

Late Night Partisans: Major Late Night Comedy Programs in 2010

From January 2 through Labor Day 2010, CMPA analyzed 5,710 jokes about public figures on the "Tonight Show", "Late Show with David Letterman", "Latenight with Jimmy Fallon" and the "Daily Show." In this issue we explore the top joke targets, the partisan balance across the late night shows and finally make comparisons between President Obama and his two predecessors.

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From January 1 to Labor Day (Sept 6) 2010, CMPA analyzed all jokes about public figures by Jay Leno (“Tonight Show”), Jimmy Fallon (“Latenight”), David Letterman (“Late Show”) and John Stewart (“Daily Show”), in the monologues and opening segments of their shows prior to their interviews with guests.

Top 20 Joke Targets The President of the United States usually leads the list of joke targets by virtue of making news so often. So far this year is no exception to this rule. President Barack Obama tops the joke tally with 309, over twice as many as the two prominent Republican politicians who follow him – Sarah Palin with 137 jokes and George W. Bush with 132. Then there is another drop in joke totals to numbers four through six on the list — Vice President Joe Biden with 74 jokes, beleaguered former BP CEO Tony Heyward with 73, and Senator John McCain with 71.

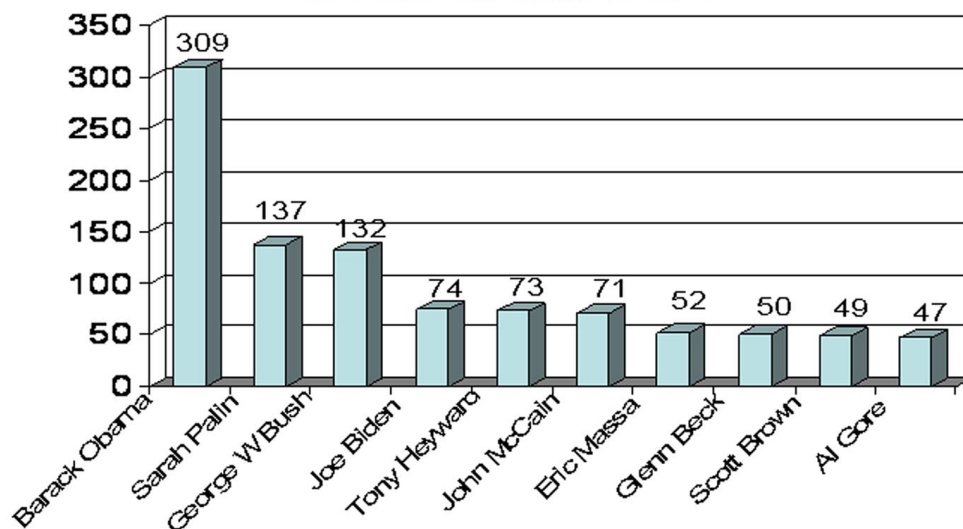
The rest of the top ten are also clustered together on the joke list, but for very different reasons. Number seven is former Democratic

Congressman Eric Massa, who resigned his seat amid allegations of sexual misconduct toward his staff members (52 jokes). Number eight is Glenn Beck, a radio and television talk show host and Washington DC rally organizer (50 jokes). Number nine is Scott Brown, the recently elected Senator from Massachusetts (49 jokes). Number ten is former Vice President Al Gore, who moved back into the comedians’ gunsights after separating from his wife Tipper and being charged with sexual harassment by a massage therapist (47 jokes).

The bottom half of the top twenty joke targets were all clustered within ten jokes of one another. Odd couple Dick Cheney and Osama bin Laden tied for eleventh with 42 jokes apiece, followed by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad with 41 and former President Bill Clinton (making his twentieth consecutive appearance on our top 20 list) with 38. Tied for fifteenth were New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg and former New York Governor Elliot Spitzer, who resigned after reports that he

Top 10 Targets of Late Night Jokes

Jan 1st through Sept. 6th 2010



paid prostitutes for sex (37 jokes apiece). Tied for seventeenth with 34 jokes apiece were former North Carolina Senator John Edwards, with his own long-running sex scandal, Gaffe-prone Republican National Committee Chairman Michael Steele, and failed Times Square car bomber Faisal Shahzad. Rounding out the top 20 was golfer and former husband Tiger Woods with 33 jokes.

Letterman also told a majority of the Dick Cheney jokes (29 of 42) and Scott Brown jokes (38 of 49). Jon Stewart single-handedly put Glenn Beck on the top ten list, telling 44 out of the 50 Beck jokes. Jay Leno told a majority of the Al Gore jokes (29 of 47) and Jon Edwards jokes (21 of 34).

