

Candidates who use humor on Twitter may find the joke is on them

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Political candidates' use of humor on social media could sometimes backfire on them with potential supporters, new research suggests.

People were more likely to view messages using [humor](#) as inappropriate for a [political candidate](#) they didn't know, the study found. That led participants to rate a candidate using humor as less credible than one

who didn't—and less likely to get their vote.

"Candidates should be cautious about using humor on social media," said Olivia Bullock, co-author of the study and a doctoral student in communication at The Ohio State University.

"People have expectations that politicians will show seriousness and competence even on social media, where users are often encouraged to be more informal."

The study was published online recently in the journal *Communication Research Reports*.

In this study, people reacted to posts from a fictitious candidate, so there was no prior knowledge of the candidate.

It is possible that the rules may be different for politicians—like Donald Trump or Elizabeth Warren—who are already known, said study co-author Austin Hubner, also a doctoral student in communication at Ohio State.

"For candidates who aren't well-known, using humor may be more of a risk than for established politicians," Hubner said.

The study involved 476 [college students](#) who viewed a profile of a fictitious political candidate on the social media site Twitter. The candidate's name was Alex Smith. Participants were randomly assigned to see an Alex Smith who was either male or female and either young or old, as depicted by their photos.

No [political party](#) was given for the candidate.

The Twitter profiles contained five tweets pertaining to infrastructure,

education, voting and campaign donations.

Half of the participants saw straightforward tweets on the issue, while the other half saw tweets that used a humorous device—puns—to send the same message.

For example, one [tweet](#) using a pun was "We're sick of getting bad health care! It's time to heal our broken system." The equivalent formal tweet was "We're tired of getting bad health care! It's time to fix our broken system."

Results showed that participants who read the tweets using humor were more likely than those who read the standard tweets to say the messages were not appropriate for an individual running for public office and that they were surprised that the candidate sent them.

As a result, candidates who used humor in their tweets were deemed less credible and participants were then less likely to say they would vote and campaign for and donate to them if they were running in their district.

The sex or age of the candidate did not affect how participants in the study judged the use of humor.

Bullock noted that the participants in the study were all college students, and results may be different in other demographic groups.

"On the other hand, if any group is going to respond positively to humor on social media, the expectation would be that it would be [young people](#)," Bullock said. "That's not what we found."

One question not addressed specifically by the study is the role of partisanship in how humor is accepted, because the candidates in the study did not have party labels.

But the researchers did ask participants what party they identified with, and what party they thought the candidates in the study belonged to. Most participants thought the candidates in the study were Democrats.

But participants who identified as Democrats were not more likely than those identifying as Independents or Republicans to have a positive reaction to the use of humor by the candidates, Bullock said.

"That provides some indication that people may not be more accepting of humor from a candidate from their own party," she said.

Overall, the findings suggest that candidates should be mindful of their audience on [social media](#), particularly when they're first starting out, Bullock said.

"People have certain expectations of political candidates and they need to keep those in mind when they are communicating."

More information: Olivia M. Bullock et al, Candidates' use of informal communication on social media reduces credibility and support: Examining the consequences of expectancy violations, *Communication Research Reports* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/08824096.2020.1767047](#)

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