



The Battery Dies Quicker Than a Black Guy: A Thematic Analysis of Political Jokes in the American and Iranian Contexts

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Abstract

As a central component of political discourse and a prolific resource for argument, political humor targets leaders, politicians, or representatives as well as political institutions, groups, actions, and parties. Each of these groups is liable to be a political humor theme. Although previous literature has proved that analyzing the themes of political wisecracks presents valuable information about the socio-political concerns, thematic analysis of political jokes, particularly, in Iranian and American contexts, as a necessary clue for understanding serious sociopolitical issues seems to be an area in need of further analysis. In order to address this problem, this study investigated the most popular themes in Iranian and American political humor. Analysis showed that the general themes of Iranian and American political humor are more similar than different. However, while sexual infamy, racism, and gun control marked considerable themes of American humor, despotic forces and religion-related humor seemed to be exclusively Iranian.

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1. Introduction

Politics, today, affects every aspect of human life, from the most trivial (how often your garbage is collected) to the most decisive (national sovereignty versus international acceptance) and makes it an “inevitable feature of the human condition” (Heywood, 2013, p.2). Humor is a widespread political communication device that acts as a vehicle for meaningful political participation (Davis, Love, & Killen, 2018). Accordingly, to mirror what people find undesirable, wicked, and disturbing (Brottman, 2004), a good portion of daily humor is devoted to political issues. In view of that, since political humor reflects and makes sense of the serious and significant political problems (Allagui, 2014) if analyzed cross-culturally, its popular themes can unveil valuable information about the socio-political status of and the sensitive issues brought under censure in the targeted communities.

The Islamic Republic of Iran – “the world's most heinous terrorist regime” based on a nickname given by the US government (Lederer & Lee, 2020) -and the United States of America– the “Great Satan,” to borrow Iran’s epithet (Beeman, 2005), due to their socio-political circumstances and the radical ideological differences (Beeman, 2005; Leverett & Leverett, 2010), can be two of the most favored candidates for a cross-cultural comparative analysis of political humor. From among those differences, freedom of speech and people’s participation in political discourse are compared below.

The United States safeguards the right of expression through the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution written in 1787, which provides that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances” (Cavalli et al., 2013; Lewis, 2002, p. 319). The U.S. Constitution protects even the most offensive and controversial speech from government suppression and permits regulation of speech only under certain limited and narrow circumstances including clearly stated categories such as obscenity, fraud, and child pornography. The

young Constitution of Iran (first composed in 1906 and revised after the revolution in 1979 with amendments through 1989), on the other hand, does not explicitly refer to freedom of expression and thought (Rezvani, 2016). In Article 24 of the Constitution of Iran, only the freedom of the press is mentioned. In accordance with Article 24 of the Constitution, “Publications and the press are free to express their content unless they are detrimental to the principles of Islam or public rights” (Madani, 2014, p.77). Due to the ambiguity in stating the special categories of expression that may be restricted under article 24, this right is liable to different temporal and local interpretations.

Participation of Americans and Iranians in political discourse is also a noteworthy point. While the majority of Iranians from university students to shopkeepers and taxi drivers for some reasons enjoy talking about politics (Nafisi, 1985; Wojciszke, 2004), according to Pew Research Center (2019), it seems that Americans live by an unspoken agreement hidden behind a behavior code in keeping with which politics and social issues are often left out of discourse. All these and more show the differences Iranian and American political and ideological systems have. To understand the mechanism of these differences and how they affect political discourse, studying political humor as an informative entertaining channel of hard news communication seems essential.

Although previous literature showed that themes analysis of political humor presents valuable information about the socio-political concerns and offers information about the sensitive issues brought under official/social/cultural censure, thematic analysis of political jokes, particularly, in Iranian and American contexts, as a necessary clue for understanding serious social-political issues (Billig, 2005, p. 13), seems to be a field in need of further analysis. In order to fill this hiatus, the present study aims to find the most popular themes depicted through Iranian and American political jokes.

The study is significant in embodying the perception of Iranians and Americans of their politicians and political systems depicted through humor. It also helps explain the socio-political concerns of the targeted contexts. In addition, this comparative study specifically puts forward the shared and exclusive political

problems which people try to control through this infotainment channel. The study is also helpful in comparing and justifying the perspicuity of political discourse represented by political humor in both contexts.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Political Discourse and Humor

Humor, according to Palmer (1994), is everything that is actually or potentially funny, and the processes by which this jocularity occurs. However, jocularity is not the sole criterion for being humorous. Chateau (as cited in Attardo, 1994) rejects the idea of humor for comedy and fun as he asserts humor should be compared with a seriousness not tragedy (which is compared with comedy). Attardo (1994) complicates the nature of humor as he states that “the very things that people find humorous seem to change” (p. 7). This view of humor calls for a historical definition to attain a general scope of the term. Ordinary people use humor as an expression of superiority, to relieve tension, and to deal with incongruity (Owen, 2002). We use humor to show: (1) a sensation of superiority over what is laughed at; (2) a sensation of psychological relief; and (3) a perception of incongruity in what is laughed at, where laughter is a fast comparison between our natural expectation and what really is (Morreall, 1983).

