At Odds: Laughing and Thinking? The Appreciation, Processing, and Persuasiveness of Political Satire

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This study constructs and tests a conceptual model of how and for whom political satire affects political attitudes. With an experiment, we show that young adults compared to older people are more absorbed in satirical items than in regular news. Subsequently, absorption decreased counterarguing such that the attitude toward the satirized object was affected negatively. By contrast, we show that political satire positively affects the attitude toward the satirized subject via perceived funniness; this was particularly strong among those who held views congruent with the satire or lacked background knowledge, which follows disposition theory. Investigating the underlying and conditional processes gave insight into mechanisms through which satire influences attitudes and pinpointed possible reasons for mixed effects of this infotainment genre.

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Incongruity between what is expected and what is presented is an inherent element of humor (Eisend, 2009; Meyer, 2000). Political satire, by means of incongruity, allows for new ways of looking at political matters and can make the “taken-for-granted” less self-explanatory and influence attitude formation (Colletta, 2009). Besides that satire may close the age gap in political attentiveness between younger and older citizens (Hmielowski, Holbert, & Lee, 2011; Young & Tisinger, 2006), it thus makes a potentially significant democratic contribution by offering perspectives that differ from those in the traditional media (Holbert, 2013). Studies on political satire, however,
have found persuasive effects that were often insignificant or rather weak (Holbert, 2013).

We aim to advance the understanding of how satire may or may not affect citizens’ attitudes using a conceptual model that provides insight into the most important processes through which satire may be persuasive. The conceptual model used to investigate how and for whom political satire is effective is grounded in an extensive review of the literature on political satire and builds on the pioneering studies of Nabi, Moyer-Gusé, and Byrne (2007) and LaMarre, Landreville, Young, and Gilkerson (2014). The model shows what precedes the persuasive effects of satire and pinpoints two possible reasons for prior findings of mixed or null effects of exposure to political satire.

First, satire has been shown to evoke opposing underlying processes that may prevent an overall effect of political satire (Nabi et al., 2007). Therefore, our model includes two mediating processes, one through perceiving satire as funny and the other through absorption in the satire. These are examined and tested in one partially latent structural equation model, so that both underlying pathways through which satire may affect political attitudes are investigated at once. Second, we focus on the conditional nature of these processes as another explanation for the lack of strong effects in prior research (see Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Effects of satire arguably play out stronger, weaker, positive, or negative depending on individual characteristics. This study shows that political preference, background knowledge, and age moderate particular pathways in our model and, thus, influence satire’s attitudinal impact.

Previous studies hitherto considered none or only one such nuance of opposing mediating or moderated processes at a time. As such, an integrated framework for whether and how political satire causes attitude change remains lacking (Young, Holbert, & Jamieson, 2013). In this study, professionally created stimuli were employed in an experiment that looked into the effects of satire and the complementary influence of exposure to regular news. The study speaks to the need (see Baym & Jones, 2012) to go beyond the late-night comedy genre and U.S. borders as it has been conducted in the Dutch context with a different type of satire and investigates the differential susceptibility to media effects (see Valkenburg & Peter, 2013) due to both dispositional factors (i.e., political preference) and developmental factors (i.e., age). The conceptual model we sketch for the effects of political satire brings conceptual clarity to the study of this genre. Moreover, it contributes to understanding the persuasiveness of other genres than only political satire, as we elaborate on in the discussion.

The effects of political satire

Most studies on political satire focused on direct persuasive effects without considering the underlying processes. However, due to a diversity of findings, questions arise as to how humor affects the political attitudes of viewers. Nabi et al. (2007) found that
perceiving political messages as funny sets in motion two processes that, respectively, evoke and inhibit counterarguing: On the one hand, the information of funny messages is frequently discounted (Nabi et al., 2007), whereas on the other hand, humorous messages enhance engagement with the narrative, so-called “absorption” (Slater & Rouner, 2002, p. 179). LaMarre et al. (2014) shed light on similar processes by looking into satire’s indirect effects on attitudes of message discounting, resource allocation, and argument scrutiny.

By applying and combining the theoretical insights from these studies (LaMarre et al., 2014; Nabi et al., 2007), we substantially add to the understanding of political satire’s persuasive process in the following ways: We investigate (a) how perceived funniness and absorption are impacted by political satire relative to regular news content, (b) whether these effects are conditional on viewers’ characteristics, and (c) how satire through perceived funniness and absorption eventually affects people’s attitudes indirectly via counterarguing.

When is political satire perceived as funny and when is it not?
The consumption of political satire is a participatory act in which people deconstruct a satirical message by using existing knowledge, often acquired through other media texts, and reconstruct the message to individually come to an understanding of what they see (Holbert & Young, 2013). This explains why some do and others do not recognize the intended meaning of satire (Colletta, 2009; Simpson, 2003), and hence perceive it as funny or not.

Fully understanding satire is not required to perceive it as funny; people also just laugh at what surprises or is odd (Matthes & Rauchfleisch, 2013). Yet, people only laugh when the joke is not perceived as a threat to one’s self-image (Meyer, 2000). Disposition theory posits that joke appreciation depends on the favorableness of one’s disposition toward the targeted subject (Becker, 2014; Zillmann & Cantor, 1972). Thus, because people interpret satire in the framework of their own experiences and values (Zillmann & Cantor, 1972), satire only evokes laughter when it is not perceived as threatening the receiver’s self-image (Nabi et al., 2007).

However, this presumption—people do not laugh at satire that targets themselves—was rejected more than once (Colletta, 2009). Unprejudiced viewers of the 1970s sitcom All in the Family liked that the prejudiced blue-collar worker Archie Bunker was being satirized. Prejudiced viewers, however, also liked the series because they loved seeing Archie expressing their feelings and, thus, found the sitcom funny by misinterpreting the satire and selectively processing it in a nonthreatening manner (Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974). Similarly, conservatives and liberals both laughed at The Colbert Report, but for different reasons that were in line with their political views (Colletta, 2009; LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009).

