

# Talking About What Provokes Us: Political Satire, Emotions, and Interpersonal Talk

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Hoon Lee<sup>1</sup> and S. Mo Jang<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

The current research assessed whether political satire viewing could indirectly promote interpersonal talk about politics by eliciting emotions. The theoretical model was tested utilizing both experimental and survey designs. The findings indicated good agreement, demonstrating that negative emotions significantly mediate and reinforce the effect of political satire viewing on interpersonal talk. Conversely, the process wherein traditional news sources motivate interpersonal talk is mostly direct, with little development of affective responses. The results suggest that political satire can help to paint a sanguine picture of a healthy deliberative democracy mainly through an affective rather than cognitive route.

## Keywords

interpersonal talk, emotions, political satire, soft news

Since the introduction of the concept of a “two-step flow” (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) of media influence via interpersonal communication, scholars have been exploring the theoretical underpinnings for the role of mass media in

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<sup>1</sup>Kyung Hee University, Seoul, Republic of Korea

<sup>2</sup>University of South Carolina, Columbia, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Hoon Lee, Department of Journalism and Communication, Kyung Hee University, 26

Kyunghae-daero, Dongdaemun-gu, Seoul, Republic of Korea.

Email: hoonlz@khu.ac.kr

stimulating discussion among citizens. Indeed, mounting research supports the idea that news media provide a resource for political discussion and create opportunities for exposure to conflicting viewpoints, encouraging political talk that might not otherwise occur (Mutz, 2002; Mutz & Martin, 2001). For instance, J. Kim, Wyatt, and Katz (1999) observed that both newspaper reading and television watching could increase the amount of political talk. Meanwhile, Pan, Shen, Paek, and Sun (2006) found that during a time period near an election, even the use of less politically oriented programs could prompt higher levels of talk about public affairs due to the media's elevated focus on election coverage.

Political satire, despite its emphasis on politics, is not often reckoned to be a critical component of deliberative democracy, which is primarily due to its nature as entertainment programming.<sup>1</sup> In particular, it has been hotly contested whether political satire has the capacity to educate citizens as sensible members of the public sphere by conveying substantial public affairs knowledge (see, for example, Brewer & Cao, 2008; Parkin, Bos, & Doom, 2003). Nonetheless, this genre's significant influence in the realm of serious politics has well been accredited, as in President Obama's first appearance on *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart* on October 27, 2010, as an incumbent president and again on July 21, 2015, when Stewart was about to leave the show. Further, Seth Meyers' and Stephen Colbert's appearances at various White House correspondents dinners and Jon Stewart's infamous interview on CNN's political debate program *Crossfire* during the 2004 presidential campaign (Morreale, 2009) have given political satire a prominence in modern political discourse that is truly novel.

Drawing on its political significance, several studies (e.g., Landreville, Holbert, & LaMarre, 2010; Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005; Young & Esralew, 2011) have examined the link between political satire and meaningful discussion in the public sphere. However, little is known about the processes explicating why and how consuming humor can promote interpersonal talk about politics. In fact, political satire may be insufficiently substantive, as critics of soft news maintain (e.g., Parkin et al., 2003; Prior, 2003; Young, 2008), yet the scarcity of information may not hinder viewers' deliberate behaviors as suggested by the theory and practices of low-information rationality (e.g., Lupia, 1994; Popkin, 1994; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991). Motivated by this direction, the present study explores the likelihood that political satire, albeit less enlightening, could spur a citizen's engagement in interpersonal talk indirectly by eliciting emotions. In other words, political satire could spark critical debate by uncovering wrong doings and ills of the government and by making political criticisms more accessible (Caufield, 2008), and it is mainly through an affective rather than cognitive route. Briefly, this study

argues that emotions mediate and reinforce the association between political satire viewing and engagement in interpersonal talk about politics. The present study endeavors to assess this mediation model of political satire by utilizing data from an online experiment and a mail survey.

## **Emotions as a Mediator Between Political Satire Viewing and Interpersonal Talk**

Recent studies (Brewer & Marquardt, 2007; Fox, Koloen, & Sahin, 2007) noted that political satire contains a considerable amount of substantive information, which is typically sufficient for enabling audiences to make sense of the political world. Accordingly, optimists (Brewer & Cao, 2008; Graber, 2008; Hollander, 2005) maintain that a steady diet of political satire should explain at least some forms of public affairs knowledge gain. However, critics (Niven, Lichter, & Amundson, 2003; Parkin et al., 2003; Young, 2008) disagree with the positive enlightening role, arguing that the nature of information contained in this genre is less issue-oriented, with more jokes geared toward personal subjects and the foibles of political leaders, merely distracting viewers from the core substance of politics. Inferred from this rather pessimistic view is that political satire programs are less effective at educating viewers, thus preventing thoughtful interpersonal discussion and rational deliberation.

Although numerous observers have underscored the critical value of political knowledge for the production of a responsive electorate (e.g., Junn, 1991; Williams & Edy, 1999), the deficiency of hard knowledge among citizens has become a conventional wisdom (Campbell, 1954; Converse, 1964). Nonetheless, political knowledge constitutes only one ingredient for rehabilitating democracy; it does not, in and of itself, refer to an ideal democratic citizen (Richey, 2008). As such, the democratic premise of an informed citizenry has been challenged by scholars of low-information rationality (e.g., Lupia, 1994; Popkin, 1994; Sniderman et al., 1991) both theoretically and empirically, who have shown that even poorly informed citizens can be engaged in sophisticated political thought and rational behavior as they rely on informational shortcuts and heuristics are available.