Humor is assumed to be an integral part of political discourse. As members of cultures and discourse communities, we encounter (and may cooperate in) political discourse nearly every day. Defined, in a broad sense, as a complicated human endeavor, political discourse appears in manifold discourse types, “whose discourse organization and textual structure are determined by the respective discursive practices” (Chilton & Schaffner, 1997, p. 254). Besides, it relies very significantly on the principle that people’s perception of certain issues or concepts can be influenced by language (Jones & Wareing, 1999, p. 35).

Humor as an essential player in social changes (Halsall, 2002) can assume a “crucial part of society’s political discourse” (Peifer, 2012, p. 268) and it can serve as a “powerful tool in social protest” (Hart, 2007, p. 1). Humor, as argued by Palmer (1994), has been utilized in various political opportunity constructions,

from free democratic societies to ruthless oppressive governments. Political humor often promotes the progress of the collective identity of a social movement, while in several cases acts as an influential communication device, serving as a bona fide “weapon of the weak” (Hart, 2007, p. 1). In addition, politicians themselves also exploit humor in order to move their agenda ahead or to downgrade their opposition (Paletz, 1990).

2.2. Review of Previous Studies

Up to the present, a variety of studies have been carried out in the area of political humor, some of which have focused on themes and some on the targets of humor. Some studies analyzed their corpus of political humor based on pre-modified general themes and theories (superiority, incongruity, and relief) and others performed bottom-up analyses to find the main functions and themes (Hammoud, 2014; Naghdipour, 2014; Săftoiu & Popescu, 2014; Shehata, 1992; Weise, 1996).

Shehata (1992), for example, analyzed the jokes, in the political context of Egypt, exchanged at the time of Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak using a bottom-up approach to reveal the main themes of political jokes during each of those periods. According to the findings, the jokes were made about the denial of freedom of speech, torture by the police and authorities, failure of socialism in Egypt, the tremendous incompetency of the Army after 1967, the strained relation between President Sadat and the Coptic church of Egypt, and the government’s misuse of religion as a political tool to win favor. The study even revealed a popular theme which dealt with the alleged promiscuity of Sadat’s wife. In a similar attempt, Naghdipour (2014) investigated a corpus of 1000 Persian jokes randomly selected from different online websites. The result of the analysis revealed that the targets of Persian jokes are mostly ethnic and political issues and that the jokes violate the social and political taboos and censorship to achieve their end.

3. Methodology

This research is a part of a larger study that was conducted on attitudes in political jokes in American and Iranian contexts. The study analyzed political jokes electronically distributed through the World Wide Web in a bottom-up

mode. With the possible dearth of comprehensive theories of the use of wittiness in political discourse (Anderson, 2007, p. 62), we examined humorous utterances within their socio-cultural contexts to explore and explain the functions and themes they might depict, in the hope of ultimately developing a bottom-up classification of the most targeted political themes dealing with Iranian and American political issues and depicted through political jokes.

3.1. Corpus

In the present study which concerns itself only with verbal jokes, leaving performance comedy and other forms of humor aside, the studied jokes targeted American and Iranian readerships. Therefore, the corpus was twofold: a set of American English political jokes made by American native speakers and a set of Iranian Persian political jokes said and shared by Persian native speakers (translated into English by the current researchers for the purpose of this study). Due to their abundance and availability for a vast spectrum of readers, only on-line jokes were collected and studied. The jokes were taken from various net-based platforms (political humor sites like laughfactory.com/jokes; social networks like Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, Tweeter, WhatsApp; and comment sections). One of the main objectives of this research is to provide a complete unbiased sample of the whole society's concerns that includes all walks of the society, including jokes both told by people involved in political issues and jokes formed and shared by laypeople.

Political humor has an on-going open-ended corpus to which a considerable number of jokes are added on a daily basis. In order to tease out the most common jokes, the researchers scrutinized diverse sources of jokes. Care was exercised to exclude jokes with similar contents and language in order to allow for as much variety of content as possible. Selection and analysis went in parallel and this simultaneous analysis and selection continued until it was realized that no new themes emerged, and further additions of jokes would only increase the size of the data, hence barely affecting the results. Therefore, the size of the datasets appeared to be representative of all the common themes at the time of the data collection. The final corpus included 600 jokes --starting from

the most recent ones which made a definite point of time in each context and ending at the point when saturation was achieved and no new themes could be located (starting in 2019 backward, saturation was achieved in a period of 17 years for American humor and 14 years for Iranian humor). Care was exercised to include jokes that circulate around diverse topics.

3.2. Procedure

The jokes were coded and categorized to extract the main themes and provide a big picture of the overall situation of joke concepts. Extracting the main themes was a process of classification and categorization. Synchronous with selection and analysis, the researchers grouped the jokes on the basis of the common issue they sought to depict. The main themes were then divided into smaller sub-themes based on more subtle differences. The theme of Election, for instance, includes sub-themes like electoral scandals, false promises, and biased support. The obtained groups were then labeled according to the specific topic they tried to raise and ridicule. To fully understand the themes, the researchers had to study and analyze the various incidents which might have led to the appearance of such popular subjects of humor. Some of the labels were then reconsidered and modified many times by the researchers. This theme-induced humor analysis helped the researchers develop their own classification of the most targeted themes dealing with the contexts under investigation.

