The Viral Water Cooler: Talking about Political Satire Promotes Further Political Discussion

Min Seon Jeong[a], Jacob A. Long[b], and Simon M. Lavis[c]

[a] *Department of Communication Studies, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV, USA*

[b] *School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC, USA*

[c] *Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching, University of Suffolk, Ipswich, England, UK*

Correspondence should be addressed to Min Seon Jeong, E-mail: minseon.jeong@mail.wvu.edu

Min Seon Jeong (Ph.D., The Ohio State University, 2020) is Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at West Virginia University. Her research interests include technology-mediated communication and political communication. ORCID: http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7767-9670

Jacob A. Long (Ph.D., The Ohio State University, 2020) is Assistant Professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of South Carolina. He studies political communication and quantitative research methodology with a special interest in partisanship and social identity. ORCID: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1582-6214

Simon M. Lavis (Ph.D., The Ohio State University, 2019) is a Learning Designer at the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching at University of Suffolk. His academic research focuses on narrative communication, as well as engagement with and the effects of political entertainment. ORCID: http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2778-0708

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[Abstract] Much effort has been devoted into understanding the participatory outcomes of political satire. Despite the increased impact of social media in disseminating political information online, however, researchers have not yet examined the potential role of social media in the relationship between political satire consumption and political communication processes. This study uses a three-wave panel survey to test the effects of both viewing political satire (intentionally) and incidental exposure (via shared content on social media) to political satire on political discussion, mediated by the viewers' conversation about the content of political satire. This study also examines how Affinity for Political Humor (AFPH), specifically its social cohesion dimension, moderates those relationships. Results demonstrate that regardless of whether the exposure was incidental via social media or not, exposure to political satire increased political discussion, mediated by conversation about political satire. This indirect effect differed by individuals' level of AFPH. These results indicate that viewing political satire, even when it is incidental, can make people more likely to talk about the content of the satire programs, which in turn can promote their political discussion in general. This effect was found to be more prominent among those who score high on AFPH.

Political satire has attracted scholarly attention due to its unique features that deliver a substantial amount of political information (Brewer & Marquardt, 2007; Fox et al., 2007). Pew Research Center (2014) reported that approximately 10% of Americans receive their news from some of these programs, such as *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* or *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*. Since political satire programming has become one of the primary information sources for many people (Pew, 2014), understanding its influence on political behavior has been a vibrant line of research in political communication. One of the major potential outcomes of exposure to political satire that has been examined is political discussion (Landreville et al., 2010; Lee & Kwak, 2010; Lee & Jang, 2017) due to its importance in promoting political learning (Eveland, 2004) and civic engagement (Shah et al., 2005).

Research has demonstrated how watching political satire could promote political discussion (Landreville et al., 2010; Lee & Jang, 2017). However, given the constantly changing media environment and its influence on the ways people consume media content, there are unanswered questions that need to be examined to advance our understanding of the role of political satire in promoting political discussion. First, most of the existing research on political satire has examined individuals' consumption of political satire as a deliberate decision made by a television viewer. Changes in the viewing habits of the American public, in addition to strategies on the part of the producers of these programs (e.g., Comedy Central, 2015), make it more likely that a substantial number of people encounter political satire from these programs via social media from "viral" clips and commentary. We refer to this kind of exposure to shared content on social media as *incidental exposure* as such exposure is different from individuals' voluntary consumption of political satire programs, which we refer to as *viewing political satire*. We presume that the nature of individuals' viewing political satire is more deliberate and voluntary relative to their incidental exposure to the

shared political satire content on social media. Considering the potential role of political satire in promoting political discussion, one of the primary goals of this study is to test whether individuals' inadvertent consumption of political satire through shared content on social media can lead to more political discussion.

Second, prior research has not fully examined to what extent watching political satirical programs encourages viewers to talk about the content of the program itself, nor if this leads to their political discussion in general. Although a few experimental studies (Lee, 2012; Lee & Jang, 2017) tested whether watching political satire clips can increase the viewers' intention to talk about the content covered by the programs, the relationship between political satire consumption and the viewers' actual engagement in conversation about such programs have not been examined with observational data. Thus, by using three-wave panel survey data, this study aims to test 1) the degree to which political satire promotes conversation about the content of political satire programs, and 2) whether individuals' conversation about political satire can further lead to their everyday political discussion, which is not necessarily about the content of political satire programs. For these reasons, we conceptually differentiate between interpersonal talk that is directly provoked by the content of political satire (referred to as *conversations about political satire*) and political conversation in general (referred to as *political discussion*), which indicates individuals' conversation about political matters that are not directly influenced by political satire exposure. Thus, the discussion is not limited to the content of political satire programs.

We acknowledge that there may be some overlaps between conversations about political satire and general political discussion in terms of the subject matter that are being discussed since political satire generally focuses on real-world events. However, we differentiate these two concepts to examine the extent to which political satire programs serve as a conversational booster that could eventually promote individuals' general political

discussion via their increased engagement in interpersonal conversation stimulated by exposure to political satire. In other words, although someone may be reluctant to strike up a conversation about a political issue in general, it is likely far easier to engage in a conversation that references part of a political satire program and begins with, “did you see that?” Such conversations can transition from the media content in particular to the larger issue being portrayed. Furthermore, it may help to create or enhance relationships that allow for further discussion in the future. If we find that those viewers’ conversations about the satirical content can further lead to individuals’ political discussion in general, this may suggest a unique role of political satire in facilitating interpersonal talk about politics.