Top Five Targets for Each Show

<i>Jay Leno</i>	<i>David Letterman</i>	<i>Jon Stewart</i>	<i>Stephen Colbert</i>	<i>Jimmy Fallon</i>
Barack Obama 68	Barack Obama 92	Barack Obama 72	Barack Obama 71	Barack Obama 77
Tony Heyward 31	George Bush 72	Glenn Beck 44	Tony Heyward 17	Joe Biden 27
Al Gore 29	Sarah Palin 58	Sarah Palin 35	Eric Massa 10	Sarah Palin 19
Joe Biden 27	Scott Brown 38	John McCain 29	Ahmadinejad 10	Tony Heyward 14
Sarah Palin 24	Michael Bloomberg 37	Michael Steele 28	Joe Biden 9	Eric Massa 14
George Bush 24			Glenn Beck 9	

Diff'rent Strokes This list of leading targets includes a mix of sex scandal participants like Edwards, Spitzer, and Woods, controversial political figures like Palin, Steele and Beck, and villains like bin Ladin and Shahzad, as well as holders of high office like Obama and Biden. But the different comedians sometimes favored different targets.

But the different comedians sometimes favored For example, David Letterman told more jokes about George W. Bush than the other three comics combined (72 out of a total of 132).

Partisan Punchlines This led us to wonder whether there were overall partisan differences in the targets of their punchlines. To find out we identified the 1625 jokes directed at political partisans, including Democratic and Republican politicians as well as prominent liberal and conservative commentators, such as Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh on the right, and Rachel Maddow and Keith Olbermann on the left. In fact we did find a partisan split, with two comedians taking aim more often at the right side of the political spectrum and two others firing their barbs mainly at the left.

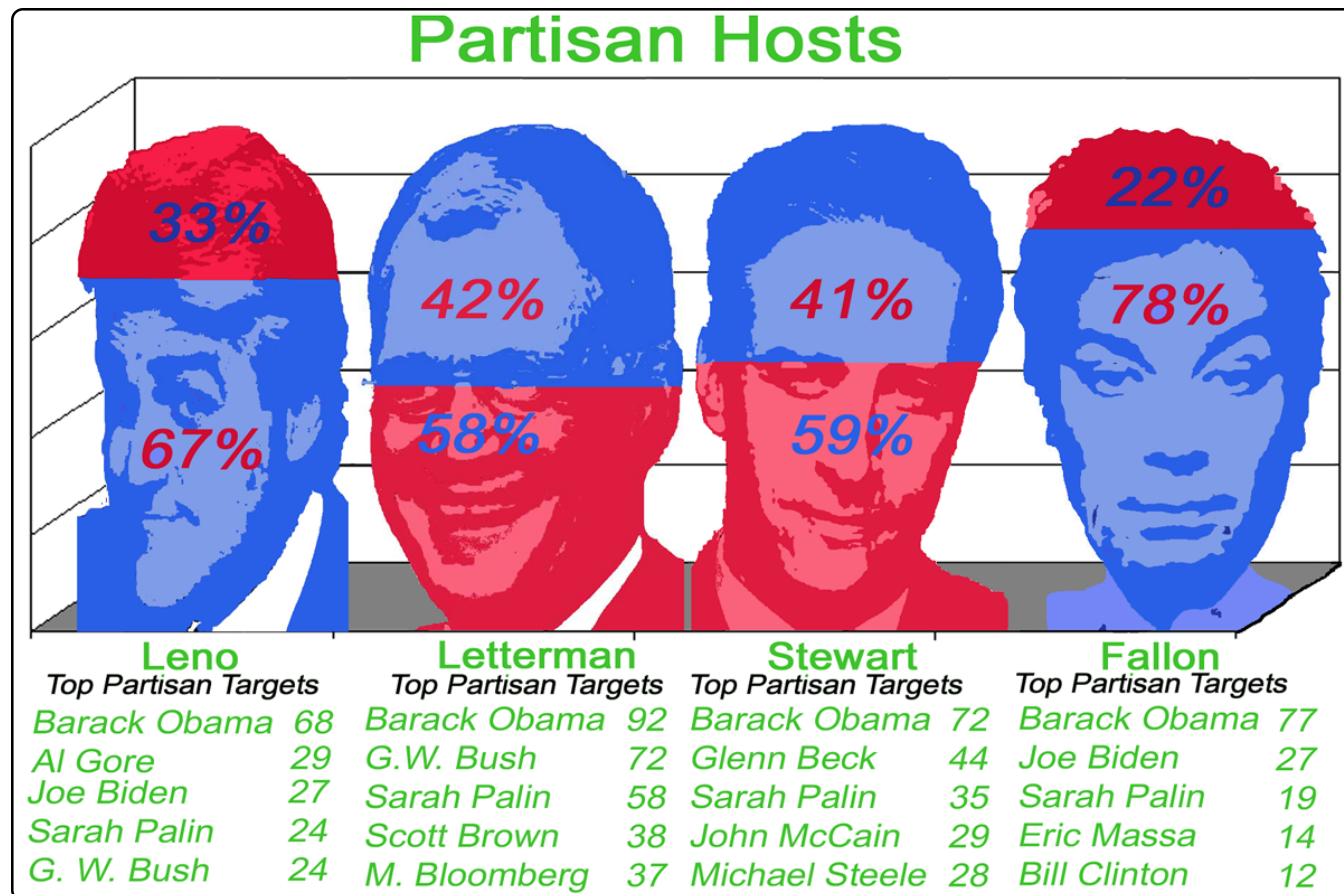
Jon Stewart and David Letterman both aimed three out of five partisan jokes at Republicans

