https://doi.org/10.7592/EJHR.2025.13.4.1087

The European Journal of Humour Research 13 (4) 36–56
www.europeanjournalofhumour.org

Humorous political rhetoric in the US: analysing Trump's and Ocasio-Cortez's use of humour

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Abstract

Over the last decade, humour has undergone a metamorphosis, becoming a rhetorical weapon for—what appears to be—primarily right-wing populist politicians (Beck and Spencer, 2024; Kuipers, 2026). Unfortunately, empirical research has not yet fully explored the extent to which politicians use humour, with some notable exceptions (e.g., Mendiburo-Seguel, 2022). In critical theory and sociology, on the other hand, much has been said about the destructive force of political laughter, albeit without much empirical backing (e.g., Giamario, 2022). These theoretical debates about political humour often end in despair. Michael Billig (2005) and Nick Butler (2024) have both concluded that leftist humour will never trump the immense transgressive power of right-wing laughter. Research on the futility of Saturday Night Live parodies of Trump also evinces this sentiment (Becker, 2020). Nonetheless, not much has been said about how right-wing politicians use humour precisely nor has it been researched if only right-wing politicians utilise humour as a rhetorical weapon. This essay will provide empirical and philosophical tools to better comprehend how humorous political rhetoric is manifested. To do this, I analyse the humorous rhetoric of President Donald Trump and progressive U.S. congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. By providing a rigorous data analysis of humour in 498 tweets and 3 campaign speeches with an intercoder agreement combined with a close theoretical reading of selected texts, I argue how humorous political rhetoric (HPR) works both as a means of persuasion and—as philosophical research already suggested—that HPR primarily functions as an aggressive, deceptive, and unconstructive deliberative tool.

Keywords: political humour, political rhetoric, Donald Trump, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, deliberation.

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, humour has undergone a metamorphosis into being a rhetorical weapon for predominantly far-right populist politicians. Think about Argentinian president Javier Milei with a chainsaw on the campaign trail or how former TV-entertainer and businessman Donald

J. Trump became "Leader of the Free World" twice.[1] In this essay, I will address this trend and conceptualise how politicians use humour as a rhetorical tool. Empirically, this *humorisation* trend has been almost exclusively analysed from a response-side. Empirical research into how politicians use humour themselves is largely under-represented, with some notable exceptions (Meyer, 1990, Gardner, 1994; Stewart, 2012; Rhea, 2012; Mendiburo-Seguel et al., 2022). This paper seeks to address this gap in the literature on political humour by using both empirical and philosophical tools. And instead of dwelling on "political humour," I will work on presenting a conceptualisation of *humorous political rhetoric* (henceforth HPR). In contrast to political humour, an umbrella term primarily used in the context of political satire, HPR clearly refers to how politicians use humour as a rhetorical weapon, unlike political humour which implies many other things too such as comedy, laughter or satire.

Discussions about humour in the public sphere were often dominated by primarily positive viewpoints. Amongst other things, humour has been hailed as a virtue, common good, educating tool, and a weapon for social justice within public discourse (Critchley, 2002; Benacka, 2016; Lambek, 2023). One example is Sammy Basu's argument (1999) that humour should be included in Jürgen Habermas' dialogue ethics. Basu asserts that humour works as social lubrication, playful friction, and a consensus seeking glue. In this way, humour supposedly contributes to the essential virtues of constructive deliberation such as participation, justification of claims, respect for others (Steenbergen et al., 2003).

Post-2020, there has been a significant resistance against this positive perspective on humour as the ultimate democratic virtue.[2] In 2024, this countertrend resulted in a special issue on humour in the public sphere, including a contribution by Basu. The editors (Kuipers & Zijp, 2024) criticised the overtly positive views of political humour while refraining from the more negative perspectives by arguing that humour is ultimately ambiguous and can be used for both the good and the bad.[3] Before this special issue, contemporary theorists already theorised how our public sphere has become a permanent carnival or an 'Age of Hilarity' (e.g., Berlant & Ngai, 2017, Giamario, 2022). Billig's *Laughter and Ridicule* (2005) famously introduced a contemporary critique of the role of humour in public discourse. Recently, such critical scholars as Perez and Giamario have published on humour as a white supremacist tool (Pérez, 2022), or Patrick Giamario's (2022) theorisation of *gelopolitics* (i.e., laughing politics) in *Laughter as Politics*, which sketches a rather grim picture of the contemporary political role of humour and laughter. In the latest addition to this debate, Nick Butler (2024, p. 35) ends in an even more sombre tone and argues that both Giamario and Pérez still perceive humour too optimistically:

> *The Trouble with Jokes* rejects this message of hope [of Giamario and Pérez]. This book has argued that humour towards the transgressive and the taboo […] We ought to resist the urge to seek salvation in laughter. Humour isn't 'redeeming'. On the contrary, it's one of the most dangerous forms of political speech available to us today, even if its victim isn't always visible and its effects aren't immediately obvious.

These debates suggest that the broad conception of the public sphere and political humour create confusion. This confusion complicates any general claims about the role of humour in the public sphere, which, arguably, are inherently flawed. I therefore investigate how humour is used by politicians and specifically how humour is utilised in *political discourse*. I want to conceptualise how politicians tend to use humour within an American – Western – context. To do this, I will

[1] Many other examples suffice such as Jair Bolsonaro, Nigel Farage, Boris Johnson, and Rodrigo Duterte. See, e.g., Beck, 2023; Rafael, 2022; Gontijo & Ramos, 2024.

[2] Arguably, this trend started around 2005 already with the Danish cartoon scandal and Billig's publication of *Laughter and Ridicule*.

[3] Interestingly enough, Zijp criticised the overall tendency to highlight humor's ambiguous nature in Nieuwenhuis and Zijp (2022, pp. 341–354).

put forward the concept of HPR by employing two methods, namely: 1) analysing empirical and philosophical accounts of rhetoric, political joking, and political humour, and 2) comparing these accounts to my own empirical analysis of the quantity of the humour usage and styles of two major American politicians; progressive congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (hereafter Ocasio-Cortez) and Donald J. Trump. This essay aims to demonstrate how HPR functions as an undervalued, as well as politically and morally problematic, tool. Backed by my data analysis based on 498 tweets and 3 campaign speeches by Ocasio-Cortez and Trump, I show that their political humour, or rather HPR, is mainly manifested in an aggressive humour style, while often engaging in deflection and deception as well.