Indications of both selective processing and disposition theory have thus been found for political satire. Circumstances may predict when one or the other occurs. When a satire’s intended meaning is overly clear, people interpret it in the “correct” way and will therefore notice when it is incongruent with their existing views (Podlas,
Most often, a satire’s meaning is, however, only implicitly presented due to irony or sarcasm (Simpson, 2003; Young et al., 2013). In that case, interpretations can be guided by existing beliefs, and selective processing occurs, so people see reflections of their own preferences in the satire (Podlas, 2013). Consequently, when a satire’s meaning is not explicitly made clear, people do not feel threatened, and laugh about the satire even when it actually was incongruent with their views.

Satire’s clarity, however, not only depends on message characteristics but arguably also on viewers’ ability to understand the message (Holbert et al., 2011). This ability most likely relates to the possession of background knowledge, which often is retrieved from other media texts. The theoretical concept of intertextuality argues that the interpretation of a text (e.g., satire) not only comes from the text itself or from its producer but is also highly dependent on the readers’ positioning and context of reception (Gray, 2006). This context and positioning consists not only of readers’ demographic characteristics but also very much (on the accumulation) of previous textual experiences on the same topic, which helps to construct meaning of a new text and elaborate on its content (Landreville & LaMarre, 2013).

As people differ on their previous experiences, the interpretations of a satire may differ too. Those who have been exposed to (media) content on the subject can construct an interpretation based on the knowledge they retrieved from those texts (Gray, 2006), whereas those without previous experiences probably find it difficult to “correctly” interpret the satire and have to rely on their existing views while (selectively) interpreting the satire. Following the elaboration likelihood model (ELM), this means that intertextual sense-making increases one’s ability to centrally process the message (Landreville & LaMarre, 2013) and helps to recognize whether a satire is in line with or opposes one’s preferences.

Not much is known, however, about how satire functions together with traditional news (Holbert & Young, 2013), which typically provides citizens the background information to interpret political satire (Gray, 2006). Yet, knowledge regarding how satire functions in conjunction with regular news is of great importance in terms of external validity: Those who tune into political satire often do this supplementary to the consumption of traditional news and not in a news vacuum (Young & Tisinger, 2006).

Following the line of reasoning behind intertextual sense-making (Gray, 2006), we expect those without previous textual experiences to lack the knowledge, and therefore the ability, to fully understand the intended meaning of a satire. Consequently, they will selectively process the satire in a manner that is not threatening to one’s self-image (i.e., in line with their preferences) and hence perceive it as funny even if the producer’s intended meaning was counterattitudinal (see Holbert et al., 2011). Satire viewers with previous textual experiences on the topic, by contrast, have sufficient background knowledge and, presumably, are able to interpret the satire in the intended manner (LaMarre & Walther, 2013; Landreville & LaMarre, 2013). Being able to understand the satire well provides these viewers with the means to decide
whether they believe that the satirized subject was worthy of being attacked according to their preferences (Holbert et al., 2011) and thus determines whether viewers think it is funny or not. We hypothesize as follows:

H1: Viewers find a satirical message funnier when its intended meaning is congruent with their political preferences than when it is incongruent with their preferences. The moderating role of preference (in)congruence is conditional on the availability of topic-specific background information such that only the viewers with topic-specific background knowledge dislike satire that is incongruent with their preferences.

The consequence of perceiving political satire as funny
Perceiving messages as funny has been shown to set in motion a discounting mechanism (Nabi et al., 2007); generally, humorous messages are perceived as less credible and less informational than nonhumorous messages (Eisend, 2009; LaMarre & Walther, 2013). The delivery of humorous messages suggests that the information contained in them is not serious and should therefore not be used in serious considerations (Nabi et al., 2007). Consequently, perceiving political messages as funny increases counterarguing due to this discounting process (Nabi et al., 2007). Evoking relatively more negative thoughts about the idea that a satire intends to convey, subsequently, negatively affects attitude-agreement with the satirist. That is, compared with similar content without humoristic cues, the attitude toward the targeted subject may be influenced relatively less negatively in the event that people find a message funny. Parody, for example, generally causes negative evaluations of parodied politicians, but perceived funniness of the parody simultaneously counterbalances this negative effect somewhat (Matthes & Rauchfleisch, 2013).

Similarly, satirical content has been shown to evoke more positive thoughts toward the targeted subject than critical news (LaMarre & Walther, 2013): Rather than scrutinizing the message’s target, people scrutinize the satirical message because it provides cues not to be taken seriously. This discounting mechanism was also found in the processing of different types of satire (LaMarre et al., 2014), horatian and juvenal satire, which differ not only in the conduct of aggression and laughter but also on the degree of judgment implicitness (Holbert, 2014). Lighter forms of humor (horatian satire) were perceived as funnier and less serious than bitter approaches to humor (juvenal satire; LaMarre et al., 2014). Horatian satire, therefore, caused more message discounting and more message scrutinizing than juvenal satire, which eventually led to less agreement with the horatian satire message. When such differences between satirical messages are compared, the cognitive resources available to counterargue information are also greater when people are exposed to light-hearted satire than to more bitter and less funny forms of satire because the first are immediately perceived as funny and require less thinking to get the joke (LaMarre et al., 2014).