Lastly, we suggest that the effect of political satire on increased political discussion may be particularly prominent among those who are more prone to be moved by political satire than others. The present study tests how affinity for political humor (AFPH), specifically the social cohesion dimension, moderates the relationship between exposure to and conversation about political satire and political discussion in general. The social cohesion dimension of AFPH is centered on understanding how individuals’ appreciation of political humor is associated with their uses of political humor as “a social lubricant” (Holbert et al., 2013, p. 554). We expect the social cohesion AFPH will be closely related to one’s motivation for appreciation of political humor as a way of engaging in conversation with others (Holbert et al., 2013). This captures the extent to which people engage with political satire for the purpose of having something to discuss. Thus, we examine if those who score high on the social cohesion dimension of AFPH are more likely to talk about the program with others, regardless of whether their exposure to political satire is voluntary or incidental.

Using a representative three-wave panel survey in the United States, this study expands the existing literature by incorporating the effects of incidental exposure to political satire via social media on increased political discussion, and then whether the effect is

mediated by talking about the content of the programs. This study also shows that the indirect effect is generally stronger among those who score high on affinity for political humor, specifically its social cohesion dimension.

Literature Review

Political Satire

Research on political satire, an entertainment programming genre that presents politics as its primary subject matter for ostensibly subversive and humorous purposes (see Holbert, 2005, for a typology of political entertainment programming), has flourished in the last two decades following the mainstream success of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and the large number of shows which followed it. Due to the substantial amount of political information covered by such programs, viewers engaging with satire programming learn about political issues as a result, at a lower but still comparable level when compared with viewers of news (Hardy et al., 2014). This is significant given that today's audiences, with access to an extremely and increasingly choice-laden media landscape, are turning towards entertainment options at the expense of news (Knobloch-Westerwick & Lavis, 2017; Prior, 2007). In addition, some Americans consider political satire one of their primary sources of political information (Pew, 2014). Thus, political satire programs have the potential to reach an increasingly wide audience, including politically inattentive or uninterested viewers (Knobloch-Westerwick & Lavis, 2017) who may not necessarily tune into traditional news programs and may serve as a gateway to political attention or participation at a later time (Cao, 2010; Hoffman & Young, 2011). As a result, attention has been paid to a variety of political outcomes, including political discussion.

Political Satire and Political Discussion

Political discussion has been a longstanding component of the study of the effects of mediated messages on politics in spreading political information (e.g., Lazarsfeld et al.,

1944). Political discussion is also considered an important "reasoning behavior that facilitates mainly the influence of news exposure" (Lee, 2012, p .649). Research has begun to explore how political satire might serve as a compliment or even alternative to news exposure (Landreville et al., 2010; Lee, 2012; Moy et al., 2005).

Research has also shown that political satire may increase political discussion (Landreville et al., 2010; Lee & Jang, 2017). One of the explanations for the positive relationship between watching political satire and political discussion is based on the literature suggesting the linkage between media consumption and interpersonal communication (Chaffee & Mutz, 1988; Kim et al.,1999; McLeod et al., 1999). That is, people tend to have conversations about the information that is disseminated via mass media, and many empirical studies show an association between news consumption and the extent to which individuals engage in political conversation (Kim et al., 1999). This logic can be extended to political satire given the substantial amount of political news covered by some of the political satire shows (Fox et al., 2007). In other words, it is highly likely that political satire viewers would talk about the content they are exposed to, especially about political issues.

Prior research has also demonstrated the role of political satire programs in promoting individuals' engagement with traditional news (Feldman & Young, 2008) and television debate viewing (Landreville et al., 2010), which both are positively associated with political discussion (Kim et al., 1999; Landreville et al., 2010). The function of political satire programs as a gateway to traditional news media (Feldman & Young, 2008) can also explain how political satire consumption leads to political discussion. Drawing upon prior research and these theoretical explanations, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1a: Watching episodes of political satire programs will be positively associated with political discussion.

Incidental Exposure to Political Satire via Social Media and Political Discussion

Due to significantly increased use of social media sites in the years since political satire research began, people have new opportunities to encounter content that they may not otherwise have intended to watch, read, or listen to. For example, Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert successfully used social networking sites to gather more than 200,000 people for their rally to restore political civility (Tavernise & Stelter, 2010). Considering the increased role of social media in disseminating news and media content to the public (Pew, 2018), many people may have been incidentally exposed to clips from political satire programming, meaning that viewing this kind of content may have not been the intended purpose for using these platforms.

Prior research indicates the humorous nature of political satire programming can make the clips of such programs get shared on social media as well as encourage the viewers to engage in interpersonal conversation about the content of political satire clips. For example, research has demonstrated that highly arousing emotional content (Berger, 2011) tends to be socially transmitted more often than non-emotional (not arousing) content online (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Since political satire often includes satirical jokes evoking negative feelings toward the politicians or issues at hand (Holbert & Hansen, 2006; Holbert et al., 2007; Lee & Kwak, 2014), clips of political satire programs, particularly those that evoke strong emotions, would be highly likely to be discussed with others as well as shared online.

