**The Millennial Classroom: Satire as Public Pedagogy**

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Steven Colbert delivered the White House Correspondents’ Association Dinner in 2006 and roasted President Bush to his face. While it could be argued that satire is an inherently pedagogical mode, Colbert’s speech demonstrated the increasingly important role of satire as a source of public pedagogy.  Panned in the mainstream media, Colbert’s speech went viral anyway and it demonstrated an entirely new way that “citizen-satirists” are not only consuming satire, but also producing it.

This essay will trace features of the millennial generation that incline it towards wholly new ways of defining citizenship and political participation.  And it will show how satire is an essential part of that process.  Despite being demonized by the mainstream media, millennials vote at a higher percentage than older generations, they perform more community service than their predecessors, and they score higher on knowledge of political issues.  What is of note, though, is that they also produce an impressive amount of political satire. From twitter hashtags like #NoBudgetNoPants to Occupy Wall Street stunts, this generation combines entertainment and fun with political commentary and social action.

But do they ”get” what they are doing? Can they fully appreciate the nuances of satire and irony? Or are they just copying the professionals like Colbert and Jon Stewart?

This essay will look at one key example when professional satire intersected with millennial satire in order to suggest that the “learning” process is clearly not one-sided. By tracing Colbert’s founding of his own Super PAC, I will show how Colbert taught the nation key features of campaign finance. But, he also learned from his millennial viewers, adapting to their insights and suggestions and going on to inspire a host of mini Super PACs run by college students.

  So what do those of us who teach in traditional classrooms do with all of this? How can we support the energetic engagement of millennials while also teaching them the art of satire?  How do we explain the difference between mockery and satire, between caustic irony and ethical spectacle? This essays closes with specific suggestions for ways to help productively connect the college classroom with the millennial classroom.

**The Millennial Citizen**

Much has been made about millennials as coddled, entitled, slactivist whiners. Most of that hype is simply not true.[[1]](#endnote-1) In fact, as generational scholar Russell Dalton points out, millennials may be the most unfairly denigrated generation in history. He explains that part of the reason why this is so is because millennials have a different notion of citizenship—one that drastically differs from the duty-bound notion of citizenship held by the Baby Boomer generation. According to Dalton, the younger generations of Xers and Ys hold to a model of “engaged citizenship”: “Engaged citizenship emphasizes a more assertive role for the citizen and a broader definition of the elements of citizenship to include social concerns and the welfare of others.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Thus millennials see civic engagement as more important than respect for authority: “Engaged citizenship has a broader view of social responsibility than the old norms of citizen duty.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Millennials may not vote, but they volunteer and perform community service. Dalton finds that they score higher on “habits of the heart” like donating blood, contributing to charities, and signing up to be organ donors.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Millennials come under fire for their political participation despite the fact that their voting trends are not significantly lower than previous generations of young voters—and in some elections, such as the election of Barack Obama in 2008, the youth vote has been surprisingly high. But focusing only on voting misses that various ways that the millennial generation is engaged in the political process. Millennials are some of the most active citizens today, and yet much of their activism is shunned as slactivism, clictivism, or worse.

“Slactivism” is the term that refers to the idea that internet activism—signing petitions on-line, sharing political memes, reposting content on social media sites, etc. – is not *real* activism because it doesn’t require enough physical engagement to be serious. It’s just too easy and therefore is more likely to create self-satisfied citizens than engaged ones, or so the argument goes. But here’s the crazy thing, almost all accusations of millennial political engagement as slactivist or selfie-driven ignores the actual research on these forms of political participation.

For instance a 2013 Pew Research Center study of “Civic Engagement in the Digital Age” proves that social networking activists are *more* politically engaged than those who aren’t on those services.[[5]](#endnote-5) Adding to that research, the Millennial Action Project points to research by the Harvard Institute of Politics that showed that survey participants, especially millennials, who were actively engaged on social networking sites had higher levels of political engagement and stronger partisan identity.[[6]](#endnote-6) According to the Millennial Action Project, “Slacktivism—as a form of digital citizenship—is a stepping stone for deeper and stronger ties to political involvement and participation. These Harvard and Pew Research Center studies reveal a legitimate connection between political participation and social media.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

So, the anti-millennial hype is wrong. It fails to understand that millennials have a redefined notion of citizenship and it fails to appreciate the ways that social media is playing a serious role in shaping political participation today. But here’s the part that really gets misunderstood: Satire is the core political idiom for millennials. Scholars of satire know that irony, parody, and puns open up a host of possibilities for political engagement and critical thinking. But to the outside world these forms of communication seem like nothing more than mockery, cynicism and snark. Thus, the presence of satire in millennial political discourse can often be read as disdain, disconnection, and disrespect when it is actually functioning as political participation and active engagement.

