

# **This *is* a Laughing Matter: Stand-Up Comedy Tactics and their Facilitation of Routine Creation**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The rise of political polarization in America has contributed to a demand for alternative forms of political discourse, notably political stand-up comedy. This shift toward comedic expression in politics is attributed to humor's accessibility in presenting divergent perspectives. Previous research has primarily dissected political stand-up comedy through the content analysis of individual comedian's routines, without addressing how comedians' tactics can then translate to original routine creation. Filling this gap is pivotal to increasing political stand-up comedy creation. Thus, this study integrates data from a content analysis across multiple comedians into the production of an original political stand-up comedy routine. By doing so, it offers novel insight into how preferred stand-up tactics can foster the development of original political stand-up comedy routines. The findings indicate that comedians frequently employ tactics that invoke a sense of superiority over a third party, and that implementing these tactics does facilitate the creative process.

## **Introduction**

Hitting the stage in the late 19th to early 20th century, stand-up comedy rapidly gained popularity as a form of American entertainment (Zoglin, 2023). Stand-up comedy, or stand-up, is defined as a comical and verbal performance directed towards an audience (Brodie, 2008), and through its history, its purpose has varied from strictly comical to politically purposeful. Mort Sahl, for example, set the stage for political commentary in comedy by addressing politicians' hypocrisy (Weber, 2021). Inspired by Sahl, Black comedians in the 1960s, such as Dick Gregory, used stand-up to ease racial tensions, an unorthodox contribution to the Civil Rights Movement (Ushe, 2023). Evidently, as stand-up has progressed in the media, its socio-political relevance has as well, meaning that it likely has a place in the modern political sphere. But where do American politics currently stand?

According to Fluit (2020), American politics are "polarized," with political polarization more than doubling between 2008 and 2016. Political polarization means that political parties in America have adopted a heightened "us versus them" mindset, which sets a preface for increased distrust (McCoy & Press, 2022). Stand-up comedy is relevant to this polarization because it may serve as a method of relieving it (Harris, 2009). By addressing political issues through stand-up, an alternative method of political discourse that varies from the traditional conversation comes to light. This may allow for a step away from political polarization and a step toward civility between political parties.

Yet despite the possible value of stand-up comedy to prevent polarization in an increasingly partisan world, little research into the process behind creating political stand-up comedy has been conducted. Thus, there is limited understanding surrounding how to incorporate rhetoric and politics into comedy. Perhaps a study which investigates the tactics stand-up comedians use in their routines to express their political opinions could provide more insight into the creation of stand-up comedy as an avenue for positive political discourse.

## The Conversation

### Current Political Atmosphere

Between 2008 and 2016, political polarization in the United States increased by a staggering 157% (Fluit, 2020). This term, “political polarization,” entails the “us versus them” mindset concerning political parties, resulting in increased distrust toward those with opposing beliefs (McCoy & Press, 2022) and the alignment of opinions around extremes (Parker, 2017).

In recent years, political discourse has reflected such polarization. For example, in the 2020 presidential debates, the two speaking candidates, Joseph Biden and Donald Trump, were characterized by informality, interruption, and disrespect towards the opposing party (Arellano & Metha, 2020). Mimicking their candidates, constituents are not only becoming increasingly polarized (Fluit, 2020), but are also currently more ideologically split than anytime in the last 50 years (DeSilver, 2022). The Pew Research Center (2014) furthered this research, explaining that the number of Republicans and Democrats averse to the opposing party has more than doubled since 1994. Yet, Parker (2017) contradicted the narrative of a partisan public, asserting the stance that the public remains moderate despite polarized political parties.

Although Parker’s findings contrast those of the aforementioned sources, each of the authors agree that the United States’ political sphere is facing partisan tensions. While the degree to which this is the case varies throughout the literature, political polarization is an issue addressed throughout the professional conversation. The need for an alternative method of political expression is apparent.

### Comedy as Successful Alternative Discourse

One such alternative for standard political discourse is comedy. In politics, a speaker may incorporate comedy into their message in order to appear approachable and increase exposure (Harris, 2009). Humor also creates an avenue in which speakers may contest their opponents without coming across harsh or negative. Minsky (1980) explained that this is the case because humor points out mistakes in a “conciliatory” manner, which is intended to make light of an opponent’s flaws rather than pinpoint them as a target of attack. As compared to the previously mentioned disrespect that characterizes modern political discourse (Arellano & Metha, 2020), comedy seems to have an appeasing, rather than aggravating, effect. Comedy also provides a counter-narrative to inflexible belief systems (Maqsood, 2021). Maqsood found that comedic content representing Muslim Americans’ experiences had a diminishing effect on Islamophobia in audiences. Thus, Maqsood suggested that comedy can counter opposing beliefs by providing approachable insight into contrasting perspectives. Once again, this bridge between points of view contrasts the “ideological split” born from standard political discourse (DeSilver, 2022), indicating that comedy may alleviate the polarization caused by standard political discourse.

However, Suttie (2017) disagreed with this stance, claiming that humor provides a more comfortable atmosphere for expressing prejudices that one would normally suppress. Suttie also went on to state that comedy contributes to polarization because it accentuates differences, which challenges the ideas put forth by Harris, Minsky, and Maqsood. Nevertheless, Suttie conceded that, in some regards, comedy does have potential as a successful method of alternative political discourse.

Thus, the professional conversation, although not whole-heartedly agreeing on the extent to which comedy functions as a form of successful alternative discourse, acknowledges that it can do so. However, few studies consider the specific tactics used to create comedy’s rhetorical appeal.

## Rhetorical Tactics

Considering the discussion surrounding both comedy and politics thus far, I studied the conversation concerning rhetorical tactics in both fields. First, I will address rhetorical tactics in politics, and then in comedy. Finally, I will discuss research surrounding *ad hominem*, a logical fallacy that frequently surfaced in the professional conversation.

