Political satire has become increasingly prominent in recent years, leading some political science instructors to respond by using satire in their courses. The motivation is clear: students enjoy satire and research shows they may actually be informed by it. Yet recent work also suggests that political satire may encourage cynicism and decrease political efficacy—a finding likely to give instructors pause. Here, I develop and test an approach to teaching with satire effectively: frequent use, source diversity, and critical evaluation of satire engages students while allaying satire’s potential detrimental effects. I evaluate this pedagogical approach through a classroom experiment using both in-person and online classes (student N=163). The results offer suggestive evidence refuting the warning that satire fundamentally depresses political efficacy. By moving beyond The Daily Show and The Colbert Report and deliberately using satire as a teaching tool, instructors can maximize the benefits of satire while minimizing the potential drawbacks. Additionally, I present qualitative and quantitative data indicating that students enjoy satire and endorse its use in the classroom. For instructors that are so inclined, the author’s website contains a searchable catalogue of satirical articles, video clips, and cartoons that can be used to teach specific political science concepts.
Political satire isn’t just for the interior pages of the newspaper anymore. Far from the obtuse (or obvious) black and white cartoons of yesteryear, modern political satire garners the attention of millions of viewers each year (Gorman 2011; Bibel 2013). What does this mean for the political science classroom? Today, satire is more accessible than ever and students are more likely to be exposed to it (Baym 2005; Pew 2004). But does it follow that using satire is a good pedagogical move? Does satire communicate a dystopic political message and dissuade students from participating in politics, or might it make the political world accessible, understandable, and even interesting?

The classroom strategies described here attempt to minimize the cynical effects of satire and bolster the feelings of understanding and engagement it can provide through three teaching techniques: regularly using satire, utilizing a variety of satirical materials, and emphasizing critical evaluation of satire. A teaching experiment in online and in-person classes indicates that this approach is likely to be well-received and may actually improve political efficacy.

The Pedagogical Relevance of Political Satire

Satire is sometimes difficult to identify.¹ In fact, LaMarre, Landreville, and Beam (2009) found that interpretations of whether a work is considered satire are moderated by political ideology. The sometimes ironic effect is seen in studies like the one by Baumgartner and Morris (2008), which found that Stephen Colbert’s ultra-right wing satire actually had a conservative effect on students. Drawing from the Oxford English Dictionary, the definition of satire used here is: the use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize incompetence or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues. Satire has a long and important tradition in political commentary. Satire has historically been a socially acceptable

¹ I once had a student express outrage at the satirical article “Bill of Rights Trimmed Down to a Manageable Six,” thinking it was an actual news item.
outlet for criticism of elites and the politically powerful (Duff 1936; Jones 2010; Mann 1973; Meddaugh 2010). But far from a relic of history, satire is part of the political world we encounter and construct daily (Edelman 1995; Ogborn and Buckroyd 2001).

Two of the most prominent satirical programs today are Comedy Central’s The Daily Show and The Colbert Report. These programs are of particular interest to political science professors in part because they are so popular with young people. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2008) finds that The Daily Show and The Colbert Report have the youngest audiences of any outlet in the survey (between 74% and 80% of their audience is 49 or younger); the same survey also reports that these viewers are mostly tuning in for entertainment (53% of Colbert’s audience and 43% of Stewart’s are there primarily for entertainment).

Beyond its entertainment value, there is some evidence that satire promotes learning. Scholars have found modest gains in political knowledge from watching late night comedy and other “soft news” sources (Baek and Wojcieszak 2009; Baum 2003) and content analysis indicates that the political content of these programs is comparable to mainstream news (Fox, Koloen, and Sahin 2007; McBeth and Clemons 2011; Pew 2008). Indeed, viewers of late night satire are more informed about candidates and issue positions (Young 2004) and more knowledgeable about politics in general (Pew 2007), compared to those who do not view these programs. Along these same lines, Baumgartner and Morris (2006) find that watching The Daily Show increased confidence in one’s ability to understand politics; Moy, Xenos, and Hess (2005) find that late-night comedy viewing boosts both the intent to vote and interpersonal political discussions; and Cao and Brewer (2008) find that exposure to political comedy is positively associated with political participation. As scholars who spend hours each week trying to teach
political science to the core demographic of these programs, the overwhelming evidence that politics can be engaging—and even entertaining—to students is good to know.

