

Humour and Social Power: A Sociological Lens on Political Communication

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Abstract

Humour is a key part of political communication. It can connect people, but also create division. From early satire to modern memes, it has shaped how societies question authority, respond to political messages, and express dissent. At the same time, it can increase polarisation, spread false claims, and distort facts. Examples from both democracies and authoritarian regimes show that humour is neither only entertainment nor always constructive. Its impact depends on culture, media, and how audiences receive it. This article explores the evolution of political humour across historical, cultural, sociological, and digital contexts, highlighting its capacity to simplify complex issues, stimulate participation, and foster community.

Keywords

Political Humour, Satire, Political Communication, Polarisation, Political Memes, Civic Engagement, Media Discourse

1. Introduction

Humour in politics is defined as “*the strategic use of comedic devices and amusing incongruities in political communication that serves to communicate political messages, build rapport with audiences, critique opponents, and potentially influence public opinion*” (Tsakona, 2011). It is a double-edged tool: it engages the public and builds civic participation while simultaneously critiquing power structures and running the risk of deepening polarisation and obscuring the truth. Its impact can be dictated by the content, setting, delivery, and audience, not only the context. It is widely used globally in different political systems, from well-established democracies in the West to developing democracies in Asia and beyond.

Humour is much more than a simple form of entertainment; after all, political jokes undermine power and often serve as a critique or even subversion. It em-

employs serious strategies in politics, including irony, sarcasm, and parody, to convey political messages on issues that can be contentious when approached directly. Irony and sarcasm are often used to question arguments that support exclusion. They expose contradictions and hypocrisy (Birkelund, 2023). Parody, as Beck and Spencer (2024) note, often draws on exaggeration or mimicry. These devices reshape how the subject is seen. Humour plays a role in reflecting social concerns. In literature, political humour is not only entertainment; it can raise political awareness and motivate people to take part in public life (Beck & Spencer, 2024). Yet, it also faces the risk of spreading misinformation or distorting meaning (Young, 2016). Political humour works on different levels. It may look simple, yet it relies on shared cultural or political knowledge. Without that knowledge, much of its meaning is lost. For example, Iranian political satire is tied to the country's social and political structure. Its appeal is strongest for those familiar with that context (Jalilifar, Sayaedi, & Don, 2021). Political humour entertains. It also informs, provokes, and sometimes unsettles authority.

2. Methods

To scope this review, a structured literature search was conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, covering publications from 2010 to 2025. Keywords included political humour, satire, political memes, media discourse, polarisation, and civic engagement. While not exhaustive, this strategy ensured coverage of both historical accounts and contemporary digital studies, reducing selection bias and clarifying the scope of evidence examined.

3. Historical Traditions of Political Humour

The tradition of political satire involves questioning outdated practices and discovering a new identity consequent to the exercise of power. The US is an example where political satirical expression has frequently drawn upon the contrasts between what the country states are its ideals and what it often practices. This persistent gap between rhetoric and practice has been a recurring motif in American satire, from Mark Twain's humorous observations to the critiques of politicians in vaudeville and early television (Phillips-Anderson, 2024; Feldman, 2024). Using burlesque humour in its theatre, the satirical subplot has been the hallmark of ancient Greek culture. Aristophanes, the celebrated dramatist who epitomises antiquity, used satire to ridicule political leaders and question social norms. His works, like *The Acharnians*, became a mocking characterization of the absurdity of war and the nonsense of the judiciary (Rosen, 2012)—the very earliest way of using humour as a political tool to function as a critique, and consequently the concept that these means had the capacity to move the public was thus laid in history as a key chapter of the struggle against other political powers.