### *Rhetorical Tactics in Politics*

Each of the studies about rhetorical tactics in politics addresses a list of tactics, examples of their usage, and their effectiveness in the field. The first is Kadim (2022), who analyzed Donald Trump's election campaign speeches to evaluate rhetorical tactics in the recent political atmosphere. Kadim found that Trump repeatedly used tactics such as Blame, Hyperbole, Implication, and Negative Comparison. However, Kadim derived these tactics from a larger list of discourse strategies created by Van Dijk (1992, 1995, 2006). Van Dijk's list of strategies included Presupposition, Appeals to Compassion, Statistics, Metaphors, Repetition, and Pronouns. Throughout the professional conversation, I found similarities in the mentioned techniques. For example, Voloshchuk and Usik (2018) had Pronouns, Metaphors, Hyperbole, Repetition, and Contrast in common with Kadim and Van Dijk. However, they also brought diverse findings to the conversation, such as Intertextuality and Disguised Assertions. Baciú (2010) built on these findings, also studying Disguised Assertions and Metaphors. In addition, Baciú contributed knowledge on Negative Argumentation, or argumentation with a negative connotation meant to undermine an opponent and strengthen one's own argument.

Holistically, the professional conversation identifies similar political rhetoric techniques. However, there are rhetorical tactics that go beyond the political sphere and are instead found in comedy.

### *Rhetorical Tactics in Comedy*

For the sake of this research, the discipline of comedy that I will focus on is stand-up comedy. Greene (2012) began the conversation on how stand-up comedians use persuasion techniques by detailing the three humor theories that are commonly accepted as rhetoric: Superiority, Incongruity, and Relief. Greene then explained that each of these theories resonate with the audience in a different way, convincing the audience to support and listen to the speaker. For example, the Superiority Theory in stand-up allows audiences to laugh with the comedian at a third party and take pleasure in others' humiliation. Doing so fulfills the audience's desire for triumph, so they support the comedian's stance. DeCamp (2015) elaborated on techniques for appealing to the audience, such as humanizing oneself, establishing vulnerability, and creating a tone of sincere rapport. Connecting to Greene and DeCamp, Heritage and Greatbatch (1986) introduced six rhetorical techniques with applications in both stand-up comedy and politics. Because of their findings' political use, Heritage and Greatbatch built on aforementioned sources, such as Kadim (2022) and Van Dijk (1992, 1995, 2006), as well. The six rhetorical tactics they contributed are Contrast, List, Puzzle-solution, Headline-punchline, Position Taking, and Pursuit. Rutter (1997), expanding on Heritage and Greatbatch's findings, compared each of the six methods' political and comedic application. Beyond this research, though, there are methods of persuasion not recognized as traditional "rhetorical tactics."

### *Ad Hominem*

Ad hominem-- the act of personally attacking an opponent, rather than his position-- is not considered a rhetorical tactic (Texas State University, 2019). Instead, it is a logical fallacy that is used in persuasive speech. Throughout the professional conversation surrounding conventional rhetorical tactics, researchers mentioned ad hominem just as frequently. Ad hominem is especially important to my research because of its increased prevalence since the 2016 presidential election (Patel et. al, 2023), which aligns with my research's time period

of study (2015-2023). While Patel and associates detailed how ad hominem has increased in fields ranging from science to law, Druckman and colleagues (2010) added that it has surfaced in politics as well.

Ad hominem's success is discussed in the professional field as well. Macagno (2013) asserted that ad hominem is a successful method of argumentation though it lacks logical soundness. Macagno even explained that speakers use ad hominem to target specific rhetorical objectives. However, Malloy and Pearson-Merkowitz (2016) disagreed, stating that positivity, rather than antagonism towards one's opponent, proves more appealing among audiences. Directly contesting Malloy and Pearson-Merkowitz, though, Heritage and Greatbatch (1986) showed that audiences are more likely to support attacks than constructivism.

Evidently, ad hominem as a method of rhetoric is relevant in the professional field. However, little research has been conducted into its usage as both a comedic and political device. While ad hominem is used to create rhetorical appeal, the conversation also highlights tactics that specifically generate comedic appeal. These are called comedy devices.

## Comedy Devices

Because my research studies stand-up comedy creation, it is important to understand the devices comedians use to establish humor in their routines. Berger (2017) set the preface for comedy devices by examining joke books, plays, comic books, novels, short stories, comic verse, and essays. He then developed a list of 45 devices based on his finding, which he sorted into four categories: Language, Logic, Identity, and Action. Mimicking Berger's humor typology, Heidari-Shahreza (2017) tailored it to stand-up comedy, rather than comedy as a whole. Heidari-Shahreza did so by catering Berger's work toward the audiovisual aspects of stand-up comedy. Together, both authors synthesize to create a comprehensive collection of comedy devices. However, neither source discusses the application of these devices in political stand-up comedy routines.

## Definitions

Definitions of the aforementioned rhetorical and comedic tactics, as well as of the following terms-- tactic, political party, stand-up comedy, comment, Trump Era (2015-2023), trending, handbook, and stand-up comedy bit-- are in Appendix C of this paper.

## Gap

Throughout the literature, research concerning the polarized state of American politics, rhetorical tactics, or comedic devices is present. However, research that finds a crossroads between all three areas of interest is limited. There is a deficit in the knowledge surrounding the comedic expression of political beliefs and the techniques used to create political stand-up comedy. Thus, my research will fill this gap, concentrating on which tactics stand-up comedians frequently employed and how they can assist in further routine creation. My research question is as follows: What tactics did stand-up comedians use to comment on the Republican political party in America during the Trump Era (2015-2023), and how can using these tactics facilitate the creation of further political stand-up routines?

## Methods

### Preface

My research was split into two parts. First, I studied which tactics stand up comedians used the most to comment on the Republican political party. Second, I observed how those tactics facilitated the creation of further stand-up comedy by using them as a baseline for my own. I approached my research through exploration and creation.

### Approach

An explore approach aligned with the first half of my research question: “What tactics did stand-up comedians use to comment on the Republican political party in America during the Trump Era (2015-2023)...?” It was practical to use exploration for this portion of my research question because trending tactics in political stand-up have not yet been studied in depth and need further clarification.

