourage democratic backsliding, the gradual deterioration of democracy through a discontinuous series of incremental actions (Waldner and Lust 2018). Comedians sought to explain Trump's threat to democracy, taking an earnest approach to opposing him and the potential deterioration of democracy he represented. Instead of their traditional role questioning and reassessing the status quo, television comedians made an earnest defense of democracy.

Chapter 1

"Beyond Satire": How Trump Reversed the Formula of Political Humor

Trump's election disrupted the traditional formula of political humor. Satire assumes some level of seriousness from politicians. Mocking their foibles requires this baseline assumption of their adherence to some norms. Trump, however, broke the mold of the traditional politician, breaking with it the underlying assumptions of political satire. Trump's entertainment acumen informed his approach to his campaign and presidency. He made sarcastic comments and did impressions at rallies to get laughs. His use of humor and ridicule helped him build rapport with audiences (Stewart, Dye, and Eubanks 2018). His embrace of entertainment politics minimized the power of parody to critique the spectacle. Trump relocated the center of entertainment politics from television satire shows to the Oval Office, and the shift in dynamic brought several challenges for political humor. An entertainment figure like Trump in office questions the ability of even more entertainment to provide insight and critique.

Satire uses laughter to level a critique of society (Gilmore 2018). The value of laughter's serious contribution to political discourse has been institutionalized, to some extent, in the White House Correspondents' Dinner, a carnivalesque annual event hosted by the White House Correspondents' Association. The president traditionally attends the dinner, and a headlining comedian performs a comedic roast of the president and other prominent figures in attendance, while journalists, politicians, and celebrities eat and laugh together in the audience. Trump refused to attend any of the Correspondents' Dinners held during his presidency, disrupting tradition and centering the Correspondents' Dinner as a battleground for arguments over the roles of journalism and

political humor (Gessen 2018). Ultimately, the Correspondents' Association itself broke tradition and decided not to feature a comedian for the 2019 dinner. Instead, the Association invited popular writer and historian Ron Chernow to deliver serious remarks about the historical relationship between the president and the press (Grynbaum 2018). The trajectory of the White House Correspondents' Dinner represents, in miniature, the broader trajectory of political humor in the Trump era. Trump himself refused to play along with the traditional processes of political journalism and humor. This disruption led to some contestation over the role of political humor, with questions about its usefulness in providing an adequate and appropriate critique of Trump era politics.

This chapter takes a closer look at the Trump presidency's disruption of the traditional format of political humor. The first section provides an overview of the fundamental concepts and theories of political humor and laughter, focusing on humor's potential to provide unique perspective and encourage social change. The second section details how the Trump presidency created several challenges for the essential elements of political humor, reversing some of humor's baseline assumptions and preempting some of its ability to level critique. The final section describes the concepts of metacommunication and advocacy, two earnest ways comedians responded to the challenges of the Trump era as they sought to reassess the redefine their own role and encourage meaningful political participation. Together, these sections outline the unique dynamics of political humor in the Trump era.

Theories of Political Humor

The term "political humor" designates a broad category that includes any humorous text that focuses on any political issue, person, or institution. These humorous texts include the jokes of late-night comedians, television shows like *VEEP* and *The Simpsons*, and online parody videos, not to mention non-video sources like literature, art, and music. Regardless of the mode, political humor's main elements—the humor, designed to elicit laughter, and the focus on something political—define its boundaries. As a broad category, humor might involve political jokes without necessarily leveling a critique of political people or processes, as an impression of a politician that provides entertainment but no critique of substance. Humor contains several subcategories, including satire, parody, and irony, that often overlap to create the critiques associated with political satire (Young 2014). This section reviews the fundamental definitions and theories of these terms.

Satire

As a subcategory of humor, satire is designed to elicit laughter. Its distinguishing characteristic from the broader category, however, is the requirement that satire cast judgment. Satire criticizes existing institutions and norms, questioning the status quo and offering a vision of how things should be (Young 2014). The laughter associated with satire becomes a vehicle to lead people to a particular viewpoint, often through fantasy, exaggeration, and distortion, like a trick mirror on society that provides a warped view of reality that reveals a higher truth (Gilmore 2018). In targeting imperfections and revealing better possibilities, satire's casting of judgment becomes a hopeful enterprise,

arguing that we collectively deserve better (Young 2014). In this way, satire uses nonserious elements like laughter to make a serious point.

The paradox of satire is that it simultaneously holds serious and nonserious sides. Crucially, satire does not incorporate serious and nonserious elements. Rather, its serious and nonserious sides operate at the same time. Satire risks losing this essential contradiction when its intent to reform, its potential to "speak truth to power," outweighs its humor, shifting away from its efficacy in eliding a binary of serious and nonserious (Caron 2016). In other words, the laughter matters. Any ability satire has to make a unique contribution rests in the simultaneous operation of nonserious and serious. To make its humorous critiques of politics and society, satire often overlaps with two other subcategories of humor: parody and irony (Young 2014).

Parody

Parody is a form of intertextual allusion by which new texts are created. It relies on the audience's familiarity with an original text and exaggerates its familiar aspects (Young 2014). The process is typically accompanied by laughter (Dentith 2000). Caricatures, impersonations of individuals, and texts like television shows that mimic or exaggerate a genre are all examples of parody (Young 2014). Though some types of parody like pastiche represent a form of pure imitation without transformation, parody usually imitates its precursor text with transformations that create humor and offer insight into the original (Dentith 2000).

The carnivalesque energy of parody allows it to level critiques of accepted norms and institutions (Bakhtin 1984). Parody can create a spectacle that exposes how much of

media and politics already exists as absurd spectacle. Stephen Colbert's *The Colbert Report*, as a parody of Bill O'Reilly's *No Spin Zone* on Fox News, represents such a project on a grand scale (Baym 2009). Similarly, Colbert's parody documentary and subsequent congressional testimony on migrant farm workers, which he performed in character, received backlash from some who argued his performance was inappropriate for Congress. Colbert's performance, however, cut through the existing theater of media and politics to make a serious point and resist the entrenchment of institutional norms (Baym 2013). Parody's imitations and transformations provide fresh perspectives on the original texts.

Irony

Irony involves a gap between what a text says and what it means. It seamlessly serves satire's purpose of juxtaposing, through humor, the way things are and the way they should be (Young 2020). Jonathan Swift provides the quintessential example of irony with his 1729 essay *A Modest Proposal*. Swift suggests Ireland's economic problems can be improved if the poor Irish sell their babies as food to wealthy English landowners, simultaneously eliminating extra mouths to feed while advancing the economic standing of the parents. Of course, Swift does not mean what he says, and that gap requires readers to question his heartlessly rational approach in parallel with England's own economic exploitation of Ireland (Young 2014). Irony's ability to expose a moral deficiency allows Swift to make a serious argument about Ireland's economic troubles. As a matter of understanding, irony requires shared norms and values to make its critiques clear (Colebrook 2004).

Irony's sense of shared values underlies its relationship to earnestness. Though irony and earnestness may seem fundamentally at odds, the ability to be "ironically earnest," making a serious argument about social and political flaws through a deep commitment to irony, is one of satire's central tools (Day 2011; Caron 2016). Still, some have viewed irony as an inappropriate or incompatible response to serious moments. Commentators proclaimed the death of irony after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and Joan Didion bemoaned a lack of irony amidst the earnest hope and change message of the Obama era. But these assessments overlook irony's potential to make a serious point. Rather than opposing one another, irony can add to earnestness, creating satire's essential juxtaposition between what is and what ought to be (Day 2011).

Irony is often the key ingredient of satire. Because of its reliance on incongruity, irony offers audiences a riddle, requiring the unpacking of its inherent contradiction. The resolution brings humor as well as an implication of judgment. Saying the opposite of what you mean allows audiences to question their own assumptions. The humor and ambiguity of irony make it the preferred genre of the political left, in contrast to the outrage programming that dominates the talk radio and opinion television on the right (Young 2020). But because irony is ambiguous, comedians can subtly wink at the audience, often through tone or structure of the joke, to indicate their ironic stance.

Metacommunication and Self-Awareness

Irony can provide subtle cues that lets audiences in on its humor. Particularly when irony is self-aware or self-referential, it involves a metacommunicative element that signals its own ironic stance. Though the interpretation of what irony says versus what it

means is ultimately up to audiences, the structure of an ironic joke can signal that a comedian really believes the opposite of what she says (Young 2020). Irony's literal and intended meanings are at odds with each other, a feature that would present a quandary for audiences without the guidance of humor's inherent metacommunication.

Metacommunication describes communication that references the ongoing communication. In other words, it is self-referential, communicating about aspects of itself. Humor itself is a metacommunicative process. Humor always signals its own humorous mode (Brock 2009). The broader play frame, of which humor is a subset, includes a metacommunicative standard—participants and audiences recognize play through metacommunicative signals. Without these metacommunicative signals, humor and irony are likely to be misunderstood. Practical jokes are an example of humor that purposefully avoids metacommunicative signals to leave the target out of the joke (Marsh 2015).

Metacommunication involves self-awareness. The act of winking at the audience to bring them in on the joke puts everyone on the same page and becomes part of the joke itself. *The Simpsons* tells this joke in its opening credits as the family jostles for spots on the couch to watch television. The sequence displays the show's awareness of itself, winking to let us know it also knows it is a TV show. This kind of self-aware irony represents a subtle form of metacommunication that lays the groundwork for mutual understanding of the humor. The paradox of self-aware television satire that incorporates advocacy is that the show knows the audience it is encouraging to action is sitting watching television (Colletta 2009).

Satire and the Potential for Social Change

Satirical discourse inherently maintains a hopeful commitment to the possibility of social change. Humor's power stems from its ability to illuminate the foolishness of the human condition, in the process inspiring its audience to engage in "water cooler conversations at work" about important topics (Lear 2020, xi). The best comedy moves beyond only making people laugh to triggering these important conversations, something it does by supplying "a unique lens that can help repair the world (but only if the comedy is thoughtful and really funny)" (xi). As Sarah Taksler, a former senior producer of *The Daily Show* puts it, "Comedy doesn't change things. Comedy changes people. People change things" (Borum Chattoo and Feldman 2020, 36). Political humor provides a unique perspective that can change minds; it works when it is both thoughtful and funny.

Humor's potential to encourage social change stems from the unique processes and meanings of laughter. Bakhtin (1981) understands laughter as a corrective, an "uncrowning" that removes an object from distance and brings it into "crude contact," a plane of familiarity where we can "turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it" (23). In this process, laughter "demolishes fear and piety before an object," a fearlessness "without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically" (23). Laughter creates the conditions for truly comprehending reality by allowing a reconsideration of norms that otherwise go unquestioned.

Specifically, Bakhtin (1984) proposes a theory of carnival laughter that celebrates "temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from established order" (10). The

theory stems from the Medieval tradition of folk carnivals, where the social order was turned upside-down; the king was mocked, and the fool was crowned king. Out of this "peculiar logic of the 'inside out' . . . comic crownings and uncrownings," Bakhtin draws his theory of a universal, ambivalent carnival laughter (11). Because this laughter celebrates the overturning of societal order and norms, it prevents the entrenchment of norms by providing a space to turn them around and mock them. Notably, this overturning of social and institutional norms is "temporary," seemingly conceding that the "established order" remains necessary, if not beyond doubt and examination.

Language plays a central role in Bakhtin's theory. The familiar language of the marketplace provides a space where various genres of speech that are "excluded from official intercourse," including abusive speech and profanities, "were filled with the carnival spirit, transformed their primitive verbal functions, acquired a general tone of laughter, and became, as it were, so many sparks of the carnival bonfire which renews the world" (17). Bakhtin stressed the ambivalence of carnivalesque language and humor; it mocks and derides at the same time it renews and revives (11). The centrality of harsh, humorous language to the carnivalesque energy of renewal again highlights satire's duality as serious and nonserious.

Carnival laughter exists alongside seriousness. In fact, because laughter "liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naivete and illusion," it "does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it" (122-23). Laughter complements seriousness. Through its ambivalence, laughter prevents seriousness from atrophying and tearing away from the whole. For Bakhtin, seriousness is incomplete without nonseriousness. Laughter contains a liberating spirit that counters fear and

illusion in a way that seriousness alone cannot. Rather than opposing one another, or representing separate elements of the carnivalesque, seriousness and nonseriousness are two parts of a whole, and laughter in fact purifies the serious part. Laughter allows humor's critique of society to maintain its seriousness.

Gilbert (2004) combines Bakhtin's carnival with comedy's "most important" tradition: the wise fool (46). The court fool was not only the butt of others' ridicule, but also a powerful social critic, to the point that even the fool's self-deprecating humor represents a parody and critique of society. With comedy clubs as a reincarnation of Bakhtin's carnival, the comic plays the contemporary fool, bringing the powerful down to the level of the people, using humor to force a critical reappraisal of society as well as provide entertainment. The role includes inherent tensions between marginality and institutionalization and the goals of critique and entertainment. Any shift one way or the other, toward pure entertainment or pure critique, can weaken humor's unique carnivalesque energy.

Bakhtin's carnivalesque also applies to a broader range of comedic spaces. Julin (2018) uses carnivalesque laughter as a framework for understanding constructive versus deconstructive satire in the contemporary, multi-cultural, global context. Thompson (2009) applies a carnivalesque framework—laughter, grotesque humor, billingsgate, and reversals—to contemporary television satire. Davisson and Donovan (2019) explore how a trolling style of advocacy creates a participatory irreverence that opens a carnivalesque space for critiquing power. Meddaugh (2010) proposes carnivalesque television satire as a form that positions the television audience as insiders and satirical critiques of media as a site of media literacy education. This scholarship positions television satire as a

contemporary manifestation of carnival laughter, a source of comic discourse that temporarily questions the status quo and offers new perspective.

Comedians are not political actors, and conceptions of satire that advance its potential as a "potent political weapon" or "effective tool for political change" risk equating it with activism and ignoring its comic discourse (Caron 2016, 168). Because they are not political agents, comedians do not hold any political or legislative power; rather, comedians can use a form of cultural activism that allows them, with the amplified voice of a popular comedy show, to exhort audiences to action (Michaud Wild 2019). Satire's relationship to activism can be understood as a two-step process: satire sets the stage for individuals to "repent"—change their minds—while policy changes in the public sphere require another step outside satire's reach (Caron 2016, 168). Satire's comic abilities, however, remain an important and changing first step. Television satire's genre expands as comedians incorporate trolling into a form of antagonistic comic discourse. This satire relies less on irony and more on a Bakhtinian reveling in irreverence that exposes flaws in the systems of power. This rhetorical trolling provokes responses both from its targets, in the form of cease-and-desist letters and lawsuits, and from its audience, in the form of social activism (Davisson and Donovan 2019).

In this discussion of political humor's relationship to advocacy and activism, it is important to maintain focus on the unique aspects of humor's contribution. Rather than providing yet another source of earnest activism, humor's unique discursive properties allow it to serve as a center for collective action, seeking to persuade people who will go on to take action. Humor distinguishes itself from basic problem solving by signaling a playful context. This play frame allows humor to work as a change agent in several ways,

including increasing attention and recall for social issues, disarming audiences and lowering resistance to persuasion, breaking down barriers (in providing a voice to groups and individuals outside mainstream culture), and stimulating sharing and discussion. Additionally, while humor may have these direct effects on its audiences, its more important impact lies in its discursive power to shape the cultural conversation, often through intermedia agenda-setting, in ways that can even influence policymakers(Borum Chattoo and Feldman 2020; Boukes 2019).

Comedians have grappled with the line between discursive agent and political actor before. Events like the Jon Stewart's Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear featured comedians in a more earnest capacity and received backlash from journalists and pundits. Earnestness, defined as a combination of tonal seriousness and commitment to political change, was deemed an inappropriate discursive position for a satirist (Carlson and Peifer 2013). Stephen Colbert's in character congressional testimony also received backlash from politicians and journalists concerned with appropriateness and the responsibility of political satirists (Compton 2019). Crucially, these early examples of earnestness from television comedians occurred "outside the box," mostly beyond the context of their television shows (Jones, Baym, and Day 2012). On *The Daily Show* itself, Stewart largely maintained his typical stance of ironic detachment (Weiss 2019). But a new generation of television comedians, including Samantha Bee and John Oliver, incorporates earnestness directly into the format of their television shows.

Theories of political humor that describe its unique potential for offering new perspective and encouraging social change stress the importance of humor and laughter. Without satire's paradoxical serious and nonserious sides operating simultaneously, satire

loses its unique position. Satirical advocacy without humor or laughter is really just ordinary advocacy (Caron 2016). The irony and laughter of political humor are central to its unique appeal, not only as an instigator of change but as the preferred genre of the left (Borum Chattoo and Feldman 2020; Young 2020).

The theories that focus on the abilities of humor and laughter to lend new perspective on norms also presume the seriousness of politicians. Resisting the entrenchment of norms requires that there be some norms to resist. The carnivalesque ritual of crowning the fool and mocking authority assumes that everything followed tradition the day before (Bakhtin 1984). When politicians and institutions operate according to established assumptions, political satire can play its role of mocking and holding up a trick mirror to question those established assumptions (Gilmore 2018). But when politicians themselves warp or distort norms, laughter's reversals and satire's trick mirror become more difficult or even useless. Trump turned his own upending of presidential norms into entertainment, performing a recurring parody of presidential behavior at rallies and claiming that acting presidential would be easy but too boring (Baker 2019). Trump's blatant disruption of expectations and norms presented challenges for political humor. The absurdity of Trump's statements, actions, and associates outpaced parody's ability to add insight. The Trump administration's reliance on alternative facts and claims that the president's more ridiculous statements were meant sarcastically shifted the playing field for irony. And in general, the Trump presidency threatened progressive values and generated outrage among progressive comedians.

Political Humor During the Trump Presidency

An episode of *The Simpsons* from 2000 encapsulates a key problem of political humor in the Trump era. The episode takes place in a future where Lisa Simpson has been elected president. In an Oval Office meeting with her cabinet, Lisa notes, "As you know, we've inherited quite a budget crunch from President Trump" (Addley 2016). At the time the episode aired, Trump had been toying with the idea of a presidential run, giving the joke a flicker of possibility (Haberman 2015). But the joke's premise ultimately assumes the absurdity of the idea of "President Trump." Those words together generate the joke's incongruity. Once Trump's successful campaign for the Republican nomination made his presidency a possibility, creator of *The Simpsons* Matt Groening declared, during an interview with cartoonist First Dog on the Moon, that the idea of "President Trump" is "beyond satire" (2016). Trump's election made "President Trump" a reality instead of a fictional absurdity. The fulfillment of satirical prophecy eliminated the premise of its own humor. The Trump presidency was only funny as an absurd hypothetical in an alternative cartoon universe. And, if Trump in the Oval Office could represent the most absurd outcome for a cartoon comedy, a Trump presidency later becoming reality leaves no room for humor to make another joke. As the incarnation of a joke, the Trump presidency turned the tables on political humor.

A Carnivalesque Inversion

The Trump presidency required a reconsideration of the carnivalesque abilities of humor to invert the established order and question societal norms. The carnivalesque centers on crownings and uncrownings, temporary reversals and inversions that provide

fresh perspective on established norms. But the election of a reality television star to the presidency turned the carnivalesque itself upside-down. Trump in the highest government office preempted carnival laughter's power to crown the fool and mock institutional authority. *The Simpsons* episode predicting President Trump provides a classic example—the carnivalesque joke becomes the permanent reality, denying the joke's power for critique. Rather than operate as a temporary, limited ritual that allows a reexamination of society and institutions, the carnivalesque infiltrated those very institutions on a more permanent basis. Trump's election represented the crowning instance of the carnivalesque in reality, though his administration's carnivalesque celebration of alternative facts can be seen as a symptom of a broader post-truth context than a cause (Zaretsky 2017). Within this postmodern version of the carnivalesque, exemplified and fulfilled by Trump, political comedians faced an inversion of their own role. The carnivalesque relocated from the toolbox of the satirist to the halls of political institutions. In this position, rather than uncrowning traditional authority and questioning norms, comedians often took an earnest approach in trying to put things back together.

Absurd Reality: A Problem for Parody

Parody faces a potential problem when reality becomes so absurd it outpaces parody's ability to imitate and exaggerate with new context and insight. Scholars point to Tina Fey's *Saturday Night Live* impersonation of vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin as an early example of this phenomenon. Fey's Palin was a pastiche, an identical imitation that is supposed to be understood as parody, self-aware of its existence as a copy (Reilly 2012). When Palin was unable to name any newspapers she read regularly in

an exchange with journalist Katie Couric, *SNL* featured a sketch with Fey that copied, nearly word-for-word, the original video. The parody had the effect of elevating the embarrassing exchange in journalistic discourse (Abel and Barthel 2013), but as a parody the sketch failed to provide new context or framing for Palin's gaffe, diminishing its satirical goal of casting judgement (Momen 2019). Palin, like Trump, subverted assumptions about politicians, creating difficulty for parody.

Political humor, particularly parody sketches from *SNL*, faced this problem on a broad scale during the Trump presidency. In light of the difficulty of parodying Trump and his administration, *SNL's* parodies often prioritized playful and ridiculous elements over political critique (Sims 2017). The October 4, 2020 cold open, a parody of the first presidential debate between Trump and Joe Biden, was *less* chaotic than the original. The stilted delivery of interruptions written into the script failed to capture the original noise of the two candidates and moderator talking over one another. At one point, Trump (played by Alec Baldwin) distracted Biden (played by Jim Carrey) with a laser pointer, and Carrey's Biden responded by scratching and hissing like a cat. Later, Maya Rudolph appeared as Kamala Harris to get the "boys" to play nicely with one another (SNL 10/03/20). These departures from any sense of the original weaken the parody's ability to level a critique.

Satirical parody uses exaggeration and distortion to provide new insight on a precursor text. Metaphorically, satire holds up a trick mirror that renders a warped view of reality, revealing a higher truth (Gilmore 2018). But the process becomes impossible, not to mention pointless, when institutions have already become exaggerated and distorted. When Trump himself, as president, completely disrupted a presidential debate

or performed a comedic impression of "presidential behavior" at a rally, he left little room for political humor to add insight with its own layer of parody.