4. Findings

The recruited jokes comprised a considerable range of themes some of which were highly frequent and some less customary. Given the increasing prominence and visibility, the researchers made sure to focus on the most repeated themes as the main political concerns of the community and not to take into account less targeted political humor topics. It was decided that the themes which were touched by less than three jokes were classified as less targeted topics. In the following, the most common themes depicted through Iranian and American political humor are presented and discussed in tandem.

4.1 The Most Common Themes in Iranian Political Humor

In political humor, it is the politicians’ actions, statements, practices, policies, etc. that are judged by humorists as points needed to be highlighted. The accusations raised in political humor against Iranian politicians and the political system in recent years can be classified into various themes: Decadence, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Election, Qualification, Corruption and Embezzlement, Aristocracy, Contracts,

International relation, Diversion, Despotism forces, Religion, Utopianism, Decrees, Senility, Censorship, Suppression, Thank you Rohani (TYR), Ahmadinejad, Sophistry, Snowballing, Projection, Self-opinion, Guts, Dole out, and Familial appointments. Some of these themes seem to overlap but a detailed study showed that they have very distinct borderlines. In addition, some of the induced themes include sub-categories as indicated in Figure 1. In what follows, a few examples marking the major themes together with some discussion are presented:

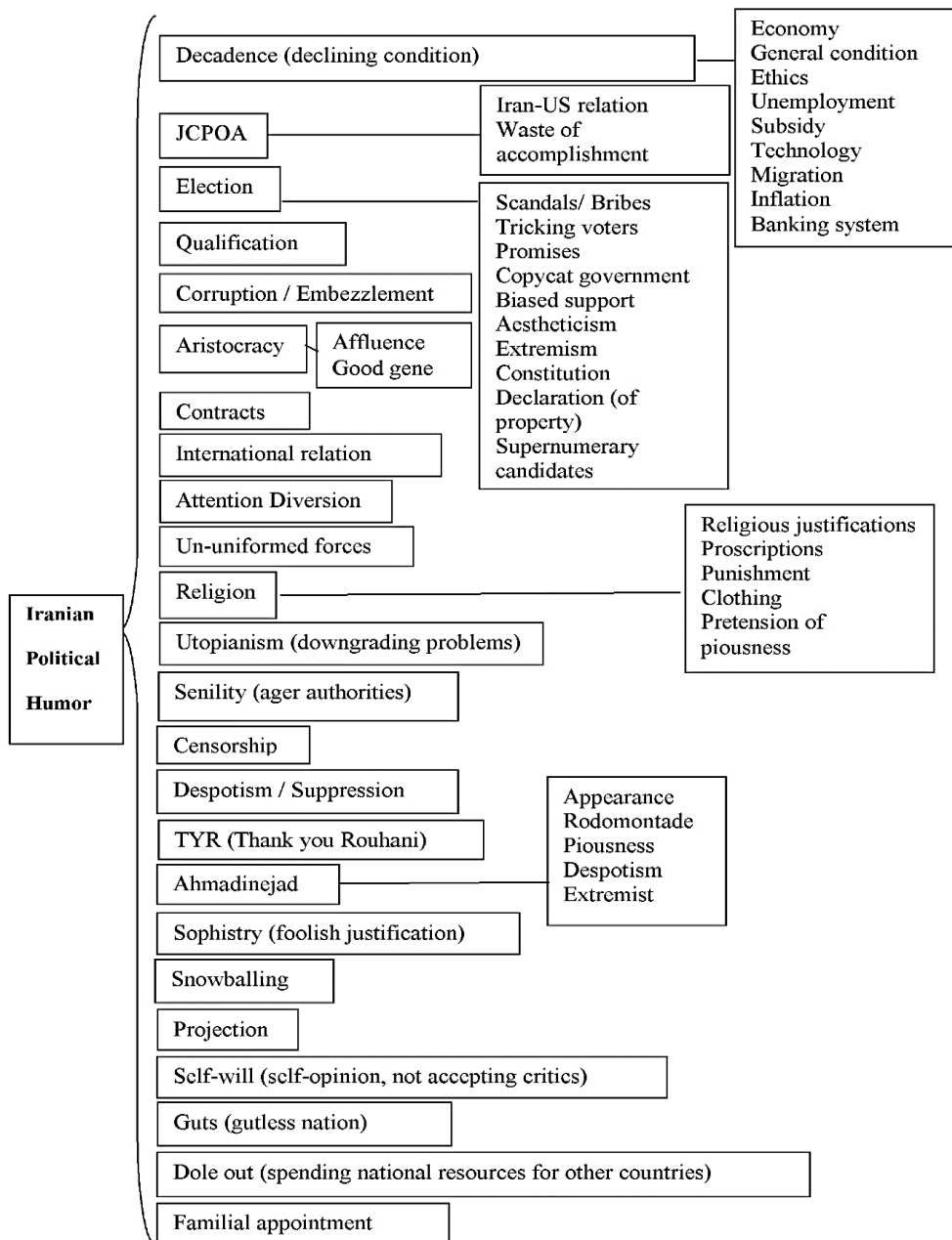


Figure 1
The Most Common Themes in Iranian Political Humor

4.1.1. General Condition / Quality of Life

Quality of life is influenced by many factors including health, well-being, justice, economy, social relationships, work, family, prosperity, spirituality, and the environment (Chaturvedi, & Muliya, 2016; Pinto, Fumincelli, Mazzo, Caldeira, & Martins, 2017).

