

RIDICULING AS AN EXPRESSION OF CULTURAL IMAGINARY IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE. AN ANALYSIS OF GENDERED REMARKS IN RECENT PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES¹

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Abstract

This paper examines ridiculing strategies in presidential discourse, focusing on how they operate as rhetorical tools of delegitimation through gendered remarks and as reflections of the cultural imaginary of the speaker. Drawing on Henri Bergson's (1924) notion of laughter as social correction and Michael Billig's (2005) theory of ridicule as a disciplinary practice, ridiculing is situated at the intersection of political performance, cultural norms, and gendered expectations. The study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a method for analysis, emphasizing how meaning is negotiated through interaction and how discursive practices reveal deeper structures of power. By examining selected extracts from recent presidential debates and campaign interactions in the United States of America, France, and Romania, the analysis seeks to uncover how ridicule is constructed linguistically, how it functions in the dynamics of debate, and how it reflects broader social

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imaginaries. In the extracts selected from the US debates, Donald Trump's ridiculing of Hillary Clinton ("such a nasty woman") and Kamala Harris ("don't lie") illustrates ridiculing as a gendered practice of domination, where insult and interruption serve to undermine credibility. Clinton and Harris countered by emphasizing factual accuracy, competence, and integrity, indirectly resisting ridiculing but without adopting it fully as a strategy. The French debates between Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen reveal a different dynamic. Le Pen's strategy of constant interruption contrasts with Macron's metaphorical ridicule, exemplified by calling Le Pen the "grande prêtresse de la peur." Here ridiculing operates through symbolic framing rather than overt insult, underscoring the French tradition of rhetorical wit and ideological confrontation. The Romanian examples foreground the salience of gender. Viorica Dăncilă appropriated the "gender card" by framing herself as both resilient and underestimated, ridiculing male fragility while mobilizing maternal and biological imagery to claim strength. Elena Lasconi confronted paternalistic ridicule through the "big hat" metaphor, reappropriating domestic stereotypes ("sent back to the saucepan") as markers of competence and versatility. These strategies show how ridicule, often directed against women, can be inverted into empowerment and authenticity. From a cross-cultural perspective, ridiculing emerges as a 'double-edged sword', on the one hand delegitimizing opponents but also crystallizing anxieties about authority, gender, and legitimacy. The findings suggest that ridiculing is not merely a marginal rhetorical device but a core feature, a constitutive element of contemporary presidential discourse. As women gain visibility in the highest offices, the cultural imaginary of leadership is being renegotiated, with ridiculing serving as a tool for both combat of the opponent and seduction of the audience.

Keywords: ridiculing; cultural imaginary; political discourse; presidential debates; discourse analysis.

1 Introduction

Presidential debates, as a subgenre of political discourse, are mediated combat spaces in which finalist candidates put a final effort to shape public perception, frame policy discussions, and negotiate legitimacy. Among the array of rhetorical strategies deployed, ridiculing opponents has emerged as a particularly effective device, capable of undermining credibility, entertaining

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audiences, and reinforcing cultural norms. Ridiculing operates at the intersection of humor, power, and social meaning, making it a revealing lens for understanding the core dynamics of political discourse. This article examines ridiculing as an expression of the cultural imaginary in presidential debates featuring female and male finalists. Drawing on examples from the United States, France, and Romania, the study explores how ridicule is deployed in interaction and how it reflects, reproduces, or subverts gendered expectations and broader cultural narratives.

2 Literature review

In this section, I present an outline of the main theoretical notions the analysis is based on, summarizing general aspects of political discourse and presidential debates, ridiculing as a core rhetorical phenomenon used for combat in the genre, and a broad perspective on gender and language as closely related to the cultural imaginary of the speakers.

Political discourse functions as a performative form of talk where candidates enact authority, legitimacy, and symbolic roles. Televised debates, in particular, are ritualized confrontations combining adversarial dialogue with performative strategies that include rhetoric, gesture, and timing (Fairclough, 1995; Chilton, 2004; Wodak, 2009).

