

American Popular Culture, Politics, and Comedy:
How Saturday Night Live Delivers the “News”

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ABSTRACT

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Saturday Night Live has delved into the realm of politics throughout its forty-one seasons as a means of generating humor through satirical and parodical representations of politicians. This thesis explores Saturday Night Live during election years in particular, when the show generates a great deal of its content from the surrounding political atmosphere to comment on the issues at hand in a way that most often contrasts the style of reporting done by traditional hard news programs. The increasing role of entertainment in news delivery sheds light on the blurred lines between news and entertainment news, and this thesis will explore these continuously fading lines. Saturday Night Live explores pertinent issues, through the use of humor, as a means of delivering a comical analysis of the political matters at hand, and, in doing so, the show reveals a potential to influence viewers and the hard news media world based on the critical commentary and interpretations it delivers.

Chapter 1: Politics in American Media Culture

The portrayal of politics in American media varies in form, delivery, and content based on the specific media outlet, and such differentiations affect the overall messages each source desires to deliver. These media channels can be found in the form of newspapers, radio stations, television networks, internet communications, and various other types of broadcasts, and the importance of these sources lies within the relationship they share with popular culture, politics, and public opinion. While these forms of media may aim to deliver information in ways which render unique effects, Daniel Shea argues in his book, *Mass Politics: The Politics of Popular Culture*, “These messages have a collective effect, building upon and reconfiguring prior information, and in the end shaping each person’s political identity and political culture” (Shea 4). Consumers of American political media are offered a wide variety of platforms to gather and interpret information, and this marketplace of ideas reveals the depth and complexity found within the nature of news media.

By examining the variations in which politics are discussed in American media, this chapter will delve into the complex structures of news and entertainment news in particular regard to the use of comedy and satire to deliver political critiques. Looking closely at the differentiations between news and entertainment news, as well as their delivery modes, the stage will be set to study the content of these media sources. Distinctions between hard and soft news are presented to highlight the different varieties of topics covered by news outlets and the types of audiences each attract, as well as to shed light on the increasing presence of soft news topics across traditional news outlets and more entertainment-focused sources. These differences call

attention to the subsequent discussion of the blurred lines between news and entertainment news, which is increasingly prevalent in contemporary society. Looking more closely at the portrayal of politics in media, this chapter will examine the use of satire to evaluate and oftentimes criticize this subject and the ensuing effects. Highlighting the late-night variety show, *Saturday Night Live*, the political commentary presented on the show will be discussed in regard to the discussion of news versus entertainment news. Lastly, criticism of entertainment news sources, such as *Saturday Night Live*, will be revealed to provoke questions about these representations and interpretations being presented to wide American audiences.

News vs. Entertainment News

Traditionally, distinctions have been made between “appropriate” ways to gather news, sources which focus on delivering cultural or political facts to wide audiences, and entertainment news sources, which present or reinterpret facts in ways which may generate greater viewing pleasure. Believing that there is a very clear difference between news and entertainment, with traditional news forms taking the upper hand, political communications scholars, as Michael Delli Carpini and Bruce Williams discuss in *After Broadcast News: Media Regimes, Democracy, and the New Information Environment*, “have produced a large literature that either implicitly or explicitly assumes the validity of this information hierarchy” (Delli Carpini & Williams 10). While extensive research and documentation has been performed on media sources which are deemed factual and respectable to determine the impact such may have on the knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors of the public, Delli Carpini and Williams argue that far less attention has been paid to the possible influences of other forms of media; thus, indicating that these

alternative media genres are not seen as “appropriate” when delivering relevant news (Delli Carpini & Williams 9-10).

Continuing on in their discussion of news and entertainment, Delli Carpini and Williams delve into the difficult realm of distinction when attempting to characterize the two as completely separate entities. When struggling to find elements which would mark news and entertainment as dissimilar, the authors write, “The opposite of ‘news’ is not ‘entertainment,’ as the news is often diversionary or amusing (the definition of entertainment) and what is called ‘entertainment’ is often neither of these things” (Delli Carpini & Williams 10). While distinctions between news and entertainment do exist, evident through delivery modes and viewership, the differentiations may seem more easily expressible than they actually are. Notable similarities between media sources which are deemed as “news” and those which are referred to as “entertainment” are visible in terms of the content delivered by each source and their ability to impact the public, which are topics to be discussed later.

Television and Its Means of Delivering News

Narrowing in on particular forms of media expression will help to paint a clearer picture of the ways in which political matters are delivered to American audiences and the potential effects of such. While television is a media outlet in its entirety, within its realm, television embodies several different means of communication in which viewers are informed. Both soft news and hard news can be delivered via television, but the content delivered by each regarding politics often vary greatly. Thomas Patterson discusses the differences in, “Doing Well and Doing Good: How Soft News and Critical Journalism Are Shrinking the News Audience and

Weakening Democracy - And What News Outlets Can Do About It,” stating, “Hard news refers to coverage of breaking events involving top leaders, major issues, or significant disruptions in the routines of daily life, such as an earthquake or airline disaster. Information about these events is presumably important to citizens’ ability to understand and respond to the world of public affairs” (Patterson 3). Examples of hard news media include network evening newscasts and newspapers such as *The New York Times* (Baum & Jamison 2). Patterson refers to all other types of news as soft news, or “market-centered journalism,” and, as hard news is often more focused on public policy, there has been a decline in hard news stories and an increase in soft news stories due to studies which show entertainment news is better capable of pulling in and holding viewers (Patterson 5). Soft news media typically include “entertainment and tabloid news shows, network newsmagazines, and daytime and late night talk shows,” such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* (Baum & Jamison 2).

Diving deeper into the discussion of hard versus soft news, Patterson details the characteristics of soft news which have created its significant appeal to audiences. Soft news is not only described as less public-policy oriented, but also as “sensational, more personality-centered, less time-bound, more practical, and more incident-based than other news” (Patterson 4). Since media outlets ranging from local and national television news and newspapers to daytime and late-night talk shows and entertainment news programs can each deliver soft news and are doing so more increasingly according to Patterson, Matthew Baum argues that differentiations between the delivery of soft news can be measured by the degree to which each source delves into such topics rather than the kind of media outlet the news is coming from in his essay, “Sex, Lies, and War: How Soft News Brings Foreign Policy to the Inattentive

Public” (Baum 92). While hard news and soft news can be distinguished due to the content which they deliver more so than the outlet each comes from, soft news in and of itself acts in the same manner. Topics considered “soft” are increasingly being seen amongst a variety of both traditional news and entertainment news sources, and the differentiating lines between these sources are beginning to blur as topics typically more prevalent in soft news media are entering into the realm of hard news.

The differentiation between soft news and hard news leads to a further discussion on the divisions present amongst viewers, the consumers of these television media structures, while the growing intersections between the two draw connections between news and entertainment. As Matthew Baum and Angela Jamison discuss in "The Oprah Effect: How Soft News Helps Inattentive Citizens Vote Consistently,” those who engage themselves in shows which deliver soft news tend to “have comparatively little education or interest in politics” and are more entertainment-focused, whereas those who actively engage in hard news shows are more public affairs-oriented (Baum & Jamison 946-947). Understanding that consumer divisions exist based on cultural and political interest aids in comprehending the reasoning behind which soft and hard news have developed, but further separations amongst television audience members exist within another vital category.

While television viewers of both hard and soft news may be segregated based on their interest in popular culture and politics, age plays an important role in television viewership, as well. As both soft and hard news can be presented on television, divisions amongst viewers can exist based on the kind of program these different types of news are broadcasted on. For example, late-night talk shows often draw a different audience than traditional news programs,

and such shows a divide between those who seek out soft news versus hard news. The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press performed research on soft news viewers and their age in 2004, and the data gathered by the center found that 61% of people under 30 years old turned to late-night comedy shows to receive some of their political news. Findings of the survey, as stated in a summary by The Pew Research Center, reveal that “Young people, by far the hardest to reach segment of the political news audience, are abandoning mainstream sources of election news and increasingly citing alternative outlets, including comedy shows such as the *Daily Show* and *Saturday Night Live*, as their source for election news” (The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press).

The survey discussed above, amongst others performed by The Pew Research Center and popular culture, politics, and media scholars, sheds light upon the generational divide present amongst television viewers, in particular those who engage in soft news versus those who seek out hard news from traditional network television sources. These important factors and distinctions are critical to keep in mind when delving deeper into the discussion of hard versus soft news. In addition, these two forms of news delivery add further complexity to the discussion on news versus entertainment, especially as the lines between the two become increasingly blurred.

The Blurred Lines of News and Entertainment

As alternative forms of media communications develop and popularize, the differences between logically presented facts and entertainment news are becoming increasingly obscured. While defining soft and hard news helps to understand the different types of news sources

available to the public, as well as distinguish the dividing sectors present within society and their news interests, measuring the quality and effectiveness of the news being presented via either source is becoming more and more difficult as news and entertainment are merging and gaining market appeal. News and entertainment news are increasingly reporting on similar or the same topics yet in different styles, providing the public with various platforms to gather information. While the choice for some may be based on fact or fiction, many scholars argue that both will be present in any type of narrative; thus, the decision being made by the public is being based more and more on the desired viewing experience; formal versus informal delivery, “fair and balanced” news versus comparatively more outright and critical, biased versus unbiased, and comedic versus serious (Delli Carpini & Williams 10-11).

Traditional television news sources, such as CNN and MSNBC, and entertainment television news sources, such as *The Colbert Report* and *Saturday Night Live*, can delve into the same topics but shed light upon each in different ways, “blurring the boundaries between earnest communication of rationally presented facts and discourses of entertainment,” as Julie Webber discusses in her book *The Cultural Set Up of Comedy: Affective Politics in the United States Post 9/11* (Webber 5). These entertainment networks continuously gain appeal, especially from younger generations, by discussing relevant cultural and political topics in a more informal and alternatively interpretive manner. For example, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, which “combine entertainment with political reflection,” offer viewers satirical interpretations and parodies of current news (McClennen 1). Sophia McClennen discusses the work of Jon Stewart, former host of *The Daily Show*, and Stephen Colbert in *America According to Colbert: Satire as Public Pedagogy*, revealing, “Colbert and Stewart don’t envision their work as replacement for

the news, but as a supplement or satirical addition, that can push conversations about current events into a more critical realm. As Colbert points out, if audiences are not aware of the current news, they can not even appreciate the goofiness” (McClennen 99). However, the popularity of entertainment news programs such as these remains on the rise as customary informants at times suffer from traditional reporting constraints, thus, these shows may replace the viewing of customary news shows for some audiences.

One of the pitfalls of professional journalism, as detailed in *After Broadcast News*, is its slow approach to being “fair and balanced,” allowing entertainment media to deliver news content more quickly and openly increasing these sources’ popularity (Delli Carpini & Williams 9). In addition, the information and commentary delivered by these sources is often predictable as newspapers, news magazines, television news, and public affairs talk shows have traditional means of conveying their desired information. Jeffery Jones, author of *Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement*, highlights the growing disadvantages of these customary communications in particular regard to politics, sharing, “As the news media continue to falter economically and lose status (both culturally and politically) as the primary agents and venues for the conduct of politics through media, entertainment television has offered viable and at times important alternative forums for political discussion, information, and critique” (Jones 5). Furthering his point, Jones continues on to discuss the public’s reevaluation and questioning of the traditional means of portraying politics in media, ultimately arguing that entertainment television provides a “new way of thinking about politics and television” and its ability to shape political culture (Jones 5). These characteristics of entertainment news both set it apart from

traditional journalism-like media and obscure the lines between the two, creating a complex mix of cultural and political television news sources which each seek to inform viewers.

Satire and Parody in Entertainment Media

As entertainment media sources which discuss news related material continue to grow in popularity, an analysis of their ability to critique politics is pertinent to the discussion of news versus entertainment and valuable in gaining a better understanding of the role these entertainment outlets seek to play. As it pertains to television in particular, comedic representations of political figures and events have the ability to provide critical commentary in a way traditional network news channels may not explore. Entertainment news sources use various comedic techniques, but the discussion to follow focuses on the use of satire and parody as they are used to project criticism. As defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, satire is “a way of using humor to show that someone or something is foolish, weak, bad, etc.,” as well as, “humor that shows the weaknesses or bad qualities of a person, government, society, etc.” Parody is defined as, “a piece of writing, music, etc., that imitates the style of someone or something in an amusing way” (Merriam-Webster). While entertainment news channels vary in their comedic approach, the use of satire and parody are pertinent to the discussion of many of these outlets’ ability to evaluate and provide interpretive commentary on politics.

Although comedy has long been used as a tool to deliver news in regard to societal and governmental matters, the desire for this viewing experience is continuously on the rise, and satire and parody have developed as key players for several entertainment outlets to deliver their content. Sophia McClennen offers insight into the increasing morale of entertainment news after

the events of 9/11 and the use of satire, in particular, in *America According to Colbert* stating, “Satire serves as a comedic and pedagogic form uniquely suited to provoking critical reflection. Its ability to underscore the absurdity, ignorance, and prejudice of commonly accepted behavior by means of comedic critical reflection offers an especially potent form of public critique, one that was much needed in the post-9/11 environment” (McClennen 1-2). While traditional news forms may desire to take a more reasoned approach to delivering information to viewers, entertainment news sources utilize comedy and often use satire and parody to present facts and figures in a unique and censorious manner.

By parodying recent events and satirically representing politics, many entertainment outlets provide critical reports and commentary for viewers. In comparison to professional and traditional reporting, these entertainment media have the ability to criticize in a more outright and condemning way. As previously discussed, traditional network news stations have often lived within the constraints of being “fair and balanced,” although biases certainly exist, whereas entertainment news programs develop content in a manner that is less interested in meticulously forming words so as to prevent controversy (Delli Carpini & Williams 9). This characteristic lends itself to the argument that entertainment news can unveil judgements and unfavorable features of politics in a way traditional news may not be able to due to its ability to use comedy. In addition, an understanding of this attribute opens the door for a discussion of the trending effects of entertainment news.

The influence these entertainment sources have amongst one another and on viewers is constantly growing, and the reasoning behind such can be found in the reinforcement and perpetuation of evaluative ideas and themes, as well as public opinion. Russell Peterson

discusses this phenomena in regard to politics in his book *Strange Bedfellows: How Late-Night Comedy Turns Democracy into a Joke*, expressing, “The existence of photography, sound recording, and television limits the license of those constructing portraits of contemporary politicians...What’s more, the liberties a comic Picasso might take in constructing these depictions become self-perpetuating and self-reinforcing when the images start passing, as they invariably do, from performer to performer and show to show” (Peterson 72). As popular images and ideas spread from one entertainment network to another, these representations and interpretations have the ability to resonate amongst viewers, and, as is described in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, “Being funny and smart sells and has proven a powerful draw for audiences’ attention” (Gray, Jones & Thompson 3). While it may prove difficult to measure how these comedic informants affect viewers and their opinions, their use of comedic techniques often call for reflection, thus, these sources provide audiences with the opportunity to take on a diverse perspective when thinking about different political topics.

Political Commentary Amplified by Saturday Night Live

On October 11, 1975, *Saturday Night Live* aired for the first time on network television under the title *NBC’s Saturday Night*, marking the beginning of a legacy that continues to grow year by year. The show’s longevity is described in *Saturday Night Live & American TV*, as the authors state, “Because it has held onto both its format and its self-constructed, alternative identity, *SNL*’s nearly forty years of programming provide a lens through which the critic can focus on television’s evolving construction of what is new, normative, and noteworthy in American culture” (Becker, Marx, and Sienkiewicz 3). When the show premiered, ABC, CBS,

and NBC were the dominating broadcast networks in what is commonly referred to as the network era, and executive producer Lorne Michaels utilized the variety show format to draw weekly viewership and test content (Becker, Marx, and Sienkiewicz 10). While *Saturday Night Live* did not gain commercial success immediately, its progress and shifts throughout the years have enabled its increased ability to engage audiences in popular culture and politics through the lens of comedy.