Alternative Reality: A Problem for Irony

The Trump administration relied on alternative facts, which accrued into an alternative reality (Blake 2017). The blatant construction of alternative facts represented a fulfillment of "truthiness," Colbert's concept that truth is based on individual perception rather than reason or facts. Colbert's ironic conservative character employed truthiness in a New Journalism tradition of exposing media construction of reality, but this aesthetic failed to reveal anything about Trump, who, along with his audience, already assumed the possibilities of truthiness. Trump and his administration operated within a constructed reality, built from alternative facts, and in a fragmented digital landscape there is no point in arguing over facts (McKain and Lawson 2019).

The futility of arguing over facts becomes clear in the shifting semantics of the term "fake news." It used to be synonymous with news parody, referring to late-night television satire's send-up of television news. Then Trump and other right-wing politicians popularized "fake news" as an attack on traditional sources of journalism. The Trump presidency, and its broader context of alternative realities, represented a crisis for journalism's modernist sense of itself as an arbiter of truth and reality (Waisbord 2018). Political humor's stake in this crisis, starting with the changing meaning of "fake news," stems from its own connections to journalism (Baym 2005; McKain 2005), including its parallel modernist project of affirming the value of rationality and objective truth (Baym 2007; Richmond and Porpora 2019). As "fake news" became the popular term both for

the misinformation driving alternative realities and politicians' attacks on journalism, the comedians who had inherited the traditional news parody format reconsidered their role.

The central problem for irony remains the possibility for misunderstanding. This misunderstanding shows up in examples of Dave Chappelle's ironic sketches reinforcing racial stereotypes for some viewers or classrooms of students horrified by Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (Young 2020; Colletta 2009). Particularly on highly polarized issues, where cultural battle lines have been clearly drawn, misunderstood irony can come across as betrayal. And, in another carnivalesque inversion of the Trump era, Trump himself adopted a warped form of irony, as he and his allies dismissed untrue and inflammatory statements as joking and sarcasm, at least retroactively (Marsh 2018; Kreuz 2020). This environment, where comedians leaned into earnestness to avoid misunderstanding while the president and his supporters insisted he meant very little of what he said, created a unique inversion of roles. Trump's claims of sarcasm contribute to his construction of an alternative reality, and comedians respond with earnest affirmation of reason and fact.

Colbert's trajectory from Comedy Central's *The Colbert Report* to hosting *The Late Show* on CBS highlights the dynamics of irony in the Trump era. Moving to a new show prompted a reconsideration of his persona, and Colbert reasoned he could no longer stomach playing his ironic conservative character and wanted to more earnestly present his views so as to not be misunderstood (Gross 2016). Leaving behind the encompassing irony of his previous character and shifting to a genuine and unmistakable political stance opens the opportunity to make a clear statement of values and earnestly advocate for particular issues (Van Hoozer and Peuchaud 2020). Colbert's experience highlights a difficulty of political humor in the Trump era. He became emotionally invested in

political events to a point that approaching them with a purely ironic stance became distasteful to him.

Outrage, Worry, and Grief

Though some scholars argue that television satire maintains a core commitment to modernist ideals as it affirms facts and dismisses alternative realities, the form often relies more on emotion than reason (Ames 2020). While comedians, especially those with weekly shows like Bee and Oliver, employ a rational, step-by-step in-depth explication of policy and political issues, outrage and worry often underpin the format. Outrage, accompanied by worry before the 2020 election, played a unique role in political humor as comedians advocated political engagement.

Some of the most earnest moments on television satire shows can be marked with appeals to emotion rather than reason. When Hillary Clinton lost the 2016 election, *Saturday Night Live's* cold open segment featured Kate McKinnon, who had often parodied Clinton throughout the campaign, dressed as Clinton and earnestly singing Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah" as a way of comparing the loss of the election to the loss of a great artist, channeling a sense of political grief. McKinnon capitalized on her parody of Clinton to urge the audience not to give up in the face of defeat, channeling the affect of the moment into a platform for collective action. This moving through grief to a place of action relies not on rational rhetoric but pathetic appeal (Davisson 2018). Learning from the past, comedians echoed McKinnon's expression of grief and worry, followed by calls to action, in the leadup to the 2020 election.

One way satire can influence its audience is through affect mimicry, a process through which a display of grief or outrage on screen triggers some of that negative emotion in the audience (Ames 2020). This process occurs in fiction, where the emotional engagement includes alignment that gives access to the actions and feelings of characters and allegiance that attempts to garner an audience's sympathies for or against the fictional characters. This emotional engagement also applies to television satire shows where hosts display outrage over a wide range of political issues and characters (Ames 2020). The outrage of comedians, even to the extent that it is performative, can engage the outrage of the audience.

A combination of outrage and humor can enhance political activism. Leng (2020) chronicles the development of the Lesbian Avengers, an activist group that, devoting considerable attention to the rhetoric of protests and slogans, implemented humor to emphasize their goal of placing lesbian issues in the spotlight, particularly as the group's co-founders noted a public perception that lesbians have no sense of humor. The group initiated carnivalesque protests, and the humor included both playful elements as well as angrier edges, particularly when the group protested sexual violence or used grotesque humor to counter misogynistic views of the female body. Ultimately, humor played a central role in legitimizing lesbian rage. In this example, outrage and humor played complimentary roles in political activism. Leng (2020) argues that the Lesbian Avengers provide an important example of how feminists have employed humor as a political tool. *Full Frontal* provides a clear example of a contemporary television satire show that echoes this feminist use of outrage and humor.

Outrage and humor can combine to create a sense of earnestness and urgency in activism, particularly the kind of advocacy incorporated into television satire shows. But outrage has limitations, as well. Ames (2020) applies Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities to audiences viewing television satire shows, noting that viewers can expect their opinions and emotional engagement with the outrage of the host will be shared by other members of the audience. This connection to the assumed others in the audience creates part of the appeal of watching television satire shows—they offer the opportunity to be part of an in-group. This kind of social sorting can itself fuel anger in response to political messages, driving affective polarization (Mason 2016).

The debate around whether outrage in satire can lead to political change centers on the benefits and consequences of satire's ability to simultaneously stoke and release anger (Ames 2020). The outrage in political satire that emotionally engages the audience could lead viewers to political action, but the associated laughter, in line with humor relief theory, could at the same time dissipate the outrage, leading to apathy or inaction. In fact, a proliferation of satirical forms could weaken satire's impact, giving citizens plentiful options for consuming outrage, ultimately displacing outrage and preempting more meaningful forms of engagement (Brock 2018). Both Brock (2018) and Ames (2020) conclude, however, that humor maintains an optimism that counters the cynicism of outrage and helps viewers turn negative emotions into engagement.

Even though humor may lead from negative emotion to meaningful engagement, a problem arises when humor becomes incidental to outrage. The Trump presidency fueled outrage across several political topics, like immigration, race, women's rights, and more, that progressive comedians care deeply about. Beyond specific political topics,

comedians saw Trump as an existential threat to democratic institutions. Comedians earnestly opposed Trump on all these grounds, and the 2020 election presented the worry that Trump could be reelected. And when people feel anxious and threatened, humor becomes difficult or impossible (Young 2020). As comedians turned their own outrage into earnest advocacy for political engagement, humor at times took a secondary role.

The 2020 Election

The Trump presidency presented unique challenges for key elements of political humor. The absurd idea of Trump as president, once a joke on *The Simpsons*, became a reality, questioning the ability of parody to add insight to the actions of Trump and the cast of characters in his administration (Gilmore 2018). The administration's reliance on alternative facts, accruing into an alternative reality, questioned the effectiveness of a traditional critique through deep commitment to irony (Blake 2017; McKain and Lawson 2019). These challenges of the Trump era were clearly on display before the 2020 election. Elections provide emphasis points for media and public attention, and comedians certainly centered their focus on the campaigns and voting during the weeks before election day (Fox and Steinberg 2020). Comedians expressed outrage and worry over Trump's actions and the threat of his reelection, emotions that can make entering the playful frame required for humor more difficult or contradictory (Ames 2020; Young 2020). In this environment, examples from before the 2020 election feature comedians using metacommunication to reassess their own role and earnest advocacy to encourage participation in the election.

Metacommunication and Advocacy: The Serious Side of Satire

The Trump era highlighted a changing role for late-night television. The traditional breezy fare of late-night provided easy watching and, during elections, opportunities for candidates to get some airtime, participate in fun and games, and present a likeable image. It was under this paradigm that Trump appeared on NBC's *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* in September 2016. Trump participated in some lighthearted jokes and parodies and then, at the end of the interview segment, amiably allowed Fallon to tousle his famous hair. When the show aired, Fallon received blowback from those who argued his rapport with Trump humanized the candidate and ignored his offensive rhetoric. *The Tonight Show's* ratings dropped, and Fallon later apologized. His playful interview with Trump had missed a shift in the role of late-night comedy. Audiences no longer wanted cheap laughs but insightful critiques of the opposition. Ratings went to Colbert, who took a much harsher approach to Trump (Morris 2018).

Fallon's experience highlights the affective aspect of Trump's presidency. Comedians and their audiences felt outrage over Trump at the same time that Trump rendered some elements of humor more difficult or obsolete (Ames 2020; McKain and Lawson 2019). Feeling outraged and threatened also makes it difficult to enter the playful stance required for humor (Young 2020). In response to this shifting dynamic, comedians leaned into the serious side of political humor. In earnest attempts to define their role and encourage political participation, comedians employed metacommunication and advocacy in the weeks before the 2020 election. A key aspect of the serious side of satire, however, is that without its comic counterpart it simply becomes political speech, leaving behind the unique abilities of humor (Caron 2016).

Metacommunication and advocacy both stem from inherent qualities of political humor. Metacommunication is a fundamental element of humor, as humor always signals its own playful frame (Brock 2009; Marsh 2015). Irony specifically can wink at audiences, through tone or structure, to bring them in on the joke (Young 2020). Advocacy also flows from satire's inherent juxtaposition of what is and what should be. By staking a moral claim and casting judgment when its target falls short, satire holds the potential to encourage social change (Young 2014; Borum Chattoo and Feldman 2020). In theory, however, both metacommunication and the potential for social change are subtle, inherent qualities of political humor. In contrast, comedians employed explicit metacommunication and advocacy in the weeks before the election, breaking the fourth wall in efforts to respond to Trump era challenges to humor.

Metacommunication

Metacommunication in political humor includes self-referential statements that expose the processes and format of humor. It can define and assess humor's role, explain the absence of humor, become part of the humor itself, and clarify meaning. These explicit uses of metacommunication differ from the implicit metacommunication inherent to humor's play frame (Brock 2009; Marsh 2015). Rather than subtly winking at audiences, explicit metacommunication directly states its self-reference and self-awareness. The direct, face-value aspect of explicit metacommunication creates opportunities for earnestness and self-reflection as comedians reassess their role in the Trump era.

Explicit and direct metacommunication allows for more earnestness in political humor. Irony produces double binds that present conflicting messages, creating an existential challenge to audiences' relation with the representation of reality. Undetected irony conveys a meaning opposite its intended meaning, which can create impressions of existential betrayal. Metacommunication provides one way for comedians to break the double binds that otherwise contain the potential for misunderstanding (Nichols 2016). This feature of metacommunication allows it to earnestly explain and clarify.

Metacommunication shares close ties with earnest advocacy in political humor. The performative spectacle of satire can point out how much of media and politics already exists as spectacle (Baym 2013). This spectacle of public performance creates a participatory energy that models citizenship and encourages audiences to take action (Meier 2017). But participatory satire relies not only on pointing out absurdity but in audiences recognizing the irony and acting to encourage change (Paroske 2016). Metacommunication offers one way for comedians to ensure audiences recognize the earnest message to take action.

Advocacy and Activism

Scholars devise various terms to describe the incorporation of advocacy, activism, and satire, including "truthiness satire" (Caron 2016), "satiractivism" (McClennan 2019), and, most clearly, "advocacy satire" (Waisanen 2018). Despite the variation in descriptive labels, these concepts all explain how comedians seek to engage citizens in political action. Comedians desire to impact public affairs, and in the context of a rapidly changing, complex, globalized media system, comedians use investigative journalism and

other immediate, earnest forms to capture attention (Fox 2018). More specifically, Trump's election to the presidency marked a rise in advocacy satire, as comedians realized an increased urgency for political engagement (Waisanen 2018). As public trust in media fell, satire incorporated solution and motivation building frames into its critiques. Some argue that satire has the potential to encourage cynicism through its constant critique and argument about how things could be better. The advocacy satire of the Trump era, however, addressed audience cynicism explicitly, attempting to motivate people toward meaningful participation. This formula includes making a traditional satirical critique, and then offering solutions to the problem and directly encouraging action (Kilby 2018).

Both advocacy and metacommunication represent a breaking of the fourth wall where comedians directly address audiences. Metacommunication involves direct self-reference to the processes and format of political humor that is more overt and self-aware than the metacommunication inherent to humor's play frame. Advocacy makes concrete humor's inherent potential for social change, seriously offering solutions for problems and outlining the specific action required to enact the solutions. Both concepts take inherent elements of humor and make them more overt. These explicit manifestations of metacommunication and advocacy are also more sincere. They relocate metacommunication and the potential for social change outside humor's play frame, meaning a joke is not always necessary.

Conclusion

Satire requires baseline values and norms to level its critiques (Gilmore 2018). These norms include the presumption that political actors will behave according to expectations of seriousness and political decorum. Crucially, a presumption that politicians will follow norms of seriousness does not imply any inference about inherent honesty or authenticity. Politicians can of course lie and hold obvious ulterior motives while adhering to a façade of political etiquette. Exposing this spectacle is a central role of traditional political satire (Baym 2013). But Trump waived presumptions of presidential seriousness, and he himself mocked the idea of acting presidential as too boring (Baker 2019). In response to Trump's fundamental disruptions to political institutions, comedians experienced a reversal of their own role as they leaned into the serious side of satire and defended the value of norms.

Trump's election created a carnivalesque reversal of political humor's traditional formula, preempting carnival laughter's temporary crownings and uncrownings that provide unique perspective and resist the entrenchment of norms (Bakhtin 1984). Trump's own focus on entertainment politics and exemplification of truthiness made parody and irony more difficult and at times obsolete (McKain and Lawson 2019). Additionally, the outrage and threat progressive comedians experienced over Trump's statements and actions stand in opposition to humor's playful frame (Young 2020). In this context, explicit metacommunication and advocacy gave comedians the ability to reflect on their own role and make an earnest argument for political participation. These sincere elements represent the serious side of satire. Trump's presence in the Oval Office preempted the nonserious side of satire that mocks authority and questions norms, a

reversal that at times left comedians in the strange position of earnestly affirming the value of reason, facts, and norms rather than mocking or critiquing. This study takes a closer look at television satire before the 2020 election to analyze how comedians balanced the serious and nonserious sides of satire in response to the Trump presidency.

Chapter 2

Method

Political campaigns and elections provide unique opportunities to study political satire. Public interest in news increases alongside ratings for late-night political satire shows around key moments in campaigns and elections, including debates and election night (Fox and Steinberg 2020). Comedians take the opportunity to increase critiques of politicians and media and develop special segments and episodes focused on the election. Politicians, journalists, and citizens all notice an increase in political humor around elections and even express faith that humor can provide a subversive corrective during election season, as some did in hoping that political humor could curb Trump's 2016 election ambitions (Kersten 2019). With this hope in humor's abilities, journalists and scholars pay further attention to television satire's coverage of elections and even extend accolades. The heritage of television satire's special election coverage goes back to *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart's* Peabody Award-winning coverage of the 2000 election (Peabody 2000).

The 2020 U.S. election provided several unique points that prompted responses from political comedians. The COVID-19 pandemic generated record early voting, both in person and through mail-in voting. Trump himself contracted COVID-19, garnering intense media attention, questions about the president's health, and ultimately leading to the cancellation of the second presidential debate. The debates that did occur were chaotic. Political comedians responded to each of these points during the election, often with outrage, angst, and earnestness, offering a window into political humor's unique role during the Trump era. Late-night television satire increasingly leans to the left (Young

2020; Farnsworth and Lichter 2020). After four years of Trump in the Oval Office, comedians worked to make clear their own opposition to his presidency and their perspective on the stakes of the 2020 election.

This chapter outlines the research method for this study about how television comedians balanced seriousness and nonseriousness in the weeks leading up to the 2020 election. The first section details the process of sample selection, providing background on the five television satire shows in the sample and specifying the date range and segment categories included in the sample. The second section describes the process of textual analysis, including the suitability of the interpretive method and the iterative approach to the transcripts in the sample.

Sample Selection

Satire is a broad category, encompassing literature, cartoons, and TikTok videos. This study focuses specifically on television satire programs in the tradition of news parody shows. Five prominent television satire shows are examined here: two nightly shows, *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* and *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*; and three weekly shows, *Saturday Night Live*, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, and *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*. These shows represent a broad range of television satire.

With Jon Stewart as host, *The Daily Show* reinvented television satire in the early 2000s as an increasingly serious form of news parody (Baym 2005); notably, the hosts of all the shows examined here, except *SNL*, have a direct connection to Stewart's original project. South African comedian Trevor Noah took the helm of *The Daily Show* in 2015, initially losing a third of the show's original audience before building back to even higher

viewership than before (Brooks 2020). Noah offers a broadly progressive, global outlook on U.S. politics. He also represents a Black perspective, emphasized in recurring segments like “Trevor Noah: Racism Detective,” in a career field dominated by white men. The show also relies on a team of correspondents, including Roy Wood Jr., Desi Lydic, and Ronny Chieng, plus regular contributors like Jordan Klepper.

Stephen Colbert started as a correspondent on *The Daily Show* before moving on in 2005 to create an incisive pastiche of conservative punditry on *The Colbert Report*. Now on CBS since 2015, Colbert’s *Late Show* traffics less in wry irony and more in the breezy fun and games of mainstream late-night fare and earnest opposition to Trump (McKain and Lawson 2019). He remains more political than his mainstream late-night competition (Farnsworth and Lichter 2020). Colbert’s focus on attacking night after night may help explain his continued dominance in ratings among the network late-night rivals (Morris 2018). Colbert led the pack in season-to-date ratings at the beginning of 2021, earning 3.18 million viewers to Jimmy Kimmel’s 1.78 million and Jimmy Fallon’s 1.53 million, and *The Late Show* often beats the combined competition in weekly ratings. *The Late Show’s* YouTube channel also leads network competitors in views of uploaded content (CBS 2021).

Saturday Night Live has long been a cultural touchstone for American political humor, going back to 1975 and Chevy Chase’s impersonation of President Gerald Ford (Momen 2019; Jones 2009). During elections, the show’s distinctive cold opens typically parody key election events like debates. The long-running segment *Weekend Update*, currently hosted by Michael Che and Colin Jost, consists of a roundup of the week’s headlines followed by punchlines. Che and Jost began their tenure in 2014; Che is the

first Black anchor of the segment. The duo was promoted to head writer positions in 2018 in addition to their jobs behind the news parody desk. *Weekend Update* focused on election-related news in the weeks before election day, and this study, in turn, focuses on *Weekend Update* among *SNL* segments.

John Oliver, a former correspondent on Stewart's *Daily Show*, started his own HBO show *Last Week Tonight* in 2014. Oliver takes an in-depth approach to the show, devoting most of each week's episode to a single 20-minute segment on a specific topic. These main stories often investigate original topics than may not have gained much traction in mainstream media outlets. Oliver's discussion of these topics often includes explication of the ins and outs of specific policies. *Last Week Tonight's* YouTube channel had amassed 8.56 million subscribers and over 2.84 billion views by the end of 2020.

Samantha Bee, another alumna of Stewart's *Daily Show*, started her show *Full Frontal* on TBS in 2016. *Full Frontal* has the lowest profile of the five shows, with 1.03 million YouTube subscribers and just over 450 million views by the end of 2020. Bee could, however, stake a claim to the title of most unique late-night show of the five. Her humor is acerbic and often insult-driven, informed by an underlying outrage and a strong feminist outlook on politics and policy. Bee is the only female host in the sample and the only one who does not sit behind a desk. She engages directly and earnestly in advocacy and interviews and collaborations with activists, and her field pieces are more earnest documentary than news parody.

Though the shows in the sample considered here have roots in an older generation of television satire, they all represent a new generation of television satire that parallels the Trump era. All five of the shows started or transitioned to new hosts in a short period

from 2014 to 2016, the same period that Trump was gaining serious prominence as a political actor, from his advocacy for the "birther" conspiracy theory about President Obama through Trump's own campaign and election to the presidency. As a Trump-era generation of television satire, these five shows provide a view of how political humor operated during the Trump presidency.

Television satire shows typically consist of a few primary elements: a monologue or main topical segment, field pieces, unpolitical late-night fare like games and some recurring segments, and guest interviews. This study focuses on monologues, main stories, and field pieces related to the 2020 campaign and election. Segments like Colbert's "Meanwhile," which features a review of goofy or feel-good stories in the news, fall into the unpolitical recurring segments category and were not included in the sample. Interviews with guests, including politicians, academics, journalists, activists, and others, represent an essential aspect of television satire's significance and seriousness. Notably, Colbert sat down with President-Elect Joe Biden and Dr. Jill Biden for their first joint interview after the election (Bella 2020). The interview segments of television satire shows make a unique contribution to political discourse and deserve academic study, but they are distinct from the purposeful humor and satire of the other segments (Baym 2007). Because of this study's focus on political humor, interview segments were not included in the sample.

All the television satire shows considered here archive their shows on official YouTube channels, enabling more specific sampling for research (video clips are broken down into segments rather than whole episodes) as well as influencing the way audiences engage with the content (Momen 2019; Waisanen 2018). Video segments were collected

from the official YouTube home page of each show between the dates September 30 and November 15. The starting date captures shows that aired after the first presidential debate on September 29, and the end date captures all the shows that aired after the election results became clear, including Oliver's November 15 main story about the results. The date range naturally includes the three election day special episodes that aired, Colbert and Noah's on November 3 and Bee's on November 4. For clarity and consistency, the video segments quoted in this study are cited parenthetically with acronyms of the show's title followed by the air date. The acronyms are:

Full Frontal with Samantha Bee	FF
Last Week Tonight with John Oliver	LWT
Saturday Night Live	SNL
The Daily Show with Trevor Noah	TDS
The Late Show with Stephen Colbert	TLS

The sample totals 102 individual segments. The shows all have slightly different formats and take different approaches to uploading clips to YouTube, so there is some variation in what a segment represents. *Last Week Tonight* uploads entire main story segments, about twenty minutes each, meaning that only three distinct segments related to the election are included in the sample. *Full Frontal*, on the other hand, uploads five to ten-minute monologues and field pieces, creating a larger number of shorter segments in the sample. *The Daily Show* and *The Late Show* average around ten to twelve-minute monologue segments, though as daily rather than weekly shows they account for over fifty of the segments in the sample. The transcription service GoTranscript was used to acquire transcripts for the videos in the sample.

