

The Comedy Campaign: The Role of Late-Night TV Shows in Campaign '08

This issue of *Media Monitor* examines two aspects of the role late night television shows played in the 2008 presidential election campaign: The appearances that the candidates made on these shows and jokes about the candidates that the shows featured in stand-up monologues or other comedy routines.

MAJOR FINDINGS:

- Presidential candidates appeared over 100 times on late-night TV, four times as often as in the 2004 campaign. *pg. 2*
- John McCain and his family appeared on more than 20 shows. *pg. 3*
- Jay Leno edged out Jon Stewart as the host with the most candidates as guests. *pg. 3*
- John McCain attracted 658 jokes from late-night comedians during the general election. *pg. 3*
- Barack Obama finished fourth in the joke race behind McCain, Sarah Palin, and George W. Bush. *pg. 4*
- The GOP ticket was joked about four times as often as the Democratic ticket. *pg. 4*
- Republicans have attracted more jokes than Democrats in four straight elections. *pg. 5*
- Leno's jokes were the most balanced between the parties; Letterman's were the least balanced. *pg. 5*

When Bill Clinton took his sax on the *Arsenio Hall Show* in 1992 it was a controversial move that had pundits predicting dire consequences. Eight years later, both George W. Bush and Al Gore made time for appearances on the *Tonight Show* and the *Late Show with David Letterman* as part of their general election campaigns. Their appearances were seen as necessary outreach to parts of the electorate that were otherwise politically unengaged. The Pew Research Center found that in 2000, almost half (47%) of those surveyed under 30 got information about the candidates from late night shows. A second survey in 2004 found similar utilization of the late night shows for information.

By 2004, the late night shows were a regular part of the

campaign landscape – so much so that John Edwards announced his candidacy on the *Daily Show*. In campaign '08, the trend continued, with John McCain throwing his hat in the ring on the *Late Show with David Letterman* and Fred Thompson following suit on the *Tonight Show*.

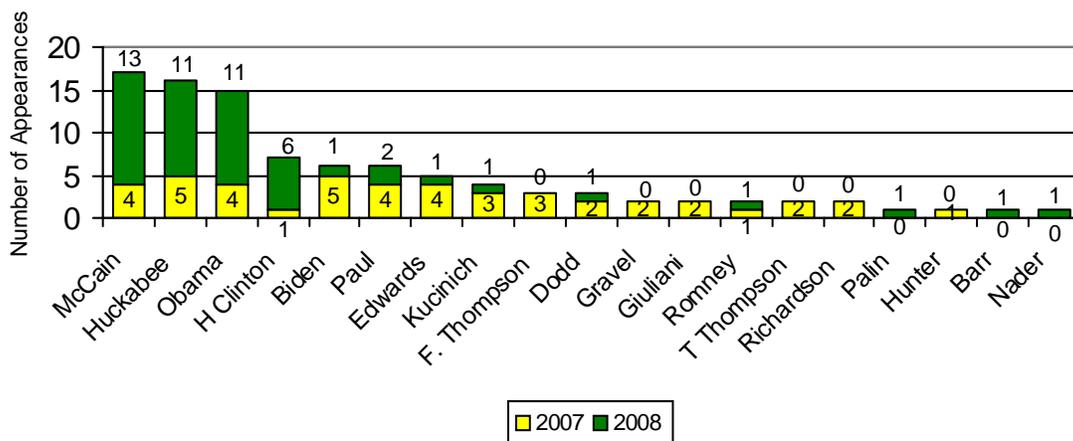
“The Road to the White House Runs Through Me”

The list of late night talk and comedy shows has grown over the years and now includes the *Tonight Show*, *Late Show with David Letterman*, *Latenight with Conan O'Brien*, *Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson*, the *Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *Colbert Report*, *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, *Last Call with Carson Daly*, *Real Time with Bill Maher* and *Saturday Night*

Live. From April 2006 (when Mike Gravel became the first official candidate in campaign '08) until Election Day, the candidates and their families made 110 appearances on the late night shows. Fifty of these took place during the campaign “preseason” prior to the primaries, and 60 were in calendar year 2008. This represents more than a fourfold increase over the 2004 campaign, when candidates made only 25 appearances on late night shows. David Letterman’s quip, “the road to the White House runs through me,” has become a truism for the late night hosts.