Saturday Night Live is set up as a variety show hosted by a celebrity guest and featuring a special musical guest. Each episode consists of several sketches parodying or satirizing elements of popular culture or politics, and the celebrity guest is featured in several of the sketches along with a cast of recurring comedians. During each show, a segment entitled “Weekend Update” is shown, in which two of the show’s cast members impersonate news anchors and deliver short stories on current events with a humorous twist. When *Saturday Night Live* premiered in the 1970s, executive producer Lorne Michaels was set to revolutionize American comedy “in the face of the television industry’s notorious aversion to risk,” whereas NBC’s hope in developing a late-night variety show was to broaden the network’s control of programming (Becker, Marx, and Sienkiewicz 6). While *Saturday Night Live* did not achieve immediate outstanding viewership and Lorne Michaels temporarily resigned from 1980-1985, the show’s momentum picked up during the post-network era of the late 1980s and 1990s. New viewing options for audiences, such as cable and broadcast satellite, and buyouts by multimedia corporations hindered the control of broadcast networks. *Saturday Night Live and American TV* details this shift in broadcast and entertainment platforms, stating, “Unlike during the classic network period, in the multichannel era *SNL* would increasingly deploy its dexterity in comedic

innovation in the service of broader industrial strategies” (Becker, Marx, and Sienkiewicz 9).

From the multimedia channel age to today, *SNL* has been pressured to remain culturally pertinent as a means of maintaining viewership and its place in the “collective consciousness” of America, and, in doing so, has experienced both highs and lows (Becker, Marx, and Sienkiewicz 11).

The forty-year stability of *Saturday Night Live* is an achievement to be explored more closely through the show’s use of satire and parody in regards to examining popular culture, especially in terms of politics. Continuing on in its discussion of *SNL*’s history and longevity, *Saturday Night Live and American TV* highlights the show’s use of political comedy, sharing, “Viewers have long turned to *SNL* for political commentary unavailable via conventional news and have spread the program’s political satire in both personal and remediated interactions. In order for a topical show like *SNL* to last for nearly forty seasons, it must successfully respond to the continually changing cultural context upon which it is so dependent” (Becker, Marx, and Sienkiewicz 12). Political comedy is such a significant feature of *Saturday Night Live* due to its prevalence in American culture and a desire from various sectors of the public to receive political commentary in non-traditional forms. *Saturday Night Live* utilizes satire and parody, its variety show format, and celebrity and politically-affiliated guests to bring to light interpretations of and commentary on popular culture and politics for viewers who stray from traditional news sources.

SNL: Special Guests & Impersonations

A key factor in *Saturday Night Live*’s lengthy television history is the show’s invitation to well-known social and political figures to host and make guest appearances on the show each episode. *SNL* uses satire and parody to poke fun at and impersonate celebrities, socialites, and

politicians, and many of these individuals agree to be a part of the show for a multitude of reasons. By focusing in on the representation and appearances of political figures, especially during election periods, the reasoning behind the selection of these guests, impersonations of influential figures, and the potential consequences of each, both positive and negative, can be examined. “Self-deprecating humor is of particular value in U.S. politics,” argues Stephen Farnsworth and Robert Lichter in *The Nightly News Nightmare: Media Coverage of U.S. Presidential Elections, 1988-2008*, and *Saturday Night Live* utilizes this element of politics to engage and entertain viewers and make political commentary via their government-affiliated guests and impersonations (Farnsworth & Lichter 161).

As *Saturday Night Live* gains much of its viewer appeal through its clever impersonations and satirical and parodical interpretations, a great deal of the show’s content focuses on poking fun at celebrity and political figures. A pertinent question which arises due to these elements of the show pertains to why guests of these particular backgrounds would agree to appear on *SNL*. *The Nightly News Nightmare* details several of the reasons why politicians would choose to be guests on the show, with the first being their desire to speak to voters who do not give much consideration to the news, and the book shares, “Such potential voters might not care that much about issues, but they might be persuaded to vote for a candidate who appears to have a healthy sense of humor.” Furthermore, *Saturday Night Live* provides an outlet for politicians to gain more exposure and place themselves in a different, more “human” light (Farnsworth & Lichter 161). Political guest appearances can benefit both the show and the guest, giving each more publicity, but, whether this attention is positive or negative, especially for the guests, can vary.

The harmful effects of the guest appearances made by politicians and impersonations of these figures on *Saturday Night Live* may not be easily measured, but the critiques that are being made through the skits these politicians are asked to perform in and via these representations are often quite evident. *Entertaining Politics* reveals a quote made by writer Steve Linstead which details the damaging effects of humor, stating, “Humor can have great impact in the world by having its content transposed and defined as serious, but also by transposing real-world content into the humorous frame...Its impact may be more effectively destructive in this way than through the more torturous channels of negotiation and construction” (Jones 4). By taking social and political news content, placing it within the realm of comedy, and inviting the participation of celebrities and government figures, *Saturday Night Live* provides a unique perspective from which to view current events and the potential to generate diverse opinions based on the impersonations and real-life representations made.

Taking Away Focus with Tomfoolery: Critical Responses to Saturday Night Live

While *Saturday Night Live* has received critical acclaim for its comedic transformation and reinterpretation of current social and political events as a means of delivering news to various audiences, as highlighted above, many criticisms have been made regarding *SNL*’s use of humor to explore such matters. Televised entertainment news as a whole has been condemned for its diversion from traditional news-telling. This condemnation is described in *Strange Bedfellows: How Late-Night Comedy Turns Democracy into a Joke*, as it states, “In a nutshell: TV comedians with their cheap tomfoolery and silly japes, have captured the attention of an alarming number of impressionable young voters, usurping the rightful role of the qualified

journalists and news organizations” (Peterson 39-40). Several marks of disapproval have surrounded *Saturday Night Live* in particular, the first being that the show does not dig deeply enough into the issues which it discusses or represents, rather, “The comedians move from punch line to punch line, quickly flitting from issue to issue” (Day 89).

In addition to the evaluation of *Saturday Night Live* which regards it as floating above the real issues of society and politics, critics have also argued that the show focuses too heavily on the personal characteristics of the figures the show chooses to represent, rather than exploring the more profound matters surrounding these individuals. “The central weakness is that the show’s preferred form of political humor focuses more on the personal characteristics of politicians (such as Dana Carvey making fun of George H. W. Bush’s stage lexical tricks) than their policies or approach to power,” describes Jeffrey Jones in *Entertaining Politics* in specific regard to political impersonations (Jones 10). *Satire TV* strengthens this argument, stating, “Since the mid-1970s, *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) has regularly processed presidential politics for viewers, offering interpretations that structured how images of the president were filtered through popular culture. But such caricatures are typically missing any form of meaningful political critique, instead depending largely on impersonation humor that is focused more on personal mannerisms and political style than on politics” (Gray, Jones & Thompson 38). This statement brings to light a most critical issue for reviewers of the show: the potential ability of *Saturday Night Live* to influence the ways in which politics are viewed by the American audience.

As seen through the research performed by The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, which was earlier discussed, and the critical commentary made about *Saturday Night Live*’s capacity to assess American popular culture and politics in non-traditional ways, the show

has the ability to entice diverse audiences and project varying perspectives upon them. Many critics reject any benefits of *Saturday Night Live*'s potential to do so, and highlight the disadvantages of the show's distinct displays. Josh Compton's essay, "Surveying Scholarship on *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*," in *The Stewart/Colbert Effect: Essays on the Real Impacts of Fake News*, details a main concern for media reviewers, as it states, "*Saturday Night Live* and late-night television monologues shown at the conclusion of news broadcast can reduce viewers' worries and decrease their perceptions of the severity of the issues raised during the preceding news stories" (Compton 19). *Saturday Night Live* is broadcast on Saturday evenings at 11:30 P.M., typically after a traditional news program has aired. Compton is bringing to light the differences between traditional and entertainment news programs, with specific regard to *Saturday Night Live*, and draws further attention to the question of benefits for this type of news delivery.

Saturday Night Live Delivering the "News"

As this chapter has highlighted, news and entertainment are not always placed on opposite ends of a spectrum, rather, their characteristics have the potential to be blended and delivered to audiences. In particular regard to television, the discussion of hard versus soft news reveals one of these overlaps, as soft news topics have been presented on both traditional and entertainment news programs due to their increasing appeal. Additionally, news and entertainment news are reporting more and more on similar topics, yet in different styles, blurring the lines between news and entertainment and popularizing television programs which provide satires and parodies of recent events and influential figures in popular culture and

politics. The commentary delivered by these interpretations and representations is often viewed as more critical than that of traditional news sources, and these elements of entertainment news may frequently call for reflection from viewers who may then develop new or further opinions on the subject at hand.

In regards to the reporting and presentation of politics, entertainment news shows such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* have been successful outlets for satires and parodies of current political happenings and the actions and beliefs of politicians, and *Saturday Night Live*'s format and forty-year television history make it a pertinent topic of discussion for better understanding the role of entertainment news in American culture. *Saturday Night Live* examines the political atmosphere of America through skits, impersonations, a comedic news broadcast section, and the invitation of political figures to either host or make guest appearances throughout the show. This variety show format has led to both positive and negative reactions regarding the political guests who take part in the show, revealing the potential of *SNL* to influence the political discussions and opinions of viewers. These characteristics place *Saturday Night Live* as an influential marker of American culture, especially in regard to political discourse, and lead to questions of the degree of influence these portrayals may have on audiences.

While *Saturday Night Live* may not be defined as "serious" in terms of social and political communications and is often criticized for its belittling of important issues, those who judge the show are not hesitant to reveal that it has the potential to entice viewers and may, therefore, influence their opinions, though such is hard to measure exactly. The criticisms described above open the door for a discussion of the various political representations and

impersonations which have been most heavily discussed by critics and scholars and seemingly influential on audiences. This thesis will explore *Saturday Night Live* during election years in particular, when the show generates a great deal of its content from the surrounding political debates and utilizes satire, parody, and political guests to comment on the issues at hand in a way that most often contrasts the style of reporting done by traditional news programs. Additionally, *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* will be used as vehicles for comparison, and as a means of generating a greater understanding of the various ways in which soft news outlets can present presidential candidates to viewers through soft news comedy and have potential subsequent effects. After analyzing news versus entertainment news, the blurred lines in between the two bring to light the increasing role of entertainment in news delivery. Focusing in on *Saturday Night Live*, this thesis will explore these continuously fading lines as the show delves into pertinent issues, through the use of humor, with increasing viewership and the potential to influence viewers based on the critical commentary and interpretations delivered.

Chapter 2:

The 2008 Presidential Election Through the Lens of Saturday Night Live

In 2008, history was made on November 4th when Barack Obama was elected as the first African American president of the United States after a lengthy campaign. While Hillary Clinton sought the Democratic nomination in the hopes of becoming the first female president, Obama prevailed and stood against Senator John McCain, his Republican opposition, who ran with vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin, the then governor of Alaska hoping to become the first female vice-president (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica). McCain and Palin were defeated by Obama and his running mate, senator Joe Biden, with Obama receiving 365 electoral votes over McCain's 173 ("Election Center 2008"). The voter turnout rate for this election was its highest in four years, thus, the election and its groundbreaking history stimulated a great deal of attention on both hard and soft media platforms (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica).

Saturday Night Live has been imitating politicians and delivering "news" of political affairs and elections since its first season in 1975, but one of its most critically and popularly discussed seasons for such representations took place during the 2008 presidential election.

Season 34, which aired from September 13, 2008 to May 16, 2009, encompassed twenty-two episodes and an additional special entitled the "2008 Presidential Bash" ("Season 34").

Presidential candidates Barack Obama and John McCain, along with their running mates Joe Biden and Sarah Palin, were frequently portrayed during this season, with the occasional participation of these politicians themselves. The 2008 election brought *Saturday Night Live* one of its most highly rated episodes, to be discussed in detail, and a platform for amplified political

comedy due to the contrasting opinions, personality traits, and even physical characteristics of the candidates.

The presidential election of 2008 stirred debates about the financial crisis of the time, the War in Iraq, healthcare, taxes, and sexism, to name a few, and, as typical during an election period, both hard and soft news media highlighted the different opinions of each candidate. Along with *Saturday Night Live*, soft news comedy shows, *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show*, take part in using humor as a means of critiquing presidential candidates, and comparing their methods of portrayal and criticism to those of *Saturday Night Live* will aid in further analyzing the objectives of *SNL* and its place within the realm of soft news media. *Saturday Night Live*, *The Colbert Report*, and *The Daily Show* discussed the 2008 election through their own interpretations of the events and politicians involved in an effort to either inform, entertain, or perhaps both, and, in doing so, lend themselves to a broader discussion of the nature of America's media culture.

Methodology

Through an in-depth examination of four seasons of *Saturday Night Live* during the 2008, 2012, and 2016 presidential elections, this thesis will explore the satirical and parodical representations of election politics and candidates, as well as compare these portrayals to those in other soft news media outlets, such as *The Colbert Report*, *The Daily Show* and *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*. Verbal content of sketches involving candidates will be analyzed by comparing the amount of dialogue centered around political versus non-political discussion. In addition, evaluating the verbal content will aid in comparing the amount of dialogue surrounding

politics versus more irrelevant topics. By evaluating the timing and content of the scripts of certain sketches, a clearer understanding of the larger focus of these sketches will be determined.

The tone of voice in which the comedians imitate politicians will be explored as a means of highlighting the central comedic purpose of each sketch analyzed. For example, an over-exaggerated accent which evokes laughter from the audience will reveal and help to define certain trends in the portrayal of frequently impersonated political characters. A study of the physical and gestural characteristics of the interpretations of politicians will be performed by an analysis of the movements of the comedians and the physical traits which are chosen to be over-exaggerated; some traits may include over-the-top hand gestures or frequent winking. Lastly, a look at which politicians are featured most often and in what sort of light, either positive or negative, will aid in understanding *Saturday Night Live's* desired portrayal of candidates and the political realm at large. In order to reveal which politicians appear on the show most frequently, either in person or via an impersonation, numbers will be calculated via an examination of each sketch in each analyzed season's episodes.

Trends based on character, content, and desired message of the sketches will be revealed through these evaluations, and will then be compared to a broader review of the representation and discussion of specific politicians featured on *The Colbert Report*, *The Daily Show*, and *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* using the methods described as appropriate. Additionally, secondary sources which comment on the format of *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show*, as well as provide specific analytic examples of presidential representations, will be used to gain further insight into the similarities and differences between these shows and *Saturday Night Live*. This comparison will aid in interpreting the methodology of *Saturday Night Live* to a greater

extent, as contrasting one show to another will highlight the various means in which presidential elections can be interpreted and delivered to viewers through soft news comedy, and produce a broader understanding of the role of soft news in the culture of American media and politics.

Can Sarah Palin Actually See Russia from her House?

The first episode of *Saturday Night Live*'s 34th season, hosted by Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps, featured a cold open which set the stage for the rest of *SNL*'s election "coverage" by placing Alaskan governor and Republican Vice Presidential nominee Sarah Palin in the main arena for satirical representation. The opening sketch, entitled "Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton Address the Nation," features Tina Fey and Amy Poehler as Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton, respectively, discussing their unified belief that sexism should not play a role in the campaign, as well as their contrasting opinions on matters such as foreign policy and global warming. However, since *Saturday Night Live* thrives on satire and parody, these remarks were made with emphasis on tone of voice, physical attributes, and an exaggeration of prior statements made by the politicians.

On September 13, 2008, when this season opener aired, Hillary Clinton had been withdrawn from the election for roughly three months and had since endorsed Barack Obama, a fact which her imitator Amy Poehler states at the beginning of the sketch while drawing attention to the Barack Obama pin she is wearing. Amy then goes on to reveal in a serious manner a few beliefs of Clinton which differ from those of Palin. Amy's vocal impersonation of Clinton is not highly over-exaggerated and her comments during this part of the sketch are not suited for evoking laughter from viewers; for example, Amy states, "I believe that diplomacy should be the

cornerstone of any foreign policy.” In contrast to Amy’s impersonation of Clinton, Tina’s responses as Sarah Palin drive the sketch in its comedic endeavors. Tina’s shocking resemblance to Governor Palin and her use of an over-exaggerated accent, as well as facial quirks such as winking, led this political impersonation to be one of the most popular in the show’s history, as evidenced by an increase in viewership during particular episodes in which Tina was featured as Palin throughout this season and those to follow (Andreeva, Spector, Yahr). The responses Tina makes are humorous and far from political, and reveal a common thread of politically-related statements followed by jokes which poke fun at, satirize, or parody the politician or another in or related to the sketch, which is a trend present in many of the political sketches performed on *Saturday Night Live* during election seasons.

