

# The Agenda-Setting Power of *Saturday Night Live*

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## Abstract

*This study explored the effects of the late-night sketch comedy Saturday Night Live in the political sphere, specifically analyzing its impact using agenda-setting theory. As primarily secondary research, this study reviewed previous studies suggesting that satirical news segments and critical portrayals of politicians have a tangible effect on voters' perceptions of political issues. In the 2008 Presidential Election specifically, vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin's favorability ratings dropped in accordance with the program's parodies, illustrating Saturday Night Live's possible influence on public perceptions of politicians and political issues by spotlighting critical issues and blending humor with truth. This study sheds light on the evolution of the program from mere entertainment to a political platform with the potential to influence viewers' political beliefs.*

## I. Introduction

Throughout its nearly 40-year run on American national television, the sketch comedy program *Saturday Night Live* has introduced viewers to memorable characters, from the aliens with cone-shaped heads, to the "Blues Brothers," to "Wayne and Garth," to the upright and uptight "Church Lady." Beyond the entertaining and humorous, and fictional, creations of the show's writers, the program's political parodies, often skewering the politicians found in the most recent newspaper headlines, also garner significant media attention. In the past decade in particular, *Saturday Night Live* cemented a pivotal place in the world of politics. This work considers the question, particularly relevant given the show's popularity throughout the past two national elections: "How, and to what extent, did *Saturday Night Live* set the political agenda?"

The most recent literature about *Saturday Night Live* delves mainly into the 2008 political season, as Tina Fey's portrayal of then-Alaskan governor Sarah Palin shaped the way the American public perceived the relatively unknown politician, and as some argue, influenced their decisions at the polls. The show's increasing political power may be explained through the agenda-setting theory, which asserts that the media influences what issues the general public, or in this study, the *Saturday Night Live* viewers, perceive as the most important political values. The "Weekend Update" satirical news segment additionally bolsters the notion that the program plays an informative role, as the segment's writers pull actual news headlines and spin them in a humorous light.

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## II. Literature Review

The literature revolves primarily around *Saturday Night Live's* history, evolution, and agenda-setting capabilities. Some sources argue that the program truly influences the political sphere, beyond providing pure entertainment. Generally, the work done on *Saturday Night Live* in recent years spotlights the "Tina Fey Effect," pertaining specifically to the power exhibited by the program's actors and writers in the past five years. Historically, little research on the show's political satire has been conducted, although researchers have studied the program's origins in political parodies. To broaden the study beyond just *Saturday Night Live*, additional literature on the agenda-setting theory itself, historically and in present-day was reviewed. Literature on other political satire programs, including *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, was also included to expand the discussion beyond one program's style of political humor.

### ***The Agenda-Setting Theory***

Weaver (1994) analyzes the evolution of the agenda-setting theory and asserts that the 1992 presidential election illustrated a shift in political power from the media to voters themselves. Weaver writes that the media's ability to set the political agenda is dependent on several factors, including "prior knowledge of voters, the nature of the media coverage, the type of issues, and the kind of effects being measured (Weaver 348). He claims the media's power is limited, but also asserts that the media can set the agenda by constructing a "perceived reality that voters rely upon in making decisions" (Weaver 349).

A definition of agenda setting in a contemporary context is also integral to the discussion. Authors Guo, Vu and McCombs discuss the evolution of the agenda-setting theory and suggest that the media influences what issues are perceived as important, persuading the audience to believe that certain clusters of information are most important. The authors take a psychological approach to their research, countering that modern-day agenda setting is not a simple practice or linear storyline created by the media, but rather emphasizes connections between a political figure and one's own background and beliefs.

### ***The Evolution of Political Satire***

Becker's (2012) research further supports the argument that *Saturday Night Live* has set the political agenda in a presidential campaign. Becker's work similarly analyzes the 2008 presidential election, focusing not on Palin, but on Senator John McCain, her running mate. Becker defines and compares the political satire on *Saturday Night Live* with Stephen Colbert's deadpan satire on "The Colbert Report." Although other literature pinpoints *Saturday Night Live's* negative portrayal of Sarah Palin as one of the main reasons the McCain/Palin campaign lost the presidency, Becker suggests that the program allowed McCain to salvage and boost his public image and political career by appearing on the show and lampooning himself in his campaign's final days.