In my co-authored book on satire and politics in the 21st century, *Is Satire Saving Our Nation?*, Remy Maisel and I argued that one of the core distinguishing features of political satire today is the rise of what we call the “citizen-satirist.” Following on the heels of citizen journalism, citizen satirists engage directly in the political process through satirical modes of communication. What we found fascinating was that much of this millennial satire was totally spontaneous and bypassed the need for a professional satirist to create the spark that led to citizen action. We claimed that there were a number of contributing factors to this development: 1) well-founded lack of public trust in mainstream news, 2) increased trust in satirical “fake” news, 3) increased ease of citizen access to the public sphere through social media platforms, and 4) increased presence of satire as a mode of political discourse.

There are numerous satirical Twitter sites, many of which are attributed to millennials, that produce daily political commentary with major impact. And Twitter opens up the space for a range of hashtags that allow for the sort of quick, witty humor connected to satirical puns and other wordplay. Accounts like @LOLGOP with 242K followers and @BipartisanReport with 197K followers are only two examples of this sort of citizen satire. The Binders Full of Women Facebook page was launched during the actual debate when 2012 Presidential candidate Mitt Romney made the comment that he had “binders full of women” as governor of Massachusetts. That page is a closed group with over 8,000 members. These are only a handful of examples but they serve to highlight an ongoing trend where satire is used in the public sphere to comment critically on politics. One concern directly tied to the rise of citizen-satire is the downside of satire’s omnipresence in contemporary political discourse. It can deflate the political potential of satire and may lead satire to lose its ironic edge. Alternatively, as I’ll illustrate in the next section, active engagement in satire can provide a welcome opportunity for citizen participation in the political process.

**Colbert’s Super PAC is a Civics Lesson**

In Stephen Colbert’s run as host of “The Colbert Report” from 2005-2014 he offered viewers a healthy diet of productive political satire. From his epic White House Correspondents’ Association Dinner speech in 2006 to his Twitter interventions there are countless examples of ways that Colbert’s satire had major public impact. I’ve written about much of them in *Colbert’s America: Satire and Democracy*, so I’ll just briefly highlight one example here.

In 2010 a series of court decisions, most notably the Citizen’s United decision that allowed unlimited campaign contributions from corporations, made it legal for political donations to become more secretive and more directly controlled by corporations and the wealthy. Thus the stage was set for an unprecedented amount of corporate influence in the US elections of 2012. Both Colbert and his satirical counterpart Jon Stewart dedicated significant air time on their shows to covering the role of big money in politics.

In one example, Colbert parodied candidate Tim Pawlenty with an ad that closed with a mention of “ColbertPAC.” “PAC” is a reference to a political action committee, an instrument in US politics that is able to raise unlimited funds from corporate or individual donors to support a political cause. Not only are unlimited funds acceptable, but the funds can also be used for virtually anything. Most critics agree that Super PACs are a clear example of an abuse of the democratic process.

When Colbert mocked Pawlenty’s PAC, it was just a joke, but when Comedy Central asked Colbert if he actually planned to found his own PAC he started the process of filing with the Federal Election Commission or FEC to start his own PAC. The FEC approved Colbert’s request in June of 2011 and he founded “Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow,” colloquially known as the Colbert Super PAC. By the end of the process Colbert had raised over $1 million dollars, all of which would be later donated to charity. But the real story is the way that Colbert satirized this process, educated his viewers, and encouraged them to get involved.

Colbert covered his experiences with the Super PAC regularly on his show, often inviting his lawyer, former FEC chairman, Trevor Potter on air to help explain the process. One of the keys to these conversations was Colbert’s on air pundit persona. Because Colbert would speak to Potter in-character he could emulate a greedy, privileged member of the US oligarchy. He could ask “dumb” questions of Potter that helped the audience understand how an outright abuse of campaign finance had been hidden in legislative legalese.