In response to Amy’s brief statement on foreign policy, Tina responds with the humorous declaration, “And I can see Russia from my house,” audibly sending the studio audience into immense laughter and cheer and laying out the comedic landscape of the rest of the sketch and many of those to follow in future episodes. As Amy continues to portray Hillary in a more careful manner, providing viewers with one-liners that have the potential to appear more factual, Palin is continuously painted in a light of negativity, unintelligence, and unsuitability for office. Amy makes a remark about global warming being caused by man, whereas Tina pushes Palin further into criticism by saying, “And I believe it’s just God hugging us closer.” This back-and-forth continues on to subjects such as the Bush Doctrine, which Tina presents Palin as not knowing of, and lastly the subject of sexism is brought up once again; however, both Tina and Amy are now far strayed from making any serious political statements and their lines are focused fully on satire.

The final moments of the sketch highlight not only the stark contrast in Palin and Clinton's political desires based on *Saturday Night Live's* interpretation, but some of the main points of ridicule and fault-finding that these two candidates received throughout the election. On the subject of sexism, Tina asks to stop being called words such as "pretty," whereas Amy asks for a refrain from words such as "shrewd." When discussing a female holding the presidency or vice-presidency, Tina commands that it is time for such a feat, whereas Amy portrays Hillary as wanting the presidency simply for herself not just any female. Palin is characterized as ignorant and over-confident in her campaign, whereas Clinton is rendered as more intellectual, yet over-eager and unappealing, especially physically. The scene closes with Amy ripping a piece of wood off of the podium the two are standing at in frustration when Tina declares that all one has to do to become president is to want it. These contrasting depictions are telling of the comedic atmosphere of *Saturday Night Live* and its potential effects on viewer opinions.

The comedic layout of "Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton Address the Nation" is representative of a repeated pattern in *Saturday Night Live's* interpretation of political addresses and debates. As described, the comedians in the sketch alternate their lines, with the first, mostly spoken by Amy representing Hillary, being more serious compared to Tina's statements as Sarah which initiate a joke. *SNL* writers and comedians humorously transform politicians by over exaggerating their personalities and reinterpreting their prior statements; for example, when Tina states, "And I can see Russia from my house," she is reinventing a comment made by Governor Palin in an ABC News exclusive interview with Charlie Gibson on September 11, 2008, when she stated, "They're our next door neighbors and you can actually see Russia from land here in Alaska, from an island in Alaska" when asked, "What insight into Russian actions, particularly in

the last couple of weeks, does the proximity of the state give you?” Such reinterpretations of Sarah Palin added to the negative portrayal of her already present in the media, and the bitter, sarcastic attitude continuously displayed of Hillary Clinton does little to draw positive reactions. Impersonations which are highly critical, somewhat life-like, in the case of Palin, and overtly amusing saw their potential far-reaching effects on the opinions of viewers, and represent the prevalence and influential abilities of soft news media outlets which utilize satire and parody as a means of delivering stronger messages about certain politicians.

The Fey Effect

Throughout *Saturday Night Live*’s 34th season, Sarah Palin was continuously impersonated by Tina Fey, and, although Palin made a few appearances herself on the show, her continued parody and what has been coined “The Fey Effect” reveal the prospective damage that can be caused by humorous and unfavorable representation in the media. Fey’s impersonation of Governor Palin was brought back shortly in Episode 3, which aired on September 27, 2008, in a sketch entitled “CBS Evening News: Katie Couric Interviews Sarah Palin,” where Palin was portrayed once again as unknowledgeable and simple-minded as Fey mentions her disappointment in seeing so many foreign workers when visiting the United Nations, yet this sketch also incorporated close to verbatim, yet exaggerated, answers that Palin actually provided to Katie Couric in an interview; a fact which MSNBC highlighted in a comparison of the two after the episode’s airing on Countdown with Keith Olbermann on September 28, 2008.

Palin herself joined the show twice, with one of her appearances in which she briefly shared the stage with Tina Fey leading to one of *SNL*’s highest rated episodes with 17 million

viewers at the time of this particular sketch (Yahr). Although Palin sought in a sense to redeem herself during this sketch in Episode 5, entitled “Governor Sarah Palin’s Press Conference,” the presence of actor Alec Baldwin confusing Sarah for Tina and calling her a “horrible woman” added little positivity to the image created of her by *Saturday Night Live*. The sketch alternates between Tina impersonating Sarah during a press conference and Sarah discussing this inaccurate depiction with executive producer Lorne Michaels. Palin is seen watching the sketch on a small television with Michaels after Fey makes comments about changing the names of states she thinks sound “un-American” and asking to perform her pageant walk. Governor Palin states that she did not think it was a “realistic depiction” of the way her press conferences would have gone, but this comment is overshadowed by Alec Baldwin’s direct insults. This episode’s increased viewership has much to do with the brief moment in which Sarah Palin and Tina Fey crossed paths, but is also reflective of viewers and the ways in which their political judgements can be formed.

“The Fey Effect: Young Adults, Political Humor, and Perceptions of Sarah Palin in the 2008 Presidential Election Campaign,” a scholarly article by Jody Baumgartner, Jonathan Morris, and Natasha Walth, delves deeply into the effects of Sarah Palin’s *Saturday Night Live* exposure on her political career, and more broadly highlights the role political comedy can play during an election. Six surveys of 18 to 24 year olds from ten public universities in every state throughout 2008 asked students about their views on Sarah Palin, media coverage of the election, and personal political affiliation, and data reveals a “Fey Effect,” or a decline in Sarah Palin’s polling numbers due to her impersonations and exposure on *Saturday Night Live* (Baumgartner, Morris, Walth 2). In total, 1,755 subjects responded to all six surveys, with the most negative

reactions stemming from Republicans and Independents. While the respondents were all young adults, the authors state, “Young adults are the primary consumers of political humor” and “Many studies of media effects use samples recruited from individual universities” (Baumgartner, Morris, Walth 3). While these *Saturday Night Live* sketches may not have directly affected voters at the polls, the authors argue that this decrease in approval for Palin still holds considerable importance.

The authors conclude their study, stating, “This analysis supports earlier contentions that comedic impersonations can change how a political figure is perceived among younger adults,” and, while it is not argued that Fey’s representation of Palin had an actual effect on the outcome of the election, it is suggested her portrayals had a negative effect on how the public viewed her (Baumgartner, Morris, Walth 8). The study performed is telling of the many factors which play into how people form opinions on politicians, where political information is gathered, and what factors play into the opinions of voters, especially young adults. Such is revealing of *Saturday Night Live*’s role in these perceptions and unveils a pattern of candidate representation deigned to draw audiences in and deliver strong statements. This trend can be traced through an examination of the portrayal of other candidates involved in the 2008 presidential election and elections to follow.

Obama and McCain: An Election of Jokes

Saturday Night Live’s 34th season aided in further introducing viewers to its portrayal of presidential candidate, Barack Obama, and his Republican opponent, John McCain, and an examination of the sketches in which they appeared reveal the diverse ways in which these

candidates were impersonated in comparison to the representation of the female politicians discussed earlier. Throughout the season, *Saturday Night Live* pokes fun at both Obama and McCain, but the political settings are seen shifting to more comical scenarios, thus, shifting the focus to a broader comical discussion of the 2008 election. Through the use of satire and parody, *Saturday Night Live* highlights the discourse between Barack Obama and John McCain with exaggerated interpretations of their personal traits and characteristics, and additionally creates a platform for heightened comedic representations of the two through non-political settings.

“John McCain Struggles to Approve This Message,” a sketch which aired in *SNL*’s second episode of Season 34 on September 20, 2008, sets the tone for John McCain’s interpretation on the show as a candidate unsure of himself and his capabilities of being President. The setting of the sketch is a recording studio where McCain, played by Darrell Hammond, and voiceover actor Ken Lewis, played by Bill Hader, record approvals of campaign ads which state highly incorrect information about Barack Obama. The sketch begins with Hammond portraying McCain as rather dated, not being able to grasp the concept of digital recording, before moving on to say, “The goal of these ads is not only to support my campaign but also to raise the level of the integrity and political discourse, my friends, that was my promise to America.” The irony of this statement leads to the comedic effect of the sketch, as the voiceover actor reads such statements as, “Barack Obama says he wants universal healthcare. Is that so? Healthcare for the entire universe? Including Osama bin Laden? I think we’ll pass. No way. No how. No-Bama.” While Hammond portrays McCain as slightly skeptical of this statement when he asks for its validity, the explanation that universal is in reference to the entire universe suits McCain enough to approve the message. The sketch continues on in such a

manner, as McCain is shown as initially doubtful yet is very quickly persuaded that the statements being made are essentially factual.

By portraying John McCain as highly persuadable and unsure of information regarding his campaign opposition, *Saturday Night Live* is creating a character for McCain which highlights personal uncertainty and a general sense of unawareness. *Saturday Night Live* over exaggerates personal and political characteristics of politicians, and, whether or not these traits are factual to any degree for John McCain, the show is aiding in painting McCain in a negative light as someone who is unsuitable for office. Throughout the sketch, Hammond only makes one serious statement regarding the goal of the ads, which, in fact, acts as a diving board for the punchlines to follow. This sketch represents a trend in *SNL* political sketches which do not directly mimic events, such as debates or interviews, as the focus of the dialogue is on the humorous qualities of the campaign ad statements which are false yet are given the most attention in the sketch via dramatic music and timing. Through this sketch, John McCain's *SNL* character is defined and a new mode of representation via a scenario which would not normally be portrayed in the media were it not fictitious.

This trend of placing politicians in settings that they would not typically be seen in via hard news, other media outlets, or at all continues in the portrayal of Barack Obama during this season and those to follow. In a sketch entitled, "The Obama Variety Show," which aired in Episode 6 on October, 25, 2008, Obama, played by Fred Armisen, and his wife Michelle, played by Maya Rudolph, addresses viewers about an upcoming variety show special the two are hosting because Obama is leading in the polls and they believe it is time to "play it safe." The two begin singing a spoof on the song "Solid as a Rock" by changing the lyrics to "Solid as

Barack,” followed by cameos from cast members portraying Nancy Pelosi, Bill Clinton, and Joe Biden. Pelosi sings of the difficulties of having Republicans in charge, Clinton sings passionately as he asks viewers not to forget about him, and Biden makes a joke about having his foot in his mouth when Obama asks, “Why did you say that if I was elected, a foreign power would test me with an international crisis?” While this sketch highlights several other politicians, the introduction and interjections by Barack and Michelle Obama return attention to them and the means in which they are being depicted.

The placement of Barack Obama in a non-political setting sets a tone for his portrayal on the show and is a trend which can be followed from season to season. Although Obama is often featured in political environments, such as debates and later the White House, the sketches which remove the solely political emphasis deliver an alternate tone for viewers to interpret. Parodies of popular songs accompanied by impersonations of politicians singing and making jokes aim to provoke laughter through voice and mannerism exaggeration. Placing these politicians in a more light-hearted situation emphasizes criticism on character more so than policies and beliefs, which are mentioned less and overshadowed by the comical circumstances, and, as seen in “The Obama Variety Show,” a presidential candidate is viewed seeking fun and losing concern over the election to come.

A final look at a sketch involving portrayals of both John McCain and Barack Obama highlights *Saturday Night Live*’s continued utilization of the debate scene for commenting on the differences amongst candidates, as well as other, more politically-oriented ways in which McCain and Obama are characterized throughout the show. Airing in Episode 3, “The First McCain and Obama Presidential Debate” is a nine-minute sketch which calls attention to several

differences between the candidates in terms of policies and opinions, with an escalating comedic tone. The scene opens with an image of “CNN” followed by an image of the University of Mississippi, Gertrude Castellow Ford Center. An impersonation of moderator Jim Lehrer introduces the debate in a highly serious manner, yet, after explaining that topics will include foreign policy and national security, he urges the candidates to look at one another to a point of uncomfortableness. Lehrer’s first question pertains to the financial bailout, in which Obama is portrayed as responding, “I think the most important element of any bailout plan is that it protect Main Street as well as Wall Street because hardworking middle class Americans shouldn’t be taxed in order to rescue the nation’s wealthiest 1%.” Obama’s serious response is followed by a proposal by McCain to suspend their campaigns and instead hold pie eating contests. The sketch follows in this pattern of serious versus comical and points out several areas of opposition as satire and parody play a key role in underlining vocal, gestural, and characteristic differences which intertwine with the issues being discussed.

Tracing the Trends

As highlighted in the discussion of various sketches from *Saturday Night Live*’s 34th season, election years provide the show with ample material to create a comedic interpretation of the political events at hand. Through an in-depth examination of the content of each sketch and the physical movements of each character, several trends have appeared which reveal a few of the methods of *SNL*. As a means of portraying the difference of opinions amongst candidates, the show will often highlight one or several politicians in negative rather than positive light. Such is evidenced in the portrayal of Sarah Palin versus Hillary Clinton and John McCain versus Barack

Obama. While Clinton is highlighted for her frustration at another woman entering the White House before her, Palin is portrayed as ignorant and unsuitable for vice-presidency as she is depicted saying uneducated and mindless statements. Similarly, McCain is placed in a far more foolish role compared to Obama, as his character seems to question his ability to become president. Obama's character has the opportunity to express more politically-associated statements and even appears in non-election related sketches due to his lead in the polls. The pattern of one politician portrayed making seemingly intelligent and election-related commentary followed by another politician providing the comedic relief of an unintelligent or out of place statement is a trend which is carried throughout *SNL*'s 34th season as a means of portraying certain candidates in particularly unfavorable light.

In addition to the verbal content of each sketch, the physicality delivered by the comedians representing the politicians is key to the overall image *Saturday Night Live* is creating for each candidate. Tina Fey is shown putting great effort into Sarah Palin's facial movements, such as winking and smiling in a particularly humorous way, as well as over-exaggerating her voice for a comedic effect. Fred Armisen overemphasizes Barack Obama's voice and physical mannerisms in less demeaning ways, as he is not creating an image of lack of intelligence as in the case of Palin, but these amplifications of personalities nonetheless bring physical and personal characteristics of politicians to the forefront. In combination, these verbal and bodily dramatizations and humorous renderings of candidates in the 2008 presidential election are telling of *Saturday Night Live*'s aims at delivering critical portrayals to audiences via satire and parody.

Saturday Night Live, Stewart, and Colbert

Saturday Night Live is not alone in its satirized and parodied late-night political endeavors, as comedy-centered soft news media programs *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* utilized a great deal of material from the 2008 presidential election to critique the candidates. While there are differences aplenty amongst these two shows in comparison to *Saturday Night Live*, the strong opinions about these presidential candidates delivered by *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show*, are note-worthy in terms of the messages they are delivering to audiences. *The Colbert Report* is “comprised of parodies of current news and simulated right-wing punditry” and “offers its audience a way to combine entertainment with political reflection,” and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* examines “politics, pop culture, sports and entertainment through a sharp, reality-based lens” (McClennen 1, “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart”). Both shows aired on *Comedy Central*, with *The Colbert Report* airing from 2005 to 2014 and Jon Stewart hosting *The Daily Show* from 1999 to 2015.