But does the popularity of modern late-night satirical television programs—and its correlation with some characteristics we would like to see in our students—mean that satire may be useful in the political science classroom? Many professors have already decided that a little satire can go a long way and have introduced satire through a variety of methods, for instance: assigning Jon Stewart’s satirical textbook (Baumgartner and Morris 2008; Teten 2010), showing clips from *The Daily Show* (Beavers 2011), using political cartoons (Hammett and Mather 2010; Stark 2003), and discussing Saturday Night Live parodies (Journell 2011). Emerging research support these efforts, suggesting that viewing satire has positive and significant effects on political participation (Cao and Brewer 2008; Hoffman and Thomson 2009; Hoffman and Young 2011) and attentiveness (Cao 2010), in addition to providing a non-threatening medium through which to discuss important political issues (Cutbirth 2011; Lee 2012).

Yet, despite these positive indications, some research has been less enthusiastic, finding that satire’s effects on learning are minimal (Baumgartner and Morris 2008) and its effects on political efficacy are actually negative (Baumgartner 2008; Guggenheim, Kwak, and Campbell 2011; Tsfati, Tukachinsky, and Peri 2009). Baumgartner and Morris (2006) find that young people who watched *The Daily Show’s* 2004 presidential campaign coverage exhibited more cynicism toward the candidates, the electoral system, and the media. Other studies similarly find that viewers of satirical news programs exhibit greater cynicism (Tsfati, Tukachinsky, and Peri 2009) and distrust of politicians (Baumgartner 2008; Guggenheim, Kwak, and Campbell 2011).

The collective effect of these mixed studies may be the tempering of enthusiasm towards political satire as a teaching tool. If satire engages our students in politics only to alienate them,
then the endeavor is a wash or perhaps even, on balance, a negative. Thus, the purpose of the current study is to build upon the growing satire literature by using an applied teaching experiment to assess the value of satire as a teaching tool, testing the effect of satire on political efficacy. The results indicate that, by carefully selecting satire and thoughtfully incorporating it into courses, it is possible to minimize satire’s negative effects and maximize its potential for political and educational good.

**Strategies for Using Satire**

The potentially alienating effects of satire are concerning. In an attempt to counter any negative effects on political efficacy, I adhere to three pedagogical principles when using satire in my courses. Used together, I believe these strategies can maximize satire’s benefits while avoiding its potential downsides. First, use satire regularly. As with any teaching tool, it is best to incorporate satire as part of an overall teaching plan with clear goals in mind (Toohey 1999). Regularly employing satire to address a variety of different topics in a deliberate, as opposed to an ad hoc, way may limit the negative impact of satire on efficacy. The literature indicates that repeatedly exposing students to political satire may reduce the shock and subsequent cynicism some may experience when first encountering sharp political criticism. For instance, Baumgartner and Morris (2006) find that the more self-reported exposure respondents had to *The Daily Show*, the smaller the effect of decreased efficacy was. It is possible that viewers become accustomed to political criticisms and the alienating effects of satire decline over repeated exposures. Thus, I try to incorporate some satire into nearly every class meeting.

Second, use a diverse selection of satirical materials. Although much of the scholarly research has focused on popular late-night satirical programs, there are many ways to employ satire in the classroom. Although Baumgartner and Morris (2006) find a decrease in external
political efficacy as a result of watching *The Daily Show*, it is possible that a more diverse use of satire could yield a different result (Polk, Young, and Holbert 2009). It may be the particular approach of *The Daily Show*—namely Jon Stewart’s distinct style of juxtaposing statements by politicians and media outlets to point out hypocrisy and stupidity (Jones 2005; Baym 2005)—that fosters cynicism in viewers. Multiple satirical mediums, especially when analyzed thoroughly and repeatedly, are likely to provide a more diverse overall experience to students. For instance, Stephen Colbert’s satire takes the form of parody, *The Onion* is sarcastic, and political cartoons often communicate complex and symbolic satirical messages (Conners 2005; Diamond 2002; Elder and Cobb 1983; Paletz 2002). I use all of these sources and more in my classes to present students with a varied range of satirical perspectives.

