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Political humor in late-night television: A Quantitative and qualitative examination of late-night talk show monologues

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Running head: POLITICAL HUMOR IN LATE-NIGHT TELEVISION

Political Humor in Late-Night Television:

A Quantitative and Qualitative Examination of Late-Night Talk Show Monologues

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the Department of Communication

Rochester Institute of Technology

In Partial Fulfillment

of the

Master of Science Degree in

Communication & Media Technologies

By

Eileen Shannon

August 19, 2005

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Title of thesis or dissertation: *Political Humor in Late-Night Television: A Quantitative and Qualitative Examination of Late-Night Talk Show Monologues*

Name of author: Eileen Shannon

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POLITICAL HUMOR IN LATE-NIGHT TELEVISION:
A QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF LATE-NIGHT TALK
SHOW MONOLOGUES

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Abstract

This study examines political trends that existed in late-night talk show monologues throughout October 2004. Designed to detect which candidates and issues were addressed, along with the degree to which hosts positively or negatively framed the candidates, the results clarify the issues and people that the public was familiar with.

The monologues of *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and *The Late Show with David Letterman* were examined. A content analysis and a semantic differential scale distinguished important issues, candidates and the framing of those candidates. Trends within each show were noted.

The results show President George W. Bush as the prime target for jokes. Comedians were the most negative about candidates familiar to the audience from the previous election.

“Some undecided voters are saying they wish they could mix [Republican President George W.] Bush and [Democratic Party presidential candidate John] Kerry together. Oh, that would be the perfect candidate—a boring guy who trips over his words” (The Tonight Show, Oct. 5, 2004).

“The Vice Presidential debate was tonight. Dick Cheney did well. He only flat-lined twice” (The Late Show, Oct. 5, 2004).

“According to the latest poll, Bush and Kerry are tied at 49% and [Independence Party presidential hopeful Ralph] Nader is at 1%, and the margin of error is 3%. You know what that means? Nader is trailing the margin of error” (The Tonight Show, Oct. 5, 2004).

In their monologue jokes, late-night talk show hosts often comment on politicians and political current events, such as in the jokes above. Whether satirizing the candidates' personalities, their physical health, or simply their positions in the presidential race, hosts like Jay Leno, of *The Tonight Show*, and David Letterman, of *The Late Show*, often find humor in American politics.

Late-night talk shows, which air after 11pm on weeknights, have become increasingly important in the realm of politics. In his book *Great Political Wit: Laughing (Almost) All the Way to the White House* (1998), Republican Party presidential nominee Bob Dole reflects on the importance of his appearance on *The Late Show with David Letterman*. “The audience laughed, and pundits, ever quick to grasp the obvious, claimed to have discovered a New Dole” (p. XII). George W. Bush appeared on Letterman's

show as well in 2000 as a way to gain exposure for his presidential campaign. Letterman quipped, “The road to the White House goes through me!” (Taylor, 2000, para. 9).

As ridiculous as he may have tried to make it sound, David Letterman may have had a point. During campaigns, people use all different sources to get their political news, including late-night talk shows (Pew Research Center, 2004). Some voters use shows such as Letterman’s to get their political news, which means that the hosts may have significant political influence on their audiences. As McCombs and Shaw (1972) discovered, the amount of news coverage an issue received pre-election tended to determine what voters thought was important. Therefore, if voters are using late-night television programming to learn about candidates and election news, several questions must be asked to determine exactly what news the late-night talk show hosts are extending to their audiences.

Research Questions

The present study seeks to answer the following questions:

- In the month leading up to the Presidential elections, which individuals are the late-night comics talking about in their monologue jokes?
- What are the hosts addressing—personality, previous actions of the person, daily events, party affiliations, etc.?
- Are the jokes portraying specific individuals in positive, negative, or neutral ways?
- Within each show, do any trends (excluding daily news events) exist regarding which individuals are mentioned, what topics are discussed, or how the candidates are framed?

Rationale

For several reasons, late-night talk shows have become increasingly important in studying the media during election years. One reason late-night talk shows are important to study is that the hosts use their openings as a place to focus on newsworthy topics in America. He uses his monologue to indicate what news stories are important enough to bring to the audience's attention. As the agenda-setting theory states, people who immerse themselves in mass media "learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position" (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 176). By using news stories at the top of the show, the hosts imply that certain issues are more important than others.

For the host, the main purpose of the joke is to get a laugh. However, he understands that the audience will not find humor in the joke without understanding its topic. Therefore, important, widely-known news stories will often be the focus of this form of political humor. By determining the hosts' chosen topics, one can discern what the general public knows about the candidates, and more importantly, what universal perceptions of the candidates exist.

Late night talk shows are also significant to examine because their jokes are presented in such a timely fashion, especially compared to other comedy programming. "Taped just a few hours before broadcast, they are the only entertainment programs that can do comic riffs on the same day's events" (Battaglio, 2001, para. 16). This timeliness is important because audiences respond to it while the news is still fresh in their minds. Rust notes that political humor, like political journalism, is a race for timeliness. In this realm, events require an almost instant response (1998, p. 18). If late-night comedians

are providing a humorous perspective on the day's events, it is critical to determine whether the jokes are portraying the events in positive or negative ways, especially since the audience may still be forming their opinions.

Social importance may be found in this study as well. Many of the viewers of late-night talk shows are considered younger viewers, which the Pew Research Center classifies as ages 18-29. Of this group of younger viewers, 61% say they regularly or sometimes learn about political campaigns from comedy and/or late-night talk shows ("Cable and Internet Loom," 2004). With over half of young viewers getting their news about politics from these comedy shows, it is important to determine what the hosts are saying about the candidates and other prominent political figures.

Conducting this study based on the monologue jokes of October 2004 gives it particular relevance, since this is the most crucial month for candidates running for office in November 2004. With only a month left to win the public over, candidates attempt to position themselves in the most favorable light possible. Comedians can comment on the candidates' actions and campaigns on a daily basis, so discovering how they choose to craft the commentary of the races for public office is noteworthy. Knowing how the late night shows, which are not supposed to be politically-affiliated, spin the days' events is critical, considering Americans are inundated by candidate-sponsored propaganda during this month, more than any other.

This study has scholarly merit because there is a relatively small collection of literature on the topic of late-night talk show monologues. While several popular magazines have addressed the monologues in their recaps of political humor, there is a distinct lack of scholarly research on this topic. This paper intends to contribute a

meaningful addition to the scholarly literature about late-night talk shows. It also sets out to emphasize the value of these shows in the assessment of media during times of heightened political awareness.

