

‘May the Best Man Win’:
Masculinity in Political Humour about the 2008 Canadian Federal Election
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Daisy Raphael

PhD Student

Political Science Department

University of Alberta

10-16 HM Tory Building

Edmonton, Alberta

T6G 2H4

dmraphae@ualberta.ca

Abstract:

This study explores the relationship between masculinity and political leadership as it was constructed in political humour about the 2008 Canadian federal election. Using discourse analysis, I have examined gendered depictions of the two frontrunners in that election – Stéphane Dion and Stephen Harper – on the popular television programmes the *Rick Mercer Report*, *22 Minutes* and the *Royal Canadian Air Farce*. Guiding this analysis is Connell’s ([1995] 2005) theory of masculinities. I argue that political satirists constructed a hierarchy of masculinities in their portrayals of Dion and Harper by depicting Dion as submissive, weak, and effeminate, while portraying Harper as dominant, aggressive, and bullying, in other words as ‘too masculine’. In doing so, I argue, Canadian political humourists contributed to the normalization of the purported connections between masculinity, power, and politics and to the social construction of politics as a ‘man’s world’. This research corresponds with that of other feminist researchers studying gender, politics and the media, who have found that masculine narratives tend to depict women as Others in the political realm (for example, Gidengil and Everitt, 1999; 2000; Sampert and Trimble, 2003).

Introduction

The Liberal party fared dismally in the 2008 Canadian federal election. Earning just 26.2% of the popular vote and losing 27 seats, the Liberal party's showing in the 2008 election was only slightly better than the party's worst performance ever. Stéphane Dion, who resigned as leader of the Liberals in December 2008, took responsibility for the party's catastrophic showing saying, "If people are asking why [we lost], it's because I failed" (CBC, 2008b). He added that he faced difficulty combating Conservative Party attack ads (CBC, 2008b). Indeed, the Conservative party of Canada created an entire website devoted to criticizing Dion's leadership. Of the various attack ads posted on notaleader.ca, perhaps most notable is the infamous "pooping puffin", which featured a bird defecating on the leader's shoulder (Taber, 2008). In an attempt to counter the Conservative party's campaign to humiliate Dion, the Liberal Party created their own website, ThisisDion.ca, which portrayed the leader as "a rugged family man who loves fishing, spending time with his wife, his daughter and his dog" (CBC, 2008a). In response to the ad, moreover, the leader declared that he intended to "fight with Canadian courage" to beat Harper (CBC, 2008a). Meanwhile, the "pooping puffin" video only added to Stephen Harper's reputation as a cold, unfeeling bully. In fact, this harsh image of Harper is one that the party had been trying to counter for some time, with advertisements portraying him as a warm, kitten-loving "sweater-vested family man" (CBC, 2008a). In short, while Dion attempted to recuperate his masculinity after Harper had succeeded in undermining it, Harper attempted to soften his image from that of a hypermasculine bully to a warm, caring family man.

This story of the 2008 Canadian election illustrates the ways in which masculinity is foregrounded in election campaigns. Indeed, politicians – male and female – emphasize their masculinity in order to portray themselves as 'man enough' for the job. Because of this, Duerst-Lahti (2007) argues that election campaigns are often about "[m]anly men doing manly things, in manly ways" (87). This paper investigates this long-standing, deeply-entrenched and socially constructed link between masculinity and political leadership as portrayed by Canadian political humorists. Specifically, I study portrayals of Harper and Dion on the popular Canadian political humour programmes: the *Rick Mercer Report*, *22 Minutes*, and the *Royal Canadian Air Farce* throughout the 2008 election. I argue that political satirists constructed a hierarchy of masculinities in their portrayals of Dion and Harper by depicting Dion as submissive, weak, and effeminate, while portraying Harper as dominant, aggressive and violent, in other words as 'too

masculine'. In doing so, I argue, Canadian political humourists contributed to the normalization of the purported connections between masculinity, power, and politics and to the social construction of politics as a 'man's world'.

I begin this analysis of masculinity in Canadian political humour by answering the question, "Why study political humour in the first place?" On top of political humour's increasing cultural relevance and its status as an alternative – and accessible – form of information about politics, I argue that scholars studying gendered depictions of party leaders should be particularly interested in the genre, through which frank discussions of normally 'taboo' subjects like sex and gender proliferate. I then provide a brief overview of Connell's ([1995] 2005) theory of masculinities, followed by a discussion of previous feminist research on masculinity, politics, and the media. Before presenting my findings, I briefly summarize my methodological approach. Finally, I offer some tentative conclusions.

Why Study Political Humour? The 'Politainment' Phenomenon

Though rarely taken seriously, there are several reasons for studying political humour in general, and Canadian political humour in particular. Citizens – especially youth – are increasingly turning to political humour as a source of information and critical commentary on politics, trading in the nightly news for *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* (Baumgartner and Morris 2006: 344; Baym, 2005: 260). This reflects a broader shift, whereby politics and entertainment have become increasingly intertwined, the so-called 'boundaries' between politics and entertainment increasingly blurred (Jones, 2010: 5-6; Street, 2011: 61; van Zoonen, 2005: 2). The increasing popularity of 'fake' news shows, appearances by politicians on entertainment talk shows, television programmes that dramatize politics, sketch comedy shows that feature satiric imitations of politicians, and even reality television including, for instance, *Sarah Palin's Alaska*, all suggest such a shift is occurring (Gray et al., 2009: 4; Jones, 2010: 5-6). Referencing the apparent blurring of boundaries between politics, information, and entertainment, this phenomenon has been labeled 'politainment' and 'infotainment'. While many critics lament entertainment's supposed 'encroachment' into the political sphere, others argue that politics and entertainment can coexist – that "politics can be pleasurable" (Jones, 2010: 15) – viewing political entertainment as an alternative, and amusing, form of political information and commentary.

