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# Laughing in Washington

Issue 1

November 7, 2026

Special issue: the funniest things satirists wrote about American politics

Will Rogers

## Will Rogers: “I don’t make jokes. I just watch the government”



An Oklahoma cowboy who became, in the 1920s and 1930s, the most famous political commentator in America, with a daily column carried by more than 300 newspapers. He mocked both parties equally, and summed up his own loyalties in one line: “I am not a member of any organized political party. I am a Democrat.”

Congress was his favourite beat. “I don’t make jokes. I just watch the

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Will Rogers

### “We have the best politicians money can buy”

When it came to elections, Will Rogers made no distinction between the parties. He bent the old proverb about a fool and his money into a new one: “A fool and his money are soon elected.”

“The short memories of the

Continued on page 2

Will Rogers

### The best job in America? Vice President

Public office got the Rogers treatment too. The best job in the country, he reckoned, was the vice presidency: all the man has to do is get up every morning and ask, “How is the President?”

Diplomacy? “The art of saying ‘nice

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The classics

### Mark Twain: “Suppose you were an idiot. And suppose you were a member of Congress”

The founding father of American political satire (1835–1910). The author of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn despised politics, and enjoyed saying so in public.

“Reader, suppose you were an

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## Continued: Will Rogers: “I don’t make jokes. I just watch the government”

government and report the facts.”

“Every time Congress makes a joke it’s a law, and every time they make a law it’s a joke.”

“I could study all my life and not think up half the number of funny things passed in one session of Congress.”

> «Every time Congress makes a joke it’s a law, and every time they make a law it’s a joke.»

“A man gets up to speak and says nothing. Nobody listens, and then everybody disagrees.”

“The only difference between death and taxes is that death doesn’t get worse every time Congress meets.”

On the federal budget: “a mythical bean bag. Congress votes mythical beans into it, then reaches in and tries to pull real ones out.”

And a word of comfort for voters: “Don’t blame a legislative body for not doing something. When they do nothing, they don’t hurt anybody. When they do something is when they become dangerous.”

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## Continued: “We have the best politicians money can buy”

American voters is what keeps our politicians in office.”

“The more you read and observe about this politics thing, you got to admit that each party is worse than the other. The one that’s out always looks the best.”

“If you ever injected truth into politics, you would have no politics.”

“Our public men are speaking every day on something, but they ain’t saying anything.”

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## Continued: The best job in America? Vice President

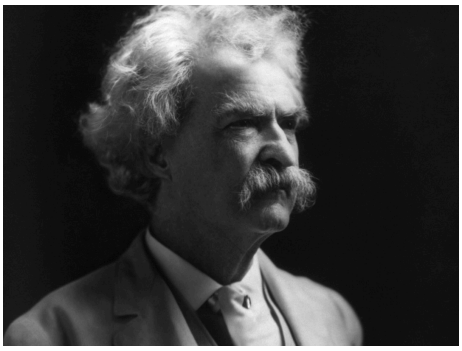
doggie’ until you can find a rock.”

Taxes? “The income tax has made more liars out of the American people than golf has.”

And a prayer to close: “Be thankful we’re not getting all the government we’re paying for.”

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## Continued: Mark Twain: “Suppose you were an idiot. And suppose you were a member of Congress”



idiot. And suppose you were a member of Congress. But I repeat myself.”

“It could probably be shown by facts and figures that there is no distinctly native American criminal class except Congress.” That one comes from Pudd’nhead Wilson’s New Calendar, the mock almanac that opens each chapter of Following the Equator (1897).

Local government did not escape either: “In the first place God made idiots. That was for practice. Then He made School Boards.”

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## The classics

The classics

# Jokes Mark Twain never said

Mark Twain's name attracts jokes the way a magnet attracts iron filings. When our agents checked the lines credited to him, three of the most famous had no source anywhere in his writing.