An inference from the theories and practices of low-information rationality is that political satire could promote viewers' deliberative behaviors, which are anchored in reasoning as long as the consumption of humor endows them with informational shortcuts and heuristics. In the current research, emotion is proposed as a viable mediating mechanism of low-information rationality, suggesting that political satire can indirectly promote a reasoning process that encompasses interpersonal talk (see, for example, Cho et al.,

2009) by eliciting viewers' emotional responses, although its role to educate viewers may be inadequate. While investigating specifically the role of emotion in this framework, Sniderman et al. (1991) documented that emotion, when appropriately arranged, could promote more effective reasoning. Furthermore, Y. M. Kim and Vishak (2008) demonstrated that exposure to political comedy facilitates citizens' political judgments based on overall affective assessments, although little hard knowledge might be retained from viewing. In fact, the significance of emotions in media processes and effects has been recognized, and some evidence demonstrates that emotional experiences from media use, in turn, produce significant consequences in citizens' behavior and attitudes (Cho et al., 2003; Nabi & Wirth, 2008). Moreover, some observers (e.g., Hwang, Pan, & Sun, 2008; Kelly & Edwards, 1992) point to the intervening role of emotion between the reception of media content and the resulting discursive activities, such as individuals' discussion and expressions of their opinions.

Meanwhile, the constructive role of entertainment media in promoting deliberation has received a good deal of scholarly attention. For instance, Nabi, Moyer-Guse, and Byrne (2007) demonstrated that consuming political comedy fostered subsequent discussion about political humor, thereby concluding that the memorable nature of the message may have motivated individuals to ponder upon the content over time and eventually encouraged them to talk about it. More bluntly, a handful of studies (e.g., Jones, 2005; Landreville et al., 2010; Moy et al., 2005; Young & Esralew, 2011) revealed that exposure to political satire was associated with more frequent engagement in political talk.

Drawing on this line of research, the current study inquires about the mediating role of emotion in translating the influence of political satire into an individual's deliberation. The following section provides accounts as to why exposure to political satire is believed to hold a tie to a viewer's emotional experiences. The subsequent section explores the relationship between emotion and interpersonal talk. These two suggested causal links, when conjoined, should present strong support for the hypothesized mediating role of emotion between exposure to political satire and interpersonal talk about politics.

## **Political Satire and Emotions**

Given that the tone of political humor is predominantly negative, critics (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Hart & Hartelius, 2007) expressed concerns that regularly following political satire may trigger profound cynicism toward political processes and public figures. However, a multitude of research

findings challenged deleterious effects of political satire revealing that its viewing was in fact tied to certain positive attitudes such as political efficacy, interest, and trust (Becker, 2011; Cao & Brewer, 2008; Hoffman & Thomson, 2009). Reconciling these competing perspectives, a recent study (Lee & Kwak, 2014) noted that exposure to satirical programming can prompt an individual's negative attitude that is conceptually distinct from cynicism.

On this note, it is arguable that political satire is essentially different from negative news stories of traditional media with regard to the manner in which negativity is conveyed to audiences. Rather than merely emphasizing the failings of the public discourse, satirists first rebuke politicians, elections, and the political process as a whole, yet they also encourage the viewers' confidence that they can rectify perceived social ills by signaling "disappointed idealism" (Jones, 2005, p. 121). As such, the proper coupling of criticism and idealism embedded in political satire may invite negative emotional responses (Lee & Kwak, 2014), which many believe to be conducive to the health of a functioning democracy (e.g., Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000; Valentino, Brader, Groenendyk, Gregorowicz, & Hutchings, 2011). It is also worth noting that satire usually has a clearly defined target (Test, 1991) and sarcastic political humor is often directed at parties, policies, and politicians (Caufield, 2008; Fox et al., 2007; Holbert, 2005). Hence, we first hypothesize the following.

**Hypothesis 1 (H1):** Exposure to political satire will be associated with negative emotions (e.g., anger, worry) geared toward public officials, political parties, and government policies.

On the other hand, the relationship between humor exposure viewing and positive emotion remains less clear. On the plus side, certain attributes of political humor prompt us to believe that frequent viewing of satire can draw positive emotional resonances from audiences. For example, these comedy shows usually present politics in an amusing manner that provides audiences with the pleasure of watching (Cao & Brewer, 2008). It can also mean that these shows are more effective at engaging viewers and urging them to consider significant issues, rather than diverting and distracting from them (Baym, 2005). In addition, satirists are adept at translating negative emotions such as anger and resentment into great impulses for positive change (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009). The presentation of substantive issues in an amusing manner could create a sense of assurance among viewers that they could correct malfunctions of society and produce better political prospects, thereby promoting more positive emotional states.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, the norm of negativity bias suggests that negative information as compared with its positive counterpart tends to be more salient and

influential (Rozin & Royzman, 2001) and commands more attentive and thoughtful processing (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). It can be inferred from this premise that, although political satire features negative as well as positive information, viewers are more likely to assimilate negative components rather excessively, thus giving greater weight to appreciably negative criticisms embedded in satirical humor. Furthermore, previous studies have indicated that political media contents are more likely to elicit negative emotions than positive responses (Chang, 2001; Cho et al., 2003). Although some past works have suggested that humor may trigger positive emotions such as enjoyment (Nabi et al., 2007; Young, 2008), these rather generic affective states are less likely to persist around political parties, policies, and politicians, given that satirical criticisms are mostly geared toward these core constituents of public discourse. All in all, the association between exposure to political satire and positive emotions remains less clear. Thus, we put forth the following research question.

**Research Question 1 (RQ1):** Will exposure to political satire be associated with positive emotions (e.g., hope, excitement, enthusiasm) geared toward public officials, political parties, and government policies?

## Emotions and Interpersonal Talk

Students of political psychology came to acknowledge that emotional experiences are not antithetic to the process of human reasoning but serve as one of its pivotal components. For example, Marcus et al. (2000) articulated that emotions enhance citizen rationality in so much as they could motivate citizens to reconsider their political judgments. Dealing specifically with functions of emotion in the low-information rationality research, Sniderman et al. (1991) showed that emotion could facilitate the efficiency of reasoning. Together, these studies lend credence to the reconceptualization of emotion as a cognitively rich tool to enhance the capacity for reasoned calculation and deliberation (Marcus, 2003).