and conservatives, while Jay Leno and Jimmy Fallon aimed at least two out of three jokes at Democrats and liberals. Specifically, Stewart aimed 59% and Letterman 58% of their jokes at Republicans and conservatives, while Jay Leno aimed 67% at Democratic or liberal targets, and Fallon devoted 78% of his jokes toward Democrats and liberals. (Fallon told fewer partisan jokes than the others. As a result, his totals were more influenced by the relatively large number of jokes he told about President Obama.)

These differences are all the more notable because President Obama was the leading target of all four comedians. (As noted above, the President of the United States is the nation's newsmaker-in-chief, and as such is usually the target of more jokes than any other individual.)

For all four comedians' combined totals, the top ten partisan political targets were:

1. Barack Obama – 309
2. Sarah Palin – 137
3. George W. Bush – 132
4. Joe Biden – 94
5. John McCain – 71
6. Eric Massa – 52
7. Glenn Beck – 50
8. Scott Brown – 49
9. Al Gore – 47
10. Dick Cheney – 42



Sample Partisan Jokes:**Jay Leno:**

The economy is so bad Al Gore had to give himself a massage.

This Gore divorce could prove to be expensive. Al Gore has begun to talk of saving only half of the planet.

Bill Clinton [said] his only involvement in Chelsea's wedding is paying the bill. Since he's a Democrat he doesn't actually pay the bill himself, he leaves it for future generations of Americans.

David Letterman:

Iranian President Ahmedinejad is in town. So for one day Mayor Bloomberg is not the shortest dictator in New York.

George W. Bush is writing a book....It's all part of his war on literacy.

Sarah Palin made her debut as a Fox News analyst. They finally found a job that she's not under-qualified for.

Jon Stewart:

Glenn Beck and his magic erasable truth board.

This [Glenn Beck] is a guy who uses more swastika props and video of the Nuremberg rallies than the History Channel.

Damn you, President [George W.] Bush, I can't even comically debase you. It's not fair.