Building on the Greek tradition, the Roman Empire took the tradition of satire even further, bringing in authors like Juvenal and Horace, who used humour to deride political corruption and social disparity. Roman satire was often composed in verse, which helped it gain a considerable number of followers and allowed it

to critique the ruling class without facing retaliation (Young, 2016). It was during this period that political caricature first emerged, a genre that subsequently grew to become one of the most established among satirical art forms. In Europe, humour was a method for rebelling against dictatorial regimes and for directly or indirectly exposing the deeds of their political leaders. During the Cold War in Eastern Europe, humour served as a strategy of resistance to express opinions and critique communist regimes, which circumvented the strict censorship imposed (Osipova, 2023; Laineste & Fiadotava, 2024). **Table 1** provides a comparative overview of political humour traditions across different historical periods and regions. The table highlights the main forms of humour, key figures or examples, and the political functions they served.

Table 1. Historical traditions of political humour.

Historical Period/Region	Main Forms of Humour	Key Figures/ Examples	Political Function
Ancient Greece	Satirical theatre, parody, irony	Aristophanes (<i>The Acharnians</i> , <i>Lysistrata</i>)	Critiqued leaders, mocked war, exposed judicial absurdities
Roman Empire	Verse satire, caricature	Juvenal, Horace	Condemned corruption and inequality while evading retaliation
Early Modern Europe	Caricature, pamphlet satire	16 th -18 th century satirists	Challenged monarchy and religious authorities through ridicule
19 th -20 th century US	Vaudeville, political cartoons, Twain's wit	Mark Twain, early TV comedy	Highlighted contradictions between ideals and practices
Cold War Eastern Europe	Underground jokes, coded satire	Anonymous popular jokes ("radio Yerevan" format)	Resistance strategy to circumvent censorship and express dissent

4. Contemporary Forms of Political Humour

The evolution of modern satire has been dramatically transformed by the communication media over the last decade, particularly with the advent of 24-hour news stations (LaMarre & Walther, 2013). Entertainers and those who curate political commentaries are caught in a struggle to adjust and eventually reinvent the format. It is only a matter of time before the lines between entertainment and political commentary are blurred (Loggins, 2011). The Portuguese Iniciativa Liberal party utilised humour and playful satire in its 2019 campaigns to differentiate itself from other parties and emotionally engage potential voters (Matos & Ribeiro, 2024). The right-wing populists in Austria and Germany effectively applied the political humour strategy to provoke attention by utilising multimedia and visual elements (Brantner, Pfurtsceller, & Lobinger, 2019). In Ukraine, political humour has served as a means of exposing autocracy and corruption by targeting

subtle, multi-layered references that pour salt into the wound, a tactic the authorities have often tried to censor (Osipova, 2023; Laineste & Fiadotava, 2024). While fostering community among citizens through this improvement, it also enables them to express their disagreement and participate in public conversations, thereby strengthening democratic discourse.

Political memes have become a crucial component of online political discourse. Their comic form makes them easy to share. This makes them effective carriers of political messages (Febriandy, Habibah, & Hutapea, 2024; Rezeki, Sagala, & Rabukit, 2024). During the 2024 Indonesian elections, memes significantly influenced how voters perceived the candidates. They mixed humour with commentary, which made the candidates appear more relatable (Pandutama et al., 2024). The spread of political memes leaves a clear mark on political life. TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram are the main platforms for this content. They allow rapid circulation across society. Memes simplify complex ideas into short, graspable messages. These messages often spark broader discussion (Febriandy, Habibah, & Hutapea, 2024; AlAfnan, 2025). This is especially influential among younger voters. They rely on social media more than other groups for political content (Sreekumar & Vadrevu, 2013). Satirical news shows and online parodies are also common. They mix humour with critical commentary. This blend entertains while also prompting audiences to engage in political reflection (Young, 2016). **Figure 1** illustrates the use of political humour in modern campaigns.



Figure 1. How to effectively use political humour in modern campaigns.

