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The impact of watching political comedy on political opinions

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Master in Political Science

Supervisor:  
Doctor José Santana Pereira, Assistant Professor,  
Iscte - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa

November, 2022



SOCIOLOGIA  
E POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS

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Department of Political Science and Public Policy

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To the teachers and students of Iscte-Instituto Universitário de Lisboa and Universidade Lusófona, who collaborated with the project and made this dissertation possible. Without them, this wouldn't be feasible.

To my supervisor, José Santana Pereira, for all the patience and for pushing me to become better and do a better job. His constant availability was fundamental to me.

To Afonso, André, and João, for being my best friends for as long as I can remember. Far away or close by, our booth is wherever the four of us are together. To João, again, for the help in collecting data for this dissertation.

To Bernardo and Rodrigo, companions of many conversations and adventures. Because sometimes the nights last for months.

To Raquel, for all the friendship and love. For believing in my capacities more than anybody else, for motivating me when I need it the most, and for always being there for me in the difficult times.

To my aunt Xana, who was the first to give me the suggestion to study political science.

To my grandparents, António, Graça, Óscar, and Lita, for the infinite love, and amazing life stories that inspire me every day.

To my parents, Bruno and Sofia, for making me who I am today. For all the values they have passed me, and for all the love and affection that is always present.

To my sister, Rita, my pride and joy. Since the day you were born until forever, you've got a friend in me.

“Life is a jest, and all things show it; I thought so once, but now I know it.”

John Gay's epitaph



## RESUMO

A política e a comédia têm partilhado uma relação próxima durante milénios. Isto levou a que os impactos da comédia política tenham sido amplamente estudados, especialmente desde o final do século XX e do crescimento generalizado da presença da sátira política na televisão. Os efeitos têm sido estudados principalmente em termos de participação, eficácia, conhecimento político, e avaliações de políticos eleitos e candidatos, especialmente ao nível da personalidade. Por outro lado, a investigação sobre os efeitos nas opiniões sobre questões políticas, tais como políticas públicas ou tópicos politicamente relevantes, é quase inexistente. Com esta dissertação, procurei contribuir para colmatar esta lacuna, aproveitando ainda para colmatar outra: ao contrário da maioria da investigação sobre efeitos de exposição à comédia política, esta investigação está centrada em Portugal e não nos Estados Unidos. Em concreto, foi feita uma experiência centrada em dois temas: a eutanásia e a greve dos enfermeiros de 2019. Alguns dos participantes viram vídeos de comédia, enquanto outros assistiram a notícias sobre estes assuntos. Os resultados mostram que a exposição ao conteúdo de comédia influenciou as opiniões sobre os assuntos, com os participantes a mudarem as suas opiniões de acordo com as posições tomadas pelos comediantes. Além disso, tal aconteceu em ambos os temas, independentemente da sua saliência. Três semanas depois do visionamento dos vídeos, foi possível notar que estes efeitos ainda eram observáveis. Por outro lado, não se observaram efeitos de recência, sendo a evidência mais favorável à hipótese da primazia.

**Palavras-chave:** comédia política; opiniões políticas; saliência dos temas; efeitos de primazia e de recência



## **ABSTRACT**

Politics and comedy have shared a close relationship for millennia. This has led to the impacts of political comedy being widely studied, especially since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and the widespread growth of the presence of political satire on television. The effects have been mostly studied on political participation, political efficacy, political knowledge, and evaluations of elected politicians and candidates, especially at the level of personality. On the other hand, research on the effects of opinions on political issues, such as public policies or politically relevant topics, is almost non-existent. With this dissertation, I tried to contribute to filling this gap, while stimulatingly filling another one: contrary to the majority of research on the effects of exposure to political comedy, this research is focused on Portugal and not in the United States. In concrete, an experience was made centered on two topics: euthanasia and the nurses' strike of 2019. Some participants watched comedy videos, while others watched news about those issues. The results show that exposure to the comedy content influenced opinions on the topics, as the participants changed their opinions according to the positions taken by the comedians. In addition, this happened in both issues, regardless of their salience. Three weeks after viewing the two videos, it was possible to notice that these effects were still observable. On the other hand, recency effects were not observed, with the evidence being more favorable to the primacy hypothesis.

**Keywords:** political comedy; political opinions; issue salience; primacy and recency effects





## CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	i
RESUMO .....	iii
ABSTRACT .....	v
LIST OF FIGURES .....	ix
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 1 - LITERATURE REVIEW .....	3
1.1. History of political comedy and its relevance in society .....	3
1.2. The effects of watching political comedy.....	6
1.3. Intervening Factors .....	12
1.3.1. Issue salience .....	12
1.3.2. Primacy and recency effects .....	14
1.3.3. How long do the effects last?.....	15
CHAPTER 2 - RESEARCH DESIGN .....	17
2.1. Goals .....	17
2.2. Methodology.....	18
2.3.1. Experimental Design .....	18
2.3.2. Procedure .....	19
2.3.3. Participants .....	23
CHAPTER 3 - HYPOTHESES TESTING .....	27
CONCLUSION .....	41
REFERENCES.....	43



## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.1. Opinions on euthanasia before and after exposure to the videos .....	27
Figure 3.2. Opinions on the civil requisition mechanism before and after exposure to the videos .....	28
Figure 3.3. Opinions on the rights of nurses to strike before and after exposure to the videos .....	29
Figure 3.4. Opinions on Nurses vs. Government after exposure to the videos .....	30
Figure 3.5. Opinions on the usage of the civil requisition mechanism in 2019 after exposure to the videos.....	30
Figure 3.6. Opinions on euthanasia before and after exposure to videos according to viewing order .....	32
Figure 3.7. Opinions on the civil requisition mechanism before and after exposure to videos according to viewing order.....	33
Figure 3.8. Opinions on the rights of nurses to strike before and after exposure to the videos according to viewing order.....	34
Figure 3.9. Opinions on Nurses vs. Government after exposure to videos according to viewing order .....	35
Figure 3.10. Opinions on the usage of the civil requisition mechanism in 2019 after exposure to videos according to viewing order .....	35
Figure 3.11. Opinions on euthanasia before exposure, after exposure, & three weeks later ...	37
Figure 3.12. Opinions on the civil requisition mechanism before exposure, after exposure, & three weeks later.....	38
Figure 3.13. Opinions on the rights of nurses to strike before exposure, after exposure, & three weeks later.....	39
Figure 3.14. Opinion on nurses vs. Government after exposure to the videos & three weeks later.....	40
Figure 3.15. Opinion on the usage of the civil requisition mechanism after exposure to the videos & three weeks later .....	40



## INTRODUCTION

Comedy and politics have always been intrinsically connected. Humor (or sense of humor) can be defined as a unique way to view society and the world, looking at it in an unconventional form (Araújo Pereira, 2016). Therefore, it can be utilized to analyze the world in a critical way, playing a cultural and social role in the re-reading of power relations, being utilized as an expression of doubt, uncertainty and questioning of political and societal conventions (Bernardo, 2017).

The relationship between comedy and politics runs so deep that, according to Robert Speel, political satire is as old as politics itself, being, at least, 2400 years old (Poremba, 2008). In the ancient Athenian democracy, public opinion was strongly influenced by the political satire performed by comedians in the theatres, with the earliest example being Aristophanes (447 BC – 385 BC) (Hall & Wrigley, 2007). Since then, political comedy has been a common denominator among the various societies around the world, with many types of political humor have existing throughout the centuries. Even in authoritarian regimes with strong censorship systems, satires against authority figures and the government have long existed, with consequences going from fines to imprisonment or exile, or even death (Freedman, 2012). Plays such as Aristophane's *Acharnians* (Rosen, 2012), Dante's *Divine Comedy* (Ferrante, 1984), Shakespeare's *The Life and Death of King Richard II* (Halverson, 1994), or Voltaire's *Socrates* (Berland, 1990) are examples of pieces of entertainment containing some degree of political satire.

Due to this, the impact of political comedy is something that has been widely studied in political science, especially in the United States of America. Despite its main goal of being funny and entertaining, satire has long been considered persuasive (Gruner, 1967). Different authors have approached the thematic by studying effects on political participation (e.g., Hoffman & Thomson, 2009), internal political efficacy (e.g., Hoffman and Young, 2011), or political sophistication (e.g., Baum 2002). Overall, and despite some conflicting results, a great quantity of works has shown the existence of an impact of exposure to political in all these items. There is also research made on the impacts of political comedy on opinions about elected officials, political institutions (e.g., LaMarre et al., 2009), or candidates in campaigns (e.g., Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). The effects of self-depraving humor by the candidates themselves has also been analyzed (Becker & Haller, 2014), but more on opinions of the public on the personality of candidates than on political issues.

There is, in fact, a notable lack of research centered on the effects of watching political comedy on public opinion on specific political issues (with Greenwood et al., 2016, being the most prominent exception). This dissertation aims to help close that existing gap, by studying the effects of watching political content on two main issues: euthanasia and the nurses' strike of 2019 in Portugal. Aiming to be more comprehensive than the (few) previous studies done around this topic, the impact of issue salience was taken into account, as well as order effects (primacy vs. recency). To accomplish this, university students were selected to watch videos of political comedy about the two issues mentioned. Others served as a control group, as they watched news pieces about the same topics. All participants responded to a pretest, a posttest, and a three-week delay questionnaire to assess the evolution of their opinions on the matters. This last element adds another dimension to this research, enabling an examination on the duration of the effects at study. It is also important to mention that this is the first work that measures the effects of watching political comedy on political opinions in Portugal, as nothing of this genre has been previously done in the Portuguese political and comedic landscape.

This dissertation is divided in three chapters. The first one is the literature review, where the state of the art is presented. Along with a brief history of political comedy, it accommodates the research focused on the various effects of political comedy. The hypotheses are also presented in this chapter. The second chapter is devoted to the research design, with the objectives and methodology being presented in detail. In the third and final chapter the results of the hypotheses' testing are displayed. The dissertation ends with a brief conclusion, which includes a discussion of the findings and pathways for future research about this topic.

## CHAPTER 1 - LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1.1. History of political comedy and its relevance in society

Resuming the review of the history of political comedy started in the introduction, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, political cartoons, which are satirical pictorial depictions of political events, started to become a predominant part of society. William Hogarth and James Gillray played an important role in popularizing them in the United Kingdom (Rowson, 2015), and Benjamin Franklin created, in 1754, what is considered the first political cartoon in American history, with this type of medium remaining a vital part of America's democracy (Katz, 2004; Poremba, 2008). One of the biggest cases of prevalence of satirical political cartoons was in Imperial Germany, between 1907 and 1909, on the occurrence of Eulenburg Affair, which concerned allegations of homosexual practices of two important members of Kaiser Wilhelm II's entourage and chancellor Bernhard von Bülow. These allegations lead to several trials, and, as put by James Steakley (1983:21), "(...) every facet of the shocking revelations was minutely depicted in political cartoons (...)", with this type of caricature assuming a great relevance in German society at the time. In France, magazines as *Charlie Hebdo* presented a sharp style of humor, with a notable presence of social criticism and anti-institutional spirit (Collovald & Neveu, 1999).

With the advancement of technology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, other forms of media emerged and became dominant, which opened doors to new forms of political comedy. The insurgence of radio led to programs such as the *The Goon Show*, which had great importance in England's post-World War II society and featured some satirical societal dissent from one of the main performers. In the 1960's, political satire on radio stations was very popular, and radio programs were a prominent form of appealing to counterculture (Punnett, 2015). Even with the decline in the status of radio in western societies, radio satirists such as Howard Stern and Don Imus still enjoyed much prevalence in American society in the 90's (Rosen, 2012), and a considerable amount of regional or national radio satire shows still air in the United Kingdom (Punnett, 2015).

Outside the English-speaking world, the *Gerd Show* in Germany, in which then-German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder was constantly imitated and satirized, was particularly relevant in the turn of the century, amassing millions of listeners every day, and lead to the release of various popular CD's with songs mocking Schröder (Mohr, 2002; Freyberg, 2002). More recently, and in Sweden, *Tankesmedjan i P3* is an example of a very popular political comedy

radio show. Aimed especially at teens and young adults, it amassed, in 2014, an average of 300,000-350,000 listeners per broadcast, considered to be relatively high ratings (Doona, 2016).

In British and American societies, the post-World War II period was also marked by an enormous growth in the popularity of television, especially in the 1950's decade (Bain, 1962; Spigel, 1992). As in other mediums before, political comedy soon became a staple of television. Shows such as *That Was the Week That Was*, which had both a British and an American version, were some of the first programs featured on prime-time television which the focus was on political satire. In the decades that followed, other types of shows, still with a prominent political satire aspect, such as *Saturday Night Live* or *All in the Family*, had a great impact in American culture (Gray et al., 2009). In the UK, *Yes, Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister*, which debuted in the 1980's, still have a last impact in current British political discourse (Granville, 2009). In France, the puppet show *Le Bébête Show* and *Les Guignols de l'info* were major audience successes (Collovald & Neveu, 1999). The success of this type of program seems transcendent, with research pointing its impact on culture in countries such as Canada (Gray et al., 2009), Italy (Domènech, 2007), Germany (Casadevall, 2007), Denmark (Bruun, 2012), Russia (Freedman, 2012) or Egypt (Ibrahim & Eltantawy, 2017).

The popularity of this type of comedy programs shows the close relation between politics and entertainment. These shows fall into the broader term umbrella of infotainment, a phenomenon that has been growing in the last decades in several countries and consists of the progressive blurring of boundaries between politics and entertainment (Santana Pereira, 2019). Some TV programs cannot be exclusively assigned either to information or entertainment categories, in a context of emerging difficulty in defining where to draw the line between said categories (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001).

The growing of this sort of TV content has been driven, in part, by the replacement of serving the public interest with the quest for profit as the primary goal, with broadcast stations being more focused on obtaining good ratings instead of informing (McNair, 2000). The attention shifted from politics, economics, and society, to sports, scandals and entertainment, with news about private lives of individuals, famous or not, raising in prevalence in TV channels (Sparks, 2000; Thussu, 2007).