In analyzing the agenda-setting effectiveness of *Saturday Night Live* on young adults, Holbert, Tchernev, Walther, Esralew, and Benski (2013) counter the notion that the program has the ability to subtly plant ideas or images in viewers' minds. The authors agree that political parodies can contribute to young adults' political knowledge, but assert that there are limitations for parodies in actually setting the political agenda. They suggest that young adults in particular are able to separate satire from truth, and are not persuaded by political parodies on television. The literature asserts that young adults are cognitively able to separate persuasive material from their own beliefs and may "avoid the message, counter-argue the message . . ." (Holbert et. all 173).

In addition to its satirical characterizations of political figures, *Saturday Night Live's* "Weekend Update" news segment also influences viewers' political views. Reinheld (2013) describes the role of the comedic news segment in disseminating information to viewers, countering the argument that the program is mere entertainment. The literature describes the development of the segment, and show creator Lorne Michaels' intent for "Weekend Update" to be considered a serious voice in the American political landscape and to serve an informational purpose" (Reinheld 191). Reinheld also sides with other researchers promoting the idea that *Saturday Night Live* plays an informative role, with cast members often learning about the news primarily from the segment's jokes, mirroring similar work revealing that young adults who watch political parodies are more informed than those who do not.

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## ***Saturday Night Live* During the 2008 Election**

Author Dannagal G. Young (2013) discusses *Saturday Night Live*'s influence as a part of the political sphere after the show defined vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin's public image. Although David Weaver defines the press as the agenda-setting vehicle, Young casts *Saturday Night Live* as the ultimate power-holder during election times. Young asserts that the rise of news coverage and "emphasis on candidate personalities" enabled *Saturday Night Live* to create Palin's public persona. The media focused primarily on Palin in comparison to Fey's satirical portrayal, shifting the political discussion away from political issues to an actress's characterization of a politician. The author analyzed the "Fey Effect," where Fey's portrayal of Palin is pinpointed as the basis for Palin's increasingly unfavorable poll numbers. Young's research contributes to the argument that *Saturday Night Live* does play a role in political agenda-setting, directly resulting in Palin's inability to secure the vice-presidency.

Esralew and Young (2013) also delve into the "Fey effect." The authors support the idea that there is no longer separation between news and entertainment, countering literature equating *Saturday Night Live* to mindless entertainment without political agenda. The authors define modern agenda-setting as "not about direct persuasion but, rather, subtle cognitive effects that take advantage of how the brain is hardwired." Instead of overtly telling viewers not to vote for McCain and Palin, *Saturday Night Live* subliminally planted cognitive shortcuts in viewers' minds. Esralew and Young assert that agenda-setting is the first part of a two-step process, where agenda-setting spotlights certain issues in the media, followed by priming, where viewers "ascribe increased importance" to the issues (Esralew and Young 340).

Abel and Barthel(2013), similarly utilize the depiction of Sarah Palin as evidence for the argument that *Saturday Night Live* influences how journalists and the mass media cover certain figures. The research primarily concerns the incorporation of political satire and comedy into the political information pool. The authors suggest that *Saturday Night Live* holds an impactful relationship with the general public, as they can inject their satire with political commentary that journalists must avoid. The two authors reference a possible "SNL Effect," a recent theory similar to the "Fey Effect" that claims that the show truly does influence public opinion. They came to the conclusion that the program led the media to skewer and heavily criticize Sarah Palin after airing a critical sketch, while the media's coverage of her prior to the episode was mainly favorable.

Pfeifer (2013) claims that in the 2008 election, *Saturday Night Live* played an important role in the campaign's narrative. Pfeifer explains the show's significance through the "framing" theory, similar to the agenda setting theory, stating that political parody can shape viewers' understanding and perception of political figures. He delves into the definition of a parody, and asserts that political parodies can be used to shape our beliefs and create new political realities. He also says political parody is not necessarily just an imitation, but can also contain added commentary. Pfeifer cites several sources that further the idea of political framing, in this case asserting that *Saturday Night Live* determines the storyline of an election, guiding viewers' interpretations of media portrayals.