The clear benefit of a late night appearance is a large block of time to speak directly to the public. In 2000, George Bush was on-screen for a total of 13 minutes during one October appearance on the *Late Show*

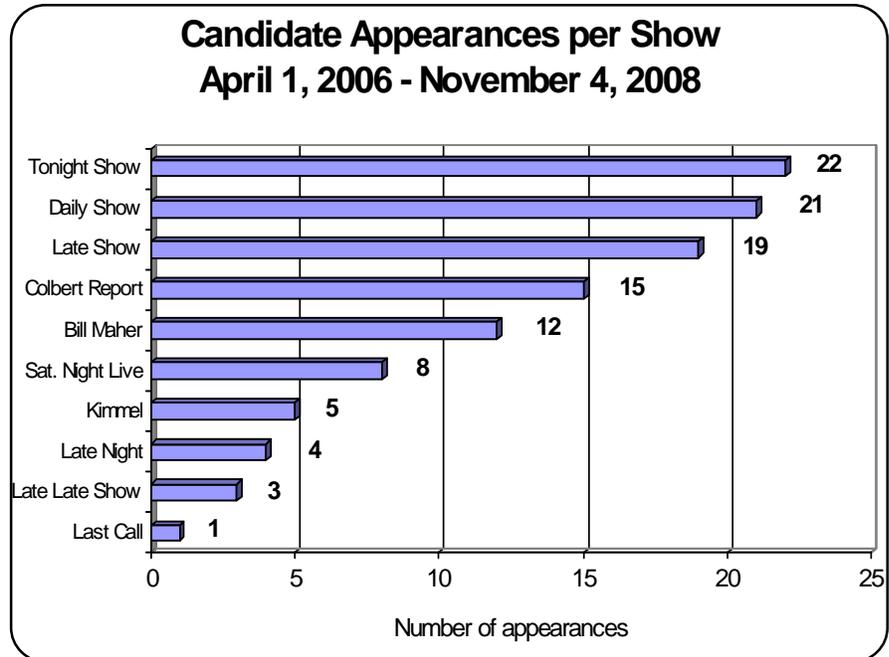
Late Night Candidate Appearances 2007 through Election Day



with David Letterman, which exceeded his entire speaking time on all three network news shows during the month of October. Similarly, Al Gore received more air time from one September appearance with Letterman than on all the network newscasts for the same month (*Media Monitor* Nov/Dec 2000).

While the shows provide candidates with an unfiltered platform to talk to the electorate, candidate appearances can be very good for ratings. John McCain's appearance on the *Late Show* on October 16th gave the show its best ratings in almost three years. Sarah Palin's appearance on *Saturday Night Live* (on October 18th), gave that show its best ratings in 14 years. Michelle Obama set a new ratings record for the *Daily Show* with her Oct. 8 appearance, only to have it surpassed when her husband appeared on Oct 29.

Candidates' use of the late night shows varied widely, from a high of 17 appearances for John McCain to single appearances for Duncan Hunter (R), Bob Barr (Libertarian) and Ralph Nader (I). When appearances by McCain's wife and daughter Meghan are included, the McCain family appeared on 21 shows.



Mike Huckabee was a close second to McCain with 16 late night appearances, including several during the Hollywood writers' strike. Close behind was Barack Obama, who made 15 appearances. Rounding out the top five were Hillary Clinton (7 appearances), Joe Biden (6) and Ron Paul (6).

The various late night shows also had different appetites for political guests. The *Tonight Show* featured the most candidate appearances (22), followed by the *Daily Show* with 21 and *The Late Show* with 19.