Indeed, political communications scholars note that political satire programmes not only provide *criticism* of politicians and their policies, just like traditional news sources, but often provide *more biting* criticism. Using humour, political satirists often say what journalists – striving for fairness and balance – cannot (Gray et al., 2009: 4; Meddaugh, 2010: 387). Because political entertainment programmes are free from the “structural norms and unwritten rules” characteristic of the traditional news media, interactions between television personalities and candidates can be “more aggressive or critical than journalism” (Jones, 2010: 5). Their acerbic critiques of politicians and their policies is why the label “fake news” is not adequate to describe news parody programmes (Baym, 2005; 2009; Day, 2009). Baym (2005) argues that ‘fake’ news, such as that of Stewart’s *Daily Show*, is no less real when compared to so-called ‘real’ news (Baym, 2005: 261). In Baym’s words, “Any notion of ‘fake’ depends upon an equal conception of ‘real’” (2005: 261). Refusing to accept that there is such a thing as ‘real’ news, characterized by a purportedly “authentic or legitimate set of news practices”, Baym conceives of *The Daily Show* as both “an old form of comedy” and a “new kind of journalism” (2005: 261). Similarly, Day (2009) argues that *The Daily Show* – as so-called ‘fake’ news – actually does ‘real’ news better than the ‘real’ news media. Indeed, for their critical commentary on both politicians and the press, Stewart and Colbert have been deemed “the ‘most trusted names’ in news, fake or otherwise” (Meddaugh, 2010: 377).

Not only does political humour serve as an alternative form of journalism, but it is an accessible one. Indeed, political information may actually reach a larger audience through the presentation of politics as entertainment than through traditional news sources. Jones (2010) speculates, for instance, that during the 2008 US Presidential election, political comedy shows provided political information to audiences “that may not regularly attend to the traditional venues of electoral politics and its narratives” (4-5). In fact, Baum (2002) found that audiences who consume ‘soft’ news – news that has been “repackaged” into entertainment in order to compete for viewers and increase profits – as opposed to traditional ‘hard’ news learn about politics, even if learning about politics was not their objective for tuning in (92). Individuals who are typically “politically inattentive”, then, are exposed to political information when they consume ‘soft’ news (Baum, 2002: 91-92). Today, moreover, political entertainment programming reaches larger audiences than ever before via the Internet. Through the Internet,

users can access archived video content ‘on demand’ on television network websites and view ‘viral’ videos on websites like youtube (Gray et al., 2009: 4; Jones, 2010: 12).

Long before *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, however, it was Canadians who were successfully producing political sketch comedy and news parody programmes. In fact, Canada has a remarkably rich tradition of political humour. Featuring prominently on Canada’s public broadcaster, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), political humour is said to have aided in the formation of a “national imagined community” (Tinic, 2009: 169-170). Capitalizing on the ability of humour – the success of which always involves shared meanings and understandings – to affirm and enhance social cohesion, political humour in Canada has often united a country otherwise divided by regional, linguistic, cultural and economic differences (Rasporich, 1996: 84-85). Through political humour, Canadians have also demonstrated that they refuse to “take their leaders so seriously” (Rasporich, 1996: 85). Popular Canadian television humour programmes include *SCTV* – one of the first North American sketch comedy programmes to feature news parody (Druick, 2008: 112) – as well as *CODCO*, *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, the *Royal Canadian Air Farce*, *Talking to Americans* and the *Rick Mercer Report* (Druick, 2008; Rasporich, 1996). In fact, of the ‘made in Canada’ programming produced by the CBC, these news parody and political satire programmes have been some of the most popular, longstanding and successful (Druick, 2008: 107; Tinic, 2009: 168-69).

Gender and Humour

Feminist scholars interested in gendered portrayals of politicians should be especially interested in the genre for several reasons. First, controversial and normally “taboo” subjects such as sex, gender and sexuality are more likely to be discussed when the context is one of humour (Horlacher, 2009: 18; Kotthoff, 2006: 16; Palmer, 1994: 60-61). Since “[s]ocially unspeakable topics [...] more readily enter the discourse” when the discursive context is humorous, we are more likely to see frank discussions of a political leader’s gender in political humour as opposed to traditional news (Crawford, 2003: 1420). Moreover, the humorous context causes sexist remarks to appear less so. That sexism in humour tends to be perceived as somehow less sexist makes critical analyses of humour – “with special attention to its ability to hide patriarchal, sexist, and even misogynist tendencies” – all the more necessary (Horlacher, 2009: 18).

By “taking humour seriously” (Palmer, 1994), we can see that humour assists in the construction and maintenance of gender norms, reproducing “the gender system” (Crawford, 2003: 1414) by implying standards for the ‘appropriate’ performances of masculinity and femininity for males and females, respectively (Kothoff, 2006: 6). While it is important to note that gender norms can be subverted, deconstructed, criticized and undermined through humour (Crawford, 2003: 1414), humour tends to have a profound regulating effect (Powell and Paton, 1988: xvii). Powell (1988) for instance, argues that humour, which “clarifies and differentiates [...] the ‘normal’ from the ‘abnormal’”, can be used to discipline social deviants (99). Indeed, it is “people who do unpopular things” who “become the butt of jokes” (Palmer, 1994: 58). In this way, humour often functions to signify ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ (Little, 2009: 1255). Since humour signifies the ‘Other’ by sanctioning ‘deviant’ behaviour, political humour can certainly tell us something about who are considered insiders and outsiders in Canadian politics.