Politics and entertainment have been mixing essentially in two forms. Firstly, by means of a heavy emphasis in political topics and politicians in entertainment television. Secondly, with politicians acting as celebrities, and celebrities getting involved in political activities. This phenomenon includes the appearances of politicians in non-news daytime TV programs, political satire, TV fiction depicting the inner workings of the political world, the participation



of politicians in talk shows, cameos, or contests to identify political talent (Santana Pereira, 2016, 2019).

There are different modalities of programs where the approximation between politics and entertainment can take place. To systemize them, Holbert (2005) created a typology with two dimensions: spectators' expectations (if viewers expect political content or not) and the level of subtleness of the message passed (whether the political content is explicit or implicit). Regarding the first dimension, shows can be primarily focused on politics, be somewhat centered on the topic, or have little presence of politic topics. In terms of the second dimension, shows can have explicit or implicit messages, or have a mixture of both (Holbert, 2005; Santana Pereira, 2016).

Santana Pereira (2019) carried out a revision of ways politics and TV shows have mixed in several different countries and continents, fitting them in Holbert's typology. For example, traditional satire shows as *The Daily Show* have politics as the central topic, but the message is passed in a more implicit, less direct way (Holbert, 2005). In Mexico and Brazil, telenovelas have served to showcase political ads, directly support certain candidates, and both support or attack the government and its politicians and politics (Orozco, 2011; Porto, 1995). This serves as a clear case of a situation where the message is explicit, but politics are not the focus of the show. Political fiction shows (as *House of Cards* or *The West Wing*) tend to feature both explicit and implicit political messages, a feature also present in docudramas or reality legal programs (such as *America's Most Wanted* or Portugal's *Linha Aberta*) (Santana Pereira, 2019).

In Portugal, only a small number of studies has been produced about political and entertainment mixing up. For example, Cabrera (2010) analyzed *Gato Fedorento Esmiúça os Sufrágios*, a show that utilized sarcasm to speak about political topics in the running-up to the 2009 legislative and local elections. This show also featured a daily humorous interview with a political figure, mocking and exploring political contradictions. Shows as *Diz Que É uma Espécie de Magazine*, *Os Contemporâneos* (Deodato, 2013) and *Governo Sombra* (Pardal, 2015) have also been studied, with analyses regarding matters such as the main focuses of these shows or the type of humor that is utilized. Deodato noted, for example, that in the programs she studied, the comedy content tends to be focused on political issues, rather than the political personalities themselves. In other words, there is not a personalization of the content, which the author says is in contrast with American shows of the same kind.

## 1.2. The effects of watching political comedy

As covered so far, the relationship between politics and comedy has been noted and studied by various political scientists, especially with a growing prominence and visibility of political humor programs (Becker, 2011). Many political scientists have focused on the effects that being exposed to political comedy have on variables such as political knowledge, political participation, and political attitudes. One example that will not be elaborated in this research, comedy news can influence the agenda-setting process, in some conditions even more than traditional hard news (Kowalewski, 2012).

Watching political comedy can contribute to an increase in political knowledge, throughout various mechanisms. Political comedy can provide important political information, especially to less political sophisticated viewers (Cao, 2010; Xenos & Becker, 2009), while also stimulating a deeper thinking about the issues talked about on the shows (Gregorowicz, 2013). Late-night comedy can, in fact, make its viewers think more about the content presented than traditional news (LaMarre & Walther, 2013).

For example, watching *The Daily Show* has been shown to be positively related to seek news about topics frequently discussed on the program (such as the Afghanistan War or the 2004 American presidential election), especially between politically inattentive citizens (Cao, 2010). By being a unique communicative form, and not only an alternative news source, it also promotes attention, by making politics more interesting and encouraging information processing and cognitive engagement. This enhances thoughtful engagement and learning (Gregorowicz, 2013), and attracts viewers that otherwise would not be exposed to news (Baum, 2002; Prior, 2003). Watching *The Last Week Tonight* can also be a source to learn political information, being as effective as traditional newscasts (Becker & Bode, 2017; Ramsey, 2018) or even more (Hardy et al., 2014). Overall, comedy can be informative, narrowing gaps in political knowledge, increasing motivation, and providing resources for learning (Baum 2002, Baum 2003a, & Baum 2003b), with longer, more developed comedy bits having a bigger potential to enhance information acquisition (Jennings et al., 2019).

However, there are authors who present a not so positive view on the impact of comedy in political sophistication. First off, frequent viewers (3-4 times a week) of late-night talk shows that feature political comedy but are not focused on it tend to be less politically sophisticated and consume less news through the media. Their exposure to current events comes from other activities, such as classes, work, or by flipping through the channels. However, on the contrary, typical viewers of *The Daily Show*, that is focused on politics, are already sophisticated

(Gregorowicz, 2013; Sarver, 2007). These people have already acquired information from sources such as traditional media, and comedy shows can hardly provide additional information (Cao, 2008), with viewers tending to already be more knowledgeable than non-watchers before exposure to those programs (Morris, 2009; Young, 2008; Young & Tisinger, 2006). Also, several works show that those who learn the most from this type of shows are those with lesser sophistication (Baek & Wojcieszak, 2009; Cao, 2010; Xenos & Becker, 2009). This lowers the general impact of these shows, as those viewers are a minority. For instance, in 2002 and 2004, just 20% of the viewers of *The Daily Show* did not follow politics, while the majority displayed a medium or high level of attention to what happens in the political realm (Cao, 2010).

Another view is that political comedy can be informative, but not on difficult issues, having been found that knowledge gains vary from topic to topic, depending on their difficulty. The increase in knowledge resulting from late-night comedy is predominantly associated with relatively simple and commonly known political facts (Baek & Wojcieszak, 2009). This can be due to the main goal of the people watching these programs being entertainment and not obtaining information (Prior, 2005), causing viewers to give more attention to the entertainment side of politics, and not getting substantial information from it (Prior, 2003).

There is also a debate on whether watching political comedy influences political participation. Various authors have defended that exposure to political humor has a positive relationship with participation (Hoffman & Thomson, 2009; Young & Esralew, 2011), with varying explanations for this phenomenon. Cao and Brewer (2008) speculated that this could be due to an increase in political efficacy (a citizen's belief that one can understand politics and, therefore, participate in the political process; Baumgartner & Morris, 2006), a rise in concern about political issues (Martin, 2004), or the creation of an imagined community among viewers, inducing a sense of collective experiences and opinions. Also, as these shows tend to present politics in an entertaining way, it might create a sense that politics are enjoyable, which may as well contribute to the rise of participation (Mutz, 1998).

More concrete explanations and results have been found in later studies, with Hoffman and Young (2011) indicating that, in fact, watching comedy increases participation due to an increase in internal political efficacy. Both exposure to political comedy on websites such as *The Onion* or in shows not completely focused on politics as *Saturday Night Live* increase internal political efficacy (Becker, 2011).

Political comedy shows might further incite participation through provoking interpersonal discussion and online interaction (H. Lee, 2012). Also, political satire can encourage political participation by increasing negative emotions towards government policies (Lee & Kwak,

2014). Similarly, Chen et al. (2017) indicate that exposure to satire that is against a certain political figure, government decision, or regime leads to greater issue-related political participation than satire in favor, as it evokes discontent and anger about the political issue. This effect is even stronger when people view the matter in question as personally important (Chen et al., 2017). One example, in the show *The Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, the host ends the main piece, usually focused on a political issue instead of actors or parties, by featuring a direct call to action. This call to action, aligned with persuasive quality of the comedy presented, can have a positive impact on online social networks participation. Despite showing no direct effect on traditional participation, people who voice their opinions on social media are more likely to participate in traditional ways (Hoffman, 2015).

Once again, it is important to address the distinction between political oriented comedy shows (e.g., *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*), and late-night comedy ones that feature some political bits (e.g., *The Late Show*, *The Tonight Show*). Purely political shows tend to focus on issues and policy, whereby traditional late-night shows feature more caricatures of public figures and punchline jokes. This difference results in shows such as the *The Daily Show* making the spectators political efficacy increase, and, therefore, causing a rise in participation in political activities, while this does not happen in shows as *The Tonight Show* (Hoffman & Young, 2011).

Other authors defend that political satire can have a negative effect on participation. The negative emotions presented on shows as *The Daily Show* might be detrimental, leading to more negative visions of the political system. By decreasing external efficacy (the belief the government will respond to popular demands) and support for leaders and political institutions, it may diminish political participation, especially among those already inclined to not participate (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). Frequent viewers of these shows are also more familiar with the negative side of politics, such as political scandals, resulting in high levels of cynicism and an intentional disengagement, rather than just apathy. This can lead to certain viewers, especially those who are more distrusting of the political system, to turn away from traditional forms of participation (Sarver, 2007). These shows can, in fact, contribute to a sense of alienation from the political process (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006), and the culture of cynicism they promote can be a generally negative influence in attitudes toward the political system (Hart & Hartelius, 2007; Xenos et al., 2011).

Additionally, some studies have found that watching political comedy has a neither positive or negative impact on participation, political efficacy, or overall political attitudes (Gregorowicz, 2013). For example, despite the increase in social media participation after

watching *The Last Week Tonight*, levels of political efficacy do not increase. Consequently, there is no rise in civic participation through an increase in internal political efficacy, a mechanism that has been noted above and in other studies (Hoffman, 2015). Polk et al. (2009) found that watching comedy did not contribute to shifts in attitudes such as political motivation or perceptions of internal political efficacy. Furthermore, these results apply to both complex (recurring to irony) and not complex humor (recurring to sarcasm), with no significant difference between the two types. So, this research does not provide corroboration of comedy's ability to persuade in the political field. The contradicting results across different studies might validate the opinion that the effects on political participation derived from late-night talk shows vary according to specific political activities and demographic groups (Cao, 2010).

The ambiguity present in these studies is also present regarding the capacity of derogatory humor in negatively effecting public trust on politicians. It has been shown that exposure to this type of comedy can impact the trust on political figures, but only in the short term, with levels of trust returning to pre-exposure levels just one week later (Mendiburo-Seguel et al. 2017).

Finally, there are studies that focus on the potential effects of political comedy in forming or altering opinions. It is argued that there is a real possibility that watching political comedy can both contribute to both the acquisition of political knowledge (as mentioned above) and to the creation of political opinions, having a possible hybrid effect (Ramsey, 2018; Xenos et al., 2011).

It is feasible that watching this type of shows allows viewers to form opinions without needing to be informed about every aspect of an issue, resorting to a common cognitive shortcut: individuals will form their opinions based on what trusted sources tell on television. This happens especially because some comedians are associated with certain political opinions that are regularly similar to those of the audience, which results in the spectators thinking that a more complete cognitive process would probably lead them the same outcome or opinion (Xenos et al., 2011; see also Mondak, 1993).

Xenos et al. (2011) explored this issue, studying *The Daily Show* and the effect of perceived left-leaning host Jon Stewart criticizing the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi and her party (Democratic Party). After watching the clip of the show, participants who identified as Democrats or Independents diminished their overall evaluations of Pelosi. The authors suggest that after seeing the video, this group of people saw Pelosi as an "enemy of my friend" (p. 56). The opposite phenomenon happened with self-identified Republicans, who ranked Pelosi higher than other partisans who did not watch the Stewart clip. On this situation, they might have seen Pelosi as an "enemy of my enemy" (p. 56).

Watching *The Daily Show* was also shown to have a negative impact on perceptions of the candidates in the 2004 American presidential election. Exposure to jokes about the two main candidates, the incumbent George W. Bush and John Kerry, led young viewers to rate them more negatively. The humor produced by the show influenced the support for the presidential candidates even when partisanship was controlled for. Furthermore, the lesser known candidate, Kerry, was more affected than Bush, who was already well known to the public. This is due to attitudes towards him being sufficiently solidified and less likely to be impacted (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006).

In the following elections, four years later, a similar effect was noted. Comedian Tina Fey's (*Saturday Night Live*) mock impersonation of Republican candidate Sarah Palin's performance on the vice-presidential debate was associated with a drop in approval of her choice as John McCain's running mate. This negative effect was particularly felt in Republicans and Independents, as Democrats had probably already formed negative views about Palin in that stage of the campaign (Baumgartner, et al. 2012). In the 2016 presidential election, exposure to anti-Trump comedy in the *Late Night with Seth Meyers* also had negative impacts on opinions on the candidate, subsequently influencing voting intentions (Warner et al., 2018).

However, comedy can also have the reverse effect. In *The Colbert Report*, Stephan Colbert mocked conservative personalities such as political commentator and journalist Bill O'Reilly. Instead of this leading the public to be more antagonistic to the right, exposure to Colbert might have led to increased support for President Bush, Republicans in Congress, and Republican policies. Colbert's ambiguous messages, as mentioned by LaMarre et al. (2009), might confuse some of the show's young viewers. In fact, his program showed similar persuasive effects as true right-wing commentators, helping them in spreading their message (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008).

Watching politicians making comedy themselves can also influence the perception of voters. Subjects who were exposed to David Paterson's (New York's first blind and African American governor) self-depriving comedy skit on *Saturday Night Live's* were significantly more likely to view him in a positive way than those who watched a news clip or a comedian mocking the Governor (Becker & Haller, 2014). In a similar vein and in another research study, done by Kucera (2015), after watching a video where they saw presidential candidates John McCain and Barack Obama do a series of self-deprecatory statements and statements mocking the opponent, participants showed a positive change of opinion in almost all characteristics measured of both candidates. However, this effect might be dependent on the characteristics of the viewers, as seen in other variables. In a research study done in Pakistan, less educated

viewers and those who spent more time watching TV were more likely to being influenced by comedy content watched (Riaz et al., 2021).