Ridiculing emerges as a central rhetorical device, capable of undermining opponents, entertaining audiences, and reinforcing cultural norms. Theoretically, ridicule is both corrective and persuasive: Bergson (1924) emphasized its social function of highlighting absurdity and enforcing norms, while Billig (2005) highlighted its role in social argumentation. Charaudeau (2006, 2011, 2013, 2015) conceptualizes ridicule as a strategic tool that delegitimizes opponents while asserting the speaker's authority, and Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2013a, 2013b, 2019) situates it interactionally, as co-constructed within discourse and shaped by cultural knowledge.

Gender and language intersect closely with these dynamics. Gender is understood as a socio-cultural construct, enacted and renegotiated in interaction rather than biologically

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determined (as detailed in Botaș, 2025). Early approaches, such as Lakoff's (1975) dominance model and Tannen's (1991, 1996) difference model, emphasized women's politeness and male assertiveness, while later research (O'Barr & Atkins, 1980; Mills, 2003; Cameron, 2005) challenged universal binaries, focusing instead on power, context, and communicative style. Cultural imaginaries provide a symbolic framework within which both ridiculing and gender are interpreted (Castoriadis, 1987; Kølvråa & Forchtner, 2019). In presidential debates, ridiculing strategies not only target opponents but also enact and contest gendered expectations, negotiating authority, credibility, and audience alignment within specific socio-cultural and historical contexts.

2.1 Political discourse as Performance

Political discourse, as extensively discussed in the field literature, is not a neutral transmission of information; it is performative, enacting social roles, power relations, and symbolic meanings transmitted by the ones in power to the general public with the constant aim of gaining popularity, affiliation, and ultimately, votes. Critical discourse analysts have emphasized that political communication operates as a form of social practice, in which language choices are inseparable from semiotic performances, including tone, gesture, and timing (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak, 2009).

Presidential debates, in particular, are highly adversarial staged confrontations, where candidates address their opponents, moderators, and audiences simultaneously, projecting authority, credibility, and relatability.

Chilton (2004) conceptualizes political discourse as strategic interaction wherein linguistic decisions are inseparable from broader performative goals. Debates combine adversarial dialogue with ritualized performance, making them ideal arenas for rhetorical combat.

Ridiculing is emblematic of this performative dimension. It functions not only to delegitimize the opponent but also to stage the speaker as witty, authoritative, or aligned with audience expectations. Laughter, shock, or applause triggered by ridicule

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reinforces its immediate effect, crystallizing cultural imaginaries in the public sphere.

2.2 Ridiculing as a Rhetorical Strategy for Combat and Seduction

Ridiculing has been theorized as a complex social and linguistic phenomenon, intertwined with humor, irony, and moral judgment. Bergson (1924) emphasized the social function of laughter, interpreting ridicule as a corrective mechanism: through ‘negative’ laughter, it punishes inflexibility, exposes absurdities, and reinforces norms. Michael Billig (2005) later expanded this perspective, showing that ridicule is deeply rhetorical, constituting a form of social argumentation that simultaneously mocks interlocutors and persuades i.e. seduces the audiences.

In the context of discourse analysis, Charaudeau (2006, 2011, 2013) frames ridiculing as a strategic tool that operates through contrast, exaggeration, and moral evaluation, enabling speakers to delegitimize opponents while reinforcing their own authority. Ridicule often involves a double movement: it presents the target as absurd or incompetent, while implicitly asserting the speaker’s legitimacy and alignment with audience expectations. Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2013, 2015, 2019) further highlights the conversational and interactional dimension of ridicule, showing that it is co-constructed in context and shaped by shared cultural knowledge, intonation, and sequential positioning within discourse.

When examined in presidential debates, ridiculing is observed to function both as a performative speech act and as a declaration of symbolic power, intersecting with gender and cultural imaginaries. It can enforce traditional gendered expectations, for instance, by mocking a woman’s assertiveness or emotional expression, while simultaneously allowing women to deploy ridiculing strategically to assert and claim their personal authority and moral competence.