I begin this essay by exploring what political rhetoric entails and how classical rhetoricians saw laughter and ridicule. I then present – both empirical and philosophical - studies on how politicians use humour. Following this, I will expand on the role of mediated spectacle in HPR. Finally, I present quantitative data on humour usage by Ocasio-Cortez and Trump, and conceptualise HPR through both the empirical data and the theories presented earlier. After responding to counter arguments, I conclude with some moral and political implications of my conceptualisation of HPR.

2. Towards a conception of HPR: literature review

2.1. Rhetoric and laughter

To define *humorous political rhetoric* (HPR), we need to have a proper understanding of its meaning and background. Aristotle's definition of rhetoric still functions as a strong foundation for the concept. He argued that rhetoric is the "art of discovering all of the available *means* of persuasion in any given situation" (Aristotle, 1909, p. 5). In this sense, rhetoric is a means, or a device, to persuade others, especially within a political context, which Aristotle also asserted. Political rhetoric could therefore most commonly be understood as rhetoric that employs the available means of persuasion, such as tropes or figures of speech, in political discourse. There are multiple rhetorical means or devices that a speaker can use, including metaphor, analogy and anaphora among several others.

The word 'rhetoric' seems to have possessed a negative connotation, as an immoral *means* to persuade, dating back to debates between the sophists and Plato. However, according to contemporary theorists, such as Daniel Gross, rhetoric has not historically only been seen as a mere – amoral – device (Gross, 2006, p.10). Renaissance humanists, classical rhetoricians but also some contemporary political theorists have viewed rhetoric as a crucial and necessary tool for political leaders to lead and inform their citizens. Gross (2006, p. 11) mentions Nicolas Caussin's concept of *rhetores duces populi* ("rhetoricians lead the people"), which relates to this notion of rhetoric being a moral and political good if exercised accordingly. Additionally, Giambattista Vico showed how the rhetorical device of metaphor could have a powerful effect of *movere* beyond public discourse. Vico elaborates on this *movere*, the (emotionally) moving force of rhetoric, when he argues that rhetoric can change the legal and moral structure of a society (Vico, 1725, retrieved from Gross, 2006, pp. 13-14). An example he uses is how the Romans began to refer to illegitimate children as monsters. Over time, this metaphorical reference changed how Romans perceived these children, resulting in prohibitive legal regulations. We can see how, in contemporary times, populist rhetoric about [against?] immigrants has also changed societal perceptions and sometimes even legal structures in the form of stricter immigration laws.

Aristotle identified three different modes of persuasion: *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*. *Pathos* is using emotion to persuade, whereas *ethos* is using your character/personality to persuade your

opponent and/or audience. Above all, most rhetoricians see *logos* – the use of reasoned argumentation – as the most important and virtuous mode of persuasion (Braet, 1992, pp. 307-320). All three modes of persuasion can be employed humorously.[4] First, most jokes have their own incongruous logic. Fabrizio Macagno and Michael Cundall (2022) claim that all jokes contain hidden playful premises (*enthymemes*). As an example, Biden recently joked that "he is a grown man running against a six-year old (Trump)". It is humorous because the hidden premise that Trump behaves like a six-year-old is a playful exaggeration, but still logically coherent due to Trump's perceived behaviour. Incongruity theories, such as script opposition, confirm that incongruities need to be comprehensible to some extent, as the scripts need to overlap. Script opposition asserts that every joke is based on two contrasting scripts (i.e., incongruities) that overlap, making it humorously comprehensible and not simply strange. From a critical theoretical perspective, Giamario (2022) juxtaposes the *logos* (rational intelligent speech) to *phone* ('mere' voice/noise including laughter) of humans. The *logos* is decided upon our own situatedness, ideology or "social order", and when we laugh, we acknowledge our own social logic or somebody else's. Our *logos* decides what is considered risible and what is not. Jokes about Trump being a dictator mock the *logos* of liberal democracy, just as like Biden's jokes about the childishness of Trump critique Trump's *ethos* of political leadership (Bayoumi, 2024; CNN, 2024).

Moving on to *pathos*, philosophers like Noël Carroll (2014) claim that the (comic) amusement felt after a joke can be viewed as an emotion. When a speaker makes a demeaning joke about their opponent, the audience feels amused and persuaded of the opponent's absurdity. The speaker uses the *pathos* of humour to make their point. Arguably, this is backed by research. One study argues that political satire invokes the public expression of the emotions of contempt, anger and disgust (Phiddian, 2019). Finally, regarding *ethos*, when politicians make jokes, they often want to present themselves as informal atypical politicians. To shape their persona, politicians can use their humorous *ethos* as a rhetorical weapon.

Classical rhetoricians also reflected on humour, or rather laughter and ridicule. As demonstrated by humour research, the Anglophone concept of humour itself only came into global use in the late eighteenth century (Baruchello & Arnarsson, 2023, pp. 32-33). Quentin Skinner has argued that most classical rhetoricians thought of laughter as an expression of scorn or contempt, and this was perceived as an important rhetorical weapon in debate (Skinner, 2002, p. 145). In the same work, Skinner writes about how Thomas Hobbes famously conceptualised laughter as a sudden feeling of glory over the other. This Hobbesian conception of laughter is now widely known as the Superiority Theory. Quintilian and Cicero argued that if you want to debate "winningly", the speaker should—besides reason—use the power of imagination or the power of ridicule (Skinner, 2002, pp. 155-168). The rhetorical devices of ridicule make sure you get the audience behind you by mocking the opponent. These rhetoricians thought of many figures and tropes that could provoke laughter, such as irony, hyperbole, and meiosis. While perceiving laughter as a strong rhetorical weapon, they also predominantly viewed it in a negative light.

Scholarship on rhetoric teaches us three important things. The first and most obvious is that rhetoric is seeking the available means of persuasion, whereby humour can be seen to be engaging in all modes of persuasion: ethos, pathos and logos. I have shown that rhetoricians did not see rhetoric as something bad ("mere rhetoric") but as a useful political tool to help, move, and inform citizens. Finally, rhetoricians seemed to assert that humour (or, in this case, laughter and ridicule) is a powerful but also morally problematic tool. In their view, laughter was primarily the physiological response to feelings of contempt and scorn.