Finally, the topic is of personal interest as well. I am an avid fan of late-night talk shows and find myself watching at least the monologues of the shows on a regular basis. This study will help me determine not what the hosts are attempting to get me to think, but what they are trying to get me to think *about*, even if delivered in a humorous format. This knowledge will help me be a more informed viewer and therefore more conscious of the messages that this medium is sending to me, as well as the rest of the American people.

Review of Literature

The Pew Research Center's conclusions regarding American election news sources are published in the article "Cable and Internet Loom Large in Fragmented Political News Universe" (2004). The study asserts that, "Young people, by far the hardest to reach segment of the political news audience, are abandoning mainstream sources of election news and increasingly citing alternative outlets, including comedy shows...as their source for election news" (2004, para. 1).

The study also finds that television is still the top source that the public uses to get their campaign news and that 67 percent of Americans prefer to get their news from sources that have no particular political point of view. According to findings, "27 [percent] of all respondents under age 30 say they learn things about the candidates and campaigns from late night and comedy programming that they did not know previously" (2004, para. 45). However, those who say they regularly learn from late night television

also proved to be the least informed about campaign news and information. Overall, a large portion of the young population watches these shows and gets their news from them, but those who consistently rely on this form of entertainment to obtain news information often lack the in-depth knowledge that others have of political events.

Niven, Lichter, and Amundson examined the choice of targets and the subjects of political humor on late-night talk shows from 1996 to 2000 (2003, p. 118). The study found that “much of the humor on each show is directed at the president, the president’s circle, and those seeking the presidency” (p. 121). Many of the jokes were about Bob Dole’s age or demeanor, Bill Clinton’s financial dealings, charges of sexual harassment, eating habits, or the “sex scandal,” and George W. Bush’s aptitude for the presidency, his demeanor, his alcohol and drug use, or his support of the death penalty. During election years, the jokes tended to be relatively balanced along partisan lines. This study establishes the tendencies of political jokes during election years.

One of the earliest and most important works on the topic of agenda-setting is the study “The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media” by McCombs and Shaw (1972). In their study, the authors set out to determine the extent to which media emphasis of specific topics influenced voters’ perceptions of the key issues during a presidential campaign. They “hypothesized that the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues” (McCombs and Shaw, 1972, p. 178-179). McCombs and Shaw interviewed 100 people regarding what they believed were the key issues of the 1968 presidential campaigns. They then collected data on the actual amount of exposure each campaign topic received on television, in newspapers, in news magazines, and on the editorial pages of newspapers

and magazines. The authors compared results from the interviews and media analysis to determine the effect that media had on people's perceptions of what news was important in their lives (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). They find that

[T]he media appear to have exerted a considerable impact on voters' judgments of what they considered the major issues of the campaign...the data suggest a very strong relationship between the emphasis placed on different campaign issues by the media...and the judgments of voters as to the salience and importance of various campaign topics (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p.180-181).

They also note that "the evidence in this study that voters tend to share the media's *composite* definition of what is important strongly suggests an agenda-setting function of the mass media" (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p.184). Voters, it seems, did not pay more attention to, or agree more with any candidate of their specific party, but more to what was covered in the news about them. The authors emphasize that their findings should be interpreted correctly. "The existence of an agenda-setting function of the mass media is not proved by the correlations reported here, of course, but the evidence is in line with the conditions that must exist if agenda-setting by the mass media does occur" (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 184). As with the present study, the results do not prove or disprove that agenda-setting was intentional, but merely that the circumstances were appropriate if agenda-setting was the intended communication objective.

Further studies have shown that agenda-setting is not as cut-and-dry as McCombs and Shaw suggested. Kosicki (1993) wrote "Problems and Opportunities in Agenda-Setting Research" to highlight the critiques of the model set out by the original authors.

“Agenda setting [sic], with its apparently simple, easy-to-explain, and intuitively appealing hypothesis, seemed right for the time” (p.103). However, he explains how times have changed and so have views on the topic. One of the main points that Kosicki addresses is that agenda-setting is a process, complete with three sub-areas. The first is public, which “deals with the link between issues as portrayed in mass media content and the issue priorities of the public” (p.101). The second area is policy. Policy deals mostly with political issues and the process of politicians channeling their agendas through the media. This area deals with how the media portrays issues that are important to politicians, rather than to the public. The third sub-area is media agenda-setting. This “examines the antecedents of media content relating to issue definition, selection, and emphasis” (p.101). The focus of this area is the media and how they frame the news items they put out to the public. The present study examines the framing of the political monologue jokes, so understanding the positive and negative spins that the media can put on topics is important.

Kim, Scheufele, and Shanahan (2002) also tackle the issue of agenda-setting. In “Think About it This Way: Attribute Agenda-Setting Function of the Press and the Public’s Evaluation of a Local Issue,” the authors conducted an opinion survey on a local issue and then performed a content analysis of a local newspaper to see what the relationship was. Their results find that the amount of news coverage of an issue increases its salience in the public’s opinion. “These findings may support the idea that mass media, by placing varying degrees of emphasis, influence the salience of particular issue attributes in the minds of audiences” (p. 13). This study emphasizes that mass media may have an impact on the public’s idea of what is important, by giving certain

issues more prominence over others. With scripted monologue jokes at the beginning of the show, it is easy to ascertain which news issues are given the most importance in the shows, which reflects why they are so significant to study.

Hester and Gibson (2003) conducted a study on the positive and/or negative framing the economy received in news stories from *ABC's World News Tonight* and *The New York Times*. The authors and an extra coder performed a content analysis on the television show and the newspaper from July 1998 through June 2002. The first findings of the study proved that news coverage of the economy was framed as negative more often than it was framed as positive. The authors also found that negative news coverage of the economy created negative emotions toward the topic and feelings of pessimism for the future of the economy. This study's importance lies in its assertions that the way news is presented to people can affect their attitudes about future conditions of the economy. With so much news presented to people on a daily basis, the framing of a story can affect the way the public reacts to it. Since late-night talk shows are notorious for framing news stories negatively to get a laugh, it is important to see what stories they are presenting to the public, because as studies such as Hester and Gibson's show, the way a story is framed can affect people's opinions on the topic.

Method

In order to answer the research questions posed in this study, the author performed a content analysis of the late-night talk show monologues. The two late night talk shows analyzed were *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* (NBC) and *The Late Show with David Letterman* (CBS), which were chosen for several reasons. Both shows air on network television, which means that they are nationally broadcast and free of charge.

This allows for a wide viewership that does not discriminate based on income, as is the case for cable television since viewers need to pay for the cable to watch it. Additionally, these shows target adults, ages 18-49 (Bowser, 1997). Since Leno tapes in Los Angeles and Letterman tapes in New York City, both the East and West Coast of America are represented. Both shows also run simultaneously for one hour—from 11:35pm to 12:35 pm, so they are on air *at* the same time, for the same *amount* of time, from Monday through Friday. Finally, Leno and Letterman each begin the show by doing a monologue.