However, a create approach aligned with the latter half of my research question: “How can using these tactics facilitate the creation of further political stand-up routines?” To address this portion of my research question, I applied the tactics I observed in part one of my research to then create an original political stand-up routine. Creation aligned with this half of my research question because it allowed me to experience the tactics as a writer, rather than strictly as an observer. In order to understand if the tactics facilitated routine production, I needed to experience the tactics as part of the production process. The most logical method of doing so was writing a routine myself.

### Design

For the first part of my research, I used a non-experimental design. Because I was examining trends in tactic usage rather than testing the effect of one variable upon another, I did not need to perform an experiment. Rather, I observed and described tactic frequency without delving into any causal relationships.

For the second part of my research, I used the creative process. This research design includes preparation, incubation, insight, evaluation, and elaboration (Hardymon, 2021). In these stages, I brainstormed, sought outside inspiration, considered different jokes, and shared my routine. Using the creative process aligned with the creation of a stand-up comedy routine, according to Markland (2020). Markland explained that renowned stand-up comedians, such as Jerry Seinfeld, use the creative process, justifying the use of it in my study.

### Method

In part one of my research, I used a quantitative content analysis method. Content analysis involves examining patterns and relationships in communicative pieces. In the context of my research, the patterns I examined were the comedians’ rhetorical and comedic tactics and the communicative pieces were the stand-up routines. Sjöbohm (2008) supported the alignment between content analysis and researching trends in stand-up comedy. Sjöbohm explained that he used content analysis in his research to describe the “manifest content of communication,” or the verbiage, of stand-up comedy. Because I also examined the written component of stand-up routines, it was logical to use a content analysis method as well. Although content analysis usually includes a qualitative approach to data collection, I used quantitative data because I recorded the percent frequency of each tactic’s use. This data still described the routines, but in a manner that numerically, rather than verbally, assessed their content.

Contrastingly, the second portion of my research, the routine creation, used a qualitative creative method. The use of a creative method implies the production of new knowledge through creation, such as sharing insight on stand-up comedy by writing my own routine. I included a qualitative description of how each tactic inspired my jokes and if using the tactics for reference facilitated my creative process. Greene (2012) supported the alignment of this method with my research because she, too, wrote an original routine to gauge the value of a potentially facilitating component. Greene also included a qualitative description of its effect on her writing process. Because my research reflects Greene's, the qualitative creative method supports my research.

Alternatively, I could have used a descriptive research method, which describes a population without influencing it. In the context of my research, this would have meant creating tactics to describe the observed routines, rather than matching the routines to existing techniques in the professional literature. Although this would have achieved my research's goal of describing comedians' tactics, it would have hindered its purpose: making political stand-up creation easier. By basing my findings around techniques that have already been studied, my research is more applicable. For example, if a comedian wants to implement the tactics in my research, they can look to other studies to develop their understanding. If I were to create original tactics, though, the information comedians could find about them would be limited to the descriptions in my paper. To make sure my research could have the largest scope of application, I examined existing, professionally studied tactics.

In addition to supporting my purpose, using preestablished tactics also offered a professional foundation to my findings. Examining professionally vetted tactics rather than those developed by myself ensured that I shared successful and valid tactics in my paper. If I were to create and share original tactics, I would risk the possibility that they are unsuccessful in comedic application, causing my research to lose its validity. I eliminated this risk by analyzing existing tactics rather than creating my own. Thus, the method I chose caters to the purpose and credibility of my research more than descriptive research would.

## Materials

I used a Youtube account and a digital device in order to conduct my research. The Youtube account was necessary to access political stand-up routines about the Republican political party between 2015 and 2023. I used a laptop to record my data and access the streaming platforms. I also used a viewing partner in my research. This individual watched each routine with me and recorded the frequency of tactic usage. Before we began, we standardized each tactic using the definitions found in Appendix C. We also outlined that one "usage" constitutes one sentence containing a certain tactic. That way, we had explicit guidelines for data collection, without the risk of personal opinions clouding our observation. I chose my viewing partner because they had a flexible schedule that allowed for their participation. My or my viewing partner's demographic information likely did not affect data collection because the aforementioned standardization practices were put in place to counteract personal influences. Thus, I will not disclose further information about my viewing partner to protect their anonymity.

## Procedures

I based my procedures on Grover's (2016) instruction. Grover detailed that the steps of content analysis are as follows: select a topic, decide on the sample, construct categories, create coding forms, train coders, collect data, determine intercoder reliability, analyze data, and report results. These were the procedures in the context of my research:

First, my selected topic was stand-up comedians' commentary on the Republican political party during the Trump Era (2015-2023). Rather than choosing whole routines to comprise my sample, I chose ten stand-up



comedy “bits” that relate to my topic. Bits are what comedians call jokes, including the setup of characters, context of the situation, and finally, the punchline (MasterClass, 2021). By examining bits, I accessed the necessary segments for my research while saving the time of watching entire routines. To select my bits, I searched Youtube for different iterations of “political stand-up comedy,” interchanging words such as “Donald Trump,” “conservative political party,” “Republicans,” and “Grand Old Party.” Under the searches, I selected twenty of the recurrent bits, assigned each a number one through twenty, and used a random number generator to select ten.

Next, I used the existing literature to find tactics for my study and constructed categories surrounding them. My categories were Rhetorical Tactics in Politics, Rhetorical Tactics in Comedy, Ad Hominem, and Comedy Devices. I had three subcategories under Comedy Devices: Language, Logic, and Identity. I organized these categories, subcategories, and tactics into a “coding form,” found in the Appendix A section of this paper.

Next, my viewing partner and I “trained” ourselves for data collection, which is the process of tactic standardization explained above. After that, we collected data. To do this, I again followed Grover (2012), who said to count a tactic’s usage every time a sentence in the bit included that tactic. In the coding form, I included space to document how many times each tactic was used. My viewing partner and I filled out individual coding forms for every bit we watched. I then counted the total number of sentences in each bit. I calculated the percent frequency of use for each tactic using the following equation:

Equation 1: Each Tactic’s Percent Frequency of Use

$$\frac{\text{Number of Sentences with the Tactic}}{\text{Total Number of Sentences}} \times 100$$

I then averaged each tactic’s percent frequency of use in each of the ten bits to find the overall percent frequencies of use.

