THE HUMOROUS EFFECTS IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE DURING INTERVIEWS: RHETORIC, PERFORMANCE, AND DEMOCRATIC AMBIVALENCE IN THE CASE OF DONALD TRUMP'S 2025 SPEECH

Azimova Marjona Salim qizi
The teacher of SamSIFL

Abstract. This article develops a theoretically grounded and discourse-analytical account of humor in contemporary political interviews, situating Donald Trump's 2025 interview speech within broader transformations of mediated political communication. Drawing on classical rhetoric, Bakhtinian carnivalesque theory, psychoanalytic relief theory, and Goffman's dramaturgical sociology, the paper conceptualizes political humor as a multifunctional discursive mechanism operating at the intersection of persuasion, identity construction, affect regulation, and accountability management. Through comparative analysis with interview performances by Barack Obama and Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the study proposes a typology of dominance, self-reflexive, and solidaristic humor. It argues that humor in political interviews constitutes a form of "affective governance" that simultaneously intensifies political engagement and destabilizes deliberative norms.

Key words: Political Humor, Rhetorical Performance, Affective Governance, Dominance Humor, Self-Reflexive Humor, Solidaristic Humor, Carnivalesque Inversion, Accountability Buffering, Affective Polarization, Democratic Ambivalence

Introduction: Humor as a Structural Feature of Mediated Politics

Political humor in interviews is often treated as incidental—an embellishment to otherwise substantive discourse. This paper rejects that assumption. In contemporary mediatized democracies, humor is not peripheral but constitutive. It is embedded within the performance logic of televised and digitally circulated interviews, where persuasion must coexist with entertainment.

Donald Trump's 2025 interview speech provides an analytically fertile case. Rather than merely "using jokes," the speech demonstrates how humor functions as a structuring principle of discourse: it shapes turn-taking, reframes adversarial questioning, and organizes audience alignment. Humor here is neither accidental nor spontaneous in a naïve sense; it is strategically integrated into rhetorical performance. The central claim advanced in this study is that humor in political interviews operates as a modality of power. It reorganizes authority relations, regulates affect, and modulates accountability. In doing so, it both strengthens and destabilizes democratic communication.

Theoretical Framework. Rhetoric and Affective Persuasion

The rhetorical tradition inaugurated by Aristotle conceptualizes persuasion as the interplay of ethos, pathos, and logos. While political science often foregrounds logos (policy substance), humor operates primarily through ethos and pathos. Humor enhances ethos by signaling confidence and control. A leader who can joke under pressure appears rhetorically sovereign. Simultaneously, humor mobilizes pathos by producing collective laughter, a shared affective experience that preconditions agreement. Thus, humor does not merely decorate argument; it pre-structures receptivity to argument.

Carnivalesque Inversion and Hierarchical Disruption

Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque illuminates the subversive dimension of political humor. The carnivalesque temporarily inverts official hierarchies, permitting ridicule of authority.

In Trump's 2025 interview speech, however, this inversion is paradoxical. A political leader—himself an institutional authority—adopts the posture of anti-elite mockery. The journalist, traditionally positioned as interrogator, becomes the object of ridicule. This inversion reconstitutes power rather than dismantling it: it performs anti-elitism while consolidating charismatic authority.

Relief, Aggression, and Affective Release

Sigmund Freud's relief theory situates humor as a mechanism for discharging psychic tension. In highly polarized political climates, humor serves as affective regulation. Laughter mitigates anxiety surrounding economic instability, geopolitical uncertainty, or institutional distrust. Yet humor also functions aggressively. Superiority-based humor, historically associated with Hobbesian theory, produces pleasure through domination. Trump's mockery of opponents exemplifies this aggressive dimension, where laughter signals alignment through shared derision.

Dramaturgy and Performance

Drawing on Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model, political interviews may be understood as "front-stage" performances in which leaders manage impressions before multiple audiences: interviewers, live viewers, digital publics, and partisan communities. Humor in this setting is an impression-management strategy. It signals spontaneity while remaining rhetorically calculated. The appearance of improvisation strengthens authenticity claims—even when carefully structured.