Third, encourage students to critically engage with satire. There is an important difference between *exposing* students to satire and *engaging* students in a critical discussion of satire. While the former may be helpful, the latter makes more pedagogical sense (Bean and Weimer 2011) and may be less likely to depress political efficacy. As satire can sometimes be difficult to grasp, critically engaging with it requires students to employ higher level thinking skills and may actually result in greater critical thinking (Baumgartner and Morris 2008). Indeed, because research shows that students bring their own preconceptions when they interpret and experience satire (LaMarre, Landreville, and Beam 2009), engaging in critical analysis may help draw out satire’s best possible effects. Thus, in addition to critical discussions of satire in class, I require a satire writing assignment. For this assignment, students identify a piece of satire, write a one-page critical analysis pointing out the political message in the satire and explaining its meaning, and present it to the class. The goal of critical engagement is to
encourage students not just to laugh at the jokes, but to think about why those particular political critiques might (or might not) be apt.

By teaching with satire using these three strategies—regularity, diversity, and critical analysis—in combination, I hope to avoid some of the declines in efficacy identified in prior studies. The next section describes how I implemented and evaluated these strategies through a teaching experiment.

Methods

In order to assess the potential effects of satire on political efficacy, I employed a teaching experiment comparing introductory political science classes taught using satire to those taught without satire. The experiment was conducted in seven introductory political science courses from the fall of 2009 to the fall of 2011. Three courses taught with satire took place in person (fall 2009, fall 2010, and fall 2011) and two took place online (spring 2010 and spring 2011). One control course—taught without satire—took place in person (fall 2009) and one took place online (fall 2011). The total number of students enrolled across all courses was 163.

The control and satire courses were taught by the same professor, using the same textbook and the same lectures; the satire condition also included some satirical materials. These materials were selected to substantively complement the topics in the course. Some examples: The satirical news article “American People Ruled Unfit To Govern” (*The Onion*, April 14, 1999) was an assigned reading for the unit on voting and elections. In an early discussion of the scientific method, students watched the June 21, 2007 clip “Ron Paul’s Colbert Bump” from *The Colbert Report* during class and were assigned to read Fowler’s (2008) article on the Colbert Bump. The video clip “Funny Or Die Presents: Playground Politics–Africa”, available on YouTube, was used to illustrate resource disparities for a class on international political economy.
and the role of the International Monetary Fund. The classic “Gerrymander” cartoon (Tisdale 1812) provided both a critique of redistricting and an illustration of its longevity.²

Incorporating discussion of the satire in class took about 5 minutes of each class meeting. In the control condition, the time was used for lecture or discussion. Students in the satire condition were also required to turn in a one page critical analysis of a piece of satire of their choosing and to present their satire to the class. Students in the control condition were given a similar assignment to select, critically analyze, and present a current event.³

At the beginning of the semester, students enrolled in both conditions took a pre-survey to establish baseline measures on a variety of political attitudes.⁴ Of particular interest here is the battery of six political efficacy and trust in government questions, which have been included in the National Election Studies since 1958 (Craig, Niemi, and Silver 1990). Possible scores on this battery range from 6 to 15. At the end of the semester, students took a post-survey, which included the same questions about political efficacy and trust. Students in the satire condition were also asked questions regarding the use of satire in the class and were provided with space for open-ended responses. This research design allows for the comparison of data within conditions (comparing the survey given at the beginning of the semester to the one given at the end of the semester) and across conditions (comparing the final surveys of both the experimental and control conditions). Teaching the satire and control conditions both in person and online also makes it possible to evaluate whether the effects of satire change across platforms. The response rate for the pre-test was 97% (159/163) and the post-test was 79% (129/163).