Following data collection, we determined intercoder reliability. This process is an effective way to establish that coders’ findings are consistent and accurate, according to Good (2023). In my research, I used percentage agreement. I determined percentage agreement by dividing the number of tactics (across all ten routines) for which my viewing partner and I recorded the same frequency of use by the total number of tactics recorded. I then multiplied by 100 to get a percentage. To address discrepancies between my and my partner’s data, we rewatched the subjects of contention, discussed, and came to a mutual agreement.

Next, I analyzed the results and explained which tactics were used most often by comedians. To do this, I found the average number of tactics, “X,” used in the ten selected bits. Then, I selected the “X” tactics from my coding sheet with the highest percent frequencies of use. I created a “handbook” (seen in Appendix B) of these tactics to then incorporate into my own routine. The final step in my procedures was analyzing how these tactics facilitated the creation of an original political stand-up routine. I did this by producing an original stand-up bit that commented on the Democratic political party during the Biden Era (2021-2024). I used the aforementioned handbook of tactics as a guideline for my writing. Then, I wrote a qualitative explanation of how the tactics furthered the progression of my bit and if referencing the handbook of tactics facilitated or hindered the creative process.

## Method Limitations

There were limitations in my method to address and remain cautious of. First, I based the qualitative description of the tactics’ facilitation of original routine creation on my subjective experience. Although this method was supported by Greene’s (2012) research, my experience may not have reflected other’s impression of the tactic handbook’s value. Another limitation to my methods was that some tactic usage may have gone unrecorded. My viewing partner and I watched ten bits and coded each of them for upwards of 30 tactics. Although the purpose of having a partner was to prevent tactic usages from going unnoticed, there is still a chance that we

may have missed some. However, we did our best to mitigate this risk by paying close attention and watching each bit multiple times.

## Findings

### Selected Stand-Up Bits

The ten selected stand-up comedy bits studied in this research are as follows:

1. Frankie Boyle's "The Donald Trump Look"
2. Bill Maher's "100 Days of Trump"
3. Katt Williams' "Funny the Presidents"
4. John Mulaney's "There's a Horse in the Hospital"
5. Jim Jefferies' "Donald Trump"
6. David Cross' "Raising a Kid in a Trump America"
7. Lavell Crawford's "The Thing About Donald Trump"
8. Paul Virzi's "Donald Trump's Presidency is Like *Game of Thrones*"
9. Trevor Noah's "The Sh\*t Donald Trump Says"
10. Shane Gillis' "Trump is the Funniest President"

## Data

**Table 1.** Inter coder Reliability/Percent Agreement

Number of Frequencies in Agreement	295
Total Number of Frequencies Recorded	330
Coefficient of Agreement	0.894
Percentage Agreement	89.4%

Table 1 shows the intercoder reliability between myself and my viewing partner. Intercoder reliability, calculated in this research using percentage agreement, is used to mitigate the risk of subjective analysis hindering accurate data collection. The table conveys that my partner and I were in agreement concerning 89.4% of data collection.

**Table 2.** Number of Tactics Used per Bit

Name of Bit	Number of Tactics Used
Bill Maher's "100 Days of Trump"	23
Katt Williams' "Funny the Presidents"	21



John Mulaney's "There's a Horse in the Hospital"	16
Jim Jefferies' "Donald Trump"	22
David Cross' "Raising a Kid in a Trump America"	17
Lavell Crawford's "The Thing About Donald Trump"	15
Paul Virzi's "Donald Trump's Presidency is Like Game of Thrones"	20
Trevor Noah's "The Sh*t Donald Trump Says"	18
Shane Gillis' "Trump is the Funniest President"	18
Frankie Boyle's "The Donald Trump Look"	11
<b>Average: 18.1</b>	

Table 2 shows the number of tactics that the stand-up comedians used per stand-up comedy bit. With 23 tactics used, Bill Maher's "100 Days of Trump" had the maximum tactic usage in this data set while Frankie Boyle in "The Donald Trump Look" used the minimum of only eleven tactics. On average, the stand-up comedians used about eighteen tactics per bit. Because of this, I incorporated the eighteen most frequently used tactics in my own political stand-up bit, in order to mimic the nature of existing routines.

**Table 3.** All Tactics' Frequency of Use, Including Outliers

Name of Tactic	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	Avg.	Q1	Q3	IQR	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Ridicule	51	82	22	41	65	6	50	27	33	67	44.4	28.5	61.5	33.0	-47.9	120.8
Superiority	67	53	9	27	65	8	47	37	33	56	40.2	28.5	55.3	26.8	-42.7	111.4
Ad Hominem	19	24	4	24	10	3	34	10	7	44	17.9	7.8	24.0	16.3	-18.1	43.8
Rhetorical Q.	12	12	0	14	65	11	16	13	12	22	17.7	12.0	15.5	3.5	-5.6	35.3
Incongruity	2	24	70	0	25	0	11	20	0	0	15.2	0.0	23.0	23.0	-19.3	34.5
Puzzle-Solution	16	18	0	11	70	6	11	20	0	0	15.2	1.5	17.5	16.0	-11.1	27.8
Presumption	12	0	9	5	20	14	5	23	7	44	13.9	5.5	18.5	13.0	-13.9	33.3
Metaphors	9	12	70	16	5	0	5	7	2	11	13.7	5.0	11.8	6.8	-3.9	22.6
Deceitful Behavior	21	18	0	14	10	8	0	13	19	22	12.5	8.5	18.8	10.3	-15.6	36.6
Hyperbole	5	18	9	0	15	6	3	3	14	33	10.6	3.5	14.8	11.3	-11.5	25.6
Repetition	4	6	13	16	0	17	21	13	7	0	9.7	4.5	15.3	10.8	-13.2	27.4
Position Taking	9	0	9	11	5	22	11	3	0	22	9.2	3.5	11.0	7.5	-7.3	20.0
Implication	14	12	0	11	35	6	0	0	0	11	8.9	0.0	11.8	11.8	-8.7	17.6
Relief	0	24	0	19	5	0	16	10	0	11	8.5	0.0	14.8	14.8	-13.6	22.1