The Colbert Report (15) and *Later with Bill Maher* (12) were the only other shows to have more than ten candidate appearances during the cam-

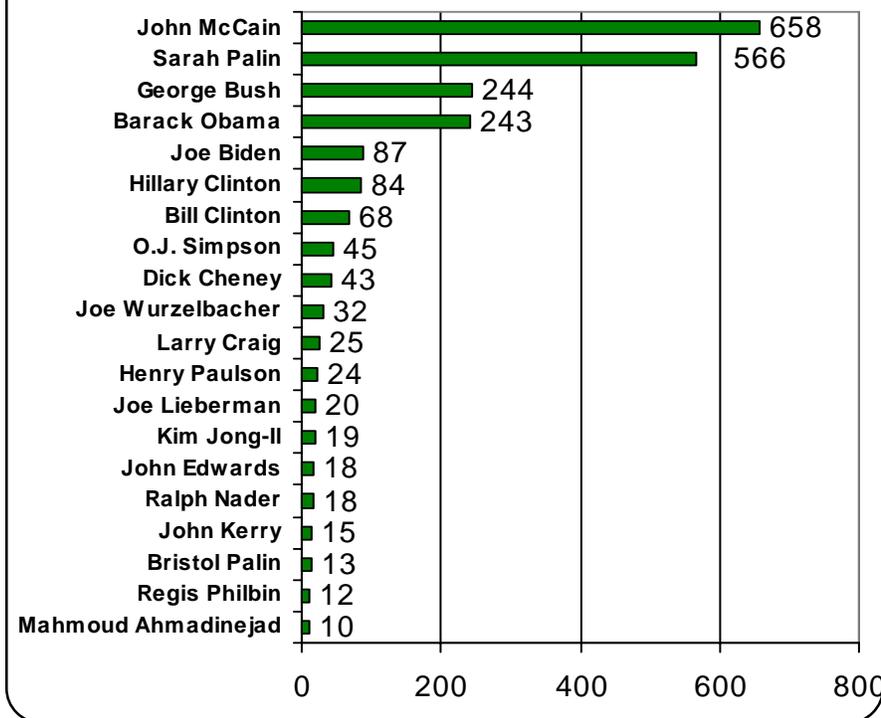
paign season.

The Punchline Race

While the candidates were using the late night shows to advance their own messages, the hosts were using the candidates as fodder for nightly punchlines. From the announcement of Joe Biden as the Democratic Vice Presidential nominee on Aug 23rd, which kicked off the party convention phase of the campaign, until Election Day on November 4th, Jay Leno, David Letterman, Conan O'Brien, Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert told over 3,000 jokes (3,376) about public figures.

The most joked about figure was John McCain with 658 jokes, His running mate Sarah

Jokes About Public Figures 2008 General Election (8/23 - 11/3)



Palin placed second with 566 jokes. President George W. Bush placed third with 244 jokes, and Barack Obama placed fourth with 243. Biden placed fifth with 87 jokes, edging out Hillary Clinton (84). Former President Bill Clinton was the target of 68 jokes. Rounding out the top ten, O.J. Simpson was the only target in the top ten who was not connected to Campaign '08. His trial and conviction on armed robbery charges garnered 45 jokes.

Vice President Dick Cheney was the target of 43 jokes, while Joe Wurzelbacher (aka

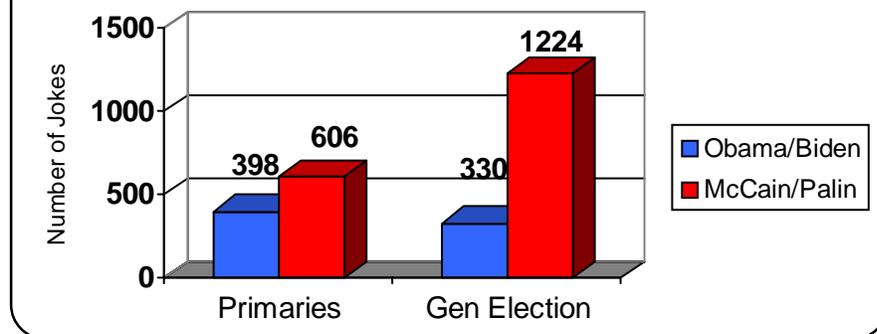
Joe the Plumber) rounded out the top ten with 32 jokes.