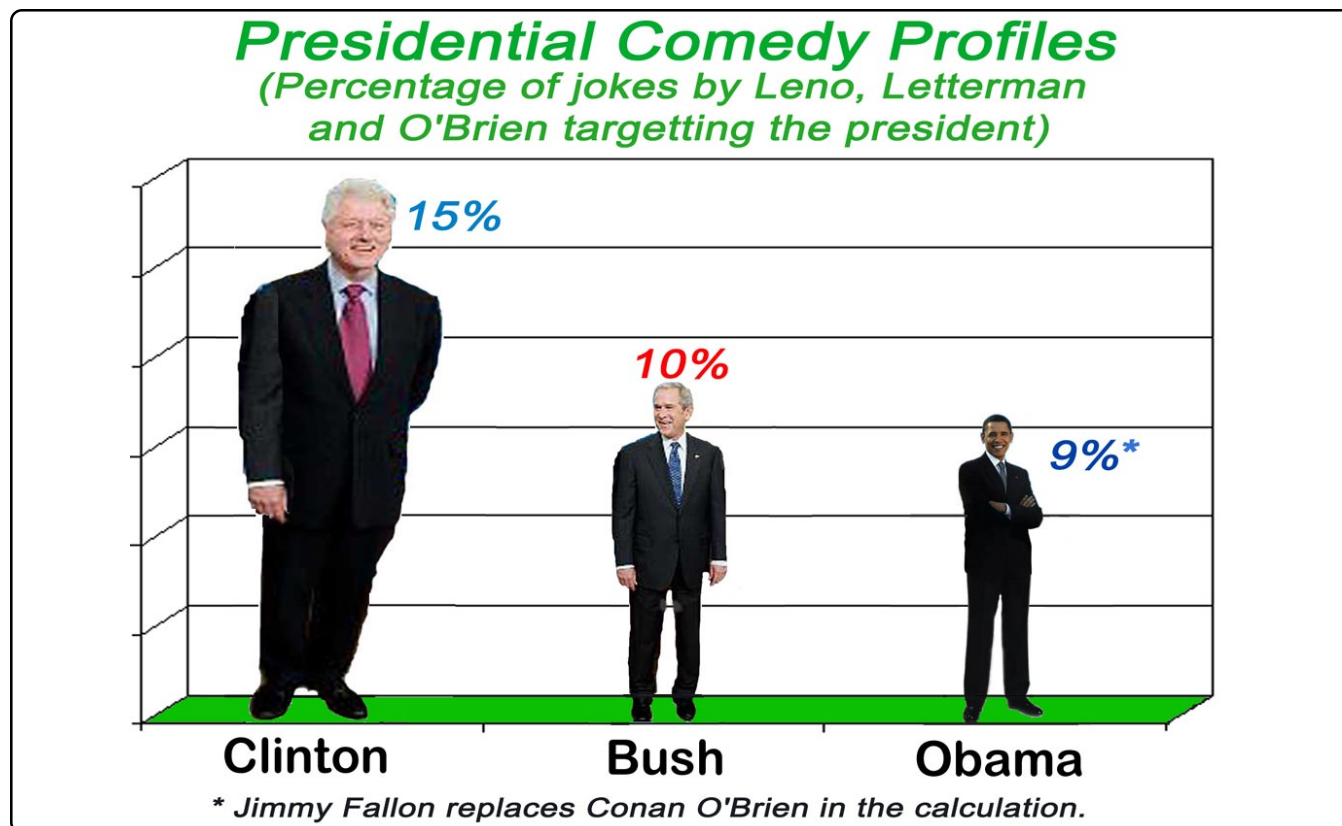
The Kennedy legacy goes down to a naked guy who owns a truck. [Scott Brown]

Where's Obama? We have noted the popularity of Presidents, regardless of their political affiliation, among late-night humorists. Everyone knows who they are, they are always making news, and they are always drawing criticism from some quarter, setting up nightly opportunities for new presidential punchlines. The same is usually true of presidential candidates during election campaigns. But as a candidate Barack Obama made news in 2008 by not drawing much attention from TV comedians.

As we reported in the Winter 2008 edition of Media Monitor, during the general election, Letterman, Leno and Conan O'Brien directed fewer than half as many jokes toward Obama (243) as they told about either John McCain (658) or Sarah Palin (556). In fact, while finishing first in

his race for the presidency, Obama finished fourth in the joke race behind outgoing President George W. Bush (244 jokes) as well as both members of the GOP ticket.

To find out how President Obama stacks up against previous presidents as a target for TV comics, we compared his joke total so far in 2010, with the totals for Presidents Bush and Clinton during their second years in office. To make this comparison we calculated jokes directed toward the president as a percentage of all jokes about public figures during the year. Our figures for Bush and Clinton are based on jokes by Leno, Letterman, and Conan. To make the comparison as even as possible, we selected jokes about President Obama that were deliv-



ered by Leno, Letterman, and Fallon.

The results of this comparison show that Barack Obama still lags behind in the joke race (admittedly a race he might prefer to lose) compared to other recent presidents, especially CMPA's all-time joke leader Bill Clinton. In 1994 the three leading late-night comedians told 530 Bill Clinton jokes out of 3522 about public figures, representing fifteen percent of all such jokes. In 2002 the same comedians told 311 jokes about George W. Bush, or ten percent of all jokes about public figures. So far in 2010 the three leading late-night comedians have told 237 Obama jokes, representing nine percent of 2614 such jokes.