[4] Asides rhetorical modes of persuasion, there is a strong link between figurative – rhetorical – language and humour, e.g., irony, metaphor, chiasmus (Godioli & Chłopicki, 2024, pp. 145-161).

2.2. Politicians' use of humour

Following the above analysis on political rhetoric and laughter, we must ask ourselves what contemporary (post-2000) theorists wrote about how politicians use humour. As hinted at above, it is surprisingly little. The reason this section is called 'Politicians' use of humour' and not 'Political humour' is due to the latter, political humour, serving as a big umbrella term in academia for nearly everything remotely related to humour and politics. Under this umbrella fall, amongst other things, political satire, cartooning, satirical TV shows, humour on internet forums, humorous political communication, and stand-up comedy.[5] As mentioned earlier, most research into politicians' use of humour has mostly been done from a response-side, addressing how audiences or comedians respond to politicians.

Luckily, some studies have been conducted about the politicians' own use of humour. Most empirical studies regarding this subject originate in the discipline of political communication. Communication theorists demonstrate that politicians contrastingly predominantly utilise an aggressive—deprecating—form of humour, while audience responses tend to favour a more inclusive affiliative style of humour (Mendiburo-Seguel et al., 2023, pp. 25-49; Stewart, 2011, pp. 201-222). The theory behind these styles comes from psychologist Rod Martin. He presented a theory of four humour styles, namely aggressive, affiliative, self-promoting, and self-defeating humour (Martin et al., 2003). Aggressive humour occurs when the speaker ridicules the target, whereas with self-defeating humour the speaker themselves becomes the target (i.e., they ridicule themselves). Both styles resemble Patrick Stewart's model of self-deprecatory (self-defeating) and other-deprecatory (aggressive) humour (Stewart, 2011). The observation that aggressive humour is primarily utilised by politicians (Chilean and American ones in these cases) seems to corroborate the classical rhetoricians' view that humour is a rhetorical weapon grounded in vicious contempt. Some studies, however, question the reliability of aggressive humour in Martin's model, pointing out that its interpretation is highly context-dependent (Ruch & Heintz, 2016, p. 449). I will nonetheless use Martin's model of humour styles, including aggressive humour, for the data analysis as it still provides a widely used intuitive model to differentiate various styles of humour.[6] One concern might be that critiquing a target is inherently aggressive, thus making satire necessarily an aggressive humour style. Strikingly, this interpretation is likely correct. Phiddian argues (2019) that political satire draws on the emotions of contempt, anger and disgust. Political satire is a highly contested subject (e.g., Holm, 2023) and is primarily described as a phenomenon to attack politicians, not as a tool used *by* politicians. This is why HPR is a practical concept to study politicians and humour.

Recently, philosophers have also begun to investigate the political role of humour. One relevant example is Zoe Walker's work on political joking (2023). Walker argues that political joking is mainly used with two goals in mind: to deflect responsibility and to persuade voters. When the latter, she argues—and there is empirical evidence to back it up—humour does not weaken the political message. Empirical research conducted by Verhulsdonk et al. (2021, p. 3898) concluded the following about the audience reception of politicians' humour: "when in doubt, be funny". With regard to the former claim—that political joking deflects responsibility—many humour theorists have also researched this topic. They have shown how white supremacist groups online advocate their agenda through humour and invite their followers to retain a seemingly light-hearted tone (Billig, 2001; Greene, 2019; McSwiney & Sengul, 2024; Sinokki, 2025). The neo-Nazi forum *The Daily Stormer* even promoted this rhetorical advice to their contributors: "The tone of the site should be light. Most people are not comfortable with material that comes across as vitriolic, raging, nonironic hatred. The

[5] For example, some notable studies into the reception and consequences of late-night television and satire are Baumgartner & Morris (2008), Hmielowski et al. (2011), and Becker (2011).

[6] This does not mean that HPR could not benefit from other humour detection methods such as comic styles.

unindoctrinated should not be able to tell if we are joking or not" (May & Feldman, 2019, pp. 26-27). Transgressive racist jokes appear (to some) to be more benign than explicit racist utterances. And when using racist humour, the speaker could always argue "it was just a joke".

While jokes are an essential part of humour or playfulness in general, we should also aim to look beyond the 'joke'. Holm argues that critical humour research should also include social context, laughter, and other forms of humour besides joking (Holm, 2022, pp. 355-358). While Holm (2022) provides an argument for political humour as a form of cultural production, I will focus on related forms of humour and joking to analyse HPR specifically. Trolling, for instance, falls under this category.[7] Trolling predominantly implies deceiving your target by provoking them with a transgressive remark. The troll's purpose is to elicit a strong emotional response, which in the troll's mind confirms their political righteousness (Lieback, 2019, pp. 9-10). Academics have mainly researched Alt-Right trolls online. These Alt-Right trolls provoke a 'liberal' with remarks like "there are only two genders". Clearly, in such instances – besides more apolitical trolling – the practice is often deeply rooted in political ideology. Most trolls seek to attack the victim's political ideologies and emotional sensitivities. This aggressive form of political rhetoric is theoretically interesting since trolling is not a means to persuade the target. Rather, it appears to function as a means to persuade the troll's friends, onlookers, and perhaps themselves of their political righteousness. Classical rhetoricians similarly regarded ridicule and laughter as tools of persuasion and exclusion. Both trolling and ridicule are strong persuasive tools, although the persuasion is aimed towards their in-group rather than the intended target of the troll. How or whether politicians use trolling has not yet systemically been researched (with notable exceptions like Merrin, 2018 and Connolly, 2022) which is surprising, since many popular news articles have dubbed some right-wing politicians like Trump as trolls (e.g., Silver, 2015).