More germane to the current research, several scholars have investigated the causal linkage between an individual's emotion and deliberative behavior. Rosenberg (2007) asserted that deliberative democracy requires not only citizens' cognitive capacity but also conditions that could stimulate their emotional attachment. Pfau (2007) contended that emotions—particularly fear and fear appeals—could positively influence political debate and deliberation. While reviewing Gordon's (1980) essay on fear, Pfau (2007) suggested "propositional" fear, which normally involves cognition and attitude, needs to be distinguished from a state of fear that is "primitive" and

“instinctive.” He further argued that, although the latter may lead to irrational and counterproductive action, the former could constitute a series of rational and strategic responses to danger that could initiate political debate and deliberations. Accordingly, there seems to be a distinction between spontaneous, panic-stricken “action done out of fear” and deliberative, reasoning-driven “fear-motivated action” as in “I flee from a dog out of fear” or “I could stand and stare at it for fear that the dog would otherwise bite me” (Pfau, 2007, p. 219). Likewise, fear about unwanted policies and less popular parties or candidates could motivate a citizen to be engaged in a series of political debates and deliberation to curtail the distasteful consequence.

Recent studies (e.g., Heath, Bell, & Steinberg, 2001; Hwang et al., 2008; Luminet, Bouts, Delie, Manstead, & Rimé, 2000) have more closely examined the direct linkage between negative emotions and interpersonal talk, although not in political contexts. While acknowledging the stress–affiliation relationship that negative emotional states such as fear and distress tend to elicit affiliation with others, Luminet et al. (2000) have observed in their experiments that participants who were assigned to the intense emotional condition were more likely to converse about their experience than those who were exposed to the mild or non-emotional stories. In a similar vein, Heath et al. (2001) attended to the emotional selection hypothesis, positing that stories would propagate if they evoke strong emotions; findings from their studies indicated that people were more likely to pass along the stories that elicited higher levels of negative emotions (e.g., disgust, anger, and sadness). In addition, Hwang et al. (2008) demonstrated that media indignation (i.e., a specific type of negative emotion toward media bias) is associated with an increase in a citizen’s discursive activities, such as expressing one’s criticisms of the media, voicing one’s own views, and discussing one’s opinions with others. Taken together, these findings speak to the pervasiveness of interpersonal talk across negative emotional states.

The constructive role of emotion is not confined to anxiety and anger; positive emotion could also contribute to deliberative democracy. It could be that, unless individuals possess a prospect of a bright future, they may opt to remain silent even if they are uneasy about the current state of public affairs. In this regard, it is worth quoting a passage from *Rhetoric* (as cited in Pfau, 2007, p. 224): “[For fear to continue,] there must be some hope of being saved from the cause of agony. And there is a sign of this: fear makes people inclined to deliberation, while no one deliberates about hopeless things.” Implied here is that positive emotions such as excitement and hope may also function as a catalyst for political talk. Supporting this view, Heath et al. (2001) demonstrated that citizens were more likely to share their experience

with others when stories evoked positive emotional states (e.g., interest and amazement). Similarly, Luminet et al. (2000) observed that stories eliciting positive emotion encouraged social sharing among citizens no less strongly than the stimuli eliciting negative emotion. Murphy, Frank, Moran, and Patnoe-Woodley (2011) recently found that those who are experiencing positive emotions were more likely to talk to others to maintain their affective state. As such, Hafstad and Aaro (1997) demonstrated that both positive and negative affective responses increased the likelihood of discussion and debate with others. Taken together, we expect that both negative and positive emotions will predict increased interpersonal talk.

**Hypothesis 2a (H2a):** Negative emotions (geared toward public officials, political parties, and government policies) will be associated with interpersonal talk about politics.

**Hypothesis 2b (H2b):** Positive emotions (geared toward public officials, political parties, and government policies) will be associated with interpersonal talk about politics.

## Political Satire, Emotions, and Interpersonal Talk

Motivated by the gap in the extant literature, the current research proposes an indirect effect model specifically suggesting that consuming satirical humor promotes more frequent discussions via the conduit of emotional experiences. First, notwithstanding the paucity of empirical evidence, political satire appears to be capable of evoking negative emotions, given widespread criticism in political satire. On the other hand, the principle of negativity bias (Baumeister et al., 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001; Taylor, 1991), in tandem with sarcastic humor's clear reference to core constituents of public discourse, raises doubts about the role of political satire in prompting positive emotions geared toward public officials, political parties, and government policies. Meanwhile, a clear reason exists to expect that emotions (both positive and negative) serve as a vital component for a citizen's engagement in interpersonal talk about politics (Heath et al., 2001; Luminet et al., 2000). Further, the literature on low-information rationality (e.g., Lupia, 1994; Popkin, 1994; Sniderman et al., 1991) in conjunction with studies highlighting the significance of emotions in cognitive processes (Marcus, 2003; Marcus et al., 2000) suggest that consuming political satire (often emotionally arousing) could promote rational deliberative behavior even with a limited amount of information. Taken together, an indirect effect model of political satire could be proposed, which can be summarized with the following hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 3 (H3):** Negative emotions (geared toward public officials, political parties, and government policies) will positively mediate the relationship between exposure to political satire and interpersonal talk about politics.

However, it is less clear whether positive emotions will play an equivalent mediating role, primarily due to the lack of our confidence in the link between political satire and positive emotions. Accordingly, we advance the following research question.

**Research Question 2 (RQ2):** Will positive emotions (geared toward public officials, political parties, and government policies) mediate the relationship between exposure to political satire and interpersonal talk about politics?

## Methods

The design of this study was twofold: experiment and survey. First, manipulating participants' exposure to political satire in an experiment permitted us to examine, in a controlled setting, the precise causal effects of consuming humor on emotions and interpersonal talk. Then, by replicating the results in a national survey, it was assessed whether the observed associations are generalizable to the real-world setting. Ultimately, tying the results from the experiment and the survey uncovered the causal structure of the relationships among the core variables embedded in our mundane life.