Counterarguing, caused by perceiving a message as funny, will lead to a relatively positive attitude toward the satirized subject; after all, those who counterargue actively hold ideas incongruent with the satire’s criticism on this subject. This criticism will,
consequently, be less effective. We accordingly formulate the following hypothesis regarding the positive indirect effect of perceived funniness on the attitude toward the satirized subject:

\[ H_2: \text{The funnier a political message is perceived to be (a), the more it induces counterarguing, which subsequently (b) positively affects the attitude toward the satirized subject as it decreases agreement with the message’s argument.} \]

Absorption in political satire

Past research also established that humorous messages have a persuasive influence because they increase absorption in the message. When people are absorbed, they are “primarily engaged in the storyline, rather than in one’s immediate environment” (Moyer-Gusé, 2008, p. 409). Entertainment, in general, and humorous content particularly have been shown to absorb viewers (Slater & Rouner, 2002). Advertising studies, for example, found that humorous messages draw more attention than nonhumorous messages (Eisend, 2009). The reason probably is that humor comprehension requires high cognitive loads (for an overview, see Young, 2008): Comprehending a joke typically involves more than language comprehension and also requires strategically recruiting background knowledge. As soon as people realize that a message is funny, they will be motivated to concentrate and process its content because they eventually hope to be rewarded with a laugh (Nabi et al., 2007). As a result, people allocate many cognitive resources to be able to understand the jokes of humorous messages. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

\[ H_3: \text{The perceived funniness of a political message positively affects people’s absorption in this message.} \]

How much individuals are absorbed in entertainment content depends on how well it serves their needs and goals (Slater & Rouner, 2002). Compared to older audiences, satire arguably serves the needs and goals of younger people better than news formats as audience ratings and survey data show that it particularly attracts this audience segment (Hmielowski et al., 2011; Young & Tisinger, 2006), which at the same time tuned out from regular news (Mindich, 2005). The period of emerging adulthood, between 18 years of age and the late 20s, is typically identified as a time of being self-focused, identity exploration, and feeling “in-between.” These characteristics translate into certain usage and gratification patterns in one’s media selection (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, & Howard, 2013) and arguably in a preference for satire over news (Rottinghaus, Bird, Ridout, & Self, 2008; Young, 2013).

As emerging adulthood is the period in life in which people are particularly self-focused (Coyne et al., 2013), it is not surprising that emerging adults have little interest in news that covers public affairs. Young people perceive an isolation from the political process and, therefore, are not inclined to politically inform themselves through the regular news media (Mindich, 2005). Older generations, by contrast, grew up in times of limited media choice, were more likely to see news when they were young, and thereby developed an interest in politics and a habit of following the
news (Mindich, 2005). Many young people did not develop this interest in watching news; yet, humor can make the coverage of politics and current affairs relevant to them and will attract their attention (Rottinghaus et al., 2008).

In terms of identity exploration, emerging adults have a psychological and social need to develop worldviews (Coyne et al., 2013). Rather than being informed, it is their priority to know what opinions they should hold (Barnhurst, 1998), because their political preferences are still developing and partisan attachments have not crystallized yet (see Jennings & Markus, 1984). Compared with traditional news, political satire provides interpretations and demonstrates which ideas prevail in a critical discussion and, thereby, helps emerging adults to develop political attitudes (Marchi, 2012; Feldman, 2007). Emerging adults, by contrast, dislike the balance and superficial political detachment of regular news coverage because this is not particularly helpful for their development of opinions (Mindich, 2005).

Lastly, emerging adulthood is experienced as a period of feeling in-between childhood and adulthood. Young people, therefore, begin to feel a responsibility to become engaged with politics; however, they may find the news media not entertaining enough (Feldman, 2007) or too didactical (Mindich, 2005) to do so. Emerging adults consider political satire an enjoyable alternative as it offers a comic relief to the serious and sad situations prevalent in the news (Rottinghaus et al., 2008; Young, 2013) and allows them to learn and to laugh simultaneously (Lee, 2013; Young, 2013). Because political satire fulfills the needs of emerging adults better than those of older ones, we expect younger adults to be more absorbed when watching political satire than regular news compared with older adults:

\[ H_4: \text{Younger viewers are more absorbed in political satire compared with traditional news than older viewers.} \]

The consequence of absorption in political satire

Formats that primarily intend to entertain have been shown to enhance persuasive impact due to absorption (Slater & Rouner, 2002). For this reason, the ELM has been extended into the E-ELM (Slater & Rouner, 2002), which predicts that people are less resistant, produce fewer counterarguments, and are more accepting of what they see as they are more absorbed in entertaining texts (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). The reason is that entertainment typically is not directly linked to one’s own life and therefore does not induce a need for scrutinizing because it does not directly impinge on one’s self-interest. Unconstrained by the need to be critical, messages used for entertainment purposes may absorb so much of viewers’ attention and cognitive capacity that it becomes difficult to critically evaluate and counterargue its information (Nabi et al., 2007). As satire for many is entertainment and by definition a kind of criticism (Simpson, 2003), Holbert (2014) even speaks of attacks, one could expect satire to negatively affect the attitudes toward satirized subjects.

The attempts to comprehend satire put such a high cognitive load on viewers (LaMarre & Walther, 2013; Nabi et al., 2007) that insufficient resources remain to scrutinize the validity of the satire’s criticism (LaMarre et al., 2014; Young, 2008).
Furthermore, and evidencing this theory, when satire is more complex and requires more cognitive effort, fewer resources are available for counterarguing (LaMarre et al., 2014), which increases persuasiveness. In addition to capabilities, viewer motivation also obstructs scrutinizing satire: Absorption and counterarguing “are fundamentally incompatible” (Slater & Rouner, 2002, p. 180). After all, message scrutiny undermines the reward component of comprehending a joke because it minimizes laughter (Young, 2008). Enhanced absorption thus increases susceptibility to the criticism of satire, because—as explained in the lead up to Hypothesis 2—counterarguing causes a decrease in agreement with a satirist's message. As absorption decreases the tendency of viewers to counterargue, agreement with the satirist increases, and the following negative indirect effect of absorption on the attitude toward the satirized subject is expected:

H₃: Absorption in a political message (a) reduces counterarguing, whereas (b) counterarguing has a positive effect on the attitude toward the satirized subject. Absorption, therefore, indirectly influences the attitude toward the satirized subject in a negative direction.

