

SPECIAL REPORT: D.C. TALKERS

Changing of the Guard

Newsmaker Shows Learn How to Cope
With Obama Administration Personalities

By Elizabeth Jensen
Special to TelevisionWeek

There's a certain giddiness in the air at the Sunday morning newsmaker shows these days, with the long election behind them and a whole new set of issues to delve into and guests to pin down.

It's a far cry from a year ago, when *TelevisionWeek* put together its annual anonymous poll of how the politicians and otherwise important people who make the rounds of the guest chairs are viewed by the Sunday show staffs who rely on them.

A year ago, the drawn-out Democratic primary had narrowed the agendas of the shows to just a handful of topics. This time around, the frenetic change agenda of the Obama administration, two wars, the swine flu pandemic, the tumult in the economy and the turmoil in the Republican Party—not to mention the unlikely mouthing-off from former Vice President Dick Cheney—has presented the long-form interview programs with a smorgasbord of stories and guests from which to fill their plates.

To use another metaphor, "With the new administration, we're like kids in the candy store," said one rejuvenated Sunday show staffer. "It's more fun than ever," said another. "Our role as far as the news cycle has never been stronger," chimed in a third.

It's not just new topics to talk about. Contributing equally to the good mood is a feeling that, unlike during the eight years of the Bush administration, the Obama White House staff seems to like doing the Sunday shows and has decided they can be useful in getting an agenda out.

Competition among the shows, while never slack, seems particularly fierce this year. Two of the five programs that go at it each Sunday have changed anchors, giving the habit-driven audience an impetus to shop around. NBC's "Meet the Press" now is hosted by David Gregory after the unexpected death of Tim Russert last June. CNN subbed out "Late Edition With Wolf Blitzer" for a new host, John King, and a new title, "State of the Union." They join ABC's "This Week With George Stephanopoulos," CBS' "Face the Nation With Bob Schieffer" and "Fox News Sunday With Chris Wallace."

With so many guests to choose from, there was perhaps a little less consensus than usual this year among those who put the shows together. But some administration stars are beginning to emerge and some patterns are becoming apparent. Here's the early view of D.C.'s Talkers from the inside out, exchanging, as always, anonymity for honesty.

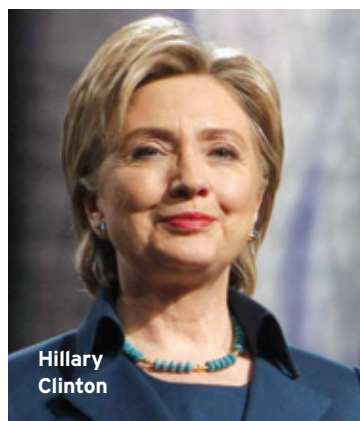


Barack Obama

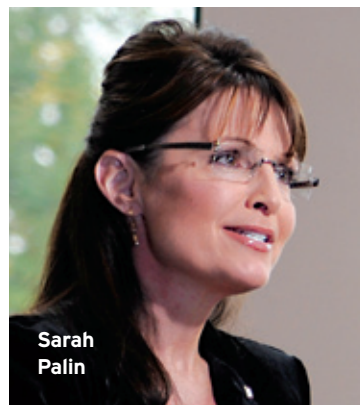
THE BIGGEST GET

Leading vote-getter: President Barack Obama, who, unlike his predecessor, seems amenable to doing the programs. ("It's always the president," even though the interviews tend to be doled out on rotation among the networks. "Audiences respond to him and, at the same time, he's shown an interest in doing the Sunday shows.")

Also mentioned: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who has done short interviews with reporters accompanying her on her globe-trotting, but has shunned the Sun-



Hillary Clinton



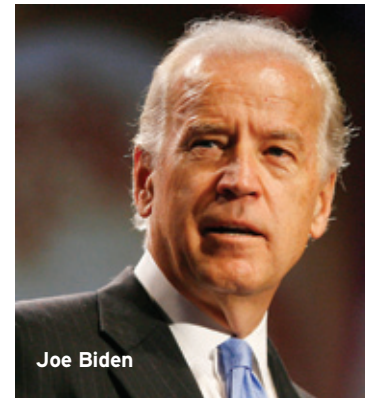
Sarah Palin

day long-form spotlight since taking on her new role ("She's stayed off the Sunday turf and seems to be deliberately doing so."); Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, who hasn't done any Sunday programs either; Pope Benedict XVI.