The author used specific guidelines to define what jokes were considered part of the monologue for each show. The monologue was defined as the jokes told by the host to the audience, with laughter being the only acceptable form of participation by the audience members. Any joke told by the host from the time he walked on the set until he introduced his band (a practice that signals the end of the monologue on both shows), was coded quantitatively and qualitatively, as described below. This included pre-taped skits done by the hosts during this time frame, as long as the audience didn't participate in the delivery of the jokes. However, if the host included the audience in conversation, as in Letterman's "Know Your Cuts of Meat" game in which he quizzed certain audience members on camera, the joke could not be coded because it would not fit into this study's definition of the monologue.

For each joke that fit into the category of "monologue joke," two types of information were recorded. The first type was a content analysis. Each show was broken down by week, with Monday through Friday's jokes analyzed for each week. The specific show being coded was recorded. Each joke from the monologue was placed in

only one category. The categories were broken down into issues and specific people (see Appendix A). If a joke made reference to an event or issue, without directly attaching a person's name to it, or if the joke focused on the issue rather than the person whose name *was* attached, then the joke would be coded as an issue under one of the following subcategories (see Appendix B): National security, war in Iraq, economy, September 11th, energy/environment, gay marriage, weapons of mass destruction, debates (Presidential), debates (Vice Presidential), voting machines/practices, not much difference between candidates, and "other." The issue portion of the quantitative section helped to determine trends in news events of importance prior to the election.

The other quantitative focus of the study dealt with people. The most important candidates in the election, both Presidential and Vice Presidential, received their own categories, while any politicians other than the ones with their own categories were also counted, but not analyzed in depth.

The first person with his own category was George W. Bush. Since he was the incumbent at the time of the election and the official candidate of the Republican Party, he was examined in depth with the following categories: Intelligence, 2000 election dispute, National Guard (question of service), economy, integrity/honesty, cowboy image, drug/alcohol use, dirty politics, war in Iraq, domestic policy (other than economy), losing the 2004 election, full of hot air, arrogance, misuse of English language, and "other." These categories helped to identify what comedians were saying about George W. Bush.

The other prominent contender for the Presidency at the time was Democrat John Kerry. As the strongest opponent to George W. Bush, Kerry also needed to be examined

in depth. Categories for jokes referring to him were broken down into the following: rich family/wife, Vietnam experience, flip-flopping on issues, losing the 2004 election, appearance, charisma, dirty politics, full of hot air, affection for John Edwards, integrity/honesty, domestic policy (other than economy), economy plans, congressional record, campaigning stunts/appearances, and “other.” These categories helped to break down the topics of interest to comedians who commented on John Kerry.

Other candidates emerged as important to study in this election as well. The first candidate was Presidential-hopeful Ralph Nader. He was not considered a strong candidate in the campaign, but due to his personality and antics, comedians found humor in discussing his role in the election. Nader was given three categories: underdog, steals votes, and “other.” The next important candidate was Vice Presidential nominee Dick Cheney. Running with George W. Bush and the incumbent Vice President, Cheney was already a prominent figure during the campaign. His three categories were heart attacks, can be mean, and “other.” The final specific candidate examined during this study was Democratic Vice Presidential nominee John Edwards. He was John Kerry’s running-mate, making him a major contender for office. The three categories applied to him were appearance, too nice, and “other.” Finally, a category was created for “other politicians,” which were any political figures mentioned who were not major contenders for office during the election. People like former President Bill Clinton, former Presidential hopeful John McCain, and others would fit into this category. These people were all significant in the 2004 election, and were therefore given importance in the study.

A second method of analysis used a semantic differential scale to code each joke about George W. Bush, John Kerry, Ralph Nader, Dick Cheney, and John Edwards. In

each case, the show the joke came from was identified, and the date, number of joke within the monologue, and subject of the joke were recorded (see Appendix C). Each joke was assessed on whether it was flattering or unflattering toward the candidate, supportive or critical of the candidate, and positive or negative about the candidate. The positive or negative scale is to determine the extent to which a joke was positive or negative *overall* about the candidate referred to in the joke. The seven-point scale utilized the number one (1) as the most flattering, most supportive, and most positive ranking that could be given to each candidate. A seven (7) represented the most unflattering, critical, and negative that a joke could be about the person who was spoken of. The number four (4) acted as a middle ground between the positive and negative traits on the scales. A special section was also included in the code book to explain the joke, if necessary, for reference. Both the quantitative and qualitative methods were designed to help answer the research questions presented in the study.

Results and Discussion

Using the research questions, as well as quantitative and qualitative methods, several important results arose from this study. The following information is taken from eligible monologue jokes from October 4, 2004 (the first full week of the month) through November 1, 2004 (the day before the election).

The first show examined was *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. During the course of the study, one week of reruns aired (October 25-October 29), which decreased the number of jokes that were eligible for analysis. Therefore, only three weeks of jokes were examined for both *The Tonight Show* and *The Late Show* over the course of this month-long study. Jay Leno told the most monologue jokes, with a total of 159 (see

Appendix D). The primary target of his jokes was George W. Bush, with a total of 55 quips. The trait that Leno discussed the most was Bush's intelligence, with 18 of the jokes poking fun at the President's aptitude. Issues were another hot topic for Leno, ranking second with a total of 33. Of the issues mentioned, voting machines/practices were discussed more than any other (9). John Kerry jokes amounted to 27, making him the third highest joked-about subject of Leno's monologue. Of the Kerry jokes, 12 referred to his appearance, which made it the top Kerry topic. In descending order, other politicians (14), Ralph Nader (13), Dick Cheney (11), and John Edwards (6) filled out the rest of the monologues during this study. Nader's underdog status (12), Cheney's heart attacks (5), and Edwards' appearance (4) all received the most commentary of the remaining candidates.

The Late Show with David Letterman yielded slightly different results (see Appendix E). Letterman's monologues were significantly shorter than Leno's, producing a total of 48 jokes for the month.¹ In the case of *The Late Show*, an equal number of jokes were told about George W. Bush and about issues, with 15 jokes apiece, making them the most talked-about topics for that show. Bush's intelligence was the most prominent subcategory mentioned (4), with his drug and alcohol use coming in a close second (3). The issue that Letterman joked about most was the Presidential debates (7). Jokes about John Kerry were also of importance, with a total of seven jokes about the candidate, three of which were about his campaigning stunts/appearances, making it the most explored Kerry topic. Other politicians received six quips, Dick Cheney received

¹ Letterman's monologues contained fewer jokes than Leno's, but his many skits about the candidates were not coded because they did not fit into this study's definition of a monologue.

three, one for each subcategory, and John Edwards and Ralph Nader each had one joke told about them, with “other” as the only joke told about each of them.