Figure 1 summarizes our conceptual model and visualizes the hypotheses that are investigated in this study.

Method

Political satirists serve a “mixed dish” of humor techniques in which elements of aggression, play, laughter, and judgment implicitness are combined to attack a political subject (Holbert, 2014, p. 4). Within one specific mixture of humor techniques, jokes may still differ in their nature of attack by varying the degrees of aggression and play (Holbert, 2014). A joke, while employing the same techniques, may be gentle—relatively more play—in how it attacks its target or may attack in a harsher manner by showing more aggression (Holbert, 2014). Acknowledging that political humor comes in a variety of forms, which may lead to differing effects (e.g., Holbert
et al., 2011; LaMarre et al., 2014), we manipulated the nature of attack of a satire: A gentle item and a harsh satire item were created with the same intended meaning and minimal differences in stimuli. Having two rather similar satire stimuli, we were able to verify the robustness of the experiment’s findings (Jackson & Jacobs, 1983).

A 2 (nature of attack: gentle vs. harsh) by 2 (background information provision: yes vs. no) with an appended control condition (a nonhumorous news item with no provision of background information) design was used to investigate the effects of political satire in an online experiment that was conducted on 3 and 4 April 2014. After providing informed consent and answering pretest questions, participants were randomly assigned by the online survey tool to one of the following five conditions: the nonhumorous news item (n = 53), the gentle satire item (n = 52), the harsh satire item (n = 58), provision of background information and the gentle satire item (n = 56), or provision of background information and the harsh satire item (n = 49). After exposure to a stimulus, the participants completed a posttest.

Stimulus materials
All videos addressed the same topic, which was the plan of the Dutch government to reduce funding for the public broadcasting organization. The government suggested that these budget cuts could be compensated for by scheduling more or longer advertising breaks between programs. The choice for a policy topic was made because recent content analyses showed that political humor often, especially in Europe (Matthes & Rauchfleisch, 2013), is issue-oriented and informative rather than person-oriented (Haigh & Heresco, 2010).

The satire items were especially made for this experiment by the producer of LuckyTV, Sander van de Pavert. LuckyTV is broadcast as a 1-minute satirical closure of the popular daily prime-time infotainment talk show De Wereld Draait Door. LuckyTV always uses video materials that have previously been broadcast and these often originate from news broadcasts of NOS Journaal, which is the news program with the highest ratings in the Netherlands. LuckyTV puts a humorous twist on these materials by re-editing them, combining them with visuals or audio from other sources, and/or by manipulating the voiceover. An original news item was used as the treatment in the nonhumorous condition, whereas this item was manipulated into LuckyTV items for the satire conditions. Stimuli thereby were improved in terms of internal validity compared with previous studies. Except for the presence or type of humor, stimuli from previous studies also varied strongly on visuals, sounds, actors, and voiceovers because they relied on existing materials (an exception is Holbert et al., 2011). Our stimuli largely showed the same visuals, with the same actors, and a relatively similar time-length. The satire stimuli were consciously made identifiable as LuckyTV items by the introduction and its logo, whereas the news item was identifiable as NOS Journaal item, because people’s expectations about what is to come determines how information is processed.

As is common for political satire (Young et al., 2013), the intended meaning of the satire stimuli was not overly clear. Participants thus had to use their knowledge...
of the topic to understand the joke. If they succeeded, they would have realized that the satirist criticized and attacked the government’s plan for the reason that the public broadcaster would become inundated with commercials (gentle item) or violence (harsh item) to attract audience share.

Nonhumorous condition
In the nonhumorous news condition, the participants were exposed to an existing item that was broadcast by NOS Journaal on 10 October 2013. The news item introduced the plan of the Dutch government to cut the budget for the public broadcasting organization and suggests that more or longer commercial breaks would be scheduled and that price of distribution would be renegotiated with operators. Then, the item shows an interview with State Secretary Dekker in which he explains that public broadcasters could fill up their deficit by broadcasting one or two more minutes of commercials per hour.

Gentle satire conditions
In two of the conditions, the participants were exposed to a satiric LuckyTV item with a gentle nature of attack. The item started with the same introduction as the NOS Journaal item stating that the Dutch government planned to cut the budget of public broadcasters and suggested broadcasting more commercials. After the State Secretary repeated that the public broadcaster should consider scheduling one or two more minutes of commercials, a tedious and ridiculous 1-minute commercial for a senior oil began with epic movie music in the background. At the commercial’s end, we see a news host waiting for the commercial to finally finish before he can continue presenting the headlines.

Half of the participants who saw this gentle satire item were in the condition of only seeing this video. The other half additionally had read an article from the NOS news website before they saw the LuckyTV item. The article reported on the planned budget cuts for public broadcasting to provide participants with topic-specific background knowledge. This news article provided information that was also presented in the nonhumorous NOS item with a few more details.