Pronouns	0	18	9	35	0	0	0	3	7	0	7.2	0.0	8.5	8.5	-5.6	12.8
Malicious Pleasure	9	0	0	0	40	0	0	0	14	0	6.3	0.0	6.8	6.8	-3.8	10.1
List of Three	11	12	0	5	10	0	3	13	7	0	6.1	0.8	10.8	10.0	-10.0	16.9
Rigidity	7	0	0	49	0	0	5	0	0	0	6.1	0.0	3.8	3.8	0.5	5.6
Appeals to Comp.	0	0	4	43	0	0	5	0	7	0	5.9	0.0	4.8	4.8	-1.2	7.1
Condescension	21	0	17	11	0	0	9	0	0	0	5.8	0.0	10.5	10.5	-10.0	15.8
Repartee	0	0	1	14	0	14	0	0	28	0	5.7	0.0	10.8	10.8	-10.4	16.1
Intertextuality	2	12	0	0	5	0	5	0	19	0	4.3	0.0	5.0	5.0	-3.2	7.5
Irony	5	6	1	3	5	0	3	7	12	0	4.2	1.5	5.8	4.3	-4.4	10.1
Headline/Punchline	7	12	9	3	0	0	5	0	0	0	3.6	0.0	6.5	6.5	-6.2	9.8
Self-Deprecation	21	6	0	3	0	3	0	0	0	0	3.3	0.0	3.0	3.0	-1.2	4.5
Neg. Comparison	0	18	0	0	0	0	13	0	0	0	3.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.1	0.0
Pursuit	0	0	9	0	0	0	0	7	2	0	1.8	0.0	1.5	1.5	-0.5	2.3
Allusion	0	6	4	0	0	3	0	3	0	0	1.6	0.0	3.0	3.0	-2.9	4.5
Conceptual Surp.	5	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.9	0.0
Statistics	0	0	0	0	0	8	0	0	0	0	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.8	0.0
Misunderstanding	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.5	0.0
Puns	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.0

Table 3 depicts all 32 tactics, their frequencies of use (% of sentences containing the tactic per stand-up bit) in each bit and on average, and the quantities used to determine outliers. Each value in this table and in succeeding tables represents a percentage (Ex: 15.5 = 15.5%). Column “A” represents Frankie Boyle’s “The Donald Trump Look,” B is Bill Maher’s “100 Days of Trump,” C is Katt Williams’ “Funny the Presidents,” D is John Mulaney’s “There’s a Horse in the Hospital,” E is Jim Jefferies’ “Donald Trump,” F is David Cross’ “Raising a Kid in a Trump America,” G is Lavell Crawford’s “The Thing About Donald Trump,” H is Paul Virzi’s “Donald Trump’s Presidency is Like Game of Thrones,” I is Trevor Noah’s “The Sh\*t Donald Trump Says,” and J is Shane Gillis’ “Trump is the Funniest President.” These letters represent their respective comedy bits in the succeeding graphs as well. The abbreviated tactic names used in this table are as follows: Rhetorical Q. = Rhetorical Questions, Appeals to Comp. = Appeals to Compassion, Neg. Comparison = Negative Comparison, and Conceptual Surp. = Conceptual Surprise. To calculate outliers, the Upper Bound is equal to the Interquartile Range (IQR) multiplied by 1.5 plus Quartile III, or Q3. The Lower Bound is equal to the Interquartile Range (IQR) multiplied by 1.5 minus Quartile I, or Q1. Each tactic has its respective Upper and Lower Bound. The outliers that fall out of these bounds are highlighted in dary gray. Including outliers, Ridicule had the highest average frequency of use (44.4%) and Puns had the lowest average frequency of use (0.0%).

**Table 4.** All Tactics’ Frequency of Use, Excluding Outliers

Name of Tactic	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	Average
Ridicule	51	82	22	41	65	6	50	27	33	67	44.4
Superiority	67	53	9	27	65	8	47	37	33	56	40.2
Ad Hominem	19	24	4	24	10	3	34	10	7	*	15.0
Deceitful Behavior	21	18	0	14	10	8	0	13	19	22	12.5

Rhetorical Questions	12	12	0	14	*	11	16	13	12	*	11.3
Presumption	12	0	9	5	20	14	5	23	7	*	10.6
Repetition	4	6	13	16	0	17	21	13	7	0	9.7
Incongruity	2	24	*	0	25	0	11	20	0	0	9.1
Puzzle-Solution	16	18	0	11	*	6	11	20	0	0	9.1
Hyperbole	5	18	9	0	15	6	3	3	14	*	8.1
Metaphors	9	12	*	16	5	0	5	7	2	11	7.4
Relief	0	*	0	19	5	0	16	10	0	11	6.8
List of Three	11	12	0	5	10	0	3	13	7	0	6.1
Implication	14	12	0	11	*	6	0	0	0	11	6.0
Position Taking	9	0	9	11	5	*	11	3	0	*	6.0
Pronouns	0	18	9	*	0	0	0	3	7	0	4.1
Irony	5	6	1	3	5	0	3	7	*	0	3.3
Repartee	0	0	1	14	0	14	0	0	*	0	3.2
Headline/Punchline	7	*	9	3	0	0	5	0	0	0	2.7
Condescension	*	0	*	11	0	0	9	0	0	0	2.5
Appeals to Compassion	0	0	4	*	0	0	5	0	7	0	1.8
Intertextuality	2	*	0	0	5	0	5	0	*	0	1.5
Malicious Pleasure	9	0	0	0	*	0	0	0	*	0	1.1
Allusion	0	*	4	0	0	3	0	3	0	0	1.1
Self-Deprecation	*	*	0	3	0	3	0	0	0	0	0.8
Rigidity	*	0	0	*	0	0	5	0	0	0	0.6
Pursuit	0	0	*	0	0	0	0	*	2	0	0.3
Negative Comparison	0	*	0	0	0	0	*	0	0	0	0.0
Statistics	0	0	0	0	0	*	0	0	0	0	0.0
Puns	*	0	*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.0
Conceptual Surprise	*	0	*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.0
Misunderstanding	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	*	0	0.0

