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AUTHOR Gruner, Charles R.
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ABSTRACT

Literati differ markedly on whether satire is persuasive. Accordingly, a study tested whether partisans of a political candidate would fail to perceive the thesis of satire ridiculing their candidate; further, it tested whether they would perceive the thesis of satire ridiculing an opposing candidate. Subjects, students at the University of Georgia, were questioned about their sex, class, and presidential preference in the McGovern-Nixon race. Based on their response to the latter question, they were given to read either a satirical piece on Nixon or a satirical piece on McGovern. They were then asked to choose from a list of statements, each summarizing what might be the writer's thesis. Finally, they were asked to rate the piece's "fairness" and "funniness." Results showed that Nixon partisans were significantly better able (or willing) to assess the thesis of the anti-McGovern column than they were the anti-Nixon column; the same rule held for McGovern partisans. Further, results showed that a piece's fairness or funniness was related only when rated by antagonists. In other words, enjoyment of satire ridiculing the opposing candidate was partly a function of its perceived fairness, but enjoyment of satire ridiculing the partisan's own candidate was independent of its perceived fairness. The study lends support to the idea that satire can operate as a reinforcement of the partisan's views. (Contain[s] a table of data and 17 references.) (TB)

SATIRE AS A REINFORCER OF ATTITUDES

Charles R. Gruner

University of Georgia

Literati differ markedly on whether satire is persuasive. Opinions differ markedly as those of Cannan and Feinberg. Cannan has boasted that, "No tyrant, no tyrannous idea ever came crashing to earth but it was first wounded with the shafts of satire: no free man, no free idea ever rose to the heights but it endured them." [1] Feinberg demurs: "....the notion that satire has played an important part in reforming society is probably a delusion. Satirists themselves know better." [2]

Experimental studies of satire as persuasion also differ in their results and conclusions. Out of a small number of studies employing satirical stimuli, some show persuasive effect, some do not. Studies by Gruner,[3] Zeman,[4] Pokorony and Gruner,[5] McGown,[6] and Markiewicz,[7] failed to find persuasive effect resulting from satire. Conversely, some studies have found satire <u>effective</u> as a persuader. Berlo and Kumata[8] found that a radio dram critical of congressional investigation and Senator Joe McCarthy adversely affected attitude toward the former but not the latter. Gruner[9] found that satire might affect those mildly opposed and/or neutral toward its thesis. He also

found that professional contemporary satire can influence attitude toward concepts such as "our policy (of non-recognition) toward Red China" and "labor unions."[10] In a later study he found that ad hominem satire can affect the perceived "image" of a public figure.[11]

The one difference between those studies showing satire ineffective and those showing satire to be effective seems to be whether the subjects understood the serious thesis of the satiric message. In the studies cited as showing satire ineffective, no evidence is presented to show that Ss did understand the thesis, and some evidence exists to indicate they probably did not understand the message. Of those indicating persuasive effects from satire, there is evidence that the Ss did understand the thesis. Berlo and Kumata's Ss correctly wrote the thesis of the radio satire. Gruner[12] introduced the satire in his dissertation replication as "a satire critical of censorship." in his first study using Art Buchwald columns[13] he used the same technique; and it was the Ss who were told the theses of the satires who shifted in attitude. Internal evidence in his other study[14] lends credence to the notion that the Ss in that study perceived the anti-Martha Mitchell message in the satire.

Feinberg suggests that satire works only as a reinforcer of attitude. He writes that, "When people already hold the opinions which satire expresses, those opinions are reinforced," but that, "The satirist who expresses unpopular views has no social effect, no matter how entertaining he may be."[15] If satire operates primarily as a reinforcer of previously--held attitude, it would seem to follow, then, that it is those people already in agreement with the satiric argument of the message who would be most able to detect that thesis.

Cooper and Jahoda[16] have found that prejudiced people respond to anti-prejudice satire by distorting it's central idea. And a small group of studies indicate that people most enjoy humor directed against "enemy" reference groups and least enjoy humor ridiculing their own reference group.[17]

The present study was designed to test whether partisans of a political candidate would tend to fail to perceive the thesis of satire ridiculing that candidate, but, conversely, tend to more often perceive the thesis of satire ridiculing the opposing candidate.

Procedures. Students in the basic communication course at the U. of Georgia responded to booklets containing (1) questions as to the S's sex, class, and Presidential preference "if the Presidential election were held today," (2) either an anti-McGovern or an anti-Nixon satirical column by Art Hoope, (3) a list of statements from which S was to check as "the one statement which you think expresses the writer's thesis, or main idea, and (4) scales for evaluating the column's "funniness" and "fairness." The anti-McGovern column by Hoppe, published in the Atlanta Journal Aug. 10. 1972, ridiculed the Democrat candidate for the "Eagleton Affair." Entitled "The George and Tom Papers," it presented a fictitious dialogue in which McGovern grills Eagleton under a strong light, finally arguing that Eagleton should volunteer to accept "a unique place in American History," as "the only candidate for that office (Vice President) who ever withdrew from the race." The anti-Nixon column was published in the Atlanta Journal Sept. 4, 1972. Entitled "Joe Against McGovern," it involved a conversation between "Joe Sikpak, American," and his bartender, Paddy.