The Colbert Super PAC financed a number of political ads, which helped viewers understand how ads can support a candidate without being financed by the candidate’s campaign resources. On one example he created an ad that satirically called Mitt Romney a “serial killer” since corporations are people and Romney had a history of “killing” them off. Colbert also had fun mocking GOP strategist Karl Rove, the mastermind of Super PACs, with a recurring character “Ham Rove.” Later, when Colbert decided to run for President of South Carolina, he had to transfer the PAC to Jon Stewart, a move that allowed them to mock the idea that PACs are not “coordinating” with candidates. Potter explained to Colbert that he could not be “active” in the PAC and run for office, but he could “volunteer” for it.

All of these stunts helped walk the audience through the details of campaign finance while using irony, parody, and a healthy dose of puns. Colbert had clearly moved his satire well beyond the confines of a television show by entering much more directly into the public sphere. ABC News reported that “The Stephen Colbert Super PAC is run by a comedian, but the Political Action Committee’s bank account is no joke, based on federal reports filed today.”[[8]](#endnote-8) Politico explained that what seemed like a parodic stunt “could have real – and potentially broad – implications in the world of campaign finance. . . If nothing else, it could help the cause of campaign finance advocates by highlighting the ability of corporations to spend unlimited amounts to support or oppose candidates.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

Colbert wasn’t content to just teach his audience about campaign finance; he decided to try to get his audience to be social actors in the process by doing more than contributing to his own PAC. So he encouraged them to create their own Super PACs. Inspired by an email from University of Texas, Austin student Howie Benefiel, Colbert invited college students across the nation to participate by founding their own Super PACs, so that he could “extend ‘the reach of my political tentacles across the college campuses of America.’"[[10]](#endnote-10) To get his audience members going Colbert sold a starter kit, valued at $99, called the Colbert Super PAC Super Fun Pack. The idea took off any a pack of Colbert inspired Super PACs cropped up across the nation. Colbert-influenced Super PACs represented 2.5 percent of all established Super PACs by the time of the election.[[11]](#endnote-11) Interviews with a range of college students that had followed Colbert’s lead proved that the process was more than just a silly game: For example, Tyler Bobik founder of “San Diegans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow” “I formed a super PAC to help show how super PACs are undermining the political process.”[[12]](#endnote-12)

Colbert’s satirical stunt was recognized for its role as a form of public pedagogy. Colbert literally taught this audience about campaign finance in a satirical and entertaining fashion. In April 2012, Colbert won a Peabody Award for his Super PAC parody, which was cited as an "innovative means of teaching American viewers about the landmark court decision".[[13]](#endnote-13) In June 2014, the Annenberg Public Policy Center reported that the Colbert Super PAC segments improved viewers' knowledge of PAC and 501(c)(4) campaign finance regulation more effectively than other types of news media.[[14]](#endnote-14)

**What Next?**

Colbert stepped down as host of “The Colbert Report” and moved over to host “The Late Show” on CBS, but that doesn’t mean the era of satire as public pedagogy is over. Since then we have seen the rise of a number of other political satirists like John Oliver, whose HBO show “Last Week Tonight” has pioneered a new form of satire activism. His long analytical segments often end with calls to action and often lead to real change as happened with his piece on “net neutrality.”[[15]](#endnote-15) In that case thousands of viewers crashed the FCC website and one year later the FCC voted to keep the internet open. Coincidence?

Citing direct cause and effect in these cases is almost near impossible, but there is significant evidence to trace links between satire, political knowledge, and civic engagement. In one clear example we can find that when Colbert calls on viewers to engage in a social issue fundraiser, they do.[[16]](#endnote-16) What we have found is that satire offers a unique combination of politics, entertainment, and critical thinking. Today’s satire goes well beyond cynical mockery and offers millennials engaged and fun ways to critique and challenge structures of power. For millennials the appeal of satire is the combination of pleasure and political power. As Maisel and I explain, participate in a notion of citizenship hat refuses to believe they have to chose between “serious” action and fun.

All of the most well known millennial-related political actions such as Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter have used social media to advance the visibility of their cause. But the important point is that they have also often used irony, satire, and snark. Stephen Duncombe points out that one of the reasons why satire, spectacle, and political action are so closely tied for millennials is because satire combines passion with politics.[[17]](#endnote-17) He explains that this new form of political action often depends on the fun of satire for its appeal. But he cautions that not all entertaining politics is productive; instead he urges towards what he calls an “ethical spectacle” –a productive use of fun for progressive politics. Duncombe points out that one of the best forms of ethical spectacle is the sort of politically engaging satire he has observed from both Colbert and Occupy Wall Street.