Example 1: On the Day of Resurrection, due to the burden of my sins, I decided to go to Hell by myself, that...

One of the angels shouted, "heyyyyyyyyy, Wherrrrrrrrrr?"

I said, "Hell!"

He asked, "Where are you from?"

I said, "Iran".

He said, "you idiot! Go to Heaven. Where do you think you've already been? You miserable have already been punished enough".

Such exaggerating banter try to describe the Iranians' (keyword: punished enough) life quality by comparing it with Hell. For religious people like Iranians, this type of similitude can be more expressive than others (keyword: Day of Resurrection).

4.1.2. Corruption and Embezzlement

Financial corruption is common among government officials in different countries, and Iran is no exception. The potential weakness or deficiency of laws is among the fundamental factors that make corruption possible. Evidence for this type of corruption can be seen in banks, oil sectors, universities, private and public sectors, among parliamentarians, clergymen, the judiciary, etc. Political humorists have always been very active in highlighting this fact and presented remarkable works.

Example 2: A crow was eating pizza over a tree

A fox told him, "Wow...What a beautiful head, what a nice tail, how handsome you are! Please sing a song and let me enjoy it?"

The crow put the pizza under his arm and said, "Bitch, the day you rubbed my cheese, I was a third grader at elementary school. I am a graduate now."

The fox said, "I see...so that's why you lost your feathers!"

The crow opened his wings to check his feathers, and suddenly the pizza fell down.

The fox said, "the day I took your cheese I was a high school student! I am the chairman of the Teachers' Resources Fund now."

The story of the fox and the raven is a folkloric proverbial poem that refers to shysters and fraudulent people. The key phrase "chairman of the Teachers' Resources Fund" is a broad reference not only to embezzlement by prominent government figures but also to all corrupt officials.

4.1.3. Dress Code

According to Jafarzadeh (2016), since 1935 in which the law of Hijab Removal was implemented in our country until today, veiling and chastity have always been challenging matters. Despite the acceptance of Hijab, especially Chador, by most women and girls in the country, non-compliance with the standards of Hijab among the youth in the corners of some cities has caused concerns among various religious groups. The authorities have always taken measures to strengthen the principle of Hijab and to prevent girls and women from freely choosing their clothing. The government has always listed the fashions and fads that they regard as against the dress code that complies with the principles and rules of the religion. The youths' non-compliance with Hijab codes is usually considered as a sign of anti-regime activities supported by western countries. This issue was demonstrated in non-offensive humor as follows.

Example 3: (The unveiling of the Islamic dress for female medical staff)

If a patient sees a physician or a nurse wearing these clothes standing above their head, undoubtedly they'll think the old gentleman in black is looking at them, and they'll die due to a stroke.

The above humor refers to the jokester's objection to the ugliness that results from the exaggerated hijab. The keywords of this humor emphasize the psychological effect of beauty and attractiveness, especially for the medical staff, to create hope in patients.

4.1.5. Snowballing

In the *Animal Farm* by Orwell (1964), Napoleon (the bad pig) exiled his competitor Snowball (the good pig) from the farm to freely

do whatever he wanted. Thereafter, Snowball was used as a scapegoat for anything that went wrong on the farm. The whereabouts of Snowball were actually unknown, and it was doubtful if he had ever put a hoof back on the farm. However, the demonizing of Snowball provides the Pigs, especially Napoleon through Squealer, a way to put fear into the animals on the farm.

The same thing sometimes has been mentioned in Iranian political humor. Iranians in whatever position they are, instead of scientifically and objectively analyzing and tracing developments, seek to introduce a mysterious force (hidden hands of foreigners) beyond the will of Iranians – a tendency to conspiracy (Javadi Yeganeh, 2009). Note the following example.

Example 4: King, “Why don't you take the enemy's issue as seriously as possible and why don't you create the worries in people”?!

Minister, “What enemy”??

King, “Darn! if there was an enemy our work wouldn't be so hard! The problem is that we have to create the enemy. Produce it, diverse, colorful and massive. The enemy is someone you can attribute all your weaknesses and pitfalls to. The enemy is something that you can scare people with in order to shelter your arms. The enemy is someone who, if you do a trivial thing, exaggerates that, and if you don't do your responsibility, he'll be the one that should be blamed. The enemy is someone whom you can revile any time you wish, without hearing an answer. The enemy is someone you can distract the people with, so they won't ask you for anything”.