Harsh humor conditions
The participants in the last two conditions were exposed to a LuckyTV item that addressed the same topic in a harsh satirical way. This video also began with the introduction of the NOS Journaal item that the Dutch government planned to cut the budget of public broadcasters. However, instead of filling up their deficits by broadcasting more commercials, this item suggested (by manipulating the voice-over) that more revenues could be derived by broadcasting violent series and movies. Furthermore, the interviewer’s question to the State Secretary whether more commercials should be broadcast was replaced by the question whether more violence should be broadcast. As in the original, the State Secretary confirmed this expectation. Visuals from inside Parliament were replaced by violent scenes from movies. In addition,
whereas the NOS Journaal item showed citizens watching sports on TV, in the LuckyTV item, the sports video was replaced by a video of a gun fight. Again, about half of the participants who saw this item had read the article from the NOS website before exposure to the video, whereas the other half only saw the satirical video.

The harsh satire item was perceived as being 0.86 points (on a 10-point scale) more tasteless than the gentle item, \( p = .052 \), and 1.17 points more offending, \( p = .016 \), than the gentle satire item. As intended, the harsh item and the gentle item did not differ on how complicated they were to be understood, \( p = .662 \), nor in terms of clarity, \( p = .169 \), prompting people to think, \( p = .395 \), or ideological bias, \( p = .728 \). This shows that it was purely the nature of the attack that was manipulated and not something else.

**Participants**

Participants were recruited from the database of a market research agency, PanelClix. Quotas were set on age, gender, and political preference to ensure variation in the sample and to make it representative for Dutch society on at least these characteristics. With a 57.1% completion rate, 268 participants successfully completed the experiment. They showed to have done so attentively by correctly responding to an instructional manipulation check (IMC, see Oppenheimer, Meyvis, & Davidenko, 2009).\(^5\)

Participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 72 years (\( M = 40.62, SD = 14.06, \) skewness = 0.04, kurtosis = −1.16), and 54.5% were female. Median educational level was elementary general secondary education, and 40.7% had obtained a bachelor’s degree or higher. In our sample, 34% of the participants identified themselves with a left-wing political preference, 30.2% with no political preference, and 35.8% indicated a right-wing political preference. It took participants on average 32 minutes (\( SD = 17.37 \)) to complete the experiment.\(^6\)

**Measures**

*Independent variable*

**Experimental condition.** The independent variable in this study was the experimental condition to which a participant had randomly been assigned.

*Moderators*

**Political preference.** In the pretest, participants were asked on an 11-point scale whether cultural facilities should be maintained (−5) or whether the government should cut the budget for these expenses (5; \( M = −0.92, SD = 2.41, \) skewness = 0.31, kurtosis = −0.58). This question operationalized people’s opinions regarding the various budget cuts that the Dutch government proposed during the period in which this study was conducted.

*Mediators*

**Perceived funniness.** How funny participants thought the video was to which they were exposed was measured with the response to one statement that was answered on a scale from 0 (not funny) to 10 (funny). The average score was 3.53 (\( SD = 3.03 \)). As
At Odds: Laughing and Thinking?

M. Boukes et al.

intended, the nonhumorous news item condition \((M = 2.38, SD = 2.27)\) was perceived significantly, \(F(2,265) = 4.97, p = .008, \eta^2 = 0.04,\) less funny than the gentle satire item \((M = 3.97, SD = 2.99)\) and the harsh satire item \((M = 3.66, SD = 3.03)\).

Absorption

How much people were absorbed in the item was measured with a latent scale of two items both assessed on 11-point scales \((M = 5.75, SD = 2.18)\). The first item was whether people felt distracted or concentrated while watching the video; the second item asked whether people remained conscious of their surroundings or whether they were completely focused on the video. Both items are part of a larger scale used by Nabi et al. (2007) and were used as indicators of the latent construct “absorption” in the structural equation model and had standardized effect coefficients of 0.65 and 0.62, respectively.

Counterarguing

Immediately after stimulus exposure, the participants were asked to write down all thoughts they had during and directly after watching the video. They were given a minimum of at least 1 minute to accomplish this task and were provided with six text entry boxes to help structure their minds and stimulate responses. On average, the participants provided 2.18 thoughts \((SD = 1.34)\), of which 1.18 \((SD = 1.22)\) related specifically to the topic of budget cuts for the public broadcaster.

The valence of the topic-related thoughts was coded by the first author to capture whether participants actively agreed or disagreed with the critical message of the satirist that the government’s plans were not good. The coding scheme followed Young (2008) and distinguished between negative message–relevant thoughts (disagreeing with the satire items, i.e., stating that budget cuts were fine) and positive message–relevant thoughts (agreeing with the satire items, that is, stating that budget cuts were problematic). In total, 20% of the thoughts were randomly selected and coded by someone not involved in the study for the purpose of intercoder reliability assessment. The number of positive message–relevant thoughts were subtracted from the number of negative message–relevant thoughts \((M = -0.52, SD = 0.99;\) Krippendorff’s \(\alpha = .87)\); so, higher scores indicated more counterarguing with satire stimuli.

Dependent variable

Attitude. How much people supported the government’s plan to cut the budget of the public broadcasting organization was measured using three responses to the following statements on 11-point scales \((-5 to 5)\): whether people thought the plans were (a) a bad or good idea, (b) unacceptable or acceptable, and (c) foolish or sensible. The three items were used as indicators of the latent construct “attitude” \((M = -0.88, SD = 2.78)\) and had standardized effect coefficients of 0.97, 0.90, and 0.94, respectively.

Analysis

Dealing with a multcategorical independent variable (i.e., allocation to one of five experimental conditions), being interested in more comparisons than only to a
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experimental condition</th>
<th>Contrast-coded variables</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gentle with background info versus gentle satire</td>
<td>Gentle satire item versus news item</td>
<td>News item versus harsh satire</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gentle with background info</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gentle satire item</td>
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<td>0.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>News item</td>
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<td>−0.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Harsh satire item</td>
<td>−0.2</td>
<td>−0.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Harsh with background info</td>
<td>−0.2</td>
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Values in the columns show the weight given per condition in one of the four contrast-coded variables.

reference condition, and having a model with multiple mediators and moderators, a sophisticated analytical design was developed that allowed to analyze all of the hypotheses at once. Following Hayes and Preacher (2013), forward difference contrast coding was applied (see Table 1), which resulted in \( k - 1 \) variables (i.e., four in this case) (Serlin & Levin, 1985).