A study performed by Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan Morris surrounding the 2004 election and entitled, “The Daily Show Effect: Candidate Evaluations, Efficacy, and American Youth,” reveals the potential effects of *The Daily Show* on the opinions of viewers, and, more broadly, speaks to the role soft news comedy programs can play in forming political judgements. Young adults from “introductory-level courses in political science at a medium sized university” volunteered to participate in this study in which one group of students watched a short compilation of *Daily Show* clips, another group watched clips from *CBS Evening News*, and a control group was not exposed to any videos. Each participant completed a questionnaire following their viewing (Baumgartner, Morris 6). Findings of the study revealed that

“participants exposed to jokes about George W. Bush and John Kerry on *The Daily Show* tended to rate both candidates more negatively” and exhibited “more cynicism toward the electoral system and the news media at large,” while also feeling more confident in their abilities to comprehend politics (Baumgartner, Morris 1). While this study focuses on portrayals of candidates from the 2004 presidential election, it acts as a cornerstone for understanding the potential effects of not only *The Daily Show*, but of other soft news sources which utilize satire and parody as a means of portraying candidates in a more critical manner.

A broader look at the *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* highlight, in comparison to *Saturday Night Live*, the extent to which soft news media centered around comedy can generate criticism toward politicians, especially during election years. While *SNL* has the ability to make harsh commentary regarding presidential and vice-presidential candidates, as seen through Sarah Palin’s portrayal, the variety show format of the show allows for emphasis to shift from political to solely humorous, as seen in “The Obama Variety Show.” *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* both fashion their hosts as if they were news anchors at desks as they share their highly blunt opinions. A particular example of Barack Obama highlights the means in which these two shows discuss politicians and, thus, reveal the alternate and heightened ways of entertainment-focused soft news media.

While *SNL*’s 34th season did not criticize Barack Obama in such an extreme manner as they did Sarah Palin and often portrayed him favorably in comparison to John McCain, in 2008 *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* dived into sensitive issues pertaining to Barack Obama more overtly. Stephen Colbert’s character on *The Colbert Report* is viewed as right-wing and Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show* as sardonic and liberal, and both shows discussed the issue of race

which often came up during this election. Colbert “was able to critique the racism of the right at the same time that he mocked those on the left who considered Obama not ‘black enough’ because he was not a descendent of slaves,” and Stewart, through references of the Ku Klux Klan and Obama’s discussion of black anger, portrays Obama as “a man of mixed race...struggling with the complexity of race relations” (McClennen 138, McBeth & Clemons 92). Both Colbert and Stewart discussed the issue of race which was plaguing the 2008 election, making references to controversial subjects such as slavery and the KKK, and, in doing so, demonstrate the more outright means of sharing opinions via comedy and soft news media.

Saturday Night Live, *The Colbert Report*, and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* are all examples of the diverse ways in which satire and parody can be used to discuss politics, and, as seen through the 2008 presidential election, highlight several of the different means of representation each candidate can receive via comedy-centered soft media. While *Saturday Night Live* may have taken the more light-hearted route, though still making sharp critiques of the candidates, *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* are evidence of the ways in which hard news media are interpreted and and challenged via humorous, yet intense political discussion. Continuing on to focus on *Saturday Night Live*’s portrayal of the 2012 presidential election, understanding the various means in which soft news media can portray candidates is imperative to the grand scale interpretation of the goals of these outlets.

Presidential Portrayals in Summary: SNL 34

Through the development of comedic characters over time, *Saturday Night Live*’s 34th season creates specific portrayals of 2008 presidential and vice-presidential candidates via satire

and parody which exaggerate certain aspects related to the candidate's political agendas, their personal qualities, and their physical attributes. Sarah Palin's character, as portrayed by Tina Fey, is shown lacking the appropriate knowledge for presidency through the show's use of irrational dialogue, some of which were actual statements made by Palin. Fey's use of a verbal accent further characterizes Palin as someone who should not be taken seriously as a vice-presidential candidate, as it is humorously driven. The portrayal *Saturday Night Live* has created of Sarah Palin is both comical and negative, as well as revealing of a trend in the show's methodology in which serious dialogue is answered with comedic dialogue in an effort to contrast politicians and reveal negative qualities of the characters the show has created, as seen through "Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton Address the Nation." Tina Fey's impersonation of Sarah Palin during the 2008 election has even been studied to determine whether or not such a portrayal had an effect on viewers and their voting decisions, and, while such a representation may not have had an impact on the outcome of the election, surveys suggested an impact on the negative opinion of Palin during this time.

In terms of the presidential candidates themselves, Barack Obama and John McCain are portrayed in stark contrast to one another through the use of non-political settings and dialogue which highlight McCain more negatively than Obama. McCain's character is seen as unqualified through the use of amusing commentary which establishes his persona as unsure and unmindful, whereas Obama is portrayed more positively through the use of dialogue which portrays his character as humorous rather than using comedy to highlight negative qualities of his portrayal. The use of non-political settings, such as a recording studio for John McCain's campaign ads and a stage setting for "The Obama Variety Show," furthers this trend of presenting presidential

candidates through solely humorous means which lack any serious political dialogue. “The First McCain and Obama Presidential Debate” continues the theme of serious commentary followed by humorous commentary seen through Palin’s characterization, and reveals *Saturday Night Live*’s ability to portray one candidate more favorably than another. Additionally, in examining *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show*, the harsher means of late-night soft news portrayals which involve more forward and abrupt dialogue in a mockery setting of hard news media is revealed as a means of comparison to the more light-hearted content and variety show setting of *Saturday Night Live* and as a method of heightened understanding of the workings of soft news comedies.

Season 34 of *Saturday Night Live* highlights several of the various means through which the show chooses to present presidential candidates to its viewers, as it highlights and exaggerates physical features and amplifies certain political beliefs in an effort to either characterize the candidates negatively or more positively than others. In doing so, *SNL* has created the potential to have some sort of impact on the ways in which viewers perceive certain candidates or the political events which the show chooses to mock. Although this impact cannot be described as factual due to a lack of qualitative evidence, its potential as a possible aim of *Saturday Night Live* or subsequent effect of the show can be seen through the use of political comedy which points to negative features of presidential candidates and their beliefs and has the potential to present certain candidates more positively than others.

Chapter 3:

Finding Humor in the 2012 Presidential Election

On November 6, 2012, Barack Obama was re-elected as President of the United States after a rather competitive campaign between Obama and his Republican opposition, Mitt Romney, and such rivalry was due largely to the struggling economy and thoughts of its future. Romney, former Massachusetts governor, campaigned for the Republican nomination most notably against Ron Paul, Newt Gingrich, Rick Santorum, Rick Perry, Jon Huntsman, Michele Bachmann, and Herman Cain, and he officially received the Republican nomination on August 28, 2012, and Romney chose Paul Ryan, a U.S. Congressman for Wisconsin, as his running mate. Debates during this election dealt greatly with the economic crisis, as well as foreign policy, and an evaluation of Obama's previous term as President played a key role in discussion and evaluations made by voters as well. While Obama ultimately defeated Romney by winning the popular vote and receiving 332 electoral votes, compared to Romney's 206, the campaign stirred discussion across many hard and soft news media platforms (Munro).

Prior examination of *Saturday Night Live's* 34th season and its overall history revealed a common thread throughout its 41 years of utilizing political events and politicians as elements of satire and parody, and *SNL* was quick to incorporate elements of the 2012 Presidential election into its 37th and 38th seasons. During *SNL's* 37th season, which aired from September 24, 2011, to May 19, 2012, presidential hopefuls Herman Cain, Mitt Romney, Rick Perry, Michele Bachmann, Newt Gingrich, Ron Paul, Jon Huntsman, Rick Santorum, and current President Barack Obama were featured in twelve out of the seasons' twenty-two episodes via impersonations by the show's comedians. *SNL's* 38th season aired from September 15, 2012, to

May 18, 2013, during which President Obama was re-elected, and five of the six episodes which aired prior to the election encompassed sketches imitating the presidential and vice-presidential nominees. These two seasons reveal continuing trends in the ways in which *Saturday Night Live* portrays politicians during election periods, as well as new means of depiction in comparison to those made during the 2008 presidential election. As presidential candidates consistently share contrasting ideals, both hard and soft news media perceptions of these candidates can be wide-ranging in terms of the light in which they choose to portray them. Additionally, comparing these *Saturday Night Live* seasons to the depictions of these candidates on *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* at this time will shed light on alternative means of portrayal in comical soft news, as a means of gaining a more broadened understanding of soft news media which utilizes humor and its potential goals in doing so.

SNL 37: Early Representations of 2012 Presidential Hopefuls

A year prior to the 2012 presidential election, *Saturday Night Live* was beginning its journey of interpreting the events of the election and its candidates through comedy, and, in doing so, the characterizations designed by the show of several of those running were beginning to be defined. In Episode 4 of Season 37, which aired on October 15, 2011, the first appearance of presidential candidates impersonated by the show's cast was in a sketch entitled “2012 GOP Debate II,” as a forecast of future debates. The sketch opens with an advertisement for Marriott hotels, as the debate is being broadcast on “Marriott TV,” which sets a less serious tone for the sketch from the onset. After being introduced as “Yet another GOP Debate,” a female moderator begins by explaining the arrangement of the candidates, which has been determined by their

order in the polls. Herman Cain is placed in the middle, as he is featured as leading the polls and surprisingly so to himself, followed by Mitt Romney, then Rick Perry, who is forced to face the wall and is described as “fading.” Michele Bachmann and Newt Gingrich are shown locked in a janitor’s closet, Ron Paul is seen through a security camera in a parking garage, Rick Santorum is placed in a gay bar, and Jon Huntsman is said to have been given the wrong address to the debate on purpose. The means of introduction chosen by *Saturday Night Live* for each candidate set the tone for their representation throughout the show's season and serves as the first impression viewers receive of these candidates this season.

As the “2012 GOP Debate II” sketch continues, a new form of debate mockery, in comparison to *Saturday Night Live*’s 34th season, is revealed, as the moderator asks less politically sophisticated questions, followed by comical responses from the candidates. Romney, played by Jason Sudeikis, is portrayed as unlikeable and accepting of such, as he is asked, “When are you going to accept that Republicans just don’t like you?” In response, Sudeikis states, “I don't think they dislike me, I just think they want to exhaust their options. You know, I understand that before anyone goes home with Mitt Romney they're going to take one last lap around the bar to see if there’s anyone better, and I’m OK with that.” This image of disapproval and inadequacy, which is endorsed by Romney’s character, continues throughout the sketch and is finalized at the end when Sudeikis exclaims, “Nothing says settling more than Mitt Romney.”

Herman Cain’s character is given a great deal of attention throughout the sketch, as well, and, like Romney, he is presented in the more negative light of criticism. Cain, who is portrayed by Keenan Thompson, is first addressed about his “9-9-9 Plan,” which the moderator states, “Most economists agree it is an oversimplified, unworkable solution to a complicated financial

situation.” In his response, Thompson states, “Well, let me explain, I never thought I would be taken seriously, so I never thought that anyone would look at it. The original goal was to get me a show on FOX News at 9:00, but if America is looking for unworkable solutions to complicated problems, Herman Cain will keep them coming.” Both the moderator and Cain’s portrayal are defining him as unprepared and unqualified; and, although he is only portrayed twice more throughout the season, the focus given to him during this sketch establishes Cain as unqualified for the presidency through the use of this comedic dialogue. Rick Perry, played by Bill Hader, receives less camera time than Romney and Cain, though during his brief questioning he references using such tactics as “playing the race card” and devising a plan to frame Romney for murder. Michele Bachmann, Newt Gingrich, Ron Paul, and Rick Santorum are portrayed essentially as irrelevant to the election due to their different locations and minimal dialogue. While these politicians are slowly seen less and less often throughout the season, their appearances during “2012 GOP Debate II” calls attention to *Saturday Night Live*’s interpretation of the earlier stages of the campaign through less serious political dialogue and scenarios.

While *SNL*’s 34th season took place during the peak of the 2008 election, it serves as a point of contrast and a means of interpreting new trends in how the show chooses to depict candidates and events, such as debates, in the earlier stages of a campaign. As opposed to a more formal debate setting, “2012 GOP Debate II” elects additional, non-political locations for candidates to be portrayed in, which are utilized to provoke humor, and the dialogue between the moderator and the candidates strays from formal and political. Rather than presenting viewers with a serious moderator, the moderator in the sketch asks blunt and judgmental questions which are followed by humorous answers, presenting all of the candidates in unfavorable light.

Similarly, in Episode 6 of Season 37, which aired on November 12, 2011, a sketch entitled “CNBC Presents the Third Republican Presidential Debate” highlights these candidates yet again in an all-encompassing negative light with the addition of dramatized facial and bodily characteristics. Each candidate is introduced by a closeup of their impersonator’s faces exaggerating a facial expression, and when asked questions the candidates respond with a total lack of seriousness. For example, when Rick Perry is asked which departments budgets he would like to cut, he cannot remember their names. These two sketches exhibit a trend which can be followed throughout the season and those to follow, in which presidential candidates are painted in increasingly informal, critical, and non-politically oriented means through the use of dialogue which demeans all those portrayed, as opposed to highlighting a candidate less negatively than another to suggest a frontrunner.

The Beginnings of Obama vs. Romney

From December of 2011 to May of 2012, Season 37 of *Saturday Night Live* saw an increase in the depiction of Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney and President Obama who would be running for a second term in office, and these portrayals aid in establishing the tone of their characters throughout the season and the following season. President Obama does not appear in a debate setting during Season 37, but a glimpse into *SNL*’s interpretation of his progress as President is delivered to audiences in Episode 8, which aired on December 3, 2011. In a sketch entitled “Obama on Power,” viewers watch as Obama, still portrayed by Fred Armisen, describes his “ceremonial” position. With a backdrop setting of the Oval Office, Armisen begins with a formal remark about Thanksgiving and Black Friday, followed by a

humorous comment regarding decreased consumer confidence and violent Black Friday events. Continuing on, Armisen discusses Obama's attempt at passing the American Jobs Act to "get people back to work," but states that such an endeavor produced "Jack" and "Squat." Additionally, he remarks that his Healthcare Reform Bill might be "killed" by the Supreme Court, and he realizes that the power of the presidency is limited. The remainder of the sketch incorporates a comparison of the commonly taught branches of the U.S. government versus where the power actually lies, according to Obama.

Armisen portrays Obama in a rather serious nature as he explains the difficulties he must endure when trying to make policy changes due to a complex power struggle, but the dialogue soon becomes comedic. After highlighting the legislative, judicial, and executive branches, Armisen states, "But that's not how it is," and reveals a thirteen-point chart entitled "America's Most Powerful." With Congress listed as the most powerful, Armisen states, "Do they do anything? No, but because of them no one else can either." Grover Norquist, whom Armisen states "Got 276 Republicans and 3 Democrats to sign a pledge that they will never raise taxes under any circumstances," is revealed as the second most powerful, followed by a joke that Obama could not get anyone to buy Girl Scout cookies from his daughter. The list continues as follows: Oprah, the NFL, Mark Zuckerberg, the Supreme Court, George Soros and the Koch Brothers, Pixar, Tyler Perry, Verizon Customer Service, The President, Pippa Middleton, and the Kia Gerbils. As the sketch comes to a close, Armisen states that he still has "more power than all of the Republican candidates combined," and, in doing so, draws attention to the approaching election.

While the “Obama on Power” sketch centers around satirizing the issue of presidential power, the ending reference to Obama’s role in the 2012 election reveals an element of *Saturday Night Live*’s interpretation of Obama’s presidency as the election draws near. The sketch encourages viewers to sympathize with Obama as his list unfolds by placing such well-known, yet, in this context, comical “powers” ahead of him. While his power as president is claimed to be compromised by these forces, the sketch ends with a confident showing of power over his Republican presidential opposition; thus, even though his authority as president is appearing limited, *Saturday Night Live* is suggesting his potential lead over the Republican candidates whom have all been portrayed negatively throughout the season thus far.

The image created by *Saturday Night Live* of Mitt Romney takes greater shape throughout Season 37, solidifying a persona of eagerness and desire for likability which ultimately projects this Republican candidate as a man struggling to create a well-received image of himself and lacking normalcy. In Episode 12, which aired on January 14, 2012, Romney, who is continued to be portrayed by Jason Sudeikis, is featured in a sketch entitled, “Mitt Romney: Believe in America,” which places the presidential hopeful in “Jim Bob’s Kitchen,” a diner in South Carolina. Sudeikis first explains that the people of South Carolina do not find him weird at all, before stating, “So normal are we,” in regards to his family watching football together. Continuing on, Sudeikis discusses Bain Capital, his alternative asset management firm, and the need to fire employees when this company takes over struggling businesses. The remainder of the sketch plays off of the criticism Romney has received in regards to Bain Capital and job terminations.