According to the keywords of this piece of humor, the existence of a hypothetical enemy and the emphasis on it by the authorities have

made them never take responsibility for the real problems inside the country. This satire also states that the more diverse, frightening, and massive the hypothetical enemy is expressed, the greater the effect will be on obeying the officials and clearing them of the existing problems.

4.1.6. Sophistry (Foolish Justification)

Government officials on specific occasions, in response to ambiguities, provide justifications that may seem strange to many or at least to humorists. These include financial matters such as the strange justification of the government about the salaries of some central insurance directors (Gorohe Eghtesadi-e Mashregh, 2016), cultural issues such as the strange justification for whipping cinematographers at the Ministry of Culture and Guidance (Tabnak, 2016), or political issues such as Mr. Zarif's strange justification of the conference of the hypocrites (Mojahedin-e-Khalgh party) in Paris (Vatan Emrooz, 2017), and many other issues.

Example 5: Kid, “Uncle Isaac! Why is everything expensive again”?

Uncle Isaac, “kid, bite your tongue, it's not costliness. It is just a tariff modification”!

4.2. The Most Common Themes in American Political Humor

The most common themes in American political humor are the politicians' qualifications, the infamy scandals they involve in, corruption, racism, terror-phobia, economy, election, constitution, ethics, and taxes. Some of the outstanding political personalities enjoyed exclusive themes for themselves. Trump, Bill Clinton, and Ivanka Trump are some examples. The complete map of these themes is shown in Figure 2. In the following, the major themes are exemplified and briefly discussed:

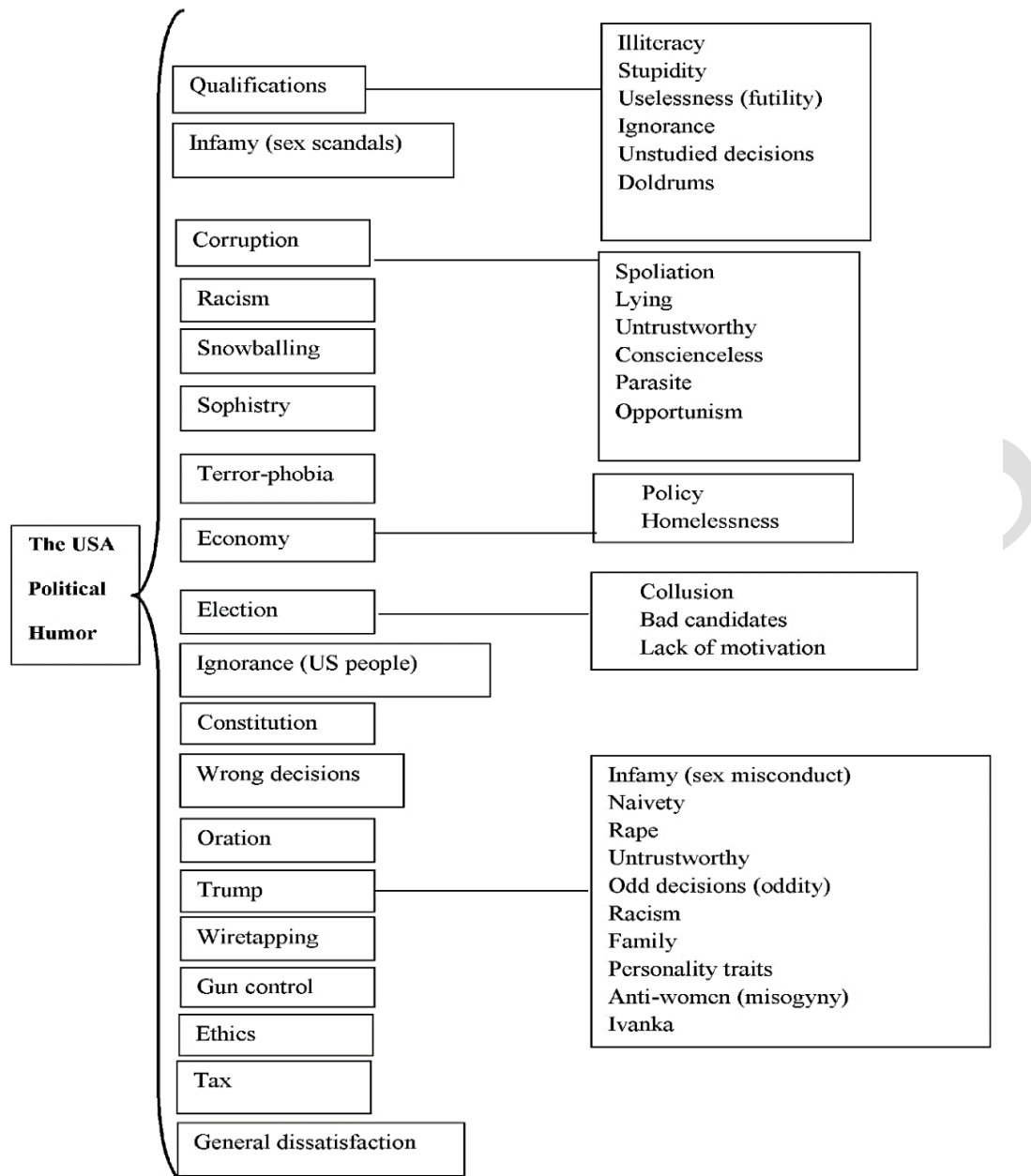


Figure 2

The Most Common Themes in American Political Humor

4.2.1. Qualification

Every politician nominating for the presidency or other high-ranking posts needs to be equipped with some personal and professional qualities. Among these qualities, political skill, management ability, persuasiveness, and temperament are some of the required factors (Dickerson, 2012). Political skills necessitate the presidents to be able to read the political landscape they will face when they get to the office; they must be honest enough with voters,