In sum, humour’s regulating effect aids in the production of gender norms. Failure to conform to gender norms might lead one to become the subject of laughter. Despite humour’s profound role in producing and policing gender norms, and the growing cultural relevance of political humour, scholars studying the media and politics in Canada have not devoted sustained attention to political humour. Very few studies, moreover, have explored the connections between gender, politics and Canadian political humour (Tremblay and Bélanger, 1997 is an exception).

Connell’s Theory of Masculinities

This study of gender and political leadership in Canadian political humour is done through the lens of masculinities theory – namely that of R. W. Connell ([1995] 2005). Connell’s ([1995] 2005) theory of masculinities has provided the basis for much of the contemporary research on masculinity. Connell defines masculinity as socially constructed rather than biologically determined, culturally and historically specific, multiple, and hierarchical. In a patriarchal society, masculinity is constructed in opposition to, and is privileged over, femininity (Connell, [1995] 2005: 68-74). Key to Connell’s theory, moreover, is the notion that power relations operate not only between men and women but also among men. That is, there are multiple masculinities, and not all are created equal (Connell, 2000: 10). Thus, Connell

distinguishes between hegemonic masculinity, complicit masculinity, and subordinated masculinities.

Hegemonic masculinity is defined by Connell as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” ([1995] 2005: 77). Hegemonic masculinity, Connell ([1995] 2005) notes, is not “a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same”; rather, it is the most “culturally exalted” – or most desired – form of masculinity in a certain social and historical context (Connell, [1995] 2005: 76-77; 164). While hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily the norm among men, it is “certainly normative” (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 832). That is, though most men do not embody hegemonic masculinity – and the world’s most powerful men may not even conform to its standards – men are encouraged by the cultural exaltation of hypermasculine exemplars to strive to embody hegemonic masculinity. Most men, moreover, are complicit in hegemonic masculinity’s perpetuation because of the privilege it affords them in relation to women and other men (Connell, [1995] 2005: 79). Indeed, complicit masculinities are those that are “organized around acceptance of the patriarchal dividend, but are not militant in defense of patriarchy” (Connell, 2000: 31).

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) note that hegemonic masculinity stems directly from “homosexual men’s experience with violence and prejudice from straight men” (831). However, gay masculinity is not the only subordinated masculinity; the masculinities of straight men and boys are constantly called into question as well through pejorative terms linked with the feminine (Connell, [1995] 2005: 79). Indeed, “[s]ubordinated masculinities are symbolically assimilated to femininity” (Connell, 2000: 31).

Masculinity, Politics, and the Media

Utilizing Connell’s theory of masculinities, I hope to build on research by feminist scholars studying the relationship between the media, political leadership, and masculinity. The latter two have become so intertwined that they are almost impossible to disentangle. Political leadership, Duerst-Lahti and Kelly (1995) argue, is gendered masculine, rendering women the “second sex” in the political realm (24). This link between politics and masculinity is so pervasive that it tends to go unnoticed; masculinity is seen as so “ordinary” in politics that it is

not noteworthy (Duerst-Lahti, 2007: 87). It is important to investigate and interrogate the purportedly natural link between political leadership and masculinity because “only when we make these normalized enactments visible, can our current thinking about the visible/invisible intertwining of leadership and masculinity be reappraised” (Clare, 2002: 2). Feminist scholars have sought to do just that, using empirical evidence to destabilize the taken-for-granted link between political leadership and masculinity. In doing so, they reveal that, though naturalized and normalized, this link is a socially produced one.

For instance, Fahey (2007) and Duerst-Lahti (2007) examined discourse surrounding the 2004 US Presidential election. Fahey argues that George W. Bush’s campaign attempted to depict John Kerry as French and feminine, and therefore unfit to lead the country. Likewise, Duerst-Lahti (2007) found that campaign rhetoric during the 2004 election revolved around the candidates’ performances of masculinity, with pundits proclaiming, for instance, that “Kerry became a girlie-man” (87). Likewise, Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles (1996) argue that hegemonic masculinity tends to be normalized and naturalized in American campaign rhetoric, which idealizes the stereotypically masculine and marginalizes women and those possessing stereotypically ‘feminine’ traits. In her examination of news discourse surrounding Hillary Clinton’s senate campaign, Anderson (2002) also found that masculinity was a prominent theme. Interestingly, Anderson maintains that “Clinton’s male opponents [...] were more disadvantaged by gender stereotypes than she was in that particular campaign” (2002: 106-7). The press, she notes, portrayed Rudy Giuliani’s so-called ‘hypermasculinity’ negatively; meanwhile, Rick Lazio was said to be not quite ‘man enough’ for the job (Anderson, 2002: 117).

Feminist scholars studying “gendered mediation” (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross 1996: 103) have argued that the news media tends to reinforce the view that masculinity is a requirement for political leadership, in turn marginalizing women and femininity. The use of the ‘game frame’ – the framing of elections as sports games between competitors or battles between warring parties – to cover elections portrays politics as a masculine pursuit, marginalizing women and femininity. Through the game frame, reporters offer “play-by-play commentary” about who is winning and losing, focusing on the strategies of the “team captains” or party leaders at the expense of discussions of key issues (Trimble and Sampert, 2004: 52). In their studies of portrayals of male and female politicians on Canadian television news, Gidengil and Everitt (1999; 2000; 2003) found that “[e]lection campaigns are portrayed in stereotypically

masculine fashion, with images of the battlefield and the sports arena filling campaign reports” (1999: 50). The use of sports and war metaphors to describe elections is telling, since both are masculine activities from which women have traditionally been excluded (Adelman, 2009; Bryson, 1987; Dunning, 1986; Tickner, 1999: 6-7; Whitson, 1990). Indeed, as Sampert and Trimble (2003) show, the use of “the masculine language of the battlefield, the sports arena, and the boxing ring” to frame elections is far from gender neutral; rather, the game frame is “laden with gender-differentiated assumptions” (211). Women, they argue, may find themselves sidelined by the game frame, since it is men who “continue to dominate the realms of sports and armed conflict”, meanwhile “patriarchal thinking classifies women as nurturing, caring, and non-combative” (Sampert and Trimble, 2003: 213). Thus, the application of the game frame to a woman creates a sense of “cognitive dissonance” (Trimble et al., 2007: 4).