In fact, there is empirical evidence showing the relationship between political satire consumption and the viewers' sharing behavior (Peifer & Landreville, 2020). Peifer and Landreville (2020) found that political satire viewers' experience of positive feelings predicted their increased willingness to share the political humor with others, and this effect was found to be prominent among those who had unfavorable disposition toward the former president, Donald Trump, in the study. A recent study conducted by Coronel and colleagues

(2021) also demonstrated that humor increased individuals' likelihood of sharing political information with others.

When political satire clips are shared via social networking sites, others who may not have intentionally tuned into these programs would have a chance to be exposed to the content or message of the programs. Accordingly, we suggest that such incidental exposure, inadvertently encountering shared political satire clips as a byproduct of their online media uses that were motivated by other purposes (Tewksbury et al., 2001) may also promote the individuals' engagement with the content of the programs. For example, incidental exposure to political satire via social media could increase opportunities for the viewers to engage in political discussion via increased attentiveness to politics (Cao, 2010), attentiveness to traditional news (Feldman & Young, 2008), or television debate-viewing (Landreville et al., 2010).

For these reasons, this study assesses the effect of exposure to political satire on political discussion in two ways. First, we test this relationship by asking about respondents' exposure to political satire programs in a way similar to prior research, which assumes most who watch are selecting the programs and viewing episodes in their entirety on television or via a streaming service (as in H1a). Second, we also examine the relationship by probing exposure to political satirical programs via social media, which we believe is more analogous to incidental exposure. Thus, we also propose the following hypothesis:

H1b: Incidental exposure to political satire via shared content on social media will be positively associated with political discussion.

Talking About Political Satire: Mediating the Relationship Between Political Satire and Political Discussion

Research has suggested several mechanisms explaining how watching political satire encourages political discussion. First, exposure to political satire can increase the viewers'

political attentiveness (Cao, 2010), partly influenced by the humor component of the programs, which further increases their political debate viewing, leading to political talk (Landreville et al., 2010). Another explanation is drawn upon the role of emotions provoked by watching political satire. Lee and Jang's (2017) experimental study tested the mediating role of negative emotions in the relationship between exposure to political satire and the viewers' willingness to engage in political talk in the near future. The findings of their study (Lee & Jang, 2017) showed that those who were exposed to political satire clips felt stronger negative emotions, which increased their level of intention to engage in interpersonal talk about the issue they watched. These results are consistent with other empirical findings from the emotion literature, in terms of the association between negative emotions and individuals' tendency to engage in social interaction (Luminet et al., 2000) and that highly arousing emotions, such as anger or amusement, tend to promote social transmission process (Berger, 2011).

Based on this line of research on emotions and social interaction/transmission (Berger, 2011; Luminet et al., 2000), assuming individuals experience highly arousing emotions when incidentally exposed to political satire, such as anger (Lee & Jang, 2017; Lee & Kwak, 2014), those who are exposed to political satire would be also likely to be motivated to talk about the content of the program. Although this paper does not test this affective response as a theoretical mechanism of the relationship between political satire and political talk, which a few experimental studies have already done (Lee & Kwak, 2010; Lee & Jang, 2017), we suggest that prior research on individuals' affective responses to political satire suggests theoretical reason to predict the potential influence of watching political satire on interpersonal conversation about political satire.

H2a: Watching episodes of political satire programs will be positively associated with conversation about political satire.

H2b: Incidental exposure to political satire via shared content on social media will be positively associated with conversation about political satire.

Furthermore we argue that conversations about political satire, directly influenced by political satire clips or the content covered by such programs, could further promote the viewers' general political discussion because of the role of interpersonal conversation as an additional reasoning process that helps political learning (Eveland, 2004; Shah et al., 2007). We believe it is important to examine the extent to which the content of the program itself plays a role as a conversation booster for the viewers, functioning as a gateway to general political discussion. Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

H3a: Conversation about political satire will mediate the relationship between watching episodes of political satire programs and political discussion.

H3b: Conversation about political satire will mediate the relationship between incidental exposure to political satire via shared content on social media and political discussion.

Affinity for Political Humor (Social Cohesion Dimension) as Moderator

Hmielowski and colleagues (2011) introduced the concept of affinity for political humor (AFPH), referring to the extent to which people appreciate political humor, to expand our understanding of individual differences that predict political satire consumption based on varying reasons for appreciating political humor. AFPH consists of four dimensions: (1) the desire to highlight incongruent information; (2) the desire to feel a sense of superiority; (3) the desire to relieve stress or anxiety; and (4) the desire to facilitate social cohesion (Hmielowski et al., 2011).