but ruthless enough to cut a deal with their enemies when necessary. In addition, they need to deal properly with the schmoozing and backslapping that might come with the office. Management ability refers to their skill in admitting mistakes, sifting through complex ideas, recognizing staff baloney, and hiring good teams. By persuasiveness we refer to the president's ability to deliver good speeches, to stay quiet when it proves to be more advantageous and to read the public opinion. And finally, presidents should enjoy the quality

of temperament by which they need to be able to face a true crisis in an appropriate way and have the calmness in handling the volatile pressures of the office (Dickerson, 2012). However, the US political humorists not only deride the paucity of these attributes in their politicians but also depict them as ignorant fools. The following is an example illustrating this theme in the US political humor.

Example 6: George W. Bush and his VP running mate, Dick Cheney, were talking, when George W. said, "I hate all the dumb jokes people tell about me." Wise Old Cheney, feeling sorry for his old boss, said sage-like, "Oh, they are only jokes. There are a lot of stupid people out there. Here, I'll prove it to you." Cheney took George W. outside and hailed a taxi driver. "Please take me to 29 Nickel Street to see if I'm home," said Cheney. The cab driver, without saying a word, drove them to Nickel Street, and when they finally got out, Cheney looked at George W. and said, "See! That guy was really stupid!" "No kidding," replied George W., "There was a pay phone just around the corner. You could have called instead."

The above example exaggerates the statesmen stupidity (minus qualification). Long ago, Americans used to attribute *fool adjectives* to their politicians. Twain (2019) admits humorously that fleas can be taught nearly anything that a Congressman can. Although people are aware that politicians themselves fool the nation, this kind of attribution can be a kind of retaliation and a strike back.

4.2.2. Racism

Racism and racial discrimination according to Dayal (2018), is defined as any discrimination against individuals on the basis of their skin color, or racial or ethnic origin and hence it is felt as if one race is superior to others in humanity or qualifications. Racism – and racialization - in the United States has been widespread since the colonial era and according to Fredrickson (2002), the racist ideology was a transparent justification for the United States' acquisition of new territories began in the late fifteenth century and climaxed in the late nineteenth. Although the era of slavery and colonialism has passed and the United States has experienced the leadership of personalities

from different races, the last of whom was Obama, the American minorities still suffer racial discrimination and the white's superiority, as noted by Samiei, Kiani, and Mohammadi (2017), in the political and social situations, the US judiciary, the economic system, law enforcement, and in the cultural system. Humorists, as shown in the following example, shouted racism out loud by mocking injustice in the United States toward other races and religions.

Example 7: Think there's a problem with my iPhone. The battery dies quicker than a black guy in the back of a police van.

The above-mentioned example, by making a comparison between cheap equipment (keyword: battery) and a black guy tried to show how governmental racism (keyword: police van) evaluates and treats colored people in the United States.

4.2.3. Snowballing

Claiming that among the reasons for its presence abroad is to fight against terrorism, weapons proliferation, international crime, and other humanitarian causes (U.S. Dept. of State, 1999), the United States governments considered Iran, North Korea, and Al-Qaeda as threats of particular concerns (Garamone, 2007). According to American jokesters, the US governments introduce these countries as snowballs (the guilty of destructive events) to legitimize their presence abroad in the guise of national and international security. The below-mentioned humor shows how Americans feel about snowballing.

Example 8: Q: What's the difference between 9/11 and a cow? A: You can't milk a cow for over 10 years.

4.2.4. Election

A study of a sweeping history of election controversies in the United States, as noted by Foley (2016), shows that the correctness of the polling procedure has always been a subject of controversy between the rival political parties. The accusation of misconduct and fraud is one of the common outcomes of most elections. In addition, according to the available humor, the inadequacy of the candidates and the low incentive for people to participate in the

election is another obstacle to an ideal election campaign.

Example 9: America is a country which produces citizens who will cross the ocean to fight for democracy but won't cross the street to vote.

"Because it would be hilarious," is probably not a good reason to elect someone to be president.

This theme mocks the reluctance of Americans to participate in elections. According to Desiver (2018), nearly 56% of the U.S. voting-age population cast ballots in the 2016 presidential election. This lack of participation puts the U.S. behind most of its peers in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), most of whose members are highly developed, democratic states. Looking at the most recent nationwide election in each OECD nation, the U.S. placed 26th out of 32. In addition, the keyword "hilarious" shows that instead of electing their president for important and logical reasons, Americans choose them for a series of trivial and perhaps ridiculous reasons.