Trimble, Treiberg and Girard (2007) found further evidence of such masculinizing news scripts in their comparative analysis of newspaper coverage of female and male Prime Ministers in Canada and New Zealand. They found that, rather than being feminized in news coverage, the female Prime Ministers were “masculinised by gendered news frames and metaphors” (Trimble, et al., 2007: 3), lending further support to the assertion that politics is constructed as a masculine activity. Similarly, in their focused analysis of newspaper coverage of former New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark, Trimble and Treiberg (2010) found that reporters depicted Clark as stereotypically masculine – as a strong, aggressive, and attacking competitor “landing body blows” to take out her opponents (Trimble and Treiberg, 2010: 127). Though coverage of Clark portrayed her as ‘man enough’ to be Prime Minister – indeed, she was often portrayed, literally, as a man – perhaps helping her “overcome the perception that women aren’t tough enough for the top job”, coverage of Clark, Trimble and Treiberg (2010) argue, simultaneously portrayed her as strangely unfeminine (120). Ultimately, they argue that the masculinizing frames in coverage of Clark “[fail] to disrupt the taken-for-granted notion of political leadership as a masculine domain” (Trimble and Treiberg, 2010: 120).

Though building on such research, which has deconstructed the taken-for-granted link between politics and masculinity, this study departs from conventional approaches to studying media portrayals of politicians by shifting the focus from women directly to men and masculinity. Indeed, feminist studies of the gendered mediation of politicians have traditionally compared the ways in which coverage of female politicians differs from those of male

politicians, unintentionally reinforcing the notion of male as ‘norm’ and the inaccurate but prevalent conception of the term ‘gender’ as synonymous with ‘women’ (Scott, 1986). This study, on the other hand, conceives of male politicians as gendered subjects. The theoretical tools provided by Connell ([1995] 2005) help to shed light on the various ways that Canadian political leadership is socially (re)produced as masculine.

Methodology

How was the relationship between masculinity and political leadership constructed in political humour about the 2008 Canadian federal election? In order to answer this question, I have performed a discourse analysis of episodes of the popular Canadian political humour programmes the *Rick Mercer Report*, *22 Minutes*, and the *Royal Canadian Air Farce* from the 2008 election campaign period. My analysis focuses on portrayals of the frontrunners, Stephen Harper and Stéphane Dion.

Since political humour is often “double-layered”, containing multiple meanings implicit in speech and images (Baym, 2009: 127), it is extremely difficult to analyze. Discourse analysis, which focuses on “the role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance” (van Dijk, 1993: 249), allows one to interpret the multiple latent meanings within humour. Specifically, visual discourse analysis, a unique form of critical discourse analysis which treats images as texts to be deconstructed and interpreted (Matheson, 2005: 103), is employed here. In visual discourse analysis, the visual is analyzed “as if it was [...] language and [...] as it mixes with language” (Matheson, 2005: 103). This method of analyzing the verbal and the visual is ideal for deconstructing television, which blends “the ‘grammar’ of visual metaphor” (El Rifaie, 2003: 75) with text and dialogue.

Findings

Utilizing a gendered lens to critically analyze representations of masculinity in television humour about the 2008 election, five discursive categories become clear. Television humour about the 2008 election featured themes of masculinity centering around: hockey and the ‘game frame’; feminization; Dion the ‘nerd’ vs. Harper the bully; Harper’s lack of warmth; and heterosexual masculinity. I discuss each of these five themes in turn.

Hockey Night in Canada: The 'Game Frame', Masculinity and Political Leadership

Several sketch comedy segments and news parody pieces centred on Canada's beloved pastime, hockey. Since sport, and hockey in particular, is a male-dominated realm wherein masculinity is exalted, the theme of hockey in political humour both (re)produces the conception of politics as a masculine pursuit and highlights the ways in which leaders such as Dion are not perceived to embody stereotypical Canadian masculinity. Two segments in particular are noteworthy.

One fake news segment from the October 7th, 2008 episode of *22 Minutes* is particularly revealing of attitudes surrounding masculinity, hockey and political leadership. The segment is introduced by a male anchor who says, "earlier this week, Stéphane Dion tried to prove he has what it takes to lead Canada". The segment then cuts to real video footage of Stéphane Dion wearing a Montreal *Canadiens* jersey taking shots on a goalie in a one-on-one street hockey match. This real footage of Dion playing hockey was likely an attempt by the Dion campaign to shore up his masculinity in the minds of voters, since Dion's masculinity and leadership ability had been denigrated by Conservative party attack ads arguing he was a weak leader. In fact, Dion's website, ThisisdDion.ca, featured similar footage of the party leader taking part in 'masculine' activities, such as floor hockey and fishing, in an apparent attempt to make him seem like more of a 'man's man'. The footage shown on *22 Minutes* reveals that, although Dion attempts to buttress his masculinity by demonstrating his capability at Canada's favourite sport, he is, in fact, a dismal hockey player. Dion is shown fumbling, out of breath, losing control of the street hockey ball, and unable to score after several attempts. After showing an entire minute of footage of Dion trying to score a goal, the shot cuts back to the anchor, who is shocked at Dion's hopeless and embarrassing performance. "Wow," he says.