## Study I: The Online Experiment

### *Participants*

The experimental data came from an online experiment conducted in February 2011. The research firm *Qualtrics* collected the data. The company recruits and maintains the census representative panel consisting of 540,298 members selected using the stratified quota sampling method. A total of 2,301 adult panelists aged 18 and older were invited to participate via email; 861 members agreed to participate, and 768 individuals successfully completed the experiment and received cash value rewards that were credited to their online accounts. This represents a cooperation rate of 33.4%. Descriptive statistics indicated that participants were in their late 40s ( $M = 47.27$ ,  $SD = 14.13$ ) and were equally likely to be males as females (51% female). Their median household income was \$35,000 to \$59,999, median education was

“some college or associate degree,” and party affiliation was 34% Republican and 36% Democrat.

## Procedure

Those who agreed to participate were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: political satire, television hard news, or control.<sup>3</sup> Upon reading a brief description of the study and signing the informed consent form, participants were asked to provide demographic information. They were then directed to the page showing a video clip. The first group ( $n = 256$ ) viewed a short video clip from *The Daily Show* comprising several segments concerning the government’s bailout of big banks.<sup>4</sup> The second group ( $n = 254$ ) was exposed to a compiled video from *NBC Nightly News*; this clip also featured selected coverage of the government’s bailout of big banks. To maintain control across the conditions, the hard news and political satire clips were of equal length and focus; both clips lasted approximately 4 min and featured the Congress’ hearing of Timothy Geithner (Treasury Secretary) over the bailout. The most notable difference was the tone of coverage; the political satire clip was humorous and sarcastic as Jon Stewart, in typical form, entertained and provoked audiences, whereas the hard news clip remained serious in tone. The third group ( $n = 258$ ) viewed a clip about a Disney Resort in Orlando; this served as a control, providing a baseline comparison for the effects of political satire viewing. Once participants finished viewing the video clips, they all completed the same questionnaire measuring their emotions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions regarding the economy.<sup>5</sup>

## Measures

*Interpersonal talk.* The interpersonal talk index in the experiment captured the respondents’ discursive intention in the future rather than actual discussion engagement due to the difficulty of measuring the latter in a controlled setting. Specifically, respondents were asked to report on a 7-point scale (ranging from *extremely unlikely* to *extremely likely*) their likelihood to engage in a conversation about the government’s bailout with three groups of individuals—namely, neighbors, friends, and family. Responses were averaged to form an index ( $M = 4.55$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ,  $\alpha = .92$ ).

*Emotions.* To measure emotions, respondents were asked to express their anger, worry, and enthusiasm about the government’s bailout of big companies. In an effort to capture fuller dimensions of an emotion, we adopted Dunlop, Wakefield, and Kashima’s (2008) suggestion that a specific emotion

may have to be further differentiated by the referent of the emotion, that is, “who or what the emotion is about, or refers to” (p. 54), which may account for distinct reasons for arousal. The authors proposed three categories of an emotion depending on its referent: *message*-referent (emotional response to the message itself), *plot*-referent (response to the target implied by the plot), and *self*-referent (response to the self). While relying on this typology, each emotion in this study was further separated into three classes according to its referent: that is, *message*-referent (“how angry [worried, enthusiastic] are you about *the government’s bailout of big companies?*”), *plot*-referent (“how angry [worried, excited enthusiastic] are you about the way that the government’s bailout of big companies affects *middle class Americans?*”), and *self*-referent emotions (“how angry [worried, enthusiastic] are you about the way that the government’s bailout of big companies affects *you?*”). Accordingly, our study incorporated a total of nine emotion variables. Using a 7-point scale, ranging from *not at all* to *extremely*, respondents expressed the intensity with which they felt a corresponding emotion.

## Results

**Manipulation check.** Participants were asked to report on a 7-point scale the extent to which they agreed with the following statements: The clip was “sarcastic” and the clip was “funny.” A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the mean scores of the clip being “sarcastic” found significant between-group differences,  $F(2, 765) = 464.18, p < .001, \eta^2 = .55$ . Scheffe post-hoc tests demonstrated that participants indeed perceived the political satire clip ( $M = 5.60, SD = 1.45$ ) as being significantly more sarcastic compared with the control ( $M = 1.81, SD = 1.21$ ) and hard news ( $M = 2.88, SD = 1.66$ ) clips (all  $ps < .001$ ). Likewise, a one-way ANOVA showed significant between-group differences in the degree to which participants perceived the clip as “funny,”  $F(2, 765) = 299.80, p < .001, \eta^2 = .44$ . Scheffe post-hoc tests indicated that participants exposed to political satire scored a higher mean score ( $M = 5.13, SD = 1.71$ ) compared with the hard news ( $M = 1.87, SD = 1.28$ ) and control ( $M = 3.07, SD = 1.54$ ) groups (all  $ps < .001$ ).

**Direct effect of political satire viewing on emotions.** The indices of negative emotions and positive emotions were subject to one-way ANOVAs to assess the results concerning H1 and RQ1. Significant between-group differences in the degrees of negative emotions,  $F(2, 765) = 6.37, p < .01, \eta^2 = .02$ , support H1, while clearly illustrating that exposure to political satire provoked participants’ negative emotions. Specifically, post-hoc Scheffe tests revealed that the political satire group ( $M = 5.35, SD = 1.48$ ) reported a higher level of

