Stewart and Colbert rallies might give voice to 'silent majority'
By Rex W. Huppke, Tribune reporter
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We are, as the bloggers and TV and radio folks tell us each day, in the midst of a political revolution.

Many have taken to calling themselves "we the people," because it sounds rebel-ish, in a tri-cornered hat kind of way. The nation is swept up in anti-incumbent fervor, and we're mad. We're mad, mad, mad, mad.

Except that, by and large, we're not really all that mad. A Pew Research Center poll earlier this year found only 21 percent of Americans "angry" at the federal government. And the term "anti-incumbent fervor" loses a bit when you learn that, according to political scientist Michael Robinson, 98 percent of all congressional incumbents who ran in this year's primaries prevailed. If the narratives of this election season can — GASP! — be called into question, it's worth considering whether an upcoming comedic event might present a more serious reflection of our collective state of mind.

On Oct. 30, comedians Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert will hold twin rallies on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Stewart's is The Rally to Restore Sanity, while Colbert's — in keeping with his role as a comically conservative pundit — will be called the March to Keep Fear Alive.

These events are obvious sendups of Glenn Beck's recent Restoring Honor rally and the progressive One Nation rally held earlier this month. And while the audiences of the two comedians undoubtedly skew somewhat to the left, Stewart is presenting the rally as a chance for the low-key middle to come together.

As described on The Rally to Restore Sanity Web site: "We're looking for the people who think shouting is annoying, counterproductive, and terrible for your throat; who feel that the loudest voices shouldn't be the only ones that get heard; and who believe that the only time it's appropriate to draw a Hitler mustache on someone is when that person is actually Hitler. Or Charlie Chaplin in certain roles."

Yes, it's a goof. But what about those folks who have remained largely on the sidelines during the campaign, chuckling at the often absurd rhetorical volleys of our feuding politicos? This could be their moment to stand up and say, "Hey. You all are acting like jerks. Cut it out."

Alan Gitelson, a professor of political science at Loyola University Chicago, compared the sizable group of people who are neither angry nor fiercely partisan to what Vice President Spiro Agnew once dubbed the "silent majority" — people during Richard Nixon's presidency who supported the Vietnam War but didn't speak out or rally en masse.

"This is like some 40 years later, but it's analogous," Gitelson said. "The tea party is clearly to the right; they're not necessarily Republican but definitely not Democrats. And then you have progressives on the other side, and then there's this large center. The rally that Colbert and Stewart are doing is kind of part of a balancing act."
Some on the right have portrayed the comedic rallies as a last-ditch effort by liberals to rile up Democratic voters before an election in which conservative candidates clearly have the enthusiasm edge and are poised to win a sizable number of congressional seats. That fits nicely in much of the conspiracy-laden, "us vs. them" talk that comes from a swath of the tea party, but I believe what Stewart and Colbert have in mind is to simply do what their shows do so well: hold a mirror up to our society, point out hypocrisies and silliness and have a good laugh.

That's why these rallies have the chance to empower those who've sat back and watched the nuttiness happen, all while thinking: "Well, you guys on the left are spending too much money and taking things a bit far government-wise, but you guys on the right want to dial it all back way too far. And some of you are just loopy."

Gitelson said Stewart and Colbert could be the right people to fire this group up, not in a way that would swing an election but enough to force politicians, once the election is over, to consider moderating their messages.

Which brings us to a curious fact about Colbert and Stewart. Their shows delight in taking on both sides of the political aisle, relentlessly ferreting out inconsistencies and absurdities. An hour of Fox News and an hour of MSNBC can cancel each other out, but "The Daily Show" and "The Colbert Report" routinely use razor-sharp satire to slice away artifice and give a clear, albeit comedic, picture of the news of the day.

The real "we the people," the silent majority, tend to recognize this and enjoy laughing at comedy that's funny because it's true. The rallies on Oct. 30 will likely be a reflection of that, a coming together of the more-or-less like-minded middle.

While these events aren't going to change the course of the country, they might serve to remind anyone with a far-left or far-right ideology that there are masses to contend with.

And those masses, for the moment, are being led by comedians.