

Election Watch '08: Early Returns

Coverage of the 2008 Presidential Campaign "Preseason"

In this issue we take a closer look at television coverage of the 2008 campaign pre-season. We begin with a summary of the latest findings from our *ElectionWatch Project* providing a detailed examination of coverage from the last three months of the year. Then we recap the major events of the past year on the campaign trail and the ups and downs of media coverage. Finally, we conclude with a look at the late night punchlines and their role in the campaign.

Election Update:

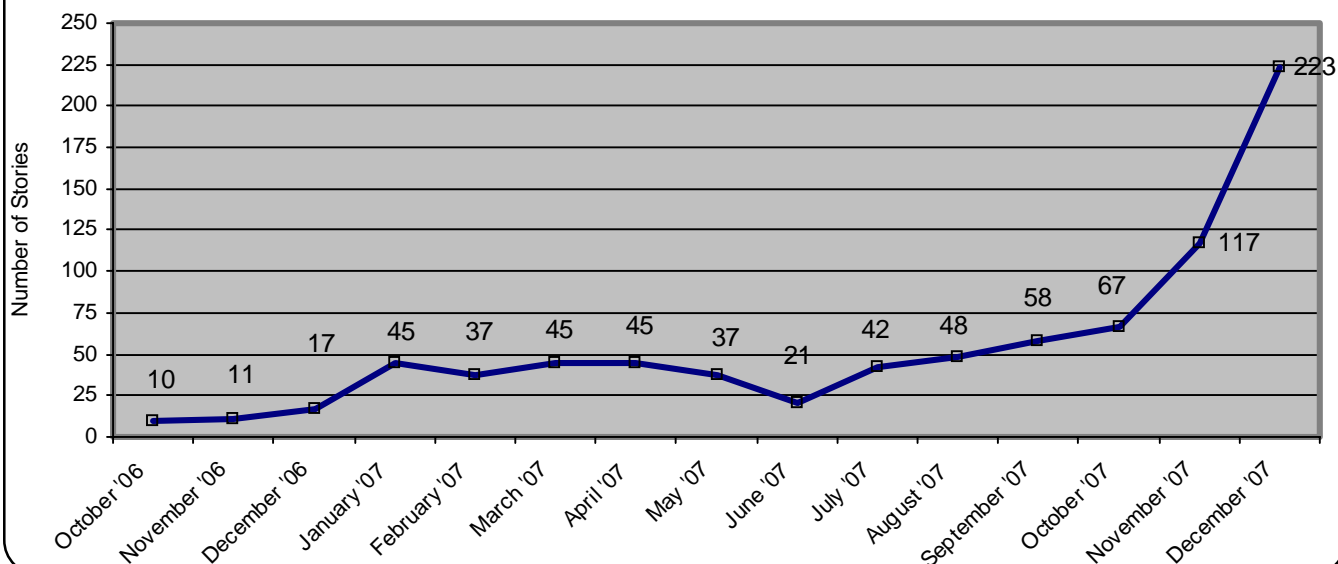
These results are from CMPA's 2008 ElectionWatch Project. They are based on a scientific content analysis of all 481 election news stories (15 hours 40 minutes of airtime) that aired on the flagship evening news shows on ABC, CBS, NBC and FOX (the first 30 minutes of "Special Report with Brit Hume") from October 1 through December 15, 2007.

n Hillary Pilloried On-air evaluations of Hillary Clinton were nearly 3 to 2 negative (42% positive vs. 58% negative comments), while evaluations of her closest competitor Barack Obama was better than 3 to 2 positive (61% positive vs. 39% negative). John Edwards attracted much less coverage, but his evaluations were 2 to 1 positive (67% positive vs. 33% negative). Senator Clinton was also evaluated more often than all her Democratic opponents combined.

n Huckabee Leads GOP Among Republicans, Mike Huckabee fared best with evenly balanced coverage -- 50% positive and 50% negative evaluations by reporters and sources. Fred Thompson came next with 44% positive comments, followed by Mitt Romney with 40% positive, Rudy Giuliani with 39%, and John McCain with 33% positive.

n Who's Fair and Balanced On FOX, evaluations of all Democratic candidates combined were split almost evenly -- 51% positive vs. 49% negative, as well as all evaluations of GOP candidates -- 49% positive vs. 51% negative. On the three broadcast networks, opinion on the Democratic candidates split 47% positive vs. 53% negative, while evaluations of Republicans were more negative -- 40% positive vs. 60% negative.

Election Stories on Network Evening News Casts



With almost a year to go before the general election the 2008 Presidential campaign is already record breaking and unique. With no incumbent President or Vice President in the running, the race has drawn an unprecedented 19 candidates to the race (not counting the short lived comedic entry of Stephen Colbert). Of those 19, 16 remain and they are raising and spending money at a record pace in an attempt to compete in the most intensive primary season ever encountered.

Campaign 2008 actually began over 20 months ago, with a declaration by Mike Gravel (D) in April 2006. It was an

announcement little noticed by the media who were focused on the 2006 midterm elections and their implications for the GOP.