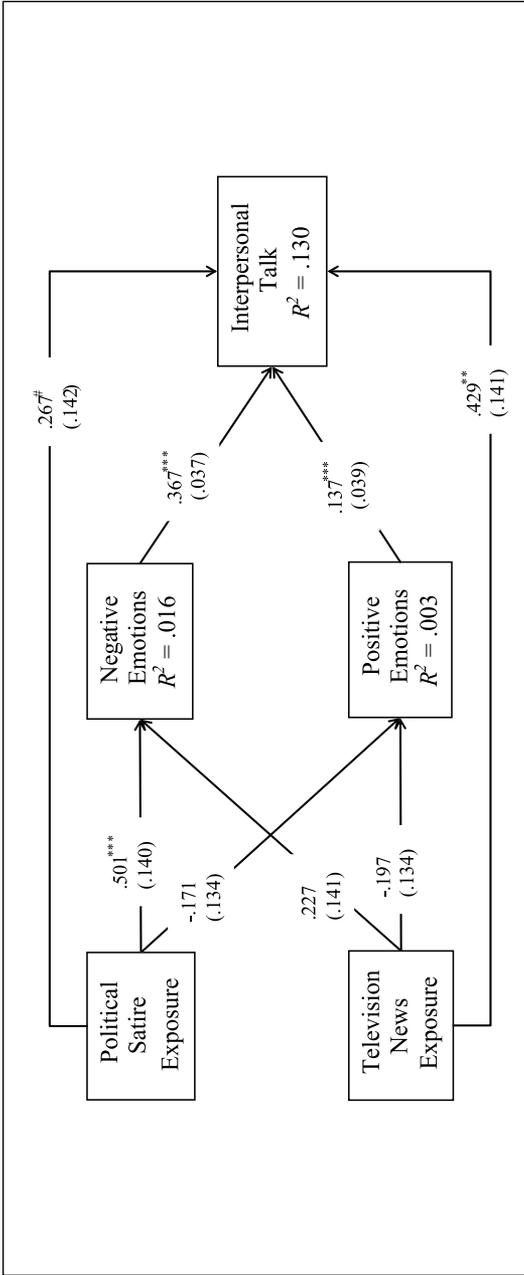
negative emotions than the control group ( $M = 4.85$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ),  $p < .001$ , although the comparison with the television news group was not significant ( $M = 5.08$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ),  $p = n.s.$  Meanwhile, little data indicated that a link existed between consuming satirical humor and positive emotions (RQ1); the manipulation failed to produce significant between-group contrasts in the level of positive emotions,  $F(2, 765) = 1.28$ ,  $p = n.s.$ ,  $\eta^2 = .00$ , with the political satire group ( $M = 2.17$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ) yielding little difference from the television news ( $M = 2.15$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ) and control ( $M = 2.35$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ) groups. On the other hand, the post-hoc Scheffe tests on the differences of the television news and control groups suggested that exposure to hard news did not prompt the respondents to feel negative about the government's bailout of big companies, nor did it alter the level of positive emotions (all  $ps = n.s.$ ).

*Effect of emotions on interpersonal talk.* The effect of emotions on interpersonal talk (H2a and H2b) was assessed by regressing the measure of talk on the indices of negative and positive emotions, controlling for the independent variable (i.e., the political satire group dummy and the hard news group dummy). The findings indicate the significant role of both negative (H2a) and positive (H2b) emotions in motivating interpersonal talk. Negative emotions predicted a greater likelihood of interpersonal talk ( $\beta = .367$ ,  $SE = .037$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Meanwhile, positive emotions raised the intended level of interpersonal talk ( $\beta = .137$ ,  $SE = .039$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

*Mediating effect of emotions.* Preacher and Hayes' (2008) indirect SPSS macro allows for testing of the mediating effects of emotion (H3 and RQ2).<sup>6</sup> The computed regression coefficients and corresponding standard errors are reported in Figure 1. The findings confirm the ANOVA results that exposure to political satire increased the level of negative emotions; it was little attached to respondents' positive emotions. In addition, path coefficients from affective elements to political participation confirmed the mobilizing effect of negative emotions, as shown in the previously discussed regression results.

For a more rigorous testing of mediation, the current study calculated point estimates and bias-corrected and -accelerated 95% confidence intervals (CIs) based on the bootstrapping of 5,000 samples (Hayes, 2009). Estimates were computed separately for a specific indirect path either through negative emotion or positive emotions. The results are summarized in Table 1.

The results support H3. The confidence interval for the specific indirect effect through negative emotions did not include 0, demonstrating that negative emotions significantly mediated and reinforced the effects of political



**Figure 1.** Mediation model of media exposure, emotions, and interpersonal talk (Experiment, N = 768).

Note. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported with standard errors in parentheses. Estimates were calculated using Preacher and Hayes' (2008) indirect SPSS macro.

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 1.** Specific Indirect Effects of Media Exposure on Interpersonal Talk Through Negative Emotions and Positive Emotions (Experiment,  $N = 768$ ).

Specific indirect effect	Point estimate	Boot SE	CI
P → NE → I	.184	.057	[.080, .303]
P → PE → I	-.023	.057	[-.069, .011]
T → NE → I	.082	.054	[-.019, .195]
T → PE → I	-.027	.020	[-.075, .005]

Note. CIs are bias-corrected and -accelerated 95% confidence intervals (Bootstrap  $N = 5,000$ ). P = political satire exposure; NE = negative emotions; I = interpersonal talk; PE = positive emotions; T = television news exposure.

satire exposure on interpersonal talk. However, the degree of mediation by positive emotions was not considerable (RQ2). Aside from the indirect effects, consuming political satire yielded a marginally significant direct relationship with the intended level of interpersonal talk (see Figure 1). Meanwhile, exposure to television news directly increased discussion intent. However, neither negative nor positive emotions significantly mediated the influence of television news viewing, as indicated by the confidence intervals in Table 1.

## Study 2: The Mail Survey

### Sample

The survey data came from a national mail survey conducted immediately following the 2006 mid-term elections. The research firm *Synovate* collected the data. A large body of individuals was contacted via mail and asked to indicate the willingness to participate in mail, telephone, or online surveys; individuals who were interested were asked to provide basic demographic information. A balanced sample was then drawn from among more than 500,000 people who agreed to participate in the pre-recruited “mail panel.” To ensure representativeness, the sample was drawn to reflect demographic distributions within the five U.S. Census divisions of household income, population density, panel member’s age, gender, and region. By relying on this stratified quota sampling method, approximately 2,000 mail survey respondents were selected. Overall, 777 individuals responded, representing a cooperation rate of 38.9%. This sampling method largely differs from more conventional probability sample procedures yet produced highly comparable data (Putnam & Yonish, 1999).