2.3 Gender, Language and the Cultural Imaginary

Political discourse is embedded in shared symbolic frameworks known as cultural imaginaries, which shape collective perceptions and expectations. Castoriadis (1987) defines the imaginary as a symbolic reservoir through which societies construct meaning and, thus, relevance. Kølvråa and Forchtner (2019) further emphasize that cultural imaginaries are active, affective projects that “seduce” audiences by offering narrative and aesthetic frameworks for understanding social and political life. In presidential debates, candidates draw upon these imaginaries to legitimate their own authority and to delegitimize opponents, particularly along gendered lines.

Gender is, inevitably, a constitutive and symbolic element in the mentioned type of communicative situation. Following a long tradition of research in gender and language studies, it is important to stress that gender is not considered to be reducible to biological sex, but is a socio-cultural construct continuously enacted and renegotiated through interaction (Botaș, 2025; Weatherall, 2002; Cameron, 2005 etc.). Early studies, such as the dominance approach of Lakoff (1975) and Spender (1980), problematized women’s linguistic “powerlessness” and politeness in contrast to men’s assertiveness, while the difference approach (Tannen, 1991, 1996) highlighted contrasting conversational styles. Later research challenged these binary assumptions, showing that “women’s language” is a reflection of social position rather than innate femininity (O’Barr & Atkins, 1980). Contemporary scholarship treats gender as a dynamic process, a “verb” rather than a noun, with communicative styles emerging contextually and locally (Botaș, 2025; Cameron, 2005; Crawford, 1995; Mills, 2003).

In this study, ridiculing is treated as a macro speech act of (negative) humour (Botaș, 2025, pp. 40-66), further understood as a discursive mechanism through which gender is constructed and contested. Thus, ridiculing expressions simultaneously mobilize cultural imaginaries of masculinity and femininity, reproducing or subverting stereotypes and shaping perceptions of authority. Female candidates can invert traditional expectations, using ridicule to position male opponents as

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obsolete, arrogant, or illegitimate, while male candidates may rely on ridicule to challenge female credibility or reinforce dominance. These processes reveal how cultural imaginaries of leadership, legitimacy, and belonging are enacted and negotiated in real time (Botaș, 2025; Kølvrå & Forchtner, 2019).

3 Methodology

This study's methodological framework is grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA views language as a form of social practice through which power, ideology, and cultural meaning are produced and reproduced (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). By analyzing instances of ridiculing in presidential debates, CDA enables an examination of how the used rhetorical strategies interact with and reflect broader cultural imaginaries and reveal gendered expectations, mirroring the current sociocultural status quo.

The analysed dataset comprises extracts from presidential debates and campaign exchanges between female and male finalists in recent elections in the USA i.e. Hillary Clinton vs. Donald Trump (2016) and Kamala Harris vs. Donald Trump (2024), in France i.e. Marine Le Pen vs. Emmanuel Macron (2017, 2022), and Romania i.e. Viorica Dăncilă vs. Klaus Iohannis (2019) and several interventions of Elena Lasconi (2024 and 2025).

The analytical procedure involved three steps. First, instances of ridicule — including irony, sarcasm, mockery, nicknaming, and humorous disparagement — were identified in the debates by the criterion of the perlocutionary effect i.e. laughter (be it targeted, tendentious, negative laughter). Second, each instance was categorized according to its rhetorical formulation, such as metaphor, exaggeration (hyperbole/litotes), or various forms of moral condemnation. Third, the extracts were interpreted in light of the cultural imaginary and gender dynamics, assessing how ridicule invoked, reinforced, or challenged shared symbolic frameworks. Reflexivity was maintained throughout, acknowledging that interpretations are influenced by the researcher's awareness of gendered norms and cultural context. Limitations include the mediated nature of

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televised debates and the variability of audience reception across different national contexts.