Following the 2006 elections, Tom Vilsack (D) declared his candidacy in late November and was followed in short order by Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D), Jim Gilmore (R) and John Edwards (D). Almost two years before the general election there were five declared candidates for President.

We logged all television news coverage in 2006 from ABC "World News Tonight," CBS "Evening News," and NBC "Nightly News" (see *Media*

Monitor Mar/April 2007). We found that coverage of the presidential campaign totaled 47 stories for the year. Four out of five (38 out of 47 stories) were concentrated in the last three months of the year.

January 2007 got off to a rolling start with the formal declarations from Senators Joseph Biden (D), Chris Dodd (D), and Sam Brownback (R) as well as Rep. Duncan Hunter (R) and Mike Huckabee (R). Those formal announcements plus speculation about when the putative frontrunners in both parties would enter the race pushed coverage to 45 stories for the month.

Coverage fell slightly in Feb-

ruary to 37 stories. Formal announcements from Senators Barack Obama (D) and Hillary Clinton (D), as well as Mitt Romney (R) and Rudy Giuliani (R) punctuated campaign coverage. The month also saw the first withdrawal when Tom Vilsack dropped out of the race. The former governor's campaign would prove to be the shortest of this elongated campaign season.

With many of the major players now formally in the race, coverage picked up in March to 45 stories. The quixotic campaign of Rep. Ron Paul (R) was also formally launched in March.

Network coverage of the campaign remained at 45 stories in April as Tommy Thompson (R) and Rep. Tom Tancredo (R) formally joined the growing field. The Democrats' first formal debate drew some attention.

Coverage dropped to 37 stories in May, despite Governor Bill Richardson (D) formally entering the race. Even the first formal debate among Republican candidates failed to keep attention on the campaign trail.

Television coverage of the

campaign continued to slide in June, dropping to 21 stories. Both the GOP and the Democratic candidates participated in debates in June, but neither drew significant attention on the network news.

In July, campaign coverage surged, doubling the levels found in June. Among the campaign events that made news were a Democratic debate and the withdrawal of Jim Gilmore from the race.

August coverage continued to rise, reaching 48 stories for the month. With both a Democratic and Republican debate, the departure of Tommy Thompson and increased speculation about when Fred Thompson would formally enter the race, there were many events to cover.

On September 5th, Fred Thompson finally ended speculation and formally declared his candidacy. In response to that announcement, as well Democratic and Republican debates, coverage rose hitting 58 stories. The first national debate specifically geared for a Latino audience was held in September (at least for Democrats, since only John McCain was willing to attend a similar event for

GOP candidates). Alan Keyes became the final candidate to seriously enter the 2008 presidential race, when he announced his candidacy on the 14th.

The upward trend continued in October with 67 stories in the month. Two Republican debates, a Democratic debate, as well as the withdrawal of Senator Brownback from the race punctuated coverage of a rapidly changing political landscape.

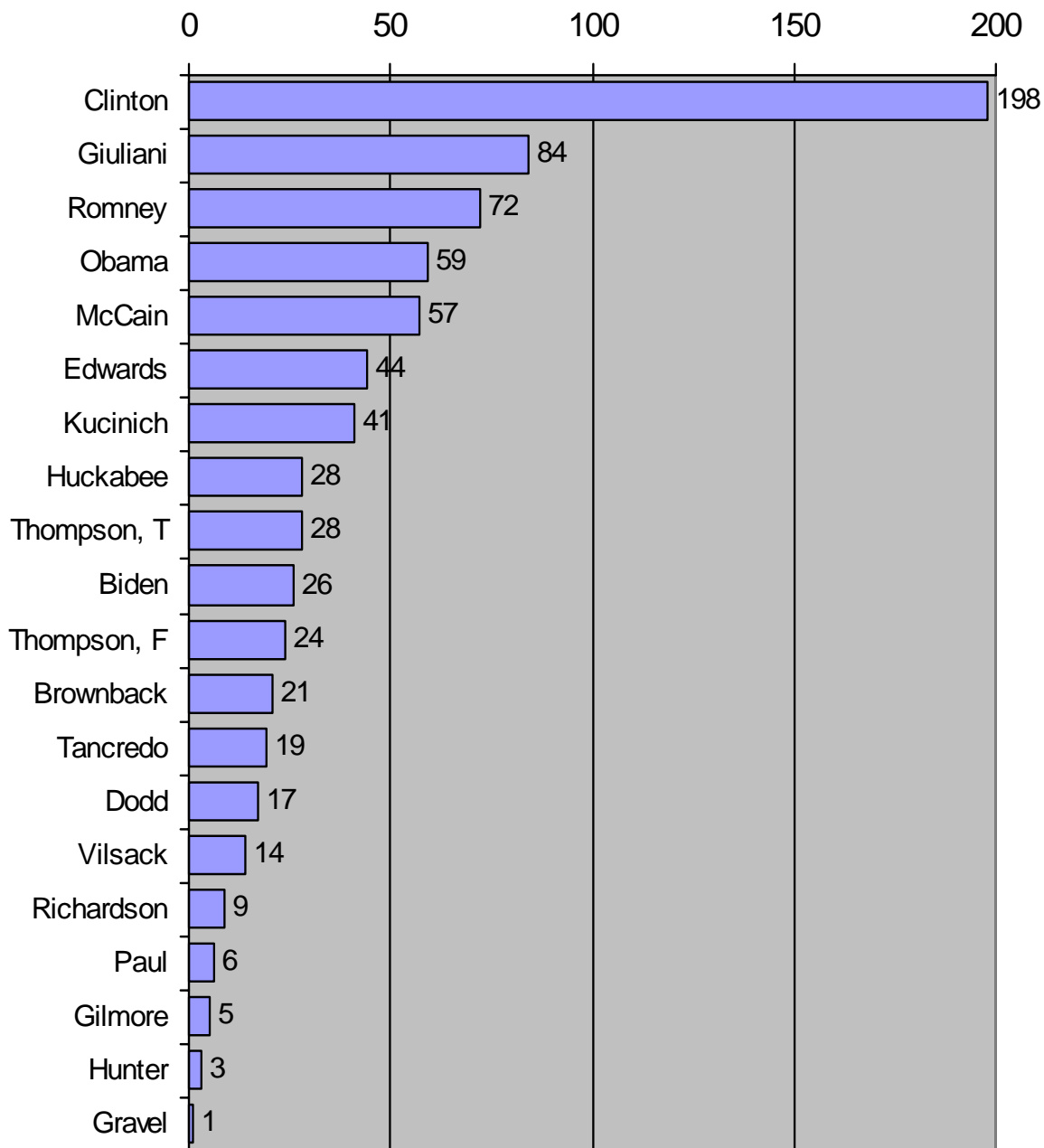
November saw great changes in the campaign as frontrunners seemed to lose ground to rising stars and candidates became more aggressive in separating themselves from their rivals. With one year to go until the general election, the big three television networks aired 117 stories.