This video is telling for two main reasons. First, that political leaders apparently feel it necessary to demonstrate their prowess at – or at least love for – hockey suggests a deep-rooted connection between masculinity and political leadership. Why should citizens care whether or not a political leader can play hockey? Certainly, footage of a politician playing hockey may have the effect of making a politician seem more likeable and relatable to many Canadians. But sport – including hockey – is intimately connected to masculinity. Sport assists in the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity by linking maleness and masculinity with "highly valued and visible skills", by excluding women and by constructing a hierarchy of masculinity whereby

some men are depicted as less athletic and less masculine, and therefore inferior (Bryson, 1987: 349-50). The second reason this video is significant is its explicit connection between masculinity and political leadership. In his introductory statement – “this week, Stéphane Dion tried to prove he has what it takes to lead Canada” – the anchor connects Dion’s leadership ability (or inability) directly to his ability (or inability) to play hockey.

Another piece from *22 Minutes* also makes this connection, depicting Dion as a weak leader in part because of his apparent lack of masculinity, which, in turn, is evidenced by his inability to play hockey well. The piece is a fake campaign advertisement for Dion and the Liberal party titled, “The real Dion”. The satiric advertisement’s ironic tagline is “Stéphane Dion – he’s the best that we have right now”. The commercial features Dion, played by Mark Chritch, trying to bolster his masculinity and portray himself as a man’s man, but failing miserably. For instance, Chritch, playing Dion, says in a thick French-Canadian accent, “I like the out of doors – I love to play the skiing, the jacks, and the ladies’ tennis! Once, I even love a roller skate!” Dion is doubly ‘Othered’ in this fake ad through emphasis on his French accent and alleged inability to speak proper English, and also on his lack of ‘natural’ masculine traits, namely, athleticism. By making a joke of “ladies’ tennis”, moreover, women’s sports (and by association, women) are portrayed as inferior.

The ad also features a parody of Dion’s dismal, and embarrassing, attempt at playing hockey, poking fun at the Liberal party’s attempt to make him seem more masculine. Highlighting the unnaturalness of Dion’s attempted performance of Canadian hockey masculinity, Chritch, as Dion, says, “I am enjoying the hockery! There’s nothing unusual here...”.

Further ridiculing Dion’s apparent lack of athleticism, Dion is also portrayed playing catch. Dion, however, is apparently scared of the ball, which hits him as he cowers. Once again, a connection is made between sports and political leadership – Dion is portrayed as a weak leader, in part because of his poor athletic performance.

“It’s, uh, more for the ladies”: Feminization

The same fake advertisement from *22 Minutes* also feminizes Dion in implicit and explicit ways. Implicitly, Dion is feminized when he is portrayed power walking, a form of exercise popularized by Oprah in the 1990s in which women take quick, short strides, bending their arms at a 90 degree angle and swinging their hips from side to side as they walk in order to

maximize calorie burn. Dion is explicitly feminized, moreover, when a man asks him from off-camera, “Monsieur Dion, can you think of *anything* rugged or edgy about yourself?” Dion replies, “One time, I had two chicks at once!” “Good. That’s good!” the man responds with encouragement. Dion continues, “It was Easter, and the egg, she hatch, and then inside, there are *two* little chicks, but one of them had the *tiniest* wing. So I nursed him back to health with milk from my nipple!” “Monsieur Dion, please!” the man interjects. Though the male interviewer tries desperately to bring forth an element of masculinity from Dion, and is encouraged by the prospect that Dion has sexually conquered “two chicks”, he is discouraged when Dion exhibits femininity, or, more accurately, the female ability to breastfeed. Dion not only fails at performing masculinity, but comes across as feminine; thus, in terms of political leadership, Dion is just “the best that [the Liberals] have right now” according to *22 Minutes*.

Dion is also feminized in a comedy sketch from the October 7th episode of the *Rick Mercer Report*. The sketch details Dion’s journey to becoming the Liberal party leader, supported, crucially, by former Liberal MP Gerard Kennedy, who played a pivotal role in Dion’s election to the Liberal leadership by supporting Dion in the third and final round of voting of the 2006 Liberal party leadership convention. As the narrator of the sketch explains, “[Kennedy’s] critical decision to quit the race and support third-place runner-up Stéphane Dion swept Dion to power”. After showing footage of the Liberal leadership convention, the sketch features a flashback to Northern Manitoba in 1971 as a young Gerard Kennedy and his father choose a puppy from a pet store. Gerard’s father says, “Okay, Gerard, now remember, choosing a family dog is very important. You have to choose one that is gonna be steadfast and tough.” His father points to a basset hound and says, “Hey! How ‘bout that one? He looks like he’s *strong* and *friendly*. Looks like he knows what he’s doin’”, to which young Gerard replies, “Uh...I dunno.” His father points to another dog, and says, “Hey, look at this one! He looks like he could protect the farm and be loyal.” Gerard isn’t satisfied, and says, “Hmm... no, not really.” Then, his attention turns to a third puppy, which clearly excites him: “I want this one!” he says, as he looks down at a puppy wearing a pink sweater and a bright pink bow in his hair. “What the hell is that?” says his father. “That’s the one I want”, says Gerard. “I don’t know, Gerard, it’s not much of a *farm* dog... It’s, uh, more for the ladies...” When Gerard begins to cry, however, his father gives in and says, “Okay, okay, *man up!* You can have the dog. I’m just saying these [he points to the other two dogs] are great dogs with a great future!” As the young Gerard Kennedy

plays with his new pink-bowed puppy, a narrator says, “Even at a young age, Gerard Kennedy made ineffectual choices and would later go on to plunge the Liberal party into a dizzying tailspin.”

