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COURT JESTERS

THE RISE OF COMEDIANS, THE NEW NEWS ANCHORS

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It is no secret that late-night comedians have become quasi news anchors, especially to under-30 voters — about half of whom say they at least sometimes learn about the campaign from programs like "Saturday Night Live" and "The Daily Show" (compared with about a quarter of people ages 30 to 49), a 2004 Pew Research Center survey found.

Late-night laughmeisters insist they are "equal-opportunity offenders" (in Jay Leno's words).

The Bush administration has been wildly popular with comics, if not voters — the president and his aides were the subject of 1,245 late-night jokes from Jan. 1 to Oct. 10, according to a survey conducted by the Center for Media and Public Affairs. That compares with 749 jokes about Democrats.

On the other hand, the Democratic candidates for president have been the butt of 383 jokes so far this year, compared with 312 aimed at the Republican candidates.

Conservatives say otherwise, complaining that late-night political humor slants left and skewers right. Jon Stewart, host of "The Daily Show," is an avowed lefty, and Stephen Colbert's on-air persona is a conservative buffoon.

Bias or not, presidential campaigns are gold mines of humor, intended and otherwise (think "Dukakis tank" in the "otherwise" category). Sen. John McCain might have scored the howler of the cycle so far when, during a Republican debate in October, he criticized Clinton's effort to allocate \$1 million for a Woodstock museum. "I wasn't there," McCain said of Woodstock, the 1969 rock 'n' roll festival. "I'm sure it was a cultural and pharmaceutical event. I was tied up at the time."

McCain, a former prisoner of war in North Vietnam, received a standing ovation.

Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr. rocked a South Carolina debate hall with his answer to a question about his whether he was capable of containing his long-windedness. "Yes," was his one-word reply.

One harbinger of less funny days ahead: The candidates who have rated highest on the laugh meter — Biden and Mike Huckabee among them — tend to rate lower in the polls. And no one would confuse Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton or Rudolph W. Giuliani with Don Rickles.

— MARK LEIBOVICH