Additionally, following Holm (2022), we ought to look at other factors beyond the joke such as playfulness or performance.[8] Regarding performance, the most apparent example of Trump's HPR is the prototypical Trump rally. According to Johannes Voelz, the Trump rally functions as a "politico-aesthetic order without any room for dissenting opinions or compromise" (Voelz, 2019, pp. 261-262), thus presenting strong "us versus them" mechanism. Through these rallies, Trump and his supporters are placed in opposition to the Democrats and "fake news media", which relates to Kuipers' discussion of humour creating a social boundary between the people who laugh and the people who do not (Kuipers, 2009, p. 219). In 2022, Yagmur Karakaya and Penny Edgel examined the "us versus them" mechanism further by arguing that the Trump rally is a mix of stand-up comedy (i.e., ridiculing or roasting the Other) and an American sports event (i.e., winning against the other). These scholars highlight the role of stand-up comedy in Trump's political rhetoric and performance. Trump's political rhetoric has been analysed in many ways, though, as mentioned before, his humour has not yet been carefully studied. Nevertheless, some studies have demonstrated—often indirectly—the significance of Trump's HPR. For instance, theoretical tools inspired by performative wrestling or carnival have been employed to better understand the aesthetic and rhetorical attractiveness of the Trump movement (e.g., Surowiec, 2021; Moon, 2022; Gaufman, 2018; 2024). Often, these theories touch upon how humour and especially laughter play a large role in Trump's rhetorical appeal. By going beyond the literal joke, even while analysing political jokes, they pave the way for contextualising these theories into my notion of HPR.

Overall, research on political humour, or rather politicians' use of humour, shows us that indeed HPR seems to be primarily aggressive and arguably very effective—just as classical

[7] Holm (2022) however argues for a flexible account of humour not as a fixed historical form of a joke which he tries to address with critical aesthetics of Jacques Ranciere and Raynold William's cultural materialism.

[8] Holm (2022) does not mention playfulness or performance specifically. I mean by following Holm's advice that we should analyse jokes not as the only factor in play.

rhetoricians would have argued. Political joking, performed by politicians or others, is also used as a form of responsibility deflection, which allows politicians to claim retroactively (whether explicitly or implicitly) that it was just a joke. And although not much has been said about how politicians use humour, other theories and concepts (in this case around Trump) closely relate to political humour and provide useful insights.

2.3. Media spectacle and HPR

Why is aggressive political humour so effective, if people seem largely to appreciate a milder (affiliative) style of humour in their politicians? Philosophical and empirical theories about the role of the media and spectacle help us address this question.

In critical theory, the concept of spectacle is often used to describe how the functions of mediated public discourse and how digital modern life, especially political life, is dominated by spectacular and sensational news and images. Douglas Kellner (2017) developed the concept of Master of Media Spectacle to understand the electoral successes of U.S. Presidents Donald Trump and Barack Obama. As Kellner writes:

> Media constructs present events which disrupt ordinary and habitual flows of information, and which become popular stories which capture the attention of the media and the public, and circulate through broadcasting networks, the Internet, social networking, smart phones, and other new media and communication technologies.
>
> (Kellner, 2017, p. 75)

Kellner (2017) argues that Obama and Trump both in their own way had mastered these media spectacles by creating disruptions and producing literal headlines and "breaking news". Kellner borrows the concept from the situationist Guy Debord, who first introduced it in *Society of the Spectacle* (1967). Debord describes how the commodity has come to dominate social life, with consumerism and commodity fetishism infiltrating both public and private spheres. Debord provides a Marxist critique of the alienation of modern life, arguing that mediated spectacles present indirect representations of lived reality. Though the broader theoretical dimensions of spectacle go beyond the scope of this essay, spectacle nonetheless offers a theoretical framework for understanding why aggressive sensational humour is promoted and reproduced in mediated political discourse. This should be self-evident as the media seek to maximise profits through increased viewer engagement. Sensational negative communication tends to capture more attention, higher engagement and, consequently, greater profit.

Empirical research has largely corroborated such an assumption. In general, research on Twitter and other social media platforms demonstrates that the dynamics (e.g., algorithms) on these platforms tend to make their users 'angrier' and actively encourage negative aggressive communication towards out-groups (e.g., Brady et al., 2021, Rathje et al., 2021). Notably, studies on trolling show that negativity is significantly related to greater viewer engagement (Sun & Shen, 2021). Mendiburo-Seguel (2023, p. 41) was puzzled by the discrepancy between the observation that his respondents preferred affiliative humour while most politicians used aggressive humour. He hypothesised—and I would agree—that politicians use aggressive humour because sensational negativity tracks better in the media. Nevertheless, there is also empirical research claiming that, media strategies aside, humans prefer aggressive humour in some cases (Ortigueira-Sánchez & Cárdenas-Egúsquiza, 2022).

3. Empirical contribution to HPR

3.1. Data collection

As noted above, my goal is to test these theoretical and empirical claims about how Ocasio-Cortez and Trump use HPR. Most empirical studies on the subject used large samples of politicians. While this is important too, I believe that it is also worthwhile to research major politicians, who are arguably 'masters of media spectacle' since large samples possibly downplay the popularity of these major politicians. For instance, major politicians (e.g., Ocasio-Cortez and Trump) may use significantly more humour than most senators and congressmen. Ocasio-Cortez and Trump both have a vast number of social-media followers. Besides Obama and Biden, they are the most followed politicians on X/Twitter. They are also highly visible (pop) cultural figures. Many memes, satires, cartoons, and news articles have been made about both Ocasio-Cortez and Trump. Moreover, both politicians seem to attract their followers and supporters with an informal, sometimes humorous rhetoric. Critically, Ocasio-Cortez and Trump are also political and cultural opposites: A young progressive woman of colour against an old conservative white man. They are arguably the faces and voices of their own political movement; respectively progressive (Green New Deal) Democrats and MAGA Republicans.

