

“I did not actually hear George Washington say that”: the use of humour in the State of The Union Address

Moshe Machlev

Fairmont State University, USA
mmachlev@fairmontstate.edu

Abstract

The topic of US presidential humour has been investigated in the past, specifically as it was used in presidential debates, press conferences, and at the White House Correspondents' Dinner. However, no such investigation has been dedicated to the study of the use of humour in the State of the Union Address. The current research used the four roles of humour in communication: differentiation, clarification, identification, and enforcement to assess the use of humour in such addresses, and the research also used the four styles of humour: affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating to determine how those styles were used. The research found that most Presidents used humour frequently and they did so, for the most part, for the purpose of enforcement of their policy proposals. The study also found that as it comes to the style of humour that was used by Presidents, in most occasions they used either the aggressive or affiliative styles of humour. There were also differences that were found in how each President used humorous remarks in their address.

Keywords: US politics, US Presidents, presidential humour, political communication, State of the Union address.

1. Introduction

The State of the Union Address in American politics is a tradition that started in 1790 when George Washington gave the first such speech (Shogan, 2015), and after his second speech it was established that a President would deliver a State of the Union Address to Congress. Thomas Jefferson was the first President to not deliver the address to the two chambers. This custom, started by Jefferson, continued until 1913 when Woodrow Wilson brought back the tradition of an in-person speech, and Wilson was also the first to expand the extent of the address from reporting on the activities of the president's office to bringing attention to the president's policy agenda. Following Wilson, some State of the Union addresses were given orally and some in writing. President Franklin Roosevelt brought back the tradition of in person address, yet again, in 1934. The first speech to be broadcasted on television was that of President Harry Truman (in 1947), and in 1965, President Johnson changed the time in which the address was given from

the afternoon to 9:30 in the evening. For the most part, this move was successful for preceding Presidents, as the address drew respectable numbers of TV audiences (Shogan, 2015).

And even in today's fractured media market in which TV ratings for different programmes and events are smaller than in the past, the State of the Union Address still draws significant numbers. For example: close to 32.2 million people watched President Joe Biden's 2024 State of the Union Address and it was the most watched TV broadcast for that evening with the TV show *Households* coming second with 23.1 million viewers (Nielsen, 2024). It is important to note that the changes in the President's delivery of the State of the Union Address were also influenced by the fact that the power of the President became greater in other areas. According to Schudson (1982), events such as the establishment of the bureau of the budget which was under the control of the executive branch, and also the fact that the written word press started to report more on things that were related to the presidency than things that were related to Congress, contributed to the growing significance of the executive branch. And it seems that this pattern has only intensified with the emergence of television news.

Presidents were able to capitalise on this new reality when delivering their messages and clarifying policies. As it comes to the political significance of the event, it has become established that the State of the Union Address is an important tradition in American politics in which the President reports on the present state of the union and also presents policy proposals for the forthcoming legislative year (Shogan, 2015). What started as a form of communication between the President and Congress, has also become a form of communication between the President and the nation. And even though the goal of every administration is to highlight specific policies and proposals, most Presidents use "common rhetorical arguments and ceremonial traditions, Bipartisanship, attention to both past and the future, and optimism" (Shogan, 2015). Some Presidents have chosen to also incorporate humour into their addresses in a deliberate manner and as a rhetorical tool.

It is of interest to examine this use of humour in the State of the Union Address with different Presidents, because this type of an investigation could provide researchers and the public with better approaches to understand specific rhetorical aspects of the addresses and their objective. Also, previous scholarship that examined the use of humour by US Presidents focused on areas such as the humour used in US presidential debates (Rhea, 2012) White House correspondent's dinner (Waisanen, 2015) and press conferences (Carpenter et al., 2019). And differences might exist between those different forms of presidential communication. Presidential debates, for example, occur in a different context than the state of the union addresses, and are characterised by a different style of communication approach. Mulkay (1988) remarked that humour that is used in a dialogue between two people might not be similar to the style of humour that is used when using a protocol (such as in the prepared State of the Union Address). In light of the significance of the State of the Union Address and its specific delivery, it is of interest to add to the scholarly work by also examining the humour used in State of the Union Addresses. Specifically, the research would ascertain how US Presidents use humour in their State of the Union Addresses, and what styles of humour they use in order to achieve different rhetorical objectives.

2. Literature review

The following literature review would discuss US presidential humour in an historical context and would also present the theoretical frameworks that were used in this study, specifically, the four roles of humour in communication and the different styles of humour.

2.1. US presidential humour

While the purpose of this research is to examine the use of US presidential humour in the State of the Union Addresses, it is of interest to provide background about the context of the use of humour by different US Presidents. Gardner (1986) writes that the use of humour by Presidents is purposeful and planned. Grander mentions how all Presidents from Kennedy to Reagan had writers that provided them with humorous materials (such as anecdotes) for the purpose of making them look appealing. And as the idea that humour is important to the political process became more common, Presidents started to rely on professional joke writers from the movie industry. Gardner (1986) also describes how personal aids to Presidents tried to modify the jokes that were told by the President to be more appropriate to an occasion. For example, according to George Reedy (who was the press secretary for Lyndon Johnson), when President Johnson was about to tell an inappropriate joke, Reedy would put his hand over the president's mouth to keep him from telling the jokes. Another example (ibid.) comes from President Kennedy. There were a lot of issues that Kennedy faced when he decided to run for President in 1960's, such as his youth, religion, and inexperience compared to his rival Richard Nixon. Accordingly, Kennedy turned to humour to deflect from his disadvantages in the eyes of the public. Gardner also discusses President Ford, whose advisors tried to create an image for him that would be less dull and wittier than what Ford was perceived in public. And those aides sought to completely change the perception of Ford and humour was at the centre of that strategy. Another perspective on presidential use of humour comes from an interview that appeared in the *Communication Quarterly Journal* (Chapel, 1978) with presidential speechwriter Robert Orben, in which he discusses specific strategies that should be used. Orben observes that

[t]he president, as is true of most powerful people, must utilise a very self-deprecating style of humour. It has to be a self-effacing style of humour and so, more often than not, the president, will begin a speech that puts him-self down in some humorous way. But here again, it is a very delicate style of putdown because it can never be in a serious area. One of the great subjects we can have fun with is his football career or sports

(Chapel, 1978, p. 45).

It is important to note that some Presidents were considered more humorous than others (Sloane, 2001). For example: Lincoln, Coolidge, Roosevelt, Kennedy, and Reagan, were considered some of the more humorous Presidents and their humour seemed to serve a purpose. Lincoln used his sense of humour for the purpose of self-therapy, Coolidge simply because he enjoyed the process of telling jokes, Roosevelt to deflect from his physical condition, and Kennedy and Reagan used humour to deal with uncomfortable situations. And it seems that their approach to humour worked and they were able to achieve their objectives (Ibid). It is also important to mention that the President's humour was a product of their times (Sloane, 2001). For example, Lincoln used ethnic humour often and also made jokes that today will be considered sexual in nature. Coolidge and Roosevelt did not use such humour, but Kennedy was known for telling jokes that today will be considered risqué. But he was also known for telling jokes about his religion (he was the first catholic President) and ethnic background (he was also the first Irish American President). Reagan also told ethnic jokes about groups such as Italian, Polish, and Japanese Americans, but also about his own group (Irish Americans), but those jokes never seemed to have any meanness in them. It also appears that all those Presidents who were mentioned were perceived as likable by the voters, and down to earth, which may have also brought them political dividends (Sloane, 2001).

But there were also Presidents who were considered less humorous than others (Sloane, 2001). For example, both Grover Cleveland and Woodrow Wilson, did not believe that the job of the President was to be funny; rather, it was an important function, and humour was not part

of the aspects of being a President. And Jimmy Carter even commented that: “If the American people wanted Bob Hope as President, they should have elected him” (ibid., p. 1). And even those Presidents that did possess some form of wit, believed that it should not be exhibited while they were Presidents or at the certain times (for example, Hoover refused to show any humorous side that he might have had while the country was going through a major financial depression).