Joe announces he is going to vote for McGovern because of his promise to end "that dumbhead war" in Vietnam; however, Paddy convinces Joe to vote for Nixon, since the President has already had four years of experience at ending the war.

Booklets were staggered in stacks so that when they were handed out a S would received an anti-Nixon or an anti-McGovern booklet by chance.

Results. Pro-Nixon Ss correctly and incorrectly choosing the thesis of the anti-Nixon column were compared to those pro-Nixon Ss choosing the correct the correct theses of the anti-McGovern column through a 2 X 2 Chi square analysis. The same analysis was conducted on the choices of McGovern partisans. Correlations (Pearson r's) were computed on the ratings of the column's funniness and fairness, on the assumption that they might be related. The means of these ratings were checked (t-tests) for significance of difference as a result of partisanship and/or sex. The Chi square results appear in Table 1.

Table 1: X^2 Results of Correct and Incorrect Choices of Hoppe Column Theses

	Pro-Nixon Ss		Pro-McGovern Ss	
Columns:	Correct	Incorrect	Correct	Incorrect
Anti-Nixon	16	48	7	10
Anti-McGovern	33	29	12	7
	X^2 /10-56, p<01		X^2 = 1.74, NS	
			(X^2 =3.84 needed for p<.05)	

Table 1 shows that the Nixon partisans were significantly better able (or willing) to identify the thesis of the anti-McGovern column than they were the anti-Nixon column. This was especially true in the case of female Nixon partisans; only 7 of these out of 41 could bring themselves to check the correct thesis of that piece, "Nixon has failed to make good his 1968 campaign promise to end the war." There was a slight tendency for the McGovern partisans to also more correctly check the thesis of the anti-McGovern piece but the Chi square was not significant. It may be that the anti-Nixon column was more subtle, thus its thesis more difficult to identify in general. Or it may be that, since the "Eagleton Affair" was quite a recent event compared to Nixon's four-year-old broken promise, the anti-McGovern thesis was more detectable because the event to which it referred was more salient in the Ss' minds.

The correlational evidence suggests that the columns' "funniness" and "fairness" were related only when rated by antagonists. The ratings by the Nixon partisans of the anti-McGovern column correlated .38 ($p<.01$) and the ratings by the McGovern partisans of the anti-Nixon column correlated .49 ($p<.01$). Ratings of these two attributes by Nixon partisans of the anti-Nixon column and those by McGovern partisans of the anti-McGovern column did not correlate significantly (r's of .11 and 08, respectively). In other words, enjoyment of satire ridiculing the "enemy" candidate was partly a function of its perceived "fairness." But enjoyment of satire ridiculing the "friendly" candidate was independent of its perceived "fairness."

This study lends support to the idea that satire can operate as a reinforcement of previous attitude in that the thesis of "friendly"

satire can be more recognizable. The results also tend to show that people seem to perceive "antagonistic" satire differently than they do "friendly" satire. Furthermore, the results of this study may be interpreted by some as proving that McGovern supporters have a better sense of humor that do Nixon supporters (since they have to have a sense of humor to be McGovern supporters).

References

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[4]James V. Zeman, "An Experimental Study of the Persuasive Effects of Satire in a Speech Presented to a High School Audience," M.A. Thesis, U. of Nebraska, 1967.

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[7]Dorothy Markiewicz, "The Effects of Humor on Persuasion," Ph.D. Dissertation, The Ohio State U., 1972.

[8]David K. Berlo and Hideya Kumata, "The Investigator: The Impact of a Satirical Radio Drama," Journalism Quarterly, 33 (1956), 287-98.

[9]Charles R. Gruner, "A Further Experimental Study of Satire as Persuasion," Speec Monographs, 33 (1966), 184-5.

[10]Charles R. Gruner, "Editorial Satire as Persuasion: An Experiment," Journalis Quarterly, 44 (1967), 727-30.

[11]Charles R. Gruner, "An Experimental Study of Ad Hominem Editorial Satire: Art Hoppe Vs. Martha Mitchell," paper presented at the SCA convention Dec 29, 1971, San Francisco. Also: Satire Newsletter, in press.

[12]Gruner, "A Further Experimental Study . . ." [13]Gruner,"Editorial Satire . . .'

[14]Gruner, ". . . Ad Hominem Editorial Satire: Art Hoppe . . ."

[15]Feinberg, p. 256.

[16]Eunice Cooper and Marie Jahoda, "The Evasion of Propaganda: How Prejudiced People Respond to Anti-Prejudice Propaganda," Journal of Psychology, 23 (1947), 15-25.

[17]For instance, see Robert F. Priest and Joel Abrahams, "Candidate Preference and Hostile Humor in the 1968 Elections," Psychological Reports, 26 (1970), 779-83.

*Note: results of the t-tests failed to detect mean differences of rated "funniness" or "fairness" resulting from sex or partisanship for either column.

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