Also, research has shown another effect of political comedy, as watching it can result in a greater ideological restraint and consistency (an ideological consistent person's attitudes concerning political topics are coherent between themselves from an ideological stand), particularly among people who are moderately sophisticated politically. Adding to that, comedy produced greater attitude consistency than traditional news, especially again in moderately sophisticated viewers. As Gregorowicz puts it (2013:160), "Comedy enhances ideological thinking primarily among moderately sophisticated viewers who possess a basic understanding of ideological principles but are not generally motivated to apply such abstract thinking when forming and expressing political opinions."

Until now, most studies reviewed were focused on political candidates or incumbent politicians. We now shift to issue related studies, as it is the focus of this dissertation. For example, Becker (2022) studied the impact of watching three different late-night comedy shows where was highlighted criticism to Israel in its conflict with Palestine. The author concluded that being exposed to these contents had a limited and modest effect on attitudes, although this effect was significant. More concretely, the participants in the study who were exposed to satire about the Middle East were significantly less likely to suggest that the United States is too supportive of the Palestinians and were marginally less likely to suggest that the Hamas response to the crisis goes too far, that the Israeli government is actively trying to promote peace, and that is possible for Israel and an independent Palestinian state to coexist peacefully. However, the effects noted here were not moderated by other variables such as partisan identification, being the result of simple exposure to the humorous sketches.

Similar results have been found in the topic of climate change, as it has been reported that watching comedy shows where the host covers the issue and defend the existence of the phenomenon can alter the perception of the viewers, who tend to have more certainty that global warming is really happening (Brewer & McKnight, 2015).

Also, Feldman and Chattoo (2019), used a pretest-posttest and delayed recontact experimental design, with four experimental groups, to examine shifts in attitudes regarding Syrian refugees after being exposed to CNN news segments and *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, a comedy show. The research included eight questions, related to personal feelings about the refugees, opinions about USA's role in the crisis, and terrorism. The results show that, right after viewing, all four groups showed an increase in positive attitudes towards Syrian refugees, an effect maintained two weeks after. Nevertheless, the effects were significantly larger in the

groups that watched the comedy segment, showing the impact that comedy could have in the shaping of political attitudes. However, this significant difference between those who watched the news segment and those that were exposed to comedy was not present in the test made two weeks after.

Lastly, Greenwood et al. (2016) focused on the show *The Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, with the purpose of studying the impact of watching the show on political attitudes on two topics: police militarization and racial discrimination, and payday lending (a short-term and unsecured lending to people usually in cash difficulties). Two distinct groups watched two different comedy bits about one of these topics, both with the same clear result: their opinions on such topics were significantly in agreement with Oliver.

Based on the extant literature, it is possible to formulate the main hypothesis of this dissertation. Despite the considerable number of investigations focused on the effects of watching political comedy in political participation, internal political efficacy, or political sophistication, there are significantly less which focus on the impacts of watching this type of content has on political opinions on substantive issues. That way, this dissertation and the answer to this hypothesis seek to help fill this gap. Looking at the existing studies (Becker, 2022; Brewer & McKnight, 2015; Feldman & Chattoo, 2019; Greenwood et al., 2016), it's possible to believe that watching political comedy can have an impact on political opinions. Thus, I expect that:

**H1:** Exposure to political comedy on a given politically relevant topic influences opinions on that topic.

### **1.3. Intervening Factors**

#### **1.3.1. Issue salience**

Issue salience can be broadly defined as the degree to which a person gives importance or relevance to a certain political issue (Dennison, 2019; Oppermann, 2010). In the agenda-setting literature, this saliency is called issue obtrusiveness. An obtrusive issue is one that is more salient to individuals, as they are more directly experienced by society in general. On the other hand, unobtrusive issues are not directly experienced by the public (Yagade & Dozier, 1990). It is important to have in mind that the same problem may be obtrusive to some people and not be for others. For instance, unemployment can be obtrusive or not dependent on whether a



person is/ever was unemployed or not. This might explain why some studies found no evidence that agenda-setting effects diminish as the obtrusiveness of an issue increases (e.g. Demers et al., 1989). Other issues are largely obtrusive to the general public, such as taxes and cost of living, or unobtrusive, as foreign affairs or the environment (Coleman et al., 2009).

It is usually argued that people will depend more on the news media for information and interpretation in a specific field if they have less first-hand experience with it; in other words, the public are more dependent on the media in unobtrusive issues, and less in obtrusive ones (Soroka, 2002). As Zucker (1978:227) puts it, “The public does not need the mass media to see, or be upset with, rising prices or a line at the gas pump”. As confirmed in his research (and in others’, such as Watt et al., 1993), in less obtrusive issues the media’s impact is larger. This also means that the public’s attention is not affected by how extensively the news media covers an obtrusive subject (G. Lee, 2004).

Issue salience has also been studied outside the agenda setting research stream. Ciuk and Yost (2016) found in their research that people tend to employ a more systematic processing of policy information when the issue in discussion is of high salience. In low-salience issues, individuals are more probable to accept party cues. In other words, people tend to accept information without engaging in critical thinking more in low-salience issues, and those who are more invested in a subject are more likely to resist attempts at persuasion (Lodge & Taber, 2013). This goes in line to what was defended by authors as Petty and Cacioppo (1986) and Kahneman (2011).

Greenwood and colleagues (2016) expectations were aligned with the mentioned research. The authors theorized that people should be reluctant to change attitudes in issues that they consider to be of high personal salience and should find more challenging to counter-argue when they are confronted with a topic that they are unfamiliar with. However, the results showed that political comedy has, in fact, potential to shape both high salience attitudes (regarding police militarization and racial discrimination) and low salience attitudes (payday lending), with no significant differences between them. A study on the area of agenda-setting showed similar results, with effects of agenda-setting at the third level (the power of media to influence the way the public relate various topics) being felt in both obtrusive and unobtrusive issues (Cheng, 2016).

The generality of literature shows evidence that exposure to content on lower-salience (or more unobtrusive) issues has more effects and influence in people than exposure to higher-salience (or more obtrusive) topics (Ciuk & Yost, 2016; Lodge & Taber, 2013; Watt et al., 1993; Zucker, 1978; and others). However, some studies dispute this assumption (Demers et

al., 1989; Cheng, 2016). More importantly, in a study similar in various ways to the present one (Greenwood et al., 2016), political comedy was shown to influence both high salience and low salience attitudes. Hypothesis 2 reflects that.

**H2:** The effect of exposure to political comedy about a given topic on the opinion on that topic occurs in both high salience and low salience issues.

### **1.3.2. Primacy and recency effects**

A primary effect refers to the memory advantage that early items in a list have. It is the tendency for people to remember the first items (three or four, usually) on a list with more frequency than the items in the middle (Murdock, 1962). It occurs due to a cognitive bias that gives disproportionate salience on initial stimuli, possibly because early items have less competition for the limited memory capacity (Panagopoulos, 2011; Waugh & Norman, 1965), which results in recent information being ignored (Steiner & Rain, 1989). However, the primacy effect is short lived, so it occurs more frequently in short time frames (Cobb & Kuklinski, 1997). In turn, the recency effect is the advantage that the last items on a list receive, due to those still being available in short-term memory. For example, research in the media field has demonstrated that television viewers tend to recall better ads transmitted at the end of the commercial break (Murphy et al., 2006; see also Duncan & Murdock, 2000). In longer experiments, with the passage of time, the recency effect is expected to dominate, affecting the outcome results (Murdock, 1962).

The effects of both primacy and recency have been studied in politics, although not extensively (Panagopoulos, 2011). Most research points to the dominance of the recency effect. For example, when people receive competing messages at the same time, they tend to annul each other. Otherwise, when separated by a considerable period of time, there is a tendency for citizens to give more weight to the more recent one (Chong & Druckman, 2010). Also, in political campaigns, partisan information presented last is more probable to enable persuasion effects, and to inform the voters more as well (Bositis et al., 1985), with messages delivered closer to the day of the election being more effective (Nickerson, 2007). In all, it is possible to say that political messages received later have a stronger impact on opinion formation (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2012).

However, there are exceptions to this rule. Highly motivated individuals, who deliberately process information, are less vulnerable to the effect (Chong & Druckman, 2010), as are citizens

with higher levels of political knowledge (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2012). Relevance given to the topic by individuals (Haugtvedt & Wegener, 1994) and internal political efficacy (Holbert et al., 2007) are also moderating factors of this effect.

In short, and over the above specific moderators, recency effects are more prominent. People tend to give more weight and remember better more recent messages (Chong & Druckman, 2010; Lecheler & de Vreese, 2012; Murphy et al., 2006; Nickerson, 2007). Also, in longer experiments, the recency effect tends to dominate, which has an influence on the results (Murdock, 1962). With all this, it is possible to expect the existence of a recency effect in this study as well:

**H3:** The effect of exposure to political comedy about a given topic on the opinion on that topic will be greater in the case of the topic that was viewed later.

### **1.3.3. How long do the effects last?**

If watching political comedy can influence opinions or attitudes, is this influence a lasting one? Or are the effects just short term? In the field of product advertising, the research usually points out that there is a quick decline in the effects of the advertisements over time (Gerber et al., 2011). Moreover, in the few studies done in political advertising, similar results have been found. Exposition to TV ads or information on the different campaigns have a strong effect on electors, affecting voters' evaluations of candidates and voting preferences. Nevertheless, memories of campaign information are quickly forgotten, indicating a powerful but short-lived effect (Gerber et al., 2011; Lodge et al., 1995). More relevant to this study, Mendiburo-Seguel et al. (2017) pointed that exposure to derogatory humorous political content negatively affected trust in politicians, but the effect was short-lived, lasting just one week.

On the other hand, other studies have presented different results. During World War II, the effects of propaganda on American soldiers was studied by Hovland et al. (1949), with Jensen and colleagues (2011) noting that this was the first study that observed the existence of this effect. In the war study, the researchers observed that the persuasive effects increased over several weeks, despite being dismissive of the information in the first place, demonstrating a sleeper effect of the messages shown. Despite some following studies not finding or even questioning that the effect existed, this field of research was revitalized in the late 1970's and in the following decade, with various authors suggesting different mechanisms that explain how and why the sleeper effect occurs (Jensen et al., 2011).

More recent studies have shown that political attitudes can be retained or even increased over time after watching political content. Feldman & Chattoo (2019), showed that positive attitudes towards Syrian refugees were maintained even two weeks after watching comedy content. Nabi et al. (2007) suggest the existence of a sleeper effect in some humorous messages, with the impact of watching comedy increasing in the week following.

Despite the majority of studies in the area of political advertisement and advertisement in general showing a rapid decrease in the effects to exposure (Gerber et al., 2011; Lodge et al., 1995), the existence of a sleeper effect after being showed certain contents has been long documented (Hovland et al., 1949; Jensen et al., 2011). Also, and despite Mendiburo-Seguel and colleagues (2017) pointing out that exposure to derogatory humorous content affected trust in politicians only in short-lived period, both Feldman and Chattoo (2019) and Nabi and colleagues (2007) propose that impacts remain stable in the following weeks, or even increase. In testing H4, the aim is to understand, in the case of political comedy influencing opinions, if this effect will persist, or if opinions will quickly return to what they were before the exposure to political humor. With more studies pointing to a more tenacious effect of comedy, I expect that:

**H4:** The effect of exposure to political comedy about a given topic on individuals' political opinion on that topic is persistent over time.

## **CHAPTER 2 - RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **2.1. Goals**

The main objective in this dissertation is to understand the impact that watching political comedy has on political opinions. As covered before, many studies over the years have covered the impact of watching political comedy on issues such as political participation, efficacy, or sophistication, but only few cover the impact on opinions (Becker, 2022; Brewer & McKnight, 2015; Feldman & Chattoo, 2019; Greenwood et al., 2016). Also, most of these studies focus on American political and comedy scenes, with none being centered on Portugal. This, adding to the mentioned social relevance of political comedy, makes this study of scientific and sociopolitical relevance.

From the main objective, some others emerge. The first relates to issue salience and understanding if political comedy influences individuals' political opinion in different ways in high salience and low salience topics. This is another relevant issue, as it has been studied numerous times, inclusively being related to political comedy in one study (Greenwood et al., 2016). However, once again, the majority of the studies are done in the United States, with another political and humoristic reality.

A third goal concerns primacy and recency effects. Many authors have focused on this topic, with some analyzing the existence of these effects after being exposed to political campaign messages (Bositis et al., 1985; Lecheler & de Vreese, 2012; Nickerson, 2007). However, none of them directly cross the study of these effects with exposure to political comedy (in other words, no research had people watching two different political satire contents to study primacy and recency effects).

Finally, the fourth objective is to understand if, in the case of exposure to political comedy having an impact on individuals' political opinions, this impact lasts. This objective is of relevance, because it is rare to find research focusing on long term effects of watching political comedy. Two of the studies analyzed above did feature a one-week delay (Mendiburo-Seguel et al., 2017; Nabi et al., 2007), and one had a two-week delay (Feldman & Chattoo, 2019). This dissertation expands on that, including a three-week delay in the experimental setting.

## **2.2. Methodology**

To fulfill the objectives of this study, we opted for the experimental methodology. This method, although traditionally not widely used in political science (Druckman et al., 2006), has seen strong growth since the 1990s (Kittel & Morton, 2012). Today, this research is fully established in the field and is well-respected (Druckman et al., 2006; McDermott, 2002). In Portugal, however, the experimental method is still a minority approach in political science (Nina, 2016; Santana Pereira et al., forthcoming).

This method offers several advantages. Firstly, the experimental method is used to test causal hypothesis – a supposition on how things interact, if one thing causes a particular outcome. In this type of research, different treatments are applied to different experimental groups, which allow to empirically test and observe the relationship between the type of stimulus received and the reactions of the experimental subjects (Druckman et al., 2011). With this method, researchers have a greater control of the independent variable, with the goal being to ensure that the groups are not significantly different in any aspect other than the one controlled. This allows researchers to compare the groups and attribute the results exclusively to the manipulation of the independent variable (de Almeida, 2016).