Contemporary scholars examined the use of presidential humour in different contexts. Rhea (2012) examined the use of humour in presidential debates, he looked at factors such as the frequency of the use of humour and the type of humour that was used. He found that the use of humour in presidential debates started with the 1980 series of debates, and he also found that most instances of humour involved candidates who sought to identify with their audiences (this study would use the same communication framework to assess presidential humour that Rhea used, and the concept of identity would be explained further in this research). Waisanen (2015) examined the use of presidential humour in the White House Correspondents’ Dinner. He grasps that after World War II audiences became less homogenous and passive and more diverse, intricate and interactive, accordingly, humour was seen as a way to interact with that type of audience. He also found that “Presidents have used the elastic and inventive nature of enthymematic joking in attempts to move pressing issues outside immediate lines of criticism.” President Clinton who at first preferred not to use humour in his communication with an audience, later embraced this style of communication and even used it when discussing his sexual scandal with Monica Lewinski (Waisanen, 2015). Carpenter et al. (2019) examined the manner in which US Presidents used humour in their press conferences. They found that the humour that was used most by Presidents in this type of an occasion was neutral, which means using humour that is meant to reclaim control of the press conference by using methods that neither diminish somebody nor meant to necessarily produce a laugh. The second most common type of humour that was used was negative: seeking control by disarming critics, separating the opposition, and controlling the press conference, and the use of positive humour was the third most frequently used (to make others feel positive, appear agreeable, and draw support for their view). Basu (2024) examined the use of humour as it exhibits itself in President’s Trump twitter postings. It was found that Trump used Twitter to counteract efforts by conventional news media commentators and news comics, such as Jimmy Fallon, to criticise (and mock) him and his version of America. Basu also claims that the approach worked well for Trump in appealing to his political base and strengthening his relationship with this base.

2.2. Theoretical framework

There are four roles that can be associated with humour and its place in communication and, since those roles are tied to politics (as would be illustrated), those roles were chosen for this study in order to evaluate humour used in the State of the Union Address.

1. Identification: Humour advances support by creating identification between the speaker and the audience (Chang & Gruner, 1981). Also, the appreciation of humour is important in order to bring people closer and at times take away the unfamiliar (Graham, 1995). Meyer (2000) brings the example of Ross Perot, who in one of the 1992 presidential debates said in reaction to another candidate: “If there are some good plans out there, I’m all ears.” Those of us who were familiar with Ross Perot’s anatomy, know that his ears were a prominent part of that anatomy. The purpose of the joke was to show to the audience that Perot has the ability to laugh at himself, and also at the same time let the audience feel a positive sense of familiarity with Perot, who up to that time was not a known political figure.

2. Clarification: Humour can be used to make someone’s views more understandable. This can also advance a better recall of the event by the audience (Goldstein, 1976). And it

also helps in getting more media coverage and focus, especially in a media culture that puts an emphasis on short sound bites. Meyer (2000) brings the example of the second presidential debate from 1984, in which Ronald Reagan said that he is not interested in making age an issue of that campaign and by that exploit his opponent's youth and inexperience. That was humorous because Reagan was the one that was questioned about the age issue due to his advanced age. That remark was the main talk of the media in the final weeks of the campaign.

3. Enforcement: Humour allows a person to express his or her opinions without sounding too negative and without creating distance with the audience, and by this maintain identification with the audience (Graham et al., 1992). Meyer (2000) brings another example from Ronald Reagan. Reagan used to criticise the federal government as wasteful and oppressive; however, often times he did so by using jokes which prevented the audience from thinking about him as a bitter critic.

4. Differentiation: By using humour individuals can illustrate the differences between their own social group and another social group, and between themselves and their adversaries (Goldstein, 1976). An individual, by using humour, has the opportunity to criticise the other side and show its faults without sounding too aggressive (Volpe, 1977). According to Meyer (2000), Robert Dole did just that in the 1996 elections. Dole commented that: "This is not the outlook of my opponent, and he is my opponent, not my enemy. Though he has tried to be a good Republican, there are certain distinctions between the two great parties." Dole was able to show how his opponent (Bill Clinton) is trying to appeal to Republican voters, while making incorrect claims, and by this created a differentiation between himself and his opponent, but he did so by using humour, taking away the negative aspect and focusing on the main idea that he wanted to advocate and that was the real difference in ideology.

The four roles that can be associated with humour and its place in communication were chosen because they allow us to evaluate the humour that is used in a State of the Union Address in a manner that is not random. By using those roles, it is possible to conduct a systematic analysis, and see patterns that emerge rather than if an anecdotal style of analysis would have been conducted.

In addition to the four roles of humour in communication, it is important to note that there are also different styles of humour that are mentioned in the literature (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray & Weir, 2003). Those styles were not conceptualised to include all possible components of humour that fit with every situation; rather the focus is on "interpersonal and intrapsychic functions that humour is made to serve by individuals in their everyday lives." The styles of humour are *affiliative*, *self-enhancing*, *aggressive*, and *self-defeating* humour. Affiliative humour means that humour is used to amuse others, to strengthen relationships, and to ease interpersonal tensions. Self-enhancing humour relates to having a humorous approach as a reaction to stress or a challenge. Aggressive humour means using sarcasm, teasing, making fun of, or disparaging others. And self-defeating humour means unduly self-disparaging humour, trying to amuse others by saying humorous things at one's own expense to receive approval. While this approach relates to distinct individual style of humour, since the State of the Union Address is written, frequently, by different speech writers, in addition to the president, this approach will be used to evaluate the humorous remarks in the speeches of the same president. It is important to incorporate those into this study, in addition to the four roles of humour in communication, because humour can be communicated differently, and also be characterised by different styles within the same type of communication technique.

3. Methodology

In addition to the humorous elements that were described, humour could be defined as a

broad, multifaceted term that represents anything that people say or do that others perceive as funny and tends to make them laugh, as well as the mental processes that go into both creating and perceiving such an amusing stimulus, and also the emotional response of mirth involved in the enjoyment of it

(Martin & Ford, 2018).

Accordingly, the criteria for whether a humorous remark was used in the State of the Union Address was whether the remark was something that was said by the President and was meant to be humorous and if the remark was accompanied by laughter. In order to perform this analysis, transcripts were obtained from the website of the American Presidency Project, which includes all State of the Union Addresses (The American Presidency); the website is maintained by the University of California Santa Barbara. The State of the Union Addresses that were examined begin after the 1965 State of the Union Address delivered by Lyndon Johnson. This is because this research sought to explore addresses that were directed not only to members of Congress, but also to the nation as all (as mentioned, the first prime time TV address was given by Lyndon Johnson in 1965). Since President Ford only made one humorous remark in just one of his State of the Union Addresses, and President Carter made just two humorous remarks in just one address, this analysis would start with the President who was the first to use humour in an expansive manner in most of his State of the Union Addresses: Ronald Reagan.

The transcripts for each address also include the word *laughter* (if members of Congress laughed as a reaction to something said by the president), and to verify the correctness of the transcripts, those addresses were also viewed online, if available. This analysis allowed looking at the frequency of the use of humour by each President, the purpose for which humour was used (differentiation, identification, clarification, and enforcement) and the style in which it was used (affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating humour). It also examined any patterns that emerged from the manner in which humour was used. For example, whether there were differences in the use of humour as it comes to the time period in which it was given (the first address, the final address before the general elections (if the candidate run for re-election) and the final address (if the candidate served two terms). The remarks are grouped by the role of humour that was used (differentiation, identification, clarification, and enforcement) and within each remark the style of humour will also be commented upon.

3.1. Analysis of addresses

3.1.1. Differentiation

President Reagan (1982):

President Washington began this tradition in 1790 after reminding the Nation that the destiny of self-government and the “preservation of the sacred fire of liberty” is “finally staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people.” For our friends in the press, who place a high premium on accuracy, let me say: I did not actually hear George Washington say that. [Laughter] But it is a matter of historic record. [Laughter].

President Reagan was criticised by the press for adding information to the details of a story if it served the message that he was trying to convey (Bowman, 1981). It seems that here he is using

humour to differentiate between himself and the press and criticise them for paying too much attention to detail. Reagan is using a style of humour that is aggressive by teasing the press corps.

President Reagan (1983):

We who are in government must take the lead in restoring the economy. [Applause] And here all that time, I thought you were reading the paper. [Laughter]

According to Condon (2011), the applause that came prior to Reagan's remark were planned in advance by the Democrats after receiving a copy of the speech. The Democrats had an ideological difference with Reagan about the role of government, which the Democrats saw as an entity that should be more involved in people's life, while the President felt the opposite. By applauding the president, the Democrats felt that they are being ironic, Reagan was surprised for a moment but then used his humorous remark in a manner that was meant to differentiate and present the Democrats in a negative manner for not being attentive to his other policy proposals throughout his speech. This can also be classified as an aggressive style of humour because Reagan is using sarcasm toward the democratic members of Congress.

President George H. W. Bush (1991):

I know there are differences among us -- [laughter] -- about the impact and the effects of a capital gains incentive. So tonight, I'm asking the Congressional leaders and the Federal Reserve to cooperate with us in a study, led by Chairman Alan Greenspan, to sort out our technical differences so that we can avoid a return to unproductive partisan bickering.

Bush is using the differentiation role of humour in communication to acknowledge the distinctions between the parties, but he does so in a humorous manner, while seeking bipartisan cooperation. Bush is using the affiliative style of humour because he is seeking to facilitate relationships with the Democrats and decrease conflict.