Combining the two shows helps to give a better understanding of what or to whom the most importance was given to in this month before the election. Of the 207 jokes total, George W. Bush had a commanding lead, with 70 jokes told about him between the two shows. His intelligence was the main topic of discussion. The second most attention was given to issues, which received 48 jokes from the two comedians. Both the Presidential debates and the voting machines/practices gained equal attention as they each had 14 jokes told about them. John Kerry was in third importance, the subject of 34 jokes, 13 of which were about his appearance. Other politicians gained more focus than the remaining candidates. Twenty jokes were aimed at them, as opposed to 14 jokes apiece for Nader and Cheney, and a meager 7 jokes about Edwards. Ralph Nader’s status as an underdog, Dick Cheney’s heart attacks and “other,” and John Edwards’ appearance all obtained the most attention from the late night comics.

This study finds that the late night comedians found it funniest to joke about the incumbent President, George W. Bush, in the time leading up to the election. There could be a few reasons for this trend. One appealing factor of the President is that he had been in office for four years, which allowed the comics to draw not only on his actions in October 2004, but also on his actions and personality from the previous four years. The comedians’ and audiences’ familiarity with the President might make him a “safe bet” for a good laugh. Aside from the history people had with Bush because he was the President, he was in the news for both his campaigning and his daily duties in office. That gave him more of an opportunity to make the news, and therefore Leno and Letterman had more

chances to include him in their monologues. These reasons, likely, made George W. Bush the most frequently mentioned person in the monologue jokes.

Equally important, though, is what the hosts were addressing specifically about the issues and the candidates. The quantitative data suggests that there are certain aspects of the issues that would be important to voters, and therefore fodder for the comedians. For example, the Presidential and Vice Presidential debates took place during the time of the study. This information is useful in determining why so many of the jokes were about the Presidential debates. Also, around the time of the election, people were concerned about how voting machines and practices would impact the 2004 election, due to the confusion surrounding them in the 2000 election, which would make them another significant topic of the moment. Comedians used current events, which would be common knowledge to viewers, to get laughs.

Certain conclusions may be drawn about the candidates from the quantitative data as well. Since President Bush and Vice President Cheney were the incumbents of the election, the comics and the audience had significant knowledge of the two men and their personalities, as well as their personal lives. Therefore, jokes about George Bush's intelligence and Dick Cheney's background with heart attacks were not only easy targets, but the comics could assume the audience didn't need an explanation to find them funny. This study found that jokes about John Kerry and John Edwards, who were running mates and relatively unknown compared to Bush and Cheney, focused mainly on their appearance. Part of the reasoning behind this may have been that audiences weren't well-acquainted with the candidates, and therefore the way they looked was an easy way to disparage them without much explanation by the host. Finally, Ralph Nader clearly

was mocked for his history with the audience as well. Even though Nader was considered a “long shot” by many, this was not his first attempt at a place as the nation’s President. Many Americans who watch the shows may have been familiar with Nader from his 2000 run for the Presidency, when he was also considered an underdog. This portrayal of Nader was another case of Leno appealing to the audiences’ previous knowledge of the candidate to make a contemporary joke about him. The quantitative section of this study helps to determine who was spoken about in the monologue jokes, as well as what specifically was most spoken of, but the qualitative section helps put a different perspective on the jokes.

The qualitative portion of this study is important to note because it helps determine not only who or what is joked about, but what type of impression the host is giving the audience about the candidates. In other words, is the host portraying the potential Presidents and Vice Presidents in favorable or unfavorable ways, and to what extent? The semantic differential scale for the qualitative dimension of the study helps to answer this question.

The Tonight Show produced some significant results (see Appendix F). On the flattering/unflattering scale, 47% of the jokes about President Bush, ranked a six on the scale (unflattering). Jokes that were supportive or critical about him were mostly neutral, with 53% of the jokes about him ranking a four. However, results also showed that 81% of the jokes were either somewhat negative (score of five) or negative (score of six) about the President, ranking 40% and 41% respectively. Jokes about John Kerry were more middle of the road, with 63% of the jokes ranking a five (somewhat unflattering), 70% neutral jokes in the supportive/critical category, and 70% of the jokes receiving a five

(somewhat negative) in the positive/negative realm. Ralph Nader was addressed in a very consistent pattern. For each category, he received mostly rankings of six, with 46% of the jokes portraying him in an unflattering way, 46% in a critical way, and 54% in a negative way. Dick Cheney was not attacked as much as George W. Bush or Ralph Nader; 55% of the jokes about Cheney were somewhat unflattering (five), 82% of the jokes were neutral (not supportive or critical), and 73% of the jokes were somewhat negative (five) about him. John Edwards was depicted the most favorably by Leno. Aside from being the only candidate to receive flattering remarks, 50% of the jokes about him were ranked as two (flattering). As with most of the other candidates, Jay Leno was neither supportive nor critical of John Edwards, with 83% of the jokes told about him with a ranking of four. Edwards was also the only candidate whose jabs were split evenly among positive/negative lines, with 33.33% of the jokes ranking as two (positive), three (somewhat positive), or five (somewhat negative). However, since over 66% of the jokes were in the positive range, the overall picture of the Vice Presidential candidate will be considered positive.

The Late Show with David Letterman was slightly different in its approach to discussing the candidates (see Appendix G). Letterman was relatively negative in his portrayal of George W. Bush. On the flattering/unflattering scale, the President was overwhelmingly portrayed in an unflattering way (six) by 73% of the jokes. Letterman also took slightly more of a stance when it came to being supportive or critical of Bush. 40% of the jokes he told about the President were ranked as a five (slightly critical). *The Late Show* also showed Bush in a negative light, with 66% of the jokes ranking as a six (negative). John Kerry received 57% fives (slight) on both the unflattering and negative

sides. 57% of the jokes were neither supportive nor critical (four). Ralph Nader was portrayed very consistently, obtaining 100% of the jokes told about him as fives in each of the three categories. Dick Cheney was described in unflattering terms, receiving 33.33% of the jokes as fours, 33.33% as fives, and 33.33% as sixes. Since over 66% of the jokes were on the unflattering side of the scale, jokes about him would be considered unflattering. Cheney jokes were neither supportive nor critical, with 100% of the jokes told about him ranking as fours. Like the flattering/unflattering scale, 33.33% of the jokes about the Vice President were fours, with equal percentages as fives and sixes, making the overall portrayal of him negative. John Edwards was once again the only candidate to be presented mainly in a flattering way, with 100% of the jokes told about him ranking as a three (slightly flattering). The rest of the data shows that 100% of the jokes about Edwards were fours, being neither supportive nor critical of him and neither positive nor negative.