4 Data Analysis

The data analysis examines ridiculing strategies in recent presidential debates across the United States, France, and Romania, focusing on interactions between male and female finalists. In the 2016 U.S. debates, Donald Trump frequently ridiculed Hillary Clinton through personal attacks, interruptions, and the use of mocking nicknames, while Clinton countered with irony and composure to project authority. In the 2024 debates with Kamala Harris, Trump maintained similar tactics, but Harris reframed ridicule by turning Trump's exaggerations into self-discrediting performances, thus mobilizing cultural imaginaries of resilience and competence. In France, Marine Le Pen faced Emmanuel Macron in 2017 and 2022; Macron often ridiculed her as incompetent and unprepared, drawing on technocratic authority, while Le Pen resorted to sarcasm to destabilize Macron's intellectual superiority. In Romania, Klaus Iohannis ridiculed Viorica Dăncilă in 2019 through implicit delegitimization, emphasizing her perceived lack of experience, while in 2024–2025 Elena Lasconi's rhetorical stance demonstrated a more confident use of irony and humorous retorts to challenge traditional gendered expectations. Across these contexts, ridiculing emerges as a culturally inflected strategy that reflects both local political imaginaries and broader gendered patterns of interaction.

4.1 Hillary Clinton vs. Donald Trump (US, 2016)

In the 2016 US presidential debates, Donald Trump (DT) repeatedly employed ridiculing as a strategy to undermine Hillary Clinton's (HC) authority. His remark "Because you'd be in jail" in response to the email controversy, his mockery of her bathroom breaks, and the infamous "nasty woman" comment illustrate multiple rhetorical devices, including threat, name-calling, and personal insult. These attacks drew on gendered cultural imaginaries, coding femininity as vulnerability or

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emotional instability and framing assertiveness in women as undesirable. Clinton's subsequent reframing of "nasty woman" demonstrates how ridicule can be reclaimed, transforming an insult into a badge of resilience and defiance.

Extract #1 – 3rd Clinton – Trump debate, 19th of October, 2016 [1:28:23 – 1:28:45] (NBC News, 2016)

- (1) HC: Well, Chris, I am on record as saying that we need to put more money into the Social Security Trust Fund. That's part of... my commitment to raise taxes on the wealthy. My social security payroll contribution will go up, as will Donald's - assuming he can't figure out how to get out of it. Uh, but what we want to do is to replenish the [social security trust fund]
DT: [such a nasty woman]

In this exchange from the 2016 US presidential debate, HC presents a policy-oriented argument on social security funding, positioning herself as committed to fairness by stressing increased contributions from the wealthy. She introduces a subtle dig at DT "assuming he can't figure out how to get out of it", alluding to his reputation for tax avoidance. This instance of ridiculing is framed as sarcastic rather than overt insult, aligning with HC's broader strategy of embedding criticism within rational, policy-focused discourse. DT's interjection "such a nasty woman" functions as a direct ad hominem attack. Instead of engaging with HC's argument, he ridicules her personally, drawing on gendered language that mobilizes the cultural imaginary of women as disruptive or unpleasant when assertive. In this way, ridicule here is explicitly gendered: HC's sarcastic jab questions DT's integrity, while his retort delegitimizes her ethos by invoking a stereotype of female aggressiveness. Interactionally, the overlap of speech marks DT's attempt to undermine HC's floor-holding authority, illustrating power struggle through interruption. The exchange encapsulates how ridiculing in debates serves both as a defensive counter and as a means to reinforce or contest gendered expectations.

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Extract #2 – 2nd Cliton – Trump debate, 9th of October, 2016 [18:55 – 19:42] (CNBC, 2016)

(2) **HC:** Everything he just said is absolutely false, but I'm not surprised. In the first debate, I told people it would be impossible to be fact checking Donald all the time. I would never get to talk about anything I'd want to do and how we're really, going to really, make lives better for people. So once again, go to Hillaryclinton.com. We have literally Trump - you can fact check him in real time. Last time at the first debate, we had millions of people fact checking so I expect we will have millions more fact checking because, you know, it's just awfully good that someone with the temperament of Donald Trump is not in charge of the law in our country.

DT: Because you would be in jail.

In (2), HC's turn frames DT's previous claims as "absolutely false," points to systemic fact-checking as corrective, and reorients the exchange toward policy (how to "make lives better for people"). Her remark about temperamen "it's just awfully good that someone with the temperament of DT is not in charge of the law", combines evaluative critique with a normative appeal to fitness for office. The move is discursive: it delegitimizes DT by questioning suitability and invites the audience to evaluate competence and temperament rather than engage in personal invective. DT's reply, "Because you would be in jail," bypasses the policy and temperament frames and performs a sudden, aggressive *ad hominem*. Rhetorically it is a threat-condensed-as-soundbite: compact, memorable, and aimed at disrupting the opponent's ethos. Interactionally, it again represents a floor-grabbing tactic that seeks to shift attention away from HC's evidence-based rebuttal toward scandal and moral culpability. In terms of ridicule, this line functions less as comic derision and more as delegitimizing intimidation—an attempt to shame and discredit by invoking criminality.