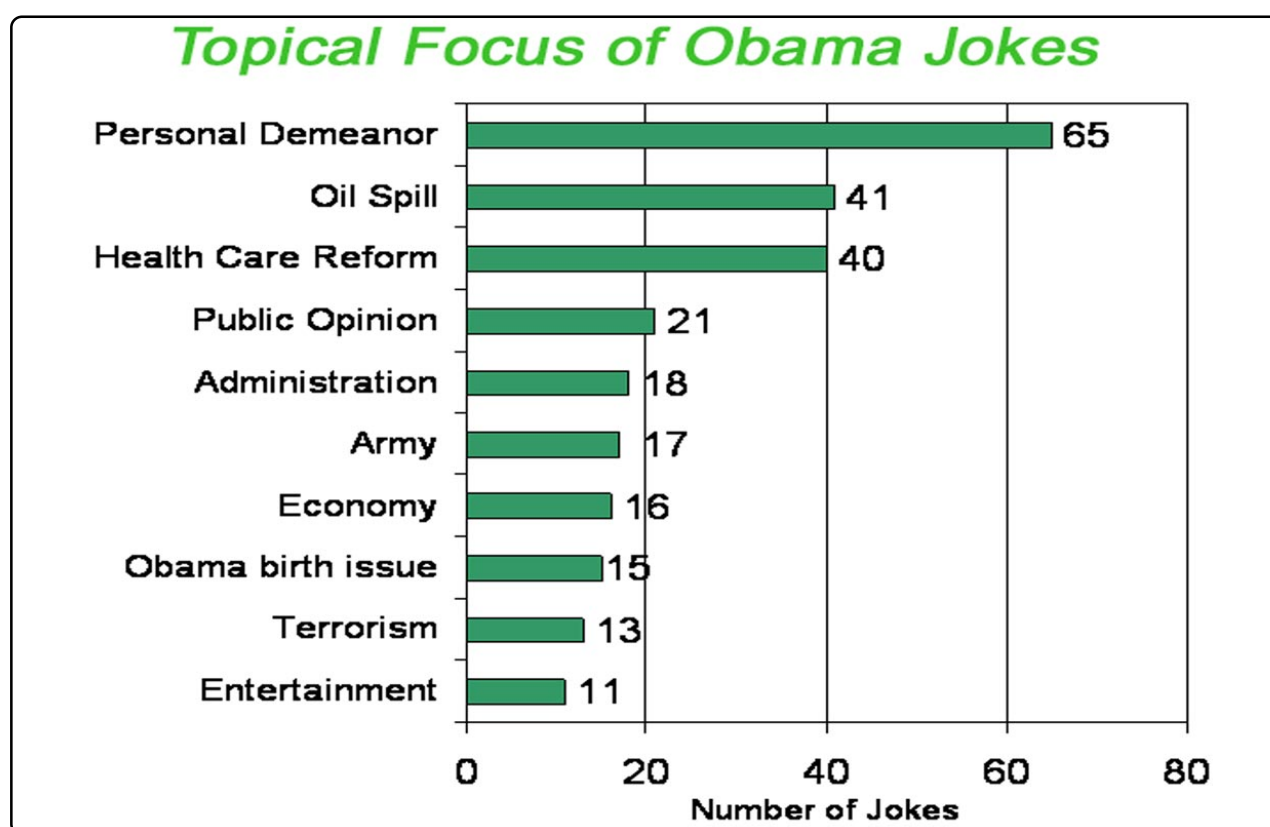
Finding Foibles This year's jokes about President Obama have covered a wide range of topics. The most common target is his personal demeanor (65 jokes), by which we mean personality traits and personal style or characteristic behavior. For example, Jay Leno compared Obama and Hillary Clinton to characters in "those '80's cop shows. Like, he's the cool street detective, she's the tough hard-hitting prosecutor. Coming this fall on NBC, it's 'Hip Hop and Pantsuits.' Stay tuned." - Leno 6/27

In a more critical portrayal of Obama's demeanor, Jon Stewart criticized him for losing touch with ordinary people: "Let me give you some image minefields to avoid. If you go to the Super Bowl, regular box seats will do. [Picture shows Obama in a gilded opera box at a foot-

ball stadium.] And if you want to listen to some music, buy an iPod like the rest of us. [Picture shows Obama standing next to Stevie Wonder with his earphones plugged into the keyboard.] – Stewart 1/25

The president's policies also came in for ribbing,

today and I want to tell you something – it's not a good sign when your age is higher than your approval rating. – Letterman, 8/4 It was so hot in Washington today, President Obama looked at his poll numbers just to get the chills. – Leno 8/5



with 41 jokes about his handling of the BP oil spill and 40 about health care reform: The health care debate is gonna be close. In fact Obama's slogan is, "Hope... this works." — Leno 3/19 President Obama said today he would've fired BP CEO Tony Hayward if he worked for him. But unfortunately the White House works for BP, so his hands are tied. – Leno 6/8

Obama's sinking popularity also provided comic fodder with 21 jokes: Obama's 49 years old

Other popular joke topics included the administration's mishandling of personnel disputes, the president's relations with the military, the state of the economy, conspiracy theories about Obama's citizenship and birth certificate, the war against terror, and the world of popular entertainment (including the president's inability to identify "Snooki" Polizzi from the MTV reality series "Jersey Shore."



**Comedy Watch:
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2010**

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