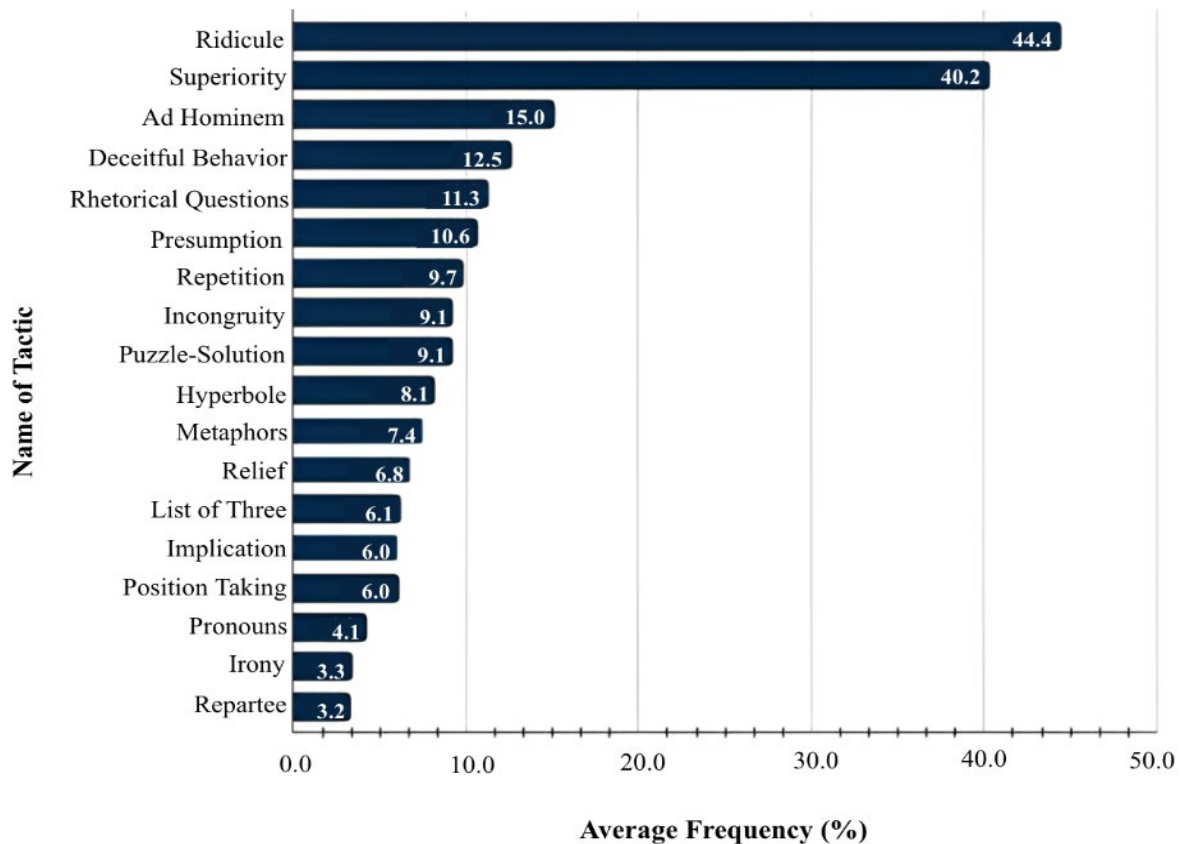
Table 4 displays all 32 tactics and their frequencies of use in each routine and on average. In the place of the outliers calculated in Table 3 are asterisks highlighted in dark gray. The outlier values were removed

from the data and this table shows the recalculated averages. Excluding outliers, Ridicule had the highest average frequency of use (44.4%) and Negative Comparison, Statistics, Puns, Conceptual Surprise, and Misunderstanding tied for the lowest average frequency of use (0.0%).

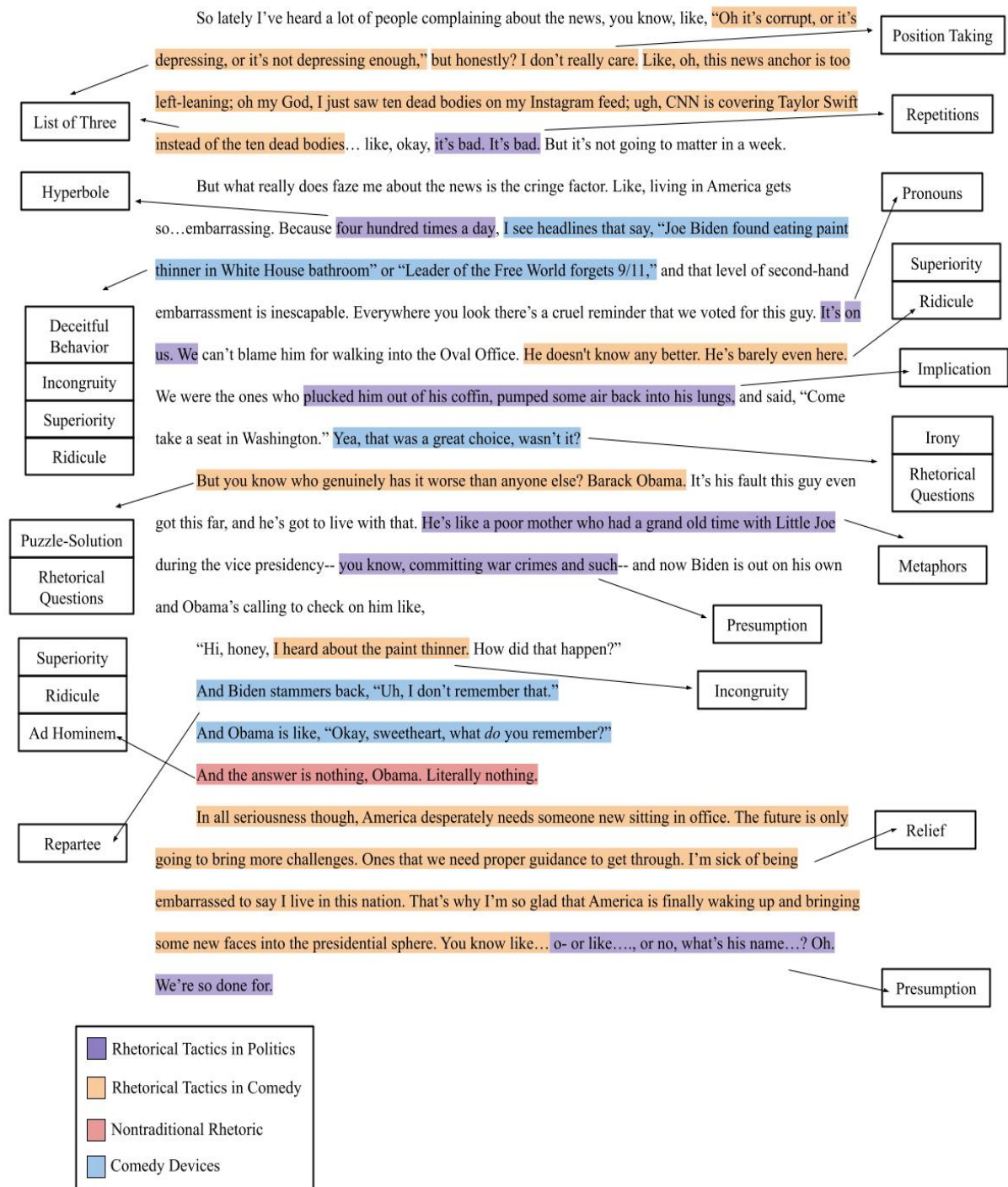
**Table 5.** Top Eighteen Tactics' Frequency of Use, Excluding Outliers