² The author’s website, [redacted], contains a list of all satirical materials used in the satire condition, as well as additional satirical materials. The purpose is both to provide the reader with a sampling of the materials used in order to better understand the teaching experiment and to provide a resource for instructors who are interested in incorporating satire into their courses.
³ The complete assignments are available at the author’s website.
⁴ The full wording for all questions presented here is available at the author’s website.
To summarize, in the satire condition, students were exposed to satire regularly, exposed to satire in diverse forms, and encouraged to engage with the material critically through classroom discussions and oral and written assignments. The expectation is that employing satire in this way will not lead to the declines in political efficacy identified in prior studies (H1). Additionally, students are expected to respond positively to the satire (H2).

Results

How valuable or dangerous is satire as a pedagogical tool in the political science classroom? One way to answer this question is to ascertain whether satire—employed in a diverse, regular, and critical manner as described here—decreases political efficacy as feared. In this study, political efficacy was operationalized through a six-question battery; mean scores on this battery were calculated for each class and the mean efficacy gains for the in-person, online, and total pooled classes are presented in Figure 1.

[Figure 1 about here.]

As Figure 1 illustrates, the general results across the courses in this study are consistent: levels of political efficacy are higher at the end of the class than at the beginning. None of the classes experienced a negative change in political efficacy. The increase in efficacy is seen in both the satire and control conditions, indicating specifically that using satire did not decrease student efficacy relative to what it was before the class nor relative to the non-satire environment. In fact, assessing efficacy gains in the in-person classes in particular reveals some positive effects of the satire condition. In Figure 1, students in the in-person satire condition experienced a nearly half point gain in efficacy, compared to a gain of just over a tenth of a point for the in-person control condition. Taken all together, the satire classes experienced an average efficacy gain of 0.4 and the control classes experienced an average efficacy gain of 0.28. The
online satire courses had an average efficacy gain of 0.24, compared to 0.49 for the in-person satire classes. The results of two way t-tests indicate that the gains in efficacy are statistically indistinguishable. An ANOVA model accounting for both experimental condition (satire vs. control) and course format (online vs. in person) similarly finds no statistically significant differences in efficacy.\(^5\)

These tests support the conclusion that, counter to previous research, we need not fear a drop in efficacy as a result of teaching with satire. The data instead show consistent, although statistically insignificant, gains in political efficacy with the use of satire. Additionally, these results suggest that satire is as useful (or, possibly, as superfluous) online as it is in person. These findings may help assuage the fears of some instructors who want to use satire in their courses but are afraid of its negative effects in terms of efficacy. At the same time, these data encourage us to be thoughtful in how we use satire, supporting H1 and the idea that the diverse, consistent, and critical use of satire does not harm our students’ political efficacy.

Another way of assessing how appropriate satire might be for teaching political science is to ask the students themselves what they thought of its use in class. Although scholars have cautioned against using only student self-reports in evaluating teaching methods (Baumgartner and Morris 2008; Beavers 2011; Hollander 1995), student responses can give us at least some insight into how our teaching is received. Students in the satire condition were asked three questions regarding the use of satire in the class: if the satire helped them understand the concepts, if it made the class more enjoyable, and if they would recommend it be used in future iterations of the course. Responses to these questions were rescaled on a single three point scale and mean responses from the in-person and online satire courses are presented in Figure 2.

\(^5\) The full model results are available from the author upon request.
Above each set of columns are the differences in the mean scores between the online and in-person classes.

[Figure 2 about here.]

The data indicate a largely positive response to the satire across both modes of instruction, with more positive survey responses coming from the in-person classes. Two-tailed t-tests were conducted to determine if the differences between the in-person and the online classes were significant. For the question about satire helping students understand the material and the question about satire making the class more enjoyable, the scores were significantly higher (p<.01) for in-person rather than online classes. Students from both modes of instruction, however, were virtually unanimous in their recommendation that satire be used in future classes.