Analysis

This study uses textual analysis to understand how these five television satire shows balanced the serious and nonserious sides of satire in the weeks leading to the 2020 election. Particularly as political comedians continue to break boundaries with their work and participate in advocacy and activism, qualitative and cultural research offers an essential piece of understanding how humor impacts political discourse (Young 2014). Evaluating the serious and nonserious sides of satire requires a qualitative assessment of the content of political humor.

The argument that Trump reversed the traditional formula of political humor focuses on the content of television satire shows. Examination of the format and content of political humor, including metacommunication and earnest advocacy, involves the meaning of the text between production and audience reception, warranting interpretive textual analysis as an appropriate method (Fürsich 2009). The interpretive nature of the study maintains a focus on meaning and the role of serious and nonserious elements in television satire discourse.

This study builds from close reading and detailed notetaking to offer an interpretive account of the texts. An open coding approach was used to analyze the texts and iteratively identify salient categories and concepts (Corbin and Strauss 1990). The transcript of each video segment was numbered and linked to a spreadsheet to facilitate the sorting and identification of primary themes. These themes were then connected to their illustrative examples, and the most significant examples are presented in the following analysis.

Chapter 3

"Like We're in that George Orwell Novel": Trump-era Challenges for Satire

Trump's election to the presidency created several challenges for political humor. The challenges go beyond a simple antipathy among comedians for Trump and his politics, though that certainly played a role as well. But Trump's occupation of the Oval Office created structural problems for the creation of political humor. The Trump administration's reliance on alternative facts made the double meanings of irony more difficult to navigate in response. Absurdities of Trump and his associates outpaced parody's ability to mimic and mock. And, most importantly, Trump's disruption of norms and threat to democratic institutions made it difficult for comedians to laugh. Instead, they earnestly defended the value of democratic norms and ideals. This chapter examines how comedians grappled with the structural challenges of political humor in the Trump era and earnestly affirmed the value of reason, fact, and democracy.

Alternative reality defined the Trump presidency. The administration's first press conference launched a lie about crowd size at the inauguration, and when the claim's factual veracity was later challenged, it was explained that the claim relied on "alternative facts." The Trump team continued to rely on alternative facts, and alternative facts accrued into an alternative reality (Blake 2017). Fact checks could only go so far in chipping away at the administration's blatant construction of an alternative reality. Similarly, political humor's ability to provide insight and maintain a clear perspective on reality faced challenges when carnivalesque chaos reached all the way to the top levels of government.

Contested truths result from digital technology's dynamic, multilayered, chaotic system of public communication, which includes opportunities for different identity groups with different epistemologies to express and engage with news and information (Waisbord 2018). As part of this contestation of truth and reality, the term "fake news," which in the past referred to news parodies on late-night television, becomes "semantically confusing," as it is used to identify disinformation but also by Trump and other right-wing politicians to disparage traditional news outlets (1867). In this environment, "fake news" no longer adequately describes the work of late-night comedians. In fact, faced with the Trump presidency and the prospect of its renewal in November 2020, comedians often leaned into the serious side of their work, realizing that the standard formula of political humor no longer functioned in response to Trump. This chapter reviews how Trump challenged political humor in three areas: irony, parody, and the emotional response of comedians.

The first challenge is one of irony, a key element of humor and satire that exposes a difference between what a text says and what it means (Young 2014; Kreuz 2020). Satire, particularly ironic satire, requires a shared baseline to be effective (Gilmore 2018; Colebrook 2004). In a highly polarized context, irony runs the risk of being misunderstood, even by the satirist's own audience. As a result, comedians had an incentive to take a more earnest approach to exposing Trump's alternative reality and affirm factual reality. This process involved fact checks of individual administration claims as well as reality checks that sought to expose Trump's overall construction of an alternative reality. Both elements required a level of seriousness from comedians as they appealed to reason and facts. Comedians still used humor, of course, though usually with

a serious point, and several examples in the sample indicate that comedians want things to return to "normal" in part so they can return to a more standard model of humor.

The second challenge to political humor is one of parody, another frequent element of humor and satire that mimics and exaggerates elements of a recognizable precursor text to create a new perspective on the original (Dentith 2000; Young 2014). The absurdity of the Trump presidency at times outpaced the ability of parody to provide insight. Several examples demonstrate parody paralleling, but not exceeding, some original ridiculousness. In addition, Trump and his audience openly assumed the epistemological approach of alternative facts and the construction of reality, and parody that aimed to expose this fiction lost its power as a form of critique (McKain and Lawson 2019). An absurd reality centered on a constructed brand like Trump made parody's mimicking less meaningful.

The third challenge to political humor in the Trump era stemmed from outrage and other emotional responses from comedians. Comedians displayed an emotional investment in Trump's actions and statements, generating a sense of outrage that sometimes shifted the aesthetic of their work. Outrage can inform satire—Juvenalian satire uses irony and sarcasm to convey bitter indignation about society's ills—but the Trump presidency's threat to comedians' progressive ideals and the stability of democratic institutions perhaps made it more difficult for comedians to enter the playful frame required for humor (Young 2020). In fact, as comedians presented in-depth explications of policy and its implications, humor often played an incidental role to earnest calls to action.

Examples from political humor shows before the 2020 election demonstrate how alternative reality, absurdity outpacing satire, and the affective response of comedians all create challenges for political humor. The dynamic of the campaign, particularly during a global pandemic that Trump downplayed, gave comedians plenty of opportunity to point out Trump's construction of an alternative reality, even as they ran into problems of an absurd reality outpacing satire. As the 2020 election approached, comedians worked to uncover the fictions of Trump's reality and sought to affirm reality through earnest appeals to reason and fact.

The first section of this chapter examines how comedians articulated the construction of alternative realities. The discussion of these examples leads into a section detailing the centrality of television entertainment politics to Trump's brand. The absurdity of Trump's television politics in turn leads to a section analyzing examples of absurd reality outpacing satire and parody. After outlining these structural challenges for television satire, the next section looks at examples of comedians responding through earnest affirmation of reality with appeals to fact and reason. The final section features the third challenge for political humor, with examples of comedians expressing emotion, including outrage, worry, and grief, in response to Trump's statements and actions. In these examples, humor is often absent or plays a secondary role, and comedians even explicitly explain that their mood is not conducive to jokes.

Alternative Realities

Constructing an alternative reality became a central aspect of Trump's construction of his political brand. Trump created the reality television version of a

president, presenting himself as a successful real estate mogul who could make deals and get things done, even as the image failed to match reality. Comedians sought to expose the construction through both humor and earnest fact-checks. As Biden's campaign began seriously outraising and outspending Trump's campaign in October 2020, Trump assured his supporters at a rally he could raise as much money as he wanted, based on his position as president. Selecting Exxon as an example, Trump performed how a phone call might play out: "I don't know. I'll use a 'Hi, how you doing? How's energy coming? When are you doing the exploration? Oh, you need a couple permits, huh? Okay.' You know, but I call the head of Exxon, I say, 'You know, I'd love you to send me 25 million dollars for the campaign.' 'Absolutely, sir, why didn't you ask? Would you like some more?' I would raise a billion dollars in one day if I wanted to" (TLS 10/20/20). Stephen Colbert points out that, though Trump's scenario detailing how easy it would be "to extort illegal campaign contributions from an oil company" was hypothetical, "Exxon Corporation felt the need to clarify" with a tweet stating the president had not made such a call (TLS 10/20/20).

In response to Exxon's statement on Twitter, Colbert channels Exxon's apparent thought process: "Sure, we poisoned your coastlines, we bury climate change research, we've dabbled in regime change and brutal suppression of popular will in third world countries, but this guy might make us look bad" (TLS 10/20/20). Colbert argues that Trump's alternative reality proved worse for Exxon than their own actual reality, prompting them to make a statement within Trump's alternative reality. Critiquing both Trump and Exxon, Colbert shows how Trump's constructed reality, where he uses his position as president and dealmaker extraordinaire to pressure companies into funding his

political campaign, sucks the oxygen out of an actual reality where Exxon Corporation has a harmful impact on the world and Trump's fundraising increasingly falls behind that of his opponent.

Comedians respond to Trump's alternative reality by attempting to expose the artifice and affirm reality. As deaths from COVID-19 continued climbing in the U.S., Trump complained, "That's all I hear. Turn on television, 'COVID, COVID, COVID, COVID, COVID.' A plane goes down, 500 people dead, they don't talk about it. 'COVID, COVID, COVID, COVID'" (TDS 10/26/20). Trevor Noah fact checks Trump's complaint by noting, "By the way, maybe the reason the news isn't talking about the plane that went down with 500 people is because there was no plane that went down with 500 people" (TDS 10/26/20). Noah then moves from this basic fact check to a more comprehensive reality check, exposing Trump's creation of an alternative reality:

> If you think 500 pretend people dying is big news, remember that almost 1,000 real people a day are still dying from COVID, COVID, COVID. If you're going to bullshit us, at least make the numbers work. Have a fake airplane crash into another fake airplane that goes down and crashes into a pretend petting zoo and then the animals get out and maul 600 more fake people. That way, you get close to the COVID numbers for today. (TDS 10/26/20)

Noah extends Trump's creation of an alternative reality to match the actual toll of COVID-19, exposing the absurdity of Trump's plane crash alternative while also highlighting the magnitude of the pandemic. His emphasis on the "pretend" people, "fake" planes, and "pretend" petting zoo highlight the made-up nature of Trump's comparison. And while there is an element of absurd humor with the petting zoo animals escaping and mauling people, it is matched with an underlying sense of outrage at a president who has decided to "bullshit us" with an alternative reality while thousands of

"real people a day are still dying." The humor in Noah's counter-example serves the larger, serious purpose of providing a reality check on Trump's claims.

The COVID-19 pandemic created several opportunities for comedians to respond to Trump's version of reality. After the White House sent out an October press release announcing that "ending the COVID-19 pandemic" was one of Trump's biggest accomplishments, Colbert called the release "clearly insane" (TLS 10/28/20). Aiming to reveal Trump's gaslighting, Colbert points out that "at this point, Trump's not just Nero fiddling while Rome burns. He's Nero sending out a press release that says, 'You're not on fire'" (TLS 10/28/20). Like Noah, Colbert shows how Trump not only ignores the pandemic, but creates a reality in which the pandemic does not exist.

Colbert also demonstrates how Trump is not the only member of his administration creating alternative realities. During the vice-presidential debate, Mike Pence claimed that "if the swine flu had been as lethal as the coronavirus in 2009 when Joe Biden was vice president, we would have lost two million American lives" (TLS 10/07/20). Pence's assertion offers an alternative version of history, and Colbert ridicules "Captain Pence" for blasting off to "Planet What If" (TLS 10/07/20). Deconstructing Pence's alternative history through parody, Colbert argues that "if the Titanic had been shot out of a catapult instead of pushed into the sea, it could have collided with the Hindenburg, killing billions" (TLS 10/07/20). Notably, where Trump's alternative reality is often in itself absurd, Pence presents a more polished version, allowing Colbert's parody to stand alone as a critique. Where Noah's extension of Trump's fake plane crash explicitly addresses Trump's fake narrative, Colbert moves on after his what-if scenario

with the Titanic and Hindenburg. The absurdity of the scenario effectively highlights the absurdity of Pence's subtle original.

The approach Colbert applies to Pence's claims, using absurdity to point out Pence's more subtle absurdity, represents a traditional formula for satire's critique of the spectacle of media and politics (Baym 2013). But the formula works so well here because Pence is a quintessentially traditional politician. Trump, on the other hand, brought his reality television sensibilities to the presidency, anticipating entertainment television and preempting the ability of satire to level its traditional critiques. As Trump leveraged the elements of entertainment television, he ultimately created a presidency and a national politics that outpaced the ability of *more* entertainment television from comedians to critique or add insight.

The Television Presidency

Entertainment television provides an essential angle for understanding the Trump presidency. Trump's construction of his presidency followed the outlines of entertainment media, exploiting the cameras from filmed cabinet meetings without real substance to raucous rallies. In a reversal, the highest office in government became a source of entertainment rather than a subject of it. After Rudy Giuliani held a press conference in Pennsylvania advocating to stop counting votes in the state, Pennsylvania Lieutenant Governor John Fetterman reacted saying, "To come in and stand on a street corner in Philadelphia saying, 'We won Pennsylvania.' It's like, LOL. It's just bizarre. It's like a bad *House of Cards* episode" (LWT 11/08/20). Fetterman finds Giuliani's statement so "bizarre," he reaches for melodramatic political entertainment as a

comparison. The parallel highlights the status of the Trump team's alternative reality as an example of entertainment drama and intrigue that remains at the core fundamentally unreal.

John Oliver follows up with Fetterman's comparison, noting point-for-point how reality matches the Netflix drama: "this is like *House of Cards* in that it's full of political intrigue, there's a sexual predator pretending to be president at the very heart of it, and it's gone on for at least four seasons too long" (LWT 11/08/20). Oliver's bullet-point comparison displays the extent to which reality blurs with entertainment politics. The points themselves blur entertainment and reality. The idea that "there's a sexual predator pretending to be president at the very heart of" *House of Cards* refers to the show's star, Kevin Spacey, who was accused of sexual assault. Oliver blends Spacey's real life into his role "pretending" to be the president, breaking down boundaries between reality and entertainment, a move Oliver applies in parallel to Trump.

Fetterman and Oliver agree that the Trump team's actions are so absurd that a theatrical HBO drama centered on political intrigue and scandal provides a point-for-point match. Oliver shows not only how reality parallels entertainment, but how reality and entertainment blend as the boundaries between them break down. Notably, while Fetterman takes an almost bemused tone, saying, "LOL. It's just bizarre," using the comparison to *House of Cards* to dismiss Giuliani's statement, Oliver takes a more earnest tone, comparing the show more broadly to Trump's presidency and making a serious argument that Trump's entertainment presidency can no longer continue.

Colbert examines the way government under the Trump administration occurs on television. When Trump contracted COVID-19, Dr. Anthony Fauci, a leading member of

Trump's White House Coronavirus Task Force, told Anderson Cooper on CNN he was unsurprised that the president had gotten sick. Fauci explained, "I was worried that he was going to get sick when I saw him in a completely precarious situation of crowded, no separation between people, and almost nobody wearing a mask. When I saw that on TV, I said, 'Oh my goodness, nothing good can come out of that. That's got to be a problem'" (TLS 10/19/20). Colbert notes that "Fauci influences Trump's COVID policy the same way we do, by staring in horror at the TV and saying, 'That's got to be a problem'" (TLS 10/19/20). Colbert points out the problem that a key member of the Coronavirus Task Force and infectious disease expert has been sidelined by the Trump administration during a pandemic. Fauci's position in government has been reduced to watching events unfold on television.

As election night approached, Colbert emphasized Trump's status as a television president. The segment incorporates a clip from CNN showing reporter Jeremy Diamond struggling to be heard at a Trump rally over the sound of Ted Nugent playing a screaming rendition of the national anthem on electric guitar. Diamond, his quiet voice further muffled by a mask, apologizes for the high level of noise and tries to continue discussing Trump's campaign schedule in the Midwest. The shot cuts from the noisy clip back to Colbert, who exclaims, "I can't believe CNN put that on air as analysis of what's happening, and I can't believe how perfect it is as an analysis of what's happening" (TLS 10/27/20). Colbert argues the excerpt "captures exactly what's going on inside our skulls right now. We're all trying to figure out what's going on, maybe to listen to that quiet voice telling us the right thing to do, but Donald Trump is trying to drown all that out with cat-scratch fever" (TLS 10/27/20). Colbert notes that the loud, chaotic,

entertainment-driven noise that impedes CNN's reporting is a key aspect of Trump's alternative reality.

Colbert continues by setting Trump and Biden's competing visions side by side, alternating clips from Trump's Michigan rally with a speech Biden delivered that same day in Georgia. The excerpts create a conversation between the candidates and present a stark contrast. Biden notes the number of lives lost to the virus; Trump repeats the word COVID ten times in an affected voice to mock media coverage of the pandemic. Biden encourages working together rather than denigrating others; Trump derides Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez for knowing less than "any human being on Earth" and having a "line of crap" (TLS 10/27/20). After Biden reiterates his message of unity and healing, Colbert gives Trump the last word: "Without TiVo, television is useless" (TLS 10/27/20). Portraying what he sees as the essential difference between the candidates, Colbert concludes that "the American people will have to listen to that quiet voice in their head and choose the better man. Maybe just TiVo the other" (TLS 10/27/20). Trump is the television version of a president, and Colbert prefers a better option.

These examples of the parallels and interactions between Trump's presidency and television showcase the entertainment absurdity of the Trump era. From Trump's legal team stepping out of a bad episode of *House of Cards* to Dr. Fauci watching Trump's COVID-19 response unfold on television to CNN struggling to cover the noise of a Trump rally, entertainment television provides the medium and the metaphor for the absurdities of Trump's presidency. Trump's disruption of norms, exemplified in his television presidency, led comedians like Colbert to advocate against him in favor of a more presidential option. But like the television journalists trying to be heard over

Trump's background noise, television comedians sometimes struggled to use humor and parody to laugh at an already absurd reality.

Absurd Reality Outpaces Satire

The made-for-TV nature of Trump's presidency challenged television satire's ability to create a parody. The precursor text of Trump's presidency had already disrupted established norms, resisting further exaggeration. On the day Rudy Giuliani held a press conference at Four Seasons Total Landscaping, Kate McKinnon appeared on SNL's *Weekend Update* in character as Giuliani. McKinnon's parody takes aim at the apparent ineptness of the Trump legal team's efforts to pursue lawsuits in several states where Trump lost the 2020 election. McKinnon's Rudy asks Colin Jost, "Hey, did you see my press conference today? It was at the Four Seasons. Fancy" (SNL 11/07/20). After Jost clarifies that the conference actually took place at a landscaping company called Four Seasons, rather than the upscale hotel, McKinnon's Rudy moves on: "Anyway, I'm glad I made it to this show on time because first I went to 30 Rocks. That's a granite quarry in New Rochelle" (SNL 11/07/20). The joke that McKinnon's Rudy could not find SNL's studio at 30 Rockefeller Plaza parallels the confusion surrounding the original booking of the press conference venue and makes the argument that Trump's legal team is inept. The parody is funny, but it adds minimal insight into the original absurdity.

The limits of McKinnon's parody become clear as Jost asks about the strategy to mount legal challenges to the vote counts in several states. McKinnon's Rudy outlines "tons of strategies," first and foremost that "we're going to throw out bogus mail-in ballots. Colin, these ballots, they could be coming from Mars" (SNL 11/07/20). In

response to this comment, Jost quickly interjects, noting, “Right, yes. No, that is a real thing that you really did say” (SNL 11/07/20). Jost breaks down the boundaries between McKinnon’s Rudy and Giuliani’s actual press conference earlier that day. Addressing McKinnon, Jost points out that the real Giuliani did state that ballots could be coming from Mars, preventing the misunderstanding that the claim is simply an escalation of absurdity within McKinnon’s parody. McKinnon’s Rudy initially parallels some of Giuliani’s original absurdity with the 30 Rocks joke but adding absurdity to the original reality proves a difficult and ultimately unnecessary task.

Another *Weekend Update* segment mocking Giuliani emphasizes how an absurd reality can outpace humor’s ability to tell jokes about it. Jost highlights a controversial scene from Sacha Baron Cohen’s 2020 sequel *Borat* film, in which Giuliani lies down on a bed after an interview with a young female reporter and “puts his hand down his pants and appears to start touching himself” (SNL 10/24/20). In response to the clip, Giuliani explained that nothing inappropriate had occurred, rather, he needed to lie down on the bed to tuck in his shirt, a claim which, Jost notes, “I think is an actual punchline to a ‘your momma is so fat’ joke” (SNL 10/24/20). Jost’s response to Giuliani’s explanation positions Giuliani as the punchline to a sophomoric brand of humor, a move that does not require Jost to actually tell the joke. Giuliani embodies the joke, so his actions preempt its telling.

In the face of absurd reality, television satire shows can create a space for hosts and audiences to affirm that the reality truly is absurd, even as it outpaces humor. In his own response to Giuliani’s Four Seasons Total Landscaping press conference, Trevor Noah showcases this more straightforward approach. After playing a clip of Giuliani at

the conference, the shot cuts back to Noah, laughing as he asks, “No, guys, come on. How is this real? Like, how is this real?” (TDS 11/09/20). Noah expresses disbelief that something so ridiculous could occur. He brings the audience into this disbelief with the address “guys” and the rhetorical questions. In this role, Noah affirms the absurdity of the reality with his audience, based more in his initial earnest reaction to the clip rather than techniques of humor. In fact, the humor in the rest of the segment focuses less on the substance of Giuliani’s press conference and more on the sex shop next door to the landscaping venue. Confronted with footage of the president’s lawyers outlining their plans to contest an election in front of a Pennsylvania landscaping company’s garage door, maybe it is easier to make jokes about dildos.

The absurdities of the Trump presidency may seem out of humor’s reach at times, but Oliver still finds ways to critique other institutional absurdities that may be taken for granted. While comedians can create absurd parallels to critique the narratives or actions of politicians, as Colbert did in his critique of Pence’s debate claims, Oliver shifts the formula, using external absurdities to point out inherent absurdities of accepted political systems. In another critique of the Trump team’s efforts to “do everything they could think of to subvert this election,” Oliver references Trump tweeting, “We hereby claim the State of Michigan” as vote counts there began to favor Biden (LWT 11/08/20). Highlighting the absurdity of a president claiming a state’s electoral votes by tweet, Oliver notes this “is clearly not how it works. Calling dibs on states is not how we elect a president. We use the Electoral College, which is at least 3% less stupid than that” (LWT 11/08/20). Oliver’s response represents a kind of fact check of Trump’s absurd claim that simultaneously exposes the absurdity of the Electoral College. In essence, Oliver shows

how absurdity exists on every level, within both the Trump team's efforts and the system they are aiming to disrupt.