AFPH was treated as unidimensional when it was first introduced (Holbert et al., 2013). However, subsequent work has elaborated on the four subdimensions, emphasizing the importance of understanding the varying role of each when examining different political

entertainment research questions (Holbert et al., 2013, who suggested using the social cohesion dimension when studying social networking behaviors related to political entertainment media as an example). We believe that the social cohesion dimension would become particularly significant when looking at the effect of exposure to political satirical shows on individuals' conversation about the programs since interpersonal conversation is one of the most common ways to engage in social interaction. Specifically, we predict that those who score high on the social cohesion dimension of AFPH would be more likely to engage in conversation about political satire and general political discussion compared to those who score low on the dimension. In other words, we suggest the social cohesion dimension of AFPH as contributory moderator (Holbert & Park, 2020) in the suggested relationships, meaning AFPH will enhance an effect that is expected to exist regardless of the level of AFPH. Thus, we propose the following moderator hypothesis:

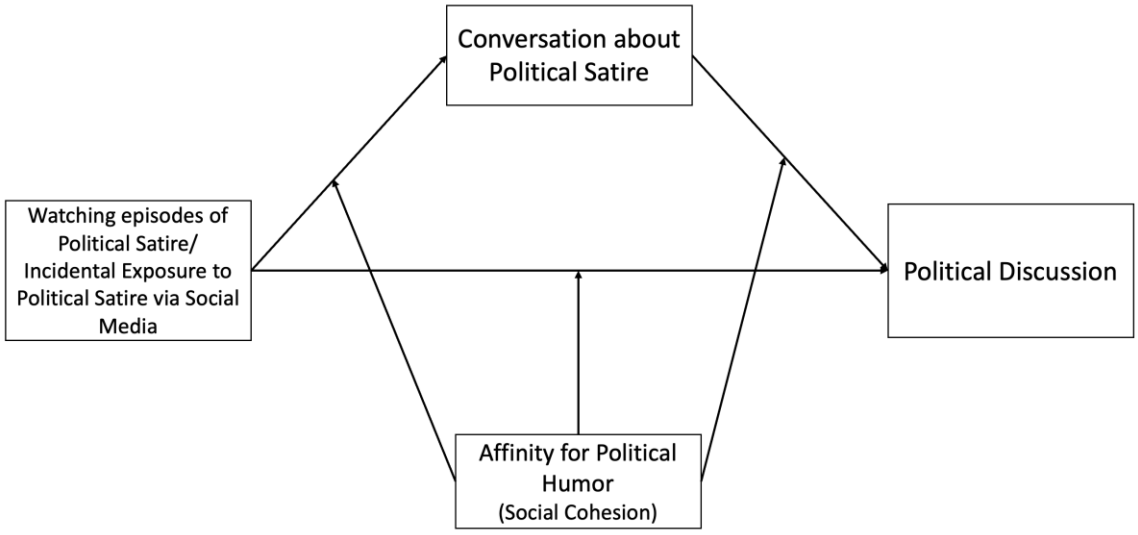
> **H4**: The effect of (a) watching episodes of political satire programs and (b) incidental exposure to political satire via shared content on social media on conversation about political satire will be stronger among those who scored high on the social cohesion dimension of AFPH.

And because this moderation occurs in the context of a hypothesized mediation process, we pose the following corresponding hypothesis:

> **H5:** The indirect effect of (a) watching episodes of political satire programs and (b) incidental exposure to political satire via shared content on social media on political discussion will be stronger among those who score high on the social cohesion dimension of AFPH.

Figure 1

Moderated Mediation Model



Methods

Procedure

We tested the proposed hypotheses using data from a three-wave panel survey collected by GfK Research (formerly Knowledge Networks) using the company's KnowledgePanel, which was part of the Omnibus Survey for the School of Communication at The Ohio State University. GfK uses address-based sampling to recruit the panel and provides resources to include panelists who do not have Internet access. The target population is non-institutionalized U.S. adults older than 18. The baseline survey was conducted from August 16, 2016 to August 22, 2016, 1,570 respondents were invited to complete the survey via e-mail.[1] A total of 825 respondents completed the survey and 812 met the eligibility criteria for a 52.5% completion rate and 98.4% qualification rate. The

[1] This three-wave panel survey underwent expedited review and was fully approved by The Ohio State University's Institutional Review Board (Date of IRB Approval: June 24, 2016). Respondents first of all consent to be recruited to the GfK panel. Respondents in the panel sampled for this survey received an invite email to take part in the study. When respondents want to begin, they were asked to complete our consent form to complete each wave's questionnaire.

second wave, conducted from October 4, 2016, to October 12, 2016, collected 630 responses (a 79.5% completion rate), followed by wave 3, conducted from November 9, 2016, to November 15, 2016, with 530 responses (84.5% completion rate). All of these 530 provided complete data for the variables of interest and are the sample used for analyses.

Sample

Demographic information collected includes age (M = 51.88, SD = 16.96), gender (51% male), education (32% Bachelor's degree or higher, 32% some college, 28% high school graduate, and 8% not high school graduates), race (76% non-Hispanic white, 9% non-Hispanic black, 10% Hispanic of any race, and 5% of another or multiple races) and political party affiliation (47% Democrat or Democrat-leaning, 13% Independent, 40% Republican or Republican-leaning).

Measures

Exposure to Political Satirical Programs

Respondents were shown a list of programs and asked, "How often have you watched episodes of these shows in the past 4 weeks?" Response options ranged from *never* (coded as 1) to *every or almost every time* (coded as 5). The list of programs includes *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*, *Real Time with Bill Maher*, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, and *Saturday Night Live*. Political entertainment exposure was operationalized by taking the mean response to all four programs (M = 1.35, SD = 0.66).

Exposure to Political Satirical Programs via Social Media

After the respondents provide their responses to the question asking their exposure to political satirical programs, they were also asked, "How often have you encountered content shared by others via social media from any of these shows in the past 4 weeks?" Response

options were *never* (coded as 1), *once a month, 2-3 times a month, once a week, 2-3 times a week,* and *daily* (coded as 6; $M = 1.52$, $SD = 1.09$).