One: "A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes." Versions of it predate Twain by decades; Jonathan Swift, among others, wrote an early one.

Two: "It's easier to fool people than to convince them that they have been fooled." Shared everywhere under his name, and unknown to Twain scholars.

Three: "Politicians and diapers must be changed often, and for the same reason." A modern joke, pinned on Twain without evidence.

Good jokes, all three. But good journalism starts with a simple question: who actually said this?

The classics

## Mencken: "Every election is a sort of advance auction sale of stolen goods"



H. L. Mencken (1880–1956), the Sage of Baltimore: journalist, critic, and the sharpest satirical pen of the first half of the twentieth century.

"A good politician is quite as unthinkable as an honest burglar."

"Every election is a sort of advance auction sale of stolen goods."

"A politician is an animal which can sit on a fence and yet keep both ears to the ground."

"The men the American people admire most extravagantly are the most daring liars; the men they detest most violently are those who try to tell them the truth."

"Every decent man is ashamed of the government he lives under."

"The urge to save humanity is almost always a false front for the urge to rule it."

## Modern satirists

Modern satirists

# O'Rourke: government is whiskey and car keys for teenage boys

P. J. O'Rourke (1947–2022), the conservative satirist behind Parliament of Whores: A Lone Humorist Attempts to Explain the Entire U.S. Government. He was called the Mencken of the baby boomers.

"The Democrats are the party that says government will make you smarter, taller, richer, and remove the crabgrass on your lawn. The Republicans are the party that says government doesn't work, and then they get elected and prove it."

"Giving money and power to government is like giving whiskey and car keys to teenage boys."

"When buying and selling are controlled by legislation, the first things to be bought and sold are legislators."

"The good, the intelligent, the wise and the hardworking don't need politics. They have jobs."

## Modern satirists — continued

Modern satirists

### What is politics? Five definitions you won't find in the dictionary

Ask American satirists to define politics, and the answers come out more honest than the textbooks.

The writer Oscar Ameringer: "Politics is the gentle art of getting votes from the poor and campaign funds from the rich, by promising to protect each from the other."

The economist John Kenneth Galbraith: "Politics is not the art of the possible. It consists in choosing between the disastrous and the unpalatable."

Senator Mark Hanna: "There are two things that are important in politics. The first is money, and I can't remember what the second one is."

Bob Hope: "No one party can fool all of the people all of the time; that's why we have two parties."

And George Carlin: "Bipartisan usually means that a larger-than-usual deception is being carried out."

Modern satirists

### "I don't approve of political jokes. I've seen too many of them get elected"

From the comedy clubs and the late-night desks, short jokes that pack a century of laughing anger.

Rodney Dangerfield: "With my luck, if I was a politician I'd be honest."

Stephen Colbert, during a government shutdown, noted that his show had now outlasted the federal government: they were still working, and Washington had closed.

An old joke comedians love, and one Jon Stewart has been known to quote: if con is the opposite of pro, is Congress the opposite of progress?

Author unknown: the word politics comes from poly, meaning many, and ticks, meaning blood-sucking creatures.

And, also author unknown: "I don't approve of political jokes. I've seen too many of them get elected."

Modern satirists

### Why does a political joke live for a hundred years?

The American political jokes that last are the ones that mock the institution itself: Congress, elections, both parties at once. Not one particular man.

That is why Will Rogers and Mark Twain still read as if they were written this morning. The names change. Congress stays.

Today's late-night comedy is more partisan and less literary. It is closer to daily commentary than to the kind of joke people still read a century later.

## About this issue

About this issue

# How this issue was made

We chose the subject in one sentence: the funniest things ever written about American politics. Everything after that was done by AI agents.

The agents searched books, newspapers and websites, collected the quotes, and checked who really said them. Lines with no source were set aside, and given a page of their own.

Then they edited the texts and sorted them into sections, and Tabaa laid out the whole newspaper: masthead, pages, photos and pull quotes.

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