Outside of Oliver's repurposing of the formula, however, using absurd comparisons to critique the Trump team's excessive absurdities often proves futile. When Trump's campaign claimed that rule changes after the first debate, including muting microphones during opposing candidate's two-minute answer times, favored Biden, Colbert exclaimed, "Enforcing the rules isn't giving someone an advantage. That's like saying, 'The Olympic judges are playing favorites because they won't let me throw bricks at Michael Phelps'" (TLS 10/20/20). And in response to the Trump campaign's debate strategy for Trump to interrupt less and try to be more likeable, Colbert mocked the idea of trying to make Trump more likeable after four years, noting, "That's like a firefighter showing up to your house and saying, 'Okay, let's wait for everything to burn to the ground and sprinkle a little water on there, see what happens'" (TLS 10/20/20). Both these examples are maximally absurd, which serves to disconnect them somewhat from the original reality they aim to critique. They may help Colbert express a level of outrage over the Trump campaign's statements and actions, but they add minimal insight into why the original reality is absurd. In this case, responding to absurdity with more broad absurdity obscures some valuable political nuance.

And, not only do absurd comparisons often fail to provide perspective on Trump's absurdity, they often fail to be funny. Responding to the first debate, Noah extends a metaphor with a goal more earnest than humorous, saying, "Now, let's just be clear. The reason that this debate was such a colossal train wreck is because Donald J. Trump was throwing grenades on the tracks" (TDS 09/30/20). The clearest indication of Noah's

earnestness is the introductory sentence “let’s just be clear,” but the metaphor itself aims more for a description of Trump’s behavior rather than a humorous comparison. Noah also responds to the first debate with a call for more real-time fact-checking as candidates make ridiculous claims, rather than expecting them to fact-check each other or themselves. For comparison, Noah explains, “It’s like the NBA Finals, and then all of a sudden they’re like, ‘Oh, yes, you can call your own fouls.’ No. That’s chaos. You need an actual ref on the court, people” (TDS 09/29/20). There is a humorous element to the idea of players calling their own fouls in the NBA, but Noah quickly follows with an earnest rejection of the absurdity of the idea, explaining the obvious problem with his scenario that without refs, things would devolve into chaos. Rather than allowing any humor to settle in to help make his point, Noah earnestly extends the metaphor to advocate for having a ref on the court. Externally to the debate, Noah himself becomes one of the refs, challenging Trump’s alternative reality and maintaining an earnest commitment to facts.

Affirming Reality

In a political world of alternative realities, comedians present a commitment to rationality, providing fact checks and reality checks. While Trump claimed ratings for the “great” and “exciting” first debate were “very high,” Colbert clarifies, “For the record, he’s lying. The ratings for the debate were sharply down. That’s such an easily checkable lie and he just doesn’t care. It’s like we’re in that George Orwell novel, the one with the pigs that stand on their hind legs” (TLS 09/30/20). Colbert’s response offers a straightforward fact check of Trump’s claim. It also offers an affirmation of the dystopian

nature of the president patently lying about easily verifiable television ratings. And this affirmation brings the audience into a communal understanding that “we’re” in this George Orwell novel together. Colbert’s insistence on fact creates an assurance that we are all seeing the same thing.

Providing a check to alternative political realities often plays out as a fundamental aspect of television satire’s journalism-adjacent form (Fox 2018). Oliver’s point-by-point explication of various issues lends itself to consistent fact checking. When vote totals in several key states began favoring Biden, Trump said, “We’ll be going to the U.S. Supreme Court. We want all voting to stop. We don’t want them to find any ballots at four o’clock in the morning and add them to the list. Okay?” (LWT 11/08/20). Oliver responds directly to Trump’s statement, launching in to say, “No. It’s not okay. It’s not okay at all. For a start, you can’t just threaten to go to the Supreme Court when things aren’t going your way . . . Second, they weren’t finding ballots, they were counting them. Counting and finding are just not the same thing” (LWT 11/08/20). The structure of Oliver’s retort to Trump mirrors the overall structure of his shows. In this episode, he responds to arguments and comments from Trump, Giuliani, and other Trump team lawyers as he moves into explications of the Trump team’s legal strategies and examines in detail how their legal challenges held up in court. Oliver moves, for example, from discussing how some challenges were thrown out of court due to basis in hearsay to debunking the claim that Republican poll watchers were not allowed in some states.

The problem Oliver encounters is that debunking every single claim point-by-point takes longer than twenty minutes every week. Responding to Republican complaints about irregularities during the vote counting process, including poll workers

wearing Black Lives Matter shirts or rolling their eyes at ballots for Trump, Oliver notes these things are not illegal and offers to "head-off any future Trump campaign lawsuits. A poll worker eating a banana is not evidence of voter fraud. One humming the chorus of 'Uptown Girl' is not evidence of voter fraud. Now, wearing a baseball cap could be evidence of voter fraud, but only if the person wearing it is putting valid votes into a paper shredder. If it's just the hat part, that, again, is not evidence of voter fraud" (LWT 11/15/20). This bit represents something of a parody of Oliver's own format, attempting a rational, point-by-point explication of the evidence. But, as he himself realizes, "I could spend the rest of this show debunking stories. The problem is, it's endless" (LWT 11/15/20). Oliver's commitment to reality and rationality can only tackle a small percentage of absurdity each week. His explanation about the limits of his own show exhibits the kind of metacommunication about the role of political humor in the Trump era that Chapter 4 further explores.

Despite the difficulty of debunking every single absurdity of the Trump era, comedians approached Trump's occupation of the Oval Office as the greatest overarching absurdity, and threat to democratic ideals, they faced. And comedians expressed frustration when media and other institutions seemed to avoid the reality that Trump had upended traditional norms. Colbert identifies this dynamic when the Commission on Presidential Debates decided, after the chaos of the first debate, to make new rules to cut off the microphones of both candidates at specified times. Colbert, whose preferred solution—a "small tweak to the format where we never have [debates] again"—was not considered, exclaims, "Come on, why are you pretending these changes are aimed at both candidates?" (TLS 10/01/20). In Colbert's view, the Commission's changes address a

reality that the Commission is unwilling to directly acknowledge. The first presidential debate between Trump and Biden upended the norms of the institution. Colbert clearly places the blame on Trump, while the nonpartisan Commission, in an attempt at objectivity and fairness, maintains a level of pretense as to what prompted the changes.

The Commission's approach would have perhaps worked better under more normal circumstances. For late-night comedians, the vice-presidential debate offered a window into something of a conventional past. Noah describes the debate as "actually pretty normal. Two calm, poised candidates exchanging lines that they'd been practicing for weeks over the course of a largely uneventful 90 minutes. It felt like it was a throwback to what campaigns used to be like before Donald Trump arrived on the scene and turned every political event into a monster truck rally on cocaine" (TDS 10/08/20). Colbert concurs, saying, "It wasn't earth-shattering, but that is how politics should be, remember? You should be able to watch it and go to sleep and not wake up in a cold sweat worried that your healthcare won't cover cold sweats. What I'll remember most about tonight's debate is probably that I won't remember any of it" (TLS 10/07/20). Beyond some predictable humor about a fly that landed on Pence's head for over two minutes, the consensus on the debate is that it was uneventful and unmemorable.

In responding to the vice-presidential debate, both comedians offer an affirmation of what a normal political reality looks like. Colbert specifically argues this is "how politics should be," asking his audience to remember the political reality before Trump, with his reality entertainment acumen, turned politics, as Noah puts it, "into a monster truck rally on cocaine." Inviting the audience to remember the past allows these comedians to emphasize the importance of norms, creating a check on the current

political reality, exposing its entertainment core and reminding viewers that politics and government should not be this way. The grand irony for comedians in this position is that they themselves are political entertainers who traditionally mock and question the political status quo. But Trump's disruption of norms and threat to democratic institutions and ideals led comedians to shift their own role and defend the value of democratic political norms.

Trump's disruption of norms generated both performative and earnest angst from comedians. Uncertainty and worry defined late-night comedy's buildup to the 2020 election, especially in the context of a pandemic, increases in early and mail-in voting, and uneasy memory of shattered expectations four years earlier. The day after the election, Noah realizes, "Maybe what's weirdest is that after all of that, the night actually ended up going mostly as everyone expected," describing how Trump showed strength in in-person votes, counted first, while Biden made gains in mail-in ballots that were counted later, a dynamic many had predicted (TDS 11/04/20). Noah's realization, that the expected reality turns out to be real, displays the extent to which the threat of Trump's alternative reality creates anxiety within television satire's coverage of the election.

Noah ends his November 9th show with an earnest affirmation of reality. In the wake of Trump's claims that he won the election, Noah concludes:

> So maybe Trump will decide to concede eventually, or hey, maybe he won't. It actually doesn't really matter either way, because it's not really his decision to make. Joe Biden is going to become president on January 20th, and Trump's opinion about that counts for exactly one vote, same as any other vote in America. I know it's hard to believe, but, after all this time, it looks like reality has finally caught up with Donald Trump. (TDS 11/09/20)

Only a few days after election night, Noah's observation seems like wishful thinking, but that is really the point. The closing paragraph is notable for the absence of any humor, but

also because it attempts to build back a reality without Trump. Noah sidelines Trump and offers his audience the hope of a reality where the former president becomes insignificant. But despite Noah's efforts, subsequent events like the insurrection at the Capitol question the idea that reality caught up with Trump and his supporters at all.

Like Noah, Colbert greets the news that Biden won the election with a sense of relief. Affirming knowledge and rationality in the wake of Trump's claims, Colbert explains, "We've spent the last four years debating the value of the Enlightenment with a reality show host" (TLS 11/09/20). Colbert uses his own platform on a comedy show to lament the impact an entertainment figure has had on political reality. This dynamic puts Colbert in a position of upholding the value of knowledge rather than telling jokes for entertainment value, stating, "Personally, I think it's better to know than not to know" (TLS 11/09/20). Colbert echoes Noah's reclamation of reality from Trump as he reminds his audience that "the president would like you to believe we will never know who won the election. But we do know" (TLS 11/09/20). Colbert confirms his rational conviction that knowledge can provide an anchor against alternative reality.

Fact checks and affirmations of reality represent an earnest response to the alternative reality and absurdity of the Trump era. These examples feature comedians arguing for how politics should be. Against Trump's disruption of norms, comedians argued for the value of norms, a reversal of satire's traditional role of critique and questioning. Traditional satire also presents a view of how things should be, but it does so through ambiguity and ironic juxtaposition (Gilmore 2018; Young 2020). In the previous examples, however, comedians take a more earnest approach to arguing for political norms. Sincerity underpins Colbert's affirmation of knowledge and Oliver's fact checks.

But as Oliver points out, the endless need for earnest affirmation of reality in the face of Trump's disruption of norms can become wearisome and frustrating for comedians. The following section looks further at the emotion that informed political humor's aesthetic in the weeks before the election.

Telling Jokes While Wearing Something Somber

Despite affirmations of reality from comedians and Colbert's commitment to knowledge and reason, political humor is not necessarily an objective or even rational endeavor. Satire always takes a point of view, and its carnivalesque energy prizes emotion over reason. The outrage comedians felt against Trump's actions and policies may have tempered their ability to enter the playful frame required for humor (Young 2020). As the 2020 election loomed, comedians expressed outrage and worry, sometimes at the expense of humor.

On *Weekend Update*, the hosts directed frustration toward both candidates. In their episode after the final presidential debate, Jost recaps his reaction:

> This debate was so frustrating to watch. Did anyone else find themselves yelling lines at the screen that they wish Biden had said? Like when Trump talked about how good he's been for the stock market, I was like, "Joe, the stock market when you were vice president went up four times higher than Trump's stock market. You have the ball, you're standing above the rim, why will you not dunk it?" Or when Trump said that Biden is all talk a no action, why didn't Biden just say, "Bitch, show us your taxes, show us the vaccine, show us the wall, and show us what prison you locked Hillary in." (SNL 10/24/20)

Jost brings his audience in on his frustration, wondering if anyone else had watched the debate yelling at their television screen. The frustration stems in part from Trump's debate performance, and Jost's bit functions partly as a fact check to Trump's claims. But the bulk of Jost's frustration centers on Biden. Jost argues that Biden failed to refute

Trump's claims himself. The humor here exists somewhat on the periphery, in the metaphor of dunking on Trump's stock market claims or the idea of Biden addressing Trump as "bitch." The indirect humor of these elements, however, ultimately serves the overall earnest frustration Jost expresses.

Michael Che echoes Jost's frustration as he critiques news media for holding town halls with candidates under the assumption that some voters are still "on the fence" about the election, contending that "whether you're voting for Trump or Biden, you've made up your mind a long time ago, and you're probably not thrilled about it. These choices are so bad that Kanye's running and people are like, 'Maybe?' That wouldn't happen if we had actual good candidates. I mean, imagine if Kennedy lost to Nixon because Wisconsin went to Little Richard. All right, whatever . . ." (SNL 10/17/20). Che trails off, discounting the joke comparison of Little Richard running for president. The resigned tone of "all right, whatever" indicates Che's frustration at the lack of "actual good candidates," and the joke, a disjointed historical comparison to Kanye West's presidential ambitions, does nothing to lift Che's spirits.

Segments from the sample before the election portray comedians wearing their emotions on their sleeve. Colbert, live after the first presidential debate, expresses dismay and outrage and the chaos of Trump's performance, admitting to his audience, "but who knows? I can get emotional. Maybe I'm a little overheated" (TLS 09/30/20). Turning to news media for validation, Colbert proceeds to berate the *New York Times* for equating the candidates, urging the paper to "stop pretending that any of this is normal" (TLS 09/30/20). Other hosts express an emotional weariness in the days before and even after the election. Oliver begins his episode on election results acknowledging that "this was

clearly a very long, very tense week," later reiterating that his Sunday night show aired "at the end of a truly draining week" (LWT 11/08/20). Samantha Bee opens her show after the first presidential debate with a bit that highlights her own weariness as well as her educational role as a political comedian. In a parody of burned-out teachers, Bee tells her audience, "I am tired, so tired. Kids, I can't do this today, I'm sorry. I'm just going to put on a movie" (FF 09/30/20). Bee communicates that the exhaustion of politics makes it difficult to create political humor. Of course, Bee ultimately turns the movie off, exclaiming, "Damn it, fine. I'll do my job, or whatever," performing her disinclination to discuss the "infuriating" debate (FF 09/30/20). The question remains what it means for Bee to "do [her] job, or whatever," as the outrage and emotional weariness comedians express can contradict the playful frame of humor.

The most striking example of outrage and emotion in the sample comes from Colbert's November 5 episode. On that day, results of the election were not yet clear, though Biden was nearing the 270 electoral votes needed to win. Trump held a press briefing where he claimed voting fraud and corruption had been rampant and that he had already won the election. Trump's briefing took place around seven o'clock, and Colbert found the event significant enough to overhaul his monologue for that evening's show. Standing behind his desk, he opens by explaining that "we're taping this just a little while after Donald Trump walked into the White House briefing room, actually, and tried to poison American democracy. That's why I'm not sitting down yet. I just don't feel like it yet. It's also why I'm dressed for a funeral because Donald Trump tried really hard to kill something tonight" (TLS 11/05/20). Colbert's level of emotion has him standing, dressed in black, as he expresses his outrage and grief at Trump's assault on democracy.

That outrage and grief define the emotional tenor of the monologue. As he describes Trump's predictability, how "we all knew" he would pretend he had won and accuse others of cheating, Colbert looks down and pauses to hold back his tears, explaining, "What I didn't know is that it would hurt so much. I didn't expect this to break my heart. For him to cast a dark shadow on our most sacred right from the briefing room of the White House—our house, not his—that is devastating" (TLS 11/05/20). Colbert also turns his outrage to Republicans, rebuking their silence and urging, "Say something right now, Republicans. Not later, not after you've stuck your finger up in the wind or wherever you want to put it. Right now . . . You need to choose—Donald Trump or the American people" (TLS 11/05/20). In contrast to silence from other Republicans, Colbert refuses to play clips from Trump's remarks, explaining, "We're not going to show you a second of what that sad, frightened fraud said tonight, because it's poison, and I like you. He can suck silence" (TLS 11/05/20). With this final expression of outrage at Trump, Colbert moves into the originally planned monologue, concluding by noting that "when we come back, you might notice that my emotional tone might have simmered down a bit, because we recorded what comes next before this" (TLS 11/05/20). The disclaimer highlights Colbert's understanding that the humor of the prerecorded segments may no longer match the reality created by Trump's allegations in the White House briefing room.

At the outset of his revised, emotional monologue, Colbert highlights the difficulty of humor in the context of his own outrage at Trump's claims about the election. He notes his wardrobe choices, explaining, "I'm wearing black tonight, because I was getting dressed this afternoon, and I thought, 'He might try some shenanigans, and

it might be fitting to tell jokes while wearing something somber if he goes down that dark path'" (TLS 11/05/20). Colbert's explanation of his black clothes and emotional tone highlights the use of metacommunication, further discussed in Chapter 4, to negotiate political humor's place in the Trump era. More broadly, his idea to tell jokes while wearing something somber encapsulates the conundrum of humor in the Trump era. Colbert's emotion over Trump's actions precludes him from pursuing a fun-and-games-as-usual approach to his comedy show. He does tell a few jokes throughout the monologue, like pointing out that Trump will leave a stain on the office of the presidency, "and not just from his butt bronzer," but the humor remains secondary to Colbert's serious, emotional evaluation of Trump's degradation of the presidency and threat to democracy (TLS 11/05/20). To tell jokes while wearing something somber means the jokes arrive filtered through the seriousness and, for the most part, fade into the backdrop of black.

Conclusion

Trump upended norms of presidential behavior. His disruption becomes clearest in his own parody of "acting presidential," which he performed to laughter at rallies throughout his presidency. Trump argued that his staid, serious impression of a president would be "too boring," highlighting his focus on entertainment value (Baker 2019). The parody of the presidential itself became part of the entertainment. Beyond disrupting political norms, Trump's realization of entertainment politics also reversed the standard model of political humor. Satire traditionally questions assumptions and critiques society, using laughter to resist the entrenchment of norms (Bakhtin 1984). In response to the

television entertainment absurdities of Trump's presidency, however, comedians disrupted their own format to make earnestly affirm reality and defend the value of norms.

Trump's creation of a reality television presidency relied on an alternative reality, where he touted his ability as a dealmaker and discounted the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic, among other alternative facts. Examples at the beginning of this chapter feature comedians pointing out Trump's creation of an alternative reality. Beyond the reliance on alternative facts, Trump and those around him were often so absurd as to resist exaggerated parody. These two dynamics created structural challenges for satire's ability to critique through irony and parody. Structural challenges, combined with the emotional investment over Trump's disruption of norms, led comedians to take a more serious approach to opposing Trump. Oliver's point-by-point debunking of Republican voter fraud claims, Bee's outrage at Trump's disruptive debate performance, and Colbert's emotional reaction to Trump's tarnish on the presidency all represent sincere affirmations of reality in the face of Trump's alternative.

Seriousness from comedians in response to President Trump created an inversion of traditional roles. Rather than following the expected norm of seriousness from politicians that allows satire to question and critique with nonseriousness, Trump himself disrupted norms with an entertainment aesthetic that led comedians to reversing their own role to seriously advocate for the importance of norms. This chapter has outlined three specific conditions that contributed to this reversal. The following chapter looks at metacommunication as a discursive strategy through which comedians are able to clarify and negotiate the serious and nonserious sides of their work. Some of the examples in this

chapter have previewed moments of metacommunication, like Oliver explaining how his show has a limited ability to fact check every absurd Republican claim, or Bee expressing her exhaustion by pretending to cancel her show and just put on a movie, or Colbert's frankness about why he chose to wear black to host a comedy show. The next chapter takes a closer look at the roles metacommunication played as comedians considered their own role amid the outrage and worry around the 2020 election.

Chapter 4

"I Don't Have a Joke for That": Metacommunication in Political Humor

All five shows in the sample feature comedians grappling with the difficulties of humor in the Trump era through metacommunication—self-referential communication about the role of humor in their work. Comedians also discuss their work in external settings like interviews, but metacommunication involves incorporating communication about their own role into the regular format of their shows. The sample of shows leading up to the election is notable for its numerous examples of metacommunication that aim to navigate the role of political humor in relation to the Trump presidency and worry over the election result. These moments of metacommunication provide a unique window into how comedians approach their work, including how they balance seriousness and nonseriousness in response to serious topics they care deeply about.

Humor itself is an inherently metacommuncative process, winking at the audience to bring them in on the joke (Brock 2009). Without this metacommunicative standard of play, the audience remains unable to get the joke (Marsh 2015). The examples in this study, however, involve a more explicit level of metacommunication, sometimes without humor at all. Comedians even use metacommunication to explain a lack of humor on their shows. In this context, metacommunication represents direct explanation, breaking the fourth wall to expose the format and processes of television satire. This explicit metacommunication allows comedians to express outrage and worry about Trump and the election, reflect on their own role as comedians in relation to the Trump presidency, and even use metacommunication itself as an element of their humor.

Ultimately, metacommunication allows comedians to maintain authenticity in the relationship with their audience. Self-referential explanation of their choices mitigates the possibility for misunderstanding. The Trump presidency, with its carnivalesque inversion of entertainment politics, required that comedians examine their role and explain themselves. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Trump presidency created challenges for irony and parody, traditional elements of political satire. Irony, with its gap between what is said and what is meant, creates a double bind, an existential challenge that questions the audience's relation to reality and its representation. A failure to detect irony can create feelings of betrayal in the audience, but metacommunication can break the ambiguity of irony (Nichols 2016). In a politically polarized landscape, metacommunication gives comedians a tool for maintaining audience trust in addition to more broadly negotiating their own role in political discourse.

One of the clearest examples of self-referential communication that gets to the heart of political humor's role in the Trump era comes from *Full Frontal* in a "pandemic video diaries" clip where Samantha Bee and the crew compare production of their 2016 and 2020 election special episodes. The conversation employs self-referential communication in a struggle to understand the purpose of the show. The crew chuckles at their own naïveté for failing to anticipate the possibility of a Trump victory and going all in on plans for a show celebrating the first woman president (FF 10/05/20). To avoid the same mistake, they created the 2020 show with three alternative endings to prepare "a piece that we could make and shoot before the election that would be relevant after the election, in any outcome" (FF 10/05/20). Despite uncertainty about results, Bee notes that the purpose of *Full Frontal* remains the same regardless of election outcomes: "We still

have to live in a world. How do we rebuild what has been broken? How do you keep people energized?" (FF 10/05/20). Strikingly, these self-reflective questions do not explicitly mention humor. Rather, Bee takes a broader approach to defining her purpose, highlighting her focus on rebuilding and keeping people energized, language that could as easily describe the work of politicians or activists.