Conversation About Political Satirical Programs

Respondents were asked to answer how regularly they have engaged in conversations (in person or via the Internet) about the content of any of the programs they indicated watching in the past 4 weeks. Response options were *never* (coded as 1), *once a month, 2-3 times a month, once a week, 2-3 times a week,* and *daily* (coded as 6; $M = 1.50$, $SD = 1.02$).

Political Discussion

Respondents were asked to answer how regularly they have engaged in conversations (in person or via the Internet) about politics in the past 4 weeks. Response options were *never* (coded as 1), *once a month, 2-3 times a month, once a week, 2-3 times a week,* and *daily* (coded as 6; $M = 3.06$, $SD = 1.82$).

Affinity for Political Humor (Social Cohesion Dimension)

The items measuring social cohesion dimension of affinity for political humor are adapted from Hmielowski, Holbert, and Lee (2011). Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with the following statements: "I appreciate political humor a) because it can help me express my political opinions; b) because it allows me to be friendly with people who hold political views that are different from my own; c) because it allows me to form stronger bonds with people who hold similar political views as my own." Response options were *strongly disagree* (coded as 1) to *strongly agree* (coded as 7; $M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.60$). This was not measured in each wave and is treated as a stable variable.

Exposure to News Programs

Respondents were also asked to answer how often they have watched "network nightly news" and "cable network news." The same response options were used as for

exposure to political satirical programs and the responses to the two items were combined by calculating their mean (M = 2.45, SD = 1.25).

Exposure to political content via social media

In a question format parallel to that for social media exposure to political satire via social media, respondents were asked instead about "content about politics" in general, with responses ranging from *never* (coded as 1) to *daily* (coded as 6; M = 2.48, SD = 1.87).

Analysis plan

Analyses capitalize on the panel design by focusing on within-subject variance in the key variables. This is accomplished with what are best known as fixed effects models (Allison, 2009), which minimize confounding from individual differences. In other words, stable characteristics of respondents like race, gender, and so on do not need to be controlled for because each subject serves as his or her own control. This is not a feature of the more common cross-lagged panel model, which neither separates within-subject variance from between-subject variance nor is it robust to confounding from stable characteristics (Hamaker, Kuiper, & Grasman, 2015). We used OLS with de-meaned variables for estimation (see Allison, 2009) with cluster-robust standard error calculations using the individual and wave as clusters (Thompson, 2011) calculated via the sandwich R package (Berger, Graham, & Zeileis, 2017; Zeileis, 2004). Substantively, the coefficients in these models are interpreted as the effects of change in the predictor on change in the outcome compared to the participant's average value.

Because our hypotheses concern a mediation process, we proceeded in a piecemeal fashion. Mediation analysis, in most frameworks, involves combining information from two or more regression models. With that in mind, we first present results from those constituent regression models before moving on to formal mediation analysis. For both the predictor-to-

mediator and mediator-to-outcome paths in the mediation process, we fit a pair of models: first without exposure to satire via social media, and then with it.

All models include the main measure of intended satire exposure. Exposure to news is also included in all models to control for general changes in political media consumption. When we added exposure to satire via social media to the model, we also added the measure of exposure to political content via social media to control for increased political exposure on social media in general. The fixed effects regression models, by their nature, do not accommodate time-invariant demographic controls due to the way they control for both measured and unmeasured time-invariant factors. The lone exception to this is when interactions between time-varying and time-invariant predictors, in which case the interaction is defined even though the main effect of the time-invariant predictor is not interpretable. The measure of affinity for political humor did not vary over time and is therefore included only as part of interactions with satire exposure (when the outcome is talk about political satire) and talk about political satire (when the outcome is general political discussion). Variables were mean-centered before entering the model to aid the interpretation of the regression coefficients in the presence of an interaction term.

As the substantive process of interest may occur on a shorter timescale than the approximate one-month period between panel waves, models predicting conversation about satire programs (the mediator) included both the current-wave and lagged predictors. Recent research (Vaisey & Miles, 2017) finds that misspecified lags—that is, including a predictor measured before or after the actual time the effect occurs—in models like these greatly biases

the coefficient estimates.[2] The simple fix for this issue whenever there is any uncertainty about timing is to include both the non-lagged and lagged predictors in the model to remove the bias (Leszczensky & Wolbring, 2019), so this is what we did to avoid making incorrect inferences. We present complete results for both the lagged and non-lagged predictors. To account for time trends in the dependent variables, all models included an indicator for the panel wave.

To accommodate the complex standard error calculation for panel models, we used the "mediation" package for R (Tingley, Yamamoto, Hirose, Keele, & Imai, 2014) with slight modification to allow for panel-corrected variance estimates. Each parameter estimate was derived via 5000 simulations of the quasi-Bayesian algorithm described by Imai, Keele, and Tingley (2010). With identical constituent regression models, the mediation framework implemented in the "mediation" package produces identical results to the product-of-coefficients method popularized by other available software (especially PROCESS; Hayes, 2018), but generalizes to many more model types. For cases like the present one in which both the predictor to mediator and mediator to outcome paths are moderated, there is no clearly defined omnibus test for moderated mediation and instead the best course of action is to test for differences in indirect effects at two theoretically meaningful values of the moderator (Hayes, 2015; Tingley et al., 2014). We do this by comparing results when the

[2] To be clear, by lag specification we mean that if the outcome variable of a model is measured at time *t*, the time at which a predictor affects the outcome may be so soon before *t* that the predictor measured at time *t* best captures the timing of the effect compared to the same predictor measured at time *t* - 1, which we refer to as the lagged predictor. The choice of which time(s) to include for the predictors is the lag specification.

moderator, affinity for political humor, is 1 standard deviation below and above its mean, which in these data correspond approximately with the 25th and 75th percentiles, respectively.

