

# A future in sitcoms after the election? Presidential debates may be funnier than popular sitcoms

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(Phys.org)—Researchers from Murdoch University's [Audience Labs](#) have created a new technique for gauging real-time audience reaction to the US Presidential and Vice-Presidential debates.

Measuring faint activation of the 'smiling muscle' ([zygomaticus](#)) and [nerve signals](#) in the skin ([electrodermal activity](#)), the method uses non-invasive facial coding software to pick up the strength and frequency of positive viewer reactions to candidate remarks.

Audience Labs Executive Director Professor Duane Varan said he was

surprised in particular by one aspect of the results.

"While shorter in duration, the intensity of the humour in the debates was greater than what we've seen with similar research on popular sitcoms," Professor Varan said.

"I'm not saying you'll see [Mitt Romney](#) or [Barack Obama](#) on [The Big Bang Theory](#) after November 6, but it does indicate the level of tension in the debates that suddenly gets released."

Professor Varan said given the role humour plays in positioning candidates as personable and likable during the election, the new technology could be a valuable resource to strategists and commentators.

While the immense volume of data produced by the study will take months to analyse, initial results show who won voters' funny bones.

"The first Obama-Romney debate saw strong humour moments for both [Democrats and Republicans](#), and the foreign policy debate was lacking in humour, with only two funny moments, both among Democrats," Professor Varan said.

"However, the second debate (the Town Hall Debate) definitely went to President Obama, who was funnier to Democrats than Mr Romney was to Republicans, and Paul Ryan trumped [Joe Biden](#) in the Vice-Presidential debate even though Vice President Biden benefitted from the strongest pivot with his comment to Ryan: '[Now you're Jack Kennedy](#)'?"

The quip that got the biggest laugh across all four debates occurred during the second presidential debate (the Town Hall Debate) when [President Obama claimed the size of his pension wasn't as large as Mr Romney's](#).

**More information:** [media.murdoch.edu.au/wp-content... sidential-debate.pdf](https://media.murdoch.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/future-sitcoms-election-presidential-debates.pdf)

Provided by Murdoch University

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