I have collected a selection of statements by Ocasio-Cortez and Trump, produced online on X/Twitter and 'offline' during campaign rallies. May 2019 was chosen for the data collection because both politicians were in office and both held political rallies (which are rarer for Ocasio-Cortez than Trump). These texts were coded on whether they were humorous and which humour style they displayed. Trump's speeches come from two "Make America Great Again" rallies at Panama City Beach, Florida on the 8th of May, and in Montoursville, Pennsylvania on the 24th of May. These were selected because these were the only "MAGA" rallies in May 2019. Both of Ocasio-Cortez's speeches were delivered in the context of the Green New Deal: a set of proposals aimed to tackle climate change and economic inequality in the United States. The selected speech of Ocasio-Cortez was a Green New Deal rally at Howard University in Washington on the 13th of May. Tweets were scraped from the internet using a Python script and an Academic Twitter API. The speeches are collected through archives on CSPAN and The American Presidency Project at the University of California Santa Barbara. In Atlas.ti, I coded these texts through an iterative process. Humour detection was based on Marta Dynel's (2018) and Paul Simpson's work (2003) on the relation between humour and the rhetorical devices of hyperbole (inflation), meiosis (deflation), irony, and metaphor. Since these methods possibly omit contextual or intertextual cues from humour detection, I used an intercoder agreement (ICA) to check whether other coders would reasonably agree with my coding of humorous texts. Two coders got access to the code script (with codes based on the rhetorical devices of Dynel 2018, Simpson 2003 and Martin's humour styles) and blindly coded parts of the same text I did with the same code script. The ICA corroborates to what extent the codes by different coders (three in this case) overlapped. The ICA uses Krippendorff alpha binary coefficient to calculate this statistical overlap between multiple coders.

3.2. Results

Table 1. Results of Humour Styles Coding

Humor Styles	Ocasio-Cortez X (n=181, h=53)	Trump X (n=317, h=26)	Trump speeches (h=146)
Affiliative	8 (15,1%)	1 (3,8%)	35 (24%)
Aggressive	38 (71,7%)	24 (92,3%)	60 (41%)
Self-Defeating	4 (7,5%)	0	5 (3%)
Self-Promoting	4 (7,5%)	4 (19,2%)	30 (20%)

The collected texts were analysed based on the quantity and quality (i.e., humour styles) of humour they possessed. I will argue that the results show—often in accordance with the literature—how HPR is primarily aggressive, deflective, a means but also an end, and a deceptive tool. For each element of HPR, I will provide examples from the collected data. These examples are sometimes put in a larger context wherein I analyse the relevant uptake and intertextuality of a joke.

Our results underwent a successful intercoder reliability test. The global alpha binary of the codes combined was 0.842. Two important codes (humour and aggressive humour) resulted in an alpha binary of 0.770 and 0.733. The most obvious result is that both Trump and Ocasio-Cortez use a considerable amount of humour, albeit in different ways. Trump uses significantly more humour during speeches than on Twitter (9%) while Ocasio-Cortez does not use humour in the analysed speech, but uses a substantial quantity of humour on Twitter (29%). In totality, the percentage of humour in Ocasio-Cortez's tweets is 29,2% in May 2019 (h=humorous tweets divided by n= total of all tweets = h/n = 53/181). What stands out is that Ocasio-Cortez uses considerably more humour on Twitter than Trump. Only around 8 percent of Trump's tweets were deemed humorous while Trump's speeches were highly humorous, with more than 145 humorous instances in two hours of speech (1.2 humorous moments every minute). The contrast between Trump's Twitter and speech humour is striking. Ocasio-Cortez's analysed speech only had two humorous moments in half an hour. Due to this (almost) entire absence of humour in Ocasio-Cortez's speeches, we left the results out.

Compared to earlier research on politicians' use of humour on Twitter, Ocasio-Cortez employs significantly more than the average 8 percent while Trump is quite close to it (e.g., Mendiburo-Seguel, 2023).

4. The nature of HPR in American political discourse

In this section, I will further conceptualise HPR as manifested in American political discourse, while expanding on certain trends or consistencies in HPR. By trends and consistencies, I mean that—in most cases—HPR is manifested in this manner. Consequently, I do not claim to identify any sufficient or necessary conditions or general rules on how HPR is manifested. I show, instead, how HPR primarily manifests itself in aggressive, deflective, deceptive and affective ways. While the quantitative data analysis already identified certain patterns in humour styles, such as aggression, these findings warrant a deeper contextual interpretation. A case-study approach helps to further dive into (otherwise neglected) trends, especially the patterns of deception and deflection in HPR. These close readings of certain texts from the data collection are conducted with the help of the previously mentioned theories from section 2.

4.1. Aggressiveness

As expected, both Trump and Ocasio-Cortez primarily use an aggressive style of humour. However, Trump's humour during speeches is far less aggressive than online. As demonstrated by the data, the humour in Trump's speeches is aggressive 41 percent of the time (as for the rest of the humour styles, 30 percent is self-promoting, 24 percent affiliative, and only 3 percent is self-defeating humour) while his Twitter is 92 percent aggressive humour. These results align with previous research regarding the aggressiveness of politicians' use of humour online (e.g., Brady et al., 2021, Rathje et al., 2021). It also seems that online humour is more aggressive than 'offline'. Nevertheless, aggressive humour appears to be the most used style, on Twitter and during rallies.

Aggressive humour typically targets rival politicians or parties through ridicule. Mocking a target often incorporates racist or sexist remarks, exclusively in the case of Trump, since (unsurprisingly) the collected data did not reveal any racist or sexist jokes by Ocasio-Cortez. An example of aggressive racist humour occurred during Trump's campaign rally in Panama Beach, Florida, when he discussed [ISIS?]:

> These people are stone-cold crazy. And it doesn't mean they don't go around blowing up a store and blowing up some. They are just nuts (laughter) […] but still, still it's a mental condition. These people are sick, they're crazy, they're crazy, so always keep your eyes open, be careful, and let law enforcement know when you see a kook (laughter).

Trump ridiculed ISIS followers by using hyperbolic language and intonation changes. Audience members laughed twice during these remarks. Trump's remarks exemplify what Simon Weaver calls *liquid racism* (2011). Liquid racism is a form of racism that is difficult to capture, often cloaked in humour, and requires reflexivity on the part of the reader or listener. When discussing the supposed craziness of ISIS terrorists, Trump eventually utters, "keep your eyes open and let law enforcement know when you see a kook". When Trump says this, the listener or reader requires this reflexivity Weaver talks about. One must ask: what does Trump mean by 'kook' and how could we spot one? Logically, one cannot spot an Islamist terrorist by facial features—only if he has literal bombs around his waist. So, implicitly Trump argues that you can spot a kook by recognising facial features, for instance, when a Muslim has a big beard. This is, of course, racist. Audience members laughed at Trump's remarks, although Trump also seemed serious while amplifying stereotypes about Islamic terrorists (blowing up stores, etc.). Remarkably, this racist statement did not get any traction in the media. It serves as a key example of how racist humour (and HPR in general) can be elusive and difficult to detect.