Name of Tactic	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	Average
Ridicule	51	82	22	41	65	6	50	27	33	67	44.4
Superiority	67	53	9	27	65	8	47	37	33	56	40.2
Ad Hominem	19	24	4	24	10	3	34	10	7	*	15.0
Deceitful Behavior	21	18	0	14	10	8	0	13	19	22	12.5
Rhetorical Questions	12	12	0	14	*	11	16	13	12	*	11.3
Presumption	12	0	9	5	20	14	5	23	7	*	10.6
Repetition	4	6	13	16	0	17	21	13	7	0	9.7
Incongruity	2	24	*	0	25	0	11	20	0	0	9.1
Puzzle-Solution	16	18	0	11	*	6	11	20	0	0	9.1
Hyperbole	5	18	9	0	15	6	3	3	14	*	8.1
Metaphors	9	12	*	16	5	0	5	7	2	11	7.4
Relief	0	*	0	19	5	0	16	10	0	11	6.8
List of Three	11	12	0	5	10	0	3	13	7	0	6.1
Implication	14	12	0	11	*	6	0	0	0	11	6.0
Position Taking	9	0	9	11	5	*	11	3	0	*	6.0
Pronouns	0	18	9	*	0	0	0	3	7	0	4.1
Irony	5	6	1	3	5	0	3	7	*	0	3.3
Repartee	0	0	1	14	0	14	0	0	*	0	3.2

Because the selected stand-up bits used eighteen tactics on average (as seen in Table 1), I used the eighteen tactics with the highest average frequency of use in the creation of my own comedy bit. Table 5 displays these eighteen tactics, their frequency of use per bit, and their frequency of use on average. Just as they are in Table 4, outliers are excluded and represented by asterisks. Of the top eighteen tactics, Ridicule had the highest average frequency of use (44.4%) and Repartee had the relatively lowest average frequency of use (3.2%).



**Figure 1.** The Eighteen Tactics with the Highest Average Frequency of Use. Figure 1 depicts the top eighteen tactics out of the original 32 with the highest average frequency of use. Each value represents an average percent frequency. (Ex: Repartee, 3.2 = on average, 3.2% of the sentences in each stand-up bit contained Repartee). As seen in Figure 1, stand-up comedians used Ridicule most frequently in their routines, with an average of 44.4% of sentences using Ridicule per bit. Of the highest eighteen tactics, the frequencies of tactic use ranged from 3.2% to 44.4%. Out of the top eighteen tactics used most frequently, seven were rhetorical tactics in politics, three were humor theories, three were rhetorical tactics in comedy, one was nontraditional rhetoric, and four were comedy devices.



**Figure 2.** Rhetorical and Comedic Tactics in Original Political Stand-Up Comedy Bit. Figure 2 depicts my original political stand-up routine, which comments on the Democratic political party during the Biden Era (2021-2024). Using the arrows and surrounding labels, the eighteen most frequently used tactics are identified throughout the routine. Each of the highlight colors used represents a different set of rhetorical or comedic tactics.

## Discussion

To reiterate, my research question is as follows: What tactics did stand-up comedians use to comment on the Republican political party in America during the Trump Era (2015-2023), and how can using these tactics facilitate the creation of further political stand-up routines? My data answers this question by providing insight into the eighteen tactics that comedians most often incorporated into political stand-up routines, as well as a first-hand account of their effect on original routine creation. By answering my research question, this data provides an empirical foundation to my purpose, which is to increase understanding surrounding the creation of political stand-up in order to facilitate alternative political discourse.

## Data Analysis

### *Analysis of Inter-coder Reliability*

Inter-coder reliability, calculated in this research using percentage agreement, estimates the risk of subjective analysis hindering accurate data collection (Ikram et al., 2018). With a calculated percentage agreement of 89.4%, this study's data collection is adequate, according to McHugh (2012), who states that percentage agreement between 82-100% illustrates an almost perfect level of reliability. The calculated percentage agreement suggests that my findings are reliable.

### *Analysis of Tactic Usage*

My data suggests that the eighteen tactics used the most to comment on the Republican political party are, in descending order: Ridicule, Superiority, Ad hominem, Deceitful Behavior, Rhetorical Questions, Presumption, Repetition, Incongruity, Puzzle-Solution, Hyperbole, Metaphors, Relief, List of Three, Implication, Position Taking, Pronouns, Irony, and Repartee. The conclusion that comedians used Ridicule the most is supported by Romansyah and associates (2019), who found that the comedians often center their humor around the ridicule of a third party. Romansyah et al. also explains that Ridicule is used to create a sense of superiority within the audience. Thus, Romansyah et al. corroborates the conclusion that Superiority is the second most prevalent tactic. The fact that comedians appear to use Ridicule, Superiority, and Ad hominem frequently suggests that creating an "inferior" third party is recommended for the creation of an original political stand-up comedy routine.