President George H. W. Bush (1992):

I'll tell you, those of you who say, "Oh, no, someone who's comfortable may benefit from that," you kind of remind me of the old definition of the Puritan who couldn't sleep at night, worrying that somehow, someone somewhere was out having a good time. [Laughter].

Bush is using humour to differentiate between those who support his plan regarding cuts to the capital gains tax, and those who object to it, by presenting those who object to it in a preposterous manner. This fits with the aggressive style of humour, because Bush is ridiculing those who oppose his plan.

President Clinton (1998):

At least equally important, we have to address the real reason for the explosion in campaign costs: the high cost of media advertising. [At this point, audience members responded.]. The President: To the folks watching at home, those were the groans of pain in the audience. [Laughter]

Clinton believed that the Federal Election Commission (FEC) should ban or restrict unregulated contributions to political parties from labour unions, businesses, and rich contributors (King, 1998). He uses humour to differentiate between his view of the need for campaign finance reform from the views of those who wanted to leave the status quo as it is. This fits with the

aggressive style of humour since Clinton is using ridicule to portray those who object his view about the matter.

President Clinton (2000):

I also want to say something, if I might, very personal tonight. The American people watching us at home, with the help of all the commentators, can tell, from who stands and who sits and who claps and who doesn't, that there's still modest differences of opinion in this room. [Laughter] But I want to thank you for something, every one of you. I want to thank you for the extraordinary support you have given, Republicans and Democrats alike, to our men and women in uniform. I thank you for that.

Clinton is using humour to point to the fact that while there are intense differences between the Democratic and the Republican parties, there are also points of agreement such as support for the military. Here he is using the affiliative style of humour, because is seeking to enhance relationships with Republicans, and to decrease partisan tensions.

President George W. Bush (2008):

We faced hard decisions about peace and war, rising competition in the world economy, and the health and welfare of our citizens. These issues call for vigorous debate, and I think it's fair to say, we've answered the call. [Laughter]

Some in Washington argue that letting tax relief expire is not a tax increase. Try explaining that to 116 million American taxpayers who would see their taxes rise by an average of \$1,800. Others have said they would personally be happy to pay higher taxes. I welcome their enthusiasm. I'm pleased to report that the IRS accepts both checks and money orders. [Laughter]

With the first remark Bush is using humour to acknowledge that there are differences between the two parties, but he does so in manner that is affiliative; he is using humour that is meant to amuse others and to also reduce tensions between the two political sides. With the second remark, he is using humour to differentiate between his tax plan initiative, and those who do not believe in its benefits, and he challenges them to make the same personal sacrifices that they are asking others to do. The style here is more aggressive, he is teasing and perhaps also ridiculing those who have different solutions than he does.

President Obama (2010):

At the beginning of the last decade, the year 2000, America had a budget surplus of over \$200 billion. By the time I took office, we had a 1-year deficit of over \$1 trillion and projected deficits of \$8 trillion over the next decade. Most of this was the result of not paying for two wars, two tax cuts, and an expensive prescription drug program. On top of that, the effects of the recession put a \$3 trillion hole in our budget. All this was before I walked in the door. [Laughter].

Of course, none of these reforms will even happen if we don't also reform how we work with one another. Now, I'm not naive. I never thought that the mere fact of my election would usher in peace and harmony...--[Laughter].

This week, I'll be addressing a meeting of the House Republicans. I'd like to begin monthly meetings with both Democratic and Republican leadership. I know you can't wait. [Laughter]

With the first remark, Obama is using humour to differentiate between himself and his predecessor (a Republican president) and to illustrate that the challenges in the present are not

of his making but the making of a Republican administration. Obama is using the aggressive style of humour because he is ridiculing the previous administration and its failures. With the following two remarks, Obama is using humour to emphasise the ideological differences between the two parties, but he is also signalling a will to work with Republicans despite of those differences. Both remarks can be classified as using the affiliative style of humour because Obama is not ridiculing his political opponents, rather, he is acknowledging the differences and seeking to enhance relationships, and to decrease hostilities.

President Obama (2011):

Cutting the deficit by gutting our investments in innovation and education is like lightening an overloaded airplane by removing its engine. It may make you feel like you're flying high at first, but it won't take long before you feel the impact. [Laughter]

Obama is using humour to differentiate between his tax cuts proposals and his opponents. The style of humour that is used here could be described as aggressive, because he is teasing those who have different proposals than he is, as having proposals that are counterproductive.

President Obama (2014):

Now, I do not expect to convince my Republican friends on the merits of this law. [Laughter] But I know that the American people are not interested in refighting old battles. So again, if you have specific plans to cut costs, cover more people, increase choice, tell America what you'd do differently. Let's see if the numbers add up. But let's not have another 40-something votes to repeal a law that's already helping millions of Americans like Amanda. The first 40 were plenty. [Laughter].

Obama is using humour to differentiate between his policy plan regarding health care and the view of that plan as it comes to his political opponents. He is using an aggressive style of humour, since he is ridiculing those who have opposed his plan for health care reform as not offering specific plans that would be useful.

President Obama (2015):

Last year, as we were doing the hard work of imposing sanctions along with our allies, as we were reinforcing our presence with frontline states, Mr. Putin's aggression, it was suggested, was a masterful display of strategy and strength. That's what I heard from some folks. [Laughter] "In Cuba, we are ending a policy that was long past its expiration date. When what you're doing doesn't work for 50 years, it's time to try something new. [Laughter]

2014 was the planet's warmest year on record. Now, one year doesn't make a trend, but this does: 14 of the 15 warmest years on record have all fallen in the first 15 years of this century. Now, I've heard some folks try to dodge the evidence by saying they're not scientists, that we don't have enough information to act. Well, I'm not a scientist, either. But you know what, I know a lot of really good scientists—[laughter]—at NASA and at NOAA and at our major universities.

With those two remarks, Obama is using humour to differentiate between himself and his opponents, as it relates to foreign policy and climate change. He does so in a manner that is aggressive: ridiculing those who oppose his policies as evaluating events in an incorrect manner and as being misinformed.

President Obama (2016):

Now, I'm guessing we won't agree on health care anytime soon, but—[laughter]—a little applause back there. [Laughter] Just a guess. But there should be other ways parties can work together to improve economic security.

Obama is using humour to differentiate between himself and his opponents, as it comes to health care and economic policies, but he is doing so in a manner that is affiliative; the humour is meant to illustrate his willingness work together with Republicans.

3.1.2. Clarification

President Reagan (1984):

People like these are heroes for the eighties. They helped 4 million Americans find jobs in 1983. More people are drawing paychecks tonight than ever before. And Congress helps—or progress helps everyone-well, Congress does too— [Laughter]

This remark is made for the purpose of clarification. While Reagan did not intend to mention Congress, but he unintentionally did, he then switched to his original intention (stating that progress helps). He nonetheless sought to clarify that Congress does have role in American life. Here he is using affiliative humour that is meant to illustrate that he believes that Congress has a positive role in the political process.

President Reagan (1987):

Governors of States were called Excellency. Justices and Chancellors had reserved for them honourable with a capital “H.” For Congressmen, it was honourable with a small “h.” And all others were referred to as “the following respectable characters.” [Laughter]. Well, for this 100th Congress, I invoke special executive powers to declare that each of you must never be titled less than honourable with a capital “H.”

Prior to this, Reagan congratulated the members of Congress for being a part of the 100th Congress, a landmark which also coincided with celebrating 200 years for the Constitution. With this humorous remark, Reagan is clarifying that he values the work of Congress, this is of importance because in the 1986 midterm elections the Democrats took control of both the Senate and the House of representatives, which was considered a major blow to Reagan's agenda (Dionne Jr., 1986). Reagan is using the affiliative style of humour because he is looking to smooth relationships with the Democratic members of Congress.

President Clinton (1995):

More important, I think we all agree that we have to change the way the Government works. Let's make it smaller, less costly, and smarter, leaner, not meaner. [Applause] “I just told the Speaker the equal time doctrine is alive and well.” [Laughter]

Clinton received robust applause from both Democrats and Republicans after mentioning that he would like to make the government smaller and less costly, and then he turned to the speaker of the House: Newt Gingrich. When he mentions the equal time doctrine, he is referring to a rule that mandates broadcasters to treat a candidate for the same political office the same as every other candidate for that office, a law that goes back to 1934 (47 U.S. Code § 315 - Candidates for public office). It appears that Clinton is using this humorous remark for the effect of clarifying that he is content with the fact that both Democrats and Republicans are

supporting his agenda. This is an affiliative style of humour because he facilitates connections between members of both parties by finding topics that both sides can agree on.