5. Cultural and Emotional Dimensions

Beyond digital spaces, political humour also works through emotions. It seeks to engage feelings while shaping how people reason about politics. Humorous messages can spark interest and ease anxiety. This helps people connect political ideas with daily life (Becker, 2014). Sarcasm often provokes anger. When people feel angry, they may act by confronting the issues targeted in the joke (Lee & Kwak, 2014). Emotional resonance is therefore a central link between humour and political action. These dynamics can be interpreted through the lens of incongruity theory, which views humour as arising when expectations clash with unexpected outcomes. Applied to political humour, incongruity highlights how satire unsettles official narratives, making contradictions visible. When linked with relief and superiority theories, this provides an integrated framework for understanding why humour simultaneously engages audiences, alleviates political anxiety, and

reinforces partisan distinctions. Political satire further deepens these effects. Its style matters. Horatian satire is gentle and invites reflection. Juvenalian satire is sharp and confrontational. The first encourages thought, while the second often produces polarised reactions (LaMarre et al., 2014).

Humour, as part of social commentary, provides individuals and groups with the opportunity to critique and resist power and social norms, as illustrated in **Figure 2**. In oppressive regime settings, humour served as a method of resistance, providing a safe space for normal political expression to avoid the dangers of direct opposition (Abdelbagi, 2023; Alisieich, 2022). For example, in Sudan, social media, through amusing videos and memes, addressed political events and helped in the healing process for the masses, thus portraying humour as a vehicle of social potency (Abdelbagi, 2023). Humour can also become a tool that legitimises or delegitimises political actors and ideologies. In Finland, some populist candidates have aggressively attacked opponents using humour, whereas others have attempted to appear relatable and believable by using benign humour to achieve this aim (Koivukoski, 2022). This duality highlights the sociological complexity of political humour when it influences the social perception of politicians and their political views. Reactions to political humour often depend on partisan views. Studies show that conservatives and liberals laugh more when the joke targets the other side (Braun & Presider, 2013). Humour that mocks an opposing group often strengthens existing prejudices and makes them seem acceptable (Ford, 2017). In cross-cultural settings, misunderstandings are common. Effectiveness depends on shared cultural knowledge and political awareness (Koivukoski, 2022). Audiences interpret jokes differently depending on their cultural background (Godioli & Little, 2022).

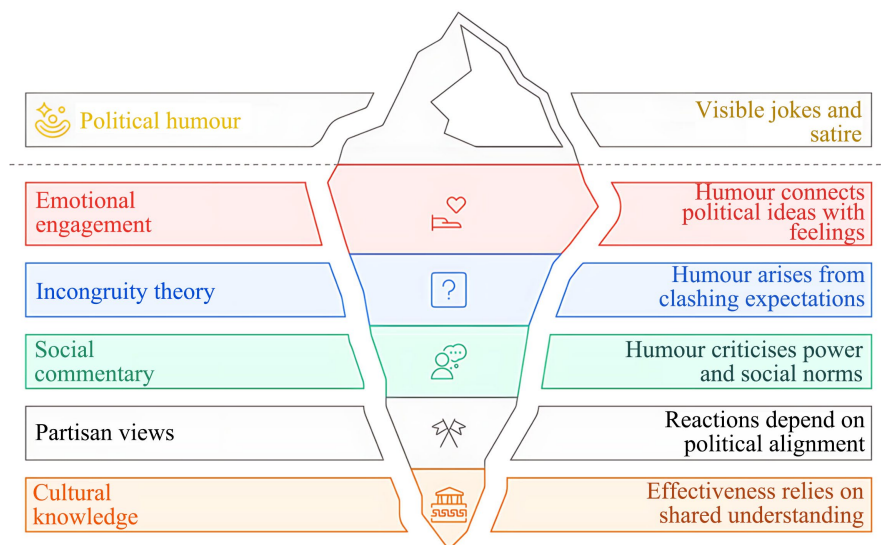


Figure 2. Political humour: More than just jokes.