Methodology and Analytical Orientation

This study employs qualitative critical discourse analysis, integrating:

- Micro-linguistic examination (lexical intensifiers, metaphor, evaluative language)
- Pragmatic analysis (irony, implicature, ambiguity)
- Interactional analysis (turn-taking, interruption, laughter cues)
- Media-framing review (post-interview circulation and commentary)

The selection of Trump's 2025 speech is justified not by its uniqueness but by its representativeness of a broader shift toward spectacle-infused political interviews. Comparative references to Barack Obama and Volodymyr Zelenskyy are not symmetrical case studies but heuristic contrasts that clarify divergent humor models.

Analysis: Donald Trump's 2025 Interview Speech

Hyperbolic Intensification

A defining feature of Trump's humorous rhetoric is systematic hyperbole. Superlative constructions ("the greatest," "never seen before") function on dual levels:

1. Literal assertion of achievement

2. Comedic exaggeration recognizable as stylized excess

The exaggeration invites laughter while simultaneously normalizing maximalist claims. Importantly, the humor does not undermine authority—it amplifies it.

Ridicule and Hierarchical Reversal

Trump's humor frequently targets interviewers or political adversaries. This maneuver repositions the speaker as evaluator rather than respondent. The interrogative structure of the interview is disrupted. Such moments perform carnivalesque inversion. However, unlike Bakhtin's medieval carnival, the inversion does not dissolve hierarchy; it reconstructs it around charismatic centrality.

Strategic Ambiguity and Accountability Buffering

Humor generates interpretive flexibility. Controversial remarks can be retroactively framed as sarcasm. This creates what may be termed an "accountability buffer"—a rhetorical gray zone between sincerity and jest. This buffering mechanism complicates journalistic fact-checking. Was the statement literal, ironic, hyperbolic, or purely comic? Ambiguity becomes a protective resource.

Affective Polarization

Humor operates as a sorting device. Supporters experience shared laughter as validation; critics perceive irresponsibility or trivialization. Thus, humor intensifies affective polarization even when it appears lighthearted.

Comparative Models of Political Humor

Self-Reflexive Humor: Barack Obama

Barack Obama frequently employed self-deprecating humor in interviews. By making himself the object of light irony, he reduced perceptions of elitism while retaining intellectual authority. Self-reflexive humor diffuses antagonism. It signals confidence precisely because it does not rely on humiliating others.

Solidaristic Humor: Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Volodymyr Zelenskyy, whose professional background includes comedic performance, utilizes humor as emotional solidarity. In wartime interviews, subtle humor humanizes leadership without undermining gravity. Here humor functions not

as dominance but as resilience-building. Laughter becomes collective endurance rather than partisan triumph.

Humor as Affective Governance

Humor in political interviews can be conceptualized as a form of affective governance: a technique for managing public emotion. It reduces anxiety, fosters loyalty, and shapes memory. In digital ecosystems, humorous moments circulate disproportionately. Programs such as Saturday Night Live historically blurred satire and legitimacy; contemporary social media accelerates this fusion. The result is a political sphere in which spectacle and governance intertwine.

Democratic Ambivalence

Humor's democratic implications are inherently ambivalent.

Positive dimensions:

- Increased accessibility
- Emotional engagement
- Humanization of leadership

Problematic dimensions:

- Dilution of policy substance
- Evasion of accountability
- Intensification of polarization

Trump's 2025 speech illustrates this ambivalence vividly: humor strengthens charismatic appeal while destabilizing deliberative clarity.

Toward a Theoretical Typology

This study proposes three analytically distinct forms:

Humor Type	Core Mechanism	Democratic Tendency
Dominance Humor	Ridicule, hyperbole	Polarization & spectacle
Self-Reflexive Humor	Self-irony	Trust & moderation
Solidaristic Humor	Shared resilience	Collective cohesion

These types are not mutually exclusive but analytically useful for distinguishing rhetorical orientations.

Conclusion. Humor in political interviews is not epiphenomenal—it is structural. It reorganizes authority, regulates affect, and reshapes democratic norms. Donald Trump's 2025 interview speech exemplifies humor as dominance-infused spectacle, while comparative cases reveal alternative configurations. The broader implication is clear: as politics becomes increasingly mediatized, the boundary

between governance and performance erodes. Humor, once ancillary, now operates as a central technology of power.

Future research should integrate experimental audience-response data, cross-cultural comparison, and computational discourse analysis to further interrogate humor's role in democratic transformation.

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