Thereby, we could analyze most of the differences between experimental conditions that were of interest to our theory and conceptual model. The contrast-coded variables allowed for the following comparisons of conditions: gentle satire with background information versus gentle satire; gentle satire versus news item; news item versus harsh satire; and, harsh satire versus harsh satire with background information. The effect coefficients of contrast-coded variables replicate post hoc differences between conditions as in an analysis of variance (ANOVA).

The contrast-coded variables were used in a partially latent structural equation model with attitude and absorption included as latent constructs (see Figure 2). The hypothesized moderated relationships were included as interaction effects with age and existing political preference. The analyses were conducted in AMOS 21 using maximum likelihood estimation. The model fitted the data well; \( \chi^2(90) = 110.36, \ p = .071 \), the comparative fit index (CFI) was >.99, standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.04, and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .03 with 90% confidence interval (CI) [.00, .05].

**Results**

Table 2 shows the estimates of the effects yielded with the structural equation model. Findings are discussed in the order of the hypotheses.
Figure 2 The partially latent structural equation model testing the underlying processes of satire’s effect on political attitudes. Note: For reasons of clarity, we did not visualize the specified covariances between the exogenous variables, although they were included in the model.

Effects of political satire via perceived funniness
The significant parameter estimates in the structural equation model for the contrasts with the news item showed that the two satire items were perceived as funnier than the news item. Generally, no differences in perceived funniness were found between those who read the news article before they saw a satire item and those who were not provided with this background information before exposure.

However, whether people were provided with background information did matter for how funny the satire was perceived to be. When the gentle and harsh satire conditions without background information were compared to the news item, no significant interaction effects were found with people’s existing political preference. Therefore, these effects were restrained to zero (i.e., there were no effects) in the structural equation model, which indicates that political preferences did not moderate how funny the satire was perceived to be among those who were not provided with the news article that provided the background knowledge.

The interaction effects with political preferences were, however, significant for the contrast-coded variables that compared the satire conditions without background information to the satire conditions that were provided with background information for both the gentle and the harsh items. Thus, the availability of background knowledge allowed political preferences to moderate the effect of satire on perceived
### Table 2
Parameter estimates for the partially latent structural regression model predicting attitudes toward budget cuts on public broadcasting by the government

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Independent variable</th>
<th>Dependent variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>(SE)</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Gentle with background info versus gentle humor</td>
<td>Perceived funniness</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>.543</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Gentle humor versus news item</td>
<td>Perceived funniness</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>.037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>News item versus harsh humor</td>
<td>Perceived funniness</td>
<td>-1.45</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Harsh humor versus harsh with background info</td>
<td>Perceived funniness</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>.207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Existing preference (against vs. favoring budget cuts)</td>
<td>Perceived funniness</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>.342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>(Gentle with background info vs. gentle humor) × preference</td>
<td>Perceived funniness</td>
<td>-0.44</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>(Gentle humor vs. news item) × preference</td>
<td>Perceived funniness</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Restricted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>(News item vs. harsh humor) × preference</td>
<td>Perceived funniness</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Restricted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>(Harsh humor vs. harsh with background info) × preference</td>
<td>Perceived funniness</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>.020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Perceived funniness</td>
<td>Absorption</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Gentle with background info versus gentle humor</td>
<td>Absorption</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>.418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Gentle humor versus news item</td>
<td>Absorption</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>News item versus harsh humor</td>
<td>Absorption</td>
<td>-5.81</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Harsh humor versus harsh with background info</td>
<td>Absorption</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Absorption</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>(Gentle with background info vs. gentle humor) × age</td>
<td>Absorption</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>.362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>(Gentle humor vs. news item) × Age</td>
<td>Absorption</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>(News item vs. harsh humor) × Age</td>
<td>Absorption</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>(Harsh humor vs. harsh with background info) × Age</td>
<td>Absorption</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,₄</td>
<td>Perceived funniness</td>
<td>Counterarguing</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5,₄</td>
<td>Absorption</td>
<td>Counterarguing</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5,₄</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Counterarguing</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>.262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5,₄</td>
<td>Existing preference</td>
<td>Counterarguing</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2₄ &amp; 5₄</td>
<td>Counterarguing</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>.025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Existing preference</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*R² = 0.07  
*R² = 0.24  
*R² = 0.15  
*R² = 0.21

Note: Cells contain unstandardized (B) coefficients with standard errors (SE) in parentheses and probabilities (p).
funniness. When the news item condition was compared with the two satire conditions in which people were first provided with background information, the interaction effects were also significant. Johnson-Neyman significance regions (see Hayes, 2013) below 0.66 and −1.10, respectively, showed that people who were provided with background information and disagreed with the satire’s viewpoint did not significantly perceive the satire items as funnier than the news item.

Figure 3 plots these interaction effects and shows how funny people with different political preferences thought the videos were. The differences between the people who were against budget cuts on cultural facilities and those who favored these cuts were small and insignificant except in the satire conditions where they first had read the
news article. In those conditions where background knowledge was provided, joke appreciation was significantly the highest among those who generally were against budget cuts and, thus, held political preferences congruent with the satirist’s message.