In a comparison and contrast of the two shows, several important trends emerge. It is clear from the data that John Edwards was spoken about in the least severe way. Aside from a few jokes (4%) told about John Kerry that entered the slightly flattering and slightly positive categories, John Edwards was the only candidate to receive a flattering (two) and positive (two) joke. (On October 12, 2004, John Edwards was a guest on *The Tonight Show*. This may have led to a more positive joke about him that evening and also a more negative joke about his opponent George W. Bush. There were no jokes made about Dick Cheney that evening on the show.) Clearly, comedians were not as harsh with him as they were with other candidates. In sharp contrast, the only candidate to score a ranking of seven in every category on *The Late Show* was George W. Bush.

7% of the jokes told about him were very unflattering, very critical, and very negative. This fact is particularly important considering no other candidate mentioned on this show received a seven in any category. Unmistakably, David Letterman was more caustic with the President than he was with any other candidate. Jay Leno, on the other hand, was slightly more even-handed with the candidates. With the exception of John Edwards, each candidate had at least 4% of the jokes told about him that ranked as a seven in at least one of the categories. Leno, however, was much more derogatory about Ralph Nader than Letterman was; 39% of Nader jokes were very unflattering and 31% were very negative. Jokes from *The Tonight Show* did find fault with George W. Bush, too, though, as 11% of the jokes about him were very critical, giving him the highest percentage of sevens in that category. Overall, both shows took similar approaches in their depictions of the candidates. Except for jokes about John Edwards, most of the jokes were considered unflattering toward the candidates, with scores between five and seven appearing frequently. John Kerry, Dick Cheney, and John Edwards consistently exhibited neither supportive nor critical results. George W. Bush and Ralph Nader were the only candidates to draw somewhat critical (five) and critical (six) attention from the comics. The comics tended to stay on the negative side of the positive/negative side of the scales, as well. John Edwards was the exception, again, with mostly positive jokes about the Vice Presidential hopeful. However, except for 4% of the jokes told about John Kerry, the rest of the jokes about the candidates ranged from four (neither positive nor negative) to seven (very negative), which makes many of them negative in focus.

It seems that the late-night comics have a certain method to their monologues. They tend to address the people and events that have been in the news, particularly ones

that their audiences would be familiar with. They also tend to be the most harsh with the candidates that have been around for a while—for example, since the previous election—and a little more forgiving with candidates who are new to the political forefront.

Conclusion

The present study confirms that politics are an important part of late-night humor. During the 2004 election, comics enjoyed taking aim at the President, as well as current events, and major candidates for the Presidential election. Although the comedians did not necessarily try to set an agenda for the audience as far as what to think about, they did make jokes based on the most well-known candidate (George W. Bush) and the national current event stories that the audience would have been familiar with. They were also more severe with the candidates that the audience knew better. Bush, Cheney, and Nader received the most negative depictions, which is important to note since they were also the candidates who ran in the 2000 election. Since the audience had known of them for at least four years, they were easier targets for jokes. In that sense, familiarity played a role in the treatment and portrayal of the candidates in the monologue jokes.

Limitations to the study may have yielded relatively narrow results on the topic of political humor in election years. One of the limitations was that the study was conducted only in the month prior to the election. Although this is a crucial month to examine, a study over several months prior to the election might have yielded different results, since the density and spin of political humor in the monologue jokes may have been different. Another limitation is the programming chosen for the study. Someone else interested in studying this area may consider looking at other network late-night shows (which air at different times), such as *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* and *Jimmy*

Kimmel Live, to gauge different perspectives. The third limitation is of content. The purpose of this study was to look solely at monologue jokes. A person interested in pursuing this area further may want to consider coding the skits outside of the monologue definition (which may expand the number of jokes coded for Letterman), or even coding the mention of political issues during the entire course of the show. These steps would create a more general idea of the importance of politics in late-night talk shows, as opposed to simply in the arena of monologue jokes. The main change that entire-show-coding would have to consider, however, is that agenda-setting would be less applicable, since the hosts would have less control of the content delivered to their audiences.

For anyone considering future research in this field, several avenues exist to expand on the results of this study. One way to cast a wider net on the topic of monologue jokes prior to the election is to take a longer sample of jokes. Aside from expanding a few months, as suggested above, a study over the course of an election year would provide many more samples for the researcher, and may give a better understanding of political humor in an election year, as opposed to just the crucial month before the election. A future researcher may also consider including other shows in the study, like the satirical cable news program *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. This show puts a humorous spin on the already news-worthy items of the day, so a qualitative analysis would be particularly relevant in order to identify the tone of the jokes presented. Finally, further research could be done by examining the less prominent figures at election time (in this study referred to as “other politicians”). For example, Bill Clinton was mentioned several times in monologue jokes, but since he was not one of the major players in the 2004 election, he received only a tally mark every time he was mentioned.

Future research focusing on less prominent political figures may yield different results, or at least a glimpse into how the politicians who are not up for election are projected onto the American public via late-night comics. Regardless of what route a scholar may take in the future, politics will always be important to American culture, and therefore a topic worthy of exploration.

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Appendix A—Categories

Note: Coding categories were created using the code book for the September 21, 2004 National Annenberg Election Survey (<http://www.naes04.org>), as well as original categories created by the author based on current events.

Issues

Issue--Description/Useful information

National Security--Jokes about U.S. security measures would fit here.

War in Iraq--This category exists for jokes about the events in Iraq current to the study that do not specifically mention President Bush.

Economy--“Economy” refers specifically to jokes about the economy of the United States.

September 11th--Although people often do not find this topic humorous, jokes regarding the candidates’ use of this event for personal gain were coded here.

Energy/Environment--Energy and the environment were both important issues prior to the election and jokes about either would fit here.

Gay marriage--This topic was widely debated just before the study was conducted. Since the candidates had somewhat different views on the issue, it was considered a current event at the time of the study.

Weapons of Mass Destruction--Abbreviated WMDs, this subject was addressed often in the news at the time of study, since it was President Bush’s justification for invading Iraq.

Debates (Presidential)--Both the Presidential and Vice Presidential debates occurred during this study.

Debates (Vice Presidential)--Both the Presidential and Vice Presidential debates occurred during this study.

Voting machines/practices--After the 2000 election, people criticized voting methods in Florida, which initially caused confusion over whether George W. Bush or Al Gore won the Presidential race that year.

Not much difference between candidates--A major complaint during the candidates’ campaigns was that there was not enough of a difference between the two of them and their platforms.

Other--This category is for jokes that did not fit into any of the other categories.

People

George W. Bush--Description/Useful information

Intelligence--Bush’s intelligence has long been a source of political humor, since comics often joked that he was lacking it.

2000 election dispute--Some people claimed that G.W. Bush did not win the 2000 Presidential election, since voting practices were questioned and a recount deemed Democrat Al Gore the winner of the popular vote.