Beyond this negotiation of her show's purpose, Bee closes the segment with uncertainty: "I know that anything is possible, and so I am planning for the worst. I am hoping for the best, but I won't be expecting . . . whatever. I don't really know. What is the show going to be like? [*chuckles*] What am *I* going to be like? Who am I? What are we doing? Is comedy relevant anymore? I don't know" (FF 10/05/20). The uncertainty and worry of the election create an existential crisis for Bee, leaving her uncertain whether comedy remains relevant. "Planning for the worst," unsurprisingly, impedes the laughter and nonserious side of political humor. Of course, for a progressive comedian like Bee, "the worst," which has prompted her existential questions, is Trump. In the weeks leading up to the election, the Trump presidency and the potential for a second term loomed over political humor.

This chapter focuses on examples of comedians using metacommunication to navigate the role of humor in their work. The first section features examples of comedians lamenting Trump's monopoly on political media attention, arguing that the focus on Trump and the angst of the moment before the election precludes some fun jokes. The following section looks at the adjacent phenomenon of how the absence of jokes can sometimes become part of the humor, though it is a humor based in sincere affirmation of reality rather than irony or parody. The next two sections feature examples

from the election itself, first looking at the self-awareness and metacommunication of election night special episodes and then, once election results became clear, the sincere relief comedians expressed and the hope that being able to ignore Trump would improve their comedic work. The penultimate section displays examples of humor playing an incidental role to more serious arguments from comedians. Metacommunication grapples with the role of humor in television satire, and examples of incidental humor demonstrate the earnestness comedians employ in explicating policy. Finally, the chapter concludes with a look at one of the most striking examples of metacommunication about seriousness and nonseriousness in the sample: comedians' responses to Trump contracting COVID-19. Metacommunication plays several roles, explaining an absence of humor, clarifying ironic humor, or even itself becoming humor. What ties these elements together is the process of comedians thinking out loud about their role in response to the challenges for humor in the Trump era.

Trump's Hold on Humor

One of the themes that runs through the segments in the sample is that Trump creates a political environment that makes the fun aspects of humor difficult or even impossible. Trump himself claims that his own role as president amplified the entertainment value of politics, campaigning on the argument that "if you want depression, doom, and despair, vote for sleepy Joe Biden and boredom, because if you had sleepy Joe, then nobody's going to be interested in politics anymore. That's going to be the end of that" (TLS 10/21/20). The idea that Trump's elevation to the presidency sparked a new era of entertainment politics would ostensibly benefit comedians whose

professional job entails presenting politics from an entertainment perspective. Stephen Colbert makes the exact opposite argument, however, responding to Trump's claim by offering "a preview of what we could be talking about if politics were boring again. Yesterday, one of the writers pitched a story about a popular internet video featuring a very long door handle. Look how long it is. It fits three hands. You want to hear some jokes about that? Sorry, we don't have time for doorknob jokes, because I have to talk about a president who's as dumb as one" (TLS 10/21/20). Colbert communicates that he would like to tell fun jokes on his show, but Trump's statements and actions preclude him from engaging in that kind of humor. And Colbert's self-referential response engages the audience in considering a political environment without Trump. Colbert demonstrates how some fun jokes are being held hostage by a president who sucks all the entertainment oxygen out of the discourse.

Not only does a focus on Trump result in a lack of time for any fun jokes, but several examples also highlight comedians metacommunicating when they feel humor fails to match the moment, using metacommunication to express the direness of the political situation. Amid the tension of the days leading up to the election, Michael Che uses his closing segment on *Weekend Update* to explain, "I feel like the band on the Titanic. Everything's just going bad, and I'm up here trying to do jokes" (SNL 10/31/20). Che invokes the imagery of playing music on a sinking ship, implying that joking dismisses the seriousness of an existential threat, requiring willful ignorance of election-related worry. But by communicating his position as a comedian, Che expresses that tension rather than ignoring it. In another episode, Che responds to Colin Jost's jokes about Trump infecting his supporters with COVID-19 by observing, "It's a dark show"

(SNL 10/10/20). Here again, Che expresses an awareness of humor's limited ability to respond to serious events—jokes may not always match the political atmosphere.

Bee also expresses how angst over the Trump presidency consumes her entire show. The day after the election, as final results remained unclear, Bee enacted an opening sequence where she finally comes out of hiding from election news and stress in the woods to discover the outcome remains unknown. As the worry kicks back in, Bee exclaims, "Oh, no. What does that mean? What does it mean? What do we do? . . . Oh, God. Why can't we just dance and do lip syncs on this show?" (FF 11/04/20). Bee groans that external events are so serious they preclude her from presenting pure entertainment on her show. Instead, she must grapple with important political events and consequences, and the outrage and worry that accompany those topics detract from the fun aspects of a political humor show.

Che ultimately makes the point clear by breaking the headline/punchline format of *Weekend Update*, replacing some of the humor with a darker tone. He juxtaposes headlines about a third peak of COVID-19 cases with evidence of people taking fewer precautions:

> Rates of coronavirus are spiking in almost every state as the country braces for a possible third peak. But are we actually bracing, though? Because the first time, people were having knife fights over Lysol and toilet paper, and now people are back to just eating buffalo wings outside, just licking on their fingers. It's gross. Am I the only one still terrified by this? Remember when Tom Hanks got it like five years ago six months ago, and we all sat there teary-eyed thinking we might lose Forrest Gump? Now a whole football team gets sick and they just move the game. I don't know where I'm going with this, it's just been a really weird week, and I really, really though the president was going to die" (SNL 10/24/20).

Che immediately interjects into the headline/punchline format by questioning the opening headline of this bit. He employs humor in describing how people have become more

complacent about COVID-19 compared to the beginning of the pandemic, but after complaining about this dynamic, he admits, “I don’t know where I’m going with this.” He offers no final punchline. He does offer, in an affirmation of a weary reality, that “it’s just been a really weird week.” This sighing statement, imbued with his own disappointment that Trump recovered from COVID-19, gives his metacommunication a dark tone.

In these examples, metacommunication displays a struggle to define the purpose of political humor and capture the weariness of the moment in the context of the Trump presidency. Whether focusing on Trump leaves no time for jokes, or the dire atmosphere of the Trump era precludes being funny, Trump maintains a hold on humor’s focus and abilities. Even Che’s breaking of the *Weekend Update* format, which mostly focuses on the pandemic, concludes with his admission that his despondency stems more from Trump surviving COVID-19 than anything else. Despite the darkness of these examples, however, metacommunication encompasses a wide range of possibilities, and self-reference also offers unique opportunities for humor.

Metacommunication About/as Humor

Metacommunication about humor, or the lack of humor, can itself become part of the joke. In the face of rampant absurdity that defies satire, metacommunication can offer an avenue for humor, as when John Oliver plays a clip of Rudy Giuliani rhetorically asking, during his argument about voter fraud, “Do you think we’re stupid? You think we’re fools?” (LWT 11/08/20). Oliver fires back, “Yes. Yes, we do. Actually, this is a bit awkward now because we had space for a joke here, but that took no time at all” (LWT

11/08/20). Oliver's comment follows a pattern of an absurd reality outpacing satire. Giuliani rhetorically sets the joke up himself, and it takes, as Oliver points out, embarrassingly little time and effort for a professional comedian to complete it. Giuliani himself becomes the joke, and the humor works for those who believe, as Oliver does, that Giuliani is a stupid fool. As Oliver self-referentially points out, however, this humor requires no joke work from the comedian. Rather than construct a joke, Oliver creates humor here by affirming reality with his audience and self-referentially noting that no joke is required.

On *SNL*, Jost makes a similar observation about a lack of humor that breaks the *Weekend Update* format of headlines followed by punchlines. Jost relates that "Goldman Sachs is reporting that if Joe Biden wins the election, and Democrats regain control of Congress, the economy will recover faster" (SNL 10/10/20). Following this information, Jost admits, "I don't have a joke for that," he simply wants to point out that despite Trump's claims that he improved the economy, the "economy itself" endorsed Biden (SNL 10/10/20). As in Oliver's example, the absence of a joke creates an element of humor, though it is a humor based in affirmation of reality rather than joke work on Jost's part. Notably, the lack of a joke explicitly breaks *Weekend Update's* traditional format of alternating headlines and punchlines, even if the metacommunication about the absence of a joke still provides some comic relief.

Metacommunication can provide explanation, sometimes humorous in and of itself, about a lack of jokes. Oliver points out a situation in which making a joke is unnecessary, and Jost simply chooses not to. In other instances, however, comedians make self-referential comments about jokes they do make, offering perspective on the

non-serious side of satire as well. For example, Trevor Noah responds to Trump's claim that if he loses the election he may have to leave the country by wondering where Trump would go. Crossing potential options off the list, Noah concludes, "He can't even go to Mexico because some asshole built a giant wall. There isn't actually a wall, I just wanted to tell that joke" (TDS 10/20/20). This example features a joke, but it operates within Trump's alternative reality where immigration has been solved by a border wall. Noah quickly clarifies that the joke does not work in reality. In his desire to create a joke, Noah briefly steps inside Trump's reality, but he immediately follows up by destroying the premise of the joke, privileging the fact check over the humor.

Bee also references a joke with a caveat in her show following the first presidential debate. Trump asserts, as part of his attack on policies like the Green New Deal that address climate change, that progressives "want to take out the cows" (FF 09/30/20). In response, Bee admits, "Okay, to be fair, we do want to take out the cows . . . To dinner," the joke visualized by a graphic of Bee and a cow perusing menus in an upscale restaurant (FF 09/30/20). The joke is, by Bee's own admission, not very funny. It is certainly not funnier than the original: the president asserting during a presidential debate that his opponents want to "take out the cows." To explain her own failure at humor, Bee explains that "this show was written last night at 2:00 AM," implying that, under pressure, humor is the first thing to go (FF 09/30/20). With a deadline to create a show the day after the debate, Bee and her writers prioritized their outrage at Trump's debate performance and falsehoods, with jokes playing an incidental role.

Colbert takes this concept of incidental humor even further by employing a false laughter that emphasizes seriousness. The first presidential debate itself featured a

moment of laughter as moderator Chris Wallace asked Biden to answer the final question from Trump's preceding diatribe. As Biden hesitated, "The final question is . . . I can't remember with all his ranting," Wallace chuckled and agreed, "I'm having a little trouble myself" (TLS 09/30/20). Colbert ironically echoes the laughter, apprehensively chuckling and saying, "It's funny. We are facing the most important election of our lifetimes and we're letting the idiot who shouts the loudest decide what we talk about" (TLS 09/30/20). Colbert's nervous laughter argues that laughter is an inappropriate response to Trump's behavior during the debate. The metacommunication here occurs because Colbert explains what caused the original laughter. But his explanation and uneasy laughter point out that real laughter does not match the seriousness of the context, a reversal of role as Colbert critiques laughter rather than attempting to cause it.

Colbert repeats the trick, with increased metacommunication about humor, in response to Trump's claims of voter fraud. Trump, claiming the system is obviously rigged, argues that "the only one that knows that better than me are the Democrats, and they go into closed rooms and they must laugh like hell" (TLS 10/01/20). Colbert, again with tense laughter, replies, "Sure, they're all laughing. Hey, that reminds me of a joke. Why did the chicken cross the road? To escape to Canada because Bill Barr is turning dissidents into McNuggets" (TLS 10/01/20). Here again, Colbert's nervous laughter points out that Democrats actually find it difficult to laugh in response to Trump. The joke Colbert remembers delivers an example of anti-humor, where the set-up follows a widely known joke format, but the punchline takes a darker turn. Trump assumes Democrats must be laughing, but Colbert assures that they really are not.

Pointing out the inappropriateness of humor in certain contexts can also become part of the intended humor. Noah observes a huge early turnout among Black voters, turning to his audience to emphasize, "That's right, I said, 'early.' I don't want to hear another joke about Black people being late ever again" (TDS 10/30/20). Noah uses early turnout among Black voters to dismiss a stereotype. But he argues that "jokes about Black people being late" are inappropriate not because they rely on a racial stereotype but because Black voters have disproven the jokes by showing up early to vote. Because of this level of absurdity, Noah's comment retains a humorous core that emphasizes his earnest hope that the Black vote will prove instrumental in "kicking [Trump] out" (TDS 10/30/20). Noah's dismissal of a certain kind of joke lays a groundwork for his advocacy for the importance of the Black vote.

Metacommunication allows comedians to take several approaches to jokes. It can explain the absence of humor or a lack of joke quality, adding a layer that can itself become humorous. It can also take an ironic look at external humor, pointing out situations in which humor or laughter are inappropriate responses. With these features, metacommunication situates humor, and lends it a newfound nuance, in the context of the unique challenges of the Trump presidency. Metacommunication appears throughout examples before the election, but election night special episodes from Bee and Colbert especially highlight the angst from Trump's hold on humor and the self-awareness of metacommunication.

Self-Aware Election Special Episodes

Election special episodes create a unique opportunity for metacommunication about the worry of a repeat of the previous election and self-awareness of television satire's format. As noted earlier, Bee begins her election special bemoaning that politics precludes her from presenting a more entertaining, worry-free show (FF 11/04/20). The episode also presents parody television ads throughout with a self-awareness of its own position on television. One car ad urges viewers to head to the local dealership to "hop into one of our award-winning cars and start driving as far away from this country as you can" (FF 11/04/20). Intense worry about the election permeates the ad. Promoted safety features, including dual airbags, anti-lock brakes, and a loaded handgun in the glove compartment, hint at post-election violence (FF 11/04/20). Several fake reviews build the tension and break the television car ad form: "J.D. Power and Associates named our cars, 'Good enough to flee this land God forgot.' *Car and Driver* magazine said, 'Can we come with you?' *Better Homes and Gardens* raved, 'Drive, just drive'" (FF 11/04/20). These frantic reviews, juxtaposed with conventional ad footage of cars cruising through stock scenery, expose the television ad's self-awareness, which in turn exposes an underlying anxiety about election results.

As it concludes, the ad fully turns its gaze out from the television toward viewers, urging, "Hurry before it's too late. It's your last chance. Time is running out. I'm not being rhetorical, why are you just sitting there?" (FF 11/04/20). The ad, self-aware of its format, confronts a key irony of television satire. Bee's election episode argues that the election should be worrying enough to vote or perhaps even flee to Canada, but by definition the viewers she seeks to engage are sitting watching television. The

metacommunication in the ad displays *Full Frontal's* awareness of its existence on television, though it can only face the problem through ironically berating its own viewers for "just sitting there."

Colbert also begins his election special episode by confronting his position on a comedy show on election night. He notes that "a lot of people are asking me why we're doing this thing again. We did it four years ago, and it was, quite famously, a painful experience" (TLS 11/03/20). Trump's 2016 victory had dampened the celebratory atmosphere of Colbert's election special and raised the question whether comedy can adequately respond to something many take so seriously. The last election special had turned from fun to painful, and Colbert begins his second attempt with a dose of uncertainty, comparing the ingredients of the show to cookies that will either end up with chocolate chips, raisins, or a handful of thumbtacks (TLS 11/03/20). He also grapples with satire's line between serious and non-serious, clarifying that, "while this is a comedy show, so far, the results you'll be hearing are real" (TLS 11/03/20). Colbert explains that his election updates will not be ironic but will echo official news updates from CBS, a serious aspect of his show. He also goes a step further in indicating that the episode could devolve away from any nonserious elements; it is only a comedy show "so far." Developments in the election could preclude the applicability of humor.

Election special episodes crystalize the angst before the 2020 election. *Full Frontal's* frantic ads encouraging people to flee and darkly hinting at post-election violence highlight metacommunication's self-awareness, and Colbert's underscoring of uncertainty—the live episode is not guaranteed to remain a comedy show—tries to settle down between the serious and nonserious sides of satire. The display of the struggle

echoes the broader challenges for humor in the Trump era, with an underlying sense of hope, represented by Colbert's chocolate chip cookies, that a reversal of Trump's carnivalesque hold on entertainment politics will allow comedians to get back to their regular jobs.

Relief at the Results: Releasing Trump's Hold on Humor?

When election results finally became clear, the prevalent response from comedians was relief, highlighting the earnest potential of metacommunication. Jost outlines the extent to which Trump had held the attention of comedy shows, arguing that "the most important thing about Donald Trump losing this election is that pretty soon, we will never have to listen to Donald Trump again. We may want to listen sometimes for entertainment, just like we might want to slow down to get a better look at a burning car, but we don't have to" (SNL 11/07/20). Though Jost admits that Trump provides a morbid entertainment value for shows like his, he expresses relief that Trump will no longer command the attention of his show. Trump's exit from the center of political discourse gives Jost a sense of freedom.

Colbert goes the furthest in making an earnest and self-reflective assessment of Trump's departure. Against the idea that Trump's election represented a boon to political humor, Colbert relates:

> I got up this morning, I was walking on the steps, and I just felt all of this available brain space. It's not filled with anything else yet. It's just like a clean kitchen counter where something could be made if we're just not cluttering it up with that guy. Saturday afternoon, right after we heard that Joe had clinched the Electoral College, we were on the porch, and I sat down and just started crying with relief and Evie said, 'You never have to talk about him again.' Then I cried with joy. (TLS 11/09/20)

Colbert attributes his tearful reaction to feelings of relief and joy over Biden's victory and never having to talk about Trump again. Trump's absence, which Colbert credits for his "available brain space," makes room for Colbert to create something rather than "cluttering it up" with Trump. While many, including comedians themselves, saw entertainment value and comedic potential in Trump's election to the presidency, Colbert argues that Trump's absence creates a better opportunity to create comedy.

Colbert agrees with Jost that Trump maintained a monopoly on comedic attention for four years, communicating his hope that "for the first time in four years we'll be able to shift our collective focus away from him onto anything else. Maybe each other" (TLS 11/09/20). Colbert, willing to talk about anything but Trump, indicates that a focus on Trump has diminished capacity to understand each other. Colbert also spends an extended amount of time reflecting on how a focus on Trump impacted his own humor. With Trump's departure in view, Colbert offers a self-reflective assessment of the past four years and a look toward the future:

> I'm also looking forward to possibly people being nicer, including me. One of the things I've found about this job is that I tend to reflect back the national tone, and that tone comes from the top. The president's only emotions are angry, look at me, and I'm angry you're not looking at me. Because he was the only thing we were focused on for the last four years, and this is entirely my responsibility, I've done harsher jokes than I've ever done in my entire life. (TLS 11/09/20)

Colbert laments the harsh humor that characterized Trump's tenure in office. It remains unclear, however, where Colbert lays the blame for this humor. He claims entire responsibility for his jokes, but he also notes that he tends to reflect a national tone that originates with Trump. According to Colbert, Trump's own outrage created a tone of national outrage that in turn affected humor as comedians built their jokes from the outrage. Colbert, who claims, strikingly, that he has never done such harsh jokes in his

entire life, seems to regret this shift in the nature of humor and looks forward to being nicer in the future. He follows this earnest, self-reflective look at humor in the Trump era with a joke about Trump's hair.

In the midst of celebration over the election result, Oliver also takes a self-reflective look at the nature of his show in relation to Trump, but he indicates that Trump's presidency only represents part of the equation. After Biden's victory in the election became clear, Oliver outlined his own penchant for focusing on the negative, offering insight into the basic premise of his show and a preview of how it will continue to operate after Trump. Attempting to celebrate Trump's ouster from office, Oliver acknowledges, "Look, by temperament, I'm inclined to overanalyze everything. I can already feel myself starting to do it. I'm starting to focus on the negatives here and be cynical about what a Biden presidency could or even is going to try to achieve. But before we get into anything negative at all, let me just give us all a quick moment, with no caveats, of celebration" (LWT 11/08/20). Oliver, self-conscious of his cynicism, needs to explicitly set time aside for celebration with no caveats. Without this clear designation of time for pure celebratory entertainment, what Oliver calls "uncomplicated fun," his show would include several caveats and complications due to its analysis of negative topics (LWT 11/08/20). And he indicates that "uncomplicated fun" remains an unworkable ideal, even after Trump leaves office.

The Complicated Fun of Seriousness and Humor

The metacommunication from comedians before the 2020 election highlights failures of humor, including serious moments when humor seems inappropriate, explicit

documentation of the absence of jokes, assertions that there is no time for jokes or uncomplicated fun, and even questioning comedy's relevance. Comedians communicate explicitly about how humor becomes difficult when they respond to serious political issues they care about, particularly, as Colbert argues, when the conversation takes place in the context of a national tone of outrage set by the president himself. If humor seems difficult to incorporate, particularly for emotional issues like immigration and the election, comedians can default to earnestness to make their viewpoint understood. This separation of the serious and nonserious sides of satire may help maintain a level of authenticity, but it also creates a vulnerable position for comedians as they lean into earnest arguments over topics they are passionate about.

One of political humor's serious effects is the acquisition of political knowledge in its audience. Political humor can create a gateway to traditional news, leading viewers to pay more attention to events and topics in the news (Feldman and Young 2008; Xenos and Becker 2009). Humor can also directly increase knowledge on the topics it covers. Humor's unique and playful presentation of information remains central to its efficacy—the humor itself provides an important component of the knowledge and learning (Young and Hoffman 2012; LaMarre 2013). As comedians lean into serious explication of policy, however, humor can become separated from the seriousness, creating some uncertainty about the role of humor working to make a serious point and increasing political knowledge.

Uncertainty about humor's place comes through in the way some jokes become incidental to an overall earnest flow of a segment. Bee presents a segment critiquing Trump's handling of immigration policy, particularly an executive proclamation that

imposed a “sweeping ban on immigration” that Trump hailed as “a very powerful order” (FF 11/11/20). Bee responds to Trump’s boast by joking, “Yes, but not as powerful as my order at Chipotle—beans. That’s it. Just a big old plate of beans and look me in the eye when you serve them to me” (FF 11/11/20). Not only is the joke arguably not all that funny, it responds to an incidental aspect of Trump’s executive action rather than providing a humorous perspective on the proclamation. Bee continues the segment with a serious focus on details of the policy:

> Trump’s proclamation initially blocked family-based immigration for siblings and parents. One of the cornerstones of Trump’s agenda has been to end family immigration, the way the vast majority of immigrants come to the United States. That’s largely thanks to Stephen Miller, who has been dreaming about this since the day he chewed his way out of his mother.
>
> The immigration ban was then expanded to bar most foreign workers from coming to the U.S. on employment-based visas as well. For comparison, last year alone, the U.S. issued nearly 200,000 H-1B visas for highly skilled workers, which are largely used in the tech and medical industries, but now, thanks to the ban, those kinds of workers are no longer allowed into the country. (FF 11/11/20).