Background information, therefore, seemed essential to evoke laughter only when the satire was consistent with the participant’s existing disposition, which supports Hypothesis 1. Confirming the theoretical foundation underlying this hypothesis, an ANOVA showed that participants in the conditions that first provided background information found it less difficult to understand the satire than participants without such background knowledge, $F(1,213) = 5.02$, $p = .026$, $\eta^2 = .02$; most likely, this decreases the tendency to selectively process the satire in ways that reflect one’s preferences and are not threatening to one’s self-image.

The expectation formulated in Hypothesis 2 has also been confirmed. Perceived funniness had a significant positive effect on counterarguing; counterarguing, subsequently, positively affected the attitude in a manner such that people agreed more with the government’s plan and thus less with the satirist. The 95% bias-corrected 10,000 bootstraps interval of the indirect effect of perceived funniness on the attitude via counterarguing did not negatively exceed zero, which implies a significant positive indirect effect of perceived funniness on the attitude toward the government’s plan (Hayes, 2013), $b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.01$, 95% CI $[0.00, 0.06]$, $p = .016$.

**Effects of political satire via absorption**

How funny an item was perceived to be also increased engagement with the narrative. As Hypothesis 3 predicted, a positive effect of perceived funniness on absorption was found. The experiment also confirmed Hypothesis 4 that young adults were more absorbed in satire than in regular news compared with older people. The two interaction effects of age with the contrast-coded variables that compared exposure to the news item relative to seeing one of the two satire items were both significant.

Figure 4 shows how the effect on absorption of being assigned to a satire condition relative to the news condition changes with age: Absorption was significantly stimulated among younger participants who saw the satire, whereas older participants were significantly less absorbed in it (i.e., they were more absorbed in the news item). Johnson-Neyman significance regions (see Hayes, 2013) showed that absorption significantly rose among participants aged under 28 years for the gentle satire video, whereas for the harsh satire, the same significant raise occurred among people younger than 35 years. This closely resembles the age of 30 years that has been described as the end of emerging adulthood (Coyne et al., 2013).

Absorption was expected to negatively affect the attitude toward the government’s plan due to a lack of resources and motivation to counterargue the criticism of the items. Hence, we investigated whether absorption had a negative indirect effect on the attitude via decreased counterarguing. First, a negative effect was found for absorption on counterarguing, which indicates that as participants were more absorbed in the message, relatively fewer critical thoughts raised about its intended meaning.
At Odds: Laughing and Thinking?  

M. Boukes et al.

Figure 4 The visualized interaction effect on absorption (continuous line) and its 95% confidence interval (CI) (dotted lines) of being exposed to a gentle satire item (a; left graph) or harsh satire item (b; right graph) relative to exposure to the news item for different ages (x-axis). Note: When both sides of the CI are below or above zero on the y-axis (effect on absorption) at one point on the x-axis (age), this indicates statistical significance of the effect on absorption of the experimental condition at that particular age x.

Second (as described above), because the item was counterargued less, the attitude toward the government’s plan was affected more negatively: Not disagreeing with the items increased support for the satirist’s critical perspective. The indirect effect of absorption on attitude via counterarguing was significant: The bounds of its 95% bias-corrected 10,000 bootstraps interval did not positively exceed zero, $b = -0.05$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI $[-0.17, -0.01]$, $p = .020$, which implies a significant negative indirect effect, which supports Hypothesis 5.

Following these results, and because joint significance of direct effects very well indicates the significance of indirect effects (Taylor, MacKinnon, & Tein, 2008), the conclusion can be drawn that exposure to satire has a negative indirect effect via absorption and decreased counterarguing on the attitude toward the subject being satirized. However, this negative indirect effect will only occur for emerging adults because older people were not absorbed more in the satire than in the regular news item but rather the contrary.

Effects of satire’s nature of attack

With two satire conditions in our experimental design, this allowed not only for a comparison of two types of satire that differed in their nature of attack but also for two comparisons of satire with comparable nonhumorous news content. Because the effects of both the gentle and the harsh satire items on the mediating variables were
very similar (also their interaction effects) and user-defined estimates with bootstrapping showed that these never differed significantly, this actually replicated the results and demonstrates the robustness of our findings.

Discussion

This study has shown that political satire influences attitudes via two underlying processes, perceived funniness and absorption. These, respectively, evoke and inhibit counterarguing of the criticism put forward in satire. Because these mediators have opposite effects on attitude, no overall effect of satire exposure has taken place. In addition to adding another result in the mixed row of preceding studies, this study moves beyond extant research by explaining why effects of satire can be positive or negative, but frequently are insignificant, through an investigation of these underlying processes. Focusing on the insignificant overall effect, however, leads to a distorted picture; due to the conditionality of both indirect effects, certain people remain susceptible to a persuasive influence of satire.

We show that emerging adults tend to be more absorbed in satire than in regular news. When viewers are absorbed in the content, satirists can affect political attitudes because absorbed people are unlikely to counterargue its criticism due to a lack of resources and motivation (LaMarre et al., 2014; Slater & Rouner, 2002). This is, however, counterbalanced via the indirect effect of perceived funniness (Nabi et al., 2007). As a message is perceived to be funnier, it is more likely to be counterargued. Due to such scrutinizing, less negative and more positive thoughts toward the message target are evoked, which goes against the intentions of the satirist and blocks an overall negative effect of absorption. To be effective, satirists should thus not provide too many discounting cues but make clear that although they bring their message in the form of a joke, they are serious about the content. Lighter forms of humor, such as horatian satire, thus appear to be less effective, not only because of the fewer resources they require (LaMarre et al., 2014), but also because they evoke more laughter compared with bitter approaches of humor—as in juvenalian satire.

The current study has shown that if background information was provided, it affected the appreciation of satire; thereby, it provides evidence for both selective processing mechanisms (LaMarre et al., 2009; Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974) and disposition theory (Becker, 2014; Zillmann & Cantor, 1972). Indicative of selective processing was that people without background knowledge found the satire equally funny. For those with background knowledge, however, moderation by political preference was found. This is consistent with disposition theory: Those who agreed with the satire found it funny, whereas those with preferences incongruent with the satire perceived it to be much less funny.