4.2. Deflection

Once again, my data demonstrates the prevalence of an aggressive humour style for both politicians, and the literature suggests this humour style implies an inherent deflective mechanism. Part of what makes racist humour—or HPR in general—so elusive is the ability to deflect responsibility. This deflective ability gives humour significant rhetorical power, particularly for extremist political groups, as explained earlier. Joke deflection is not only used in cases of transgressive racist or sexist humour. In fact, some people even argue that this tool is inherent in every humorous instance, especially aggressive humour. As stated by Mendiburo-Seguel (2023), aggressive humour communicates two messages: 1) an explicit offensive message towards their target; and 2) an implicit message that 'it was just a joke'. This meta-communicative message is based on a cultural belief in comic innocence or to the related notion of cavalier humour beliefs (Hodson & Prusaczyk, 2021). Zijp argues (2024) that, in contemporary Western societies, humour is seen as something innocent, and that joking about something or someone is not inherently wrong, because 'it was just a joke'. Most often, this

belief in comic innocence is highlighted in mediated cultural scandals about topics like free speech, cancel culture, and racism (to be sure, in some circumstances indeed a remark is just a joke and should not be extensively scrutinised, though these moral dilemmas are beyond the scope of this essay).

These deflections of responsibility in humour are not always implicit but also explicit. Trump and his former Cabinet members have frequently defended certain transgressive remarks as jokes, such as their making light of killing somebody on Fifth Avenue, roughing up criminals, Covid testing, and locking up opponents. Surprisingly enough, my data collection also showed how not only Trump but also Ocasio-Cortez defended a tweet as a joke. In the tweet shown below, Ocasio-Cortez defended her "it's like 10 people" remark as a combination of dry humour and sarcasm. Afterward, Ocasio-Cortez ridiculed the GOP's apparent humourlessness by comparing them to Dwight from the TV-Series *The Office* (see figures 1a and b below)

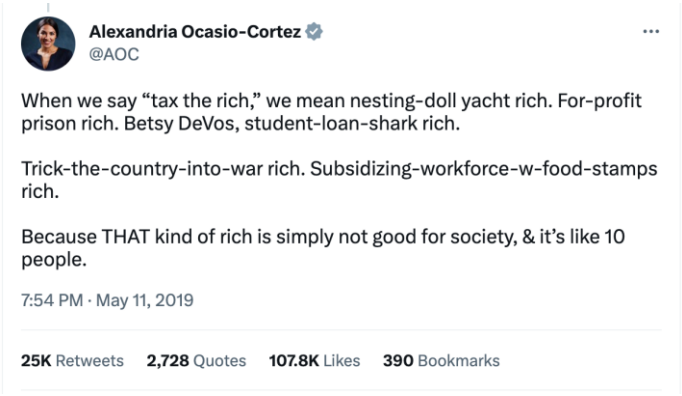

Figure 1a. Screenshot of Ocasio-Cortez's tweet

Figure 1b. Screenshot of Ocasio-Cortez's tweet

4.3. Deception

Joke deflection can easily evolve into deception. Though Ocasio-Cortez defended her "it's like 10 people" as dry sarcasm, one might nonetheless object to such a characterisation. While Ocasio-Cortez obviously overstated the meaning of her message, it does seem that she genuinely meant what she tweeted. She even quoted Max Kennerly, who defended Ocasio-Cortez's "it's like 10 people" remark as being factually correct since the fourteen richest families are worth more than 60% of all Americans combined. It thus seems that Ocasio-Cortez deceives her audience when she implies that it was only a joke, since Ocasio-Cortez is also serious about her playful remark. On a more problematic level, the same issue comes up with many of Trump's jokes, particularly during campaign rallies about extending his term limits. An example occurred during the Montoursville rally:

> Now we're gonna have a second time [presidential election], we're gonna have another one, and then we'll drive them crazy, get ready? [cheers and applause] And maybe, if we really like it a lot and if things keep goin' like they're goin', we'll go and we'll do what we have to do. We'll do a three and four or five, but they'll have tomorrow. We knew he—oh, I don't want to say. [laughter]

The same kind of remarks were made during the Panama Beach City rally:

> Now if we want to drive them crazy, I'll say in 10 years, they'll go crazy. See he is a despot. He is a despot. Well, 10 or 14, let's see whatever we like, right? Watch, it will be headlines tomorrow. Donald Trump wants to break constitution. [laughter]

These transgressive remarks are forms of trolling wherein Trump provokes the liberal media and Democrats. In the first quotation above, he uses the rhetorical device of aposiopesis by humorously censoring himself for saying something transgressive. Generally, theorists agree that deception is a necessary condition for trolling to occur (e.g., Dynel, 2016, pp. 358-360). Trolls deceive the target by trying to provoke them with an outrageous statement. In these instances, Trump deceives the targeted liberals and laughs together with his supporters in the audience. Nonetheless, I would argue that the deception does not stop there. Consciously or subconsciously, Trump also deceives his own supporters who are laughing at his remarks. The supporters cannot infer to a reasonable degree whether Trump really wanted to be a dictator or not. On one hand, these remarks are clearly hyperbolic—and perhaps ironic—jokes to provoke the other side. On the other hand, even before the Capitol storming, Trump clearly showed some genuine admiration for dictators and ambiguity around whether he would accept the outcome of the 2016 election (Axelrod, 2022). This inherent ambiguity in Trump's remarks makes it, even now, very difficult to determine Trump's true intentions.[9] Additionally, humour—particularly irony—is often suffused with ambiguity. This means that there will always be people who do not get the joke. In the case of these dictator remarks, it could be the liberals who do not get the joke but also Trump supporters themselves. Strikingly, many conspiracy theories, such as QAnon, started off as a sort of ironic deceptive play (e.g., Davies, 2020), though, over time, many MAGA supporters came to take this joke seriously. In another work, I argue (Prakken, 2026) that in these sorts of deceptive jokes, Trump also deceives and radicalises himself in a process. I call dark absorption whereby playful actions become increasingly more serious.

Not only Trump trolls and deceives in his HPR. Ocasio-Cortez, too, frequently utilises trolling. An example is when Ocasio-Cortez made fun of religiously conservative Republicans when she introduced a bill against predatory interest rates.

