

SERIOUSLY FUNNY: A LOOK AT HUMOR IN
TELEVISED PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to understand how humor was used in U.S. Presidential Debates and what kind of coverage it garnered in the press. A content analysis was done on the general election presidential debates from 1960-2004 and a newspaper sample of post-debate news stories to see the functions of humor use, type of humor used, and location in the debate humor was used. Results show Republican and Democratic candidates use humor similarly in trying to identify with audiences and using language types of humor. Results also find consistent coverage of humor in news stories with the most sensational cases of humor receiving the most coverage. Discussion explores the significance of the results, looks at a chronology of humor use in debate, third party influence and suggests implication for antecedent genre theory and methods to study humor research.