Both sketches feminize Dion, the first by depicting him taking part in the ‘feminine’ sport of power walking and by portraying him as someone with the ability to nurture and breastfeed, and the second by comparing him to a feminine puppy, wearing a pink sweater and a bow in its hair. Both sketches imply that Dion is weak *because* he is feminine. In the *Rick Mercer Report* sketch, for instance, Mercer, playing Kennedy’s father, describes the qualities of a good ‘dog’, and by way of comparison, the qualities of a good political leader, including: strength, loyalty, steadfastness, toughness, and the ability to protect – all stereotypically masculine qualities. The dog – and, by implication, the party leader – that Kennedy chooses is said to lack these qualities, possessing, instead, a distinct femininity. Femininity, then, is directly linked to weakness in political leadership in these two comedic sketches.

“I’ll meet you at the lockers”: Dion the ‘Nerd’ takes on Harper the Bully

Political humour on the three programmes depicted a hierarchy of masculinities occurring between Dion and Harper, with Dion portrayed as the quintessential nerd, and Harper as a stereotypical bully. For instance, in his ‘Rant’ from September 30th, Mercer compares the competition between Harper and Dion to a school rivalry between “the nerdy kid” and “the bully”. In Mercer’s words:

Remember back to high school folks, remember when the nerdy kid finally had enough of being slapped around by the bully and he said, ‘Ok, I’ll meet you at the lockers!’ Everyone showed up for that fight, because this, this is not a normal political rivalry, this is personal. Never mind that the Tories have spent millions of dollars calling Dion a pathetic loser; lately, they’ve been going after his wife [...] Personally, I wouldn’t be surprised if Dion snaps and takes a smack at him! So, never mind the promise of democracy, tune in for the promise of bloodshed, and maybe, if we’re lucky, a knockout punch! [...] And for the first time in a long time, thankfully, nobody can say, ‘May the best man win!’”

Clearly, masculinity is a prominent theme in this rant, not only through the depiction of Dion as the ‘nerd’ and Harper as the bully, stereotypes imbued with meanings surrounding masculinity, but also through the use of masculine boxing and battlefield metaphors. This masculinist language, in which Mercer promises “bloodshed” and hopes for a “knock-out punch”, assists in constructing politics as a male domain, since one would not typically imagine women engaging

in such activities (Trimble et al., 2007: 4). While Mercer argues that the presence of a woman, Elizabeth May, in the 2008 debates renders the phrase ‘May the best man win!’ irrelevant, the focus on Harper and Dion’s masculinities in election humour shows that manliness is still a commodity in the political realm.

Another segment from the *Rick Mercer Report* takes part in the portrayal of Dion as the quintessential nerd and Harper as the stereotypical bully. That segment, a fake commercial about the Canadian party leaders, which originally aired on September 30th, 2008, features all of the party leaders being portrayed by children. The ad features the slogan, “Politics is no place for grownups”. While the ad is a comment on the leaders and perhaps contemporary Canadian politics in general, it also features some implicit meanings pertaining to masculinity, particularly through the portrayals of Dion and Harper. Harper, for instance, is shown bullying Dion, whose stamp collection, when proudly displayed, is knocked to the ground by Harper. Through this portrayal, Dion is constructed as less masculine than Harper – the victim of his bullying. Harper, meanwhile, is portrayed as perhaps too masculine – he is aggressive, bullying, and cold.

“[He’s] a person... or, at least, a mammal?”: Humanizing Harper

In fact, a popular theme in humorous depictions of Harper across the three programmes was his perceived coldness, and the political satirists and parodists on these programmes found a source of comedy in attempts by the Harper campaign to ‘soften’ his image through advertisements featuring him in a cozy blue sweater. All three shows made fun of Harper’s cold persona, and while masculinity is not necessarily an explicit theme in such jokes, his masculinity is implicitly called into question through suggestions that he lacks warmth. Indeed, while Dion was portrayed as unmasculine, Harper was portrayed, perhaps, as ‘too’ masculine.

A fake news segment from the October 14th, 2008 episode of *22 Minutes*, for instance, features anchor Mark Chritch saying, “Despite leading in the polls, Wednesday, Stephen Harper admitted he knows a lot of people still find him cold and unlikeable”. Then, real footage shows Harper saying, “I know that, because, as I say, my *mother* is one of those people, and... you know, I hear about it every single day.” Another fake news segment from *22 Minutes*, this one from September 30th, 2008, features real footage of Harper greeting a mother and her baby on the campaign trail. Harper smiles as he pokes the baby awkwardly. The anchor jokes that Harper “accidentally mistook [the] baby for an ATM”. In this segment, the anchor – by pointing out

Harper's uncomfortable encounter with a baby – shows how real footage of Harper contradicts the 'warmer' and 'softer' image that Harper had been attempting to convey to voters.

A third example comes from a comedy sketch titled, "Mr. Harper's Neighbourhood" from the *Royal Canadian Air Farce* (October 10th, 2008). The sketch, a parody of Mr. Rogers' neighborhood, features Craig Lauzon playing Stephen Harper. This sketch also parodies Harper's "blue sweater" campaign ads, and features "Mr. Harper" changing from a blazer into a cozy blue cardigan, just as Mr. Rogers did on his famous children's show. The skit contrasts the persona Harper attempts to create – as warm and cuddly – with the way he is perceived – as controlling, bullying, attacking, and dominating. In Mr. Harper's neighborhood, says Harper, "everything is beautiful and peaceful, because I do all the thinking for everyone. Can you say 'control freak'?" Harper is portrayed as aggressive and dominating in this sketch. For instance, Harper's policy platform is contained in a document titled, "The True North Strong and Free: Stephen Harper's Plan to Dominate Canadians". The sketch also features Harper travelling to "Mr. Harper's World of Make Believe" where he is portrayed by a puppet referred to as "King Majority XIII" and accompanied by his loyal helper, John Baird. Harper says to Baird, "You are my most trusted member of cabinet", to which Baird replies, "But, I am only a puppet!" "Exactly!" says Harper. This controlling image of Harper is inconsistent with the warm and cuddly image he sought to portray.

