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**Review of Baumgartner, J.C.; Becker, A.B. (2018)
Political humor in a changing media landscape: a
new generation of research**

Polak, S.A.

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Book Review

Baumgartner, Jody C. and Amy B. Becker, eds. 2018. *Political Humor in a Changing Media Landscape: A New Generation of Research*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Lexington Books. xii + 340 pp. ISBN: 9781498565080. E-book ISBN: 9781498565097.

Reviewed by **Sara Polak**, Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society (LUCAS), Leiden University, Leiden, Netherlands, E-mail: s.a.polak@hum.leidenuniv.nl

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In the conclusion to this edited collection, Baumgartner and Becker describe how, in the spring of 2016, Amy Becker and a colleague were designing a new course titled *Entertainment, Media and Politics*, and they needed a book. However, the existing volume of relevant texts, Baumgartner and Morris's *Laughing Matters: Humor and American Politics* (2008) had been overtaken by rapid transformations in the field of American political humor. The development of late-night comedy into a key source of news for many, especially younger, viewers, coupled with these shows' move towards more journalistic and media-critical formats had dramatically changed the relationship between humor and politics. Add to this the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency in 2016, and one understands the urgency for this new publication. Across five sections and 15 chapters, the contributors to this collection address the changing state of political humor with a focus on political comedy and news satire on television, mostly American late-night shows, such as *The Daily Show*, *Last Week Night with John Oliver*, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, and *Saturday Night Live*, although there are also forays into European and Israeli variations, and the violent controversies around political cartoons of the 2010s.

The first section of the collection focuses mostly on the content of those programs: how they seem to have moved from entertainment to 'advocacy satire' as Don J. Waisanen terms it; how *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, and many similar shows, have become more journalistic in orientation (Julia R. Fox), and how late-night comedy shows treat politicians differently across partisan lines (S. Robert Lichter and Stephen J. Farnsworth). Perhaps unsurprisingly Trump seems to trump them all, not primarily because of his partisanship but because of his previous status as an entertainment figure himself, and his unusual propensity to spawn fodder for outrage and humorous treatment regardless of party lines. Shifting from content to impact, the second section is concerned with the influence of political humor on citizens' democratic engagement. In these chapters, it is questioned whether the satirical treatment of politicians lowers viewers' evaluations of their performance,

and whether this is different for the two presidential nominees than it was for other candidates in the primary races (Jody C. Baumgartner); what motivates viewers to watch the interview fragments in political satire (Amy B. Becker), and whether politicians can ‘inoculate’ themselves, through participation in late-night shows, against mockery that will harm their *imago* (Josh Compton).

Section three then shifts focus to audience responses: to the presidential debates of 2016 (Stewart, Dye, Eubanks); to the risks involved in satire for various stakeholders (McClennen), and to the questions of how people’s interest in politics and political issues affects their appreciation of political humor (Christiane Grill). Departing from the previous focus on the US, section four expands the scope to consider international comparisons between gateway effects of political entertainment in the US, Italy, the UK, and Germany (Xenos, Moy, Mazzoline, and Mueller-Herbst), the effects of Affinity for Political Humor on what viewers take away from it in the Dutch context (Mark Boukes), and how different kinds of, potentially transgressive, humor can contribute to threatening the freedom of the press in the US and Israel (Edo Steinberg). Finally, section five focuses on potential futures and future developments in this field: how are adolescents drawn in to watching political comedy (Stephanie Edgerly), and how have different candidates influenced late-night political comedy? The last question is approached first over a longer period of about two decades by Michael Parkin; in the final chapter, Jonathan Morris zooms in on the same question applied to just the Trump years.

Altogether, this collection offers a fascinating overview of the lines of research in this field, showing that a great deal of work is being done to address the shifts in televised political comedy of the last years, as well as the shift in the political landscape occasioned by a US president for whom the need to entertain and hold onto citizens’ attention, and produce outrage, were driving forces. As a whole, the collection offers both a good sense of the state of the academic field and an overview of the political satire field in American and international television. Some of the chapters are (partly) based on MA students’ research and they will no doubt inspire other students to conceive of adjacent research projects to extend the field as a whole. Given the diversity of content considered, it is understandable that the book does not address political humor in the context of social media platforms, but this choice might have been more explicitly addressed. As it is, the suggestion might arise that political humor is primarily a television phenomenon, and that it is primarily a left-wing, or at least, a liberal phenomenon. If meme culture and social-media responses had been addressed more broadly – as Edo Steinberg and Jonathan Morris do, to some extent in their chapters – a more complex picture might have emerged. Bluntly put, it seems that whereas liberal viewers during the Trump presidency watched late-night political comedy as a kind of cathartic

opportunity for laughter-to-assuage-anger before bed, Trump supporters were mobilized on social media platforms to respond humorously to his tweets via memes. It makes sense that both sides of the coin do not fit into one book, but some acknowledgment of the full spectrum of the changing media landscape referred to in the title might have helped provide more context for what is offered.

There is also a question of disciplinary expectations and standards. The book situates itself clearly in the fields of political science and communication studies: disciplines that usually understand themselves as social sciences. As a result, the chapters' methods are mostly quantitative, and sometimes experimental, which to me, as a humor scholar aligned with the humanities (American studies) seemed thought-provoking. In some cases I found it really helpful to get a quantitative sense of, for instance, from whom adolescents pick up the habit to watch news satire, and interesting to know which different devices (television, computer, tablet or phone) they used in what proportions. However, at other moments I found the quantitative focus a bit jarring, particularly when the situations analyzed (e.g. audience laughs during the presidential debates of 2016) would seem well-placed to benefit from a more humanistic or critical perspective.

For instance, interpreting the audience laughter during presidential debates – in response to 'self-deprecatory' or 'other-deprecatory' remarks from the candidates – is of course very difficult. Still, it seems a mistake to reduce this complex cultural exchange to an exercise in quantification ("How many audience responses are there, which type of humor do they each respond to, and what does that say about the success of different types of humor?"). The chapter remarks on the fact that the second Trump–Clinton debate was lacking in audience laughter, but it does not address how that debate might have been affected by the fact that it was held two days after the *Access Hollywood* tapes (in which Trump boasts of his sexual abuse of women) were revealed. The atmosphere during the debate was extremely tense; it was not yet obvious that Trump would get away with it; he angrily prowled around the stage; women who had in the past accused Clinton's husband of sexual misconduct filled the front row at the Trump campaign's request. It was not a laughing matter, and the tense atmosphere in the room was perhaps not a countable audience response, but it was an almost tangible response nevertheless. Consequently, although the research question was answered, I felt there was more to be said about politics, humor, and how political humor had played a role in this particular historical context. This is just a small instance of a sense that I often had: this book is absolutely about political humor in a changing media landscape, but it does not really fully theorize political humor or the late-night political comedy show, nor does it go deeply into how the changing media landscape affords new effects and affects for political humor.

In the introduction of the book Becker and Baumgartner acknowledge the rapid development of the political humor landscape in the US and internationally, and they promise not to let another decade elapse between this volume and its successor. I do hope they will indeed initiate the creation of a successor volume in the coming years. In so doing, they could perhaps consider broadening the field, not just (further) beyond the United States, but also in terms of interdisciplinary cross-pollination, and possibly even in terms of diversity in kinds of media platforms under consideration.