The majority of literature on the subject supports the argument that *Saturday Night Live* agenda setting influences the political sphere and possesses the ability to set the political agenda. In accordance with the theory's definition, the program shapes what viewers perceive to be the most prominent issues. Several researchers utilize the program's depiction of Sarah Palin as a key piece of evidence in their assertions. However, the literature relies heavily on quantitative, rather than qualitative, data, drawing upon other media sources to support their arguments. Since the agenda-setting power of the show manifested most clearly in 2008, most of the literature only illustrates the agenda-setting effect during one election. The literature suggests that agenda-setting, and other political and sociological theories, reach beyond politics into the entertainment world.

## **III. Methodology**

The data collected for this study is primarily qualitative, drawing upon other research and literature to further interpret and answer the question presented. Since this research analyzes *Saturday Night Live* and agenda-setting theory from a historical perspective, and compares the political power of the program beginning nearly 40 years ago, quantitative research is not appropriate or necessarily integral to the study.

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Rather, anecdotes and theories from previous research are reviewed in order to analyze and synthesize the various components in this discussion. To keep the literature objective, academic writings from both viewpoints were included. Literature providing informative definitions and examples of concepts like political satire and the agenda-setting theory was also referenced to foster a clearer understanding of the ideas behind the argument. To support the claim that *Saturday Night Live's* political coverage has a tangible effect on political views, several Gallup poll results were also included.

## IV. Analysis

### *The Definition and Evolution of the Agenda-Setting Theory*

Before discussing whether or not *Saturday Night Live* truly possesses the power to set the political agenda, the theory of agenda-setting must first be clarified. The current definition of the agenda-setting theory delves into the impact of television programs in impacting viewers' perceptions of political figures or issues. Programs like "The Daily Show," "The Colbert Report," and "Saturday Night Live" do not directly persuade or influence viewers to support a candidate or issue, but instead plant certain ideas and concepts in their minds. (Esralew & Young 339) Esralew and Young also argue that issues spotlighted on television programs are often perceived by viewers as the most important. The authors identify agenda setting as the first step in a two-step process of television's political influence. The second step, called "priming," takes place when viewers evaluate political figures according to the program's positions on the issues or characterizations promoted during the agenda-setting phase.

Initial research on the agenda-setting theory began in the late 1960s, and defined the concept simply as the "the relationship between which issues voters considered more important and which issues were most heavily covered by the news media (Weaver 348). Weaver promotes the notion that the media can create a "perceived reality" by airing material about certain candidates or issues. Thus, viewers often turn to television programs for political information. The media's power in the political sphere has evolved, Weaver argues, due to the development of new forms of media (Weaver 348). Recent studies on the agenda-setting theory define the concept as a theoretical model, where the media sources "bundle different sets of objects or attributes," promoting those issues or ideas as most important in a short period of time. Referred to as the "Network Agenda Setting Model," the expanded theory suggests that audiences will form connections between certain ideas or messages when promoted together (Guo, Vu & McCombs 65).

### *The Definition of Satire*

The second element of the discussion, the art of satire itself, is necessary to conclude whether programs like *Saturday Night Live* serve as purely trivial entertainment or as informative and persuasive sources. Becker (2013) explains that satire is based on four elements: aggression, judgment, play, and laughter, and presents "a critical perspective or take on accepted reality" (795). The humor of *Saturday Night Live* in particular is regarded as satirical based on its frequent social commentary during the "Weekend Update" satirical news segment, and on its caricatures of famous figures. Becker describes *Saturday Night Live's* style of satire as "self-ridicule," and introspective, and less hostile than the humor of another successful show, "The Colbert Report," where the style of humor is intended to mock its target (Becker 797). She thus asserts that the program's self-effacing humor is frequently received in good nature, inviting viewers to laugh at themselves as portrayed through the show's content.

Satire ranges from Becker's harmless and self-deprecating definition, to bitter and harsh. (Holbert et al. 171) The researchers define all satire as possessing an "element of assault," with political satire taking on multiple forms, as evidenced by the range of political content aired on *Saturday Night Live* alone. (Holbert et al. 172) The authors equate modern political satire's main goal with presenting "human folly" to "shape people's impressions of the objects being satirized." (Holbert et al. 174) After defining the two key elements of the discussion, the analysis of *Saturday Night Live* and its potential ability to utilize satire to promote a political agenda follows.