## Measures

*Interpersonal talk.* For the interpersonal talk measure, respondents were asked to report on an 8-point scale (ranging from *never in the last 2 months* to *every day*) how often they discussed politics with neighbors, friends, and family; responses were combined to form an index ( $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ,  $\alpha = .84$ ).

*Emotions.* Respondents were asked to report their emotional responses toward the two major parties using four types of emotions for each party: anger, worry, hope, and excitement. Respondents were asked to report the extent to which they agreed with each emotion item on a 6-point scale (ranging from *definitely disagree* to *definitely agree*). An index of “negative” emotion was formed by averaging “angry” and “worried” responses toward two parties ( $M = 3.22$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ,  $\alpha = .38$ ). Likewise, “hopeful” and “excited” responses toward two parties were averaged to create a measure of “positive” emotion ( $M = 3.02$ ,  $SD = .78$ ,  $\alpha = .20$ ). Combining responses toward both parties resulted in low reliability figures, but this is an appropriate option for measuring general emotions across targets (Valentino et al., 2011); this technique is standard in research on emotion (Marcus et al., 2000; Rudolph, Gangl, & Stevens, 2000).<sup>7</sup>

*Political satire viewing.* Respondents were asked to report how often they viewed *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* on a 5-point scale (*never, once in a while, sometimes, often, or regularly*). The responses on these two items were averaged to form an index of political satire exposure ( $M = 1.44$ ,  $SD = .87$ ,  $\alpha = .85$ ).

*Conventional news uses.* To measure television news exposure, respondents were asked to indicate how often they viewed nightly national news and local television news on the same 5-point scale as the previous measure. Responses on these two items were averaged to form an index ( $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ,  $\alpha = .79$ ). One item measured on the same 5-point scale measured daily newspaper use ( $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ).

*Control variables.* The analyses controlled for a host of demographic variables, including age ( $M = 49.24$ ,  $SD = 15.30$ ), gender (46% female), race (75% White), household income (median: \$55,000), and education (median: “some college or associate degree”). The model also controlled for party affiliation (33% Republican, 31% Democrat) and political interest measured on a 6-point scale ( $M = 3.50$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ). In addition, the model incorporated political interest, knowledge, and internal efficacy that could also explain

variance in media uses, emotional responses, and interpersonal talk. Political interest was measured by asking respondents to report on a 6-point scale to what extent they were interested in politics ( $M = 3.50$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ). For the measure of political knowledge, we counted the number of correct answers to four questions asked about current public affairs ( $M = 2.25$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ,  $KR-20 = .75$ ). An index of internal efficacy was created by averaging responses on two items measured on a 6-point scale ( $M = 2.83$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ,  $\alpha = .60$ ).

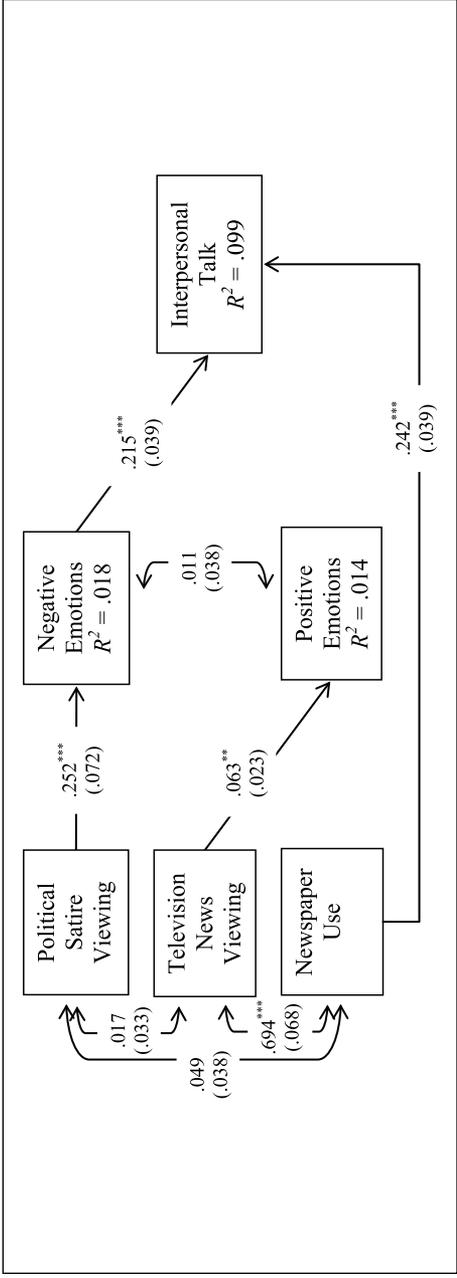
## Results

*Model specification and fit.* A path model was specified using AMOS.<sup>8</sup> Before fitting the model to the data, all variables in the model were residualized for the previously discussed control variables to avoid any confounding results. The analyses were then conducted with the covariance matrix of unstandardized error terms obtained from this residualization procedure. First, a saturated model was estimated, with all structural paths left free. The model was then trimmed by removing non-significant paths ( $p \geq .05$ ). Figure 2 presents path coefficients and standard errors. Overall, this model fits the data well, with a chi-square value of 7.520 with 7 degrees of freedom ( $p = .377$ ; root mean square error approximation [RMSEA] = .010, 90% CI for RMSEA = .000 to .048; goodness of fit index [GFI] = 0.996; adjusted goodness of fit index [AGFI] = 0.989; and normed fit index [NFI] = 0.968).

*Direct relationship between political satire viewing and emotions.* The relationships observed here support H1—namely, that political satire viewing is associated with negative emotions. The volume of political satire consumption predicted the higher level of the negative emotion index, implying that frequent viewers of political satire programs are more likely to feel angry and worried about the two major parties. However, the findings of the survey regarding RQ1 illustrate that political satire watching was little tied to positive emotions. On the other hand, the consumption of television news was attached to positive emotions.