Results

To test H1a, a direct relationship between changes in satire exposure and changes in political discussion, we fit a fixed effects regression model predicting changes in political discussion without the mediator, conversation about political satire, in the model. The non-lagged measure of change in political satire exposure showed evidence of a positive relationship ($b = 0.24$, $t = 4.55$, $p < .001$) with no apparent lagged effect ($b = 0.01$, $t = 0.07$, $p = .95$). This supports H1a and gives some insight about the likely timing of effects (i.e., they occur in a timeframe much quicker than the month between waves). Adding incidental exposure via social media yielded no clear evidence for a non-lagged effect ($b = 0.04$, $t = 1.07$, $p = .29$) but evidence for a lagged effect ($b = 0.11$, $t = 3.11$, $p = .002$) although both were in the expected direction. These results support H1b. For both pairs of predictors, the difference between the non-lagged and lagged predictors were not themselves significant using post hoc contrasts; the evidence therefore does not support saying with certainty that the lagged and non-lagged effects differ from one another.

Details of regression results for models predicting the mediator, conversation about political satire programs, are included in Table 1. Results showed a clear main effect of political satire exposure in the same wave ($b = 0.75$, $t = 2.73$, $p = .006$ in Model 1) but no average effect of lagged political satire exposure ($b = -0.00$, $t = -0.03$, $p = .98$). This supports hypothesis H2a, suggesting that there is a main effect of satire exposure and it happens in a short time span. Conversely, there was no interaction between current-wave political satire exposure and affinity for political humor ($b = -0.00$, $t = -0.05$, $p = .96$) but clear evidence of one between lagged political satire exposure ($b = 0.18$, $t = 4.32$, $p < .001$). This partially supports H4a, although we do not have an *a priori* explanation for why AFPH would act as

moderator at one lag and not another. These results were not substantively changed when exposure to satire on social media was added in Model 2. There were main effects for exposure to political satire via social media on discussion about satire for the non-lagged (b = 0.44, t = 6.35, p < .001) but not lagged (b = 0.14, t = 0.97, p = .33) measures, supporting H2b in a similar pattern to H2a. There were no indications of an interaction between political satire exposure via social media and affinity for political humor, however, so H4b was not supported by these models.

Models predicting general political discussion are summarized in Table 2. In both models 3 and 4 (without and with exposure to political satire via social media, respectively), the main effect of discussion about satire was clearly positive (b = 0.24, t = 3.63, p < .001 in Model 3; b = 0.21, t = 2.32, p = .02 in Model 4). There is evidence of an interaction between talk about satire programs and affinity for political humor in Model 3 (b = 0.06, t = 3.15, p = .002) and this interaction coefficient increased in magnitude with the addition of social media exposure to Model 4 (b = 0.09, t = 7.66, p < .001). Although these results are suggestive, it is important in mediation analysis to assess the process systematically rather than make judgments based on the significance of coefficients in the regression models (Hayes, 2018). With that in mind, we move to the mediation results to incorporate all these aspects of the models simultaneously.

The estimates from the mediation analyses for each predictor are included in Table 3. Our theoretical interest, however, lies in the indirect effects, which were consistently positive—in the expected direction—and had 95% confidence intervals that excluded zero in all but one case, giving support to our mediation hypotheses, H3a and H3b. The lone exception was the lagged measure of exposure to satire programs via social media. The largest indirect effect was that for the non-lagged measure of exposure to satire showed (b = 0.18, 95% CI [0.12, 0.24]) while the lagged measure had a smaller estimate (b = 0.03, 95%

CI [0.01, 0.04]). Exposure to satire via social media was associated with smaller effects for the non-lagged (b = 0.09, 95% CI [0.04, 0.15]) measure while the lagged effect was similar to its non-social media counterpart but with a confidence band that included zero (b = 0.03, 95% CI [-0.00, 0.07]), although it should be acknowledged the two forms of exposure were measured on slightly different scales.

Tests assessing moderated mediation are described in Table 4. Results consistently showed reduced indirect effects at low levels of affinity for political humor, sometimes reduced to no effect or in one case a negative effect. There was clear evidence of indirect effects when affinity for political humor was relatively high. The statistical tests of the differences between the indirect effects at these different levels of affinity for political humor affirmed these differences were significant in three of the four tests, providing partial support for hypotheses H5a and H5b. In the other moderation test, for lagged social media exposure, the pattern of results was as expected but the statistical tests offered insufficient evidence with a p-value of .21.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine a causal process in which exposure to political satire promotes political discussion by first prompting those who see the programs to discuss the show's content. We also test the indirect effect of political satire when people encounter political satire via shared posts on social media rather than by more deliberate means. This study also shows the moderating role of the social cohesion dimension of affinity for political humor (AFPH) to advance our understanding of this relationship by considering it as individual difference likely to be associated with one's likelihood of engaging in conversation about political satire.