When I visited the relief centres after the floods in California, Northern California, last week, a woman came up to me and did something that very few of you would do. She hugged me and said, “Mr. President, I’m a Republican, but I’m glad you’re here.” [Laughter].

Clinton is using humour to clarify that he is there to work for the American people regardless of what party they associate themselves with. Here Clinton is also using the affiliative style of humour: seeking to foster better connections and ease partisan disagreements.

President Clinton (1999):

So let’s raise the minimum wage by a dollar an hour over the next 2 years. And let’s make sure that women and men get equal pay for equal work by strengthening enforcement of equal pay laws. [Applause] That was encouraging, you know. [Laughter]

Clinton is using humour to clarify that he embraces the fact that both Republicans and Democrats applauded him for seeking equal pay for women and men. This is an affiliative style of humour; Clinton is emphasising the commonalities between both parties.

President Clinton (2000):

Last year the Vice President launched a new effort to make communities more liberal— livable— [laughter]—liberal, I know. [Laughter] Wait a minute, I’ve got a punchline now. That’s this year’s agenda; last year was livable, right? [Laughter] That’s what Senator Lott is going to say in the commentary afterwards—[laughter]—to make our communities more livable.

Initially, Clinton intended to say the word *livable* when he mistakenly said liberal (a word with negative connotation at the time as is implied by Clinton himself), he continued with making a humorous comment to clarify what he intended to say, and later with the reference to Senator Lot, he made another humorous remark to further clarify his comment (because the Republicans might later try and capitalise on him substituting the word *livable* with liberal). The style of humour that is used here could be described as self-enhancing because this is the style of humour that is used when an individual seeks to preserve a humorous outlook in the face of stress or adversity, which Clinton might have felt that he is facing after he misspoken.

This fall, at the White House, Hillary had one of her millennium dinners, and we had this very distinguished scientist there, who is an expert in this whole work in the human genome. And he said that we are all, regardless of race, genetically 99.9 percent the same. Now, you may find that uncomfortable when you look around here. [Laughter].

Clinton is using humour to clarify that he believes that there are more things in common between Congress members, than differences, even if they see each other as political opponents. However, the style of humour could be considered aggressive because he uses teasing to clarify this issue.

George W. Bush (2002):

I was proud to work with members of both parties: Chairman John Boehner and Congressman George Miller; Senator Judd Gregg. And I was so proud of our work, I even had nice things to say about my friend Ted Kennedy. [Laughter] I know the folks at the Crawford coffee shop couldn’t

believe I'd say such a thing— [laughter]—but our work on this bill shows what is possible if we set aside posturing and focus on results.

It appears that Bush is using humour for clarification; he is illustrating that even though he is a Republican, he was able to work with Democrats when it came to an issue that is important for the nation: education reform. Bush is using an affiliative style of humour seeking to facilitate relationships with the Democrats.

President Obama (2010):

And if there's one thing that has unified Democrats and Republicans and everybody in between, it's that we all hated the bank bailout. I hated it. I hated it; you hated it. It was about as popular as a root canal. [Laughter]

Now, let's clear a few things up. I didn't choose to tackle this issue to get some legislative victory under my belt. And by now it should be fairly obvious that I didn't take on health care because it was good politics. [Laughter]

With the first humorous remark, Obama is clarifying his stance that even though he decided to bail the banks with his fiscal policy, he was not fond of it. He is using affiliative humour because he seeks to reinforce the commonalities between the two parties; neither were enthusiastic about such a bailout. And with the second remark, Obama is clarifying his view, by using humour, as to why he took on health care reform; because he believed that it was the right thing to do. This is a personal issue to Obama since health care reform cost him political capital. Obama is using the self-enhancing style of humour to deal with the adversity that he had to deal with from those who objected to his plan.

President Obama (2011):

Now, I have heard rumours that a few of you still have concerns about our new health care law. [Laughter] So let me be the first to say that anything can be improved. If you have ideas about how to improve this law by making care better or more affordable, I am eager to work with you.

Obama is using humour to clarify his position that he is willing to hear suggestions about and to modify elements of his health care law. And he does so in an affiliative manner, without ridiculing those who object to the law, and willing to work with them.

President Obama (2014):

We all owe it to the American people to say what we're for, not just what we're against. And if you want to know the real impact this law is having, just talk to Governor Steve Beshear of Kentucky, who's here tonight. Now, Kentucky is not the most liberal part of the country. That's not where I got my highest vote totals. [Laughter]

He is using humour to clarify that he is working for all Americans, and not only for those who voted for him. He does so in a manner that is affiliative, seeking enhanced relationships with the Republican's electorate.

President Obama (2015):

My only agenda—[Laughter]. Audience member. [Inaudible] The President. I know because I won both of them. [Laughter] My only agenda for the next 2 years is the same as the one I've had since the day I swore an oath on the steps of this Capitol: to do what I believe is best for America.

With this remark, Obama is using humour to clarify that he is no longer worried about being elected but he is concerned about doing what is best for the country. This might be an aggressive style of humour because he is using a “put-down” against those who object to his policies by highlighting his successful election wins.

3.1.3. Identification

President Regan (1987):

Incidentally, I’m delighted you are celebrating the 100th birthday of the Congress. It’s always a pleasure to congratulate someone with more birthdays than I’ve had. [Laughter].

This remark is alluding to Reagan’s age (75) which was a part of an age group that experienced some bias as it came to their ability to be vibrant and engaged (Hilts, 1986). Reagan makes light of this issue by using the age reference and allows the audience to identify with him as a joke teller, instead of an older man. The style of humour that is used here is self-enhancing since Reagan is using it in the face of adversity: the negative view of his age.

President George H. W. Bush (1992):

Thank you very much for that warm reception. You know, with the big buildup this address has had, I wanted to make sure it would be a big hit, but I couldn’t convince Barbara to deliver it for me. [Laughter]

I see the Speaker and the Vice President are laughing. They saw what I did in Japan, and they’re just happy they’re sitting behind me. [Laughter]

With the first remark, Bush is using humour to create a more positive identification; he is aware that at this point of his presidency, he is not as popular as he used to be, with his approval ratings being around 44% as opposed to 74% just six months prior (Reinhart, 2018). Accordingly, he is hoping to create an identification with his wife (which would benefit him politically) who at that point had higher approval ratings than he did (Reinhart, 2018). With the second remark, Bush refers to an incident that he had in Japan, in which he vomited on the Prime Minister of Japan, during a state dinner (McDaniel, 2017). He is using humour for the purpose of identification, he wants to be the one delivering the joke, as opposed to the one who is the object of the joke. Both of those remarks could be classified as self-enhancing, and this is because Bush is using humour in the face of stress and adversity; his low polling numbers in an election season and an embarrassing incident that happened to him.

President Clinton (1994):

I’m not at all sure what speech is in the Teleprompter tonight—[laughter]—but I hope we can talk about the state of the Union.

Clinton is seeking to create identification by making light of the fact that a couple of months prior to this speech, while also addressing Congress, his teleprompter had failed, and he was forced to ad lib some portions of his speech (Hains, 2013). Here Clinton is using the self-enhancing style of humour, because he is referring to a stressful situation that happened to him.

President Clinton (1995):

If we agree on nothing else tonight, we must agree that the American people certainly voted for change in 1992 and in 1994. And as I look out at you, I know how some of you must have felt in 1992. [Laughter]

Clinton is alluding to the fact that in the 1994 midterm elections, Republicans took control of both Houses, and also to the fact that many Republicans felt gravely after he won in 1992. Clinton is using humour for the purpose of encouraging identification between the Republicans and himself (and this might benefit him politically). He is using the affiliative style of humour implying sympathy for those who felt the same political disappointment as he felt at that moment.

George W. Bush (2005):

Our generation has been blessed by the expansion of opportunity, by advances in medicine, by the security purchased by our parents' sacrifice. Now, as we see a little gray in the mirror—or a lot of gray— [laughter]—and we watch our children moving into adulthood, we ask the question: What will be the state of their Union? Members of Congress, the choices we make together will answer that question.

Bush is using humour to create an identification between himself and those people from his own generation, who care not only about their future but also the future of their kids. This is meant to encourage them to later put pressure on the legislators to join with President in supporting his agenda. But Bush is using an affiliative style of humour, in this case to facilitate connections with the electorate.

George W. Bush (2006):

We must also confront the larger challenge of mandatory spending, or entitlements. This year, the first of about 78 million baby boomers turn 60, including two of my dad's favourite people— me and President Clinton. [Laughter] This milestone is more than a personal crisis— [laughter]— it is a national challenge. The retirement of the baby boom generation will put unprecedented strains on the Federal Government.

Bush is using humour to create an identification to promote the idea that he is a part of the baby boomers generation, and he is working on plans for their benefit. By mentioning President Clinton (who had developed a close relationship with Bush's father: George H. W. Bush), he might also be trying to appeal to members of Clinton's political party and also create an identification with them. This use of humour is affiliative for the purpose of enabling positive relationships with the electorate and members of the Democratic party.