A close look at the qualitative and quantitative data indicates that variance in the student population and the mode of instruction may be behind these differences. It is certainly possible, and even likely, that there is an element to satire that isn’t easily communicated electronically. But it also may be that online students are not accessing the satire as regularly. The average age of the online students was 29.5 and the average age of the in-class students was 22.4. There was also a greater percentage of women in the online class, compared to the in person class, 63% to 42%. It may be that online students—more likely to have heavier work and family obligations, compared to students who attend class in person (Kramarae 2001)—saw the satire as optional or as a waste of time. One online student said, “Working full time and attending school full time, I just didn’t have the time available to fully utilize the satire element of the course.” Another commented, “I don’t really see the point of having this.” Importantly, though, online students don’t recommend removing the satire from the class; it appears that they just don’t have, or take, as much time to engage with it.
In all, ninety students across five satire courses responded to the post survey; a few representative comments are included here to reinforce the supportive numbers in Figure 2. For instance, one repeated comment, in line with scholarly research (Torok, McMorris, and Lin 2004; Ziv 1988; Deiter 2000), was that the satire helped the students learn and remember the material. As one student put it, “the satirical articles help to provide an easier way to remember the material. When something is funny it is much easier to recall both that and the material that was read before and after.” Another representative comment: “I really enjoyed [the satire]; it made a lot of the material more relatable and also made it easier to remember certain terms.”

Student comments also illustrate strong support for the use of satire on the grounds that it led to greater enjoyment of the course. A common sentiment was that the satire, in the words of one student, “made the course less boring and really more entertaining than others.” Some student comments also provide insight into how students’ views of satire changed throughout the course. Many students reported that they were initially unfamiliar with satire and/or its political meanings, saying, for instance, “I always enjoyed it but never really understood how to read it for more than a laugh.” The consistent critical analysis of satire in the course appears to have impacted not only how students interpreted the satire as part of the course materials, but also their experience with satire outside of the classroom. As one student said, “it's changed the way I watch The Daily Show & The Colbert Report. Thanks!”

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that the potential danger of satire as a disillusioning damper on political efficacy is not found when the material is presented regularly, critically, and from multiple sources. The teaching experiment reveals that using satire to teach Introduction to

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6 This comment was followed by a smiley-face emoticon, not included here.
Political Science did not result in a decline in political efficacy, and indeed in the case of in-person classes, efficacy levels were higher in satire classes than the control class. Although the increased efficacy scores are not significant, it is possible that political satire may help keep students’ attention and thereby improve efficacy indirectly, especially in traditional classroom settings. As one student put it: “I feel that the satire in class made the class much more enjoyable. The satire kept me awake in class and not once did I ever feel like falling asleep.” Of course, each instructor has to decide if satire is right for his or her classes, but the student endorsements from this study may be enough to encourage a trial adoption. At the very least, the evidence presented here suggests that we shouldn’t stay away from satire for fear of disengaging and disillusioning our students.

As with many pedagogical studies, the data here are limited; in order to really understand the effects of satire, we need to collect data on its use across a broader range of students. One way to do this may be through coordinating instructors across multiple campuses and implementing satire across courses in similar ways. For now, those interested in trying out some satirical materials in their courses can access the satirical resource repository on the author’s website: [redacted]. This searchable repository is a resource to help instructors select satire that will complement the other content in their courses. Instructors can search or browse satire organized by subfield and topic, and listed with the title, date, direct link, and a brief description.

The approach to teaching with satire presented here—employing diverse satire in a consistent and critical way—appears to have some benefits. It does not decrease political efficacy as some have feared, but instead may actually increase it. This finding, in conjunction with the overwhelmingly positive student feedback, provides an invitation to political science instructors to get in on the joke and use satire in their teaching.
Figure 1. Gains in Political Efficacy across Instructional Medium and Overall
Two-tailed t-tests were conducted to determine whether the differences in means identified above each set of columns were significant, **p<.01. 
References