6. Political Effects and Risks

One of the primary strengths of political humour lies in its ability to render com-

plicated political issues more accessible and comprehensible to the general public (Beck & Spencer, 2024; Rani & Yadav, 2023). This accessibility, especially, benefits people who are likely to remain indifferent to political discussions because they find the distinction of the issue too complicated or uninteresting (Beck & Spencer, 2024; Rani & Yadav, 2023). In this article, “positive effects” are indicated by higher voter turnout, increased political efficacy, and the fostering of civic debate, while “negative effects” are denoted by heightened polarisation, the spread of misinformation, and the erosion of trust in democratic institutions. These indicators sharpen the evaluative lens through which diverse cases are assessed. Exploiting humour can make it easier to simplify complex political topics, which then become more relevant and understandable, and it can help initiate political activities by making political issues simpler and more engaging. Thus, humour can help generate political engagement among voters by rendering complicated matters more accessible and relatable.

For those already interested in politics, satire can strengthen engagement (Schemer et al., 2024; Gulevich & Kalashnik, 2023). Research finds young voters gain a stronger sense of political efficacy from exposure to humour and satire (Rani & Yadav, 2023; Schemer et al., 2024). In the United States, late-night comedy shows often highlight political issues and encourage viewers to take action (Zhang, 2023). In Europe, humorous campaigns explain party positions and create memorable slogans (Matos & Ribeiro, 2024). These strategies simplify political issues and create common ground for debate. They also foster a sense of belonging. Humour engages audiences through both logic and emotion. When tied to political arguments, it creates empathy and strengthens the persuasive effect (Zhang, 2023; Gornostaeva & Semenovskaya, 2019). This influence is not limited to the entertainment industry. It can also help people cope with political crises. Humour acts as a release, easing anxiety and helping individuals adapt to uncertainty (Beck & Spencer, 2024).

The aggressive or divisive nature of humour can reinforce partisan divides and reduce empathy for opposing viewpoints (Koivukoski et al., 2024), and it can also divide audiences. In the US, partisan comedies like *Gutfeld!* and his form of Judas for the right have been criticised for bridging the growing ideological divide and for addressing issues typically associated with left-wing views, thereby promoting a one-sided partisan agenda (Zhang, 2023). By the same token, humorous performances of populist parties in Europe may sometimes amplify polarising rhetoric, leading to political polarisation (Brantner, Pfurtscheller, & Lobinger, 2019). **Table 2** provides a summary of indicators used to assess the political impact of humour, with illustrative examples showing both constructive (positive) and harmful (negative) outcomes.

Table 2. Indicators of positive versus negative effects of political humor.

Effect Type	Indicators	Illustrative Examples
Positive	Higher voter turnout	Humorous campaigns in Europe that mobilized youth participation

Continued

	Increased political efficacy	US late-night shows boost engagement among young voters
	Civic debate and reflection	Indonesian election memes simplify candidate policies
Negative	Heightened polarisation	Conservative vs. liberal laughter split in U.S. political comedy
	Spread of misinformation	Viral memes distorting candidate statements (e.g., Palin parody)
	Erosion of trust in institutions	Populist satire frames opponents as illegitimate or corrupt

7. Discussion

The role of humour in political communication has been a traditional aspect in the US, exemplified by “folksy humour” and the vigorous oratory of the late President Ronald Reagan and the current President Donald Trump, respectively. Political satire in the US often shows the country as deeply divided, so both comedians and politicians use humour for different partisan identity purposes (Krasner, 2024; Kuipers, 2025). Such trends point to the double-edged nature of humour in politics (Young, 2016). It can produce polarisation and even help establish ideologically driven silos that do not encourage productive interactions.

The political slapstick humour has the potential, on the one hand, to unite society and, on the other, to exacerbate a greater rift among community members. A notable example is the comedic sketch by Tina Fey, in which she impersonated Sarah Palin, making her appear less qualified for the Vice President candidate position in the eyes of many people (Baumgartner, Morris, & Walth, 2012). Fey fabricated a parody, bolstering public scepticism regarding Palin’s suitability for high office by intertwining both her controversial statements and distinct speech patterns. “*I can see Russia from my house*” is a satirical line that encapsulated the perceived irrationality of purported foreign policy claims, even though Palin in fact never uttered such a statement. It shows that the cutting sense of humour might solidify emotional reactions through the satirization of political personalities. Furthermore, politicians using humour to disbelieve their opponents might erode the people’s trust in these political institutions and consequently lead to their disengagement from them (Alafnan, 2025). Belittling humour also acts as a catalyst, wherein people tend to express their pre-existing negative opinions, leading to the social acceptability of prejudices against political outgroups in society (Ford, 2017).