Along with offering specific tactics to incorporate into an original routine, these findings also suggest which type of tactics comedians may prefer. Of the top eighteen tactics, almost half were rhetorical tactics often found in political speeches (Rhetorical Questions, Presumption, Repetitions, Hyperbole, Metaphors, Implication, Pronouns). This is likely the case because comedians learn from commentary in traditional politics in order to create alternative political discourse. Webber (2020) supports these findings, stating that the American political rhetoric forms the basis of political stand up comedy. Thus, it is within reason for these tactics to continually appear in the sampled stand-up bits. However, it is interesting to note that Ridicule, the tactic employed the most, is a comedy device rather than a technique of traditional political rhetoric.

### *Analysis of Facilitation of Original Bit/Routine*

After writing an original political stand-up comedy bit, my experience suggests that using existing tactics as a baseline does facilitate original routine creation. The tactics initially furthered my routine by building connections between different topics. For example, beginning with List of Three allowed me to comically introduce "the news" as the initial topic of my bit. Then, I used Repetition to emphasize the severity of current news. After that, I applied Hyperbole to transition to the topic that American news is embarrassing. In this manner, the tactics advanced my bit between various topics, such as Obama and Biden's relationship, Biden's memory,



and the current presidential candidates. In addition, tactics like Deceitful Behavior, Incongruity, Puzzle-solution, and Metaphors provided examples to contribute to the humor of the bit. One example of this is the incongruous idea of Biden eating paint thinner. Meanwhile, other tactics furthered the bit by fostering connection with the audience, such as Rhetorical Questions, Superiority, Irony, and Pronouns. Adding to the overarching comicality of the bit, Ridicule, Ad hominem, Repartee, Presumption, and Implication also furthered its progression. Thus, my findings imply that basing original stand-up creation around a handbook of existing tactics facilitates the creative process by connecting topics, transitioning focus, providing examples, and creating a sense of humor within the bit.

## Limitations

There are limitations to this study concerning the selection of the stand-up bits, the analysis of tactic usage, and the analysis of original routine creation. When selecting the stand-up bits used in this study, I did not perform a simple random sample of all relevant comedy bits on Youtube. Instead, I chose the selected bits randomly out of a sample of twenty available bits. This may have resulted in an improper representation of the population of relevant stand-up bits. In addition, some of the selected stand-up bits emphasized only Donald Trump, rather than the members of the Republican party as a whole. This may have affected my study's focus because my research question is directed toward the entire Republican party, rather than just toward the president. Also, the comedians performing the bits did not explicitly state that their routines' purpose was to comment on the Republican political party. This is a limitation because my idea of "commentary" may vary from that of the comedians, hindering my sample's alignment with my research question.

One limitation in my analysis of tactic usage is that I fixated on the verbiage of the stand up routines, not on the delivery. Considering that delivery, timing, and intonation are integral to the success of stand-up (Aarons et al., 2017), my research's purpose-- to broaden the understanding of political stand-up creation-- may be limited. In addition, some tactics, such as Ad hominem and Ridicule, may have led to limitations in the accuracy of data collection. Because such tactics are so similar in nature, making fine distinctions between the two, even with the help of a viewing partner, could have resulted in inaccuracies in data collection. In general, the subjective nature of the tactic analysis process, although combated with the use of a viewing partner, is a risk for slight inaccuracies in data collection.

Because the analysis of how existing tactics facilitate original routine creation is subjective, it is another source of limitation. My impression could vary from that of another researcher with a different creative process. Despite support from Greene's (2012) method, this may mean that my conclusion's reliability is somewhat limited, seeing as the tactics' facilitation of original routine creation is variable. Also, in my routine I applied my findings about Trump Era commentary to Biden's Democratic party. Doing so could have limited my conclusion by overlooking how the commentary about each party may differ. Employing Trump Era stand-up tactics in a routine about a different presidential era may have interfered with routine facilitation.

## Implications

Within the existing professional field, this research provides a unique insight into political stand-up creation. While Romansyah and associates (2019) also performed a content analysis of the discourse in stand-up comedy, their study focused on how one comedian produced unique stand-up, rather than on how various comedians' stand-up coincided during a certain political era. Similarly, Hart (2013) examines the rhetoric of political comedy but also focuses primarily on one comedian, rather than multiple. Ikram and associates (2018) found the stand-up comedy techniques comedians used most frequently, similar to my own research. However they did

not apply their findings to the facilitation of original political stand-up comedy. In addition, Meier (2014) explored how stand-up comedy offers an alternative method of political expression, but conducted a historical evaluation, rather than one focused on a recent era. Thus, this study introduces a new understanding of political stand-up comedy creation to the field. It establishes a novel intersection between Trump Era commentary, comedians' preferred tactics, and the application of existing techniques to original stand-up. This research can encourage aspiring stand-up comedians to use existing comedians' preferred rhetorical and comedic tactics as a baseline for their original political stand-up creations. Currently, it suggests that political rhetoric and audience superiority are prevalent in successful political stand-up. As American political polarization increases (Fluit, 2020), this study provides guidance in the creation of political stand-up comedy, allowing for advancement into alternative avenues of political discourse. Therefore, this research informs prospective stand-up comedians on how to help deter political polarization in America.

## Suggestions for Future Research

To further the research done thus far, future research may focus on commentary in political stand-up comedy during another presidential era or under a different political party. Coupled with the data collected during this study, future research could provide more insight on how commentary changes during different political atmospheres and on what tactics remain continuous. In addition, future research could document the tactics used most by specific demographics of comedians, such as specifically female comedians. Also, future research could look into complimentary, rather than critical, commentary within political stand-up and see if the tactic usage varies. By researching further into the variations of political stand-up creation, researchers can broaden the scope of knowledge on alternative forms of political discourse, filling the existing gap in the professional field.

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