

In The Campaign, a fictional race for Congress

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Directed by Jay Roach, written by Chris Henchy and Shawn Harwell

As we have noted before, the scope for satire and ridicule of American political life is almost limitless. In fact, at times American political life seems to be a parody unto itself.

On the nightly television news, after all, one is confronted with politicians and government officials, hirelings of finance and industry, who preach “moral values” with a straight face. Cabinet ministers and generals, responsible for violence and terror around the world, praise peace and global harmony. None of this meets with a challenge in the media. The present situation is unreal, and almost unbearable.

The American political system is held in wide contempt, as a nest of corruption and self-interest. Tens of millions understand that public officeholders from both major parties, from the White House and Congress on down, are thoroughly indifferent and hostile to their needs and interests.

A recent Gallup survey found that only 10 percent of the population, *one in ten*, approves of the job the US Congress is doing, which matches the lowest figure the polling firm has ever recorded in nearly four decades. Eighty-three percent disapprove.

Gallup notes: “Congress approval has been below 40 percent since early 2005, and below 20 percent every month since June 2011—dropping to 10 percent in February of this year and again now. ...

“Congressional approval is down among all political groups and is now virtually the same across these groups—with Democrats at 9 percent, independents at 11

percent, and Republicans at 10 percent. Democrats’ approval declined the most, from 18 percent in July. ...

“Although Americans have generally been more negative than positive in their assessments of Congress over the past four decades, opinions have been especially negative in recent years ... Americans’ views of Congress are so bad that it has now been more than a year since Gallup’s monthly assessment was as high as 20 percent.”

A minute portion of this popular sentiment makes its way into *The Campaign*, directed by Jay Roach, and skewed and diffused at that by Hollywood amorphousness, complacency and, frankly, cowardice. The overall result is miserable.

I held off commenting directly on *The Campaign* until the eighth paragraph because the film is something of an embarrassment to write about. Its storyline is sophomoric and incoherent, largely an excuse for gross-out humor and over-the-top caricature.

Cam Brady (Will Ferrell) is an incumbent—and unopposed—Democratic member of Congress from North Carolina. When his extramarital antics ignite a scandal, his erstwhile backers, the billionaire Motch brothers (John Lithgow and Dan Aykroyd), decide to dump him and create a viable Republican opponent, whom they find in Marty Huggins (Zach Galifianakis), the oddball son of a cohort of theirs (Brian Cox). They send in experienced political hatchetman Tim Wattley (Dylan McDermott) to oversee Marty’s campaign.

The Brady-Huggins race undergoes various twists and turns. Coached by Wattley, Huggins, hitherto considered something of an idiot by his father and local townsfolk alike, makes a favorable impression in an initial debate.

Cam manages to punch both a baby and, subsequently, a celebrity animal, hurting him in the polls. He retaliates by charging Huggins with belonging to Al Qaeda, while the latter accuses Brady of writing a “communist manifesto” at the age of seven.

Brady’s claims to be a Christian (“America, Jesus and freedom” is his overall campaign slogan) are dealt a blow when he fails to remember the words to the Lord’s Prayer. Outraged by one of Huggins-Wattley’s dirty tricks, Brady has sex with his opponent’s wife and broadcasts the video in the form of a campaign ad.

Events proceed on this level. In the end, Huggins regrets his subservience to the Motch brothers, after they reveal plans to sell the congressional district to Chinese interests, and Brady realizes the wickedness of his former ways.

To describe *The Campaign* in this manner is to do it more than justice. The implausible, careless, unconvincing and for the most part *unfunny* manner in which the goings-on are organized dominates everything. While a few points about fake religiosity and patriotism in American politics come across, these are mostly lost in the overall facetiousness and unseriousness ... and they are all too easy, in any case. Anyone hoping to see a scathing send-up of the US political scene will be disappointed.

By targeting both Democrats and Republicans, the filmmakers indicate their desire to be evenhanded. In fact, they simply demonstrate the blunted, pointless character of the entire enterprise. Director Jay Roach told an interviewer from the *Huffington Post*, “But, you know, we never started thinking, ‘Let’s make a film that is about any partisan issues.’ It was always about, ‘Let’s just have a great, funny, arena.’ This movie *could* have taken place in the professional wrestling world. Will and Zach joke about it, but I think it’s partly true—they thought it might be in the ‘boy pageant’ world.”

Roach (the *Austin Powers* and *Meet the Parents* series) has directed more intelligent fare, including *Recount* (2008), about the Gore-Bush election and Florida recount in 2000, and *Game Change* (2012), on the 2008 John McCain-Sarah Palin campaign in 2008, both for HBO. Presumably, those were designed for people with brains, while *The Campaign*, aimed at a wider audience, needed to be broad, stupid and vulgar. What cynicism and insularity!

Ferrell is talented, and has indicated an ability to do something more substantial in, for example, *Everything Must Go* (2011). Galifianakis is a gifted comic performer, and the few moments in *The Campaign* that bear a resemblance to anything one might encounter in real life belong to him.

The witlessness of *The Campaign* is the product of a protracted decline in the American film industry. After all, Hollywood was once capable, with varying degrees of perceptiveness and honesty, of representing the American political process in, for instance, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), *The Great McGinty* (1940), *Citizen Kane* (1941), *The Glass Key* (1942), *State of the Union* (1948), *Flamingo Road* (1949), *All the King’s Men* (1949), *A Lion is in the Streets* (1953), *The Last Hurrah* (1958), *Advise & Consent* (1962), *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), *The Best Man* (1964), *The Candidate* (1972), *Nashville* (1975), *Bulworth* (1998) and even perhaps *Primary Colors* (1998), among others. If nothing else, these works suggested something about the complexities and dilemmas that present themselves in political life.

Tellingly, as the social chasm in America has grown, along with popular disgust with the political status quo, filmmakers have found it harder and harder to treat the electoral process and government in a forthright or insightful manner, with a few honorable exceptions.

Affluent Hollywood liberalism, from which *The Campaign* essentially springs, is particularly culpable, turning out weak works such as Rod Lurie’s *The Contender* (2000) and Barry Levinson’s truly inexcusable *Man of the Year* (2006). Overwhelmed by events, intimidated by the ultra-right, intellectually lazy, distant from the population and its problems and feelings, the liberals find it almost impossible to summon up anything meaningful to say.



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