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4.2 Kamala Harris vs. Donald Trump (US, 2024)

During the 2024 debate between Kamala Harris (KH) and DT, KH utilized ridiculing differently, exposing absurdities in DT's statements and contrasting them with rational, fact-based rebuttals. Laughter and derision were directed at exaggerated claims about immigration and ideological labels such as "Marxist." Ahead of the campaign, Trump had referred to his opponent as "crazy," "dumb," "crooked," a liar, "grossly incompetent," "low IQ" and "weak" (Haines, 2024). Gendered imaginaries were evident: KH's composure, rationality, and moral authority contrasted with the male opponent's hyperbolic rhetoric, emphasizing traditional expectations of women to display enhanced rationality and credibility.

Extract #3 Kamala Harris – Donald Trump, 11th of September 2024 [42:20 – 42:40] (Hoffman, 2024)

(3) DT: Fracking? She's been against it for 12 years. Uh, defund the police. She's been against that forever. She gave all that stuff up, very wrongly, very horribly. And everybody's laughing at it, okay? They're all laughing at it. She gave up at least 12 and probably 14 or 15 different policies. Like, she was big on defund the police.

KH: That's not true. [mouthed, not audible]

DT: In Minnesota, she went out -- wait a minute. I'm talking now. If you don't mind. Please. Does that sound familiar?

KH: Don't lie. [lie is audible]

In this 2024 debate exchange, DT ridicules KH by exaggerating her policy shifts and framing her as inconsistent and laughable: "everybody's laughing at it." This instance of ridiculing blends hyperbole and mockery, projecting KH as untrustworthy and weak. KH's responses "that's not true" and "don't lie" are minimalistic but pointed, countering DT's narrative with direct accusations of dishonesty. Interactionally, DT asserts dominance with interruptions ("wait a minute. I'm

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talking now”), echoing her style in previous interventions, while KH resists by reclaiming moral authority through a concise charge of lying. The clash illustrates ridicule as a gendered strategy: DT amplifies derision and spectacle, while KH reduces her counter to a sharp ethical stance, relying on brevity and credibility rather than elaboration.

4.3 Marine le Pen vs. Emmanuel Macron (France, 2017, 2022)

In the French debates, Macron ridiculed Le Pen through metaphor and moral contrast, labeling her the “high priestess of fear” and linking her candidacy to her father’s controversial legacy. The ridicule relied less on physical or personal traits and more on symbolic and ideological positioning. Gendered imaginaries were invoked through notions of female succession and perceived dependence on male predecessors, while ridiculing reinforced Macron’s rational, legitimate, and steady leadership in contrast to Le Pen’s fear-driven, demagogic persona.

*Extract #4 Marine Le Pen – Emmanuel Macron, 3rd of May, 2017
[1:44:57 – 1:45:10] (REPLAY, 2017)*

(4) **EM:** On peut avoir un [débât démocratique?]

MLP: Allez-y, allez-y, allez-y, allez-y...

EM: D’abord, la grande peur qui la manipule depuis le début, c’est vous qui joue avec la peur de nos concitoyens sur le terrorisme et ça c’est vous la grande peur, la grande prêtresse de la peur, elle est en face de moi. ((HAND POINTING AT MLP))

(EM: So much more disciplined than five years ago, Madame Le Pen.

MLP: Yes, it is true. Listen, one can tell when one is aging.

EM: I believe it is done... I will be very respectful regarding you. It is not visible in your case. But in my case, I am afraid it is very much visible, Madame.)