President Obama (2010):

And by the way, I want to acknowledge our First Lady, Michelle Obama, who this year is creating a national movement to tackle the epidemic of childhood obesity and make kids healthier. [Applause] Thank you, honey. She gets embarrassed. [Laughter]

It appears that Obama is using humour in order for others to have a positive identification with the first lady, portraying her as being helpful and modest. He is using an affiliative style of humour that is meant to foster greater appreciation of his wife.

President Obama (2011):

That dream is why I can stand here before you tonight. That dream is why a working-class kid from Scranton can sit behind me. [Laughter] That dream is why someone who began by sweeping the floors of his father's Cincinnati bar can preside as Speaker of the House in the greatest nation on Earth.

With this humorous remark, Obama is referring to his Vice President and to the speaker of the House (one is a Democrat, and the other is a Republican: Speaker Boehner was from the state of Ohio) and he is using humour to identify himself as someone that embraces the American dream, and appreciates the fact that it benefited different people in different walks of life. Here is using the affiliative style of humour to appeal to members the Republican party and also to members of the electorate and highlight similarities.

President Obama (2016):

Thank you. Mr. Speaker, Mr. Vice President, Members of Congress, my fellow Americans: Tonight marks the eighth year that I've come here to report on the State of the Union. And for this final one, I'm going to try to make it a little shorter. I know some of you are antsy to get back to Iowa. [Laughter] I've been there. I'll be shaking hands afterwards if you want some tips. [Laughter]

Obama is using humour to create identification: the speech was given during the 2016 election campaign that traditionally starts in Iowa, and the contenders would go through the same process that Obama went through when he was running for president, regardless of their party affiliation. Obama is using affiliative style of humour that seeks to entertain others and illustrate commonalities, in this case with members of both parties.

President Trump (2019):

Tonight I am also asking you to join me in another fight that all Americans can get behind: the fight against childhood cancer. Joining Melania in the gallery this evening is a very brave 10-year-old girl, Grace Eline. Every birthday—[applause]. Hi, Grace. [Laughter] Every birthday since she was 4, Grace asked her friends to donate to St. Jude's Children's Hospital. She did not know that one day she might be a patient herself. That's what happened.

Tonight we are also joined by Pittsburgh survivor, Judah Samet. He arrived at the synagogue as the massacre began. But not only did Judah narrowly escape death last fall, more than seven decades ago, he narrowly survived the Nazi concentration camps. Today is Judah's 81st birthday. [Audience members sang "Happy Birthday."] The President. [Laughter] Great. Pittsburgh, PA, resident Judah Samet. Thank you! [Laughter] The President. They wouldn't do that for me, Judah. [Laughter]

With those statements, Trump is using humour to create a more positive identification by being playful. It can be claimed that in the first case humour is used in an affiliative manner for the purpose of entertaining others, while in the second case humour is used in a self-enhancing manner, to deal with the fact that democrats in Congress were not fans of Trump and even felt disdain toward him.

3.1.4. Enforcement

President Reagan (1984):

The problems we're overcoming are not the heritage of one person, party, or even one generation. It's just the tendency of government to grow, for practices and programmes to become the nearest thing to eternal life we'll ever see on this Earth. [Laughter]

Our second great goal is to build on America's pioneer spirit— [laughter] —I said something funny? [Laughter] I said America's next frontier—and that's to develop that frontier. A sparkling economy spurs initiatives, sunrise industries, and makes older ones more competitive.

The first remark has to do with, as mentioned previously (Meyer, 2000), the fact that Reagan used humour to enforce his view that the federal government can be wasteful and inefficient. He does the same here by pointing toward the idea that the growth of the federal government didn't result in better solutions to the nation's challenges. Here he is using the aggressive style of humour since he is ridiculing the concept and operation of the big "government." Regarding the second remark; prior to this Reagan said that he wanted a tax proposal plan presented to him by December 1984, to which the Democratic side reacted with disapproval and then laughter, Reagan attempted to switch the tables and make a humorous remark himself, and indeed once he said "I said something funny?" the Republican side reacted with laughter. Reagan is using humour as an enforcement: his tax plan can be made to a proposal by December 1984. This is also an aggressive style of humour since he is teasing the Democrats who ridiculed him with their initial reaction.

President Reagan (1985):

Mr. Speaker, I know we agree that there must be no forgotten Americans. Let us place new dreams in a million hearts and create a new generation of entrepreneurs by passing enterprise zones this year. And, Tip, you could make that a birthday present. [Laughter]

Reagan might be referring to the Democrat's claim that during Reagan's time not all Americans were enjoying his policies (as was evident from Mario Cuomo's speech at the 1984 Democratic national convention: "a tale of two cities"). The speech was delivered on February 6, 1985, and Reagan's birthday was on the same day. By humorously asking the Democratic speaker of the House of Representatives to grant Reagan a birthday gift by passing a part of his agenda, Reagan is using humour as an enforcement tool. But he is using it in an affiliative manner, attempting to enhance relationships with those across the political aisle.

President Reagan (1988):

History records the power of the ideas that brought us here those 7 years ago—ideas like the individual's right to reach as far and as high as his or her talents will permit; the free market as an engine of economic progress. And as an ancient Chinese philosopher, Lao-Tzu, said: "Govern a great nation as you would cook a small fish; do not overdo it." [Laughter]

Instead of a Presidential budget that gets discarded and a Congressional budget resolution that is not enforced, why not a simple partnership, a joint agreement that sets out the spending priorities within the available revenues? And let's remember our deadline is October 1st, not Christmas. Let's get the people's work done in time to avoid a footrace with Santa Claus. [Laughter]

Over the past few weeks, we've all learned what was tucked away behind a little comma here and there. For example, there's millions for items such as cranberry research, blueberry research, the

study of crawfish, and the commercialisation of wildflowers. And that's not to mention the five or so million [\$5 million] that—so that people from developing nations could come here to watch Congress at work. [Laughter] I won't even touch that. [Laughter] So, tonight I offer you this challenge. In 30 days I will send back to you those items as rescissions, which if I had the authority to line them out I would do so.

My friends, some years ago, the Federal Government declared war on poverty, and poverty won. [Laughter] Today the Federal Government has 59 major welfare programs and spends more than \$100 billion a year on them.

The war against drugs is a war of individual battles, a crusade with many heroes, including America's young people and also someone very special to me. She has helped so many of our young people to say no to drugs. Nancy, much credit belongs to you, and I want to express to you your husband's pride and your country's thanks. Surprised you, didn't I? [Laughter]

With the first humorous remark Reagan, who as mentioned prior was a lifelong critic of the size and scope of the federal government, is using humour to enforce this lifelong belief. And Reagan is also using an aggressive style of humour to ridicule the size of the federal government. With the second humorous remark, Reagan, by referring to Santa Claus, is enforcing the need to have a budget ready in time while stressing cooperation instead of confrontation. Here he is using an affiliative style of humour that is meant to advance political cooperation. Regarding the next two humorous remarks, Reagan is using humour to enforce his view about the waste of public money and the need to cut certain aspects of federal expenses. In both of those instances Reagan is using an aggressive humour to ridicule governmental waste. The last humorous remark has to do with the fact that Nancy Reagan was criticised for her “just say no” to drugs campaign; asking middle age kids to just say no to when offered drugs (Engs & Fors, 1988) with his “supersized you” remark, and the words that preceded it, Reagan is enforcing his belief that his wife's campaign was successful. He is also using a self-enhancing style of humour that is meant to deal with the criticism that his wife received.

President George H. W. Bush (1992):

You know, it's kind of an American tradition to show a certain scepticism toward our democratic institutions. I myself have sometimes thought the aging process could be delayed if it had to make its way through Congress. [Laughter] You will deliberate, and you will discuss, and that is fine. But, my friends, the people cannot wait. They need help now.

Bush is using humour to enforce his view that his policy plans should be enacted, without unnecessary delays. This is an aggressive style of humour that is used; Bush is ridiculing the slow process of passing legislation in Congress.

President Clinton (1995):

For years, Congress concealed in the budget scores of pet spending projects. Last year was no difference. There was a \$1 million to study stress in plants and \$12 million for a tick removal program that didn't work. It's hard to remove ticks. Those of us who have had them know. [Laughter].

By referring to ticks, Clinton is talking about unnecessary spending. Perhaps because ticks are like spending items; they stay in the budget and are hard to remove. He is enforcing the view that he is opposed to excessive governmental spending. Here he is using an aggressive style of humour for the purpose of ridiculing wasteful spending.