[9] To deal with Trump's ambiguous speech in relation to the Capitol storming, constitutional law researchers have asserted for the employment of overt acts to contextualise Trump's ambiguously inciting speech on January 6th. An overt act would be Trump wanting to drive back to the Capitol instead of the West Wing or not calling the National Guard on the day (Rozenshtein Shugerman, (2022, pp. 275-314).

Figure 2. Screenshot of Ocasio-Cortez's tweet

Ocasio-Cortez deceives the reader by ironically writing "looking forward to the religious right uphold their principles + sign onto my bill" and provokes the Republicans by ending with "unless of course they're only invoking religion to punish women + queer people." While some readers could misinterpret Ocasio-Cortez's irony, it is generally recognisable as humour. In most cases, Trump's deception is more present because it involves cases in which he himself is ambiguous. I refer to this phenomenon as pre-situational ambiguity. Just like a suicidal person's jokes about killing themselves, Trump is ambiguous about democratic norms. Therefore, when he jokes about them, it is unclear what he means for the onlookers and perhaps himself too (Prakken, 2026).

4.4. Means and an end

The last conceptualised pattern of HPR deals with the means and end of humorous persuasion. Clearly, Ocasio-Cortez and Trump also utilise humour—especially aggressive humour—as a way to persuade onlookers of their political righteousness. All the previous examples can be read as persuasive messages. In HPR, persuasion is pursued through ridicule. The implicit message is: "don't vote for this party/politician because they are laughably absurd" (e.g., Ocasio-Cortez's tweet that "Republicans are like Dwight from The Office" or Trump's dictator jokes that imply that 'liberal media are so stupid they believe everything I say!'). These implicit messages rely on the inherent *logos* of their HPR, which determines what is laughable and what isn't. Furthermore, I would argue that using humour as a politician is not only a means but also an end in itself. Politicians, especially elected officials, have not always used humour. A study into humour during presidential debates, for instance, showed that, in 1960 and 1976, the nominees did not make any jokes (Rhea, 2012). Recently, particularly populist politicians (e.g., Javier Miliei, Javier Bolsonaro, Geert Wilders) seem to use high amounts of humour, although—as already mentioned—research regarding this phenomenon is seriously lacking. In this sense, even using humour as a politician is meant to send a clear message of informality and anti-political correctness. This relates to the *ethos*, i.e., persuading the audience through one's (informal) personality. Just like deflection, it seems that this implicit message is inherent in

every joke or humorous remark. An example is when Trump laughed about shooting migrants at the border during the Panama Beach City rally:

> How do you stop these people [illegal border immigrants] you can't there's not [somebody in the crowd yells: shoot them down] that's only in the Panhandle you can get away with that stuff (crowd laughs) only in the Panhandle.

Trump appears to use irony in his mockery when he says "only in the Panhandle you can get away with that stuff." He mocks the audience but does so in an affiliative manner. They are all laughing together about their shared transgressive playfulness and racism—or, at the very least, xenophobia. In addition to serving as another example of deflection, Trump's remark weaponises *pathos* to persuade his audience through affect. Trump's laughter and response were heavily scrutinised in the media. *The New York Times* published an article arguing that his anti-immigration rhetoric led to a mass shooting in El Paso Texas by a Trump supporter. This example demonstrates how Trump's humour and laughter is clearly aimed towards informal bonding with his supporters. At a Trump rally, humour is used by both the audience and Trump. During the Montoursville rally, a Trump supporter dressed in a border wall suit was invited on stage by Trump amidst widespread laughter. These shared humorous moments seem to create a strong bond between Trump supporters and the President. As mentioned above, I theorise in another essay (Prakken, 2026) that these shared humorous moments also radicalise the Trump movement. With every transgressive remark, the agenda is pushed more to the extremes. Serious topics such as democratic values, war heroes, or dictators become less serious and even playful for the Trumpists. Although this process probably does not occur during Ocasio-Cortez's interactions with her public, this goal of informality also applies to her. Previous studies into Ocasio-Cortez already described how her followers feel a strong bond with her, and not with the Democratic Party *per se* (Matos, 2019). In these ways, humour is used as an end to form a strong bond by laughing together, *ipso facto* leading to more polarisation when political groups are laughing together *at* other political groups. This end is achieved by all three modes of persuasion present in the HPR examples. Every example of HPR indicates a certain social *logos*, implies an *ethos* of the speaker, and aims to reach an affective response (*pathos*). The affective dimension of HPR, *pathos,* is reflected in the prevalence of aggressive and affiliative humour observed in the data. Both styles indicate aggression, affective bonding, or both (e.g., bonding through attacking a mutual enemy). Aggressive humour and affiliative humour arguably evoke the strongest emotions since affiliative humour is the most emotionally appreciated by a general crowd (Stewart, 2011; Mendiburo-Seguel, 2023) while aggressive humour creates a feeling of amused superiority over the target and shame or anger for the intended target of ridicule.
HPR seems to capture four elements that are, to some extent interrelated:

1. HPR manifests itself in an aggressive form. Just as earlier rhetoricians argued, humour is used as a rhetorical means to ridicule and belittle one's opponents. The empirical data also demonstrates that Trump and Ocasio-Cortez primarily used aggressive humour, though far more so online than offline.
2. The second element is the deflection of responsibility, which is—according to some authors—already inherent to aggressive humour.
3. Besides this implicit deflective nature, I also showed some explicit deflective communication (e.g., "it was just a joke") by Ocasio-Cortez. This deflective nature also translates into the deceptive element of HPR. The empirical data demonstrate how both Ocasio-Cortez and Trump use the deceptive rhetoric of trolling. In some cases, this could lead to a deception of their own political base. I even claimed that sometimes even Trump seemingly does not know whether he is serious when joking about extending his term limit.

4. Finally, HPR is not only a means of persuasion but also an end, in the shape of informal bonding. The Trump rallies, but also Ocasio-Cortez's informal jokes on Twitter, result in in-group bonding through shared laughter and play. This shared laughter is often done in spite of another person or group, due to the aggressive nature of HPR. In producing this effect, HPR involves all three modes of persuasion (i.e., logos, ethos and pathos).

