

THE FEY EFFECT

YOUNG ADULTS, POLITICAL HUMOR, AND PERCEPTIONS OF SARAH PALIN IN THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN

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Abstract Using panel data of young adults, we find evidence that exposure to Tina Fey’s impersonation of Sarah Palin’s performance in the 2008 vice-presidential debate on *Saturday Night Live* is associated with changes in attitudes toward her selection as VP candidate and presidential vote intentions. These effects are most pronounced among self-identified Independents and Republicans.

Recent studies show that late-night comedy exposure is significantly associated with multiple aspects of political attitudes (Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Moy, Xenos, and Hess 2006; Young 2004). Using panel data of young adults surveyed in the late stages of the 2008 presidential campaign, we find that those who saw Tina Fey’s impersonation of Sarah Palin on *Saturday Night Live*’s (SNL) skit of the vice-presidential debate displayed steeper declines in approval for Palin than those who saw debate coverage through other means. Interestingly, this “Fey Effect” spilled over into vote intention, and was most pronounced among self-identified Republicans.

This research is important because it serves as a corrective to the mostly post-hoc and correlational evidence regarding the effect of comedic portrayals of Palin on public opinion. Interestingly, most of the published empirical research on the effect of humor on attitudes ignores sketch comedy and focuses on late-night talk shows. This is surprising, given that SNL has been doing parodies of presidential candidates since its inaugural season in 1975. The analysis also provides a telling

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glimpse into the effects of an increasingly popular form of nontraditional media on the political attitudes of those who use it most, young adults.

***Saturday Night Live* and the “Fey Effect”**

Few political impersonations have attracted as much attention as did Tina Fey’s 2008 portrayal of Sarah Palin as an uninformed political novice (Carter 2008; Deggans 2008). In total, *SNL* aired six such skits throughout the campaign. Many attributed to this a so-called “Fey Effect,” or a decrease in Palin’s polling numbers due to the spoofs (Slotek 2008; Esralew 2009). There is some reason to expect that this might be the case. Negative portrayals and caricatures play a significant role in helping people form opinions (Geer 2006; Jamieson and Waldman 2003, pp. 67–70), and research illustrates that political comedy can move opinion in a message- or caricature-consistent direction (Young 2004; Baumgartner and Morris 2006).

We suggest that any potential “Fey Effect” can be understood within the context of priming and attitude change. This theory highlights the idea that the media draw “attention to some aspects of political life at the expense of others” (Iyengar and Kinder 1987, p. 114). Citizens, who are overloaded with information, tend to come to judgment by activating familiar concepts—often those that the media have highlighted.¹ In addition to other applications, priming has been used to explain attitude change in evaluations of presidential candidates (Jacobs and Shapiro 1994; Druckman and Holmes 2004) and to show that negative political ads can adversely affect opinion (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Schenk-Hamlin, Proctor, and Ramsey 2000).

Unlike negative political ads, political humor seems to be fairly popular, which could increase receptiveness to the message. And, because political humor is a form of negative priming (Moy, Xenos, and Hess 2006), it should also be associated with more negative perceptions of its targets, particularly targets that are new to the national political scene (Baumgartner and Morris 2006).

Formally, we hypothesize that viewing the *SNL* skit will be negatively associated with views of Sarah Palin (H1) and with the likelihood of voting for John McCain (H2).

Data and Methods

Data are from an online survey panel of 18-to-24-year-olds conducted throughout 2008. To obtain our sample, we requested undergraduate student e-mail

1. This is not inconsistent with political psychology research on decision-making during a campaign, which suggests that recently acquired information is more salient (Redlawsk and Lau 1997; Redlawsk 2006).

addresses from 10 public universities in each state. We received directories from 114 institutions in 36 different states.² Starting in early 2007, we began e-mailing these students, asking them to participate in our “American Values Survey.” By November 2007, 10,343 subjects had agreed to participate.

The panel comprised six surveys from December 2007, through November 2008. In total, 4,971 subjects completed the first survey (response rate of 48.1 percent). Subsequent surveys were sent only to those who had completed all of the previous surveys. Ultimately, 1,755 subjects completed all six surveys (17 percent of the recruited panel, 35 percent of those who completed the first survey) and served as our baseline *N* for this study. We use items from the fourth (wave one) and fifth (wave two) surveys for this analysis. Wave one (the fourth survey) was fielded September 15–25, 2008, and wave two (the fifth survey) October 24–November 2.