2008: Then-Sen. Clinton and then-Sen. Obama, as they fought to the end for the Democratic presidential nomination.

UNDER THE MISTAKEN IMPRESSION THAT THEY ARE THE BIGGEST GET

Leading vote-getter: By a very slim margin, Vice President Joe Biden. ("He always thinks he's more



Joe Biden

of a big get than he is." "Even when he was a senator and failed presidential candidate, he always thought he was hot stuff for a Sunday show.")

Also mentioned: Sen. Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., and Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev. ("They tend to act like more than Senate leaders."); Sen. Arlen Specter, D-Pa., and Obama Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel ("Still a good get but...")

2008: Sen. Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y.

THE HARDEST TO GET

Leading vote-getters: A tie between First Lady Michelle Obama ("It's not her kind of thing." "There's just this caution, it's not even an instant no, it just goes out with no response.") and investor Warren Buffett, who hasn't done any Sunday shows throughout the months of economic turmoil.



Michelle Obama

Also mentioned: Gov. Palin (“I mean, who can blame her?”); Jeb Bush (“He rarely does a Sunday show and even though he’s not in office right now, he’ll always be a good booking.”); Attorney General Eric Holder; embattled California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

2008: Then-Vice President Dick Cheney.

PLAYS HARDEST TO GET

Leading vote-getters: No consensus. Mrs. Clinton, for her current reticence; Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass. (“Maybe he still thinks he was elected president? He takes forever.”) Vice President Biden (“So interesting because he was the biggest friend of the Sunday shows before he was in office.”) Secretary of Defense Robert Gates (“Doesn’t particularly like doing Sunday shows.”); Sen. Reid.

2008: Then-Rep. Emanuel, D-Ill.

SURE TO MAKE THE MOST NEWS

Leading vote-getter: Former Vice President Dick Cheney, who has been making the rounds—and the headlines—by refusing to bow out gracefully, as convention would have it. (“He wants to make news; he’s a flame-thrower at the moment.” “He doesn’t care anymore.” “He only comes when he comes to play.”)

Also mentioned: President Obama (“By his style, no, but now that’s he’s the president, whatever he says makes news.”)

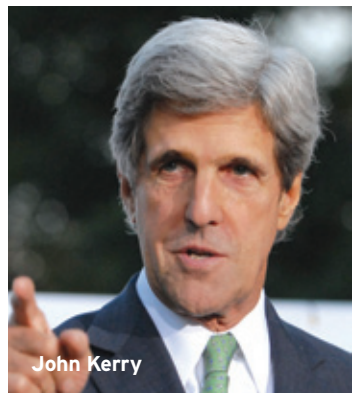
2008: Any presidential candidate; Bill Clinton.

DOESN'T MAKE THE NEWS (S)HE PROBABLY SHOULD

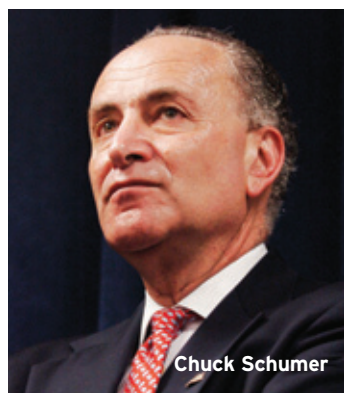
Leading vote-getters: No consensus, but lots of frustration. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., is “just very careful”; her House Minority counterpart Rep. John Boehner, R-Ohio, “rarely does.” Rep. Steny Hoyer, D-Md., “rarely makes news either,” and “It’s hard to get anything out of Harry Reid.” As for Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner: “When [Federal Reserve Chairman] Ben Bernanke says something it’s really news, but Geithner so far has



Nancy Pelosi



John Kerry



Chuck Schumer

not been as news-producing. He’s getting better at interviews, however.” And finally, Obama adviser Valerie Jarrett “is incredibly close to the president and in one of the most influential positions, yet she’s very good at sticking on message ... in a delightful way.”

2008: Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

MAKES THE MOST EFFECTIVE USE OF NEWSMAKER SHOWS

Leading vote-getter: Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz. (“He’s experienced at it. He’s pretty strategic about when he comes out, and when he comes out, most of the shows take him.”)

Also mentioned: New administration go-to person David Axelrod (“always seems to have something to say when he comes

on”); Mr. Emanuel (“He’s incredibly good at knowing when and how to feed the beast, and he’s in that role for a reason.”); Gen. Col Powell (“comes out when he has a reason”); Mr. Geithner (“When he’s coming out and doing things, there’s definitely a reason for it.”)