During the entire 2008 campaign from January 1 through Election Day, John McCain

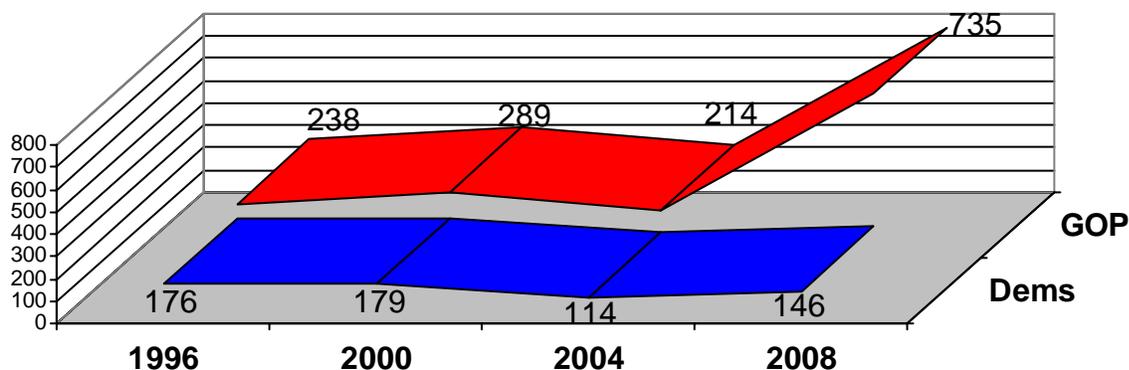
was the target of 1,264 jokes. Hillary Clinton placed second for the year with 663 jokes, followed closely by Barack Obama with 641 jokes. Sarah Palin's two and a half months in the limelight put her in fourth place with 566 jokes. Rounding out the top five candidate targets for the year was Mitt Romney (132 punchlines). John Edwards (92 jokes), Joe Biden (91), Ralph Nader (69), Mike Huckabee (58) and Rudy Giuliani (36) fill out the remainder of the top ten candidate targets.

The disparity between the Republican and Democratic tickets in the general election punchline race was dramatic – there were nearly four times as many jokes about McCain/Palin as there were about Obama/Biden (1224 vs. 330). Throughout all of 2008, McCain was the target of 1264

McCain/Palin vs. Obama/Biden Jokes 2008



Jokes About the GOP vs. Democratic Tickets



jokes vs. 641 for Obama.

While this disparity between the tickets in 2008 is striking, the pattern has held true (to a lesser extent) during every general election since 1996. Three late night shows have been around since the 1996 election: the *Tonight Show*, *Late Show with David Letterman* and *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*. Between Labor Day and Election day in each cycle there have been more jokes told about the GOP ticket than the Democratic ticket.

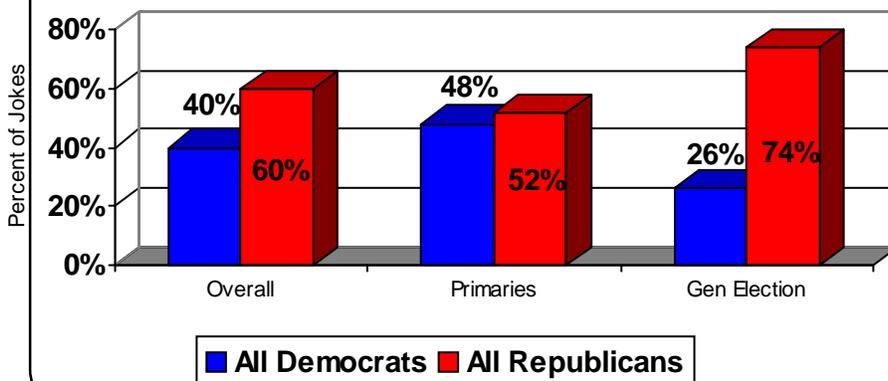
This partisan disparity among joke targets holds true beyond the presidential candidates. When we combine all current and former elected officials into Democratic and Republican groups we found that there were 5,825 jokes about political