Experimental studies in political science are traditionally grouped in three categories: laboratory, survey and field experiments (Kittel & Morton, 2012). Opting for a laboratory design has its advantages. First off, it is the type of experiment that takes place in the more artificial environment, which results in a greater control of variables by the researchers. Using it results in highest levels of internal validity, with the conclusions of the causal relationship being valid and credible (Morton & Williams, 2010). Laboratory studies also have less associated costs and more flexibility, as they can take place with convenience samples, such as those composed of college students (Martini & Olmastroni, 2021).

### **2.3.1. Experimental Design**

A 2x2x2 experimental model was implemented, involving the crossing and manipulation of two experimental variables: the first is the type of content one is exposed to (comedy videos vs. news videos); the second is the order by which contents on two topics (nurses' strike and euthanasia) are presented. The decision of which classes would be exposed to which treatment was made completely randomly. In order to avoid any bias, I tried to replicate the same environmental and experimental conditions in every group.

There is also a third, within-subjects, experimental variable, related to issue salience. All participants were exposed to both a high-salience issue and a low-salience issue. The high-salience one is the nurses' strike of 2019 in Portugal. As data from the Standard Eurobarometer 96 (Silva & Santana Pereira, 2022) points out, 39% of Portuguese people consider health one of the two biggest issues facing the country. The strike in question is directly related with the functioning of the National Health Service in Portugal. Also, it concerns a labor rights issue, and university students are close to entering the workforce, or have entered it already. Many young people work in a precarious situation, which can bring them into organized labor movements and strikes, and it has been shown in various countries that there is a direct connection between civil society, young workers' groups and the labor movement (Tapia & Turner, 2018). The low-salience issue present in this study is euthanasia. Despite being an issue also concerning health, it is a practice utilized more by individuals between 60 and 85 years old (Steck, 2013), people much older than the average university student. Recent reports, about Switzerland (Fahy, 2018), Canada (Health Canada, 2019), and The Netherlands (Groenewoud, 2020), show that the average age of people recurring to euthanasia is above 70 years.

### **2.3.2. Procedure**

The fieldwork took place between October 18, 2021, and November 29 of the same year, in two universities in Lisbon, Portugal. The first thing students were asked to do was to fill in a questionnaire. The participants were not informed of the true objectives of the experiment, being told that the study was about attention, and neither were told about the further visualization of the videos or the posttest questionnaire. The pretest questionnaire was the same for every group and contained a battery of social-demographic questions (age, gender, religion, interest in politics, and political alignment), questions regarding news and comedy consumption, as well as questions about the two topics under study (opinions on euthanasia, and opinions on nurses' strikes, on the civil requisition mechanism, and on the 2019 strike). Also, questions about several other topics, such as evaluations of government performance or opinions on economic policies, were included, to not give away the goals of this study. The application of the questionnaire lasted approximately 15 minutes.

In the next step, the groups diverged. One group first watched a video named "*Argumentos idiotas contra eutanásia - Quero lá saber #36*" ("Stupid arguments against euthanasia – I don't care #36"), dated from 31/05/2018, in which comedian Diogo Batáguas makes fun of various anti-euthanasia arguments in a humorous way. The version of the video shown lasts 10 minutes

and 35 seconds. After watching that video, the students were shown a second clip, from the TV show *Gente Que Não Sabe Estar* (“Folks who don’t know how to behave”). In this clip, in spite of comedian Ricardo Araújo Pereira making some fun of the leader of the Order of Nurses (Ana Rita Cavaco) and a representative of the nurses’ union (Lúcia Leite), he takes a clear pro-nurse-strike position, mocking positions from the Prime-Minister António Costa, who defended that the actions from the nurses were “absolutely illegal”. The video shown lasted exactly five minutes. A second experimental group watched the same videos, but in the reverse order: first the video about the strike, then the video about euthanasia.

In turn, a third group watched news videos instead of comedy ones. In more concrete terms, participants watched four videos about euthanasia, and two about the strike. Three of the videos about the first topic featured arguments made by one people from each of the two opposite sides of the discussion (one in favor and one against the depenalization of euthanasia). The fourth video showed the parliamentary debate, with members of parliament from all parties making their positions clear. The first three clips were showed on *RTP* and the last one on *SIC*. The total duration of the videos was 8 minutes and 57 seconds, similar to that of the comedy video about the same topic (10:35). After watching these videos in quick succession, the group was exposed to two news pieces about the nurses’ strike of 2019, with arguments from members of the government such as Prime-Minister António Costa and Minister of Health Marta Temido, as well as from the leader of the Order of Nurses Ana Rita Cavaco and union representative Lúcia Leite. The second video had a particular focus on the declaration of civil request of nurses by Costa’s government. The clips were shown on *RTP*, with a total duration of 5 minutes and 55 seconds, once again similar to the comedy video about the topic (5:00). The last experimental group watched the same videos, but in the reverse order: first the videos about the strike, then the videos about euthanasia.

After watching the videos, the groups were presented with a second questionnaire. This questionnaire was very similar to the first one. The social demographic questions were dropped, as well as the questions about news and comedy content consumption. All other questions were maintained but presented in a different order. Additionally, the participants were asked about how easy it was to keep attention on the videos, with the vast majority of them (75.3%) saying it was easy or very easy to focus on the videos shown. However, there is a significant difference between groups ( $F_{(3;162)} = 3.528$ ;  $p = 0.016^1$ ). This is due to one of the groups (the one that

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the modest dimension of the sample of this dissertation, I worked with a confidence interval of 90%. Therefore, statistically significant results are obtained when  $p$  is inferior to 0.1.



watched comedy and the euthanasia content first), in which the figure is of only 57.5%. Nevertheless, this is also the group with the less combined “hard” or “very hard” answers, as it displays a large proportion of “neither easy or hard” responses (37.5%). This small difference therefore does not strike as particularly dramatic.

Also, this second questionnaire included two new questions specifically about the 2019 nurses’ strike, to see if the content watched impacted opinions on the dispute: one that asked participants if they sided more with the government or with the nurses, and other on what they felt about the government’s use of the civil requisition mechanism in that situation. Moreover, the groups that watched comedy content were asked if they found each video funny, while the ones that watched news were asked if they found each group of videos informative. In general, the majority of people who watched comedy found both videos either “very funny” or “somewhat funny” (67.9% for the nurses’ strike video, 64.1% for the euthanasia video). However, the group that watched the nurses’ strike video first found that video significantly funnier than the other group did ( $F_{(76)} = 3.170$ ;  $p = 0.002$ ). This difference isn’t verified in regard to the euthanasia video ( $F_{(76)} = -0.931$ ;  $p = 0.355$ ). In the groups that watched news, there was an even bigger majority of students who found the videos informative, with no significant differences between both the nurses’ strike ( $F_{(82)} = 0.769$ ;  $p = 0.444$ ) and euthanasia ones ( $F_{(82)} = 0.762$ ;  $p = 0.448$ ).

Three weeks later, the participants were once again given a questionnaire, which was the same for all groups. This questionnaire was very similar to the posttest one, with the main questions being the same but in a different order. Also, questions regarding about whether the students found the videos funny/informative were dropped. On the last questions on the questionnaire, the participants were asked how well they remembered the content they watched three weeks prior, and if they had watched the content again during the period between tests. Between the comedy groups, the group that watched the nurses’ strike content first significantly remembered both the videos better (nurses’ strike:  $F_{(53.449)} = 1.693$ ;  $p = 0.096$ ; euthanasia: ( $F_{(49.842)} = 1.817$ ;  $p = 0.444$ ). In relation to the nurses’ strike video, 50% of the group which watched that video first claimed to “remember it well”, and 36.7% to “remember it vaguely”. In contrast, in the other group that watched comedy, these figures were 19.2% and 69.2%, respectively. However, no significant differences emerged concerning the participants rewatching the content in the weeks following the first viewing (nurses’ strike:  $F_{(54)} = 0.671$ ;  $p = 0.505$ ; euthanasia: ( $F_{(54)} = 0.367$ ;  $p = 0.715$ ), with few having done it, either those who watched the strike’s content first (nurses’ strike: 13.4%; euthanasia: 23.3%) or last (nurses’ strike: 7.7%; euthanasia: 19.2%).

Regarding the groups that watched news, no differences of significance surfaced. The levels of recollection of the videos of both topics were similar (nurses' strike:  $F_{(55)} = -0.849$ ;  $p = 0.399$ ; euthanasia: ( $F_{(55)} = -0.379$ ;  $p = 0.706$ ). 37.9% of the group that watched the strike's videos first remembered that video "well", and 62.1% "vaguely". Also, this group seemed to remember the euthanasia videos slightly better (62.1% "well", 34.5% "vaguely"). A similar pattern was verified with the group that watched news: 53.6% remembered "well" the strike videos, and 42.9% "vaguely"; 67.9% remembered "well" the euthanasia videos, and 28.6% recalled it "vaguely". Moving to the question about whether the participants watched the content again, there were no significant differences between the groups that watched news (nurses' strike:  $F_{(49,559)} = 1.162$ ;  $p = 0.251$ ; euthanasia: ( $F_{(55)} = 0.626$ ;  $p = 0.534$ ). The results were similar to the comedy groups, with a very small percentage of the participants rewatching the contents. This is found in both those who watched the strike's content first (nurses' strike: 17.2%; euthanasia: 20.7%), or those who watched it last (nurses' strike: 7.1%; euthanasia: 14.3%).

The data on opinions collected via the procedure described above was transformed in the following way. The seven questions<sup>2</sup> related to euthanasia were used to produce an index, which behaves well in all three moments of the study (the pretest index has a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.877; the posttest an Alpha of 0.867; and the three-week delay index an Alpha of 0.860). These indexes run from 0 to 21, with 0 representing the position more in favor of euthanasia, and 21 the position more against it.

The questions related to the nurses' strike showed low levels of internal consistency, so the variables were not added together, and are therefore analyzed individually. The variables used

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<sup>2</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> - Regarding euthanasia: (0 – You're for it; 1 – You're for it, but not in the way it was approved in Portugal; 2 – You're against it); 2<sup>nd</sup> - Regarding the argument presented in favor of euthanasia, "it is a question of individual rights, freedom and autonomy": (0 – You completely agree; 1 – You agree; 2 – You neither agree or disagree; 3 – You disagree; 4 – You completely disagree); 3<sup>rd</sup> - Regarding the argument presented in favor of euthanasia, "it allows the patient to relieve pain and suffering which are considered unbearable": (0 – You completely agree; 1 – You agree; 2 – You neither agree or disagree; 3 – You disagree; 4 – You completely disagree); 4<sup>th</sup> - Regarding the argument made against euthanasia, "doctors should take care of patients, not kill": (0 – You completely disagree; 1 – Disagree; 2 – You neither agree or disagree; 3 – You agree; 4 - You completely agree); 5<sup>th</sup> - Regarding the argument presented against euthanasia, "the decriminalization of assisted death can lead to its generalization, and result in the death of many people, especially the elderly": (0 – You completely disagree; 1 – Disagree; 2 – You neither agree or disagree; 3 – You agree; 4 - You completely agree); 6<sup>th</sup> - Regarding the rules for resorting to euthanasia, you consider that: (0 – Are very restrict; 1 – Are fine as they are; 2 – Should be more restrict); 7<sup>th</sup> - Regarding euthanasia and medical care, you consider that: 0 – There is no relationship between the decriminalization of euthanasia and the level of investment and valorization of health care services; 1 – The decriminalization of euthanasia may lead to less investment and valorization of health care services)

regarded the positions of the respondents related to the existence and usage of the mechanism of civil requisition, and the right of nurses to strike (whether they should have the same rights as other professions to strike, due to the nature of the profession). These two questions were present in all three questionnaires, with scales from 0 to 2, with 0 representing a position more in favor of less limitations to strikes, and 2 a position favoring a wider government control. Two other variables were used, but were only present in the last two questionnaires, and directly regarded the nurses' strike of 2019, being therefore analyzed via a post-exposure comparison strategy. The first one asked, in a scale from 0 to 4, with whom the respondents agreed more in the conflict: the nurses (0) or the government (4). The second one was about the usage of the civil requisition mechanism by the government in the situation. Opinions were measured via a scale from 0 to 2, with the smaller number represented saying the executive acted in a wrong way, and 2 that it acted correctly.

### **2.3.3. Participants**

A total of 204 college students, from seven different classes, participated in the study. Due to the nature of the experiment (taking place in two different moments separated by three weeks), the final N is naturally smaller, due to mortality effects. A few students had to be excluded: for example, those who only answered one questionnaire (the one in the third stage). We kept the students who answered the three questionnaires and those who responded to at least the first two, giving us two different groups to analyze, depending on the hypothesis being tested (since hypothesis 4 is tested with the group that answered all three questionnaires).

I start by characterizing those who at least responded to the first two questionnaires. This group is composed of 162 students – 68 males (42%), 90 females (55.6%), and 4 non-binary people (2.5%). The average age is 21.56 (SD = 6.58). All students attend social science's BA programs, with the large majority (more than 85%) either in Political Science or Political Science and International Relations. 41.4% of the participants described themselves as religious.

Also, nearly a fourth of the participants (23.4%) said that they watched political comedy every day or multiple times a week, 34% said that they watched it weekly, and 37% monthly or less than one time per month. Only 5.6% of the students said they never watch political comedy. In relation to keeping up with the news, almost 70% of participants watch political news on television at least various times a week, being the second most preferred medium, only surpassed by the internet, where 85.8% get the news multiple times a week or every day. These

numbers are much smaller for newspapers (34.8%), and radio (21.6%). In terms of interest in politics, most of the participants considered themselves interested (45.1%) or very interested (43.2%). Regarding political ideology, in a scale from 1 (the position most to the left) to 10 (the position most to the right), the average of all participants was 4.90 (SD=2.07), close to the center but slightly tilted to the left.

