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Funny Thing about Elections

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What's the difference between a politician and a stand-up comedian?

In pondering this, it may help to imagine a new reality show called *Do You Want to be a Governor?* or *Pennsylvania's Next Senator*. On the show, once the pathetically lame contestants are eliminated, finalists would face a range of hurdles.

They would produce commercials designed to introduce themselves to voters, work scripted jokes into debates, and slander, while seeming to praise, potential opponents. Their final challenge would involve taking questions from the press after a potentially explosive scandal breaks.

It's sobering to think that if such a show became popular, it could draw a larger group of voters than our actual elections. It's even more sobering to consider the ways it highlights the manipulative uses of humor in politics.

In the three-card Monte world of contemporary campaigning, joking has become a technique of misdirection deployed by candidates and their consultants on both offense and defense. If this seems like a game and therefore harmless, remember that your mind is their playing field, your vote their walk-off home run.

When politicians stumble, when soft spots in their records or personalities are exposed, Plan A is generally a serious, finger-wagging denial, as in "Brothel, what brothel? I thought that was a cheese factory." But when denials fail and the candidate is subjected to scorn and ridicule, Plan B is likely to include apparently self-denigrating humor designed to minimize the fault. If this works, while the politician shifts from butt of joke to joke teller, the catastrophic error becomes a peccadillo.

On offense, campaigns tend to outsource their attacks, as in the mocking of John Kerry during the 2004 presidential race as a flip-flopping hack who lied about his Vietnam War wounds. While claiming to respect his opponent's service, what could candidate Bush possibly have done to prevent delegates at the 2004 Republican convention from wearing Band-Aids and yukking it up about Kerry's allegedly minor cuts and scratches? Should objections be raised, the response is built-in: "Lighten up! We were just kidding."

At times, comic banter misfires. Sen. George Allen (R., Va.) spent a week recently issuing increasingly intense apologies for using an obscure racial slur (macaca) to refer to an American college student of Indian descent. But when a political joke works - as Allen's quip might have had it not become a national story - it's often by way of encouraging listeners not to think critically about the ideas it advances.

When candidates tell jokes, especially as a way of introducing themselves to voters, the strategy is to convey multiple ideas about who they are. Research on attractiveness suggests that when we conclude that someone we are just meeting has a good sense of humor, we are also likely to assume that he or she is interesting, considerate, imaginative, creative, impulsive and perceptive - all highly desirable traits.

The informed and rational evaluation of a candidate can, then, be undermined by an artful joke. In such cases, voters may find that they feel like someone who, after a few drinks, goes home from a bar with a pickup

artist who seemed funny and, therefore, smart and simpatico, only to realize a week later that the person is a jerk. If this jerk ends up running or representing your state, your hangover may well last for years.

The point is not that all political humor is misleading. Satire can expose folly and corruption. Truly spontaneous witticisms, especially if they are self-deprecating, can demonstrate intelligence and modesty - qualities we desperately need in our leaders.

Still, in this and future campaign seasons, when a politician strains for humor, it may be prudent to hold back. In the circle of laughter, skepticism can falter and reflection fail. The candidate you laugh with may soon enough strike you as a very bad joke.

OK, so how is a stand-up comedian different from a politician? One performs a routine; the other speaks softly and carries a big shtick.

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