One obvious limitation of this study is the fact that we used an unweighted non-probability sample. In addition, the design does not control for potential selection effects associated with the fact that respondents may have had a pre-existing interest in seeing Palin lampooned. The study is also limited to young adults. Having said this, we have some confidence in our sample. First, young adults are the primary consumers of political humor (Pew Research Center 2004). Moreover, many studies of media effects use samples recruited from individual universities; ours was drawn from public universities in all regions of the country. While not completely representative,³ the sample is “not a homogenous, freakish, collective” (Nelson and Oxley 1999, p. 1044).

Waves one and two had identical questions that measured views of Sarah Palin, asking respondents, “Do you approve or disapprove of John McCain’s pick of Sarah Palin as his vice-presidential running mate?” (1 = disapprove, 2 = not sure, and 3 = approve). A second question asked, “Does John McCain’s pick of Sarah Palin as his vice-presidential running mate make you more likely to vote for McCain, less likely, or won’t it make any difference in your vote?” (1 = less likely, 2 = no difference, and 3 = more likely). Similar questions measured approval of Joe Biden and the likelihood of voting for Obama.

By the time wave one was fielded, *SNL* had aired its first skit featuring Fey’s impersonation of Palin (on September 13); a second followed on September 27. The vice-presidential debate took place on October 2, and the *SNL* spoof of that debate aired on October 4. As noted, wave two was fielded from October 24 through November 2. While three more *SNL* skits lampooning Palin (on October 18 and 23 and November 1) aired during that time period, we specifically

2. The regional distribution was slightly skewed (South, 58.7 percent) but nonetheless relatively broad.

3. The sample overrepresented women (68 percent) and whites (89 percent) but was consistent with national averages with respect to partisan identification (40 percent Democrat, 39 percent Independent/no preference) and ideology (36 percent liberal, 38 percent moderate). See American National Election Studies 2008 Time Series Study (<http://www.electionstudies.org>).

asked respondents in the latter wave whether or not they had seen any media coverage of the debate. Those who answered yes were then queried where they saw coverage and given a list of over 20 possible media source choices, including *SNL*. Respondents were able to identify multiple sources. In total, 255 reported seeing the *SNL* spoof (15 percent).⁴ We created a dummy variable of *SNL* exposure (1 = saw *SNL* spoof, 0 = did not see the *SNL* spoof).

We controlled for a number of other factors in the analysis. Partisan identification was measured by responses to the question “Generally speaking, do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?” (1 = strong Democrat, 3 = Independent/neither/don’t know, and 5 = strong Republican). Ideological orientation was measured similarly: “In general, how would you describe your political views?” (1 = very liberal to 5 = very conservative). We also controlled for overall media exposure, political knowledge,⁵ gender (0 = female, 1 = male), race (0 = non-white, 1 = white), and respondents’ age.

Findings and Discussion

In the weeks following her appearance in the vice-presidential debate, overall approval for John McCain’s pick of Sarah Palin dropped from 40 to 31 percent in our sample (from wave one to wave two), while disapproval increased from 39 to 55 percent. Was this drop related to viewing the *SNL* skit?

Table 1 presents the results of an ordered logit analysis of approval of the selection of both Palin and Biden as vice-presidential candidates. The dependent variables here are approval ratings from wave two. To control for views that respondents held prior to viewing the *SNL* skit, responses from wave one are included in the model, creating a lagged dependent variable model that tests for change in approval. Table 1 provides support for our hypothesis that viewing the *SNL* spoof is associated with a drop in approval of McCain’s selection of Palin. Based on this model, and holding all other variables at their mean, an individual who saw the spoof had an 8.5-percent probability of approving, and a 75.7-percent probability of disapproving of the Palin choice. Those who did not see the *SNL* debate had a 16.1-percent probability of approving

4. This level of exposure likely compares favorably with the general 18-to-24-year-old population. In 2004, approximately half of 18-to-24-year-olds received some information about the campaign from shows like “Saturday Night Live” (Pew Research Center 2004). In 2008, Fey’s sketches were enormously popular: *SNL*’s ratings increased by more than 50 percent from the previous year (Carter 2008; Slotek 2008), and the September 13 sketch was “NBC.com’s most-watched viral video ever” (Roberts 2011).

5. Media exposure was measured as follows: “On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being NOT AT ALL and 10 being VERY REGULARLY, how closely would you say you have been following news about the 2008 presidential elections?” The political knowledge variable was an additive index of eight fact-based questions about politics and the campaign (see Appendix).