2008: Then-Sen. Biden.

LEAVES THE BEST LINES IN THE GREEN ROOM

Leading vote-getters: Sen. Schumer is “good on TV and even better in the green room”; ditto for Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C. (“He delivers on-air but he’s better in the green room.”). Sen. McCain, thinks one, is “more outgoing before you get him on the set.” And the “incredibly witty” Republican political consultant Mike Murphy is often at the center of a “green room fest,” where he throws out great lines that others then use on-air.

Also mentioned: In a slightly different category—those who talk big when off-air—is Sen. Kerry (“You always need to have his quotes from the paper as a backup; he’ll say things in print that are a little more explicit than when he is on the air.”); Lawrence Summers, director of the National Economic Council; and Rep. Boehner (“talks a big game beforehand”).

2008: Senators “jockeying for position.” “They all do.”

STAR OF THE GREEN ROOM

Leading vote-getter: The ever-popular, always accessible



Dick Cheney



Lindsey Graham

Sen. McCain.

Also mentioned: Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn. (“Down to earth and sometimes shows up without staff,” “wants to see the control room”); Sen. Graham; Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich.; VP Biden; Mr. Emanuel; and Gov. Schwarzenegger (“very charming”).

2008: Sen. McCain; former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee.

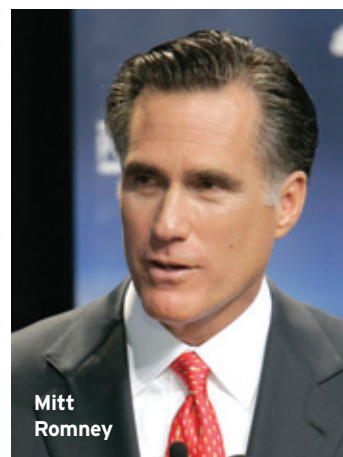
HARDEST TO BUDGE OFF THE TALKING POINTS

Leading vote-getters: It’s a “7,000-way tie.” “We don’t invite those people back.” On the list are Secretary Clinton and her predecessor, Gen. Powell; Mr. Summers; Obama spokesman Robert Gibbs (While a good Sunday guest because he’s speaking for the president, “He’s so practiced at it.”); Ms. Jarrett; Mr. Geithner; and Christina Romer, chair of the White House Council of Economic Advisers.

2008: Sen. Bob Casey, D-Pa.; Ms. Rice; Sen. Clinton; Sen. Obama.

HIGHEST MAINTENANCE

Leading vote-getter: House Speaker Pelosi, who may be losing some bookings because of it. (“It’s ridiculous.” “You gotta go there, it’s



Mitt Romney

gotta be a Friday, they remember every perceived slight.” “She never does anything live; you have to go to her.” “We rarely make so many accommodations for anyone else.” One mild dissent: “It’s more pain-in-the-neck than high-maintenance. When we get up there she’s always very nice.”)

Also mentioned: former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (“Since he belongs to Fox, you have to get Fox to OK it and it’s an ordeal every time.”).

2008: Then-Republican presidential candidate Rudolph Giuliani and Rep. Pelosi.

EASIEST TO DEAL WITH

Leading vote-getter: Sen. Graham (“A dream boat. He’s available, it’s not high-maintenance.”)

Also mentioned: Sen. Richard Lugar, R-Ind. (“Just a real gentleman, a nice guy and easy-going. Not self-important in any way.”) Sen. McCain; Sen. Richard Shelby, R-Ala.; Sen. Schumer; Sen. Jack Reed, D-R.I. (“low-maintenance”).

2008: Sen. Graham.

MOST OVEREXPOSED

Leading vote-getter: Sen. Schumer (“The joke is that the most dangerous place in Washington is between Chuck Schumer and a camera.”)

Also mentioned: Rep. Eric Cantor, R-Va. (“will always come on”); Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell; Gingrich (“Enough!”); Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo. (“getting up there”).

2008: The candidates; the campaigns; anyone from a primary state.

MAKING THE LONG ROAD TO THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION FEEL EVEN LONGER

Leading vote-getter: Former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney. (“It’s obvious that he’s running for president again.” “He’s been running for the past four years and it’s just never stopped.”)

2008: Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean; the unresolved Michigan, Florida and super-delegate issues; daily conference calls and counter-conference calls by the campaigns. ■



John McCain