President Clinton (1999):

We must strengthen our lead in technology. It was Government investment that led to the creation of the Internet. I propose a 28-percent increase in long-term computing research. We also must be ready for the 21st century from its very first moment, by solving the so-called Y2K computer problem. We had one Member of Congress stand up and applaud. [Laughter] And we may have about that ratio out there applauding at home, in front of their television sets. But remember, this is a big, big problem.

Clinton is using humour to enforce his view (especially to those who did not support his position), that the Y2K technological threat (a problem in the coding of computerised systems that was predicted to create chaos in computers and computer systems around the world at the start of the year 2000) was real. Here he is using an aggressive style of humour to tease those who don't believe the Y2K problem is real, and to urge them to perceive it as a real threat.

President Clinton (2000):

Now, 2 years ago—let me try to balance the seesaw here—[laughter]—2 years ago, as we reached across party lines to reach our first balanced budget, I asked that we meet our responsibility to the next generation by maintaining our fiscal discipline. Because we refused to stray from that path, we are doing something that would have seemed unimaginable 7 years ago. We are actually paying down the national debt. Now, if we stay on this path, we can pay down the debt entirely in just 13 years now and make America debt-free for the first time since Andrew Jackson was President in 1835.

Clinton is using humour to enforce his plan to make the nation debt-free. This is an affiliative style of humour because he seeking to build bridges with Republicans and work together on his policy proposal.

President George W. Bush (2007):

Next, there is the matter of earmarks. These special interest items are often slipped into bills at the last hour, when not even C-SPAN is watching. [Laughter].

By using people's familiarity with CSPAN, the network that follows both Houses of Congress activities at all hours of the day, Bush is employing humour in order to enforce his view that earmarks are wasteful and dubious. This is an aggressive style of humour since he is ridiculing the attempt to pass special interest items in secrecy.

President Obama (2010):

Now, let me repeat: We cut taxes. We cut taxes for 95 percent of working families. We cut taxes for small businesses. We cut taxes for first-time home buyers. We cut taxes for parents trying to care for their children. We cut taxes for 8 million Americans paying for college. [Applause] I thought I'd get some applause on that one. [Laughter]

Now, I know that some in my own party will argue that we can't address the deficit or freeze Government spending when so many are still hurting. And I agree, which is why this freeze won't take effect until next year, when the economy is stronger. That's how budgeting works. [Laughter]

Rather than fight the same tired battles that have dominated Washington for decades, it's time to try something new. Let's invest in our people without leaving them a mountain of debt. Let's meet our responsibility to the citizens who sent us here. Let's try common sense--[Laughter]--a novel concept.

With the first humorous remark, Obama is using humour to enforce his view that his plan for tax cuts is appropriate and desirable, and this is something that should be supported by his political opponents. It is an aggressive form of humour, because Obama is teasing and ridiculing those who do not approve of his plan. With the next two humorous remarks, Obama is using humour for the same objective: enforcing his view that his ideas regarding the deficits and debt reduction are correct and stem from common sense. With both of those remarks he is using an aggressive style of humour to ridicule those who object to his plan as uninformed.

President Obama (2011):

We need to get behind this innovation. And to help pay for it, I'm asking Congress to eliminate the billions in taxpayer dollars we currently give to oil companies. I don't know if you've noticed, but they're doing just fine on their own. [Laughter]

Within 25 years, our goal is to give 80 percent of Americans access to high-speed rail. This could allow you to go places in half the time it takes to travel by car. For some trips, it will be faster than flying, without the pat-down. [Laughter]

There are at least five different agencies that deal with housing policy. Then there's my favourite example: The Interior Department is in charge of salmon while they're in fresh water, but the Commerce Department handles them when they're in saltwater. [Laughter] I hear it gets even more complicated once they're smoked. [Laughter]

With the first humorous remark, Obama is using humour to enforce his idea that oil companies do not need additional help from the government. This is an aggressive style of humour that is used to tease those who believe that oil companies should get unnecessary benefits. With the second remark, Obama is using humour to enforce his view that a high-speed rail is needed. In addition, he implies that the speed rail does not need the additional security procedures enacted due to terrorism. This is an affiliative style of humour that is used to amuse others by using common experiences (the airport security process). With the last remark, he is using humour to enforce his view that he sees some governmental agencies or regulations as being wasteful. This is an aggressive humour targeting unnecessary governmental spending.

President Obama (2012):

We got rid of one rule from 40 years ago that could have forced some dairy farmers to spend \$10,000 a year proving that they could contain a spill, because milk was somehow classified as an oil. With a rule like that, I guess it was worth crying over spilled milk. [Laughter]

Obama is using humour to enforce his view that his reforms in cutting regulations are beneficial. Obama is using a common saying (crying over spilled milk) in an affiliative manner (amusing others) to illustrate the negative aspect of unnecessary polices.

President Obama (2013):

The CEO of Siemens America—a company that brought hundreds of new jobs to North Carolina—said that if we upgrade our infrastructure, they'll bring even more jobs. And that's the attitude of a lot of companies all around the world. And I know you want these job-creating projects in your district. I've seen all those ribbon-cuttings. [Laughter]

Obama is using humour to enforce his view about the importance of job-creating projects, however, his remarks also alluded to the issue of earmarks, an issue that had Congress being criticised for harshly (Everett & Snider, 2013). Also, ribbon cuttings were at times intricate and

needless, as well as the ones that Obama partook in for his stimulus bills. But his attempt at humour was not successful: only few Congressmen and Congresswomen laughed. Here it seems that there was an attempt for an affiliative style of humour, but it was not successful because some viewed it as an aggressive style of humour; criticising their spending as members of Congress.

President Obama (2014):

It is time to do away with workplace policies that belong in a “Mad Men” episode. [Laughter] This year, let’s all come together—Congress, the White House, businesses from Wall Street to Main Street—to give every woman the opportunity she deserves. Because I believe when women succeed, America succeeds.

In the year since I asked this Congress to raise the minimum wage, five States have passed laws to raise theirs. Many businesses have done it on their own. Nick Chute is here today with his boss, John Soranno. John’s an owner of Punch Pizza in Minneapolis, and Nick helps make the dough. [Laughter] Only now he makes more of it. [Laughter] John just gave his employees a raise to 10 bucks an hour, and that’s a decision that has eased their financial stress and boosted their morale.

That’s why tonight I ask every American who knows someone without health insurance to help them get covered by March 31. [Applause] Help them get covered. Moms, get on your kids to sign up. Kids, call your mom and walk her through the application. It will give her some peace of mind, and plus, she’ll appreciate hearing from you. [Laughter]

With the first remark, Obama is using humour by referring to the TV series *Mad Man* (a TV series that portrayed the chauvinistic world of ad agencies in the 1960’s) to enforce the importance of his plan for workplace regulations that are fair and equal. He is using an aggressive style of humour to ridicule those who have outdated views regarding women in the workplace. With the next two remarks, Obama is using humour to enforce the success of his minimum wage policy and to highlight the importance of his health care plan. In both of those remarks he is using the affiliative style of humour that is meant to entertain others while also drawing attention to the positive aspects of his policies.

President Obama (2015):

At every step, we were told our goals were misguided or too ambitious, that we would crush jobs and explode deficits. Instead, we’ve seen the fastest economic growth in over a decade, our deficits cut by two-thirds, a stock market that has doubled, and health care inflation at its lowest rate in 50 years. This is good news, people. [Laughter]

But here’s the thing: Those of us here tonight, we need to set our sights higher than just making sure Government doesn’t screw things up—[Laughter]

Of course, nothing helps families make ends meet like higher wages. That’s why this Congress still needs to pass a law that makes sure a woman is paid the same as a man for doing the same work. I mean, it’s 2015. [Laughter]

With the first remark, Obama is using humour to enforce his view that his policy initiatives are successful. With the second remark, he is using humour to enforce his idea that the government needs to play a bigger role in the economy, and with the third remark, Obama is using humour to enforce his notion about equal pay. With all of those remarks, it seems that Obama is using the aggressive style of humour teasing those who object to his policy initiatives and their success.

President Obama (2016):

But tonight I want to go easy on the traditional list of proposals for the year ahead. Don't worry, I've got plenty—[Laughter]—from helping students learn to write computer code to personalising medical treatments for patients.

We also need benefits and protections that provide a basic measure of security. It's not too much of a stretch to say that some of the only people in America who are going to work the same job, in the same place, with a health and retirement package for 30 years are sitting in this Chamber. [Laughter]

How do we reignite that spirit of innovation to meet our biggest challenges? Sixty years ago, when the Russians beat us into space, we didn't deny Sputnik was up there. [Laughter]

We need the same level of commitment when it comes to developing clean energy sources. Look, if anybody still wants to dispute the science around climate change, have at it. [Laughter]

I believe we've got to reduce the influence of money in our politics so that a handful of families or hidden interests can't bankroll our elections. And if our existing approach to campaign finance reform can't pass muster in the courts, we need to work together to find a real solution. Because it's a problem. And most of you don't like raising money. [Laughter] I know. I've done it.