Finally, a fake Conservative party campaign advertisement from *22 Minutes* parodies real Conservative party election ads from the 2008 campaign that featured actors playing everyday, 'average' Canadian citizens and talking about the many ways in which they can relate to Harper. The fake ad begins with the 'real' people saying things like, "He's someone I can relate to" and "I like that he's a family man with young children, just like me." As the ad goes on, peoples' observations about Harper become more and more ridiculous, highlighting and exaggerating the fact that he is, in fact, human: "I like that he's a biped – he doesn't have four legs, like a horse, or eight, like a spider or something. Two legs is something that really resonates with me", and, "I really connect with how he has... skin... as opposed to... scales. It really says, 'I'm a person.'... or, at least, a mammal?" This parody of a Conservative party campaign advertisement makes fun of Harper for appearing to be cold and lacking in humanity.

All four pieces suggest that Harper is perhaps 'too' masculine, lacking the stereotypically feminine qualities of caring and warmth – 'feminine' qualities that, perhaps, male politicians are

expected to exhibit nowadays. Interestingly, though, as feminist political scientists have shown, when a female politician exhibits traditional markers of femininity, she is often perceived as *too* feminine (Bashevkin, 2009; Murray, 2010: 235). The construction of political leadership as a masculine activity means that, “the more a woman is perceived as a woman the less likely it is that she will be perceived as professionally competent” (Valian qtd. in Bashevkin, 2009: 32).

Suggestions by political satirists that Harper is ‘too masculine’ or ‘not feminine enough’, then, are puzzling. In my view, that Harper is depicted as ‘too masculine’ is related to two factors. First, that Harper is depicted as ‘too masculine’ may be evidence of a so-called ‘softening’ of hegemonic masculinity. That is, in order to remain hegemonic – and therefore, in order to continue to guarantee the legitimacy of patriarchy – hegemonic masculinity must appear to respond to feminist criticism (MacKinnon, 2003: 10). Thus, men nowadays are expected to exhibit traditionally feminine qualities such as kindness, caring, warmth, cooperation and the ability to communicate, especially in a professional setting (Hooper, 1998: 38-41). Thus, while Harper’s masculinity is certainly portrayed as more robust than Dion’s, political satirists suggest that he does not quite embody normative, hegemonic masculinity, which requires the expression of masculinity with the incorporation of stereotypically feminine qualities.

On the other hand, humorous depictions of Harper that focus on his lack of ‘warmth’ may not relate to a perception that he is ‘too masculine’ at all, but instead to a perceived lack of authenticity in his gendered performances. van Zoonen (2005) argues, for instance, that to succeed in the era of infotainment, a politician’s gendered performance must be authentic; in other words, it:

must be consistent across the various stages and genres, because if anything will devastate a good performance it is its detection as a performance [...] The best rhetoric is not recognized as such and thus, paradoxically, what must be performed on the different stages and across the variety of public and popular genres is *authenticity* (75, emphasis added).

In terms of the sort of authentic performance is required of any politician, van Zoonen (2005) maintains that “the cultural model of a politician is much closer to the ideas of masculinity than of femininity” (75). Thus, male politicians often draw upon masculine archetypes, such as that of the ‘family man’ and the military hero, when crafting their personas (van Zoonen, 2005: 76). In the eyes of political satirists, then, the element of humour in Harper’s performance of the archetypal family man perhaps lies not in his masculinity, but in his inauthentic performance of the stereotypical warm, loving family man. Indeed, political satirists contrasted the warm, kind

and caring persona Harper sought to portray with what they perceived to be his actual cold and uncaring personality. While depictions of Harper as ‘too masculine’ may actually represent criticisms of Harper’s seemingly inauthentic gendered performance, rather than any direct critique of his masculinity, portrayals of Dion as ‘not masculine enough’ carry blatantly sexist overtones. Dion is continually depicted as embodying a subordinated masculinity – his gender symbolically assimilated with femininity – in order to suggest he is weak leader.

“Girls don’t make passes at boys who wear plain glasses!”: Constructing Heterosexual Masculinity

A series of news parody segments from *22 Minutes* serves to reinforce the perception of a hierarchy of masculinities between not only Harper and Dion, but among all of the male leaders. Throughout the campaign period, Avery Adams – the (stereo)typical single female voter – played by Geri Hall, staged interviews with each of the five party leaders in the hope that she would “fall in love” with one of them. While portrayals of Gilles Duceppe, Jack Layton and Elizabeth May are not the focus of this study, these segments are best analyzed as a whole. As such I compare the ways in which Hall, portraying Adams, the “single female voter”, interacts with, and thus shapes the portrayal of, each leader.

Avery Adams meets first with Harper. Prior to that meeting, she reiterates that she wants to “fall in love with a candidate”. The problem with Harper, however, is that “rumour has it, he doesn’t like women anywhere near his caucus”. Following a press conference, Adams appears to unexpectedly bombard Harper with questions in typical *22 Minutes* fashion, and is ultimately handcuffed and escorted out of the room by security. Adams eventually gets a chance to interview Harper, who asks her, “Do you like handcuffs?” Adams asks him about the new softer side he shows in his commercials. She says it seems like he is “wooing the female voters with [his] sweet sexy tones”. Harper is slightly awkward in his interaction with Hall, fumbling over what to say as she flirts with him shamelessly.