*Relationship between emotions and interpersonal talk.* The findings support H2a—namely, that negative emotions predicted an increase in interpersonal talk. However, positive emotions did not yield a comparable relationship with interpersonal talk, thereby failing to support H2b.

*Mediating effect of emotions.* As in the previously discussed experiment, the analysis of mediation relied on the bootstrapping approach (Hayes, 2009); the results are summarized in Table 2. The confidence interval for negative



**Figure 2.** Path model of media consumption, emotions, and interpersonal talk (Survey, N = 777).  
 Note. Unstandardized path coefficients are reported with standard errors in parentheses. Estimates were calculated using AMOS based on the Maximum Likelihood Estimation method. The effects of demographics (age, gender, race, household income, education, and party affiliation) and cognitive factors (internal efficacy, political interest, and knowledge) on endogenous and exogenous variables were residualized.  
 \*\*\*p < .01. \*\*p < .001.

**Table 2.** Specific Indirect Effect of Political Satire Consumption on Interpersonal Talk Through Negative Emotions (Survey, *N* = 777).

Specific indirect effect	Point estimate	Boot SE	CI
P → NE → I	.054	.019	[.022, .098]

Note. CIs are bias-corrected and -accelerated 95% confidence intervals (Bootstrap *N* = 5,000). P = political satire consumption; NE = negative emotions; I = interpersonal talk.

emotions did not include 0, thereby underpinning H3. This asserts that negative emotions mediated and considerably strengthened the relationship between political satire viewing and interpersonal talk. In addition, the findings from the survey agree with those in the experiment in that positive emotion failed to produce a comparable mediating effect. Further in line with the experiment results, the linkages between conventional news uses and interpersonal talk were not mediated by either emotion type. Instead of an indirect relationship via emotions, the use of newspaper showed only a direct association with interpersonal talk (see Figure 2).

## Discussion

The findings of the current research support the hypotheses concerning the mediating effect of negative emotions on the relationship between exposure to political satire and engagement in interpersonal talk. In the experiment, the manipulation of humor provoked anger and worry (H1) and these negative emotions predicted greater willingness to engage in interpersonal talk (H2a). By and large, the results of the survey are consistent with those of the experiment while capturing actual discussion involvement instead of behavioral intent and further testifying to the generalizability of the causal relationships observed in the experiment. In the survey, frequent viewing of political satire was associated with a higher level of negative emotions (H1), which was in turn tied to an increase of engagement in interpersonal talk (H2a). Furthermore, the bootstrapping results from both study designs indicated that negative emotions played a significant reinforcing mediating role between consuming satirical humor and engaging in interpersonal political talk (H3). Given the strengths of the experiment and the survey, the present study clearly evidenced that political satire watching could promote viewers' interpersonal talk about politics indirectly by stimulating their negative emotions. In contrast, conventional news uses did not seem to exert a comparable indirect effect on interpersonal talk via the conduit of emotion. Instead, the combined

results from the experiment and the survey suggest that the links between conventional news uses and interpersonal talk were mostly direct. In the experiment, exposure to television news yielded a direct increase in intended political discussion, whereas the findings of the survey indicated that frequent use of newspaper was directly associated with actual engagement in interpersonal talk. Essentially, the two employed research designs replicated the pattern of direct as well as indirect associations between the distinct modes of news acquisition and the engagement in interpersonal talk, thereby cementing our confidence in the mundane generalizability of the observed casual relationships.

On the other hand, the present study found little data supporting the mediating role of positive emotions. Although the results of the experiment showed the hypothesized relationship between positive emotions and interpersonal talk (H2), the consumption of political satire failed to produce a significant link to positive emotions in both research designs. Muffled effects of positive emotions may have warranted the prominence of negative emotions when it comes to more careful and attentive processing of information (Marcus et al., 2000). However, the lack of a mediating effect and the erratic results may allude to the weaknesses of operationalization. The positive emotion index in the survey combined respondents' hopeful and excited responses toward the two major parties, which was measured by enthusiasm about a government's policy in the experiment. Hence, the types as well as the objects of positive emotions exploited in the two research designs differed, and these inconsistencies may have produced vague results. Although relatively less attention has been paid to distinct ramifications of different types of positive emotions, future research can benefit from incorporating more diverse positive emotion items while assessing their specific causes and effects.

Furthermore, the present study revealed little about the difference between anger and worry, which has received a great deal of scholarly attention lately. In particular, many students of the cognitive appraisal theory have identified unique causes (Huddy, Feldman, & Cassese, 2007; Lerner & Keltner, 2001; MacKuen, Wolak, Keele, & Marcus, 2010) and effects (Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Valentino et al., 2011; Weber, 2007) of fear (or worry) and anger (or aversion). With regard to deliberative behaviors, MacKuen et al. (2010) recently demonstrated that anger stemming from familiar threats tends to propel a biased search for supportive information and resistance to accommodation, whereas anxiety evoked by unfamiliar circumstances promotes the balanced consideration of heterogeneous views and more willingness to compromise. Hence, the following research questions should ignite further intellectual inquiries about the causes and effects of discrete emotions: What type of negative emotion is more likely following the consumption of political

satire? What type of negative emotion encourages interpersonal talk more powerfully? Do anger and worry promote different types of discussion (e.g., discussion with likeminded others or those with dissimilar views)?

In addition, we have not directly measured interpersonal talk for the operationalization of the criterion variable. Admittedly, we asked the respondents' willingness to engage in talk in the experiment, while the corresponding survey measure relied on self-reported frequency of talk. In either case, over-reporting can be the most serious disadvantage. However, people's tendency to overstate their actual frequencies may be less problematic if these errors are randomly dispersed without them being confounded with certain experimental conditions or specific types of individuals (Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001). To further alleviate issues of the overblown self-report of behavioral intent, future studies can apply a more subtle method to capture actual willingness to take action such as imposing possible fees for intended behavior (Battaglini, Morton, & Palfrey, 2007) and adding an introduction that induces people to consider costs of their deeds (Krupnikov & Levine, 2011).