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### *The Origins of Saturday Night Live in Political Satire*

Although *Saturday Night Live*'s early years are engrained in popular culture for launching the careers of Chevy Chase, John Belushi, Dan Aykroyd, Jane Curtin and Gilda Radner, the show played an integral role in familiarizing political satire on television. During its first five years on air, the "Weekend Update" segment, where cast members dressed professionally and delivered news behind an anchor desk, albeit with significantly more punch lines than Walter Cronkite, reached more than 30 million people. (Reincheld 190) According to Reincheld (2013), show creator Lorne Michaels wanted the segment to "be considered a serious voice in the American political landscape and to serve an informational purpose." (Reincheld 191) Although some literature argues that *Saturday Night Live* at its core serves to entertain, rather than intentionally persuade, Michael's intent to create a show with overt political influence is significant.

When *Saturday Night Live* first debuted in 1975, Americans were frequently exposed to political news regarding the Watergate Scandal and the Vietnam War. The "Weekend Update" news segment allowed viewers to laugh at the show's unorthodox and irreverent interpretations of the nation's actual headlines. As the show evolved, the writers often chose to spotlight unusual or seemingly trivial news, introducing viewers to stories they might not consider newsworthy. Thus, *Saturday Night Live* possesses the ability to set the political agenda. Writers often did not intend to promote a specific agenda, according to Herb Sargent, who supervised the segment for twenty years. Sargent says writers did not create jokes with the intent to educate viewers, but eventually realized "People would say they'd heard about this major story only on 'Update'" (Reincheld 193).

### *The Increasingly Political Role of Saturday Night Live from 1980-2008*

Politicians and their associates eventually came to regard *Saturday Night Live* as a key player in influencing popular political discussions. Elliot Curson, the head of Ronald Reagan's advertising campaign in 1980, said the show carried more influence than any official political advertisements. Curson said, "When *Saturday Night Live* portrays one candidate as dumb, another as a bumbler, the audience is bound to say, 'Well, maybe they're right'" (Reincheld 195). The reliance of politicians on *Saturday Night Live* to meld their public image additionally illustrates the political power of the program. President Gerald Ford's media team perceived Chevy Chase's portrayal of him as a bumbling klutz as detrimental and harmful to his image (Reincheld 195). As a result, Ford appeared on the show to parody Chase's parody of himself. If the show were regarded as harmless entertainment, politicians likely would feel no urgency to appear on the show to combat public opinion and display a sense of humor.

Former Presidential candidate Ralph Nader publicly spoke regarding *Saturday Night Live*'s status as an integral part of a political campaign, recalling of his appearance on the program in 2000, "Here you have this serious presidential campaign, and all of us had to go on these comedy shows like *Saturday Night Live*, because that was the only way we could have more than a sound bite and reach a large audience" (Reincheld 196). Michaels equates the growth of *Saturday Night Live* as a political vehicle with modern-day political commentary similar to Mark Twain's political satire (Reincheld 196). According to Michaels, "if there was a thing that was controversial, people wanted to know what we thought about it," describing the segment as "a big part of how Americans define democracy." Although the show features actors playing characters, the appearances of actual politicians demonstrate the amount of political influence ascribed to the program, and its successful development into a real political vehicle.

*Saturday Night Live* has evolved from its initial conception as political satire into what is regarded by some viewers as a legitimate news source. Among young adults in particular, the political sketches and punch lines serve an educational purpose. Jimmy Fallon, one of the "Weekend Update" anchors from 2000 to 2004, rarely followed the news as a twenty-something, admitting, "Honestly, when they asked me if I wanted to do it, I had no idea about the news or anything. I don't read. Now I find out the news through setups we do for jokes" (Reincheld 193). Reincheld asserts that American young adults learn about the news and political issues from the "smart alecks" on the program who give their own opinions through "Weekend Update" jokes or characterizations of political figures (Reincheld 196).

Thus, the line between political persuasion and pure entertainment has become blurred throughout *Saturday Night Live*'s run, as younger viewers identify with and recall news, especially when delivered in a memorable and humorous format. Reincheld claims the show sets a political agenda by exposing viewers to opinions, masked as jokes (Reincheld 196). Whether or not *Saturday Night Live*'s political influence is sig-

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nificant enough to affect the outcome of elections, its popularity and position as a legitimate political platform and newsmaker suggest that the show does possess the ability to promote certain ideas, especially among younger adults. In the past two seasons surrounding the election of President Barack Obama, *Saturday Night Live's* ability to set the political agenda grew more salient, due in part to the accessibility of the Internet and the development of "viral videos."