There are no significant statistical differences between the four experimental groups in a large majority of variables. In fact, the experimental groups were equivalent in terms of gender ( $\chi^2_{(6)} = 3.824, p = 0.700$ ), religiosity ( $\chi^2_{(3)} = 6.395; p = 0.094$ ), and age ( $F_{(3;157)} = 1.334; p = 0.265$ ). The same happens in what regards consumption of political comedy ( $F_{(3;158)} = 1.050; p = 0.372$ ) or of political news on TV ( $F_{(3;158)} = 0.270; p = 0.847$ ), on the radio ( $F_{(3;158)} = 1.614; p = 0.188$ ), on newspapers ( $F_{(3;157)} = 1.700; p = 0.169$ ), and on the internet ( $F_{(3;158)} = 0.086; p = 0.968$ ). Regarding positioning on the above mentioned 1-10 ideology scale, there are not significant differences as well ( $F_{(3;148)} = 1.755; p = 0.158$ ). The only variable in which groups are significantly different is interest in politics ( $F_{(3;158)} = 4.036; p = 0.008$ ). One of the groups (the one viewing comedy videos with euthanasia contents being displayed first) showed lower levels of political interest – only 20% of the participants in this group answered that they were very interested in politics. In all the other groups this number was around 50%. However, considering that in all groups the percentage of participants who reported to be interested or very interested was at least 80%, this discrepancy is considerably modest and unlikely to bias the results.

It is also important to compare the two groups that watched comedy with the groups that watched news, as most analyses are centered on this comparison. Again, the vast majority of variables do not vary significantly between those exposed to comedy and those exposed to news. This is true for gender ( $\chi^2_{(2)} = 1.238, p = 0.538$ ), religiosity ( $\chi^2_{(1)} = 1.849, p = 0.174$ ), and age ( $F_{(1;159)} = 0.292; p = 0.589$ ), and also for the variables regarding media consumption habits, either political comedy ( $F_{(1;160)} = 0.037; p = 0.848$ ) or political news on TV ( $F_{(1;160)} = 0.000; p = 0.996$ ), on the radio ( $F_{(1;160)} = 1.793; p = 0.183$ ), on newspapers ( $F_{(1;159)} = 2.540; p = 0.113$ ), and on the internet ( $F_{(1;160)} = 0.089; p = 0.765$ ). There are not significant differences in terms of political ideology as well ( $F_{(1;160)} = 0.283; p = 0.596$ ). However, there is, once again, significant differences in levels of interest in politics ( $F_{(1;160)} = 6.742; p = 0.010$ ). The participants who watched news contents were more interested. Nevertheless, and once more, this difference is not that large when we look at more concrete numbers: in those who watched news, 91.7% claimed to be at least interested. This number was 84.6% for those who were exposed to comedy, a close result.

Moving on to those who answers all three questionnaires, these group is composed by a smaller number of participants: 113 (51 males, 45.1%; 62 females, 54.9%). The average age was similar to that of the wider sample, 21.84 (SD=7.48), and 39.8% were religious. The patterns of political comedy consumption were also similar, with close to 60% of participants watching it at least one time a week. News consumption numbers also remained very similar: a strong preference for getting political news on the internet (82.3% get news from the internet either every day or multiple times a week) or television (69.9%), contrary to getting informed via newspapers (36.3%) or radio (20.4%). In terms of interest in politics, the same number of respondents considered themselves interested or very interested (49, 43.4%). Only 12.4% said they were “relatively interested” and one participant considered himself not interested at all. In terms of political ideology, once again, the participants skewed a bit to the left, with an average position of 4.89 (SD = 2.03).

Once again, no significant statistical differences between groups were verified in terms of gender ( $\chi^2_{(3)} = 0.132, p = 0.988$ ), religiosity ( $\chi^2_{(3)} = 5.787, p = 0.122$ ), or age ( $F_{(3;109)} = 0.910; p = 0.439$ ). The consumption patterns of political comedy ( $F_{(3;109)} = 0.794; p = 0.500$ ), political news on TV ( $F_{(3;109)} = 0.383; p = 0.765$ ), political news on radio ( $F_{(3;109)} = 0.463; p = 0.709$ ), political news on newspapers ( $F_{(3;109)} = 1.074; p = 0.363$ ), and political news on the internet ( $F_{(3;109)} = 0.221; p = 0.882$ ) remained constant between all four groups. In this case, there was no significant difference in interest in politics, contrary to the sample that included people who only answered the first two questionnaires ( $F_{(3;109)} = 2.021; p = 0.115$ ). In its place, the only variable in which groups differentiated significantly was positioning in the left-right scale ( $F_{(3;102)} = 2.897; p = 0.039$ ). Two groups had slightly more leftist positions on average (4.16 and 4.48) than other two (5.32 and 5.54). However, these differences can be neglected, as the means of all groups are considerably close to the center of the ideological scale.

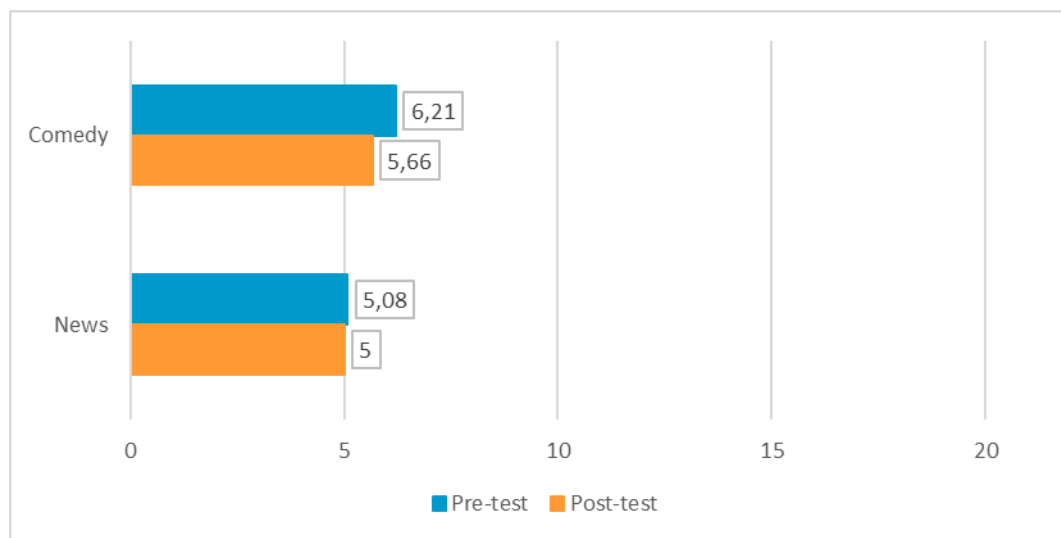
Moving to the comparison between participants by type of content watched, no significant differences were noted in all the variables. Thus, there are no significant differences in gender ( $\chi^2_{(1)} = 0.011, p = 0.917$ ), religion ( $\chi^2_{(1)} = 1.610, p = 0.205$ ), age ( $F_{(1;111)} = 0.497; p = 0.482$ ), viewing habits of political comedy ( $F_{(1;111)} = 0.066; p = 0.797$ ) and political news on TV ( $F_{(1;111)} = 0.006; p = 0.940$ ), listening behaviors of political news on the radio ( $F_{(1;111)} = 0.684; p = 0.410$ ), patterns of getting political news on newspapers ( $F_{(1;111)} = 0.502; p = 0.480$ ) and on the internet ( $F_{(1;111)} = 0.021; p = 0.886$ ), political positioning in the 1-10 scale ( $F_{(1;104)} = 0.328; p = 0.568$ ), and political interest ( $F_{(1;111)} = 2.185; p = 0.142$ ).



## CHAPTER 3 - HYPOTHESES TESTING

The first hypothesis to be tested posited that exposure to political comedy on a given political topic influences opinions on that topic, with opinions shifting accordingly to the comedian's own position on the matter. To assess this first hypothesis, I started by comparing the mean values of the euthanasia index between the participants who watched comedy and the students who watched news, via independent-samples t-tests. Despite the numbers being slightly different, there were no significant differences in neither the pretest ( $t_{(87)} = 1.097$ ;  $p = 0.276$ ) or in the posttest ( $t_{(96)} = 0.578$ ;  $p = 0.565$ ). Along with this test, I ran paired-samples t-tests to test the differences between the pretest and the posttest within each condition (either exposure to comedy or to news). In the groups that watched comedy, there were significant differences ( $t_{(41)} = 2.071$ ;  $p = 0.045$ ) in the opinion on euthanasia. The mean decreased (Figure 3.1), which means that the answers became more in favor of euthanasia. Regarding those who watched news, no significant differences were registered ( $t_{(35)} = 0.333$ ;  $p = 0.741$ ).

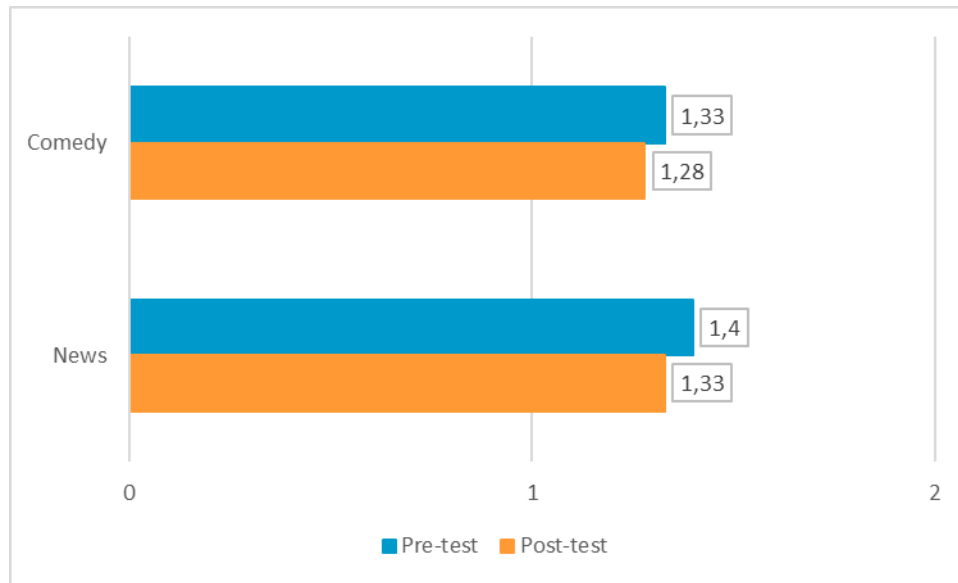
Figure 3.1. Opinions on euthanasia before and after exposure to the videos



Scale: 0 (more pro-euthanasia) – 21 (more against euthanasia)

Moving to the questions related to the nurses' strike and starting with the opinions regarding the civil requisition mechanism (Figure 3.2), no significant differences were found between comedy vs. news groups in the pretest ( $t_{(132)} = -0.745$ ;  $p = 0.458$ ) or in the posttest ( $t_{(134)} = -0.766$ ;  $p = 0.445$ ). No differences were also noted in the pretest-posttest comparisons of both the comedy ( $t_{(53)} = 1,352$ ;  $p = 0.182$ ) and the news groups ( $t_{(70)} = 1,297$ ;  $p = 0.199$ ).

Figure 3.2. Opinions on the civil requisition mechanism before and after exposure to the videos

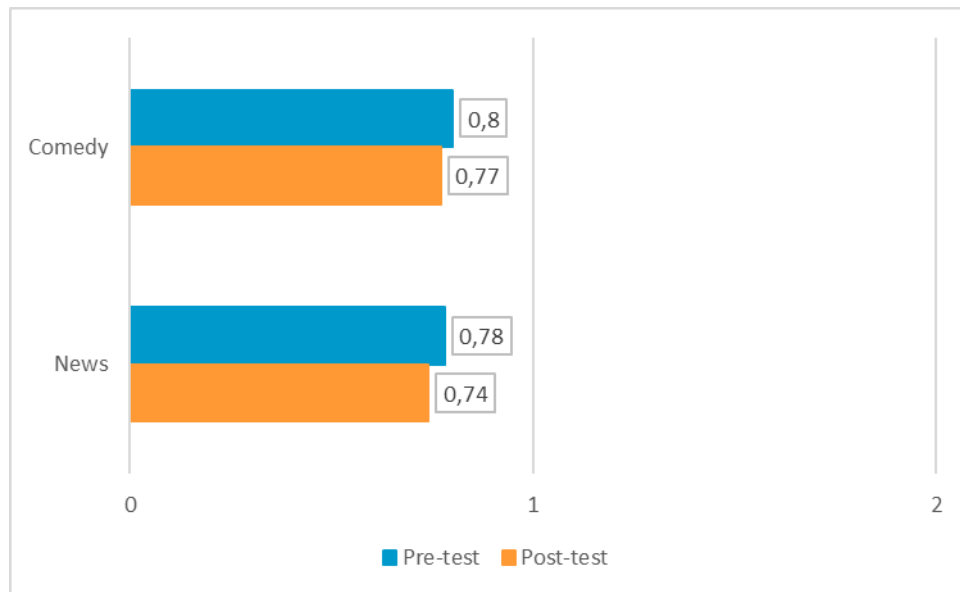


Scale: 0 (civil requisition shouldn't exist) – 2 (civil requisition should be used when necessary)

Similar results were found in the question regarding the right of nurses to strike (Figure 3.3). Once again, no significant differences were found between groups in both the pretest ( $t_{(157)} = 0.256$ ;  $p = 0.798$ ) and the posttest ( $t_{(156)} = 0.431$ ;  $p = 0.667$ ). Also, there were no differences of significance between the pretest and posttest answers in the group of participants who watched comedy ( $t_{(74)} = 0.705$ ;  $p = 0.483$ ), something that also happened in the news-watching groups ( $t_{(81)} = 0.904$ ;  $p = 0.369$ ).