Bee’s explanation of the history of the policy, with detailed facts and numbers, isolates the Chipotle beans joke, which has no connection to the policy itself. The explanation unfolds with only one other joke, which is an incidental (though grotesque) insult aimed at Stephen Miller that bears no direct connection to the policy specifics under discussion. Segments like these demonstrate Bee’s prioritization of her earnest argument about immigration policy, with jokes taking a back seat to the overarching argument.

The Daily Show provides a more reliable level of silliness than most of its competitors, but the humor, even if more ubiquitous, can still become incidental and even detrimental to Noah’s more earnest arguments. Learning that astronaut Kate Rubins cast an absentee ballot from space, Noah responds:

> Guys, I'm happy that astronauts can vote, but America has to ask itself about its priorities when it's easier for a white lady in space to cast her ballot than an old Black lady in Georgia. Just look at the lines down on Earth. Have you seen these lines? The lines look so long. Forget buying new Air Jordans. Looks like people are lining up to buy Michael Jordan. I've heard they've only got one, but I'm hoping they make an exception. (TDS 10/26/20).

Noah begins with an earnest critique of race and voting in the U.S. As he moves to discussing how long lines create part of the problem, however, the point becomes obscured by a strange joke about the scarcity of Michael Jordan creating high levels of demand for buying him. Because the joke is ultimately unrelated to Noah's point about the difficulties many Black voters face, the humor distracts from the earnest message.

Even when humor avoids distracting from an earnest point, it can play a secondary role to facts and advocacy. To avoid ironic humor being misunderstood and detracting from an argument, comedians can qualify an ironic statement with an earnest clarification of their viewpoint. Critiquing Georgia's long voting lines, some more than ten hours long, Bee parodies Georgia officials who attributed the long lines to voter enthusiasm: "See, voters? It's all your fault. If you didn't all try to vote, the lines wouldn't be so long" (FF 10/21/20). Bee's statement offers a fairly clear parody of Georgia officials, but she follows up with an earnest explanation to drive the point home: "I mean, obviously higher turnout leads to longer lines, but so does offering fewer polling places. Since 2013, Georgia's voter rolls have grown by nearly two million people, but their polling locations have been cut by almost 10%, a change that impacts Black communities more than white ones. In fact, race is one of the strongest predictors of voting wait times. People of color are seven times more likely than white voters to have to wait in line for more than an hour" (FF 10/21/20). Here the humor is not incidental to the topic at hand, but it still plays a secondary role to the facts and statistics Bee employs

in her critique of Georgia's voting system. She opens with a brief parody but then digs into details to make her own position clear.

In theory, political humor can use jokes to make serious critiques. These examples, however, portray comedians either making a serious point in earnest, with humor playing an incidental role, or using humor with a silliness that detracts from the serious point. Both extremes highlight the difficulty of navigating the serious and nonserious sides of humor, particularly in the Trump era. Earnestness creates vulnerability, and for progressive comedians who hold values about issues like race, immigration, voting, and the overall well-being of the country, the Trump presidency threatened those values in a way that made humor more difficult. Though earnestness creates more vulnerability for comedians, at times it may seem like the only appropriate response.

Metacommunication and the Limits of Earnestness

Some of the most striking examples of earnestness in the sample come from segments responding to news that Trump had contracted COVID-19. The radically different approaches to earnestness from different comedians, and their metacommunication about those choices, highlight the potential and limits of earnestness in political humor. Colbert took a remarkably serious approach to Trump's positive test, producing an unplanned Friday episode of *The Late Show* and beginning by telling viewers, "Say what you will about the president, and I do, this is a serious moment for our nation, and we all wish the president and the first lady of the United States a speedy and full recovery" (TLS 10/02/20). Colbert sets aside his usual comments about the

president to mark how serious he feels the moment is for the nation collectively, including "we all" in earnestly wishing the Trumps a full recovery.

Colbert does allow flashes of humor through, but he consciously keeps himself on track with a serious tone. Describing his reverence for the office of president of the United States, Colbert explains:

> I really think it's important for all of us to separate the man from the office, and I hope on November 3rd we literally do, but for now, I find it troubling, moving even, to see the president of the United States being taken to the hospital and to imagine the responsibility those service members flying that helicopter must feel. Trump is now in a special suite at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center for the next few days as a precautionary measure. (TLS 10/02/20)

Colbert humorously advocates for ultimately voting Trump out of office, but he quickly adjusts his tone after the joke, noting the election is in the future and "for now" he focuses on his emotion at learning of the president's condition and the implications for the country.

Toward the end of the earnest segment, Colbert turns to those who have reacted to news of Trump's illness with satisfaction or laughter:

> A lot of people are experiencing schadenfreude right now. In fact, Merriam-Webster reports a 30,500% spike in searches for schadenfreude after Trump's COVID diagnosis. I for one take no pleasure in Donald Trump being sick, because like him or not—for the record, not—he is the president. It is his job to run the country. That's a tough job for anybody. Now, he's got to do it while he's sick. (TLS 10/02/20)

Colbert expresses his earnest emotion at seeing the president of the United States flown to the hospital. He rejects schadenfreude as an appropriate response, claiming he takes "no pleasure" in the president's situation. Colbert seems to want to avoid this earnest expression of emotion being misunderstood, affirming his hope that Trump will be voted out in November and noting "for the record" that he is not a fan of Trump. But these

disclaimers seem necessary because the rest of the segment is steeped in a seriousness, complete with well wishes for the Trumps, that Colbert believes the only appropriate response to the news.

Noah takes a middle ground, not expressing the same level of personal earnestness as Colbert but still noting the seriousness of the event and taking the opportunity to advocate for precautions against COVID-19. Like *The Late Show*, *The Daily Show* typically has no Friday episode, so Noah posted a cell phone video to the official *Daily Show* YouTube account. Expressing some shock at the news of Trump's infection, Noah reflects:

> As a comedian, I'm not going to lie, my first instinct was to make jokes . . . jokes about how Dr. Fauci is probably at the White House right now, prescribing Trump bleach injections and bottles of I told you so, dumbass. But then, another idea came to my mind. If the president of the United States can get the coronavirus, then what excuse do the rest of us random assholes have for not wearing a mask? . . . People. Coronavirus doesn't care about your politics. It doesn't care if you believe in it or not. What it does care about is if you're wearing a mask. (TDS 10/02/20)

Tongue in cheek, Noah tells his jokes in the course of explaining how he decided to take the higher road and not tell his jokes. But from there, he does earnestly advocate for wearing masks to slow the spread of COVID-19. Though he does not approach Trump's infection with quite the same seriousness as Colbert, he still treats COVID-19 seriously and uses the news about Trump to advocate for safety precautions. By taking Trump's infection as proof that COVID-19 is real, contagious, and dangerous, Noah assumes an audience of those who had dismissed the effectiveness of mask wearing or even the reality of the pandemic itself. Many of those who rejected wearing masks were supporters of Trump, and Noah seems to build an argument aimed at convincing anyone who supports Trump that "coronavirus doesn't care about your politics" and if Trump had

gotten sick so could they. The result is an earnest plea for everyone to take the pandemic seriously, though there are presumably very few, if any, Trump supporters in *The Daily Show's* audience.

Weekend Update aired its first episode of the season the day after news broke of Trump's positive test, and in this context, the hosts provide a unique, performative example of earnestness failing. Jost and Che, with strong self-reflective communication throughout, indicate they know the moment requires seriousness. They perform an attempt to be earnest but ultimately cannot keep from making jokes. Jost opens by questioning the level of sincerity in well wishes for the president, observing, "It's been very weird to see all of these people who clearly hate Trump come out and say, 'We wish him well.' I think a lot of them are just guilty that their first wish came true" (SNL 10/03/20). Questioning the motives of people "who clearly hate Trump" wishing him well, Jost points out that seriousness may not be the same as sincerity. Che follows with a joke that begins with a serious tone: "Yes, well, you know, politics aside, this is awful news for us because Trump was actually supposed to host *SNL* next week" (SNL 10/03/20). Signaling, "politics aside," Che begins discussing the "awful news" in seriousness until his punchline—that the news is awful because it creates a scheduling difficulty for the show—betrays his unserious approach to Trump's illness. The joke also takes aim at *SNL* itself, as Trump did host the show in 2015 amid anger and embarrassment from the cast and protest from the public (Yahr 2021).

After his joke about Trump hosting *SNL*, Che makes a new attempt at seriousness: "No. Okay, serious voice. While in the hospital, the president isn't allowed to see any guests, but he is expected to be visited by three ghosts, probably one from his past, one

from his . . .” (SNL 10/03/20). Che trails off as his attempt to seriously convey the news again slides into a joke. After two failed attempts at earnestness, Che explains his predicament:

> Okay, look, this is weird because a lot of people on both sides are saying, “There’s nothing funny about Trump being hospitalized with coronavirus even though he mocked the safety precautions for the coronavirus.” Those people are obviously wrong. There’s a lot funny about this. Maybe not from a moral standpoint, but mathematically, if you are constructing a joke, this is all of the ingredients you need. (SNL 10/03/20)

Che’s metacommunication breaks away from his failed seriousness to explain why he finds it so difficult to refrain from laughing. Though others argue that the president being hospitalized is never funny, and Che seems to agree “from a moral standpoint,” but the humor of the situation—the ingredients for a joke—is too apparent to be ignored.

In fact, the apparent humor of the situation brings Che back to the classic problem of reality outpacing satire. Describing the wealth of humor in the fact that Trump ended up in the hospital after mocking pandemic safety precautions, Che observes, “The problem is it’s almost too funny. Like, it’s so on the nose. It would be like if I was making fun of people who wear belts and then my pants just immediately fell down” (SNL 10/03/20). Che begins by disagreeing with those who find Trump’s condition not funny at all and ends up at the opposite extreme, admitting the situation is possibly *too* funny. Ironically, as Che points out with his parallel belt example, this opposite extreme also diminishes the humor of the situation, and as he concludes the bit, he shrugs his shoulders and sighs, enacting an uncertainty about how to proceed.

Jost concludes the segment with a thought experiment about the reversal of roles. After the duo’s string of harsh jokes about Trump getting sick, Jost says, “I will point out that if the situation were reversed and it was Biden who got sick, Trump would 100% be

at a maskless rally tonight getting huge laughs doing an impression of Biden on a ventilator. Just saying" (SNL 10/03/20). Partly, Jost's comment provides some cover for the harsh jokes—Trump himself mocks the seriousness of COVID-19 so there are grounds to mock him back. But the observation also raises political humor's existential question in the Trump era: what is the responsibility of comedians when politicians are unserious or even dangerous? Though Trump, in his role as president, acts as a comedian, doing impressions and "getting huge laughs" at rallies, why, Jost wonders, should comedians react by shifting their own role to be more serious? Where Colbert takes the serious approach, (mostly) rejecting humor in response to an event as serious as the president of the United States going to the hospital, Che and Jost hold their ground, arguing that humor, maybe even especially in this circumstance, is still warranted as a critique of those in power.

Conclusion

Metacommunication crops up throughout the sample of pre-election television satire shows as comedians grapple with the difficulties of humor in the Trump era. The comedians from these five shows all have well-defined points of view, and they earnestly care about political issues like immigration and the election. This emotional investment leaves little room for what Oliver calls "uncomplicated fun" (LWT 11/08/20). Instead, comedians attempt to make earnest arguments that at times leave humor playing a secondary role, if humor seems applicable at all. Several examples of metacommunication, like Colbert not having time for fun jokes or Bee wondering why she "can't just dance and do lip syncs," indicate that comedians at times feel precluded,

whether through absurd reality outpacing satire or intense worry before the election, from making jokes (TLS 10/21/20; FF 11/04/20).

Metacommunication plays several roles in the sample of television satire shows from before the election. It functions to explain a lack of humor or failed attempts at humor in a way that can also create a larger joke about how difficult it is to create humor in the Trump era. After the election, comedians used metacommunication to reflect on the way their humor responded to the challenges of the Trump presidency and how their role might look moving forward. This chapter opens with Bee's existential questions about the style of her television show and the relevance of comedy. The election may not have cleanly answered those questions. As Oliver notes, enough serious issues in politics and policy remain for comedians to seriously analyze.

The seriousness and self-awareness of metacommunication echo the seriousness and self-awareness of advocacy, another key way comedians respond to pre-election outrage and worry. Metacommunication breaks the fourth wall, exposing the format and processes of television satire. Advocacy similarly breaks the fourth wall, looking outside the television to encourage political participation. In fact, examples of advocacy from comedians can include metacommunication about their role and the role of the audience. Metacommunication and advocacy complement each other as responses to the difficulties of humor in the Trump era. The following chapter takes a closer look at how comedians approached pre-election advocacy.

Chapter 5

"PLEASE VOTE": Earnest Advocacy and the 2020 Election

Advocacy is the active support and argument in favor of a specific cause or policy. Satire always represents a kind of advocacy, as it takes a clear moral baseline and ironically juxtaposes what is and what should be (Gilmore 2018; Young 2020). Allowing unique perspective, mocking individual and societal foibles, and calling out bad actors all contain arguments for change. Crucially, satire's arguments for social change rely on laughter (Bakhtin 1984). This requirement for laughter creates a level of ambiguity, leaving audiences to piece the argument together for themselves (Young 2020). Earnest advocacy, in contrast, makes the stakes and solutions explicitly clear, at times without any humor. As parallel projects, satire and advocacy coexists naturally, though the key distinguishing element between them is laughter (Caron 2016).

Earnest advocacy represents another approach that comedians rely on in response to the challenges of the Trump era. In the face of alternative political realities, political comedians make efforts to present a more earnest viewpoint to avoid being misunderstood (Van Hoozer and Peuchaud 2020). As polarization and distrust in media expand, rather than rely on humor's potential to expose folly based on a moral consensus, comedians employ advocacy based in an earnest explication of policy and contribution of possible solutions (Kilby 2018). By offering earnest, step-by-step implementation of solutions to political problems, comedians avoid the audience misunderstanding humor and irony and gain the opportunity to explicitly advocate political participation. Satire is never objective, and neither is the more earnest advocacy alongside it. Comedians navigate increasing polarization in part by staking a stronger claim to ideological or

sometimes even partisan ground, often signaling their position and assumed audience with first-person plural pronouns.

Unsurprisingly, comedians' encouragement of political participation leading up to the election focuses on voting. Satire mocks broad political or social foibles, but direct advocacy like encouraging voting represents different goal for comedians than simply mocking the system. Examples from before the election feature comedians outlining the stakes of the election, focusing on Trump administration policies and the potential consequences of another Trump term as well as challenges to the election itself, including the pandemic and Republican efforts to make voting more difficult. As comedians delve into in-depth exploration of these topics, they often build on an outrage that ultimately underpins the resulting advocacy. Several examples portray comedians expressing outrage over Trump administration policies or actions regarding immigration, the courts, and other topics and then using that outrage to further their advocacy for a particular outcome. Much of this advocacy occurs in the monologue or field piece segments of television satire shows, but before the election *Full Frontal* and *The Late Show* developed specific voting advocacy campaigns that had their own websites and operated beyond the confines of television. While comedians often tend to insist that they themselves are not activists, the earnest advocacy they employ on their platforms strengthens a connection between humor and activism.

One of the ways political humor and activism come together is through comedians highlighting activism they support. John Oliver devotes the end of his November 8 show about the election results to celebrating the work of activists. Noting that "defeating Trump took a lot of work, much of it by activist groups led by those with the most to lose

from a second Trump term," Oliver looks at activists who both led turnout efforts and won races of their own (LWT 11/08/20). He starts with Stacey Abrams, who led a turnout effort in Georgia and, "just before the presidential race was called, . . . was already tweeting out details about the January 5 runoff for Senate and making sure people requested their ballots" (LWT 11/08/20). Oliver argues that "if the Democrats are smart, which they are not always, they should listen to her and activists like her going forward" (LWT 11/08/20). He also celebrates figures like Ritchie Torres and Mondaire Jones as the first gay Black men elected to Congress, and Cori Bush, a Black Lives Matter activist, as Missouri's first Black congresswoman (LWT 11/08/20).

Oliver presents the success of activism as a source of hope for the future, saying, "Look, it is going to be a long road to dig us out of the place that the last four years have put us in, but that is why it might be so important to remember the moments of triumph that this week has managed to provide" (LWT 11/08/20). Learning from the success of activism, Oliver argues, can provide insight for the hard work ahead. Oliver then places himself in relation to the work of activists, stating, "There will be big systemic institutional problems we need to talk about in the months and the years to come, and we will because, for some reason, this is the life I've chosen" (LWT 11/08/20). On the heels of celebrating the work and results of political activism, Oliver turns to his own position as a late-night host with a platform to discuss big systemic problems, and his self-deprecating humor implies the task can prove wearisome. But his assertion that "we need to talk about" these political problems highlights his view that the in-depth format of his show makes an essential contribution to political discourse. And this need to provide

information echoes Abrams's efforts to, even before results of the national presidential election were called, put out information about the upcoming Georgia Senate runoff.

Oliver's celebration of activism, and his definition of his own role talking about big systemic problems, outlines the traditional relationship between humor and activism. Comedians use humor to bring attention to issues or particular activists, which encourages people to continue the discussion with friends and co-workers and even take action. Humor's unique effects are central to the process, as comedy creates a new perspective on issues and encourages engagement, making a serious point through making us laugh (Borum Chattoo and Feldman 2020). This dynamic changes, however, when comedians lean into earnestness, seriously and directly advocating for policy outcomes or specific political participation. In instances like the leadup to the 2020 election, where outrage and worry set the tone for comedians, serious advocacy becomes and end unto itself.

Voting represented the central cause for advocacy and solutions leading up to the election, particularly in the unique context of the pandemic and expanded early and mail-in voting. The first section of this chapter looks at the advocacy campaigns and instructional segments comedians created to encourage voting. The second section looks at elements that drive earnest advocacy in television satire shows, including the structural element of presenting serious solutions and emotional drivers like outrage and exhaustion that led comedians to advocate against Trump before the election. The third section looks at how comedians conveyed the stakes of the election, earnestly describing the serious consequences of Trump's presidency as an argument against his reelection. Two specific topics, immigration and the federal courts, received strikingly serious attention from

comedians. Finally, the chapter looks at performative participation and trolling as variations on advocacy that reintroduce some of the playfulness of humor. Overall, the examples in this chapter highlight comedians as they navigate the serious and nonserious—specifically, earnest, outraged advocacy for voting against Trump and laughter's more implicit call for change—in response to Trump. Several examples, particularly where comedians outline the stakes of the election, leave humor to the side.

Earnest Advocacy for Voting

Late-night comedians in the sample use their shows to spread specific information about casting a ballot and advocate voting right up until the election. A clear example comes from the end of Samantha Bee's October 28 show. The clip is excerpted into its own forty second video on YouTube, and its title implores viewers to "PLEASE VOTE" (FF 10/28/20). The title sums up Bee's closing message: "I just want to say one more time, please vote. The only thing we can safely assume about the day after the election is that our world could look very, very different, and that I'll be delivering the show, still drunk and surrounded by ten McDonald's breakfasts. See you on the other side, America" (FF 10/28/20). The short request, "one more time," that viewers vote represents a culmination of Bee advocating political participation. To further inspire participation, Bee also taps into her audience's worry about the uncertainty surrounding the election, noting that there is little "we can safely assume," other than the vague idea, either threatening or hopeful depending on the outcome, that things could look different afterward.

All five of the shows examined here advocated voting in the leadup to the election, but Bee and Stephen Colbert took an extra step, creating specific advocacy campaigns to distribute information and increase voter participation. Colbert describes his campaign in comparison to a voting PSA created by exotic dancers. Colbert plays a clip of the dancers explaining the importance of voting and telling viewers, "Don't let other people decide who's going to run your community. Get your booty to the poll," with a final call to action to go to getyourbootytothepoll.com "for information on how and where to vote, as well as resources to find out who's running where you live" (TLS 10/01/20). The PSA, with its double entendre and video that Colbert's CBS show blurs, became popular online, and Colbert takes the opportunity to thank the dancers but also complain that it "seems like they're trying to horn in on my turf. Of course, that's the Late Show's website BetterKnowABallot.com, which has voter information for all fifty states and the District of Columbia. Join the millions who have already checked out our helpful videos" (TLS 10/01/20). Though he admits his site has less sex appeal than getyourbootytothepoll.com, he indicates the site's popularity and encourages others to utilize it. And ultimately, his comparison of both websites advocates for using either of them.

Colbert's advocacy campaign represents a broad effort to get out the vote as well as a solution to specific problems related to the 2020 election. Colbert critiques a Supreme Court ruling that rejected a request to extend Wisconsin's deadline for receiving mail-in ballots, taking particular aim at Justice Brett Kavanaugh's opinion and arguing that "if we don't count all the votes, we're not declaring a winner, we're just saying who's ahead at midnight" (TLS 10/27/20). After identifying this problem in Wisconsin's

voting process, Colbert offers his website as a solution: “Hey, Wisconsinites, looks like Brett Kavanaugh doesn’t want your mail-in vote to be counted . . . You make your voice heard anyway. Drop off your ballot in person. To learn how, visit our site BetterKnowABallot.com/WI” (TLS 10/27/20). Colbert offers the website as a solution to a specific problem with voting in Wisconsin, advocating for Wisconsinites to make their voices heard in the election.

The “Better Know A Ballot” website itself contains three-minute videos Colbert recorded detailing the options for voting in each state. Pages for each state also include a text version of the video instructions, and many of the pages have a Spanish-language option. The pages also include links to official state websites, making it easy to register, request a ballot, or track a mail ballot once it has been sent. The home page features a button with an egalitarian appeal to “share #BetterKnowABallot with your friends and family. Also, your mortal enemies. Everyone should vote!” (A Late Show with Stephen Colbert 2020). Colbert’s appeal for voters to “Better Know A Ballot” echoes his rational belief that “it is better to know than to not know” (TLS 11/09/20). Colbert’s advocacy builds from a belief in knowledge leading to effective political participation.

