

Hollywood Weighs Impact of Election

By Steven Zeitchik and Paul J. Gough | Fri Oct 31, 2008 10:59am EDT

NEW YORK (Hollywood Reporter) - Jay Leno and David Letterman are rooting for the Republicans.

That's not a comment on their political beliefs, which late-night hosts play close to their vests. But if comic fodder is any factor, after-hours hosts will benefit from a John McCain administration: During a survey in September, the Center for Media and Public Affairs counted seven times as many jokes about the Republican ticket than the Democratic one.

The outcome of the battle for the White House will have consequences far beyond entertainment. But next week's election will also impact Hollywood, influencing culture and policy in crucial ways.

In redefining the pop cultural zeitgeist, it could indirectly affect which movies are made and how much media regulation conglomerates face as well as have an impact on digital development and cable-news ratings.

And it will vault some personalities to popularity and doom others to obscurity.

The principle: What's good for one category of entertainers under one administration is bad for another.

"If McCain wins, late-night hosts would have a field day," CNN pundit and Hunter College professor Karen Hunter said.

And if Barack Obama wins?

"(Right-wing radio hosts) Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity would have a field day," she said.

There are many variables in the relationship between the White House and Hollywood. But the governing principle, according to several industry vets and experts, is that opposition rules -- that is, the entertainment world will favor those aligned with the opposition.

Bill O'Reilly, Matt Drudge, Limbaugh and other conservative stars rose to power during the eight years of the Clinton administration. Over the past eight years of Republican rule, such entertainers as Jon Stewart, Bill Maher, Stephen Colbert and Al Franken were able to make the jump to the big time on the backs of White House blunders.

That means if Obama converts his lead in the polls to a victory, the next four years could bring these stars back to earth and vault others into the stratosphere.

"The people who have the most trouble will be people like Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert," one network late-night producer said. "It's very hard to rail against the machine when you helped support the machine. They're going to have to find a different dynamic."

It's not just traditional television comedy either.

Hybrid personality Michael Moore enjoyed under Bush his two biggest box office successes in "Fahrenheit 9/11" and "Sicko," feeding off resentment for Bush's foreign policy and health-care plan. Moore is prepping a sequel to "Fahrenheit" that Paramount Vantage and Overture are co-producing. But rival studio execs are questioning the movie's commercial prospects if Obama wins the White House and the country puts the Bush years behind it.

Cable news, meanwhile, is increasingly polarized, and the election will only widen the gulf.

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