Featuring a young waitress taking Sudeikis's order, the sketch incorporates dialogue used to generate criticism toward Romney who orders his eggs "laid off" and asks for his toast to lose its job without notice. The waitress appears slightly confused and off-set, but Romney is portrayed as unaware of the discrepancies or irony of his language. Speaking to viewers directly, Sudeikis ends the sketch arguing, "I think you'll agree that I've come across as genuine and warm," as his character grows even further into a candidate desperate to be perceived as normal and "human" while building yet again on the satire of the sketch. This character of Romney's can be followed throughout the remainder of the season, for example, in Episode 14, which aired on February 11, 2012, "Mitt Romney on the Republican Primaries" presents Romney on a set designed to be his living room complete with a real dog. Romney is once again portrayed as struggling to gain popularity, yet acting as though such is not an issue. Sudeikis states that Romney's losses in the Colorado, Missouri, and Minnesota primaries are all part of his "stay below the radar" strategy, and the sketch continues to paint this portrait of uncontrollability when Romney's dog will not stop barking. The unruly dog may also be a reference to an actual and infamous twelve hour car ride in which Romney strapped a dog carrier with his dog Seamus in it to the roof of his car, causing Seamus to get sick and animal advocates to suggest animal cruelty (Rucker). Both sketches highlight the opinion *Saturday Night Live* is seeking to present of Mitt Romney and the comedic ways in which they choose to do so.

Through the use of careful dialogue and comedic settings, *Saturday Night Live*'s 37th season paints a picture of Barack Obama as struggling in his presidency, yet capable of being re-elected while spreading an image of Mitt Romney which both negatively and humorously challenges the authenticity of his nature. Barack Obama's character appears in only two sketches

during Season 37, the second of which is solely humorous as Michelle Obama gets upset with Barack over eating a hoagie, and through comedic discourse he is portrayed as easy-going and funny, while not harshly making fun of himself. On the other hand, the dialogue and settings used to imitate Mitt Romney work against his character as they poke fun at his over-eagerness to please voters and make them fond of him. The tone of voice used by Sudeikis further emphasizes an inauthentic quality of Romney, as the speech is quite proper and seemingly robotic. Through these portrayals, *Saturday Night Live* has showcased its continued ability to portray presidential candidates as unfavorable through satire and parody, while also highlighting the trend, seen through the presentation of Barack Obama, which showcases less political and more humorous elements to these political characters.

SNL 38: Intensifying Election, Increasing Humor

As the 2012 presidential election drew to a close, *Saturday Night Live* honed in on its representations of Barack Obama and Mitt Romney during its political sketches in Season 38, which aired from September 15, 2012, to May 18, 2013, and the rhetoric grew increasingly comedic. From presidential debate spoofs to fictitious candidate ads, Season 38 utilized the stark contrasts between Obama and Romney as a main source of content. During a November 2012 segment entitled “Late Night Comedy and the Campaign,” Chris Connelly from ABC’s *Good Morning America* stated, “For many, this election’s been exhausting, but for those in the comedy business, it’s been one glorious goldmine.” While Barack Obama was re-elected before the show’s season was even half way over, an examination of several of the political sketches from

the first two months of the season reveal the means in which *Saturday Night Live* chose to portray Barack Obama and Mitt Romney during this highly crucial time in the campaign.

The season opener for *SNL*'s 38th season brought the parodying of the two candidates and their differences into full swing with a sketch entitled, "Obama vs. Romney," which alternates between a Democratic rally and a Republican rally to highlight the various distinctions between the candidates through comedic criticism. While Sudeikis continues to represent Mitt Romney, comedian Jay Pharoah replaces Fred Armisen in imitating Barack Obama this season, which leads to a shift in the physical and verbal nature of Obama's character as Pharoah exaggerates his speech and hand gestures more so than Armisen had. The dialogue of this sketch allows for both self-criticism and oppositional criticism; for example, Pharoah begins by stating, "Well, election day is near and things aren't great. The economy is in the tank, the job market's horrible, and, now, even my foreign policy is under attack, but there's something I want you all to know: I'm not worried. Not in the least. Should be. Seems like I would be, but I'm not." Pharoah continues on to discuss Obama's "secret weapon" for his campaign, Mitt Romney, as the screen shifts to Sudeikis at a Republican rally. As the sketch continues, this trend of self and rivalry condemnation is amplified by increased non-political language, and is a trend which can be followed throughout the season.

When the focus of the sketch turns to Mitt Romney's Republican rally, his characterization, in which he is not in sync with or truly understanding of voters, created by *Saturday Night Live* is carried over from Season 37 and amplified. Sudeikis begins by discussing his empathy with the hardships Americans face, as one of his horses did not receive a medal in the Olympics over the summer. The screen shifts to Pharoah who says, "Isn't he great? Now I

know I'm not perfect. I'm distant. I'm aloof. I'm overconfident. But wouldn't you be overconfident if your only competition was this..." shifting back to Sudeikis at the Republican rally discussing how nobody wants gay marriage. The sketch continues on in such a manner, with a brief interlude by Paul Ryan at a rally revealing that he is bad with numbers before moving on to discuss the budget. Shifting far from the political, Pharoah portrays Obama briefly singing "I'm So In Love With You" to his audience and Sudeikis sings "Old McDonald Had A Farm," which he refers to as a "groovy" song before making a racist comment about an African American in the sketch's audience. Pharoah closes the sketch, stating, "So there's your choice America: stick with what's been barely working or take your chances with that," and, in doing so, highlights the candidate back-and-forth which encompasses Season 38.

"Obama vs. Romney" portrays both candidates negatively, in one way or another, but the criticism placed on Romney is seen as more judgmental to his ability to be president, as Sudeikis makes narrow-minded, racist, and out of touch statements. Obama, on the other hand, is portrayed as lacking success in his presidency, but the back-and-forth between the two rallies shifts Obama's negatives to positives in comparison to Romney. Pharoah also places great emphasis on exaggerating Obama's voice, as he includes moments of uttering between sentences which poke fun at the way in which Obama speaks and draws audience laughter. The trend of comedy infused political scenarios and dialogue which shifts viewer's concentration from political matters to unrelated jokes has been followed throughout Seasons 34 and 37, and can be viewed throughout Season 38, as well.

Similar to "Obama vs. Romney," which plays out in such a manner, a sketch entitled, "The Colorado Presidential Debate: Obama and Romney," follows in this trend of diversion from

actual political matters. Jim Lehrer is once again impersonated as the moderator, as he was previously seen in Episode 3 of Season 34, and he introduces Barack Obama and Mitt Romney in their first face-to-face debate of the show's season. Lehrer begins in a very serious manner, asking Obama, "Mr. President, what are the major differences between you and Governor Romney in how you would go about creating new jobs?" However, Pharoah responds first by wishing Michelle a "Happy Anniversary," followed by real footage of Michelle Obama looking upset. While Pharoah discusses the devastating economic situation Obama has been faced with, he reveals that he has made a great deal of progress and if Governor Romney is elected he will only cut taxes for the wealthy whereas Obama will hire "millions and millions of teachers." When Romney is asked the same question, he discusses a plan which has "41 basic elements, 6 abrupt reversals of position, and 3 outright lies," but when he starts to list each of these, audiences become attuned to Obama's internal monologue in which he reveals that he forgot to get Michelle an anniversary present and contemplates the different items he could buy her at the hotel gift shop. Obama's thoughts are interrupted by the moderator asking him if he would like to comment on the fact that Governor Romney has just said that he killed Osama bin Laden, and Obama responds saying, "No, you two go ahead." The internal monologue of President Obama continues over Romney discussing his potential presidential policies, thus, more and more of the sketch's time is being focused on non-political matters while in a political setting.

Governor Romney receives little attention as President Obama's thought process is being revealed, and, even when his statements are made without Obama's internal reflection distracting viewers from listening, his presidential ideas call for criticism and laughter. Romney reveals that he will cut funding to PBS, upsetting moderator Jim Lehrer very much as he works for PBS, and

he later states, “I would lift all federal speed limits on our nation’s interstate highway. For heaven sake, the federal government has enough on its plate without telling private citizens how fast they can drive.” While this sketch’s most prominent focus is on President Obama forgetting his wedding anniversary, based on the amount of time in the sketch used to discuss it, the brief interludes made by Romney portray him once again as inconsiderate to many viewers and unqualified for the presidency. Obama’s internal monologue, on the other hand, does not deal directly with politics, thus, less negative criticism is placed on him in regards to the upcoming election; however, his poor performance during the actual Colorado presidential debate is reflected in the distracted nature of his character that *Saturday Night Live* has created.

The critical portrayal of Mitt Romney continues on until the election occurs, as seen through a final look at his impersonation during a “Weekend Update” sketch entitled “Mitt Romney on Still Running for President,” which aired during Episode 6 on November 3, 2012, soon after Hurricane Sandy occurred. Seth Meyers, one of the hosts of “Weekend Update,” invites Romney, continued to be played by Jason Sudeikis, to make a final appeal to voters, and Sudeikis first begins by recognizing those affected by Hurricane Sandy. Meyers points out that the election is only four days away, and, while Sudeikis recognizes the devastations of the recent hurricane, he states, “I think there is something very important that a lot of people are forgetting, which is, I’m Mitt Romney and I’m still running for president.” When Meyers asks Romney about a comment he made at a Republican debate about cutting funding to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), he claims that judging someone for what they say at a Republican debate is “like judging a person’s behavior while they’re pledging a fraternity” and that when he made such a statement it was sunny outside. Sudeikis promises voters “everything”

because he would really like to be president, but when he is asked why he would like this leadership position he says, “You know, I really don’t know why.” This final examination of Mitt Romney’s characterization developed by *Saturday Night Live* aids in understanding the overall image the show is seeking to deliver to audiences. Throughout Season 38, President Obama received far less harsh criticism than Governor Romney who has been shown as non-relatable, unfairly and unjustly critical, and unprepared for office, ultimately portraying Obama as the candidate of choice.

A Negative Plus A Negative Equals A Positive

Throughout *Saturday Night Live*’s 37th and 38th seasons, new trends in the representation of politicians have been revealed in comparison to those analyzed in Season 34, and such impersonations bring to light *SNL*’s following of the election and the key takeaways the show is seeking to amplify for audiences. Season 37 portrays several of the Republican presidential hopefuls unfavorably by placing them in non-political settings, such as Michele Bachmann and Newt Gingrich’s placement in a janitor’s closet during a GOP debate, and by utilizing dialogue which lacks any seriousness in regards to the election. While Season 38 utilizes more formal debate and interview backdrops, a common thread between the two seasons lies within the use of self-critical dialogue expressed by the Republican candidates. Each Republican represented throughout these two examined seasons is portrayed in solely critical ways, as their characters have not been created to have the opportunity to share meaningful political commentary. In doing so, *Saturday Night Live* has placed presidential incumbent, Barack Obama, as a frontrunner.

Mitt Romney serves as a character of stark contrast to President Obama in Season 38, and, while Obama is not freed from criticism, the critiques he receives are incomparable to those placed on Romney and are most often generated by his own character rather than his opponent. Although Obama can be viewed calling himself “over-confident” and appear unconcerned with the condition of the United States and the upcoming election, when put in direct contrast to the portrayal of Mitt Romney as completely unqualified for the presidency, his potential is heightened. While Obama is presented in a slightly more favorable light than John McCain in Season 34, his abilities over Romney are expressed in a more heightened manner in Seasons 37 and 38. Additionally, the sketches have shifted into dialogue which does not encompass as much politically relevant discussion overall, so a greater focus is placed on the jokes made by each candidate and the facial and style of language they use. Seasons 37 and 38 of *Saturday Night Live* exhibit the continuous technique of using comedy, particularly satire and parody, to overemphasize critical qualities or policies of the candidates, and, in doing so, these seasons place Barack Obama in a position of higher potential than Mitt Romney, who did ultimately lose the election.

The 2012 Election Through The Eyes of Stewart and Colbert

As discussed in reference to the 2008 election and *Saturday Night Live*’s 34th season, *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* have acted as means of discussion and criticism of presidential elections through the use of hard news parodying and stern commentary, and the 2012 presidential election received its fair share of straightforward, yet comical analysis as well. *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* both aired episodes on

October 23, 2012, in which they discussed the third and final presidential debate which took place the night prior, and each reveal alternate means of portraying the candidates, Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, in comparison to *Saturday Night Live*. In a segment entitled “Stephen Colbert’s Debate 2012 Coverage,” which is preceded by an animation of Obama and Romney driving off a cliff with text asking, “Who gets to drive us off the cliff?,” Colbert discusses foreign policy and how it was debated the night before. This discussion is then followed by a compilation of the two candidates saying “Israel” during various stages of the debate. Footage of Romney criticizing Obama for bringing the United States “four years closer to a nuclear Iran” leads Romney to discuss Obama’s “weak leadership,” which involved him going on an apology tour. Colbert prolongs this dialogue in a seemingly sarcastic manner as he comments that the president should not have bowed to all of the foreign leaders that he met. He then goes on to compare the faces of the two candidates by highlighting news clips of reporters discussing Romney achieving “plausibility.” This segment is critical of both presidential candidates through Colbert’s use of satire and sarcasm which is forwardly condemning of the candidates, and the insertion of hard news media clips allows viewers the opportunity to review the references being made.

This theme of inserting hard news clips into late-night soft news comedy can be found in *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, as well, as he utilizes news excerpts to show strong criticism of Mitt Romney at this crucial time in the election. In a segment entitled “Democalypse 2012 - We Missed NLCS Game 7 For this - Mitt Romney’s Leadership,” Stewart examines the third presidential debate in particular regard to the comments Romney shared throughout. The segment begins with actual news clips of reporters, political analysts, and Romney himself

describing how weak Obama is when it comes to foreign policy. Footage from the third debate is then displayed in which Romney makes several comments endorsing the foreign policy decisions President Obama has made. Several of Obama and Romney's statements from the debate are then pieced together in a compilation which follows, essentially showing the two candidates finishing each other's sentences, thus, aligning on their beliefs. Stewart follows with a racial comment, stating, "At least we still get our choice of color, but its the same model." The segment continues on to highlight Romney's hypocriticalness, as news clips reveal him making statements in opposition to Obama, followed by his commentary at the debate in which he agrees with Obama on several of the issues he is previously recorded as not supporting.

Through these two examples from *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, a means of candidate portrayal in comical soft news media is revealed through the usage of hard news media clips which allow for greater analysis of the candidates. In contrast to *Saturday Night Live*, these clippings allow viewers to see the actual events or commentary being referenced followed by the critical and comical response. Such is important to highlight, as it reveals the more ambiguous aspect of *Saturday Night Live*'s sketches, as viewers may be unaware of whether or not the scenario the candidates are being portrayed in or the commentary which they are making are based off of an event that happened or an exchange that was made, or if they are solely constructed by *SNL* to exaggerate on the candidate's policies and characteristics. *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* provide a key point of contrast for analyzing the techniques *Saturday Night Live* uses to critique presidential candidates, and, when moving forward to discuss the most recent election, the aspects of *SNL* revealed by

these comparisons will aid in better understanding the objectives of soft news comedy shows more extensively.

Presidential Portrayals and Saturday Night Live Themes

During the 2012 presidential election, *Saturday Night Live* developed humorous content mimicking the candidates and political events from 2011 to 2012, following the election from the onset of Republican hopefuls vying for a presidential nomination to the debates between Mitt Romney and Barack Obama. During *SNL*'s 37th season, highly negative depictions of the Republican presidential candidates were delivered to viewers through the use of non-political dialogue. In creating such dialogue, each politician is shown unfavorably as they make commentary which is self-criticizing, as seen in "2012 GOP Debate II." By establishing such negative characteristics for each of the Republican candidates, including Mitt Romney, *SNL* reveals a theme of solely critical commentary as a means of portrayal, rather than a back and forth of political versus non-political narration in which one candidate may be represented more approvingly.