### *Saturday Night Live and Agenda-Setting from 2008-2012*

Beginning with the 2008 election, *Saturday Night Live's* depiction of the candidates, from the nation's first African American candidate of a major political party, to a female governor receiving the Republican vice-presidential nomination, paved the way for the program to air some of its most successful and discussion-provoking content. Abel and Barthel (2013) argue that because *Saturday Night Live* sketches can be accessed by Internet users worldwide at any time, they exist "not as isolated objects within a context of comedy programs, but comingle with *New York Times* articles, blog posts, and peer commentary" (5). The authors also reference a 2008 sketch based on the premise that the media asked Democratic Party nominee Hilary Clinton more challenging and critical questions than her opponent Barack Obama. *Washington Post* columnist Howard Kurtz observed that reporters became noticeably "tougher on Obama" in response to the sketch.

The ability of *Saturday Night Live* to impact media coverage and promote an agenda at a broader level has been labeled the "SNL Effect." Abel and Barthel argue that the show is no longer regarded as a "curiosity" with little news value, but as a rival media organization (Abel and Barthel 5). *Saturday Night Live's* style of entertainment often steps into outlandish territory, with political satire enabling the show's writers to step outside the "boundaries of critique and analysis that typically constrain journalists." The authors theorize that the show can influence public opinion on candidates and issues. (Abel and Barthel 2) In 2008, *Saturday Night Live* received its highest Nielsen Media Research ratings for a season premiere since former vice-president Al Gore hosted the show six years earlier. (Flowers and Young 49)

After the live premiere, 14.3 million viewers watched some of the night's sketches on NBC.com or Hulu.com (Flowers and Young 49). At the time, a sketch featuring Tina Fey playing Sarah Palin became the most viewed viral video, with more than 17 million viewers estimated to have recorded the episode to watch later. (Flowers and Young 49) The increasing viewership of the program during election times is further evidence that people intentionally seek out *Saturday Night Live* political segments as news sources. Due to the common practice of sharing videos, people who would not regularly or intentionally watch the program could view the sketches based on friends' recommendations or to remain up to date on popular culture. As a result, *Saturday Night Live's* ability to promote certain issues or characterizations of political figures increased beyond just providing viewers with a few laughs at the expense of the nation's most famous politicians.

### *"Bitch is the new Black"*

One of the first indications that *Saturday Night Live* and its writers embodied creator Lorne Michael's intention to spark political discussion and spotlight certain issues among viewers is exemplified throughout the following dialog between Tina Fey and Amy Poehler regarding Hilary Clinton, a female candidate, and her opponent Barack Obama, an African-American candidate, on the "Weekend Update" segment.

TINA FEY: Maybe what bothers me the most is that people say that Hillary is a bitch. Let me say something about that: *Yeah*, she is. So am I and so is this one. [Points to Amy Poehler]

AMY POEHLER: Yeah, deal with it.

TINA FEY: You know what, bitches get stuff done. That's why Catholic schools use nuns as teachers and not priests. Those nuns are mean old clams and they sleep on cots and they're allowed to hit you. And at the end of the school year you *hated those bitches* but you knew the capital of Vermont. So, I'm saying it's not too late Texas and Ohio, bitch is the new black!

(Daniel Kurtzman, "Tracy Morgan on SNL: 'Black Is The New President'")

Fey, the show's former head writer and creator and star of *30 Rock*, received both criticism and praise for her declaration, with some criticizing the show for what they believed to be blatant support for one candidate. The show was further able to promote discussion and embody the agenda-setting theory by promoting which issues were most important when former cast member Tracy Morgan appeared on "Weekend Update" in a following episode. In blatant response to Fey's monologue, Morgan exclaimed:

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“Bitch may be the new black, but black is the new president, bitch!”