With the first remark, Obama is using humour to enforce his policy ideas (some deride him for trying to do too much). He is using an affiliative style of humour seeking to entertain others while advancing his agenda. With the second remark, he is using humour to enforce his view that his economic policies are needed and that Congress members that enjoy certain benefits should be fairer toward the American people, that might not be as privileged as they are. With the next two remarks, Obama is using humour to enforce his belief that there is a need to invest more in research and development. With all those three remarks, Obama is using an aggressive style of humour that ridicule those who object to his plans, plans that he believes are based on research and sound judgment. With the last remark, Obama is using humour to enforce his view about campaign finance reform. But he is doing so using the affiliative style of humour highlighting commonalities between himself and members of Congress who went through the tiring system of raising campaign money.

President Trump (2018):

One of Staub's employees, Corey Adams, is also with us tonight. Corey is an all-American worker. He supported himself through high school, lost his job during the 2008 recession, and was later hired by Staub, where he trained to become a welder. Like many hard-working Americans, Corey plans to invest his tax cut raise into his new home and his two daughters' education. Corey, please stand. And he's a great welder. [Laughter]

Homeland Security Investigations Special Agent Celestino Martinez. He goes by "D.J." and "C.J." He said, "Call me either one." [Laughter] So we'll call you "C.J." [Laughter] Served 15 years in the Air Force before becoming an ICE agent and spending the last 15 years fighting gang violence and getting dangerous criminals off of our streets. Tough job... And I asked C.J., "What's the secret?" He said, "We're just tougher than they are." And I like that answer. [Laughter] Now, let's get Congress to send you—and all of the people in this great Chamber have to do it; we have no choice. C.J., we're going to send you reinforcements, and we're going to send them to you quickly. It's what you need.

Trump is using humour to enforce his economic policies (the first statement), and with the following two humorous remarks he is using humour to enforce his border security policy. In

both instances he is using the affiliative style of humour that is meant to entertain others and also create acceptance and political cooperation regarding those topics.

President Trump (2019):

After 24 months of rapid progress, our economy is the envy of the world, our military is the most powerful on Earth, by far, and America is again winning each and every day. Members of Congress: The state of our union is strong. Audience members. U.S.A.! U.S.A.! U.S.A.! The President. That sounds so good. [Laughter]

As we work to defend our people's safety, we must also ensure our economic resurgence continues at a rapid pace. No one has benefited more from our thriving economy than women, who have filled 58 percent of the newly created jobs last year. [At this point, Democratic Congresswomen joined other Members of Congress, Cabinet members, and attendees in a standing ovation.] You weren't supposed to do that. Thank you very much. Thank you very much. [Laughter]... All Americans can be proud that we have more women in the workforce than ever before. [Democratic Congresswomen joined other Members of Congress and others in another standing ovation.] Don't sit yet. You're going to like this. [Laughter]

With the first remark, Trump is using humour to enforce the view that the United States is thriving under his leadership. He is using an affiliative style of humour that is supposed to bring positive emotions. Regarding the second remark, Trump is using humour to enforce the idea that his economic policies benefit women a great deal. Trump again is using an affiliative humour that is meant to promote acceptance and appreciation of his policies among the Democratic members of Congress.

President Trump (2020):

Just weeks ago, for the first time since President Truman established the Air Force more than 70 years earlier, we created a brand-new branch of the United States Armed Forces. It's called the Space Force. Very important. In the Gallery tonight, we have a young gentleman. And what he wants so badly—13 years old—Iain Lanphier... As Iain says: "Most people look up at space. I want to look down on the world." [Laughter]

With every action, my administration is restoring the rule of law and reasserting the culture of American freedom. Working with Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell—thank you, Mitch—and his colleagues in the Senate, we have confirmed a record number of 187 new Federal judges to uphold our Constitution as written. This includes two brilliant new Supreme Court Justices, Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh. Thank you. And we have many in the pipeline. [Laughter]

Trump is using humour, in both statements, to enforce different elements of his agenda: the creation of a space force, and judicial nominees. With the first humorous remark he is using the affiliative style of humour that is meant to amuse others. The second humorous remark might be judged as affiliative to Republicans who support his judicial appointments, but it could be seen as aggressive in the eyes of Democrats who object to his appointments.

4. Data analysis and findings

Out of the 34 state of the union addresses that were examined, humour was used in 28 of those (82%). As it comes to the presidents that used humour the most (and served for eight years): Barack Obama used humour in all of his addresses (100%), Ronald Reagan used humour in six of his address (86%), Bill Clinton used humour in five of his addresses (71%), and George W.

Bush also used humour in five of his addresses (71%). As it comes to the presidents that used humour the most (and served for four years): Donald Trump used humour in all his addresses (100%), and George H. W. Bush used humour in two of his addresses (66%). Overall, the presidents made 79 humorous remarks. The majority of these were for the purpose of enforcement (38 such remarks) and the style of humour that was mostly used across all remarks was affiliative (37 such instances) with the aggressive style coming close second (34 such remarks). Tables 1 highlights the descriptive statistics that were found.

Table 1 Frequencies for the roles and styles of humour

<i>President</i>	Differentiation (humour style)	Clarification (humour style)	Identification (humour style)	Enforcement (humour style)	Overall
<i>Reagan</i>	2 (2 aggressive)	2(2 affiliative)	1 (self-enhancing)	8(5 aggressive, 2 affiliative, 1 self-enhancing)	13 (7 aggressive, 4 affiliative, 2 self-enhancing)
<i>G.H.W.Bush</i>	2 (1 affiliative, 1 aggressive)	None	2 (2 self-enhancing)	1 (aggressive)	5 (2 self-enhancing, 2 aggressive, 1 affiliative)
<i>Clinton</i>	2 (1 aggressive, 1 affiliative)	5 (3 affiliative, 1 aggressive, 1 self-enhancing)	2 (1 self-enhancing, 1 affiliative)	3 (2 aggressive, 1 affiliative)	12 (6 affiliative, 4 aggressive, 2 self-enhancing)
<i>G.W. Bush</i>	2 (1 affiliative, 1 aggressive)	1 (affiliative)	2 (2 affiliative)	1 (aggressive)	6 (4 affiliative, 2 aggressive)
<i>Obama</i>	8 (5 aggressive, 3 affiliative)	5 (3 affiliative, 1 aggressive, 1 self-enhancing)	3 (3 affiliative)	19 (12 aggressive, 7 affiliative)	35 (18 aggressive, 16 affiliative, 1 self-enhancing)
<i>Trump</i>	None	None	2 (1 affiliative, 1 self-enhancing)	6 (6 affiliative)	8 (7 affiliative, 1 self-enhancing)
<i>Overall</i>	16 (10 aggressive, 6 affiliative)	13 (9 affiliative, 2 aggressive, 2 self-enhancing)	12 (7 affiliative, 5 self-enhancing)	38 (22 aggressive, 15 affiliative, 1 self-enhancing)	79 (37 affiliative, 34 aggressive, 8 self-enhancing)

Next, the study looked at whether there were differences between the humour used in different addresses as it comes to the time period in which those were given. When examining specific time periods in which addresses were given, Presidents used their first State of the Union Address mostly for purpose of enforcement (with the affiliative style of humour being mostly used). Regarding state of the union addresses that were given when Presidents were running for re-election, they mostly used humour for the purpose of enforcement (with the affiliative style of humour and aggressive style of humour being mostly used), and when they gave their last address after serving two terms, they also mostly used humour for the purpose of enforcement (with the affiliative style of humour being mostly used). Table 2 represents those findings.