Figure 3.3. Opinions on the rights of nurses to strike before and after exposure to the videos



Scale: 0 (nurses should have the same rights as others to strike) – 2 (nurses shouldn't be allowed to strike)

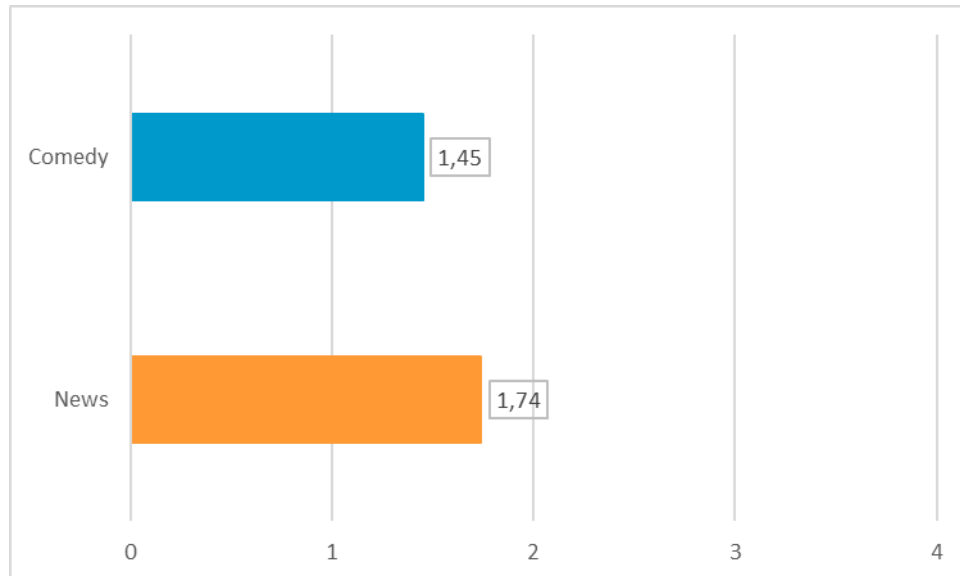
As mentioned above, there are two questions explicitly mentioning the nurses' strike of 2019 that were not present in the pretest questionnaire, as it was not expectable for participants to hold specific opinions on the matter. To analyze these specific opinions, I therefore rely on posttest answers only (Figures 3.4 and 3.5). The almost perfect homogeneity between groups in control variables such as age, gender, political positioning, or media exposure, as well as the general absence of differences between comedy and news watching groups in terms of opinions before exposure (see previous paragraphs), allows me to take conclusions based only on the posttest data with a great degree of confidence.

Running independent-samples t-tests, significant differences between groups emerged: people who watched comedy sided more with the nurses than those who watched news ( $t_{(130)} = -1.679$ ;  $p = 0.096$ ) and were also more likely to disapprove of the government's use of the civil requisition mechanism in the specific 2019 context ( $t_{(103)} = -2.378$ ;  $p = 0.019$ ).

Overall, it is possible to confirm hypothesis 1. As seen by the results regarding euthanasia, watching political comedy about a certain topic did have an effect in the opinions about that topic. The comedian made fun of anti-euthanasia arguments, and opinions of those who watched shifted to a more pro-euthanasia stance. Also, and despite the results regarding the generic opinions about the civil requisition mechanism and the rights of nurses to strike not corroborating the hypothesis, the more specific opinions about the 2019 situation – the one actually depicted in the videos – show a significant difference between those who were exposed

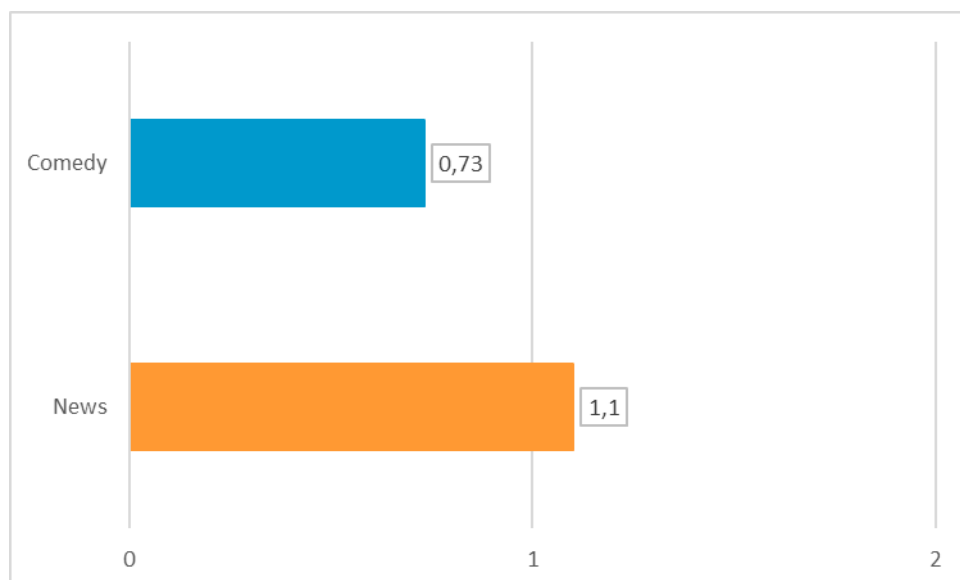
to comedy and those who watched a news clip. Once again, as the comedian made more fun of the government, those who watched the sketch tended to side more with the nurses.

Figure 3.4. Opinions on Nurses vs. Government after exposure to the videos



Scale: 0 (totally agrees with the nurses in the 2019 strike) – 4 (totally agrees with the government in the 2019 strike)

Figure 3.5. Opinions on the usage of the civil requisition mechanism in 2019 after exposure to the videos



Scale: 0 (the government was wrong) – 2 (the government was right)

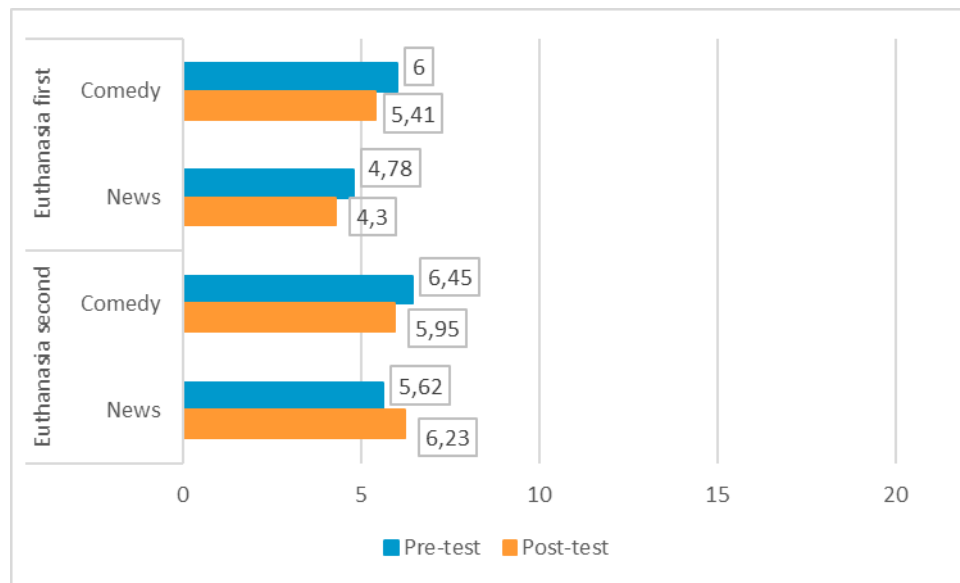
These results also allow to reach a conclusion on the expectation that the effect of exposure to political comedy about a given topic on the opinion on that topic occurs in both high salience and low salience issues (hypothesis 2). In general terms, this hypothesis is confirmed. The results show an effect on opinions in both the high salience (nurses' strike) and the low salience issue (euthanasia), despite being more consistent in the low salience one.

Moving to hypothesis 3, it was argued that recency effects were likely, with opinions changing more on the topic that was seen last, in the second place. In order to test this hypothesis, I first compare effects of comedy vs. news exposure on opinions between those who were exposed to content on this subject first and those who were exposed to it later.

Starting with opinions on euthanasia by those who watched the contents about that topic first (Figure 3.6), there are no significant differences in the pretest ( $t_{(46)} = 0.613$ ;  $p = 0.543$ ) and posttest ( $t_{(50)} = 0.698$ ;  $p = 0.488$ ) among those who were exposed to comedy and those who were exposed to news. Getting to the paired-samples analysis, there are significant differences between those who watched comedy ( $t_{(21)} = 2.026$ ;  $p = 0.056$ ), with positions becoming more pro-euthanasia after watching the video. However, distinctly to what was seen before, there were also significant differences in the group that watched news ( $t_{(22)} = 2.043$ ;  $p = 0.053$ ), with answers also becoming more in favor of euthanasia.

Shifting to the groups who watched euthanasia content in the second place, once again no significant differences between the comedy groups and news groups were noted among those exposed to comedy and to news in the pretest ( $t_{(39)} = 0.889$ ;  $p = 0.379$ ) and the posttest ( $t_{(44)} = 0.043$ ;  $p = 0.966$ ). The paired-samples analysis showed that there were no significant pretest/posttest differences for those who watched comedy content ( $t_{(20)} = 1.083$ ;  $p = 0.292$ ). Even so, there was a drop in the mean before and after watching the video that was not exactly residual (from 6.45 to 5.95), which means positions tended to move towards a more pro-euthanasia direction. There were also no significant differences in the group that watched news as well ( $t_{(12)} = -1.199$ ;  $p = 0.254$ ), despite the existence of an increase in the mean (from 5.62 to 6.23). It is important to have in mind that the N dropped to small numbers in this section of the analysis, which makes for less reliant significance results. Nevertheless, the results are not consistent with the hypothesis: to the contrary, significant impacts of watching comedy (and news) were only observed for those who watched euthanasia-related content first, supporting the idea of a primacy effect.

Figure 3.6. Opinions on euthanasia before and after exposure to videos according to viewing order

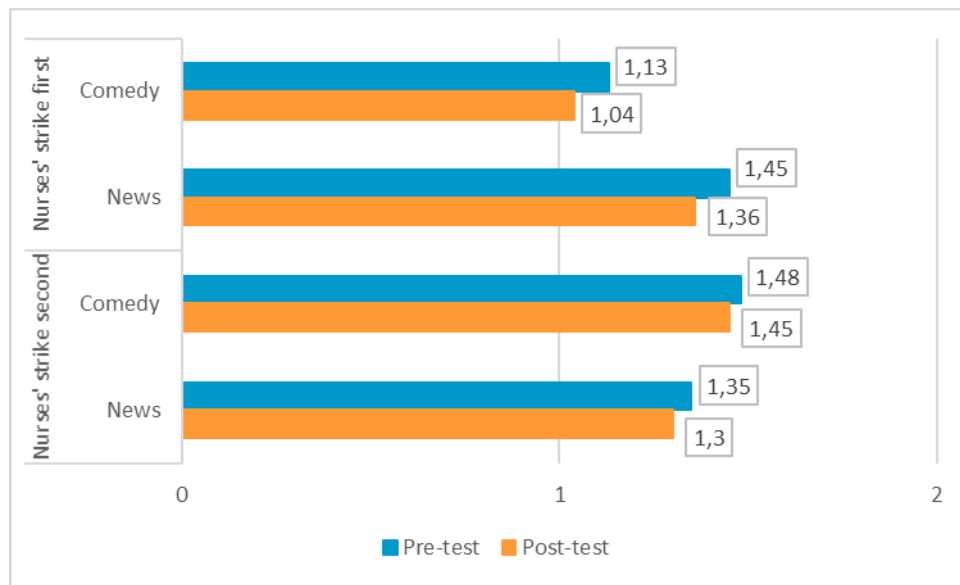


Scale: 0 (more pro-euthanasia) – 21 (more against euthanasia)

Switching to the variables associated to the nurses' strike issue (Figure 3.7), I begin with the analysis of the general opinion regarding the civil requisition mechanism. In the groups that watched the nurses' strike content first, the comparisons between the comedy group and the news group show significant differences in both the pretest ( $t_{(63)} = -2.247$ ;  $p = 0.28$ ), and the posttest ( $t_{(56.411)} = -2.440$ ;  $p = 0.18$ ). In both cases, the group of those who were exposed to comedy is less favorable to the existence or activation of this mechanism. However, the latter differences are not due to the experimental stimuli, as the paired-samples tests do not show relevant differences in neither the comedy group ( $t_{(22)} = 1.447$ ;  $p = 0.162$ ) nor the news group ( $t_{(32)} = 1.139$ ;  $p = 0.263$ ).

Moving to the groups that watched nurses' strike content last, there were no differences of significance between the comedy group and the news group in both the pretest ( $t_{(67)} = 1.115$ ;  $p = 0.269$ ) and the posttest ( $t_{(71)} = 1.285$ ;  $p = 0.203$ ), nor significant differences in the pretest/posttest comparisons within both groups, those who watched comedy content ( $t_{(30)} = 0.571$ ;  $p = 0.572$ ) or and those who watched news content ( $t_{(36)} = 0.702$ ;  $p = 0.487$ ). These results go along with patterns previously discussed, with the type of content watched making no difference in the general opinions of the participants on this matter. Evidently, no recency (nor primacy) effects can be noted.