(Rachel Sklar, SNL Shows Blatant Anti-Spitzer Bias, Endorses Obama)

Although critics claimed the show was blatantly throwing its support behind one candidate, the show’s writers likely intended to just spark the discussion of the roles race and gender play in politics. The show’s influence over the media also came to light, as media outlets like *The Huffington Post* published headlines criticizing the show’s political agenda. Rather than outright telling viewers whom to vote for, the show set the stage for discussion, and influenced media coverage of the election. The *Saturday Night Live* writers were able to “bundle” together race and gender discussions and promote those related issues as important. If the program was merely entertainment, the media would more likely than not disregard the political statements made on the show, rather than use them as headlines.

### *John McCain’s Image Restoration after the 2008 election*

A second example of the show’s ability to send a political message in recent years is the coverage of 2008 presidential candidate Senator John McCain. Although McCain was unable to elude Darrell Hammond’s characterization of himself as stiff and old, the show extended itself as a platform where McCain could shape his public image. Although McCain lost his bid for the presidency, Becker (2013) claims that McCain re-established “credibility among viewers by making fun of his age . . . and his struggling campaign on *Saturday Night Live*” (798).

Despite his loss, the show enabled McCain to end his campaign on a strong note, persuading viewers of his “abilities as a politician and his credibility and viability on the national political stage” (Becker 798). Although no blatant declarations of support were made on his behalf, McCain’s appearance suggested the show subtly voiced an appreciation for his willingness to poke fun at himself. *Saturday Night Live* restored McCain’s credibility and built on his likeability, perhaps in response to or as a subtle apology for the intense skewering of his running mate Sarah Palin, as the show’s portrayal of the Alaskan governor is often cited as one of the main reasons the McCain-Palin ticket lost the presidency.

### *Tina Fey’s Portrayal of Governor Sarah Palin Makes Headlines*

The strongest evidence that *Saturday Night Live* possesses strong agenda-setting capabilities in subliminally telling viewers what issues or character traits to think about, lies in Tina Fey’s portrayal of Sarah Palin in the fall of 2008. When John McCain announced Alaskan Governor Sarah Palin as his running mate, little was known about the politician. Although Fey was no longer a cast member, media outlets like *Vogue* immediately started the discussion about whether or not Fey would return to the show to play Palin, based merely on their physical resemblance (Flowers and Young 48). Although the press initially set the political agenda by devoting coverage to the possibility of Fey playing Palin rather than on covering Palin’s background or political stance, *Saturday Night Live* utilized the intense press coverage to significantly shape Palin’s public image.

Just two days before Fey’s debut, Palin gave her first televised interviews. *Saturday Night Live* seized the opportunity to magnify Palin’s shortcomings, spotlighting her inability to respond to questions about the Bush Doctrine and a statement that Russia and Alaska were “next-door neighbors.” (Young 254) Since the majority of viewers had yet to watch the actual interviews, Fey’s portrayal of Palin and some of the verbatim quotes included in the sketches directly shaped how the American public perceived Palin. Fey’s Palin impersonation dominated much of the political discussion, and contributed to the inability of the governor from defining herself outside of her portrayal on Saturday nights. Young asserts that in the actual vice-presidential debate, Palin debated not her opponent Joe Biden, but Fey’s impersonation (Young 258).

Whether intentional or not, *Saturday Night Live* strongly shaped the way Palin was received both by the press and by the general public. Palin’s actual interviews and appearances were frequently judged against Fey’s impersonation, with Palin having to battle the caricatured version of herself. News and media sources found Fey’s impersonation as Palin to be more interesting or relevant than Palin herself, with Fey, a comedy writer and actress, being ascribed to a political role in the race for the presidency (Young 259). The show’s support for primarily Democratic politicians, as evidenced by the constant coverage of Clinton and Obama, and through Fey’s skewering of Palin in key moments that suggested that Palin was unfit for the vice-presidency, like waving to the audience like a beauty pageant contestant, posing as if holding a rifle, and eluding certain heavy questions (Flowers and Young 56).

