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Late-night political satire to return to TV within weeks Candidates free of jabs during writer's strike

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NEW YORK - Attention, presidential candidates: Not to disrupt your holiday plans, but if you have any cringe-inducing mistakes, insensitive jokes or outright hypocrisy yet to engage in, there's no time like the present.

That is, no time like until early January, when late-night comics return to the air again.

You might think it's impossible to quantify the impact of the writer's strike on the campaign. Actually, the Washington-based Center for Media and Public Affairs tracks late-night jokes about the candidates, and reports that Clinton stands to benefit most from the strike. Why? Because she's joked about almost as often as all the other Democrats combined.

The group found that from Jan. 1 through Oct. 10, Leno, Letterman, O'Brien, Stewart and Colbert joked about Clinton 186 times, versus 197 times for all the other Democrats together. They "focused heavily on her physical appearance, including her clothes (29 jokes), her alleged lack of emotional warmth (43 jokes), and her marital problems (21 jokes)," the group said in a report. (It also found that John Edwards attracted frequent jokes about his appearance — yup, mostly his hair.)

The comedians found the Democrats (383 jokes) just a little funnier than the Republicans (312 jokes), the group said. Only Clinton and Giuliani were among the top-10 most joked-about figures in the country.

The CMPA's president, Robert Lichter, says late-night shows are a mixed bag for the candidates. On the one hand, they can make them look bad and reduce support. On the other, especially for dark horses, "simply by focusing on them, the shows can increase their support — as in, all comedy is good as long as they spell your name right."

Kurtzman, the political humorist, agrees. "Of course there are the stinging jokes that can hurt. But the more innocent jokes can help a candidate by putting them on the pop culture map. If you're a regular target, there's the sense that you've arrived."