In (4), MLP repeatedly interrupts EM with “allez-y, allez-y...,” a ridiculing gesture that trivializes his authority and frames him as over-serious or pedantic. EM counters by reframing the

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exchange at a higher rhetorical level: he accuses MLP of being “la grande prêtresse de la peur,” casting her as both manipulative and theatrical. The ridiculing here is mutual but asymmetrical. On the one hand, MLP’s is a performative interruption, mocking the debate format itself, while, on the other hand, EM’s is metaphorical, using elevated language to delegitimize her populist stance. The extract illustrates two culturally resonant styles of ridiculing: MLP’s disruptive, sarcastic interruption versus EM’s technocratic and symbolic labeling. The gender dimension is subtle but impactful: through ridiculing, MLP positions herself as combative and unruly, while EM reinscribes authority by feminizing her as a “priestess,” turning her rhetoric of strength into a caricature of irrational fearmongering.

Extract #5 Marine Le Pen – Emmanuel Macron, 20 April 2022, [2:17:40 – 2:17:55] (Franceinfo, 2022)

- (5) **EM:** Mais beaucoup plus discipline qu’il y a cinq ans,
[Madame Le Pen]
MLP: [oui...] c’est vrai. Ecoutez, on voit qu’on vieillit
((LAUGHTER))
EM: C’est- je- je crois que c’est effectué. Je serai très
respectueux à votre égard.
((MLP Laughing))
Vous, ça ne se voit pas. Moi, j’ai peur que ça se voit
beaucoup, Madame.
(*EM: But [you are] much more disciplined than 5 years
ago
[Madame Le Pen]*)
MLP: [yes] it is true. Listen, we can see we are aging
((LAUGHTER))
EM: It’s- I- I- think it is done. I will be very respectful
towards you ((MLP Laughing))
*You, it is not visible. Me, I’m afraid it is very much visible,
Madame.)*

In (5), I have identified an exceptional occurrence of non-ridiculing, almost affiliative humour, at the end of the most recent debate between the candidates to the presidency of France in 2022. In the shared instance, the two candidates briefly pause

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the official talk to share an intimate, even vulnerable exchange of impressions on their overall performance in the debate, conceding to having aged and, therefore, slowed down, compared to the previous election five years before. I chose to exhibit this rare and enjoyable occurrence, as a confirmation of the general tendency postulated in the field literature, i.e. that, in the genre of the presidential debate, in which humour is generally negative/offensive, positive/affiliative humour and pure entertainment almost never occurs (Botaș, 2025, p. 236). The tone of the sequence is joyful, filled with overt self-laughter and genuine mirth. It is the sole instance of the kind which I have encountered in the debates and speeches examined for this analysis. EM puts his thoughts into words and refers to MLP as being “much more disciplined” than five years ago i.e. in the previous debate in 2017. This remark was meant to highlight the startling contrast between his opponent’s behaviour, when she was extremely aggressive, and her present behaviour, the exact opposite. Throughout the debate in 2022, MLP was calm, mild and mostly unreactive, an attitude which came as a complete surprise given her well-known personality and ethos of arrogance and “legendary pugnacity”, as the press often referred to her. Thus, this contrast of attitudes gave birth to a moment of humour in which EM’s remark of MLP’s “discipline” was taken up unapologetically with self-laughter, naturalised and symbolically “blamed” on her having become older in these last five years. In a gentlemanly, courteous and felicitous intervention, EM assured MLP of the fact that age was not an issue for her, but assuming it with certainty for himself. MLP’s joyful and unoffended self-laughter came to confirm EM’s initial remark, which then became probably the first and mostly spread impression of the entire debate, qualifying it as weak, uninteresting and annoyingly dull.

4.4 Viorica Dăncilă vs. Klaus Iohannis (Romania, 2019)

Although specific ridiculing instances from the 2019 Dăncilă vs. Iohannis debates were not located, preliminary observations suggest that her discourse, like other female candidates, would have been interpreted through gendered

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cultural frameworks, influencing both production and reception of ridicule. Across all cases, ridicule emerges as a discursive mechanism through which gendered cultural imaginaries are invoked, contested, and performed. Female candidates' ridiculing strategies often invert traditional expectations, portraying male opponents as outdated, arrogant, or incompetent, while male candidates frequently rely on ridicule to challenge female credibility or reinforce dominance. Audience reactions amplify these performances, signaling approval or contestation and extending the reach of cultural imaginaries beyond the debate stage.