Bee’s advocacy campaign takes a fear-based approach to encouraging participation. *Full Frontal’s* website included a separate “2020 Election” page that outlines the show’s “I Know What You Did Last Election” campaign with the tagline “Samantha Bee wants you to vote like your life depends on it” (Full Frontal 2020a). The paragraph detailing the campaign’s purpose explains:

> Four years ago, Full Frontal with Samantha Bee tried to reason with you. It didn’t work. So this year, they’re telling you to WAKE THE %^&# UP with its brand new “I Know What You Did Last Election” campaign. Our democracy has been trapped in a horror movie since 2016—and not the fun Jordan Peele kind. These

> days reboots are king, but we can't get a sequel of this horror hell. For its 2020 Election coverage, Full Frontal will deploy their own version of fear tactics and use a horror themed campaign to ~~scare~~ rally Americans into voting this November. Because we know what you did last election…
>
> Watch Full Frontal's election trailer below and remember to vote this November . . . or else. (Full Frontal 2020a)

In some contrast to Colbert's knowledge-based Better Know A Ballot, Bee's campaign indicates that reason has proven ineffective and shifts to fear instead. The paragraph argues that democracy is trapped in the alternative reality of a horror movie, and that voting can provide not only an escape but an avoidance of further grim consequences. The language self-consciously grapples with the idea of scaring versus rallying people to vote, though the mashup of horror parodies in the election trailer reduce the seriousness of the advocacy somewhat. With the self-referential description of the campaign's purpose, the campaign becomes a parody both of classic horror films and of *Full Frontal* itself; the horror theme caricatures the serious outrage and fear that consistently underpin *Full Frontal's* humor and advocacy.

Oliver maintains his own classic format of logical, step-by-step explication for his voting advocacy. Though he does not have a specific voting advocacy campaign, he still devotes a significant amount of time to in-depth discussion of the nuances of the 2020 election and best practices for participation. He begins by managing expectations about what election night might look like, suggesting that "it might actually help to stop thinking of it as election night and more as an election month" and that this dynamic "is going to take an adjustment on everybody's part" (LWT 10/04/20). He also describes how Republican efforts to shift the balance in the election could introduce more chaos into the process, asserting that "if you think any of this is me being paranoid, you should know it's already started. In Wisconsin, Republican legislators threaten to sue election

officials for holding an early voting event where 10,000 people cast ballots, suggesting they might seek to have all those votes invalidated" (LWT 10/04/20). He also calls out Texas Republicans for limiting drop off locations for absentee ballots to one per county, including counties with millions of residents (LWT 10/04/20). By describing some of the specific challenges of voting in the 2020 election, Oliver aims to prepare viewers to successfully participate.

Oliver ends the episode with specific guidance on what individuals can do to help the system run smoothly, alerting viewers that "luckily, there are steps you can take" (LWT 10/04/20). Oliver encourages everyone to "make a plan to vote" and outlines some general principles for how to go about making the plan (LWT 10/04/20). Noting that "we don't want everyone" voting in person on election day, Oliver suggests, "If your schedule is flexible enough, and if you live in a state where you can vote early, you should do that . . . Now, if you want to vote by mail, that's great too, but we should be trying to flatten the voting curve to take the pressure off the system. Request your ballot as early as possible, read all the instructions, and send it back or drop it off as soon as you've filled it in" (LWT 10/04/20). Oliver describes the various options in detail, clearly advocating the importance of voting with language like "you should do that" and imperatives like "request your ballot" and "send it back . . . as soon as you've filled it in." The language also includes a sense of community responsibility in Oliver's observations that "we don't want everyone" voting all at once and "we should be trying" to help the system run smoothly.

A sense of community responsibility becomes paramount in Oliver's closing argument. The segment strongly advocates that individuals create a plan to vote that

works best for their individual situation. Oliver continues to advocate the importance of planning by reminding viewers that "the really important thing to remember is, this election is already very different from all those before it, so we all need to be on top of not only our own voting plans but making sure our friends and family are on top of theirs as well" (LWT 10/04/20). Here, Oliver's advocacy extends beyond making an individual plan to vote to helping friends and family make their own plans as well.

Oliver concludes his advocacy for making plans with a vision of the alternative. He argues that "it really is" a bad idea "if your plan is to just sit back and expect the system to magically work itself out and that [Trump] will have a three-quarter life crisis and suddenly turn into a good loser" (LWT 10/04/20). According to Oliver, making a plan to vote is required on two fronts. First, because of unique strains on the voting system brought on by the pandemic, and second, because Trump and Republicans are seeking to shift the process in their favor. Oliver devotes an extended amount of time at the end of this episode to describing these two issues and walking viewers through several options for voting in the 2020 election. Oliver scatters some jokes throughout the segment, though his overall tone remains earnest as he advocates for political participation in a unique election.

These examples feature comedians taking voting seriously, with humor playing an incidental role. Colbert's Better Know A Ballot videos feature some jokes, like his running opening gag that each state has "won" the chance to participate in the election, but overall, the website and videos focus on providing serious, useful information for voters. Similarly, Oliver focuses on outlining the unique challenges of the 2020 election and providing solutions with detailed instructions. The jokes he includes throughout the

segment are tangential, and after telling them he returns to his main, serious purpose. Bee's horror-film parody provides the clearest model of humor, but it is ultimately unclear where the joke is. Bee *does* express earnest angst about the election and *does* use fear tactics to encourage people to vote, making the "parody" less an ironic send up and more a serious declaration of *Full Frontal's* dark emotional tenor. The next section looks further at the serious elements that underlie advocacy from comedians, including the desire to offer solutions, outrage, and exhaustion.

Solutions, Outrage, and Exhaustion

Serious advocacy from political comedians manifests in several different ways. One way is the solutions framing that comedians use to encourage participation in a time of distrust in media and partisan politics (Kilby 2018). But partisan politics, particularly during the Trump presidency, also generate feelings of outrage for progressive comedians who feel invested in politics and policy outcomes (Ames 2020). Outrage over Trump goes hand in hand with worry over the election result, and comedians channel the outrage and worry in several examples to promote participation in the election. Related to that worry, comedians express exhaustion at spending so much time focused on Trump. Examples of metacommunication from comedians in the previous chapter featured their argument that focusing on Trump proved detrimental to political humor, and here comedians extend that argument to include advocating for Trump to be voted out of office. Different approaches to advocacy, including promoting solutions, channeling outrage, and expressing exhaustion, appear throughout advocacy segments in the sample.

Part of advocating solutions involves identifying the underlying problem. In response to Trump and other Republicans claiming that mail-in voting would lead to widespread fraud, Noah explains there is no evidence for such widespread problems, but "that doesn't mean that America has no problems with mail-in voting at all. In fact, the real danger with mail-in voting isn't fraud, it's all the little things that can get your vote thrown out" (TDS 09/29/20). Noah clarifies that there *is* a problem with mail-in voting, just not the problem Republicans have publicized. This correction allows for a discussion of solutions that address the real problem. In this case, Noah outlines key elements of the problem, including "minor human errors" like partially filled in bubbles, mismatched signatures, or missing secrecy envelopes (TDS 09/29/20). Even if these mistakes are avoided, Noah explains that "the government might make your mistakes for you," including duplicate absentee ballots, incorrect addresses on return envelopes, or other clerical errors (TDS 09/29/20).

Having identified these problems with mail-in voting, Noah offers some nuance and a solution: "Look, I don't want to give anyone the wrong idea. The vast majority of mail-in ballots should be fine, but if you want to be even more sure that your vote will count, you should try to vote in person if it's safe for you to do so. If your state offers early voting, that's a good way to avoid crowds and long lines on Election Day" (TDS 09/29/20). This solution responds to the potential for mistakes with mail-in voting. On another level, the solution responds to the worry that "Trump is preparing to hunt down any mistakes that could get a vote thrown out, because he knows that Democrats are planning to overwhelmingly vote by mail" (TDS 09/29/20). Noah expresses a worry that

mail-in voting can one way or another be used against Democrats and suggests voting in person, if possible, as a solution.

Comedians often respond to efforts that make voting more difficult with a combination of outrage and worry. Bee critiques the difficulty of voting in several states, noting ten-hour voting lines due to fewer polling places in Georgia, nine states that do not allow online registration, and the California GOP's installation of unofficial ballot boxes. Confronted with these specific difficulties, and the overall anxiety surrounding the election, Bee suggests that "regardless of where you live, there's a lot to be worried about for this election" (FF 10/21/20). Channeling this worry into advocacy, Bee alerts viewers that "we have only 13 days till the election. That's less than two weeks to mail in your absentee ballot, vote early, or make a plan to vote in person on November 3rd. We all have to show up" (FF 10/21/20). The sense of foreboding that underlies Bee's warning leads to an urgent sense of community responsibility. Like Oliver, Bee suggests the need to make a plan to vote, because the deadline is approaching, and the plan will only work if "we all" participate.

In one *Daily Show* example, Noah moves through outrage to create a new perspective on solutions, using as the example an instance of Republicans apparently attempting to shift the election by making voting easier for their own voters. The California Republican Party installed several of their own ballot drop-off boxes, indistinguishable from official state ballot boxes, in locations around the state. Noah calls the move "shady as hell," exclaiming, "You can't say something's official if it's not official!" (TDS 10/13/20). After admonishing the California GOP, however, Noah uses the example to advocate for making voting easier for everyone with more ballot boxes:

"The deception aside though, I don't think ballot boxes on every corner is actually a bad idea. It should be this easy to vote in America. There should be drop boxes all over the place" (TDS 10/13/20). Noah puts a positive spin on the California GOP's effort, advocating to make voting more accessible, particularly in the wake of "what we saw happening in Georgia just yesterday, where people were waiting in line for eleven hours just to vote" (TDS 10/13/20). Noah's criticism of unofficial GOP ballot boxes in California also allows him to constructively advocate for solutions to make the voting system more accessible overall.

Bee emphasizes the need for everyone to participate by creating a segment that argues the importance of every single vote, basing her argument on intense worry over the election result. Noting that Trump won the state of Michigan in 2016 by an average of two votes per precinct, Bee takes a look at local elections. Hoping to "convince you to vote," Bee talks to a "panel of losers" consisting of four individuals "who lost tight race elections to make it even clearer that every vote matters" (FF 10/21/20). The panel includes candidates who lost elections by a single vote, and one who lost via tie-breaking card draw. With explanations of how local elected officials like prosecutors are very powerful, Bee asks how members of the panel respond to people who complain that voting makes no difference, "How do you restrain yourself?" (FF 10/21/20). Bee assumes the frustration of losing by a single vote and then hearing arguments that voting has no impact. The responses include clearly stating the consequence that "if you're not voting, then your interests are not going to be the ones that are being protected," advocating for avoiding disillusionment by getting "involved in some hyperlocal races," and rethinking the problem "less as a one-vote deciding the election and being more like a community

effort" (FF 10/21/20). Bee agrees with these assessments of voting's importance while maintaining a focus on the disappointment of the losses. After joking with the candidates by double checking that they all remembered to vote for themselves, Bee shifts her tone, stating that "this is no laughing matter," highlighting the panel's progressive credentials, "because these are exactly the type of people we need in office" (FF 10/21/20). Bee uses her "panel of losers" to channel the outrage and worry over tight race elections to advocate the importance of every vote.

Outrage and worry underlie the advocacy on comedy shows, but comedians also express the exhaustion of constantly responding to Trump and use that as another basis for advocating his removal from office. On *Saturday Night Live* just three days before the election, *Weekend Update's* closing segment offers a kind of advocacy based less in outrage than in weariness. *Weekend Update's* format of quick back-and-forth of headlines and jokes does not lend itself to the same kind of direct, outraged advocacy present in the four other shows. Michael Che and Colin Jost lack the time to offer in-depth analysis of policy or develop a campaign to encourage voting. But they still use their final show before the election to advocate against Trump. Che starts by expressing the weariness and anxiety leading up to the election, telling Jost, "I don't know what's going to happen with this election. The tension is just killing me. I don't know what this world's going to be after Tuesday. I may never see you again, Colin. We might both get drafted in the race war" (SNL 10/31/20). Jost builds on Che's weariness, "Now again, guys, the election is in only three days, and I'm a little worried . . . But all I think and believe is that we cannot do another four years of Trump. It is too much. Every day I wake up after two hours of sleep and I Google, 'America still democracy?' Even if you like Trump, at this

point, you have to be exhausted" (SNL 10/31/20). Jost folds even the humor of Google searching whether the U.S. is still a democracy into an overarching sense of weariness.

Jost uses this sense of weariness to explain his own opposition to Trump. He begins with an analogy, comparing Trump to "that friend you had who at 4:00 AM would be like, 'Where are we going next?' and you're like, 'This is fun, but if I keep hanging out with this dude, I'm going to die.' Right now, it feels like Trump wants us all to do another bump of whatever he got from his Muppet doctor and just see where the night takes us. I don't know about you guys, but I think this time I'm calling a designated driver" (SNL 10/31/20). As Jost completes the analogy with the image of the designated driver, he motions to an over-the-shoulder graphic showing a picture of Biden. The analogy somewhat masks the advocacy, but Jost's earnestness breaks through as he tells the audience "we cannot do another four years of Trump. It is too much" and concludes with his own support of Biden. The audience laughs through Che and Jost's back-and-forth jokes throughout the segment, but Jost's concluding advocacy for Biden sparks applause. In *Weekend Update's* typical format, headlines serve the needs of a joke. In this final segment before the election, however, the formula is reversed, and the humor builds toward an earnest solution Jost advocates.

These examples feature outrage, worry, and weariness underpinning advocacy from comedians. Noah moves from worry about Trump's claims of mail ballot fraud and government mistakes to advocate for the solution of in-person voting. Bee focuses on the fear that a single ballot can change the course of an election. Jost expresses weariness after four years of Trump. With these emotions underpinning their work, humor can become more difficult for comedians (Young 2020). Humor plays an incidental role to

earnest emotion in these examples, and even the reliably nonserious *Saturday Night Live* shifts its typical formula to advocate for Biden. The explicit advocacy of outrage remains distinct from the more ambiguous advocacy of laughter. The next section looks further at how Trump's actions on specific topics like immigration and the federal judiciary inspired the outrage and worry that in turn led to strikingly serious advocacy from comedians.

The Political Stakes of Voting: Immigration Policy and the Federal Courts

To convey the urgency of the election, comedians portray political events or policies as the direct consequences of elections. Immigration policy and the shifting ideology of the federal courts represent two issues that comedians return to in their criticisms of the Trump administration. Outlining the details of the issues generates an outrage that comedians use to emphasize the importance of voting Trump out of office.

Immigration provides one focal point for comedians advocating against the Trump administration. In response to news that 545 children separated from their parents at the U.S. border have not yet been reunited with family, Colbert offers a scathing critique of Trump and his administration:

> Trump says and does a lot of dumb things, but we should never let his stupidity overshadow the fact that he's also a heartless monster who must be driven from office and eventually dragged in manacles before the Hague, because of all the horrible things he and his administration have done, perhaps the horriblest is their family separation policy on the border. (TLS 10/21/20)

Colbert voices an outrage based not only on what he views as Trump's stupidity—he spends the time before this paragraph mocking Trump for insulting Erie, Pennsylvania during a rally there, introducing a new campaign ad as an "original Donald Trump

Broadway play," and walking out of a *60 Minutes* interview—but on what Colbert describes as the more "horrible" aspects of the Trump administration (TLS 10/21/20). The shift in tone indicates that the family separation policy is too serious to be mocked. Colbert delivers an outrage absent humor as he advocates for Trump to be not only "driven from office" but also "dragged in manacles before the Hague."

Colbert feeds this outrage into strong advocacy for voting against Trump in the election. He moves the issue beyond Trump, however, framing the election as a referendum on the nature of the country itself:

> We have two weeks to decide what kind of country this is going to be. Either this inhumane behavior is going to be punished by the voters or just change the Statue of Liberty to read, "Give me your tired, your poor, and $500,000 in unmarked bills if you want to see the kids again . . ." There are still people who haven't made up their minds. There are still people who are going to vote for him. I know that people vote on a lot of different issues, but now that we know that these children were stolen from their parents and cannot be returned because of the negligence of this administration, that is one of the things you're voting on. You can't say you don't know. (TLS 10/21/20)

The image of the Statue of Liberty functions partly to add an element of humor, based on the absurdity of Emma Lazarus's "The New Colossus" transformed into a ransom note. But the rest of Colbert's argument, that the Trump administration's policies can fundamentally alter the nature of the country and the symbolism of the Statue of Liberty, deflates the potential for humor. Colbert's advocacy asserts that our national humanity is on the ballot and knowledge of the Trump administration's actions creates complicity. He concludes the segment with a simple call to action: "13 days. Go vote" (TLS 10/21/20).

Bee also uses the Trump administration's immigration policy to advocate voting Trump out in the election. In her discussion of the issue, she focuses on the impact of separation on the children, emphasizing the timeline and the fact that some of them had

not seen their parents in over three years. Adding that some of the children themselves are missing, and even when officials find parents few of them are allowed to reunite with their children in the U.S., Bee concludes, “No matter what happens, there’s no way to avoid the fact that the damage done to these children is permanent” (FF 10/28/20). To bolster her argument about damage to the children, Bee incorporates assessments from the American Academy of Pediatrics and Physicians for Human Rights, which characterize family separation at the border as government-sanctioned child abuse and torture (FF 10/28/20). Bee builds her case on a sense of outrage that the government would separate families and inflict emotional abuse on thousands of children. Then, like Colbert she channels the outrage into advocacy. Emphasizing common cause through first-person plural pronouns, Bee tells her audience, “If we want to end abuses against innocent families, we need to fire the administration that is perpetrating them. Our only way to do that is to vote them out. Make a plan for how you’ll vote and talk to everyone you know to make sure they’re voting, too” (FF 10/28/20). Describing the outrage of family separation at the border builds a foundation for comedians to advocate voting Trump out of office.

Republicans using power to place conservative judges throughout the federal courts provides another focal point for comedians advocating voting. In response to those who argued the 2016 election was no reason to panic since institutions like Congress and the courts would keep Trump in check, Bee rages, “Trump has beat the snot out of our institutions. He’s appointed hundreds of judges, including a third of the Supreme Court. The Republican Congress has only emboldened him” (FF 10/28/20). Also noting the failure of impeachment and the consequences for those who opposed the president, Bee

concludes that "this is what budding authoritarianism looks like. Trump is trying to break our elections because he's terrified of losing. He's trying to take away your vote so he can have another four years to fill the courts with radical judges and limit your rights so it will be even harder to make your voice heard. We can stop him . . . because there is power in voting" (FF 10/28/20). Bee builds on rage over Trump's abuses of power and fear of future consequences in crafting this strong appeal for viewers to vote Trump out of office. Bee leaves no room for misunderstanding about where she and her assumed audience stand: "We can stop him. We won the House in 2018 by the largest midterm margin ever, and we can come back even stronger this year" (FF 10/28/20). Bee identifies not only with a specific ideology but with a particular political party, stating that "we," i.e., Democrats, won the House in 2018. She includes her audience in this group as she advocates not only voting but voting for a specific political party against Trump. The alternative consequences, Bee argues, are too negative to stay home.

Noah makes a similar case for voting based on electoral consequences for the judicial branch in a segment that aired the day after Amy Coney Barret was confirmed to the Supreme Court. Noah begins, "If anyone needed a reminder about what's at stake in an election, well, last night you got it. Last night Republicans took full advantage of their hold on the White House and the Senate by officially sealing the deal on their replacement for the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg" (TDS 10/27/20). Noah channels anger over Republicans' moves to quickly fill the vacancy before the election into a conversation about the stakes of the election. He concludes the segment with a straightforward call to vote in the upcoming election:

> Look, here's the thing, the other day Mitch McConnell had a simple response to everyone who was concerned about how he got Barrett onto the Supreme Court.

> You know what he said? He said, "You can't win them all, and elections have consequences." You know what? He's right. There's another election coming up in a week, and that's also going to have consequences too, but elections are only the beginning of the story.
>
> Republicans didn't take over the Court just because they felt like it. They did it because the people who elected them made it clear that it was a priority. Whatever your priority is for the Supreme Court going forward, you better vote next week, and then let the people you put in office know what you expect of them. (TDS 10/27/20)

Noah makes his own position clear, critiquing Trump's "grade A trolling" about Barrett being "the perfect replacement for RBG" since "Barrett is going to dismantle all of RBG's good work" (TDS 10/27/20). With these comments, Noah positions himself, and presumably his audience, within the group "concerned about how [McConnell] got Barrett onto the Supreme Court," and Noah uses this position to repurpose McConnell's own argument about elections having consequences.

Noah also extends his advocacy for voting beyond the basic framing of the stakes of this election, however. He argues the election is "only the beginning of the story," indicating that political priorities require continued advocacy beyond voting. So naturally "you better vote next week" as a first step, but afterward the process of letting elected officials know your priorities and expectations remains ongoing. Noah advocates political participation while extending the conceptualization of political participation beyond simply voting in a particularly important election, explaining that participation does not end with filling out a ballot.

Immigration and the federal judiciary represent two issues that progressive comedians care deeply about. Trump's policies on these issues are anathema to comedians, who highlight Trump's actions to make clear the stakes of the election. The tone from comedians remains remarkably serious as they address these issues and

earnestly advocate for voting and holding representatives accountable, indicating that seriousness provides a more appropriate response than humor for some topics in the Trump era. Though comedians rarely completely abandon humor, in discussing issues they care most about, like inhumane immigration policy and conservative control of the federal courts, humor plays an increasingly secondary role.

Performative Participation and Trolling as Variations on the Theme

Examples of advocacy in political humor feature comedians emphasizing a serious side of their work, explaining solutions, laying out steps for taking action, and even creating specific advocacy campaigns. Advocacy from hosts of the comedy shows occurs predominantly within this more earnest context. Two variations of advocacy on these comedy shows also deserve attention, however. One involves the correspondents; two shows, *The Daily Show* and *Full Frontal*, employ correspondents who travel and conduct interviews for field pieces and take a unique approach to advocacy. Another variation to consider is Oliver's trolling-style advocacy. Though less prevalent than the earnest forms of advocacy discussed above, these forms display an advocacy that incorporates humor and playfulness.