5. Counter arguments

Not everybody will agree with my conceptualisation of *humorous political rhetoric (HPR)*. I presume that the main counterargument would contend that political humour and satire are traditionally known as democratic goods and forces for social justice. Political cartoons, for instance, have helped dilating the lens of acceptable public speech. Still to this day, political ridicule is one of the most feared and prosecuted phenomena by dictators (e.g., George & Liew, 2021). It is also apparent that Ocasio-Cortez is using humour to fight for social justice. Why then would my conceptualisation ignore social justice and humour's democratic potential? Moreover, another (more technical) objection could be that my empirical research is only based on two politicians with extreme positions on the US political spectrum—which might not be a reliable measure of how HPR is manifested worldwide.

As a response, I would first concede that my conceptualisation of HPR does not aim to predict how, always and at any time, HPR might manifest itself. Instead, I have discussed how HPR is predominantly manifested in the two US politicians that are most widely followed on social media today. Based on this, I argued that HPR (as expressed by my case studies) does not seem to be the best means to promote fair and rational democratic debate. Moreover, a close analysis of HPR as employed by two major politicians, instead of a sample of a thousand politicians, offers important insights into two "masters of media spectacle". Both Trump and Ocasio-Cortez, with their millions of followers, reflect what communication is likely to go viral in American political discourse. Although analysing a broader sample of American politicians could reveal an overall lower humour usage, such an approach would obscure the centrality of humorous rhetoric for these two very visible politicians. By focusing on Ocasio-Cortez and Trump, this study underscores the political and cultural impact of humour among the most influential politicians. I also want to stress that HPR is solely humour used by politicians, while political humour could encapsulate satirical shows or comedians too. Perhaps in the latter group, there is a larger presence of humour as a glue for constructive deliberation as claimed by Basu, or even as a force for social justice. As Robert Phiddian argues (2019), satire's main function is not necessarily to achieve social justice, but rather to serve as a (potentially healthy) collective outlet for emotions such as contempt, anger, and disgust.

6. Conclusion

I would like to stress that the present analysis of HPR in the US context comes with several implications. Most urgently, there is a lack of literature about politicians' humour even though it appears to be important for both Ocasio-Cortez's and Trump's rhetoric. Both Ocasio-Cortez and Trump make regular use of humour in their political rhetoric. For Trump, humour seems to be a key feature of his rallies, while Ocasio-Cortez uses it primarily on Twitter. If we want to understand Trumpism in particular, we ought to pay more attention to humour and play. As argued earlier, I contend that HPR radicalises both Ocasio-Cortez and Trump. With Trump, many problematic things such as his "dictator" or "lock her up" remarks started as a joke and seemed to progress to something more serious later on. Only by looking at how play, humour,

or irony are manifested politically can we fully understand—and hopefully counter—populist far-right movements worldwide. My earlier example, of how the neo-Nazi website *Daily Stormer* promotes its message through irony and playfulness, speaks volumes. This also suggests that we need more research into how HPR can function as a tool for radicalisation. Thousands of essays have been written about Trump. However, as of now, we hardly have a dozen studies that directly deal with how Trump himself uses humour (e.g., Davies, 2022; Gaufman & Ganesh, 2024; Goldstein et al., 2020; Kuipers, 2026; Prakken, 2026) This study recommends more research into Trump's humour, otherwise this seemingly vital feature of Trump's rhetoric is likely to be overlooked.

As indicated by other studies as well, HPR primarily occurs as an aggressive style of humour. This means that HPR in its most prevalent form fails to be a useful tool for constructive deliberation. Rather, HPR functions as the very opposite—namely, as a phenomenon that structurally undermines constructive deliberation by ridiculing their targets. The rhetoricians of old seem to be right when they claim that laughter or ridicule is a practical but also morally problematic tool. Not only the aggressive nature, but also the deflective and deceptive tendencies of HPR, contribute to a political discourse that structurally denies responsibility while deceiving political opponents and even their own followers. In this view, HPR should be studied as a key factor to recent political polarisation and failing deliberation across worldwide democracies. Especially within the context of media spectacle, we need more research on if and why the most reprehensible and undemocratic forms of HPR are the most engaging.

We should also investigate the moral status of this phenomenon. Could HPR ever be morally praiseworthy or at least permissible? Of course, HPR, especially in the case of Ocasio-Cortez, seems to be a means to important ends like social justice. However, her use of HPR primarily leads to unconstructive deliberation. We could thus theorise whether using humour as a politician almost necessarily leads to a dirty-hands problem. By evaluating the moral status of HPR, we can get a better sense of the ethical responsibilities of humour in politics. How can we think of ethical ways of using humour in the current system, which mainly promotes aggressive and negative communication?

Perhaps we need to agree with Butler (2024) and move beyond the notion that humour is an instrument for constructive deliberation or social justice. In the context of HPR, humour operates as a force that disrupts or even reserves those aims. Humour as used by politicians is generally a force for unconstructive deliberation at the very least and is undemocratic at the far end of such a spectrum. As such, it appears to have become the weakest force for social justice rather than the strongest. I can of course only speak of HPR, not of political satire or stand-up comedians. Nevertheless, humour scholars acknowledge the presence of a rising far-right dominance in these fields of political humour (Marx and Sienkiewicz, 2022). Future studies about the relationship between HPR and political satire could also be of interest here. Some research has already shown how Trump deals with satire about him (Becker, 2020), namely by turning laughter aimed at him into a political weapon, leaving liberal satire feeble (Giamario, 2022; Basu, 2024). We must therefore emphasise and research how humour has become the weapon of the far-right. Future research into how HPR is manifested in different cultures, politicians and styles might provide us with some answers. Inductive claims about the nature of HPR might be proven wrong. Naturally, exceptions may exist in which politicians use humour primarily in a morally praiseworthy manner. However, such cases appear to be rare.

Acknowledgements

Versions of this paper have been presented at different conferences. This paper was presented at the Humor and its Political Affordances Today Workshop of the University of Amsterdam (31 May 2024), virtually at the International Society for Humor Studies (ISHS) on 20 April 2024, the HACIDA conference in Ghent on 30 November 2023, and virtually at the Humour and Power Conference in Gqeberha, South Africa on 20 June 2023. I am grateful to the ISHS for awarding this paper with the DANYS Young Scholar Award. Finally, I want to thank my supervisors dr. Daphne Brandenburg and dr. Alberto Godioli for their invaluable support and feedback.

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