Saturday Night Live's 38th season utilizes the contrasts between President Obama and Mitt Romney, similar to the show's portrayal of Obama and McCain in season 34, as material for sketches which place Romney in a greater place of weakness compared to Obama. Romney's character is exhibited as unsuitable for presidency through the use of self-critical dialogue which presents him as non-relatable and unqualified. In terms of President Obama, he is highlighted as having suffered losses for the country as president, yet, in comparison to Romney, he is depicted as the frontrunner. Obama's physical characteristics are amplified during season 37 and 38 by

means of Jay Pharoah's impersonation which focuses on intensifying verbal and gestural tendencies through humorous exaggeration. Both Barack Obama and Mitt Romney receive critiques through the dialogues their characters are given, but the level of disapproval *SNL* has established for Romney is evidently greater than that of Obama as seen through sketches which paint Obama's errors as minimal in comparison to the potential errors of Romney. In comparison, the examination of *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* highlight additional means of creating such soft news opinions, as their opinions on Barack Obama and Mitt Romney during this time were heightened by the use of hard news clips as a means of proving the language of their discussions.

The purposeful portrayal of Barack Obama as the presidential frontrunner, the unfavorable light shed on Mitt Romney via an exaggerated depiction of his persona, and a lack of attention paid to the actual politics of the election from the portrayal of several Republican hopefuls to the comparisons of Obama and Romney highlight themes of portrayal for *Saturday Night Live*. One such theme encompasses dissenting representations of all candidates presented as a means of group condemnation, and another theme embraces a highly negative portrayal of one candidate as a means of diverting attention from any harmful qualities of another. The use of non-political dialogue enriches these themes and helps to paint a broader picture of *Saturday Night Live*'s aims at delivering specific characterizations of presidential candidates to its audiences. Additionally, these themes reveal the potential of *Saturday Night Live* to deliver impressionable depictions of candidates and provide insight on the show's possible goals in doing so.

Chapter 4:

Saturday Night Live and the Election to Come

The current political atmosphere of the United States encompasses the upcoming presidential election of 2016 and a great deal of questioning amongst the American public over which candidates will receive the Democratic and Republican nominations. As campaigns first ensued, the Republican party candidates consisted most notably of businessman Donald Trump, Senator Ted Cruz, Senator Marco Rubio, surgeon Ben Carson, former Florida governor Jeb Bush, Ohio governor John Kasich, and New Jersey governor Chris Christie, while others, such as Jim Gilmore, Mike Huckabee, Rand Paul, Carly Fiorina, and Rick Santorum received less support, and, thus, less media attention. Fewer Democratic candidates have emerged with popularity, but those currently vying for delegates are Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Senator Bernie Sanders, and former Maryland governor Martin O'Malley. Currently, Donald Trump is leading for the Republican party and Hillary Clinton for the Democratic party in terms of total delegates ("2016 Election Center - Presidential Primaries and Caucuses"). With so many political personalities present during this election, potential voters have been faced with the task of attempting to decide which candidate they might vote for, and both hard and soft news media platforms have received ample content to deliver and interpret via the diversity of candidates and the controversy amongst them thus far.

Saturday Night Live has been one of the media beneficiaries of the 2016 presidential election, and, as seen through an analysis of the representation of presidential candidates during the elections of 2008 and 2012, the show creates characters for several of the candidates throughout a season with particular negative or positive connotations associated with each.

Throughout season 41 of *SNL*, detailed representations have been created for several of the Republican and Democratic presidential hopefuls, in particular, Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, and Bernie Sanders, though less popular candidates have also received characterizations which paint them in a certain opinionated light. The first episode of season 41 aired on October 3, 2015, and is still in the midst of the season with thirteen episodes in total having been performed thus far. Eighteen election-related sketches have been televised during these episodes, which, in comparison to the previous seasons examined, is quite a large number, and appearances have been made by Trump, Clinton, and Sanders, with Trump even hosting an episode. In analyzing several of the sketches in which these candidates are impersonated or make appearances themselves, trends will be revealed which highlight an increase in politically related sketches and trends which continue in the presentation of candidates either overtly negatively or more subtly positively through amplified mockery and carefully worded dialogue.

Reaping the Comical Benefits of Trump

Donald Trump has been featured, via an impersonation by a cast member or by an actual guest appearance, in six of the season's thirteen episodes so far, with his name mentioned during several other political sketches performed throughout the season. Even though the season and the presidential campaigns are still ongoing, *Saturday Night Live* has established a humorous, highly unfavorable, and frequently utilized character of Donald Trump, and, in doing so, reveals the degree to which the show can go in creating such a negative, yet comical opinion about a presidential candidate. Episode 1 of season 41 begins with a sketch entitled "Donald and Melania Trump Cold Open," in which Donald, played by Taran Killam, and his wife Melania, played by

Cecily Strong, discuss several “misinterpretations” of Donald’s beliefs in a regal setting that is supposed to emulate their home. From the onset of the sketch, Killam emphasizes a humorous facial impersonation of Trump, while stating, “As a man who’s almost certainly your next president, I want to give you a chance to get to know the real Donald.” The sketch touches upon such items as foreign policy, women, immigration, and the economy, but through the use of critical dialogue which paints Trump as over-confident and under-qualified.

On the subject of foreign policy, Killam states that Trump has ample experience which is exemplified by him sharing the same interior designer as Saddam Hussein, and when discussing women Cecily develops Melania as ignorant as she reveals that Donald is always complimenting other women’s appearances. Melania is also featured as a reference to Donald’s feelings toward immigration, as Donald points to Melania and states, “Clearly I don’t hate immigrants.” Continuing on to unknowingly reveal negative aspects of Trump, Cecily acts as Melania probing Donald to say “crazy things” by telling him that his poll numbers have gone down, and, although Donald’s character had said that he does not make outlandish statements just to draw the attention of the media, when Melania’s character says this, Donald immediately declares, “Mexicans are stealing our children.” In terms of improving the economy, Killam briefly discusses Donald’s plan to build a “huge” wall, and, lastly, Melania is portrayed as unknowledgeable and detrimental to Donald’s image as Cecily reveals, using a thick accent, “He is the only man who can unite both sides because he’s running as Republican but his ideas are actually Democrat. Actually he was a Democrat before he was a Republican.” Throughout this sketch, both Donald and Melania’s characters delve into Donald’s stance on political issues

pertinent to the election which they both appear to be proud of, but ironically in doing so they generate exceedingly negative interpretations of Donald and his potential presidential abilities.

Utilizing such a humorously patronizing sketch as *Saturday Night Live*'s season opener has set the stage for the increasingly discredited character for Donald Trump, as well as the subsequent presentations of other presidential hopefuls. This trend of increased negativity can even be found in Episode 4 of Season 41, which aired on November 11, 2015, and was hosted by Donald Trump and featured several sketches which delved into his potential presidency. During Trump's monologue, which takes place after the cold open of the episode, he discusses the fact that he knows how to handle jokes since *SNL* has "done so much to ridicule me over the years." Trump also states that "This show has been a disaster for me," touching upon the mockery he has received as a businessman prior to declaring his hopes for presidency. The first sketch focusing on Trump and the upcoming election is entitled, "White House 2018," which takes place in a mock setup of the Oval Office which is inhabited by Donald Trump, played by himself, who has been elected to office, and several of his staff members.

Although Trump himself is present, the sketch continues to play into the humorously unlikeable character already established of him earlier in the season and beyond, as one cast member impersonating a member of his potential presidential staff states, "Everyone loves the new laws you tweeted." The sketch continues to poke fun at Trump as the topic of Syria is brought up and a military general reveals that all of the refugees have returned and have jobs as blackjack dealers at a hotel and casino owned by Trump in Damascus. Trump's daughter, Ivanka, makes an in-person appearance as the "Secretary of Interior," and discusses the private pools and cabanas which have just been completed for the White House, as well as the gold-mirrored glass

which is being placed on the Washington Monument. A cast member impersonating the President of Mexico then enters with a check for the wall Donald is to build separating the two countries, and ironically states, “Nothing brings two countries together like a wall.” After thanking the Mexican president for changing Telemundo to all English, Trump ends the sketch by addressing the camera and revealing, “Winning is tough. It’s not that easy. If you think that’s how it’s going to be when I’m president, you’re wrong. It’s going to be even better. I said to the writers of this sketch to keep it modest, it’s better to start with low expectations, that way you have nowhere to go but up.” Trump’s overconfident character developed previously by *Saturday Night Live* is furthered by Trump’s actual performance during “White House 2018,” and continues on throughout the season with harsher critiques developing Trump’s impersonation into an almost common episode occurrence.

When placed in current election-oriented settings, such as mock debates, Trump’s character is presented amongst other Republican candidates as overly self-assured and critical, unknowing to his character yet intentional toward his opponents. In Episode 9, which aired on December 12, 2015, and Episode 10, which aired on January 16, 2016, the cold openings of each show involved Republican debates and presented Trump in comparison to those campaigning against him. In the opening sketch of Episode 9 entitled, “GOP Debate Cold Open,” Trump is played by Darrell Hammond and is surrounded by impersonations of Ted Cruz, Ben Carson, Marco Rubio, Jeb Bush, Carly Fiorina, Rand Paul, and Chris Christie. Trump’s first statement fits into his arrogant character that *Saturday Night Live* has developed, as he states, “Debates are stupid. You should be paying me.” Jeb Bush struggles to craft an insulting response to Trump’s utterance, but Trump does not stumble over his words when claiming Jeb to be a girl, further

revealing his disparaging characterization. A further glimpse into *SNL*'s opinions on the election overall are disclosed when Jeb tells Trump he will never be president and Trump responds saying, "Yeah, no kidding genius none of us are." The cold open of Episode 10, entitled "Republican Debate Cold Open," sheds further light on the offensive nature of Trump as described by *SNL*, as Trump continues to insult Jeb Bush, as well as Ted Cruz, and, in doing so, helps to paint an image of Trump which is solely negative and is still being defined for audiences as the season continues.

The presentation of other Republican candidates, in comparison to Trump and seen through his interactions with Jeb's character, is critical, yet they receive less of a focus due to Trump's overshadowing negative portrayal. In "GOP Debate Cold Open," Ted Cruz uses self-critical dialogue to present himself as unlikable, responding to a question regarding ISIS stating, "Well, I can promise you ISIS will hate me and how do I know? Because everyone who knows me hates me." During the following episode in "Republican Debate Cold Open," he replies to a comment made by Trump accusing him of being Canadian by telling him that there is no way such a statement could be true since Canadians are liked and he is not. Chris Christie is portrayed as angry and unprepared to handle presidential issues in these sketches, as he appears yelling such declarations as, "We're all gonna die" and "Barack Obama is the worse president in history." Continuing on in these unfavorable characterizations of Republican candidates, Ben Carson is presented as sluggish through a menial tone of voice and gestures, Marco Rubio is exhibited egotistically through dialogue which focuses on his physical appearance, and Carly Fiorina and Rand Paul are given minimal dialogue and screen time. While these Republican candidates are featured in uncomplimentary ways, thus creating critical characters, their

minimized dialogue ultimately brings Trump to a higher level of denunciation by *Saturday Night Live*.

Saturday Night Live has made itself known for its political impersonations and ensuing humorous critiques throughout the show's forty-one year run, and the show's political characterization of Donald Trump is an example of the show's ability to focus a great deal of attention on a particular politician in an effort to portray him in the utmost realm of negativity. As seen in Season 34, Sarah Palin received a great deal of disapproval by *SNL* through a focus on her accent, gestures, and a reinterpretation her actual statements. Trump's character, on the other hand, has made more appearances than Palin's and the subject matter of his critiques have centered around the dangerous possibilities of his presidency, such as his egotistical, ill-mannered, and ill-advised persona. However, the two came together in Episode 11, which aired on January 23, 2016, in a sketch entitled, "Palin Endorsement Cold Open," in which Tina Fey portrays Palin endorsing Trump, but with side commentary from both that they do not actually approve of one another. In placing Palin and Trump's characters together in a sketch, *Saturday Night Live* brings together two political impersonations that reveal a trend in the show's practice. While *Saturday Night Live* creates comical personalities for a great deal of presidential candidates during election periods, those with larger personalities or more outlandish traits appear to be treated with greater disdain and harsher denunciation, making known a potential goal of the show to reveal to audiences the possible instability or perils a particular politician may bring to the presidency.

SNL and Democrats: Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders Vying for Voters

While Donald Trump has been receiving a great deal of attention on *Saturday Night Live* through frequent impersonations and the opportunity to host the show, Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders have been represented and made personal appearances in several of the season's episodes as well. Through these occurrences, *SNL* has developed specific characterizations for Clinton and Sanders which portray each candidate in a particular opinionated light. While Taran Killam and Cecily Strong opened Season 41 in the cold open of Episode 1 as Donald and Melania Trump, Hillary Clinton made an in-person appearance in a sketch entitled "Hillary Clinton Bar Talk" in the same episode, in which she played a bartender named Val and Kate McKinnon impersonated her. In doing so, Kate gravely exaggerates Hillary's tone of voice and facial expressions, but Hillary is given the opportunity to make comments on herself through comedic dialogue.

Introductions between Hillary's bartender character Val and her impersonation by Kate take place when Kate asks for a drink because she is portraying Hillary as a presidential candidate struggling to gain voter approval and distressed over the matter. Kate introduces Hillary first as a grandmother then as "a human entrusted with this one green earth," which lead's Hillary's character Val to realize that she must be speaking to a politician. Val reveals that she is "just an ordinary citizen who believes the Keystone Pipeline will destroy our environment," which Kate portrays Hillary as agreeing with, though she states that it took her a long time to do so. Hillary's character Val says, "Nothing wrong with taking your time, what matters is getting it right," which is an example of how her character is utilized throughout the scene as a vantage point for Hillary herself to address certain critiques of her beliefs. A cast

member portraying a young man at the bar approaches Kate telling her that he has a gay sister and appreciates Hillary's support of gay marriage, and, while Val compliments Kate for Hillary's long-term support, Kate says that she could have supported it sooner. The two argue this point for several lines before Hillary's character Val says that Kate has made a "fair point." When the subject of Donald Trump arises, Val proceeds to do a brief vocal and facial impersonation of Trump saying, "You're all losers," and Kate then reveals that Hillary would like Trump to win the primaries so that she can be "the one to take him down." The scene ends with the two agreeing that they wish Hillary would be elected, and they sing the song "Lean on Me" before Val disappears and Kate becomes saddened because she found her to be so "smart and personable."

"Hillary Clinton Bar Talk" demonstrates the first *SNL* impression viewers are receiving of Hillary Clinton as a presidential candidate in the 2016 election, and, in comparison to Trump's portrayal and appearances, Hillary gained the opportunity to make subtle comments on issues which she has been criticized for rather than Trump's endorsement of certain of his beliefs. While a few less positive comments are made regarding her timeline in determining the dangers of the Keystone Pipeline and forming her support of gay marriage, the sketch ultimately portrays her favorably through the comments she is able to make for herself and through Kate's affirmation that Val, who is evident to the audience to actually be Hillary, is a likable and knowledgeable person. This charming representation of Hillary takes on slightly more comical and critical characterizations as the season continues when Hillary herself is not present and other candidates are featured beside her, but, in comparison to the portrayal of other candidates, she is represented most sympathetically.

“Democratic Debate Cold Open” is the title of the opening sketch in Episode 3, which aired on October 17, 2015, and this sketch features Kate McKinnon impersonating Hillary along side impersonations of Democratic presidential hopefuls Bernie Sanders, Jim Webb, Lincoln Chafee, and Martin O’Malley during a mock Democratic debate moderated by an *SNL* cast member imitating Anderson Cooper. Each candidate is introduced and delivers a brief introduction, but Clinton and Sanders are introduced last as the “real candidates,” suggesting their popularity in comparison to their opponents and ultimately leading the sketch to focus more on dialogue between the two. Jim Webb, Lincoln Chafee, and Martin O’Malley are each presented as unimportant and non-competitors as cast members utilize over exaggerated voices and insulting dialogue, whereas Clinton and Sanders are featured as focal points of the sketch due to their greater potential for nomination. Clinton is projected somewhat more distastefully from the onset of the sketch, as she states, “I think you’re really going to like the Hillary Clinton my team and I have created for this debate,” suggesting she creates certain images of herself to please different audiences.