The correspondents for *The Daily Show* engage in advocacy with a playful, performative style. After Noah describes the problems with mail-in voting, the show cuts to a video of the correspondents presenting some dos and don'ts of mail-in voting. Several of the suggestions are serious, like "once you get your ballot, do vote as early as possible;" "do sign your name before sending your ballot in, and not that scribble bullshit you do on the credit card machine at CVS, your real signature;" and "do not send in a

naked ballot. In the states that require it, make sure to put your ballot inside the secrecy envelope before sending" (TDS 09/29/20). These serious instructions are interspersed with more lighthearted suggestions, like "don't eat Cheetos right before you fill your ballot out. The smudges won't nullify your vote. It's just gross;" "also, do not send in a naked photo of yourself;" and "do not keep your ballot as a souvenir. What are you, an idiot?" (TDS 09/29/20). Overall, the video echoes the step-by-step informational tone of advocacy like Oliver's or Colbert's, but the back and forth between jokes and instructions creates a more playful frame for the advocacy.

Individual *Daily Show* correspondents also offer performative portrayals of reluctant participation. At the end of an interview with Colorado's Secretary of State Jena Griswold, Roy Wood Jr. concludes that stricter vote-by-mail laws represent "voter suppression, plain and simple. But with only weeks left until the election, is there anything we can do to ensure people's ability to vote? Listen, Madam Secretary, what you are doing is amazing. You have my full support. It's just too bad that there's nothing I could do to help, but good luck" (TDS 10/07/20). When Griswold gives Wood the "good news" that he "can actually sign up to be a poll worker," Wood claims to be busy on election day; Griswold clarifies that, because of early voting, Wood can still help on another day, and Wood resorts to pretending the video call is freezing up (TDS 10/07/20). The segment follows the traditional format of identifying a problem and highlighting the solution, though ultimately Wood avoids participating in the solution for comedic effect. This performative avoidance of volunteering as a poll worker reminds viewers that volunteers are needed if *they* want to help.

Jaboukie Young-White offers a similar performance during his interview with Scott Duncombe, a co-director of Power to the Polls. Duncombe's organization aims to encourage more young people to sign up to be poll workers, particularly as the pandemic creates extra risk for elderly volunteers who traditionally take on the role. Young-White tells Duncombe, "Huge fan of your work. You're taking care of business. Everything's under control. Just wanted to contribute, give you guys a huge shout-out. Good job" (TDS 10/14/20). Young-White assumes the best way for a comedian to contribute would be to use the show's platform to give Power to the Polls a "huge shout-out." Duncombe acknowledges that the publicity is very helpful but goes a step further to say that "what we really need is poll workers to make sure that everyone can vote safely and on time this election" (TDS 10/14/20). Young-White, missing the hint, steps in: "You hear that, poll workers? This is an important election. You better do your part," to which Duncombe clarifies, "We're actually really excited to get young folks like yourself. We're really looking for someone exactly like you" (TDS 10/14/20). Young-White avoids committing to volunteer, explaining he has very little time, recommending Trevor Noah instead, and expressing concern about the pandemic, allowing Duncombe to highlight details about the position, including the typical wage of over ten dollars an hour and the fact that all poll workers who show up get personal protective equipment. Young-White ends the segment with an appeal for anyone over the age of 16 to volunteer to be a poll worker and even seems to relent himself when he hears that Duncombe provides pizza. Young-White's reluctance to participate sets the stage for Duncombe to make a strong case for viewers to sign up.

Performatively avoiding political participation creates a space for correspondents and their interviewees to advocate participation. The avoidance also echoes a certain level of discomfort comedians express about their relationship to activism. Comedians tend to view their own role as highlighting the work of activists, as Young-White does with Power to the Polls, rather than working as activists themselves. But the separation becomes muddied as comedians create their own advocacy campaigns, a dynamic Bee pokes fun at during her discussion of mail-in voting in Pennsylvania. Explaining the potential for over 100,000 "naked ballots" to get thrown out in a state Trump won by only 44,000 votes, Bee complains, "And yet, the state of Pennsylvania was completely uninterested in my awareness campaign, "No Ballot Glove, No Ballot Love" (FF 10/21/20). With this joke about a poorly developed awareness campaign with its stilted parody of a safe-sex slogan, Bee self-reflexively makes fun of the idea of comedians creating advocacy campaigns and argues such campaigns have little real effect.

Bee also minimizes the effect of comedians in comparison to other activists. For a segment in her election special episode, Bee operates a remote-controlled scooter carrying a tablet for video conferencing that allows her to roll around a park and talk to voters and activists remotely. After hearing from individuals who, some inspired by four years of Trump as president, got more involved in politics and community by protesting and working toward criminal justice reform, donating money to causes, and volunteering to help immigrants (FF 11/04/20). Bee responds to these examples of political and community participation with a joke about her tablet/scooter setup: "I actually mentor younger robots . . . Oh sure, like iPhones or alarm clocks, even the occasional Roomba" (FF 11/04/20). Bee's joke serves to discount her own contribution, but she follows up

with an explicit comparison to drive home the point, “My Roomba mentoring pales in comparison to the work of the people who brought us the BLM protests, who elected AOC, and actually a lot of progressive Democrats” (FF 11/04/20). Bee elevates the work of political activists while making light of her own potential to contribute.

Even as scholars highlight links between humor and political activism, comedians sidestep commitment to the connection. The back cover of Borum Chattoo and Feldman’s (2020) book *A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar: The Serious Role of Comedy in Social Justice* features a blurb from Hasan Minhaj, a political comedian the authors interviewed for the book. Minhaj quips, “Kudos to Caty Borum Chattoo and Lauren Feldman for teaching me so much about my own job.” Minhaj’s remark implies that he had not previously considered any connection between comedy and activism, though his own work on the Netflix series *Patriot Act* is packed with earnest advocacy. Like other political comedians before him, Minhaj indicates that his job is to be funny, and any serious side effects are incidental. As comedians engage in advocacy, they walk a line between the serious and non-serious sides of satire. As demonstrated by examples leading up to the 2020 election, the advocacy can often skew to the serious side. Despite this earnest engagement, however, comedians hesitate to appear to be serious activists.

And, on the non-serious side, humor does allow for unique forms of advocacy. Though comedians often engage in an earnest advocacy based in outrage and worry, they can use more playful techniques too, as *Daily Show* correspondents like Wood and Young-White prove. Oliver employs a particularly unique form of playful advocacy that incorporates a carnivalesque delight in trolling to encourage political participation

(Davisson and Donovan 2019). After a step-by-step deconstruction of Trump campaign claims of voter fraud and lawsuits, Oliver alerts viewers:

> Wait, that's not all. The Trump campaign also set up this website and phone number where they've invited people to submit evidence of voter fraud. Meaning if you, say, wanted to supply them with an incident that you found suspicious, you could do that. You still can, actually. You can simply go to this address and send them whatever evidence you want. There's even an option to add photographic proof.
>
> Quick fun fact here, don't know why I'm even mentioning this, a political term of art for election shenanigans is "ratfucking." If you, say, happen to have any access to images of Pennsylvania-based rats fucking, it's frankly your patriotic duty to send them to the Trump campaign straight away. (LWT 11/08/20)

Oliver adopts a playful attitude in conveying this information to viewers. He presents the information in terms of hypotheticals, "if you, say, wanted . . . you could" or "if you, say, happen to have any access," and downplays the "fun fact" for humorous effect, remarking, "Don't know why I'm even mentioning this." The fun of the segment lies in being "in" on the joke—picking up on the strong hints and participating in trolling the Trump campaign. This example incorporates more humor, through a carnivalesque playfulness, than many of the other examples of comedians advocating voting. The result—flooding the Trump campaign's voter fraud website with images of rats—is also arguably less politically impactful than encouraging people to vote.

Conclusion

The styles of advocacy satire range from Oliver's playful trolling to the ironic participation of correspondents to the dead serious appeals against Trump from Bee and Colbert. Throughout the examples, comedians earnestly advocate for certain outcomes while also sometimes expressing discomfort at the conflation of their work with activism

and discounting their ability to change anything. This tension exposes a broader issue of the role of humor in advocacy. Completely serious advocacy zeros out the nonserious side of satire, while completely silly antics may limit the ability of advocacy to encourage meaningful participation. Comedians continue to negotiate these extremes as they create advocacy satire.

The Trump era led to a rise in advocacy satire (Waisanen 2018). Certainly much of the outrage and worry that underpins advocacy was directed at Trump during his tenure in office (Farnsworth and Lichter 2020). But the connections between comedy, advocacy, and activism are broader than one president. Comedy can play a unique role in relation to activism, increasing attention for specific issues, using humor to persuade, and stimulating further discussion (Borum Chattoo and Feldman 2020). Comedians, particularly Bee and Oliver with their weekly, in-depth formats, apply advocacy satire to a broad range of political issues and policies. Often, they can focus on issues that other media outlets have given less attention.

Even as the 2020 election approached, earnest advocacy from comedians was not limited to voting. Through fall of 2020, *Full Frontal's* website had a page titled "Take Action" in addition to its 2020 Election advocacy campaign page. The "Take Action" page at that time encouraged viewers to "tell your city to #DefundThePolice" (Full Frontal 2020b). Specific information for the cities of New York, Minneapolis, Los Angeles, Oakland, Nashville, Philadelphia, and Austin listed facts about police in each city, links for prominent local organizations advocating defunding police departments, and contact information for local elected officials (Full Frontal 2020b). The site takes a

serious approach to encouraging participation in local politics on a key national issue at the time.

When comedians take an issue seriously, they often take an earnest approach to advocating solutions. Specific topics like family separation at the border or Republicans using their power to shift the ideological makeup of the courts stoke an outrage that translates into serious appeals for Democrats to vote. Humor's unique dynamics position it as a natural advocate for social change, but in a world of alternative political realities, humor and irony become more difficult to navigate as comedians try to avoid being misunderstood, and humor often takes a back seat to earnest advocacy on comedy shows. As comedians continue to advocate for causes that they care about, they will continue building a serious role for comedy shows in their relationships to activism.

Conclusion

Television Satire's Earnest Defense of Democracy

Despite assumptions that Donald Trump's campaign and presidency would be a boon for political humor, Trump created more challenges than opportunities for late-night television comedians. On the surface, Trump did inspire a lot of material from comedians, maintaining a monopoly on late-night humor's attention. His billionaire bravado, distinctive voice and gestures, and infamous orange hair were all easy targets for insult humor and ridicule. But Trump's inherent ridiculousness belied the deeper challenges his presidency posed for comedians. Trump's reality television approach to the presidency presented an aesthetic confrontation with television satire, questioning the ability of another layer of television entertainment to add insight on Trump's entertainment politics. In his own reflection on the Trump era, Stephen Colbert concluded, "This is why they say don't wrestle with a pig, because you'll both get filthy and the pig likes it. Also, your pig impression really hasn't gotten any better in the last four years" (TLS 11/09/20). Trump's carnivalesque presidency resisted parody and reversed the traditional formula of political humor.

Satire is an inherently hopeful genre that makes a moral argument by ironically juxtaposing what is and what should be (Gilmore 2018; Young 2020). The carnivalesque energy of laughter provides a unique perspective that mocks established authority and questions traditional norms, providing temporary liberation from the prevailing order and creating the conditions for fully comprehending reality (Bakhtin 1984). But this model assumes a level of seriousness and tradition from politicians. Trump blatantly disrupted norms of presidential behavior, relocating the upside-down energy of the carnivalesque

into the White House (Zaretsky 2017). He bragged about television ratings for speeches and debates, performed impressions at rallies mocking "presidential" behavior, and used insult comedy and ridicule to build rapport with audiences (Baker 2019; Stewart, Dye, and Eubanks 2018). In this environment of Trump's distortion of presidential norms, satire's trick mirror, which traditionally presents a warped reflection of reality to expose a deeper truth, failed to generate a clear perspective (Gilmore 2018). This reversal of the traditional model put comedians in the strange position of earnestly affirming the value of norms rather than ironically critiquing them.

The ambiguity of satire's role questions whether satirical responsibility lies in ironic detachment or increased earnestness (Carlson and Peifer 2013). During the 2020 election, comedians leaned into the tonal seriousness and commitment to political change that define earnestness. The examples in this study indicate that much of the earnestness comedians expressed during the 2020 election derived from what they saw as Trump's existential threat to democracy. The Trump era brought increased incidences that could contribute to democratic backsliding in the U.S., including voting restrictions and loosened constraints of accountability. Whether these incidences contribute to deterioration of democracy in the U.S. depends partly on the success of public opposition to them (Waldner and Lust 2018). Comedians included their voices in opposition, taking an earnest stance in defense of democracy. Especially as the 2020 election loomed, the threat of Trump prompted comedians to leave behind ironic detachment and earnestly advocate for political change.

Comedians had grappled with the ambiguity of their responsibility in early iterations of advocacy in satire, like Jon Stewart's Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear.

Stewart received backlash for crossing what some saw as a boundary between ironic satire and earnest advocacy (Carlson and Peifer 2013). Stewart's forays into advocacy, however, occurred mostly outside the context of his television satire (Jones, Baym, and Day 2012). During his day job as host of *The Daily Show*, Stewart created the quintessential example of ironic detachment (Weiss 2019). In contrast, the new generation of television satirists who confronted democratic threats of the Trump era incorporated earnest advocacy directly into their television shows.

Examples from five television satire shows during the weeks before the 2020 election demonstrate how Trump's disruption of norms in turn disrupted the traditional process of political humor. Across all five shows, examples feature comedians leaning into seriousness in response to Trump-era challenges to political humor. The 2020 election specifically is an important case in the closing weeks of Trump's presidency. The election represented the potential for change, and comedians capitalized on the moment to advocate rigorously and earnestly against Trump. Advocacy and earnestness had already been trends in television satire (Waisanen 2018; Fox 2018). The election crystalized earnestness in satire around one moment of potential for change. This juncture in the Trump presidency—potentially either the finish line or the halfway mark—saw comedians assuming a serious role for satire in opposing Trump.

In the leadup to the election, comedians affirmed the importance of norms and sought to expose the disruptions and fictions of Trump's presidency. As the absurd, distorted reality of the Trump administration outpaced parody, several of the examples in Chapter 3 feature comedians earnestly affirming reality in opposition to Trump's alternative. Examples in Chapter 3 also establish the affective response, including

outrage, that comedians directed toward Trump. Outrage and laughter are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but the outrage and worry comedians expressed about Trump stemmed from the threat he posed to democratic norms and institutions, a dynamic that may have made it more difficult for comedians to enter humor's play frame (Young 2020). Several examples in the sample feature comedians indicating that Trump's statements and actions, particularly on issues like immigration, the courts, and the election itself, made it difficult to laugh.

In the context of Chapter 3 examples that outline the unique challenges of humor in the Trump era, Chapter 4 features several examples of humor failing to match the moment or becoming incidental to the serious trajectory of an argument, leaving comedians explaining and clarifying through metacommunication. These moments of metacommunication highlight comedians breaking the fourth wall, commenting on the processes and decisions behind their political humor shows. Metacommunication represents a central discursive strategy comedians use to navigate their own role in political discourse. For example, Chapter 4 ends with comedians taking positions in a metacommunicative dialogue over the role of seriousness and nonseriousness in political humor as news broke that the president had gotten sick and was going to the hospital.

Examples in Chapter 5 feature comedians engaging in overt advocacy. The laughter associated with political satire inherently contains the potential for social change, but comedians, in a trend accelerated in the Trump era, also make explicit, earnest calls to action on issues they care about (Bakhtin 1984; Waisanen 2018). Unsurprisingly, comedians focused their advocacy on voting in the weeks before the election, as the potential for change on election day heightened hope and fear.

Contextualizing Trump as an existential threat to democratic norms and institutions, comedians provided serious instruction on how to vote, outlined the stakes of Trump's presidency, and channeled the fear of another Trump term in office, all to encourage viewers to take action and vote against Trump. Though voting is not the only political and social issue comedians advocate for, it did dominate examples in the weeks before the 2020 election.

It is important to reiterate the distinction between political humor's inherent metacommunication and advocacy and the explicit manifestations of these concepts in examples around the 2020 election. Political humor is an inherently metacommunicative process. Jokes always subtly wink at audiences to bring them in on the humor (Brock 2009). Without this inherent metacommunication, audiences would be unable to get the joke (Marsh 2015). Examples in this study's sample, however, take metacommunication to explicit level, breaking the fourth wall to clarify and explain their own process and decisions. Similarly, laughter holds an inherent advocacy for social change, creating a temporary liberation from prevailing norms that allows for questioning the status quo (Bakhtin 1984). Humor can provide new perspective and encourage further discussion of important issues, ultimately leading people to make changes (Borum Chattoo and Feldman 2020). The potential for social change in humor and laughter is inherent, but again, examples from the 2020 election feature comedians taking advocacy to an explicit level. In advocating voting, comedians made earnest appeals for participation, providing serious instructions for voting during a pandemic, earnestly highlighting the stakes of the election, and directly channeling outrage against Trump. This focus on seriousness moves television satire into new territory.

As previewed above, satire's central paradox is the simultaneous operation of seriousness and nonseriousness (Caron 2016). The nonseriousness of jokes and laughter inherently exposes serious questions about the status quo and leads to further discussion of serious issues (Bakhtin 1984; Borum Chattoo and Feldman 2020). But this study highlights a separation between seriousness and nonseriousness that is essential for understanding contemporary television satire. When comedians focus on seriousness at the expense of humor, the product becomes something other than satire (Caron 2016). Because humor's ambiguity fits with a liberal outlook on the world, Young (2020) cautions progressive comedians from "substituting funny with angry," privileging seriousness over nonseriousness (206). But even when funny jokes remain, they can become incidental to a point that their contribution becomes unclear. When Samantha Bee pauses from an outraged response to Trump's immigration policy for a gratuitous joke about Chipotle beans or Oliver goes on a tangent about small dogs in teacups before returning to his serious explication of policy, the serious and nonserious sides of satire become distinct in a way that no longer fits the traditional paradox model.

To be clear, this study does not argue broadly that irony is obsolete. Writers and pundits have proclaimed the death of irony at various earnest historical moments, and none of them have been right yet (Day 2011). In the Trump era, the video sharing social media platform TikTok provided a new frontier for ironic satire. Comedian Sarah Cooper created some of the best satire of Trump with lip-sync videos that leveraged subtle, interpretive expressions and gestures to offer funny, nuanced perspective on some of Trump's most outrageous statements (Li 2020). And in the realm of television satire, comedians did not just give up on humor. This study's sample contains plenty of jokes.

Lots of them are hilarious. But many of them are also incidental and tangential, separating the serious and nonserious sides of satire and creating a distance that gives more weight to the seriousness. Irony is alive and well, but television satire may no longer be the best place to find it (McClennan 2021).

Limitations

The key limitation of this study is its exclusive focus on examples around the 2020 presidential election. The sample captures a relatively short and specific period of time from September 30 to November 16, the first presidential debate until all five shows in the sample responded to election results. The short time period of the study provides a snapshot of television satire that centers on the importance of the 2020 election as a case. This study is therefore not able to provide comparison to examples from other eras of television satire or even other moments throughout the four years of Trump's presidency. Significantly, the unique circumstance of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that none of the five shows in the sample except *Saturday Night Live* had live studio audiences during the election, creating an extra dynamic for comedians to navigate.

The absence of a studio audience brings up another limitation of this study, which is that it focuses exclusively on institutionalized network and cable television satire, leaving out other important sources from YouTube, TikTok, and elsewhere. Even among television satire shows, this study focuses on five prominent and relevant examples, leaving out the two Jimmys, Fallon and Kimmel, on network late-night and the comedians who follow them on late-late-night television like James Corden and Seth

Myers. Though the sample for this study includes five of the most significant contemporary television satire shows, there is certainly more material out there.

This study focuses exclusively on the text of television satire shows. Textual analysis looks at the moment between production and audience reception of a text to offer an interpretive account of the text's meaning (Fürsich 2009). Though this study's analysis of metacommunication does provide a unique window into how comedians approached the role of political humor in the Trump era, the study does not directly examine the production of television satire shows. More importantly, this study does not examine audience reception of the texts. Particularly in the case of concepts like earnest advocacy in television satire, audience reception plays an important role. Audience studies provide an essential part of understanding advocacy satire.

Future Research

This study's analysis of political humor during the 2020 election opens several avenues for further research. As mentioned above, it will be important to consider other compelling examples of political humor, like Cooper's lip-sync videos on TikTok, that may not approach Trump-era challenges to political humor the same way network and cable television satire shows did. Crucially, though the election removed Trump from power, his hold on the Republican Party, notably including his pervasive claim that the 2020 election was fraudulent and stolen from him, continues to dominate Republican politics. Further research will be required to see if the dynamic between outrage and laughter, seriousness and nonseriousness, continues to tip toward seriousness as

television comedians continue responding to Trump and Republicans even though Trump is no longer in office.

Chapter 4 of this study features Oliver's admission that his show has little time for "uncomplicated fun." This remark came as Oliver attempted to celebrate Biden's win, and it indicates that television satire may not shift drastically even after the election. Biden was not the first choice of progressive comedians like Oliver and Bee, and further research will be needed to study political humor during the Biden presidency to see what television satire looks like under President Biden. Trump maintains sway in Republican politics, and a focus on Trump and Republicans may influence how comedians react to the Biden administration, particularly as Trump keeps open the possibility of running for president again.

Conclusion

Political humor can provide a corrective that allows us to truly comprehend reality. The common language and laughter associated with humor can expose the façade of the established order and become, as Bakhtin (1984) puts it, "sparks of the carnival bonfire which renews the world" (17). This energy of renewal also means that laughter keeps seriousness from tearing away from the whole. Laughter clarifies seriousness, heightening its impact. Satire that moves too far into advocacy and activism, leaving jokes to play an incidental role, runs the risk of losing the unique properties of laughter (Caron 2016). More specific to ideology, humor's ambiguity is consistent with a liberal outlook on the world, meaning that progressive comedians who move too far into outrage could miss taking advantage of the left's high tolerance for ambiguity (Young 2020).

Laughter holds a clarifying, unifying, and unique potential. In an environment of increasing polarization and outrage in politics, it remains essential to understand what it means when satire turns serious.

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