Figure 3.7. Opinions on the civil requisition mechanism before and after exposure to videos according to viewing order

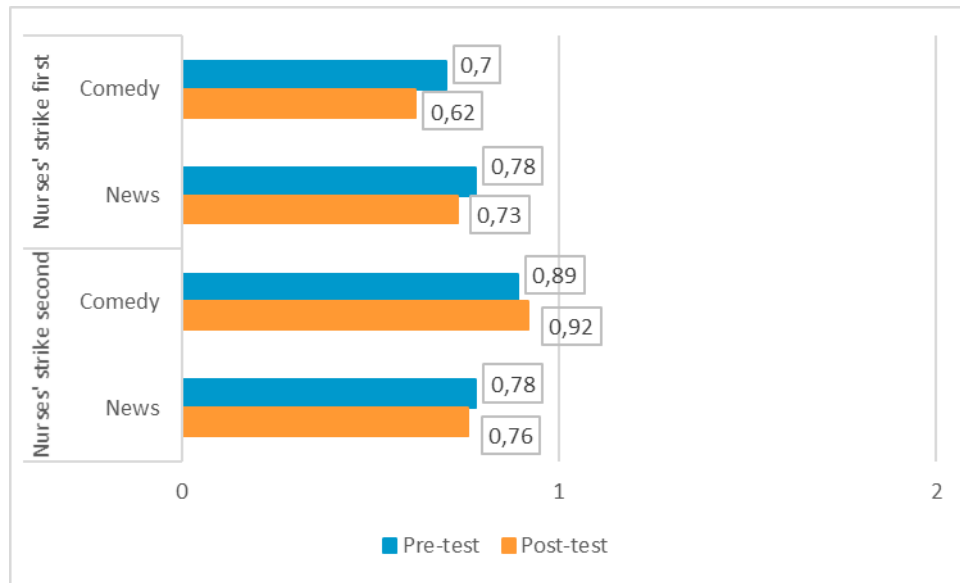


Scale: 0 (civil requisition shouldn't exist) – 2 (civil requisition should be used when necessary)

Concerning the opinion on the right of nurses to strike (Figure 3.8), there are no significant differences between groups in the pretest ( $t_{(78)} = -0.682$ ;  $p = 0.497$ ) and in the posttest ( $t_{(73.216)} = -1.029$ ;  $p = 0.307$ ), in the case of those who watched the nurses' strike content first. Adding to that, there were no significant differences between opinions expressed before and after exposure to videos in the group of students who watched comedy ( $t_{(36)} = 1.138$ ;  $p = 0.262$ ), and in the news' groups ( $t_{(40)} = 0.1000$ ;  $p = 0.323$ ).

In the groups that watched content on this issue last, the results were comparable. No significant differences between the comedy group and the news group in the pretest ( $t_{(77)} = 1.093$ ;  $p = 0.278$ ) and posttest ( $t_{(77.291)} = 1.638$ ;  $p = 0.106$ ), and in the paired-samples tests in both groups (comedy ( $t_{(37)} = -1.000$ ;  $p = 0.324$ ; news ( $t_{(40)} = 0.374$ ;  $p = 0.710$ )). These results demonstrate, once again, the inexistence of recency (or primacy) effects on the opinions of the participants.

Figure 3.8. Opinions on the rights of nurses to strike before and after exposure to the videos according to viewing order



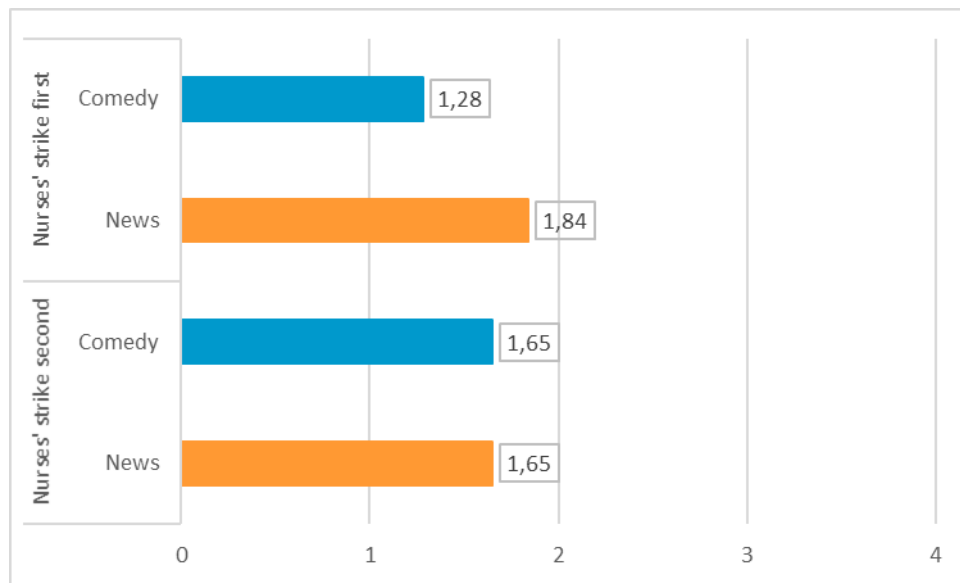
Scale: 0 (nurses should have the same rights to strike) – 2 (nurses shouldn't be allowed to strike)

Finally, I focus on questions specifically about the nurses' strike of 2019, asked only in the posttest questionnaire. Regarding whether the participants agreed more with the nurses or with the government (Figure 3.9), a significant difference is present between the groups who watched this topic's content in the first place ( $t_{(67)} = -2.407$ ;  $p = 0.019$ ), with people who viewed comedy being more pro-nurses. However, between those who watched the nurses' strike-related content in the second place, no significant differences emerged ( $t_{(61)} = 0.019$ ;  $p = 0.985$ ). This means that no recency effect is noted: on the opposite, there seems to exist a primacy effect.

Regarding the use by the government of the civil requisition mechanism in 2019 (Figure 3.10), the results have a similar pattern, with no recency effects but an apparent primacy effect. Significant differences between the group exposed to comedy and the group exposed to news when the strike's content was watched first ( $t_{(53)} = -2.221$ ;  $p = 0.031$ ), but not when it was watched last ( $t_{(48)} = -1.073$ ;  $p = 0.288$ ).

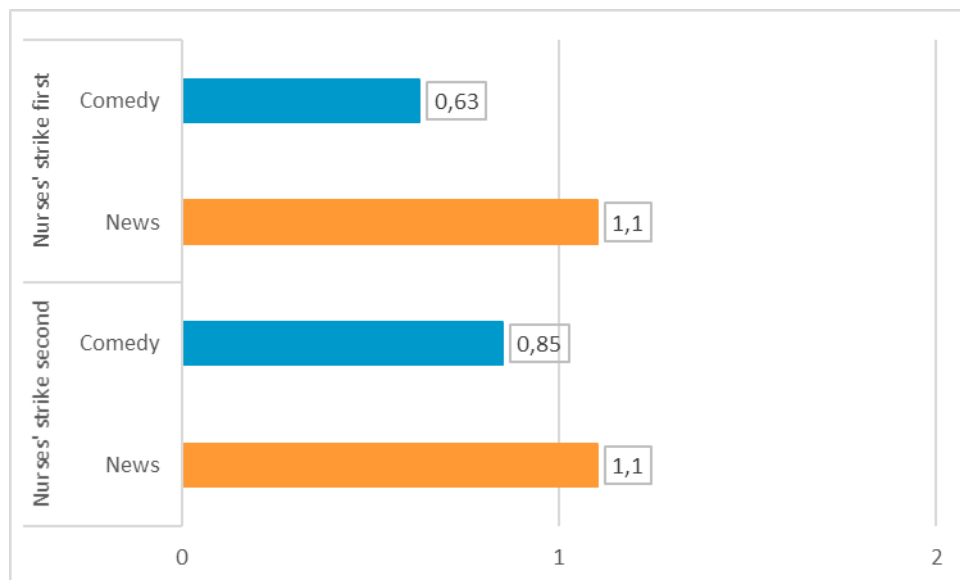
Overall, hypothesis 3 is rejected. From the array of variables explored, there is not a single case in which there seems to have existed a recency effect. On the contrary, in three of the variables under analysis primacy effects seem to occur.

Figure 3.9. Opinions on Nurses vs. Government after exposure to videos according to viewing order.



Scale: 0 (totally agrees with the nurses in the 2019 strike) – 4 (totally agrees with the government in the 2019 strike)

Figure 3.10. Opinions on the usage of the civil requisition mechanism in 2019 after exposure to videos according to viewing order



Scale: 0 (the government was wrong) – 2 (the government was right)

The last hypothesis concerns the duration of the effect of exposure to political comedy. To assess this expectation, similar tests to the ones carried out for H1/H2 were used, with a couple of differences. First, and as mentioned above, the sample is different, with only the participants

who responded to all three questionnaires being included. Second, instead of the comparisons being only between pretest and posttest, comparisons between the pretest and the delay test, and the posttest and the delay test were also included.

Starting with the euthanasia issue (Figure 3.11<sup>3</sup>), the independent-samples t-tests show that there were significant differences between the groups that watched comedy and those who watched news in the pretest ( $t_{(47.890)} = 2.233$ ;  $p = 0.030$ ) and in the posttest ( $t_{(65.347)} = 2.518$ ;  $p = 0.014$ ), with the groups that watched news being significantly more in favor of euthanasia than the groups that watched comedy. Of course, these results are different from those reported before due to the considerable decrease in terms of N. However, three weeks later, this difference is not registered anymore ( $t_{(71)} = 0.723$ ;  $p = 0.472$ ).

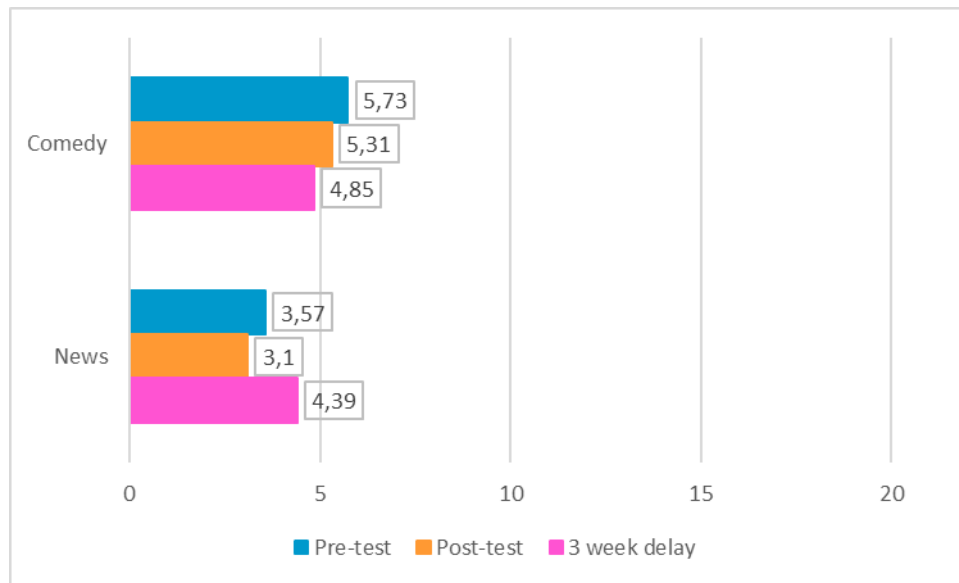
The results from the paired-samples t-tests reflect this: in the groups that were exposed to comedy, there was not a significant shift in the direction of positions more favorable to euthanasia when comparing the pretest and the posttest ( $t_{(25)} = 1.110$ ;  $p = 0.277$ ), but this was the case between posttest and the three-week delay test ( $t_{(25)} = 1.765$ ;  $p = 0.090$ ). Naturally, there were also significant differences when comparing the pretest and the delay test ( $t_{(25)} = 1.902$ ;  $p = 0.069$ ). In the groups that watched news, there were no significant differences before and after the exhibition of the content ( $t_{(20)} = 0.748$ ;  $p = 0.463$ ). Between the second and third tests, there were significant differences, but with positions becoming more against euthanasia ( $t_{(20)} = -1.888$ ;  $p = 0.074$ ). When comparing the pretest with the three-week delay, no differences of significance showed ( $t_{(20)} = -1.299$ ;  $p = 0.209$ ). The figure below, which also includes the results from the posttest, shows positions progressively more in favor of euthanasia in the three moments for those who watched comedy. This does not happen in the groups which watched news. Therefore, the results for this variable are aligned with my expectations.

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<sup>3</sup> For the mean results of the posttest, only participants who had valid answers in the index in all three questionnaires were accounted for, to have the same sample as the results from the paired-samples test between the pretest and three-week delay experimental session. The same applies to the next variables.



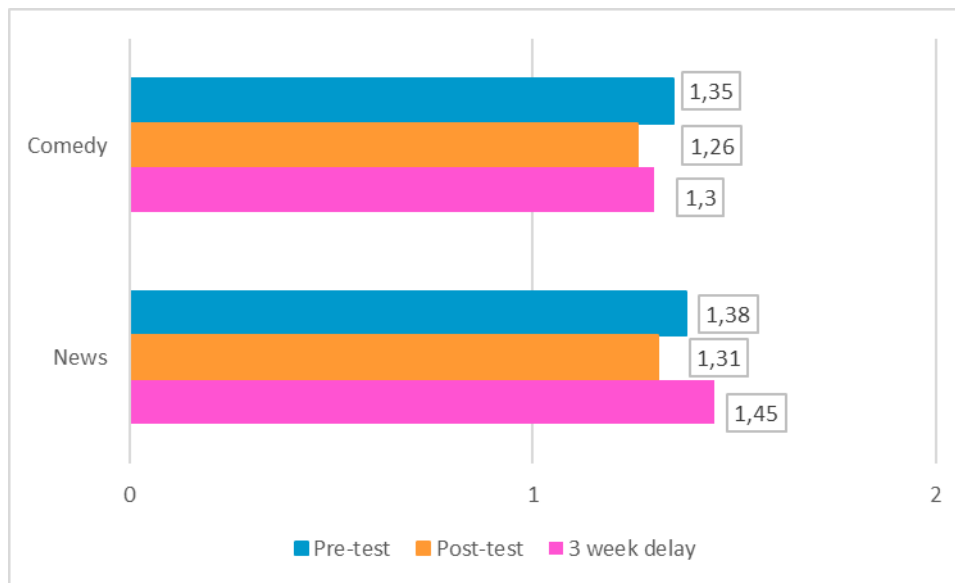
Figure 3.11. Opinions on euthanasia before exposure, after exposure, & three weeks later



Scale: 0 (more pro-euthanasia) – 21 (more against euthanasia)

Regarding the question about the civil requisition mechanism (Figure 3.12), no significant differences were found between comedy watching and news watching groups neither in the pretest ( $t_{(90)} = -0.380$ ;  $p = 0.705$ ), or in the posttest ( $t_{(95)} = -0.432$ ;  $p = 0.667$ ). After three weeks, however, a significant difference was noted ( $t_{(92)} = -1.730$ ;  $p = 0.087$ ). Nevertheless, the results from the paired-samples t-tests make it difficult to attribute any difference to the content watched. Within comedy groups, no significant differences were noted when comparing the pretest with the posttest ( $t_{(37)} = 1.356$ ;  $p = 0.183$ ), the posttest with the three-week delay ( $t_{(37)} = -0.274$ ;  $p = 0.786$ ), or the pretest with the three-week delay ( $t_{(37)} = 0.495$ ;  $p = 0.624$ ). Within the news watching groups, no significance was noted between pretest and posttest ( $t_{(41)} = 1.355$ ;  $p = 0.183$ ) and between pretest and three-week delay ( $t_{(41)} = -1.000$ ;  $p = 0.323$ ). There were significant differences between the posttest and the three-week delay measures ( $t_{(41)} = -2.218$ ;  $p = 0.032$ ), but the positions moved, once again, against euthanasia. Overall, it is impossible to say that there was any influence of the content watched in the participants' opinions.