Second, Hall meets Dion on the campaign trail, where she hopes to be wooed by him. In Adams’ words: “A girl wants her leader to seduce her. I want you to seduce me Stéphane. But it’s just hard when I don’t always understand what you’re saying.” Upon meeting Dion, Adams holds up a pair of handcuffs and tells him that Harper has him in handcuffs, metaphorically-speaking, in the election. Adams then hands Dion a pair of cool aviator sunglasses to put on,

advising him that “Girls don’t make passes at boys who wear plain glasses!” She suggests that he needs to make his image cooler and sexier: “Just try ‘em on for me. The ladies will love it”. Adams wants to be wooed by Dion, who suggests instead that she talk to one of his staff members, who is young and single. She says, “I’m not looking for just anybody, I’m looking for a *leader*”. By emphasizing that she wants a leader, meanwhile suggesting that Dion needs help expressing his masculinity, Hall, playing Adams, links Dion’s masculinity with his leadership ability. Hall plays the stereotypical subservient female, looking to be led – perhaps even dominated – by a powerful man, but Dion fails to conform to the manly image she wants him to embrace.

Later on, Hall meets Dion at his hotel room. Handing him a leather jacket and the sunglasses she made him try on earlier, she tells him, “I believe that the people out there wanna see your inner tough guy!” Adams asks him to put on the jacket and sunglasses in the hope that this will give him a more rugged and manly look. She then instructs him to deliver an insult to Harper: “Canada, Stephen Harper doesn’t give a Green Shift about you!” Dion stumbles, however, and says, “Stephen Harper doesn’t give a Green Shift to you!”

Comparing the interactions of Harper and Dion with Hall’s character, it seems that neither was portrayed as a ‘ladies’ man’, and therefore neither candidate is portrayed as embodying normative masculinity. Dion is portrayed as still less masculine than Harper, however, his weak leadership connected with his supposed lack of masculinity.

In a later episode, Hall interviews both Layton and Duceppe. The NDP leader and the Bloc leader are portrayed as the more masculine leaders of the bunch. For instance, Adams compliments Layton on his “rock hard abs”, his “sexy mustache”, and his new advertisements promoting “a new kind of strong”: “sounds like a deodorant commercial”, according to Adams. Adams also affirms Duceppe’s masculinity by allowing him to lead her in a dance, and by telling him that she has “a little bit of a weak constitution” – something she thinks he would like. Unlike Harper and Dion, Duceppe seems comfortable ‘wooing’ a woman, and Layton is complimented on his manly, muscular physique; therefore Layton and Duceppe are portrayed as more closely embodying normative masculinity.

All of these segments reinforce traditional conceptions of appropriate gender behaviour. Because masculinity is connected to heterosexuality and the ability to charm a woman, for instance, Hall’s interviews reinforce heteronormativity. Furthermore, the contrast of masculine

and feminine stereotypes is noteworthy. Hall's character conforms to sexist stereotypes of women as frivolous, interested in "rock hard abs" rather than important political issues, desperate for male attention and powerful only through their sexuality. Though Hall plays the character with irony, her portrayal of the stereotypical 'single female voter' may assist in reinforcing the construction of the political realm as unfit for women. Moreover, masculinity is implicitly linked to political leadership when Hall attempts to help Dion portray his masculinity to voters, reminding him that she is "looking for a *leader*".

In her final interview with Green party leader Elizabeth May, however, Hall undermines and quietly subverts heteronormativity and traditional views surrounding gender and politics through the introduction of a lesbian subtext in their encounter. Prior to meeting May, Hall's character admits that, though she has "never been with a chick before (unless you count the time in university when [she] experimented with Kim Campbell)", she is "envirocurious" and ready for some "girl on Green action". When they meet, May comments on Hall's beautiful green dress and says, "You look good in green. You shouldn't just experiment, you should [...] dive in!" Then, May and Hall discuss the election and talk about the need for more women in the House of Commons, challenging the patriarchal notion that politics is a man's world. "I want you to beat [Peter MacKay]", Hall tells May, "because I think that we've already got too many Peters in the House of Commons... and Dicks, and John Thomases". This 'fake' news piece serves as a reminder that, while patriarchal notions of gender are often constructed using humour, humour can also serve as a tool of resistance to patriarchal views of gender.

Conclusion

Indeed, political humour is often multilayered, open to various interpretations. Thus, it is very difficult to draw definitive conclusions about what these various portrayals of Harper and Dion from 2008 Canadian election humour tell us about masculinity, power, and politics. In their construction of a masculine hierarchy in their portrayals of Dion and Harper, Canadian political humourists, I argue, contribute to the normalization of the purported links between masculinity, power, and politics and to the construction of politics as a 'man's world'. Indeed, an apparent anxiety surrounding the masculinities of political leaders is evidenced by consistent portrayals of Dion as effeminate – a trait that political humourists tend to associate with weak leadership. This finding corresponds with research of feminist scholars studying gender, politics

and the media, who have found that women and femininity tend to be depicted as alien to the apparently 'masculine' world of politics. While portrayals of Dion are overtly sexist, representations of Harper are more difficult to decipher. On one hand, political humourists seemed to suggest that Harper lacks the stereotypically 'feminine' qualities of kindness and warmth, implying that he is 'too masculine'. On the other hand, political humourists suggested that the main problem with Harper was his inauthentic attempts to portray kindness and warmth. From this research, focused only on election humour from 2008, general conclusions about gender and political humour cannot be drawn. Further research, which takes Canadian political humour seriously (Palmer, 1994) as a relevant source of news and information about politics, and which pays attention to political humour's crucial role in shaping meanings surrounding gender and politics, is necessary.

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