National Guard (question of service)--Around the time of the study, Bush's service record was under attack, with some reports claiming that he did not serve his full term in the National Guard.

Economy--This category is present for any jokes about what the President's role in the state of the U.S. economy.

Integrity/honesty--This category was present for both Presidential candidates, since the question "Who's telling the truth?" is often raised during elections.

Cowboy image--Bush often used his Texas roots and "cowboy" way of life in his campaign.

Drug/Alcohol Use--George W. Bush's past involvement with drugs and alcohol was public knowledge and could have been an important factor in the election.

Dirty Politics--Also present for both candidates, this category existed for the "low blows" that candidates might have taken at one another to further their own political campaigns.

War in Iraq--Any jokes about the war in Iraq that specifically referred to Bush's role there were placed in this category.

Domestic policy (other than economy)--Present for both Presidential candidates, jokes about a candidate's history and/or future plans with domestic policy would go here.

Losing the 2004 election--This category was applied to both candidates in the event that a comedian made a joke about one of them losing the election.

Full of hot air--Both candidates were given this category for jokes in regards to candidates' anticipated "empty" campaign promises.

Arrogance--Bush's history of putting down or insulting others, both during and outside of campaign time, created a need for this category.

Misuse of English language--This category was developed for George W. Bush's tendency to mispronounce and make up words.

Other--This category is for jokes that did not fit into any of the other categories.

John Kerry--Description/Useful information

Rich family/wife--John Kerry's wife was once married to the owner of the H.J. Heinz Corporation, and she inherited a considerable fortune when he died. Comedians liked to point out that Kerry's marriage to Teresa Heinz allowed him to share in the fortune as well.

Vietnam experience--Prior to the election, John Kerry's war record was a frequent topic of discussion.

Flip-flopping on issues--Bush repeatedly attacked Kerry for changing his position on issues, and characterized him as a "flip-flopper."

Losing the 2004 election--This category was applied to both candidates in the event that a comedian made a joke about one of them losing the election.

Appearance--This category was created to accommodate jokes about Kerry's appearance, like his hair, his tan, etc. that comedians liked to comment on.

Charisma--Some people saw John Kerry as dynamic, mainly because they thought he was such a good alternative to George W. Bush.

Dirty politics--Also present for both candidates, this category existed for the "low blows" that candidates might have taken at one another to further their own political campaigns.

Full of hot air--Both candidates were given this category for jokes in regards to candidates' anticipated "empty" campaign promises.

Affection for John Edwards--During the campaign, John Kerry and running mate John Edwards often made public appearances hugging and seeming very close. Comedians sometimes joked that the two of them were in love.

Integrity/honesty--This category was present for both Presidential candidates, since the question "Who's telling the truth?" is often raised during elections.

Domestic policy (other than economy)--Present for both Presidential candidates, jokes about a candidate's history and/or future plans with domestic policy would go here.

Economy plans--Any jokes about what Kerry claimed he would do (with regards to the economy) if elected, were coded here.

Congressional record--Since Kerry was a Senator, this serves as a way to gauge jokes about his political past.

Campaigning stunts/appearances--Some comedians found humor Kerry's campaign appearances, finding them to be over-the-top or "gimmicky."

Other--This category is for jokes that did not fit into any of the other categories.

Ralph Nader--Description/Useful information

Underdog--Nader was considered so unlikely to win the election that he was deemed the "underdog."

Steals votes--People were upset with Ralph Nader after the 2000 election, since polls concluded that most of those who voted for Nader would have voted for Al Gore if they stuck to the two major political parties. Some say if the votes had been cast for Gore instead of Nader, then Gore would have won the election rather than George W. Bush.

Other--This category is for jokes that did not fit into any of the other categories.

Dick Cheney--Description/Useful information

Heart attacks--While in office the previous term, Dick Cheney suffered multiple heart attacks, which comedians found to be entertaining.

Can be mean--Dick Cheney had an image of being a tough, no nonsense, and even mean person.

Other--This category is for jokes that did not fit into any of the other categories.

John Edwards***Description/Useful information***

Appearance--Comedians portrayed John Edwards as the “heartthrob” of all of the men running for office in 2004.

Too nice--In stark contrast to Dick Cheney, John Edwards was often seen as the “nice” one of the two major Vice Presidential nominees.

Other--This category is for jokes that did not fit into any of the other categories.

Appendix B—Quantitative Coding Sheet

Week of (write in date range): _____

Show (circle one): *The Tonight Show* (Leno) *The Late Show* (Letterman)

Directions: Only code jokes within the monologue that deal with political figures or political issues. Decide what/who the punchline of the joke is referring to, and mark only one tally for each joke in the appropriate box. At the end of each day's monologue jokes, score the total number of jokes for the day. At the end of the week's jokes, score the total number of jokes per category to the right of the table, next to the corresponding category.

Issues	<u>Monday</u>	<u>Tuesday</u>	<u>Wednesday</u>	<u>Thursday</u>	<u>Fri.</u>
National Security					
War in Iraq					
Economy					
September 11 th					
Energy/Environment					
Gay Marriage					
Weapons of Mass Destruction					
Debates— Presidential					
Debates—Vice Presidential					
Voting Machines/Practices					
Not Much Difference Between Candidates					
Other					
Total					

People—George W. Bush	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Intelligence					
2000 election dispute					
National Guard (question of service)					
Economy					
Integrity/Honesty					
Cowboy Image					
Drug/Alcohol Use					
Dirty Politics					
War in Iraq					
Domestic Policy (other than economy)					
Losing the 2004					
Election					
Full of Hot Air					
Arrogance					
Misuse of English language					
Other					
Total					

People—John Kerry	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Rich Family/Wife					
Vietnam experience					
Flip-flopping on issues					
Losing the 2004 election					
Appearance					
Charisma					
Dirty Politics					
Full of Hot Air					
Affection for John Edwards					
Integrity/Honesty					
Domestic Policy Plans (other than economy)					
Economy plans					
Congressional record					
Campaigning stunts/appearances					
Other					
Total					

Other People	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Ralph Nader					
*Underdog					
*Steals votes					
*Other					
Total Nader					
Dick Cheney					
*Heart attacks					
*Can be mean					
*Other					

Total Cheney					
John Edwards					
*Appearance					
*Too nice					
*Other					
Total Edwards					
	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Other Politicians					
Total Other					

Appendix C—Semantic Differential Scales**Week of** (write in date range): _____**Show** (circle one): *The Tonight Show* (Leno) *The Late Show* (Letterman)

Directions: Only use these scales for jokes that “target” political candidates. (A candidate is defined as a person running for political office. In this case, the candidate will be running for either President or Vice President of the United States.) For each candidate joke that is coded, use the semantic differential scales to determine the degree to which each joke is the following: flattering/unflattering towards candidate; supportive/critical of candidate; positive/negative about the candidate. Circle the number that best describes the “intent” of the joke.