Bernie Sanders’ character, who is played by actor Larry David, is presented to audiences for the first time this season in “Democratic Debate Cold Open,” and the personality established for him suggests he is fed up with America’s current political situation and hopes to fix it via non-traditional, modest ways. Sanders’ first comment exemplifies this characterization, as he states, “We’re doomed. We need a revolution.” The sketch continues on to follow a trend which has been analyzed in previous seasons in which the moderator of the debate asks serious questions which are followed by a bit of earnestness and then humorous non-political remarks. When asked his opinion on big banks, Bernie responds, “Eh, not a fan of the banks. They

trample on the middle class, they control Washington, and why do they chain all their pens to the desk?” Bernie’s solution of having bankers pay for college for everyone as a way to fix America is followed by Hillary’s accusation that Bernie is promising a “golden goose” that does not exist, whereas she has “some chicken that’ll do.” This play on words through satire and parody is continued throughout the sketch, and ultimately ends in a culmination of the defining characteristics of both Hillary and Bernie. While Hillary reveals that this year she will be the “cool black guy” she lost to in 2008 and that a nomination for Bernie will lead America to President Trump, Bernie’s character is presented as a second choice to Hillary in terms of the election, as he states, “You know what I don’t understand America? These podiums. What are you supposed to do with your elbows? Rest them on top? They’re too short! Anyway, I’m Bernie Sanders and come next November I will be Hillary Clinton’s vice president.” Although Hillary is the recipient of a few harsh critiques generated by her own dialogue, Bernie is presented as angry and false-promising, thus, Hillary is placed in a more positive light even though she is shown still struggling to get people to like her and desiring to please in any way possible.

Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders have been depicted in the same sketch once more during *Saturday Night Live*’s ongoing season in Episode 4, hosted by Donald Trump, in an opening sketch entitled, “MSNBC Forum Cold Open,” and, although the candidates do not appear side-by-side, their characters are solidified as oppositional through less formal questioning. Clinton is introduced into the forum as “hot off crushing the Benghazi hearings,” and first struggles to find a casual position on her chair, suggesting an attempt to be more laid back, whereas Sanders refuses any sort of elaborate introduction saying, “Let’s just get on with it.” Throughout the sketch, Clinton is portrayed as seeking to please as many potential voters as

possible as she defends her move from her home state of Arkansas to New York, and a bit more negativity toward her character is presented when she is asked if she is an introvert or an extrovert and responds stating, “I’m an extrovert because I love meeting people and connecting with them and smiling with them, but I’m an introvert because no I don’t.” Bernie’s character speaks at length about the nation’s infrastructure and how he will not drive over bridges but instead uses a kayak, as well as the fact that his campaign only accepts coins from people and that black people love him. “MSNBC Forum Cold Open” dives deeper into *Saturday Night Live*’s opinions of Hillary and Bernie, with Hillary still appearing as the frontrunner seeking to please and Bernie being portrayed as an outlandish and irritable candidate.

A sketch solely devoted to Bernie Sanders’ character, “Bern Your Enthusiasm,” which aired during Episode 12 on February 6, 2016, presents Sanders as stubborn and ill-advised, but, during this same episode, Bernie Sanders himself makes an in-person appearance in a sketch entitled “Steam Ship.” While “Bern Your Enthusiasm” develops an unfavorable story of Bernie unwilling to shake the hand of a woman who coughed into her hand and resistant to help put a woman’s shoulder back into place after she got in a car accident on the way to vote for him, “Steam Ship” welcomes Sanders to perform and briefly express a political belief. As a ship is shown to be sinking and women and children are given preference over men to get to safety, Sanders states, “I am so sick of the 1% getting this preferential treatment. Enough is enough. We need to unite and work together if we’re all going to get through this.” Though Sanders appears fed-up and he is given a shorter timeframe than Hillary during her appearance to shed light on the actuality of his beliefs, a sketch in the following episode sheds light on the differences between the two candidates.

A sketch entitled “Hillary for President Cold Open,” which aired on February 13, 2016, shows a group of young adult friends at a restaurant discussing Clinton and Sanders. After they all agree that they are going to vote for Hillary due to her experience, the conversation shifts when they start to think about voting for Bernie. One cast member states, “Yeah I mean Hillary has every single thing I want in a president, but she’s no Bernie,” and another reveals, “I mean I like Hillary’s foreign policy experience, but I love Bernie’s whole vibe.” In this sketch, Bernie is being portrayed as the candidate of their choice due to his “vibe” even though they all agree that Hillary is essentially more qualified for presidency. Through these sketches, Hillary’s *Saturday Night Live* character is ultimately presented as an experienced candidate, though she is not developed in a solely positive light, while Bernie’s representation is critical of his alternative and revolutionary attitude yet most recently revealing of his potential non-conventional appeal.

Trump, Clinton, and Sanders: Examining SNL’s Political Thoughts

The ongoing Season 41 of *Saturday Night Live* has been focusing on three presidential hopefuls, Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, and Bernie Sanders, through the use of individualized representations and a hosting opportunity for Trump. In doing so, the show has been following previous trends of the portrayal of presidential candidates, as well as revealing *SNL*’s potential take on the 2016 election itself. Republican presidential aspirant Donald Trump has been painted particularly critically through the use of self-critical dialogue and exaggerated voice and facial impersonations, similar to the mode of comical impersonation used to portray Mitt Romney in Seasons 37 and 38. However, Trump’s performance as a host on *Saturday Night Live* increased his prevalence on the show in comparison to Romney’s, as well as helped in solidifying his

egotistical and overconfident character. The presence of his daughter Ivanka as “Secretary of Interior” in “White House 2018” discussing the aesthetic improvements that were being made to the White House and Washington Monument and the sarcastic dialogue exchanged about the unifying qualities of a wall dividing two countries emphasized negativity toward his candidacy even though he was present in the sketch. The sketches in which Trump has been portrayed with other candidates have shown him to be rude, and such ill-mannered qualities are presented as non-presidential. This negative Republican portrayal can be traced through Sarah Palin, John McCain, and Mitt Romney’s characters on *Saturday Night Live*, and the slightly more positive depiction of Barack Obama and now Hillary Clinton in comparison to Republican characters reveals the ability of *SNL* to exhibit a possible political lean.

Although Hillary Clinton has been the recipient of adverse representation, this discrediting has been countered by her appearance on the show and the sympathy formed through dialogue and settings which present her as a qualified candidate eager to win voters’ approval. Democratic presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders has been distinguished as an unorthodox and less qualified candidate through aggravated dialogue and non-political concerns, such as the attachment of pens to desks at banks, and, in comparison to Hillary Clinton, this negative display of character appears to place Hillary in a more favorable light. A trend analyzed in Seasons 37 and 38 in which Barack Obama’s criticisms appear overshadowed by those of Mitt Romney’s can be compared to the negative aspects of both Hillary and Bernie’s characterizations which are incomparable to those of Trump’s. Season 41 also revisits more formal political settings, such as debates and the Oval Office, which allow for more political commentary which is then followed by non-political dialogue. While *Saturday Night Live* is still in the midst of

Season 41, the strongly defined characters that have been developed for Trump, Clinton, and Sanders reveal a great deal about the show's overall aims in portrayal and shed light on potential political preferences being exhibited.

Stephen Colbert's and Trevor Noah's New(s) Platforms

Since the 2012 presidential election, Stephen Colbert has transitioned to a new late night comedy show on CBS, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, which involves a more talk-show oriented format as opposed to the hard news mockery of *The Colbert Report*. *The Daily Show* has been taken over by a new host, Trevor Noah, thus ending an analysis of Jon Stewart's specific style of presidential candidate representations in comparison to *Saturday Night Live*, however, a brief look into Trevor Noah's *Daily Show* takeover and continued examination of the similarities and differences between *SNL* and the satire and parody style of Stephen Colbert will aid in further revealing the multi-layered nature of comedic soft news. Although Colbert's new talk show is not fully centered around the methods of fake news, elements of political satire still appear throughout the show and, thus, are important to the continued discussion of late-night political comedy with the addition of reviewing Trevor Noah's take on the 2016 presidential election.

The Daily Show with Trevor Noah continues to be aired on Comedy Central and is set up in a similar manner as to when Jon Stewart hosted the show, with humorous and opinionated political commentary shared with audiences via a fake news setting and dialogue. As the 2016 presidential election remains a current and pertinent topic of discussion, Noah has shared critical responses to Republican and Democratic candidates utilizing hard news clips as Stewart and

Colbert had. In an episode which aired on January 19, 2016, Noah makes known a few of his opinions toward the most popular candidates in a segment entitled, “Breaking Down the Republican and Democratic Debates.” A discussion of the Charleston, South Carolina, debates ensues, and Noah suggests manipulative qualities of Trump who brought up 9/11 as a means of getting debate-goers and other candidates to clap for him, and a hard news clip is shown in reference. Noah then examines Bernie Sanders by poking fun at a hard-of-hearing moment during the debate, which is referenced by a hard news clip, followed by him referring to Sanders as “the cutest old man ever” who was “in the zone” during this debate.

Noah reviews the New Hampshire primary in a segment entitled, “The New Hampshire Primary Winners and Non-Winners,” which aired on February 10, 2016, Noah discusses Bernie Sanders being the first Jew to win a presidential primary, followed by him sharing that Trump was the first “pile of garbage” to win. A hard news clip of Trump is shown in which he congratulates the other candidates to “get it over with,” which leads Noah to refer sarcastically to Trump as “so eloquent.” In terms of Clinton, subtext is added to a hard news clip of her speech after losing the primary, with the text suggesting that she hates everyone and that they have failed her. Trevor Noah’s *Daily Show* mocks presidential candidates through critical commentary and stands as yet another example of the alternate means of candidate portrayal as it follows in the footsteps of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert.

As Colbert begins each of his new late-night show episodes with a monologue often discussing political affairs, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* has been an outlet for representing several of the 2016 presidential candidates through means which can be traced to Colbert’s mode of delivery in *The Colbert Report*. Similarities between Colbert’s current show,

The Late Show, and *The Colbert Report* can be found in his continued utilization of hard news clips as a means of pointing out flaws, inaccuracies, or hypocritical commentary of candidates. While this style contrasts to that of *Saturday Night Live*, comparisons can be made in terms of the broader message that is seeking to be delivered. In Episode 28 of Season 1, which aired on October 15, 2015, Colbert criticizes Hillary for a comment made during a debate in which she claims to have told Wall Street to “cut it out” when she visited in 2007 before the crash, and Colbert brings to light the moment when Sanders essentially said that Clinton’s email scandal should no longer be brought up, both of which are discussed with hard news clips. Sanders is then ridiculed for comments he made during a debate, as hard news clips are juxtaposed to show Sanders saying a lot of different percentages which suggest an uncertainty and confusion to his character, and, thus, highlighting both Sanders and Clinton negatively to an extent.

The ridicule of Clinton continues on throughout the show’s season, and in episode 92, which aired on February 15, 2016, Colbert speaks of Hillary Clinton’s failure to win youth votes in the New Hampshire primary on February 9, 2016. Colbert discusses Bernie Sander’s 83% win of youth voters and Clinton’s winning of “Old Hampshire” as he sarcastically draws attention to the response of Hillary and her team to share a “youth friendly social network” with young voters called “America Online.” The brief bit continues as Colbert thinks of Clinton’s potential ideas for drawing in youth voters, but in a highly comedic and sardonic way. Colbert ponders a “massive ad on AM radio” or a “Netflix sponsored reunion of the *Murder She Wrote* Cast” as possible next steps in Hillary’s campaign, yet these are evidently stated in criticism of her first attempt which Colbert deems as out of touch.

These example of Colbert's current portrayal of Hillary and Bernie, however, do not fare with those of Donald Trump's, which reveal a parallel between *The Late Show* and *Saturday Night Live*, even though the means through which they choose to portray candidates often differs. Donald Trump has received his fair share of criticism on Season 1 of *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, however, similarly to *Saturday Night Live*, these characterizations of Trump are visibly harsher than those of other candidates. In Episode 81, which aired on January 28, 2016, Colbert presented "The 2016 Top Tremendous All-You-Can Trump Luxury Presidential Debate" in which he asked questions which were followed by juxtaposed hard news clips of interviews and debates featuring Trump so as to reveal contradictions in his previous statements. Colbert discusses the fact that Trump boycotted a debate held by FOX News because Megan Kelly, a moderator whom he has a past history of disagreements with, was moderating it. In response to this, an image of Hillary Clinton is displayed and Colbert states, "After all, why would he want to practice going head-to-head against a strong blonde woman?" The bit continues as Colbert asks two Trump characters questions, differentiating them by calling one Donald and the other Mr. Trump, and their responses are revealed through repurposed hard news clips.

When asked about Republican presidential hopeful Ted Cruz, one clip reveals Trump expressing his disdain for Cruz and another shows him conveying a likeness toward him. The contradictions continue to be revealed as he is shown saying that he loves Iowa followed by a clip of him stating, "How stupid are the people of Iowa?" Lastly, on the subject of Hillary Clinton, a clip highlights Trump claiming Hillary is "The worst Secretary of State in history," followed by a clip of him mentioning how Hillary has done well at her job. Such a critical representation of Trump does not equally compare to that of Hillary in the example of her

analyzed portrayal by Colbert, and, therefore, signals to similarities between soft news comedy shows, *The Late Show* and *Saturday Night Live*.

While *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* and *The Late Show* chooses to use hard news clips instead of impersonations as a means of publicizing commentary on presidential candidates, their overt negativity in the portrayal of Donald Trump highlights a potential goal of these shows in relaying unfavorable messages to audiences about this candidate. In doing so, the criticism of other presidential hopefuls, such as Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders, appears less derogatory, and this element of candidate characterization has been analyzed in Seasons 34, 37, 38, and 41 of *Saturday Night Live*. Through these examples on *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* and *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, the broader scope of potential in possibly persuading or shifting viewer's opinions is revealed and connected to that of *Saturday Night Live* throughout the seasons examined.

Saturday Night Live in the Present of Potentials

Saturday Night Live has exhibited prospective areas of favorability and persuadability through its attention paid toward specific presidential candidates, with some characters falling victim to more harmful politically-related criticism and others facing more comedy-centered disapproval. In utilizing facial, bodily, and vocal dramatizations as a means of comedy and mockery, as in the case of Donald Trump, his character on *SNL* receives external fault-finding in addition to critiques on more internal elements, such as his political beliefs. This combined and exaggerated ridicule has created a figure who exemplifies non-presidential qualities and carries

the weight of criticism during episodes or sketches which feature other candidates in some sort of negative light as well.

Season 41 of *Saturday Night Live* highlights several different trends which have been followed throughout the previously analyzed seasons, as well as sheds light on the potential of future seasons and the representations of candidates to come. As examined, Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders were critiqued through the use of dialogue spoken by each of their characters and those interacting with them in both political and non-political settings, but these depictions do not appear as condemning when compared to the portrait of Donald Trump that is painted. While Trump hosted an entire episode of *Saturday Night Live* and performed in a skit, he solidified his character's persona of egotism rather than being given the opportunity that Hillary Clinton was given to address certain judgements about herself when she appeared in-person. Additionally, Bernie Sanders, who has been the recipient of character flaw criticisms throughout Season 41, has had the potential for his disapprovals to be overshadowed by those being portrayed of Trump. Thus, Hillary Clinton's character seems to have benefited from the impersonations of her fellow opponents, and, while it is uncertain whether such depictions may actually have affected the ways in which viewers think of Clinton or will vote in the election is uncertain, such examples reveal a potential generated effect.