4.2.5. Ethics

Some of the existing political humor explicitly exhibits how morality is degraded in American politics and accordingly, criticizes the alleged unbridled decline of ethical standards in the White House. "For centuries the on-going debate of the relationship between morality and politics has resulted in the division of such fundamental concepts as the right and the good, justice and equality, democracy and liberty etc." (Paul, Miller, & Paul, 2004, p. 56).

Example 10: As a new federal employee, I felt a combination of excitement and anxiety about meeting the strict standards of discretion and respect that our government imposes on its workers. Fearful of making a costly mistake, I decided to read up on procedures and standards on the federal Office of Personnel Management web page. I'm not sure if I was relieved or worried when I clicked on one page and found: "Ethics: Coming Soon!"

Keywords show the considerable disparity between people's perception of morality and decency among government officials and the existing reality.

5. Discussion

Based on the general findings of this study, the themes comprising Iranian and American political humor included a wide variety of jokes some of which directly targeted political actors like presidents and representatives. These types of jokes revealed (or rather confirmed) that both Iranians and Americans do not think highly of their politicians. Other jokes dealt with polity through economic, racial, gender, religious, and other types of texts.

The comparison of Iranian and American political jokes showed that a good number of themes are common in both contexts. Both Iranians and Americans mocked their politicians' (un)qualifications, corruption among high-ranking personalities, accusing foreign states of internal problems (snowballing), deceiving others with false arguments (sophistry), economy policies, and elections, as well as deriding the constitution pitfalls, wrong decisions and contracts, and presidents. This commonality in some political humor themes shows the generality of many political, social, and economic problems. This finding is in accordance with a survey done by Wike, Silver, and Castillo (2019), in which it was shown that anger at political elites, economic dissatisfaction, and anxiety about social issues has fueled political dissatisfactions around the world in recent years.

The findings confirmed Raskin's (1985) discussion of jokes in different countries with different political systems as well. The themes he specified when it comes to degrading political figures included jokes about politicians' unsuitability for the job, their ignorance, incompetence, corruption, immorality, unkindness, and their sex life. Politicians may also be denigrated by being represented as unknown. The agreement established may confirm the universality of some common themes in countries with different political systems. In other words, this agreement shows the common concerns regarding political issues the people around the world have. The findings also relatively agree with the tripartite thematic classification of Iranian political humor introduced by Andohjerdi (1999): 1) The terrible dominance and authoritarian tyranny; 2) The ridiculous dogmatism and religious reaction; 3) The imposed poverty caused by strata differences. These three hyper-categories

miss some of the themes hit upon by this study. The reason can be the new problems coming to the scene after the year of 1999, in which the classification was introduced. The finding was also in line with Naghdipour (2014), which showed that political humor tends to transgress political taboos and censorship to achieve its goals. Similar to our study, Naghdipour (2014) found that politicians' decisions, economy, punishments, politicians' qualifications, and false promises were among the prominent themes Iranian people disapproved of through political humor.

Despite the many similarities between the two sets of humor, there are also a few differences that can shed light on some of the political and social aspects of Iranian and American contexts. While racism, gun control, and sexual infamy themes are considerable in American humor, despotic forces and religion-related jokes seem to be exclusively Iranian. The recent changes in the region, in general, might account for the emergence of such themes in the Iranian context. Nowadays, the most popular slogan of many Middle East countries is democratization (Ehteshami, 1999). In Iran, the great demand for democratization prompted some citizens to demonstrate great dissatisfaction with the authority. (Tezcür, Azadarmaki, Bahar & Nayebi, 2011). In view of that, the emergence of such themes in Iranian humor can be an indication of the resulting expectations for more democratic values that are not restricted by the leverage of religion and pressure groups.

Example 11 (Gun control): I'm a great believer in gun control. That's why I always smoke a couple of cigarettes before I go out shooting because it helps keeps my hands steady.

Another difference between Iranian and American humor is the diversity of themes. According to the findings, Iranian political humor enjoyed a slightly higher degree of thematic variety. This thematic variety can be either due to the abundance of political, social, and economic problems Iranians experience, or it can be a logical consequence of a kind of cultural policy among Iranians. This cultural practice, on the other hand, can be either due to a culturally accepted norm in which political complaint is considered as a sign of wisdom (Wojciszke, 2004) or, according to a poem by Nafisi (1985), because of Iranians' special

strategy of treating problems with light-hearted banter and a very quick laugh to hopefully reach their social and political goals. One more potential reason for the establishment of such cultural norms, according to Abdolkarimi (2016), is Iran's being at the crossroads of historical events. Iran's being exposed to the invasion of various tribes gave Iranians a special mood. In those periods, people had to recognize sovereignty superficially and reject it internally. This duality led to a paradoxical and satirical type of language in Iran's literature. One more reason for the profusion of humor themes in Iran, as suggested by Andohjerdi (1999), is that our being Muslims makes it imperative for us to fulfill the obligation of "Enjoying good and forbidding wrong". By using humor, according to Andohjerdi (1999), we can fulfill this obligation.