These findings, however, may require some nuance as there are instances conceivable in which a satire is congruent with one’s political preferences but is not perceived as funny (Simpson, 2003; Zillman, Bryant, & Cantor, 1974). Simpson’s (2003) model for satirical uptake explains that an important condition for successful satirical
uptake is that audiences judge its criticism on the satirized object as appropriate. If judged inappropriate, satire may misfire and evoke interpretations opposite to what was intended; viewers may interpret that something they sympathize with or they themselves are being attacked. This misfiring of satire especially occurs when the satire is on “red-flagged” taboo topics (e.g., death, sexuality; p. 175) or when receivers are closely situated or emotionally entangled to the satirized topic. Our satirical stimuli most likely were not judged inappropriate because they satirized a political topic of low salience with which probably none of the participants were personally involved. By explicitly including two topics (taboo or not) or the recruitment of participants from two groups (emotionally entangled or not) in an experimental design, Simpson’s (2003) model for satirical uptake could be investigated under controlled circumstances.

Our study, furthermore, showed that the provision of a news article with topic-specific background information affected how funny the satire was perceived to be, probably due to intertextual sense-making (Gray, 2006). To experimentally explore the effect of background information in future research more clearly, participants in conditions that are not provided with background information could be exposed to a nonrelevant news article to keep the activity and time spent with news equal among conditions.

This study investigated the effects of political satire; yet, the lessons learned can be applied in the broader field of communication science. We show that absorption in a message increases its effectiveness. This is true for satire, but could be equally true for news items, political speeches, advertisements (political or not), health messages, etcetera. Thinking about message persuasiveness, it is thus important to think of its ability to absorb a receiver in the message. By contrast, the persuasiveness of satirical messages was blocked by how funny they were perceived to be and, consequently, was not taken seriously. For humoristic advertisement or health campaigns, for example, this could be the same. For other genres, the perceived reality or credibility probably plays a similar role (e.g., Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953).

Thinking of such underlying mechanisms brings conceptual clarity to the study of political satire and media effects more generally. We frequently find or expect effects but the reasons behind it often remain a “black box.” By investigating the theoretically most prominent mediating processes, we shine a light on this matter; yet, much remains to be discovered. Future research may consider complementary underlying mechanisms or attend to explicitly manipulating the mediators. By manipulating the (perceived) funniness or the possibility of absorption, stronger empirical evidence could be gathered for the conceptual model of this study than is obtained with our experimental posttest cross-sectional data.

Moreover, by focusing on the cognitive processing and the underlying mechanisms of satire’s persuasive influence, we consciously made the choice to place less of an emphasis on direct attitudinal effects of the experimental condition, perceived funniness, and absorption. Satire effects have been hypothesized and empirically tested to be fully mediated through the indirect paths (i.e., via counterarguing), and
the structural equation model together with several alternative models indicated that a model without direct effects provided the optimal solution.

In conclusion, this study demonstrated two indirect ways through which satire affects political attitudes. Whereas the process via absorption negatively affected the attitude, the process via perceived funniness did so in a positive manner. This explains why studies on political satire often find no or mixed persuasive effects. As long as satirists primarily aim to be funny and provide sufficient cues to be perceived as jokesters, it seems unnecessary to have great concerns, or unrealistic to have too much hope, regarding the power of political satire to bring down societal power structures (Colletta, 2009).

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1 The current study was part of a larger experiment with a total of 12 conditions of which only these five were relevant to this manuscript.

2 LuckyTV sometimes produces items in English, which may be helpful to understand its format. Two manipulated State of the Union addresses exemplify the humorous techniques used by its producer and can be found at http://www.luckymedia.nl/luckytv/2007/01/state-of-the-union/ and http://www.luckymedia.nl/luckytv/2012/01/up-down2/.

3 The nonhumorous news item was 1 minute 11 seconds in time-length, the gentle satire item 1:37 (including the 55 seconds commercial), and the harsh satire item 1:03. Stimuli can be viewed on the following websites: non-humorous news (https://vimeo.com/90218719), gentle satire (https://vimeo.com/90218723), harsh satire (https://vimeo.com/90218724).

4 Anticipation of a joke, strongest in the satire conditions, positively predicts how much people were absorbed in the item and how funny participants assessed the video. This variable was not included as an extra mediator to not make the model needlessly complicated.

5 The IMC of Oppenheimer et al. (2009, p. 868) was slightly adjusted. As in the original version, a relatively long question text in which participants were told that the researchers wanted to test whether people actually read the questions was followed by a list of answer possibilities. Instead of a list with sports, a list of ten supermarkets was provided because more people visit supermarkets than practice a sport. And, instead of clicking “continue,” participants had to carefully check the list of answer possibilities to select “I read the questions attentively” to minimize the chance that the right answer was clicked accidentally.

6 The distribution of completion time was highly skewed (skewness = 5.15) with various upward outliers. The median was 28 minutes. Findings do not substantially change when the outliers are removed from the sample.
7 Latent variables in a structural equation model do not have a settled mean and standard deviation as these depend on the means and effects of the observed variables in the model as well as the constraints imposed in the model. The mean and standard deviation of latent constructs “absorption” and “attitude” are approximated by computing a mean scale of their indicators.
8 Inclusion of direct effects from the experimental conditions to the attitude did not substantially change any of the effects in the model nor significantly improved model fit.
9 Considering that perceived funniness also had an indirect effect on the attitude via absorption, its overall indirect effect remains significant, $b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.01$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.04], $p = .016$.

References


