

## CMPA's Response to Greg Beato's "Midnight Bias: Can the nation survive without fair and balanced Sarah Palin Jokes?"

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In his article "Midnight Bias: Can the nation survive without fair and balanced Sarah Palin jokes?," Greg Beato questions the logic behind the following quote and data analysis in a recent Fox News online article:

"Not everyone seems willing to be so logical. Last week, for example, the Center for Media and Public Affairs shared its latest findings with Fox News: In the five weeks after John McCain announced Palin as his running mate, the CMPA revealed, Jay Leno and David Letterman told 286 jokes involving those two candidates, and only 42 jokes involving their opponents Barack Obama and Joe Biden. "Generally the Republicans get targeted much more often than Democrats, but this election is driving it off the charts," CMPA Executive Director Donald Rieck explained."

Beato cited data from varying time parameters (January 1 to September 16 of this year; January 1 to August 24 of 2004; and what he termed as a "14 month" count during the 2000 election) to point out that Republicans are not excessively targeted by political jokesters, and that to characterize the ratio of jokes as being "off the charts" makes no sense other than to suggest the unfunny business of a partisan agenda. "The path Rieck traveled to arrive at this conclusion is impossible to trace," he writes.

The Fox reporter asked how previous Republican and Democratic *general election* candidates fared in similar (post convention-general election) periods and I noted that, generally, Republican candidates are "much more often" the target than their Democratic counterparts.

Here is the *total* (post-convention) general election political humor data for presidential candidates 1992 through 2006:

Year	GOP Candidate	GOP Candidate Jokes	Dem. Candidate	Dem. Candidate Jokes
1992	George H. Bush	161	William J. Clinton	66
1996	Robert Dole	208	William J. Clinton	164
2000	George W. Bush	254	Albert Gore	165
2004	George W. Bush	261	John F. Kerry	135
		<b>884</b>		<b>530</b>

In his article, Beato also seems to try to place CMPA on one side of the debate over the fairness doctrine. CMPA, which is a nonprofit, nonpartisan affiliate of George Mason University, conducts these studies to improve the debate on media coverage and not to favor any party, candidate or policy. We cannot police how reporters or pundits use our data, but we always try to give them the full picture and point out the limits of what can and can't be said.

Sincerely,

**Donald Rieck, M.A., M.B.A.**  
**Executive Director**  
**CMPA/STATS**  
**Washington, DC**

**Greg Beato responds:** I appreciate Donald Rieck's interest in my piece, and the additional information and statistics he provides in his response. In the Fox News article, Rieck is quoted as follows: "Generally, the Republicans get targeted much more often than Democrats, but this election is driving it off the charts."

In his response to my piece, Rieck explains that he was responding to a fairly specific question; apparently the Fox reporter asked him "how previous Republican and Democratic general election candidates fared in similar (post convention-general election) periods."

Since the Fox News article makes no explicit reference to "general election candidates" or "similar (post convention-general election) periods," and since Rieck prefaces his remark with the word "Generally," I assumed that he was speaking about late-night comedy coverage of presidential elections in general, with no qualifiers or distinctions.

To get a better idea of what Rieck meant by "much more often," I went to the CMPA website to look at the statistics it compiled from past elections. What I found there is the information I include in my piece. The time periods I cite—"January 1 to September 16 of this year" and the others—are simply the time periods that CMPA used in its previous studies. That is, I didn't make any effort to pick time periods that would show greater balance in candidate joke coverage than Rieck's quote implied; I simply used whatever information CMPA had posted on its site.

As I show in my article, that information makes it clear that when you remove distinctions such as "general election candidates" and "post convention-general election periods," overall late-night comedy coverage of presidential candidates is fairly evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats. Given Rieck's stated commitment to giving reporters and pundits the full picture, I am sure he can appreciate my desire to add context to the narrow portrait of late-night comedy election coverage that the Fox News article presents.

***Link to article:*** <http://www.reason.com/blog/show/129595.html>