European culture often employs humour to challenge political leaders and foster intellectual dialogue. To illustrate, Dutch and Italian right-wing politicians have adopted a style of humour, “clownish” in this case, through provocation and ambiguity, thereby creating a distinction between themselves and the establishment (Kuipers, 2025). In the UK, politicians like the former Prime Minister Boris

Johnson have attempted to employ parodic humour as a tool to divert people's attention away from serious policy issues and towards unimportant and trivial matters (Beck, 2023). Though amusing, this strategy is equally important as it demonstrates a leader's effort to strike a balance between humour and the serious duties of governance. The use of humour, if successful, is often an effective way to manage difficult political speech in dictatorial and semi-authoritarian regimes. In Iran, leaders and institutions are the primary targets of political comedy, and the themes often revolve around the selfishness of the ruling elite and religious hypocrisy (Jalilifar, Savaedi, & Don, 2021). This skilful politics of sarcasm is not merely a channel, but rather a unifying force that protests against unpleasant realities, and at the same time, it provides people with an opportunity to express themselves in a community where everyone shares a common experience. The reach and risk of political humour are also mediated by regulatory environments. In democratic contexts, free-speech protections enable satire to flourish, but also generate legal debates surrounding defamation and misinformation. By contrast, in authoritarian settings, strict censorship and state surveillance create high risks for comedians and audiences alike, making humour both a dangerous act of dissent and a fragile form of political resistance. Comparing these contexts highlights how legal frameworks shape not only the circulation of humour but also the personal risk borne by those who use it.

8. Limitations and Future Research

This study has limitations. Much of the scholarship reviewed draws on Western and Anglophone sources, which may under-represent perspectives from Africa, Latin America, and non-Western Asia. In addition, gendered dimensions of humour, such as the role of women comedians or the gendered reception of political satire, remain less explored. Future research should broaden geographical coverage and attend to these neglected dimensions to generate a more inclusive understanding of humour's political role.

9. Conclusion

Humour is of central importance in political communication, as it can both serve as an instrument of connection and a reason for fragmentation. In terms of enactment, the scope varies across different political systems, influenced by their traditions, cultures, and ideologies. Its scope is also not limited to psychological parameters but covers sociological, media dynamics, and political engagement as well. The evidence clearly shows that humour has a multidimensional and strong place in political environments. However, although it has an "effectiveness" or positive role, this is not entirely so because it is highly dependent on the situation, encompassing a full range of possibilities, such as the politician, the actor, the target audience, calls for action, and the intended outcome. For politicians and actors in the political arena, humour serves as a strategic means to foster friendships among voters, provide a human face for them, illustrate complex issues, and mock

their political opponents. Thus, voters become emotionally engaged, but issues of substance draw their attention away. For the general public, the humour in politics can be an asset to a great extent, as it enables them to easily understand the political landscape and participate in it. It fosters a sense of political efficacy in people, provides a medium for dissent, especially in authoritarian regimes, and serves the purpose of alleviating human affliction during difficult times as well.

In democracies, the role of humour is uncertain. It can bring energy to debates and keep leaders accountable. It can also divide people, spread false ideas, block fact-based discussion, and turn complex policies into simple jokes. Because of this, its effects on democratic life need ongoing study. Researchers must pay attention to when humour sparks curiosity and when it promotes reflection or unity. In today's world, truth often competes with viral content, and logic competes with rhetoric. Political humour is not only a source of laughter but also a site of struggle. Its jokes may pass quickly, but their impact lingers. They reveal social change, conflict, and the hopes of societies as they strive to manage democratic life.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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