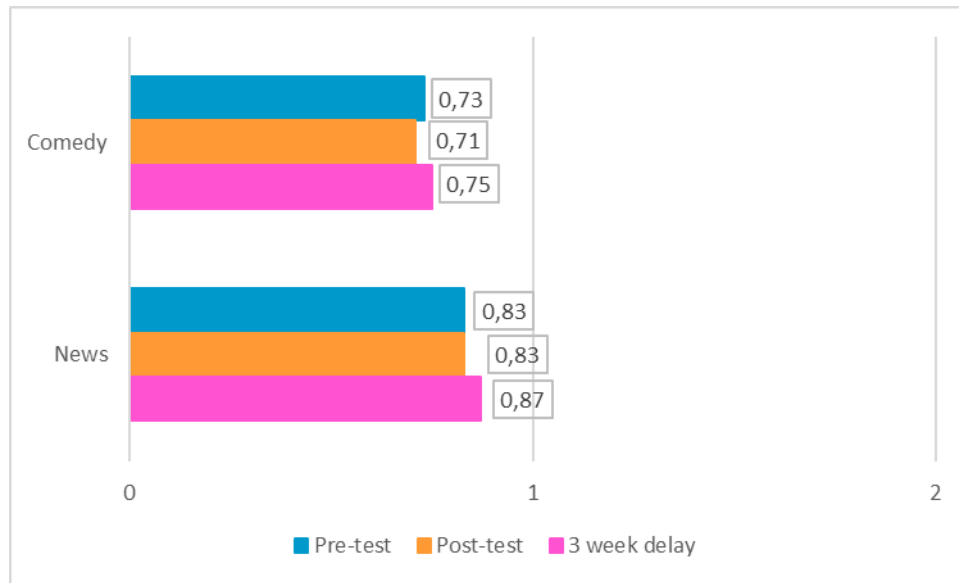
Figure 3.12. Opinions on the civil requisition mechanism before exposure, after exposure, & three weeks later



Scale: 0 (civil requisition shouldn't exist) – 2 (civil requisition should be used when necessary)

The results on the opinions regarding the right of nurses to strike also did not corroborate the hypothesis (Figure 3.13). No significant differences were found between groups in both the pretest ( $t_{(110)} = -0.707$ ;  $p = 0.481$ ), posttest ( $t_{(108)} = -0.952$ ;  $p = 0.343$ ), or in the three-week delay ( $t_{(105)} = -1.391$ ;  $p = 0.167$ ). There were also no significant differences in opinions expressed in different moments in the groups of participants who watched comedy: between the pretest and posttest ( $t_{(50)} = 0.444$ ;  $p = 0.659$ ), posttest and three-week delay test ( $t_{(50)} = -0.814$ ;  $p = 0.420$ ), and pretest and three-week delay ( $t_{(50)} = -0.375$ ;  $p = 0.709$ ). In the group that watched news, the results were similar (respectively:  $t_{(53)} = 0.000$ ;  $p = 1.000$ ;  $t_{(53)} = -0.629$ ;  $p = 0.532$ ;  $t_{(53)} = -0.704$ ;  $p = 0.485$ ). These results do not go according to the hypothesis, once again different from the euthanasia index.

Figure 3.13. Opinions on the rights of nurses to strike before exposure, after exposure, & three weeks later

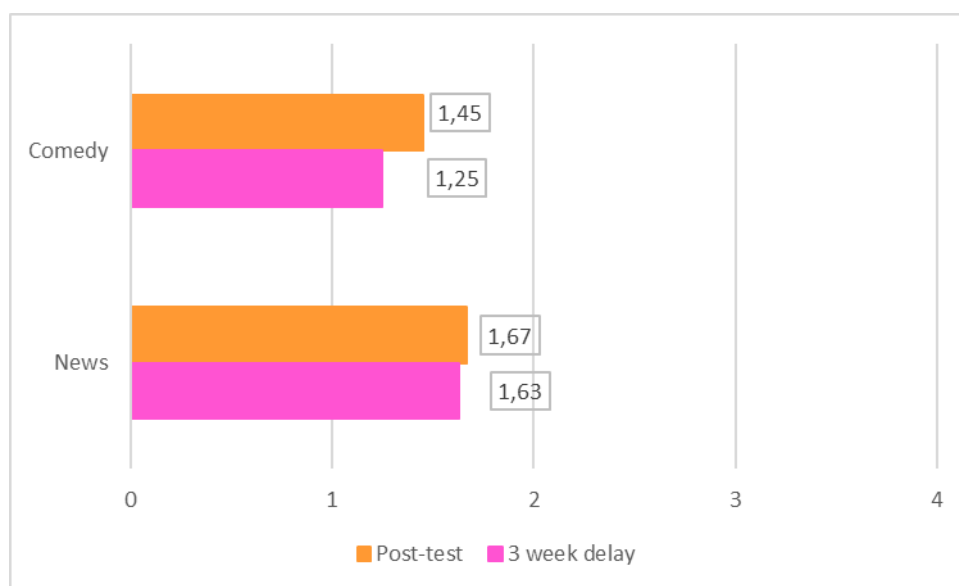


Scale: 0 (nurses should have the same rights to strike) – 2 (nurses shouldn't be allowed to strike)

I also tested hypothesis 4 with the variables dealing with specific opinions about the nurses strike of 2019. The results from the three-week delay comparative test show that participants who watched comedy supported the nurses' position more than the government's one in the 2019 strike in a significant way, compared to those who watched news ( $t_{(83.306)} = -2.136$ ;  $p = 0.036$ ). This difference was not registered in the posttests carried out three weeks earlier ( $t_{(93)} = -1.024$ ;  $p = 0.308$ ), although the people who watched comedy showed more support to the nurses than those who watched news by some margin (Figure 3.14). In the paired-samples t-test, there are no significant differences within comedy ( $t_{(39)} = 1.356$ ;  $p = 0.138$ ) or news groups ( $t_{(43)} = 0.190$ ;  $p = 0.850$ ) over time. Regarding the civil requisition mechanism use by the government, the differences were significant in both the posttest ( $t_{(74)} = -2.297$ ;  $p = 0.024$ ) and the three-week delay ( $t_{(78)} = -2.038$ ;  $p = 0.045$ ). In both times, people who watched comedy were significantly more critical of the government (Figure 3.15). Once again, no significant differences in the paired-samples tests (comedy:  $t_{(28)} = -0.902$ ;  $p = 0.375$ ; news:  $t_{(32)} = 0.000$ ;  $p = 1.000$ ).

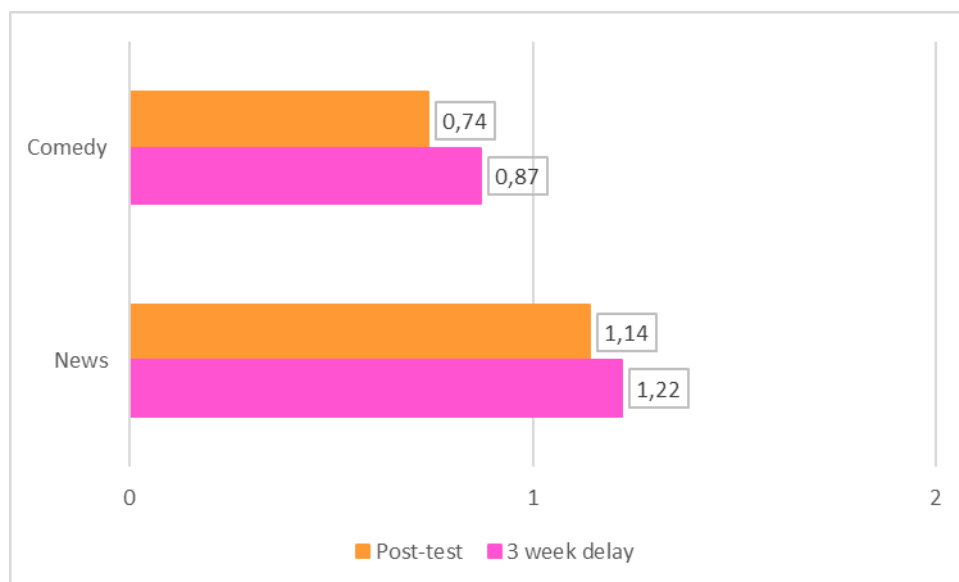
Once again, these results go in favor of hypothesis 4, and contribute to the confirmation of it. In the three variables in which the type of content watched had a significant impact on opinions, the impact of comedy watching did not vanish three weeks later – to the contrary, in this smaller sample and for a couple of variables, it seems to have needed this period of latency to be fully observed.

Figure 3.14. Opinion on nurses vs. Government after exposure to the videos & three weeks later



Scale: 0 (totally agrees with the nurses in the 2019 strike) – 4 (totally agrees with the government in the 2019 strike)

Figure 3.15. Opinion on the usage of the civil requisition mechanism after exposure to the videos & three weeks later



Scale: 0 (the government was wrong) – 2 (the government was right)

## CONCLUSION

This dissertation had the primary objective of understanding the impact that exposure to political comedy had on opinions about the issues under focus. To do this, an experimental design was put in place, in which university students were exposed to comedy about two different issues (euthanasia and the nurses' strike of 2019 in Portugal), with their opinions measured in three different moments (pretest, posttest, three weeks after the main experimental session). The results for the majority of the variables show that the groups who were exposed to comedy were somewhat influenced by the content watched: as comedian Diogo Batáguas joked about anti-euthanasia arguments, opinions shifted to a more pro-euthanasia position; also, since Ricardo Araújo Pereira made fun of the government's stances in the dispute with the nurses, those who were exposed to comedy had significantly more pro-nurses' positions than those exposed to news, and were more critical of the executive's actions, specifically the declaration of the civil requisition of nurses. However, these effects were only felt in questions specific to the 2019 strike. In the case of the more general questions, focusing both the right of nurses to strike and the civil requisition mechanism, no effects were registered. Overall, it is possible to say that there was an effect of exposure to comedy, which resonates with the results obtained by Brewer and McKnight (2015), Greenwood and colleagues (2016), Feldman and Chattoo (2019), and Becker (2022).

Regarding the secondary goals, it was also possible to confirm that this phenomenon occurred in both high-salience and low-salience issues, resembling what happened in Greenwood's et al. (2016) research. This similarity is of note, as that study follows a similar logic to this dissertation. It is also important to note that much of the existing literature points to effects being observed particularly in lower-salience or more unobtrusive issues (Ciuk & Yost, 2016; Lodge & Taber, 2013; Watt et al., 1993; Zucker, 1978). In the case of this dissertation, the results were more consistent precisely in the case of the lower salience issue (euthanasia).

I was not able to confirm hypothesis 3, as results showed no significant recency effects. As mentioned in the literature review chapter, highly motivated individuals (Chong & Druckman, 2010) and with higher levels of political knowledge (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2012) can be less effected by the recency effect. These factors may have acted in this situation, as the majority of participants were interested in politics and enrolled in politics-related undergraduate courses. On the contrary, in some variables, primacy effects apparently took place. It is possible that,

like authors such as Waugh and Norman (1965) and Panagopoulos (2011) theorized, the participants gave a disproportionate salience to the initial videos due to a cognitive bias.

The results also point to the fact that the influence of comedy lasted for at least three weeks, with differences of significance between groups that watched satire and groups that watched news continuing to exist three weeks after exposure to comedy videos. This goes in line with studies like Feldman and Chattoo (2019) and Nabi et al. (2007), that point to political attitudes being retained for some time after exposition. In particular, the latter researchers registered a sleeper effect in humorous content, with the impact increasing in the one-week delay test. This increase was also verified in some of the variables in this dissertation, which may indicate the existence of this sleeper effect.

The results from this research complement the already existing work that showcases the importance of political comedy. This type of entertainment is a powerful tool, with effects felt on political participation, political efficacy, political sophistication, evaluations of elected officials and candidates, and, as I show, opinions about concrete political issues, such as euthanasia or strikes. With a political comedy show (*Isto É Gozar Com Quem Trabalha*) being constantly the highest-rated TV show of the week in Portugal, we are left to wonder what kind of influence such program has on the audience's political attitudes and opinions.

It is important to point out, however, that this research has some limitations. The experimental method utilized does not allow for the generalization of the results to the general population, with the majority of the participants belonging to a very specific group: young university students with high levels of interest in politics. Also, relatively high levels of mortality, especially between the posttest and the three-week delay experimental session, were a hazard.

Nevertheless, with this being the first research of this kind done in and about Portugal, it is a good starting point for future work on the matter. The conclusions here presented show interesting patterns that should be tested in larger scales, with greater diversity of participants and political issues. With the ever-growing mixture between politics and entertainment, the theme of this dissertation faces a growing importance, meaning that our knowledge on this phenomenon should be expanded.

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