Overall, the results reveal that regardless of whether exposure to political satire is incidental via social media or voluntary, exposure to political satire appears to promote

conversation about the content itself, which promotes political discussion in general. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the magnitude of effects for watching these programs on television appears larger than encountering the content on social media. This likely reflects a combination of larger dosage—i.e., the period of exposure is longer if someone watches an entire episode—and the presumed intentionality underlying exposure to media on television compared to social media. These relationships are moderated by the social cohesion dimension of AFPH: Among those who score high on AFPH, greater exposure to political satire increased the likelihood that they would talk about it (regardless of whether that exposure was incidental via social media or not), which in turn made them more likely to discuss politics in general. One way to interpret the way in which the results for past changes in political satire are completely contingent of AFPH is that effects are only long-lasting for those high in AFPH. Because this was not our *a priori* expectation, this potential explanation should be taken somewhat cautiously.

The results of this study present several important theoretical and empirical contributions to the field. First, the mediation results provide additional empirical support for previous studies' claims regarding the effect of exposure to political satire on interpersonal talk (Landreville et al., 2010; Lee & Jang, 2017). Lee and Jang's (2017) study already attempted to test the extent to which exposure to political satire facilitates interpersonal talk by employing an experimental design. However, due to the nature of laboratory experiments (i.e., controlled setting), the authors were only able to measure the respondents' future intention to engage in interpersonal talk about the issues covered in the clips they used (Lee & Jang, 2017), but not the extent to which the viewers really do discuss the content in their everyday lives. Our study also provides empirical evidence for the relationship between exposure to political satire and political discussion and suggests discussion of the content of these programs mediates this process. This study not only affirms the positive association

between exposure to political satire and political discussion in general (Landreville et al., 2010), but also demonstrates that individuals' conversation that is directly influenced by viewing political satire can further lead the viewers to discuss political matters with others.

One of the intriguing findings of this study is the positive association between incidental exposure to political satire via social media and political discussion, mediated by conversation about political satire. Research has demonstrated that watching political satirical programs is positively associated with increased political engagement (Baumgartner & Lockerbie, 2018; Hoffman & Young, 2011) and political discussion (Landreville et al., 2010), but some scholars suggested that the positive association between political satire and political discussion may be more prominent among the most attentive citizens (Moy et al., 2005). However, our findings suggest that even when individuals are incidentally exposed to political satire via posts shared on social media, it can possibly exert an influence on them by facilitating conversation about political satire (i.e., the video clip they incidentally encountered), which could lead to further political conversation about other topics and with other people. This indirect effect may be particularly more meaningful for politically less interested individuals as the political learning effect of watching political satire was found to be more prominent among those who are politically less interested individuals (Xenos & Becker, 2009). Although one may wonder whether it is the committed viewers who see this content on social media, by controlling for exposure via television or streaming services (which we presume to be more intentional), our analyses should reflect the effect of social media exposure to satire independent of the more intentional exposure on television.

This study has several methodological strengths worth highlighting. The participants are a probability sample of a population of interest, adults in the United States. This makes generalizability of the results part of the design that does not have to be established either by assumption or statistical analysis (Long, 2021). The panel design offers another key benefit in

comparison to cross-sectional surveys: We are able to focus statistically on within-subjects variance, which rules out concerns confounds due to consistent correlations between individual differences such as personality or demographics and scores on the measured variables.

Having acknowledged these strengths, the design and statistical methods used in this study are also not without flaws. Although we believe we have captured a distinction between intended viewing of these programs on one hand and incidental exposure on the other, respondents were not asked to think about their responses in these terms. It is therefore possible that social media exposure was intended and watching whole episodes was incidental in enough cases to cause our assumptions to be mistaken. As a general matter, without randomized assignment as in laboratory and field experiments, we cannot completely rule out selection effects relating to who is exposed to political satire. The panel design and fixed effects regression rule out any selection effects caused by individual differences, but cannot exclude more complex confounders that vary over time. For example, we cannot be certain we controlled for other variables that changed for some participants and not others during the study period.

Beyond these general points about causal inference using panel data, there are more assumptions involved in mediation analysis that make mediation particularly difficult to establish unequivocally (Bullock, Green, & Ha, 2010; Imai, Keele, Tingley, & Yamamoto, 2011). We rely on our theoretical justification—in addition to some of the strengths of the design and analysis, like ruling out time-invariant confounders—to establish the plausibility of the mediation process. We have also assumed that satire is a more desirable choice for low-interest viewers consistent with past research (e.g., Knobloch-Westerwick & Lavis, 2017), but were not able to incorporate actual political interest here. Future research which

incorporates such elements, which we could not, would clarify whether the assumptions made about interest and post-exposure valence are accurate and significant in scope.