One of the interesting findings of this research is the careful selection and vigilant introduction of the targets in the Iranian context. While Iranians are likely to exercise caution in making fun of high-ranking targets, American humorists feel free in mentioning whoever target they think needs to be laughed at seriously. Although the indirect mentioning of some big personalities in Iranian political humor might indicate political considerations and reservations, assuming that all existing restrictions are due to the policy of silencing the confronting voices is not correct. Some of the restrictions are rooted in religion and culture, and the boundaries are set by the grassroots of the society themselves. Although politics in democratic countries is largely predicted on the assumption that citizens are able to make informed choices thanks to the unrestricted circulation of ideas in the public domain, which is guaranteed by freedom of speech and transparency of the political process, it is not the only reason and peoples' choices are inexorably shaped and determined by a web of political beliefs and socio-cultural practices and simple emotions (Molek-Kozakowska, 2010; Simpson & Mayer, 2010).

In view of indirectness, the findings also showed that Iranians usually prefer to choose a symbolic personality to represent some specific themes. The symbolic personalities have been granted the role as the representative of a group of political figures and an indirect tool of dissent. Prominent examples are Jannati for

senility and Makarem for religious dogmatism (proscriptions). The symbolic assignment of humor can help joke-tellers avoid mentioning big heads. However, whenever it is felt safe, the humorists mentioned their very targets without hesitation. A study by Pearce and Hajizada (2014) reported a similar strategy utilized by Azerbaijani jokesters to escape governmental prosecution as they used a famous folklore fool name as the representative of the political figures and an indirect tool of dissent.

A final point worth mentioning is the common trait of multifacetedness noticed in both Iranian and American witticisms. In most of the studied jokes, it was found that a significant number of jokes treat more than one issue simultaneously. For instance, some humor treated social concerns (as an added aspect) vis-à-vis political issues (as the main theme). In the following example, while giving a picture of Americans' dissatisfaction with Bill Clinton, as a side-goal, the humor addresses another social issue in the American context:

Example 12: A young gay man calls home and tells his Jewish mother that he has decided to go back into the closet because he has met a wonderful girl and they are going to be married. He tells his mother that he is sure she will be happier since he knows that his gay lifestyle has been very disturbing to her. She responds that she is indeed delighted and asks tentatively, "I suppose it would be too much to hope that she would be Jewish?" He tells her that not only is the girl Jewish, but she's from a wealthy Beverly Hills family. She admits she is overwhelmed by the news, and asks, "What is her name?" He answers, "Monica Lewinsky". There is a pause, then his mother asks, "What happened to that nice black boy you were dating last year?"

As the example shows, while this piece of humor originally intended to touch on non-marital sexual life of American presidents, it went into gay matters and religious prejudice of the Jews as well (highlighted by the underlined keywords: gay, Jewish, and Monika). Another example is the dress code among some Iranian politicians. According to Islamic teachings, "simplicity" is one of the manifestations of easy life and liberation from material belongings. However, some politicians went further and seemed to be somehow exaggerative.

Ahmadinejad, for instance, is well known for his non-attractive style. This style used to be a popular second theme mocked by humorists.

Example 13: The text of Mr. Someone's congratulatory message to Dr. Ahmadinejad: O dear elected popular president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, O more beautiful than fairies... do not go alone in the alley... reformists are thieves... they'll steal your jacket!!!

This piece of humor, while accusing the reformists of corruption and embezzlement, also mocks Ahmadinejad's unappealing appearance (keywords underlined).

In this study, we sought to find the most popular themes illustrated through Iranian and American political humor and hence juxtapose information about the socio-political concerns in both contexts. The findings indicated that both contexts share similar themes. Politicians' qualifications, corruption among politicians, and snowballing are some of the shared themes which may reflect the common concerns of both nations. The study also spotted a number of exclusive contextually/culturally-bound themes.

Despite the prominence of the findings of this study, research can also be extended in longitudinal ways and take a historical perspective. Since humor is a social practice (Fine, 1983) that has the capability of manifesting the problems of the society in which it is born and repeatedly shared and since the historical/sociological study of past events is actually "a distinct way of approaching, explaining, and interpreting general sociological problems" (Griffin, 1995, p. 1245), it is suggested that, through an intra-cultural historical analysis of jokes, the main socio-political concerns of before/after Iranian revolution be compared thematically. The findings obtained from this study can offer fresh insights into social satisfaction and political openness.

Every research inevitably has its own challenges and limitations. Among the problems that needed to be addressed in this cross-cultural exploration is cultural background knowledge. According to Apte (1985), anthropological research into humor shows a clear connection between humor and culture, and some of the

documented humor from cultures far distant from our own in time and place often seems coarse, strange, absurd, or simply unintelligible to us. In addition, jokes efficiently exploit indirect language (Dascal, 1985) and the socio-political and ideological considerations tend to be implicit. In view of that, to deal with the possible problems in interpreting jokes or decoding the socio-political and cultural innuendoes embedded in the jokes, we relied on informant intuitions rather than our personal interpretations. As a final word, the present study offers major practical contributions to enhancing our knowledge of media studies, political science, forensic linguistics, journalism, and sociology. The findings can even be applicable to political activists who wish to have a broader view of community issues.

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