(6) VD: *Eu nu am plâns deloc. Poate bărbații, că și bărbații plâng câteodată. Nu a fost niciun moment în care să plângem...* (Digiz24, 2019)

(I never cried. Maybe the men, because men also cry sometimes. There was not one single moment when we cried.)

(7) VD: *Să nu vă temeți o clipă că am să fac un pas înapoi. Nu mi-e frică de niciunul dintre ei. Sunt mai puternică decât ei toți la un loc. Dacă ar fi corect, eu ar trebui să port pantaloni și ei fustă. Sunt prima femeie prim-ministru. Când mi-am început activitatea, mulți îmi spuneau: ceilalți au rezistat șase luni, tu n-ai să rezisti nici trei luni. Le-am spus atunci: măcar nouă luni că sunt femeie. Iată că a trecut un an și nouă luni în care am rezistat oricărei jigniri, oricărui obstacol, oricărui blocaj din partea președintelui.* (Hotnews, 2019)

(Don't be afraid for one moment that I would step back. I am not afraid of any of them. I am stronger than all of them together. If it were fair, I should be wearing pants and they, a skirt. I am the first woman-prime minister. When I started my activity, many were telling me: the others lasted for six months, you won't last for three. I told them then: at least nine months, because I am a woman. Here we are after a year and nine months in which I resisted all insults, all obstacles and impediments from the president.)

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In the Romanian 2019 campaign, KI's refusal to debate VD created an asymmetrical stage, amplifying her need to perform both authority and resilience through solo media appearances. In (6), VD counters accusations of weakness by reversing stereotypes: "I never cried. Maybe the men, because men also cry sometimes." Here ridiculing is subtle, turning the motive of female fragility back against men while denying emotional vulnerability. It illustrates her attempt to neutralize gendered expectations through irony, presenting herself as composed and strong. Extract (7) is even more explicitly gendered. VD mobilizes the "gender card" by emphasizing her exceptionalism as the first female prime minister, dramatizing endurance ("I resisted... any insult, any obstacle") and even employing a metaphor of clothing reversal "I should be wearing pants and they, a skirt" to ridicule male opponents as less courageous and, finally, unworthy of the values and skills attributed to them apriorily through their gender. The reference to "nine months because I am a woman" further appropriates biological imagery to frame persistence as feminine strength. These strategies, much vehiculated in VD's discourse, reveal how ridicule and the cultural imaginary of gender intersect: VD reconfigures stereotypes of weakness into assertions of power, positioning herself as simultaneously maternal, resilient, and combative. In the absence of a direct debate, ridiculing and gender performance became her primary tools for symbolic confrontation.

4.5 Elena Lasconi (Romania, 2024 and 2025)

Romanian debates featuring Elena Lasconi showcase ridicule as witty retort and rhetorical contrast. For example, when responding to Mircea Geoană with "Domnul Bănescu vă bate și când nu participă!" laughter was elicited from the audience, highlighting the performative effect. Other statements emphasized arrogance in male opponents and societal conditions, blending critique with humor. Gendered imaginaries were central: Lasconi's ridicule constructed authority, moral integrity, and strategic competence, while negotiating cultural expectations of femininity in leadership.

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(8) Lasconi e o doamnă respectată. Nu vorbesc niciodată urât despre o doamnă [dar președinția] e o funcție cu pălărie mare. (Marcel Ciolacu)

(Lasconi is a respected lady. I would never speak badly of a lady [but presidency] it's a big-hat function.)

(9) EL: Pălăria de președinte este categoric prea mare pentru oricine dacă te gândești la ceea ce înseamnă președinte. Aș putea să spun că nu sunt un politician cu tradiție, poate nu sunt exemplu, un politician cu experiență, dar vreau binele acestei țări. (Elena Lasconi)

(The President's hat is definitely too big for anyone if you think about what President means. I could say that I am not a traditional politician, maybe I am not an example, an experienced politician, but I want the good of this country.)