Table 1. Ordered Logit Estimates of Approval of Vice-Presidential Candidate Selections, Post-VP Debate, by Viewership of SNL Debate Spoof (standard errors in parentheses)

	“Do you approve or disapprove of John McCain’s pick of Sarah Palin as his vice-presidential running mate?” (n = 1,731)	“Do you approve or disapprove of Barack Obama’s pick of Joe Biden as his vice-presidential running mate?” (n = 1,731)
	(1 = Disapprove; 2 = Not Sure/Don’t Know; 3 = Approve)	
Pre-Debate Approval	1.79** (.10)	1.86** (.10)
Viewed SNL Debate Spoof	-.74** (.21)	.46* (.19)
Party Identification (1 = strong Democrat to 5 = strong Republican)	.70** (.10)	-.30** (.08)
Ideology (1 = very liberal to 5 = very conservative)	.38** (.09)	-.23 (.08)
Overall Media Exposure	-.06* (.03)	.11** (.03)
Political Knowledge	-.13** (.04)	.07* (.03)
White	.19 (.20)	.16 (.17)
Male	-.33* (.14)	-.18 (.12)
Age	-.02 (.04)	.01 (.05)
Constant 1	5.50	1.56
Constant 2	6.74	3.92
Chi-Squared	1291.23**	757.93**

*p ≤ .05; **p ≤ .01 (two-tailed).

and a 60.1-percent probability of disapproving of the choice. Approval of Obama’s selection of Biden, on the other hand, was positively associated with viewership of the spoof ($p < .05$). Although the SNL debate was not especially kind to Biden, it is possible that his image was positively influenced by simple comparison to Fey’s portrayal of Palin.

Did this “Fey Effect” extend to views of the Republican ticket as a whole, making those who viewed it less likely to vote for McCain (H2)? Table 2 shows the results of an ordered logit analysis where respondents were asked if the

Table 2. Ordered Logit Estimates of Effect of Vice-Presidential Candidate Selections on Vote Intention, Post-VP Debate, by Viewership of *SNL* Debate Spoof (standard errors in parentheses)

	“Does John McCain’s pick of Sarah Palin as his vice-presidential running mate make you more likely to vote for McCain?” (<i>n</i> = 1,597)	“Does Barack Obama’s pick of Joe Biden as his vice-presidential running mate make you more likely to vote for Obama?” (<i>n</i> = 1,501)
	(1 = Less Likely; 2 = Does Not Matter; 3 = More Likely)	
Pre-Debate Answer	2.23** (.10)	2.71** (.13)
Viewed <i>SNL</i> Debate Spoof	-.49* (.17)	.03 (.19)
Party Identification (1 = strong Democrat to 5 = strong Republican)	.37** (.08)	-.17 (.10)
Ideology (1 = very liberal to 5 = very conservative)	.17* (.08)	-.19* (.10)
Overall Media Exposure	.02* (.03)	.05 (.03)
Political Knowledge	-.08* (.04)	.03 (.05)
White	-.27 (.18)	.10 (.21)
Male	-.24 (.12)	.28* (.14)
Age	-.01 (.03)	-.07 (.04)
Constant 1	4.25	.61
Constant 2	7.48	5.82
Chi-Squared	1003.94**	376.35**

NOTE.—Those individuals who answered “do not know” were excluded from the analysis.

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$ (two-tailed).

selection of Palin made them more or less likely to vote for McCain. Similar to the previous model, the dependent variable is responses from wave two, and responses from wave one are included as a lagged predictor. The table illustrates a significant negative association. When all other variables in the model are held at their mean, those who watched the *SNL* clip had a 45.4-percent probability of saying that Palin’s nomination made them less likely to vote for McCain. This same probability drops to 34 percent among those who saw coverage of the

Table 3. Ordered Logit Estimates of Approval of Sarah Palin Selection, Post-VP Debate, by Viewership of SNL Debate Spoof (standard errors in parentheses)