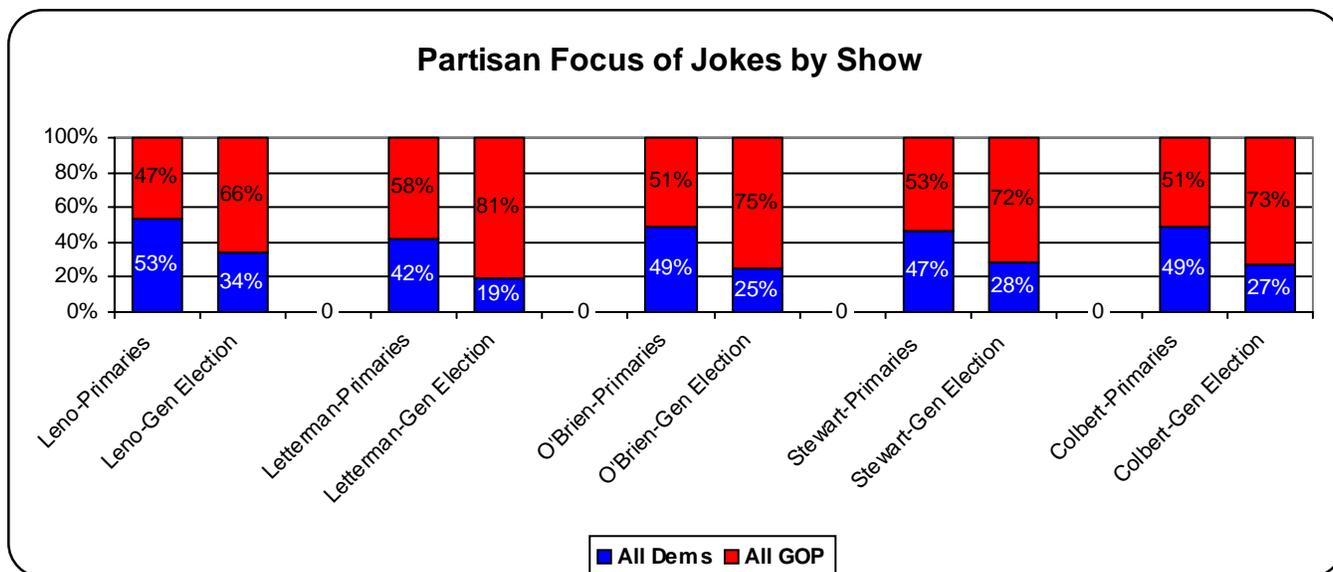
partisans in 2008. Of those partisan jokes, Republicans were the butt of 60 percent vs. 40 percent targeting Democrats during all of 2008. During the primaries and the summer, jokes were almost evenly split (52% GOP vs. 48% Democrats) but during the general election (8/25 through 11/4/08) the gap widened. Republicans were joked about in 74 percent of

punchlines vs. 26 percent for Democrats.

Some hosts were more even-handed in their treatment of Republicans and Democrats than others. Throughout 2008, Jay Leno was the most balanced with 46 percent of jokes targeting Democrats vs. 54 percent aimed at the GOP. During the primaries and summer he told more jokes

Partisan Distribution of Punchlines in 2008





about Democrats (53% vs. 47% GOP), but in the general election two-thirds of his jokes targeted the GOP (66% vs. 34%). At the other extreme, David Letterman was the least balanced with two-thirds of jokes for the year (67%) targeting Republicans vs. 33 percent aimed at Democrats. During the primaries 58 percent of Letterman jokes targeted the GOP. But in the general election 81 percent were aimed at the GOP.

Conan O'Brien was almost perfectly balanced during the primaries (51% Democrats vs. 49% Republicans), but during the general election three quarters of his punchlines were aimed at the GOP. A slight majority of the jokes told by Jon Stewart and Stephen

Colbert (53% and 51% respectively) were aimed at the GOP during the primaries. During the general election, jokes about the GOP outpaced those about Democrats by almost three-to-one on both shows.