As with the measures employed in the current research, the overall design is not without limitations. Specifically, the temporal precedence between emotions and interpersonal talk was not fully addressed. Even in the experiment, emotions and interpersonal talk were measured simultaneously. In this case, it is feasible that exposure to political satire drives changes in both emotion and interpersonal talk, thereby leaving the observed link between these two to be spurious in nature. However, this alternative explanation for the relationship can be ruled out as a post-hoc examination of correlation coefficient revealed that the index of negative emotions was highly correlated with interpersonal talk ( $r = .220, p < .001$ ), even when the manipulation condition was held constant (i.e., within the political satire group).

Another more serious confounding issue is the reverse causal direction. It seems more plausible that manipulating the tone in the experiment immediately elicited emotions; respondents' willingness to engage in talk was likely to follow. However, over an extended period of time, emotions might also become the effect of interpersonal talk. For instance, persistent engagement in interpersonal talk may reinforce or undermine prior emotional states depending upon the nature of discussion network (e.g., whether it is homogeneous or heterogeneous). Hence, future study needs to adopt a time-series design (e.g., panel survey and pretest–posttest experiment) to fend off these reverse and reciprocal orders that may underlie the mundane relationships.

Notwithstanding the shortcomings, the present study contributes to our understanding of the relationship between mass media and interpersonal communication. In particular, the findings indicate that political satire viewing could encourage interpersonal talk about politics in an idiosyncratic manner

clearly distinguished from the process for conventional news channels; consuming humor could indirectly spur discursive activities among audiences by eliciting their negative emotions, whereas the comparable mechanisms for traditional news were mostly direct with little development of affective responses. Indeed, the results clearly suggest that political satire programs play no less significant role than traditional news sources in fostering interpersonal talk and that their motivational influence is primarily explained by negative emotions, which may arise from exposure to widespread criticism of satire. Frequent viewers of political satire programs who are encouraged to participate in interpersonal talk by their emotional experiences should be distinguished from cynical citizens, who are tired of politics and opt to remain silent in a forum for public debate. Thus, the findings of this study should alarm those who often downplay the value of political satire in democratic discourse and criticize it for brewing cynicism among citizens while ultimately leading them into political inactivity. At the very least, political satire, regardless of its capacity to fully educate citizens, seems to serve as a practical means to ignite meaningful discussion about politics and prompt more animated engagement in the public discourse. Political satire can help to paint a sanguine picture of a healthy deliberative democracy mainly through an affective rather than cognitive route.

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### **Notes**

1. Satire usually disapproves of the clearly identified target but with playful laughter (Test, 1991). Particularly, political satire often attacks wrong doings and ills in the realm of public affairs in an approachable manner (Caufield, 2008). Because the primary goal of this study taps into the effects of playful political stories with ridiculing twists, political satire is rather narrowly defined to incorporate only those programs conveying a coherent political message (e.g., *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*), while excluding standard nighttime talk shows (e.g., *The Late Show With David Letterman* and *The Tonight Show With Jay Leno*).
2. In line with this reasoning, our manipulation check results, as discussed later in the method section, indicate that people felt that political satire was funnier than hard news.

3. One-way analysis of variance was used to check the effectiveness of the random assignment in terms of age, gender, household income, education, and party affiliation (all  $ps > .46$ ). Furthermore, chi-square tests showed no significant association between demographic measures and group assignment (all  $ps > .36$ ). Thus, no control variables were included in analyzing the experimental data.
4. Among diverse issues people may show affective responses about, we selected the government's bailout of big banks because we are mainly interested in people's rather general attitudes toward the entire political discourse regardless of their ideological leaning. Indeed, a poll result indicated that people's negative attitude about this issue was bipartisan (The Harris Poll, 2012). Although we acknowledge other more salient social issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and gun control, people's emotions about these tend to depend on their political stance and party affiliation, thereby making it difficult to gauge general attitudes toward the political system.
5. The specific video clips as well as the complete question wording are available at <http://1drv.ms/1o5fdR2>.
6. For a categorical independent variable with  $k$  categories, Preacher and Hayes (2008) recommended constructing  $k - 1$  dummy variables and running analyses  $k - 1$  times. With each run, one dummy variable is the independent variable and the other one(s) is (are) the covariate(s). As the independent variable in the present study comprised three categories (political satire, hard news, and control), two dummy variables (political satire dummy and hard news dummy) were created and an analysis was run twice.
7. In the experiment section of the current research, emotions were measured without reference to a specific party; thus, it is believed to be a superior practice for capturing emotional responses following stimuli as opposed to affective assessments of political parties. In either case, our proposition is that exposure to satire elicits people's emotions to the entire political process regardless of their party affiliation, given that the subjects of satire usually include political parties, policies, and politicians of either political spectrum (see, for example, Baym, 2005; Coe et al., 2008).
8. The different analytical approaches in the two research designs reflect distinct foci. The purpose of the experiment was to examine, in a controlled setting, every detailed consequence of manipulation. To this end, it seems more reasonable to look at all the possible casual links, including those failing to reach statistical significance. The exploited macro by Preacher and Hayes (2008) allows for more exhaustive assessments of causal paths. Meanwhile, the goal of the survey revolves around identifying mundane relationships among media uses, emotions, and interpersonal talk. AMOS enabled us to remove insignificant paths that may suggest null relationships in the real world and investigate whether the proposed model as a whole fits the data well.

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### Author Biographies

**Hoon Lee** (PhD, University of Michigan) is assistant professor in the Department of Journalism and Communication, Kyung Hee University, Seoul, Republic of Korea. His current research investigates social impacts of entertainment media and new communication technologies in cross-national and cross-cultural contexts.

**S. Mo Jang**, (PhD, University of Michigan) is assistant professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communications, University of South Carolina. His research focuses on social media analysis and public opinion about controversial social issues.