In a thorough evaluation of Season 41 and several preceding seasons, a trend in prospective candidate favoritism is revealed through the show's level of exaggeration on bodily and vocal characteristics, the criticalness of the dialogue used, and the consistency of portrayal throughout the season when impersonating certain candidates in comparison to others. An examination of *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* and *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*

during the current 2016 election aids in following a trend of other late night, comedy-focused soft news shows to juxtapose hard news media clips in drawing harsher criticisms of candidates, while also drawing a connection between late night soft news which involves the potential for candidate favoritism and viewer persuasion. While *Saturday Night Live* may not be a politically driven show, its incorporation of such satirical and parodical election-related sketches suggests a drive to relay a certain message or commentary to audiences.

Chapter 5:

Saturday Night Live Objectives and American Cultural Trends

Analyzing the ways in which *Saturday Night Live* has chosen to portray presidential candidates in 2008, 2012, and 2016 reveals several trends which draw attention to probable objectives of the show and its place within both the soft and hard news media genres. Drawing out the trends which are present season to season and understanding the different methods which lead to contrasting depictions of presidential candidates reveals *SNL*'s intentions in terms of political representations and critiques. Through a combination of purposeful dialogue, physical interpretations, and an overall exaggeration of character, *SNL* suggests particular feelings toward presidential candidates, and, in doing so, displays the influential characteristics of late-night comedy.

An element of satire and parody which *Saturday Night Live* has visibly utilized throughout the four seasons examined is the dramatization of the physical nature of candidates, ultimately creating more humorous characters. Sarah Palin's comical and popular imitation was amplified by the exaggeration Tina Fey put into Palin's voice and facial quirks, just as Barack Obama's voice has been consistently portrayed as an integral part of his overall persona through Fred Armisen and Jay Pharoah's impersonations. Additionally, Hillary Clinton's more reserved character is amplified by physical stiffness and occasional awkwardness, Mitt Romney's character is represented as inauthentic through a presumptuous tone of voice, and Bernie Sanders' outlandish attitude is enhanced through Larry David's use of a more aggressive tone of voice. In creating such physical characters for presidential candidates, *Saturday Night Live* is relaying diverse and critical images to audiences in comparison to what may be seen in more

traditional news sources, thus, sharing opinions of candidates which may be added to those delivered by hard news sources.

The differentiations in negative and positive portrayals are prominently highlighted through the dialogue and settings *Saturday Night Live* purposefully creates. A trend discovered in Season 34 and carried on throughout the seasons during the 2012 and 2016 elections is that of serious, politically-related dialogue contrasted with solely comical exchanges. Sarah Palin's entertaining responses to serious political questions in comparison to the more earnest replies from Hillary Clinton's character are an example of such a dialectic theme which *SNL* utilizes to not only generate laughter, but to reveal a clear distinction between candidates. *SNL* has also utilized solely negative dialogue to portray all candidates featured in an unfavorable light, and this reveals a contrastive and additional means of using dialogue to share particular opinions of the candidates with audiences.

Another means of differentiating candidates via positive or negative portrayals is found through the use of non-political settings which highlight more humorous aspects of the candidate's characters. When placed in politically unrelated settings, for example, Barack Obama's character appears to have comical elements to his personality rather than such a setting using humor to criticize him, as seen in his variety show sketch, yet candidates such as John McCain and Mitt Romney are painted more negatively when placed in such non-political scenes as an ad recording studio or a living room. While debate and interview settings highlight more election related distinctions, less formal scenarios have the ability to focus on and exhibit certain characters in a particular light, and each season examined has utilized both of these methods throughout their presidential sketches. Utilizing contrastive dialogue and humorous settings to

portray presidential candidates contrasts the means through which candidates are typically presented in hard news sources, therefore allowing viewers to think of each candidate through non-political lenses.

Saturday Night Live also forms such differentiations between candidates through the use of self-criticizing dialogue in which the statements made by candidates ironically degrade their character. Mitt Romney and Donald Trump exemplify this, as Romney's impersonation is portrayed negatively through his own paradoxical commentary on his disliked persona and overeagerness, and Trump is heavily critiqued through his overconfident and overbearing dialogue. These exclusively critical scripts are oftentimes unrelated to relevant politics of the present election as well, in comparison to the dialogue discussed which allows for a candidate's character to make a few serious political statements followed by another candidate's humorous response. Through each of these examined trends, an overarching theme of favorability is revealed which calls attention to a prominent element of *Saturday Night Live*'s comedic intentions, as well as those of shows such as *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show*, in which these soft news comedies attempt to resonate certain opinions with viewers.

As analyzed, *Saturday Night Live* has attributed both negative and positive qualities to particular presidential candidates through the described methods, and, in doing so, has presented some candidates more favorably than others. In particular, Republican presidential candidates have been depicted more critically in comparison to Democratic candidates, as seen through the disadvantageous representations of John McCain, Mitt Romney, and Donald Trump, in comparison to Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and Bernie Sanders. Such signs of favoritism reveal *SNL*'s potential to influence viewer opinions, as well as the possible ways in which the

show seeks to inform its viewers of candidates. An assessment of Seasons 34, 37, 38, and 41 of *Saturday Night Live* establishes the show as a pillar of satiric and parodic portrayals of presidential candidates and demonstrates the ways in which voters can potentially be influenced outside of the realm of hard news sources. In doing so, *SNL* exhibits the blurred lines between news and entertainment news as the show delves into serious political matters and invites audiences to review these critical portrayals of candidates in comparison to those generated by traditional news sources.

The Role of Stewart, Colbert, and Noah in Understanding the Soft News Realm

The Colbert Report and *The Daily Show*, which focus more prominently on depicting fake news, make similar, yet harsher and more direct commentary on presidential candidates than *Saturday Night Live*. *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* highlights the ways in which Colbert has incorporated elements of his fake news oriented show into a late night talk show. These soft news, comedy-focused shows are an important comparison to *SNL*, as they call attention to alternate ways of interpreting campaign politics into humorous renderings. Additionally, these shows aid in gaining a broader understanding of the role of soft news in regards to potential viewer impact, the increasingly indistinct lines between news and entertainment news, and the nature of American media culture overall.

Through a briefer, yet telling examination of *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show with John Stewart* during the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections, the role of actual campaign footage in generating comedic responses was identified as an alternative method of interpretation and portrayal utilized by soft news shows. In doing so, audiences are given the opportunity to

make connections between what is being said on the show and what commentary or events these humorous depictions are in reference to, which contrasts to the more ambivalent aspect of *Saturday Night Live*. *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* have also utilized their more direct criticism to touch upon sensitive issues such as race, as seen during the 2008 election. During both the 2008 and 2012 elections, the commentary made regarding the presidential candidates was predominantly negative and did not emphasize a sense of favoritism toward a particular candidate in the analyzed clips, however, the 2016 election revealed the ways in which soft news comedy can place a highly negative light on one candidate in particular, Donald Trump, just as *Saturday Night Live* has.

While *The Daily Show* was taken over by Trevor Noah in 2015 and Stephen Colbert moved into a late night talk show format with his new show *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, a look at these shows and their discussion of current presidential candidates reveals similar methods of portrayal as previously described, as well as exhibit similarities to *Saturday Night Live*. Both Noah, Colbert, and *SNL* paint Donald Trump in a particularly critical light, and Noah and Colbert continue the fake news trend of incorporating hard news media clips as a means of amplifying this disapproval. While Democratic candidates Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders are characterized relatively unfavorably on *The Daily Show* and *The Late Show* as well, the overarching negativity aimed toward Trump has the ability to overshadow the critiques made of Clinton and Sanders, which is a theme highlighted in the workings of *Saturday Night Live*. The importance of analyzing these alternative means of illustrating presidential candidates in comical soft news shows in addition to the grand-scale examination of *Saturday Night Live*'s methods lies within the prevailing discussion of the probable effects such depictions could have

on viewers and their opinions of presidential candidates, as well as the ways in which soft news and hard news are entering into each other's realms.

The Soft News of Hard News

The noteworthiness of the election-related sketches of *Saturday Night Live*, as well as comedic campaign discussions on related soft news shows, is evident in the treatment of such depictions on hard news channels, such as ABC News, FOX News, and CNN. Frequently, what are deemed as "serious" news shows will delve into segments from soft news shows, and, therefore, publicize these depictions to a broader audience and highlight the ways in which satire and parody can be received during pertinent political times, such as presidential elections. In an ABC News segment entitled, "Presidential Debate 2012: SNL Presidential Spoofs Define Elections," from October 2012, ABC News correspondent John Karl describes, "Over the years the *SNL* parodies have sometimes been more memorable than the debates themselves," which is followed by a clip of Tina Fey playing Sarah Palin. Karl continues on to discuss the fact that parodies such as these can hold great significance. Political consultant Frank Luntz is featured, stating, "As many people will talk about the *SNL* skit on Monday, as talk about the actual presidential debate, and that's what makes it so powerful." An ABC News segment which aired the following month, entitled "Barack Obama, Mitt Romney Butt of Election 2012 Late-Night Jokes" discusses the broader role of "presidential spoofs," as campaign clips from *Saturday Night Live*, *The Colbert Report*, and other late-night comedy shows are reviewed. *Politico* reporter Patrick Gavin refers to such sketches as "a breath of fresh air," while ABC news reporter Chris Connelly states, "Yet the late night skits and the sharp edged gags can also reinforce, even

mold, public perceptions of a candidate's personality or performance.” In not only referencing but detailing the importance of *Saturday Night Live* and other soft news shows, this hard news source is aiding in defining the role of soft news comedy in presidential elections.

CNN has more recently brought to light the potential impact of *Saturday Night Live* on voters during a discussion of Sarah Palin's appearance on SNL's 40th anniversary special, which aired on February 15, 2015. In a segment entitled “Palin's Surprise Appearance on SNL Special,” one reporter describes Tina Fey's impersonation from the show's 34th season as “brilliant” before showing viewers Palin's actual appearance during the anniversary show. Another reporter highlights the significance of Palin's appearance as she was “willing to do something so self-deprecating as she did when she was running and went on *SNL*...She has a history with them and it always gets a huge response.” FOX News has also recently discussed the goals of the appearances politicians make on *Saturday Night Live* in an article entitled, “Trump Takes Center Stage on ‘Saturday Night Live,’” which discusses Donald Trump's hosting experience during Season 41. The article reveals, “The show draws much of its comedy from politics and has become a popular stop for candidates looking to show a less business-like side of their personalities,” and adds to the attention hard news sources are paying to soft news, campaign-related comedy (Daly). Just as ABC News highlights the influential qualities of *Saturday Night Live* and other related sources, such as *The Colbert Report*, CNN and FOX News call attention to the benefits candidates see in presenting themselves in such a setting as *SNL*, ultimately suggesting a valuable impact on viewers.

While hard news and soft news have been defined in separate domains, the ways in which their borders are crossing is exemplified through *Saturday Night Live* and its growing

significance in the content of hard news reporting which defines the show and other satirical and parodical soft news as influential during presidential elections. Although determining an exact measure of this potential effect on voters who watch or are exposed to *Saturday Night Live* via its features on hard news channels is not an easily feasible task, the utilization of the show by candidates and the discussion of the show and others similar to it on hard news platforms reveals a great deal about the overall goals and achievements of *SNL*. Although *Saturday Night Live* may be regarded as a source of entertainment rather than news, its role as entertainment news and its presentation by respected news sources reveals *SNL*'s capacity to shift into a more viewer influential realm.

Does Saturday Night Live Matter?

Although proving *Saturday Night Live* may have affected voter polls in a presidential election may be an immeasurable task, this thesis has examined the possible effects of opinionated impersonations on the ways in which viewers think of or react to candidates after watching their soft news designed characters. *Saturday Night Live* may not be regarded as a factual news informant, but the trends which have been uncovered presenting political matters in alternate manners reveal the importance of *SNL* to the opinions of viewers and to the culture of American media and politics. In presenting certain candidates more favorably or unfavorably than others, *SNL* is giving viewers the opportunity to rethink the opinions they may have formed via more traditional informants, which juxtaposes the credibility of hard news in comparison to soft news. As many voters may receive some or all of their political “news” from soft news sources such as *Saturday Night Live* and base their judgements on presidential candidates via

these critical representations, *SNL* has established a highly relevant role in the presentation and perception of American politics during presidential election years.

While creating diverse and more exaggerated portrayals of candidates which can resonate with viewers and alter their perspectives, *Saturday Night Live* can also perpetuate popular opinion. Hard news sources may suggest or reveal certain opinions of specific candidates, and other platforms such as social media can generate a great deal of widespread thoughts and beliefs which *SNL* can reflect through the characters it creates for each candidate. As *SNL* develops memorable political portrayals, viewers can begin to attribute these characteristics with the representations of candidates which have been generated by hard news sources. This places *SNL* on a level of relevance to overall judgements of candidates formed by those exposed to the show in addition to traditional forms of news. In extending existing points of view, *Saturday Night Live* acts as another news informant and is therefore pertinent to the overall thoughts and opinions which are formed about presidential candidates.

Saturday Night Live is not only a source of entertainment, but a player in the political realm for viewers whose opinions can be shifted due to the critical content the show delivers. Although what is stated or suggested on *SNL* about presidential candidates may or may not be exaggerated or factual, such commentary can be perceived as accurate and therefore taken into consideration when viewers form opinions and understandings on politicians and political matters. As *Saturday Night Live* can act as a reflection of popular opinion, the show's portrayals can hold elements of truth. In over exaggerating some of these widespread beliefs and judgements, *SNL* can further amplify political critiques and be effective in allowing these opinions to resonate with viewers. *Saturday Night Live* is an American cultural mainstay and a

pivotal marking of the growing ways in which voters gather information and viewpoints on candidates, making it pertinent to the nature of American media and political culture.

Saturday Night Live and American Culture

As soft news comedy delivers particularly opinionated messages about presidential candidates and has gained a place of recognition for doing so within hard news reporting, the role of satire and parody in the communication and reception of electoral political matters becomes more distinctly defined. In studying *Saturday Night Live* during recent presidential elections, its methods in conveying candidates in distinctively favorable or unfavorable ways reveals the show's aims in relaying certain judgements to viewers. While the factual nature of *SNL* may be indeterminate upon solely watching the political sketches of the show, the thoughts, opinions, or research which could ensue upon the viewing of these sketches highlights a greater potential for impact on audiences.

The correlations between *Saturday Night Live* and late night fake news shows, such as *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show*, call attention to the growing trend of relaying certain opinions of candidates to potential voters, which is becoming more and more popularized in American media culture through these comedy-based television shows. Thus, satire and parody play instrumental roles in the ways in which Americans choose to think and form opinions on political matters. *Saturday Night Live* draws viewers in with comedic elements, confronts sensitive political topics such as elections, and asks viewers to think about them in more out of the box and opinionated ways which takes the show one step further than the more traditional presentations of hard news.

As the lines between news and entertainment news are becoming increasingly blurred as shows such as *Saturday Night Live* provide American audiences and potential voters with alternate ways of understanding presidential candidates through exaggerated, yet comedically persuasive means, the role of entertainment in American culture is made more visible. Comedy shows, reality television, the widespread use of social media, and several other outlets which may be deemed as fabricated or untrustworthy sources for pertinent information related to such matters as politics have gained increasingly larger roles in the ways in which Americans send or receive such information. *Saturday Night Live* reveals not only entertainment's relevance to American media culture, but, particularly crucial during such times as presidential elections, entertainment's significance in influencing the American opinion.

As hard news is no longer the sole source for election, and, more broadly, political information to be gathered, soft news outlets must be regarded as viable contenders in shaping American political thought. While the commentary shows such as *Saturday Night Live* deliver is not presented as factual in the ways in which hard news shows deliver information, viewers are the ultimate determinants of how they choose to process the news they receive regardless of its nature. America's media and political culture are defined by the growing connection between news and entertainment news, exhibiting *SNL* as a primary source for gathering and forming political thoughts which can ultimately affect the political decision making of those exposed to the show. *Saturday Night Live* is not just comedic fluff or tomfoolery, rather, the show is an embodiment of satire and parody as they transcend art and entertainment and become prominent factors in American's political understandings.

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