Table 2. Frequencies for the different time periods

<i>Address style</i>	Differentiation (humour style)	Clarification (humour style)	Identification (humour style)	Enforcement (humour style)
<i>The first address</i>	4 (2 affiliative, 2 aggressive)	3 (2 affiliative, 1 self-enhancing)	2 (1 self-enhancing, 1 affiliative)	5 (3 aggressive, 2 affiliative)
<i>The address before the general elections (if the candidate run for re-election)</i>	1 (aggressive)	1 (affiliative)	2 (2 self-enhancing)	6 (3 affiliative, 3 aggressive)
<i>The final address of the presidency (if finished two terms)</i>	4 (3 affiliative, 1 aggressive)	2 (1 aggressive, 1 self-enhancing)	1 (affiliative)	11 (5 aggressive, 5 affiliative, 1 self-enhancing)

5. Discussion

This research sought to examine the use of humour, by US Presidents, in their State of the Union Address as it relates to using humour as a communication tool. Four such roles of humour in communication were examined: differentiation, clarification, identification, and enforcement, in addition four styles of humour were also chosen to examine in which manner the four roles of humour were being communicated. From the examination it was discovered that all Presidents used humour in their state of the union addresses. They did so mostly for the purpose of enforcing their policy proposals and they did so by using, in most cases, the aggressive style of humour. This is understandable since the purpose of the state of the union address, in addition to highlighting previous accomplishments, is to push for new legislation. The second most used role of humour was differentiation, and indeed when Presidents make policy proposal, they seek to differentiate those from the proposals of their political opponents who offer their own policies

and political solutions. Within this category the most used humour style was also the aggressive style of humour, which is understandable considering the effort is to highlight the positives of one's policy suggestion and also the downside of the opposing policies. Clarification came third as the most used humour, and the most common humour style within this category was the affiliative style of humour. Since clarifying a policy or an idea does not mean necessarily pointing to the fault in other's ideas, but rather to fix misconceptions, it seems that the use of affiliative humour is more understandable within this category. Lastly, the identification category of humour mostly was used together with affiliative style of humour. This can be attributed to the idea that when a President wanted to create better sense of identification, to use aggressive humour would have been counterproductive and might have created negative views of the President as opposed to positive ones.

When comparing the humour that was used in debates to the humour that was used in State of the Union Addresses, the humour that was used in debates was shown to be mostly used for the purpose of identification (Rhea, 2012). While in the State of the Union Address (as was discovered in this study) humour was used, for the most part, for the purpose of enforcement and this can be attributed to several factors. In debates, policy ideas and specific plans of action are presented but since debates are between two political opponents, the main purpose is to appear more likable than your opponent, and the identification type of humour is the preferable one to use. Another issue is that with State of the Union Address there is no back and forth between two candidates, accordingly, the President can use humour without the fear that the same type of humour will be pointed toward them. Related to that is that during a State of the Union Address the President is not rebuked by others, accordingly, their enforcement style of humour does not meet any objection and can be communicated with the electorate without being contradicted.

And as it comes to the time periods in which those addresses were given, there were no real differences between the speeches that were given during the first address, before the general election, and the last address (after serving two terms). Most of those addresses belong to the enforcement type and either the aggressive or affiliative styles of humour. This might be attributed to the fact that with the first address (which is also the last address before the midterm election) a President seeks to pass policies that will help his party (and his own political capital), and he does so by using humour that either illustrates the weaknesses in the policies of his rival party or he attempts to work with the rival party to pass policy proposals. The same could be written about addresses before the general elections. As it comes to addresses that were delivered at the end of the presidency (if the candidate served two terms), those addresses were also mostly for the purpose of enforcement but were characterised by either the affiliative style of humour or the aggressive styles of humour, and one instance of a self-enhancing style of humour. At this stage, Presidents are no longer running for re-election and most of their political battles are behind them, so while they still care about the remaining months of their presidency and how to enhance their legacy, they might be in less of a combative mode as it comes to their feelings toward the other political party.

Examining the different US Presidents and their addresses, several observations could be made. President Reagan was known as the "great communicator" for the manner in which he was able to use the media in order to connect with the electorate (Stewart et al., 2024) and humour was one of the ways in which he did so. Reagan used humour to criticise authority, but without appearing negative and he also used humour to advance positive emotions (Meyer, 2009). And in his use of humour in state of the union addresses Reagan did not deviate from what he was known for: criticising authority but without sounding negative. Most of his humorous remarks involved using humour for the purpose of enforcement, and he mostly used aggressive humour that criticised ideas and institutions. He used humour for the purpose of differentiation and clarification less often. Perhaps because Reagan sought to illustrate mainly

how his ideas differ from the established and failed ideas of big government, that there was no need to illustrate the difference between his policies and the Democratic party policy proposals.

George H. W. Bush was known to be the opposite to President Reagan as it came to communicating with the public. He did not believe that public rhetoric is of importance, and he was even known to use the phrase “the vision thing” which meant that he did not see much significance in using rhetoric to explain himself, rather he believed that actions speak louder than words (Denton, 2012). From all the Presidents that were examined, he used humour the least (even when compared with another one term president: Donald Trump), and he mostly used it for the purpose of differentiation and identification. But even he used humour more forcefully in his last State of the Union Address before the general election, a speech that was described by the media, before he took the stage, as one of the most important speeches of his presidency. He started the address with the two humorous remarks that were described prior: about his wife being more popular than he was and the “throwing up incident.” He also used more humour that was either aggressive or self-enhancing.

President Clinton, while running for President in 1992, did not employ humour and some speculate that the reason for this was that Clinton, one of the younger candidates for the presidency, did not want to appear as arrogant and disrespectful toward the older generation of leaders, and also not to appear as someone who is trying to minimise important issues (Gardner, 1994). But as mentioned prior, Clinton started to use humour to deal with the different scandals that engulfed him. In his state of the union addresses, Clinton used humour mostly for the purpose of clarification, and across all of his addresses, he used mostly the affiliative style of humour. This might be because after the 1994 midterm elections, when Clinton started to use humour more frequently, he sought to engage the Republicans more (the Republicans had won substantially in 1994 midterm elections and ended up controlling both houses), because he needed their votes in order to be able to pass any type of legislation.

President George W. Bush was known for his self-deprecating sense of humour in different occasions (Kitazume, 2008). In his state of the union addresses he used humour mostly for the purpose of differentiation and identification, and across all of his state of the union addresses he used, for the most part, the style of humour that is affiliative. He did not use the self-enhancing or the self-defeating styles of humour, even though those two styles of humour have some similarities with the self-deprecating type of humour. This might be because in a State of the Union Address which is given to the electorate and the members of both houses, there is a need to maintain a ceremonial type of atmosphere, and Bush who was already ridiculed for being simple minded and irresponsible needed to walk a fine line between using humour in ways that will benefit him, rather than using it in ways that might reinforce the view of those who criticised him (Zengerle, 2004).

President Obama was known for having a developed sense of humour that some considered “edgier and more pop-culture-influenced” than previous and contemporary politicians (Heil, 2016). And in some instances, his humour could even be considered as offensive (specifically as it came to the white house correspondent’s dinner.) And this was done in order to deal with the intense criticism that his administration was receiving with things such as the use of drones and the “birther theory” (Nixon, 2019). It seems that the humour that Obama used in the state of the union addresses was not as offensive, but he still maintained his edge when using humour. He used humour mostly for enforcement purposes, and across all of his humorous remarks aggressive humour was the style of humour that was mostly used. Obama is also the President that used the most humorous remarks in his addresses, this might be influenced by his age when becoming President and the cultural shift that saw humour incorporated more into politics (Kayam et al., 2014).

President Trump was seen by some as a provocateur and an individual that sought to change established ways of communication, accordingly, his humour could be insulting and intense

(Martins, 2018). However, according to the analysis in this study, while Trump used humour mostly for the purpose of enforcement, across all of his addresses, he used the affiliative style of humour the most. It seems that the formality and tradition of those addresses made him approach those differently than trying to appeal just to his base, rather, he also wanted to appeal to the general public and members of Congress from the Democratic party.

6. Conclusion

It seems that the use of humour in State of the Union Address is a communication technique that was embraced by most of the Presidents that were examined in this study, and they used it mostly for the purpose of enforcing their policy proposals and the style of humour that they employed to do so was mostly affiliative but they also used the aggressive style of humour to a great extent (and it is worth noting that the aggressive style of humour was used, for the most part, to attack institutions or other policy proposals as opposed to attacking individuals). Considering the fact that Presidents need congressional support this seems like a common-sense approach and this use of humour might have also assisted them with the public who was watching the speech and could put pressure on Congress members to approve such policy proposals. Some Presidents also included their spouses in their humorous remarks, especially as it came to using humour for the purpose of identification, and they did so mostly to highlight their spouse's good actions or popularity with the electorate, perhaps because the first lady is considered less of a political player but is still associated with the president. And while the use of humour was not the only communication tool that Presidents used; it is of note that they did use humour to push forward their agenda. There were differences between the Presidents in using humour and that depended on the individual president, their circumstances, and propensity to use certain types and styles of humour (which was also influenced by their speech writers). But still, each President and their speech writers deemed humour as important enough to use as a part of their State of the Union Address rhetoric, which illustrates the place that humour has in political communication.

While the study made an effort to ensure that all the remarks that were considered as humorous were humorous, the judgment of whether a remark can be considered as used for the purpose of enforcement, differentiation, identification, or clarification and what was the humour style that was used is open for interpretation and differing views. It is also of interest to examine how humorous remarks were viewed among the public and members of Congress in the aftermath of the address. And it is also of interest to examine this view of the address in order to assess the possible effect of such use of humour (for example: examining the approval of different policy proposals and a president's approval ratings after an address was given).

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