So how do we marshal this energy in our own classrooms? One of the key ways to intersect classroom pedagogy with satire as public pedagogy is to flip the classroom and allow students to bring in their own ideas and energy. While we may be experts in the scholarly history of satire, our students often have a strong grasp of the ways that they can use visual and verbal satire to get attention. Merging those skill sets can be highly productive. Students often know what has worked, but they don’t always understand the deeper reasons why. I ask students to compare examples of satire such as the State Department’s use of satire to mock ISIS recruiting ads and John Oliver’s mockery of GOP advertising. They know one is funnier than the other, but humor, of course, is not the ultimate goal of good satire; it is critical thinking. Thus, they need to be encouraged to not just analyze the use of irony, but also the ways that satire creates in-groups and out-groups who get the joke or are its target.[[18]](#endnote-18) Even better, though, it is valuable to use group projects where students are asked to creatively imagine a satirical intervention. Once they have conceptualized it, they then analyze the strengths and weaknesses of their hypothetical projects. Understanding what works, what backfires, and what might land them in jail is a useful exercise. And it’s a good step towards creating the next Colbert.

1. For more on this line of argument see my “What’s Wrong with Slactivism? Confronting the Neoliberal Assault on Millennials.” *Works and Days* 65/66, vol. 33. Nos. 1-2, 2016-17. 1-15. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Russell J. Dalton, *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation Is Reshaping American Politics* (SAGE Publications, 2008), Kindle edition: 267-69. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Russell J. Dalton, *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation Is Reshaping American Politics* (SAGE Publications, 2008), Kindle edition: 278. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Russell J. Dalton, *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation Is Reshaping American Politics* (SAGE Publications, 2008), Kindle edition: 267-69. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Aaron Smith, “Civic Engagement in the Digital Age,” *Pew Research Center*, 25 April 2013, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/04/25/civic-engagement-in-the-digital-age/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. “Survey of Young Americans’ Attitudes toward Politics and Public Service,” Harvard University Institute of Politics, 24th Edition: 30 October – 11 November 2013, <http://www.iop.harvard.edu/sites/default/files_new/Harvard_TopLineDataFall2013.pdf>. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. “The Millennial Slacktivism Debate: A Political Perspective.” [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Bingham, Amy. “Stephen Colbert’s Super PAC Hauls in More Than $1 Million.” *The Note.* 31 Jan. 2012. Web. http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2012/01/stephen-colberts-super-pac-hauls-in-more-than-1-million/ [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Vogel, “Stephen Colbert.” http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0511/54946.html#ixzz2q2b0YBf8 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Schouten, Fredreka, and Maureen Groppe. “Crop of college super PACs answers call of Stephen Colbert.” *USA Today.* 7 May 2012. Web. http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/politics/story/2012-05-04/super-PAC-spinoff-stephen-colbert/54746928/1 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Levinthal, Dave. “Stephen Colbert’s super PAC spawns mini PACs.” *Politico.* 4 May 2012. Web. http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0512/75942.html [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Kurp, Josh. “Stephen Colbert Has Inspired Bored College Students to Begin Ironic Super PACs.” *Warming Glow.* 21 May 2012. Web.

    http://www.uproxx.com/tv/2012/05/stephen-colbert-has-inspired-bored-college-students-to-begin-ironic-super-pacs/ [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. http://newsfeed.time.com/2012/04/05/stephen-colberts-super-pac-satire-lands-him-a-peabody/ [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/stephen-colberts-civics-lesson-or-how-a-tv-humorist-taught-america-about-campaign-finance/ [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. http://www.mediaite.com/tv/john-oliver-explains-fccs-net-neutrality-ruling-to-confused-republicans/ [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. http://www.donorschoose.org/giving/the-jimmy-fallon-stephen-colbert-proj/157284/?id=157284&home=true# [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Stephen Duncombe, *Dream: Reimagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* (New York: The New Press, 2007), 121. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. http://www.salon.com/2014/10/06/john\_oliver\_is\_smarter\_than\_the\_state\_department\_irony\_will\_not\_defeat\_isis/ [↑](#endnote-ref-18)