The Substance of Jokes

There were also differences in the substance of jokes told about the two tickets. Sarah Palin jokes focused on her intelligence (105), her physical appearance (61) and her folksy ways (60). McCain was most often joked about because of his age (202) followed in very distant second place by jokes about personality (29) and his intelligence (29).

Jokes about Barack Obama lacked a clear focus as his

comedy image shifted during the campaign. The adulation or "rock star" treatment he received on the campaign trail was the subject of 24 jokes. His 30 minute infomercial just days before the election and other campaign ads were targeted by 19 jokes. Jokes about Mr. Obama's potential to handle the economic crisis drew 13 jokes. The racial aspects of the campaign (12) and his personality (11) round out the top five topics of Obama jokes. For Senator Biden, the most common punchline topic was his physical appearance (15 jokes), in particular his lack of hair, followed by his personality quirks (14), his intelligence (4), his outlook on the economy (4), and his campaign advertising (3).

Top 5 Specific Joke Topics by Candidate

<i>McCain</i>		<i>Palin</i>		<i>Obama</i>		<i>Biden</i>	
Age	202	Knowledge	105	Adulation	24	Physical Appear	15
Personality	37	Physical Appear	61	Advertising	19	Personality	14
Knowledge	29	Folksiness	60	Economy	13	Knowledge	4
Personal Wealth	27	Journalism	36	Race Relations	12	Economy	4
Entertainment	27	Personality	35	Personality	11	Advertising	3

Sample Jokes

McCain

McCain was asked how he's going to conserve energy. He said by taking three naps a day. – Leno

Don't kid yourself. McCain is very popular in Florida. At one campaign stop it was cute, a proud mother handed him her 48-year-old son for a kiss. — Letterman

Folks this is election eve, and as always, tonight I'm leaving out a plate of macaroni salad and Tums for John McCain, who will visit every house and leave good girls and boys pamphlets linking Barack Obama to Bill Ayers. — Colbert

Halloween, it's the dead walking among the living. That's what Halloween is. You know, they come back to life and they're dead but they're walking around. No, wait a minute, that's the McCain campaign. — Letterman

Palin

I can't believe this happened. Over the weekend, a comedian, tricked Sarah Palin into getting on the phone

by pretending he was French President Nicolas Sarkozy. Yeah, the comedian says it was really difficult to trick Palin into believing he was Nicolas Sarkozy, because she has no idea who that is. – O'Brien

I just got my 2009 Sarah Palin calendar. Pretty hot stuff. In one, she's all sudsy with a sponge working on a moose. And in April, it's Sarah Palin in a bikini firing a state trooper. — Letterman

Tomorrow night, Sarah Palin will be on "Saturday Night Live." When they told her, she said, "What night is that on?" — Leno

Obama

The big story is Obama's world tour. Today he made history by being the first man to travel around the world in a plane propelled by the media's flash photography. – Colbert

The tour may strike some as presumptuous. In fact, I joked that Obama would be stopping in Bethlehem to visit the manger where he was born. – Stewart

Last night on all the major television

networks Barack Obama had a half hour infomercial. I thought it had a wonderful ending. In the final scene Barack Obama is adopted by Angelina Jolie. – Letterman

Did you all see Barack Obama's infomercial? The show went very well. I especially liked the end where Barack rose to the heavens on a cloud. — Leno

Biden

Senator Joe Biden, he lost his voice on the campaign trail yesterday. Turns out, a hair plug stuck in his throat. — Leno

Jon Stewart, "Joe the Gaffer's most recent "Biden" occurred at a closed door fund-raiser in Seattle where he worked to reassure the crowd that Obama was ready." Joe Biden, "Mark my words, it will not be six months before the world tests Barack Obama like it did John Kennedy. Watch, we will have an international crisis, to test the mettle of this guy." Jon Stewart, "Gaffe! Senator Biden there is no law that says that the things that are bouncing around in your skull have to come out through your pie hole." — Stewart



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