(10) EL: Pe mine mă tot întreabă jurnaliști dacă nu este o pălărie prea mare, dar au întrebat vreun bărbat? Și când am fost trimisă la cratiță, am câștigat Masterchef. Sunt gospodină, dar pot să fac și carieră.

(They keep asking me if it's not too big a hat, but have they asked the men? And when I was sent back to the saucepan, I won Masterchef. I am a good housewife, but I can also make a career).

(11) EL: Încearcă să se inducă ideea că nu mă pricep.

(They're trying to make it sound like I'm not skilled enough.)

In the Romanian presidential election campaigns of 2024 and 2025, the metaphor of the “big hat” became a rhetorical battleground for EL’s legitimacy, before she ended up as a finalist in the runoff against Călin Georgescu, and the first round of the election was cancelled by the Constitutional Court of Romania on grounds of foreign interference and unconstitutionality. The incumbent prime minister and favourite candidate Marcel Ciolacu (8) frames presidency as “a function with a big hat”, simultaneously claiming to be paying respect (“a respected lady”) and implicitly ridiculing EL as unfit for such stature. This patronizing rhetoric draws on the cultural imaginary of politics as oversized responsibility and on gendered condescension disguised as politeness. EL responds by appropriating and reframing the metaphor. In (9), EL universalizes the difficulty of

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the presidency “too big for anyone” while reasserting sincerity and commitment, a move that neutralizes ridicule by broadening its scope. In (10), EL directly exposes gender bias: “have they asked the men?” EL ridicules stereotypes by invoking her past as a “gospodină” (housewife) and winner of *Masterchef*, transforming domestic imagery into proof of competence and adaptability. In (11), she explicitly names the rhetorical tactic against her: “they’re trying to make it sound like I’m not skilled enough.” These extracts illustrate an asymmetrical functioning of ridiculing: Ciolacu uses it to diminish, while Lasconi recycles and subverts it, weaving gender stereotypes into a narrative of resilience and multidimensional identity. By doing so, she transforms ridiculing into empowerment, contesting the cultural imaginary that confines women to domesticity or symbolic inferiority.

5 Discussion and conclusions

The analysis of ridiculing strategies in presidential discourse demonstrates the extent to which ridiculing functions as both a weapon for the delegitimation of the adversary and a mirror of the speaker’s cultural imaginary. As a rhetorical practice, ridiculing does not operate in isolation but intersects with gender, authority, and national traditions of political communication. Drawing on Bergson’s (1924) view of laughter as social correction, Billig’s (2005) insights on the disciplinary role of ridiculing, ridiculing is understood as strategic performance that both reflects and reinforces social norms.

The data analysis reveals recurring patterns, in terms of gendered remarks made through ridiculing. In the selected extracts from the US debates, DT’s ridiculing of HC (1) and KH (3) exemplifies ridiculing as a form of gendered domination, aimed at undermining credibility through insult and intimidation. HC and KH countered by emphasizing competence, fact-checking, and moral integrity, strategies that indirectly reframed ridiculing but rarely matched its performative punch. In France, the debates between MLP and EM highlight the clash between disruptive ridiculing (4) and

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metaphorical ridiculing (Macron's "grande prêtresse de la peur"), also displaying a unique instance of non-ridiculing, affiliative humour, illustrating how ridiculing is adapted to different registers of authority and cultural symbolism.

The Romanian examples underline the salience of the "gender card" in contexts where female candidacies are exceptional. VD turned stereotypes of fragility into resilience, ridiculing male weakness and appropriating maternal and biological imagery to project strength. EL, more recently, confronted patronizing ridiculing directly by reframing the "big hat" metaphor and mobilizing her identity as both housewife and professional, subverting stereotypes and exposing gendered (double) standards, also showing how ridiculing can be reappropriated as empowerment, not only as denigration.

From a cross-cultural perspective, ridiculing emerges as a 'double-edged sword': it delegitimizes opponents but also reveals anxieties about gender, authority, and credibility. Female candidates, often confronted with ridicule rooted in stereotypes, strategically transform it into evidence of resilience and authenticity. The cultural imaginary thus becomes both battlefield and resource, where ridicule crystallizes contested visions of leadership.

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