	“Do you approve or disapprove of John McCain’s pick of Sarah Palin as his vice-presidential running mate?”		
	(1 = Disapprove; 2 = Not Sure/Don’t Know; 3 = Approve)		
	<i>Democrats</i> (n = 607)	<i>Independents</i> (n = 637)	<i>Republicans</i> (n = 487)
Pre-Debate Approval	1.49** (.27)	1.99** (.15)	1.77** (.19)
Viewed SNL Debate Spoof	-.39 (.42)	-.78* (.34)	-.82* (.39)
Ideology (1 = very liberal to 5 = very conservative)	-.01 (.18)	.59** (.14)	.36* (.17)
Overall Media Exposure	-.30** (.07)	-.11* (.05)	.11 (.05)
Political Knowledge	-.17 (.09)	-.10 (.06)	-.18* (.07)
White	-.49 (.32)	.48 (.30)	.75 (.43)
Male	.14 (.31)	-.65** (.22)	-.24 (.23)
Age	.02 (.08)	.01 (.06)	-.04 (.07)
Constant 1	.60	5.39	3.32
Constant 2	2.07	6.72	4.43
Chi-Squared	163.76**	377.54**	130.52**

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$ (two-tailed).

debate through other media. Exposure to the clip had no significant effect on the likelihood of voting for Obama.

Given the importance of partisan identification in shaping evaluations of political leaders and presidential candidates in particular (Campbell et al. 1960), and given the fact that views of Palin were positively associated with Republican identification, we were interested in seeing how partisanship may have moderated the “Fey Effect” when it came to approval of her selection. Table 3 shows, surprisingly, a significant negative effect among self-identified Republicans and Independents ($p < .05$) but not among Democrats. While this effect did not significantly translate into intended vote choice when moderating for party identification, the apparent negative change in approval for Palin’s nomination carries substantive significance. The non-effect among Democrats

was likely because, by this point in the campaign, they had already formed negative opinions about Palin, so exposure to the skit did not worsen their already low opinions. More importantly, the significant findings among Republicans and Independents demonstrate that the “Fey Effect” was not necessarily a visceral response from the left, or any Democratic “echo chamber.”⁶ This is an especially interesting finding given that *SNL* is viewed as a left-leaning show (Spitznagel 2003) and that Fey’s portrayal of Palin mirrored Fey’s own view of her (Huff 2008).

Did Fey’s impersonation have an effect on the election? Although our findings cannot answer this question, it seems unlikely. Research shows that beyond a minimal home-state advantage (Dudley and Rappaport 1989), the vice-presidential candidate typically has little effect on the presidential voting choice of most citizens (Romero 2001). Moreover, the change in Palin’s ratings could have been associated with a number of other campaign events, including enormous spending by the Obama campaign, a slew of negative campaign ads, an economy in freefall, and more. Of course, the attention paid to her and the controversy generated by her nomination made Sarah Palin an atypical vice-presidential nominee. Moreover, the popularity of Tina Fey’s caricature of her was unprecedented. With this in mind, we suggest that the manner in which political candidates are lampooned is no laughing matter. As others have suggested, portrayals and caricatures of various political figures may be an important factor in how people form opinions about them (Jamieson and Waldman 2003, pp. 67–70). This analysis supports earlier contentions that comedic impersonations can change how a political figure is perceived among younger adults.

Appendix

Political Knowledge Questions

“Political knowledge” was an additive index of the number of correct answers to the following eight questions, asked of respondents in wave one.

Q1. Which of the candidates currently running for president favors making the Bush tax cuts permanent?

Barack Obama

John McCain

None of the above

Q2. Which of the candidates currently running for president favors a health care plan in which the government provides coverage for most Americans?

6. Some political psychology research would suggest that many Republican identifiers reached their “affective tipping point,” the point after which they stopped “reinforcing their preferences” (Redlawsk, Civettini, and Emmerson 2010, p.564).

- Barack Obama
- John McCain
- None of the above

Q3. Which of the candidates currently running for president did not vote in favor of the 2003 invasion of Iraq?

- Barack Obama
- John McCain

All of the above candidates voted in favor of the Iraq invasion.

Q4. True or False: The United States uncovered evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq after the invasion of that country.

Q5. True or False: The United States has conclusive evidence that Saddam Hussein was involved in the planning of 9/11.

Q6. To the best of your knowledge, which party is in favor of drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) and off the coast of the United States for oil?

- Democrats
- Republicans
- Neither party

Q7. In which of the following cities was the REPUBLICAN National Convention held this year?

- Denver
- Chicago
- San Francisco
- New York
- Minneapolis–St. Paul

Q8. In which of the following cities was the DEMOCRATIC National Convention held this year?

- Denver
- Chicago
- San Francisco
- New York
- Minneapolis–St. Paul

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