Fey’s portrayal of Palin suggests that *Saturday Night Live* significantly undermined the campaign, with

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one *Independent* writer claiming, “Fey and her merciless send-ups have done more to undermine Palin’s campaign for the vice presidency than the efforts of Barack Obama, Joe Biden and the entire Democratic Party attack machine combined” (Young 261). Although initially intended to provide a humorous take on the relatively unknown governor, *Saturday Night Live’s* coverage cannot be overlooked as a key influence in the 2008 election. According to Pfeifer (2013), the sketches portraying Palin as uneducated or inept only made “minor alterations to the original text,” while “hearing and seeing Palin’s words come out of the mouth of a comedian (i.e., Fey) highlighted the rambling, vacuous nature of the actual interview response, flagging questions of Palin’s competence even more than the actual CBS interview did” (Pfeifer 166).

Statistics support that the show truly set a political agenda, as Palin’s favorability ratings continually declined in the two months following the season premiere. According to a Gallup poll conducted in the days following the Republican National Convention in September 2008, where Palin received the vice-presidential nomination, 53% of those surveyed viewed Palin favorably. Several weeks later, after the first Fey as Palin sketch aired, her favorability number began to continually drop, reaching a low of 42% by November 2008. The number of respondents with an unfavorable opinion increased over the same time period, from 28% after the RNC Convention, to 41% several weeks later, and ending at 49% in November 2008. A Gallup poll conducted a year after the 2008 campaign illustrated a long-term effect, with Palin’s favorability rating dropping to 40% in September 2009, with a 50% unfavorable rating (Jones).

*Saturday Night Live’s* coverage spotlighted critical issues surrounding Palin’s nomination, and led the media and the public to question her qualifications and knowledge about pressing political issues. Pfeifer furthers that Palin’s portrayal magnified certain realities, with Fey mimicking Palin’s actual nervous body language (Pfeifer 167). Fey’s spot-on impression became engrained in viewers’ minds with most people unable to differentiate between quotes actually spoken by Palin or jokes from Fey on *Saturday Night Live* (Pfeifer 168). The press went so far as to define the decline in Palin’s approval ratings as part of a “Tina Fey Effect,” a tangible impact of the impersonation on the Republican ticket (Esralew and Young 338). To try to overcome Fey’s memorable portrayal and restore her public image in a manner similar to McCain’s eventual appearance on the show, Palin guest-starred on the program, an event that attracted *Saturday Night Live’s* largest audience in fourteen years (Esralew and Young 341).

Despite Palin’s willingness to poke fun at herself and make light of Fey’s characterization with statements like her gaffes that were intended to “keep Tina Fey in business,” Fey’s Palin sketches stole the show and Palin’s favorability ratings dropped. Young claims that Fey’s impersonation, according to some journalists, was truly intended to damage Palin’s campaign, and succeeded in defining Palin’s downfall as the “Fey factor,” “the Fey problem,” or “the Tina Fey effect” (Young 261). Palin herself eventually blamed Fey for her loss, claiming that Fey “exploited” her to bolster her own career (Young 261). Although Lorne Michaels likely did not introduce political satire into his show with the intent to seriously inflict damage on a politician’s career, the obvious impact of *Saturday Night Live’s* coverage in the 2008 election significantly contributes to the argument that the show carries great agenda-setting power to highlight the issues that viewers believe to be most important.

## V. Conclusion

In response to the original research question, “How does *Saturday Night Live* set the political agenda, and to what extent?” both historically and currently, *Saturday Night Live* has influenced the political world through both political satire and the satirical “Weekend Update” news segment. *Saturday Night Live* utilizes humor to spotlight certain issues or bundle certain ideas together, which viewers will then perceive as the most relevant or important. Poking fun at or making light of reality, *Saturday Night Live* is positioned as a voice in politics, injecting opinion and political commentary into its coverage that the ideally unbiased media cannot. In the past five years in particular, the skyrocketing success and popularity of the program, boosted significantly by Tina Fey’s impersonation of Sarah Palin additionally solidifies the argument.

Beyond impersonations, political statements made by cast members on “Weekend Update” regarding race and gender also effectively spark national discussions and spotlight certain issues as the most important. In the future, the “SNL Effect,” the term given for the effect of political satire influencing people’s perceptions and opinions, will likely continue to increase, as more and more people are exposed to the show’s content online. In addition to launching the careers of wildly successful comedians throughout its nearly forty year run,

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*Saturday Night Live* has also greatly shaped the world of politics, persuading viewers to adopt their characterizations of politicians as truth, and magnifying what issues the media and national discussion view as most important.

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