Research that occurs during a federal election has some key advantages since this is a time that politics is important in people's lives and their attitudes and intentions are most likely to turn into consequential actions through voting or other forms of engagement that may affect election outcomes. On the other hand, whether findings that are observed during such an election will apply outside the context of federal elections can be uncertain for these same reasons. Furthermore, nearly all U.S. Presidential elections are important historical events which are unique and create communication environments which may differ fundamentally from what comes both immediately after the election and in future elections. This study does not directly concern preferences for candidates, but we cannot definitively rule out the possibility that some aspects of the 2016 election could have changed the results in a way that makes them not generalizable to other time periods.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the literature on political satire, particularly its impact on political discussion. In particular, by exploring the effect of incidental exposure to political satire via social media on political discussion, as well as the role of satire talk in spurring political discussion, this research highlights the importance of considering various ways of examining the role of political satire in political communication. In addition, this study suggests an important democratic consequence of viewing political satire, even for those who may be less interested in politics. The basic logic of this study may also apply to other political media and their relationship with political communication; noteworthy political media content can provide a topic to discuss with others. Since political media are rarely totally self-confined, discussion of the media itself can provide a segue to discuss the larger issues that appeared on the program in question.

The effect of political satire on discussion is relatively underexplored in the literature despite the importance of political discussion in political learning (Eveland, 2004). We believe that future research can benefit from further investigating different mechanisms of the relationship between exposure to political satire and discussion, particularly considering various features of online media environment, for example, social factors associated with content shared online (e.g., comments, likes, or recommendations) that can exert influence on the viewers.

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Availability of Data

Replication data is available at the following URL, via the Open Science Framework: https://osf.io/tszun

Disclosure Statement

There are no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests to report.

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Table 1. Fixed effects models predicting conversation about satire programs

	Conversation about political satire programs	
	Model 1	Model 2
Satire exposure (*t*)	0.75 (0.28)*	0.54 (0.18)*
Satire exposure (*t* - 1)	-0.00 (0.15)	-0.05 (0.26)
Satire exposure (*t*) x AFPH	-0.00 (0.05)	-0.06 (0.04)
Satire exposure (*t* - 1) x AFPH	0.18 (0.04)*	0.10 (0.06)
Social media satire (*t*)	—	0.44 (0.07)*
Social media satire (*t* - 1)	—	0.14 (0.15)
Social media satire (*t*) x AFPH	—	0.01 (0.02)
Social media satire (*t* - 1) x AFPH	—	0.01 (0.04)
News exposure (*t*)	0.04 (0.03)	0.02 (0.04)
News exposure (*t* - 1)	0.02 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)
Social media politics (*t*)	—	-0.00 (0.01)
Social media politics (*t* – 1)	—	-0.01 (0.02)
Constant	0.07 (0.05)	0.07 (0.05)
R^2	.144	.292

Note: Values are linear regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

Predictors are mean-centered. * $p < .05$

Table 2. Fixed effects models predicting frequency of political discussion

	Frequency of Political Discussion	
	Model 3	Model 4
Satire talk (*t*)	0.24 (0.07)*	0.21 (0.09)*
Satire talk (*t* - 1)	0.17 (0.03)*	0.11 (0.04)*
Satire exposure (*t*)	0.19 (0.23)	0.16 (0.15)
Satire exposure (*t* - 1)	-0.06 (0.28)	0.01 (0.36)
Satire exposure (*t*) x AFPH	-0.22 (0.06)*	-0.18 (0.04)*
Satire exposure (*t* - 1) x AFPH	-0.07 (0.07)	-0.05 (0.09)
Satire talk (*t*) x AFPH	0.06 (0.02)*	0.09 (0.01)*
Social media satire (*t*)	—	-0.03 (0.17)
Social media satire (*t* - 1)	—	0.06 (0.31)
Social media satire (*t*) x AFPH	—	-0.05 (0.03)
Social media satire (*t* - 1) x AFPH	—	-0.02 (0.07)
News exposure (*t*)	0.21 (0.02)*	0.19 (0.02)*
News exposure (*t* - 1)	0.06 (0.06)	0.08 (0.06)
Social media general (*t*)	—	0.32 (0.02)*
Social media general (*t* – 1)	—	0.04 (0.03)
Constant	0.15 (0.16)	0.15 (0.13)
R^2	.063	.176

Note: Values are linear regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

Predictors are mean-centered. * $p < .05$

Table 3. Summary of mediation analysis

	Satire exposure (*t*)	Satire exposure (*t* - 1)	Social media satire (*t*)	Social media satire (*t* - 1)
Indirect effect	0.182 [0.114, 0.256]	0.025 [0.010, 0.042]	0.093 [0.036, 0.151]	0.031 [-0.001, 0.068]
Direct effect	0.189 [0.163, 0.214]	-0.056 [-0.141, 0.032]	-0.028 [-0.163, 0.106]	0.063 [-0.067, 0.193]
Total effect	0.371 [0.279, 0.467]	-0.031 [-0.102, 0.043]	0.065 [-0.012, 0.143]	0.094 [-0.022, 0.208]

Note: Values are mean estimates after 5000 simulations. 95% quasi-Bayesian confidence intervals are in brackets.

Table 4. Summary of moderated mediation results

Value of AFPH	*b* of satire exposure (*t*)	*b* of satire exposure (*t* - 1)	*b* of social media satire (*t*)	*b* of social media satire (*t* - 1)
2.00 (Mean - 1 SD)	0.114 [0.063, 0.168]	-0.044 [-0.061, -0.029]	0.033 [-0.023, 0.091]	0.010 [-0.008, 0.029]
5.20 (Mean + 1 SD)	0.250 [0.151, 0.351]	0.094 [0.052, 0.143]	0.154 [0.097, 0.211]	0.052 [-0.010, 0.122]

Note: *b* stands for indirect effect.