Rapid changes in Iowa poll standings, negative ad campaigns and assorted dirty tricks pushed network coverage to 223 stories for December.

Late Night Jokes About Presidential Candidates

January 1 through November 2, 2007

Based on jokes from the *Tonight Show*, *Late Show with David Letterman*, *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*, *Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* (from July 1st, 2007).



Campaign by Punchline

Ever since the 1992 campaign when Bill Clinton played his saxophone on "The Arsenio Hall Show" there has been an ongoing debate about the role and impact of the late night comedy shows. At first, pundits and other observers saw appearances on these late night shows as simply opportunity for a candidate to "humanize" themselves to a mass audience. The punchlines told by the comics were seen as the price of admission to the political game.

Over the past ten years, research has shown that a significant and growing part of the population is getting information about candidates and issues from the late night shows. This is particularly true with younger viewers. Given this new insight, late night shows have become a platform eagerly sought out by candidates.

In 2004, John Edwards made history by being the first candidate to formally announce his candidacy on a late night show. In campaign 2008 that practice expanded, John McCain announced his candidacy on the "Late Show with David Letterman" and later in the year Fred Thomp-

son announced on "The Tonight Show." But candidates seek out the late night shows for more than just announcements.

During Campaign 2000 both George Bush and Al Gore made appearances on late night shows to discuss their plans as president. Mr. Bush's appearance on Letterman netted him 13 minutes of airtime – more than he would get from the evening newscasts on the big three networks that same month. It was the same situation for Mr. Gore, whose Letterman appearance outstripped his network news airtime (see *Media Monitor* Jan/ Feb 2001).

In the past thirteen months (from October '06 through October '07) the candidates have made 37 appearances on the five major late night shows. "The Daily Show" was the most frequent stop (12 candidate appearances) followed by "The Tonight Show" with 11. "The Colbert Report" hosted seven candidate appearances, while "The Late Show with David Letterman" had six. "Latenight with Conan O'Brien" had one candidate appearance.

From January 1st through November 2nd 2007 (when the writer's strike ended production), the five late night shows told a total of 756 jokes about the presidential candidates. Of those, 409 targeted democratic candidates, while the GOP candidates were the target of 347 jabs.

Senator Clinton was by far and away the most joked about figure on the campaign trail (198). Rudy Giuliani placed a distant second with 84 jokes. Mitt Romney (72), Barack Obama (59) and John McCain (57) round out the top five targets.

Sample jokes:

Hillary Clinton, so far, has raised \$35 million for her campaign. Here's how they break that down. \$5 million for advertising. \$30 million for pantsuits. (*Letterman* 10/16)

If Fred Thompson runs against Hillary, it'll be *Law & Order* vs. *Cold Case*. (*Leno*)

In fact Romney criticized Giuliani so much he made him an honorary ex-wife. (*Leno* 10/11)

As Rudy Giuliani always says. "Beans, beans the musical fruit. The more you eat the more you 9/11." (*Colbert* 10/11)



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