Date (write in): _____**Joke number** (of the coded jokes ONLY, write in which number political joke it is of the day’s monologue): _____**Candidate the joke addresses in the punchline (circle one):**

George W. Bush John Kerry Ralph Nader Dick Cheney John Edwards

Assessment of joke (circle only one that best describes the attitude of the joke):

Flattering towards candidate 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Unflattering towards candidate

Supportive of candidate 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Critical of candidate

Positive about the candidate 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Negative about the candidate

Notes (write in anything that may help clarify problems or decisions in determining answers on the scales):

Appendix D—Quantitative Results**The Tonight Show with Jay Leno**

Week (Leno)	10/4-10/8	10/11-10/15	10/18-10/22	11/1	Total
Issues					
National Security					
War in Iraq		2			2
Economy					
September 11 th					
Energy/Environment					
Gay Marriage					
Weapons of Mass Destruction	1				1
Debates (Presidential)	3	4			7
Debates (Vice Presidential)	3				3
Voting Machines/Practices	1	2	5	1	9
Not Much Difference Between Candidates		4	1		5
Other	1	3	1	1	6
Total	9	15	7	2	33

George W. Bush	10/4-10/8	10/11-10/15	10/18-10/22	11/1	Total
Intelligence	8	4	6		18
2000 election		2			2
National Guard		1	1		2
Economy		2			2
Integrity/Honesty	2	1		1	4
Cowboy image					
Drug/Alcohol use		2			2
Dirty Politics	1	1	2		4
War in Iraq	1		1		2
Domestic Policy	1	1			2
Losing the 2004 election		2	1	1	4
Full of Hot Air					

Arrogance			1		1
Misuse of English language	2	2			4
Other	3	1	3	1	8
Total	18	19	15	3	55

John Kerry	10/4-10/8	10/11-10/15	10/18-10/22	11/1	Total
Rich family/wife		2	1		3
Vietnam experience				1	1
Flip-flopping	2	2			4
Losing the 2004 election			1		1
Appearance	3	7	2		12
Charisma	1				1
Dirty Politics	1	1			2
Full of hot air		1			1
Affection for John Edwards	1				1
Integrity/Honesty					
Domestic Policy					
Economy plans					
Congressional record					
Campaigning stunts/appearances					
Other	1				1
Total	9	13	4	1	27

Other People	10/4-10/8	10/11-10/15	10/18-10/22	11/1	Total
Ralph Nader					
Underdog	3	2	6	1	12
Steals votes					
Other		1			1
Total	3	3	6	1	13

Dick Cheney	10/4-10/8	10/11-10/15	10/18-10/22	11/1	Total
Heart attacks	5				5
Can be mean	2				2
Other	3		1		4
Total	10		1		11

John Edwards	10/4-10/8	10/11-10/15	10/18-10/22	11/1	Total
Appearance	3		1		4
Too nice					
Other	1	1			2
Total	4	1	1		6

Other Politicians		5	8	1	14
Total Other		5	8	1	14

Appendix E—Quantitative Results**The Late Show with David Letterman**

Week (Letterman)	10/4-10/8	10/11-10/15	10/18-10/22	11/1	Total
Issues					
National Security					
War in Iraq					
Economy					
September 11 th					
Energy/Environment					
Gay Marriage					
Weapons of Mass Destruction					
Debates (Presidential)	3	4			7
Debates (Vice Presidential)	1				1
Voting Machines/Practices		2	3		5
Not Much Difference Between Candidates	1		1		2
Other					
Total	5	6	4		15

George W. Bush	10/4-10/8	10/11-10/15	10/18-10/22	11/1	Total
Intelligence		4			4
2000 election			1		1
National Guard					
Economy					
Integrity/Honesty		1	1		2
Cowboy image	1				1
Drug/Alcohol use		3			3
Dirty Politics				1	1
War in Iraq					
Domestic Policy	2				2
Losing the 2004 election					
Full of Hot Air					
Arrogance				1	1
Misuse of					

English language					
Other					
Total	3	8	2	2	15

John Kerry	10/4-10/8	10/11-10/15	10/18-10/22	11/1	Total
Rich family/wife		1			1
Vietnam experience			1		1
Flip-flopping					
Losing the 2004 election					
Appearance			1		1
Charisma					
Dirty Politics	1				1
Full of hot air					
Affection for John Edwards					
Integrity/Honesty					
Domestic Policy					
Economy plans					
Congressional record					
Campaigning stunts/appearances	1		2		3
Other					
Total	2	1	4		7

Other People	10/4-10/8	10/11-10/15	10/18-10/22	11/1	Total
Ralph Nader					
Underdog					
Steals votes					
Other			1		1
Total			1		1

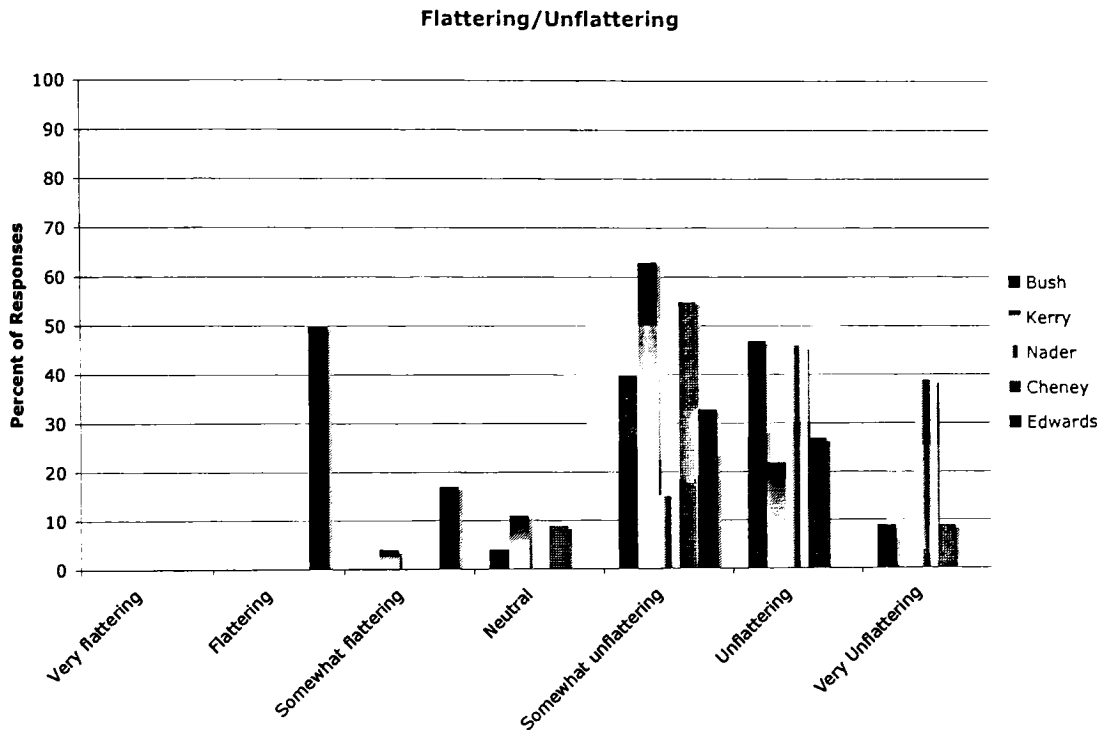
Dick Cheney	10/4-10/8	10/11-10/15	10/18-10/22	11/1	Total
Heart attacks	1				1
Can be mean	1				1
Other	1				1
Total	3				3

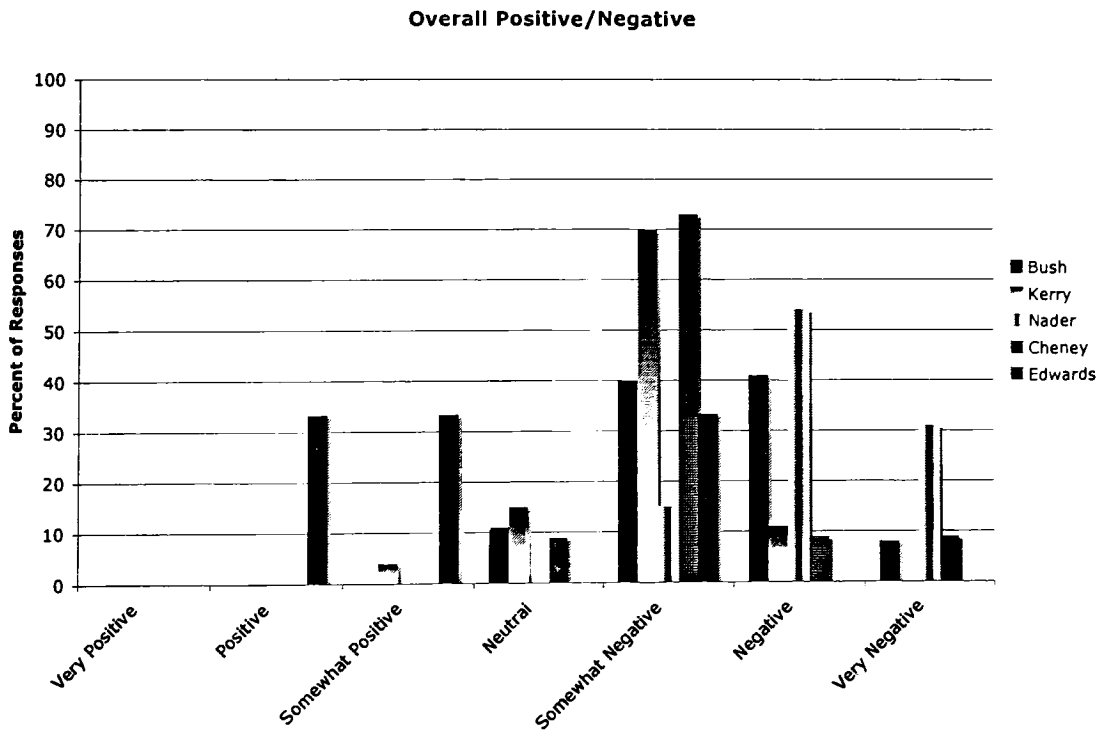
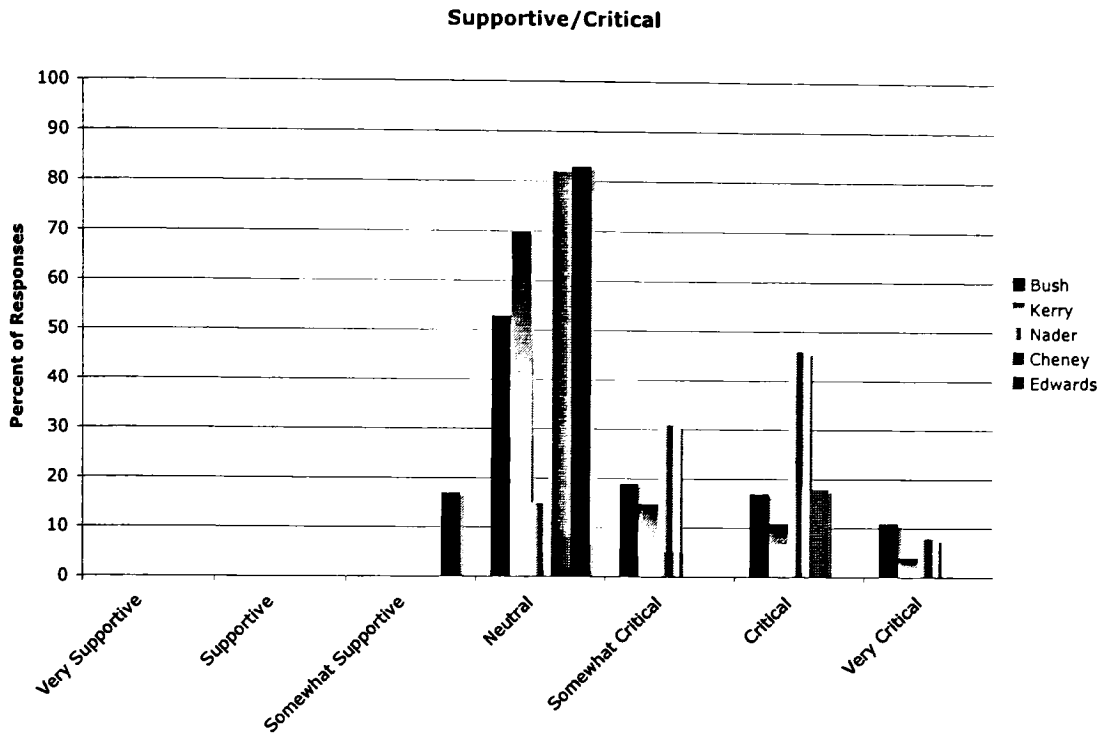
John Edwards	10/4-10/8	10/11-10/15	10/18-10/22	11/1	Total
Appearance					
Too nice					
Other	1				1
Total	1				1

Other Politicians	2	3	1		6
Total Other	2	3	1		6

Appendix F—Semantic Differential Scale

The Tonight Show with Jay Leno





Appendix G—Semantic Differential Scale

The Late Show with David Letterman

