

The Politician: The unreality of official American political and social life

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American political and social life, official and “unofficial,” presents itself today as an embarrassment of riches from the point of satire. Very few film and television artists at present avail themselves of the *almost unlimited* opportunities for ridicule and derision.

The Politician, in its first eight-episode season from Netflix, is something of a biting and humorous exception. It centers on the Machiavellian operations of an ambitious California high school senior, determined to win an election for student body president as a stepping-stone, ultimately, to the White House.

Along the way, because the series is honest and clear-eyed, it takes swipes at identity politics and a number of the other lies and falsifications that pollute the atmosphere in the US. Created by Ryan Murphy (*Glee*, *American Horror Story*), Brad Falchuk and Ian Brennan, *The Politician*’s generally disrespectful attitude toward gender and racial obsessions in particular has amused audiences but made a good many critics uncomfortable.

Almost inevitably, the series finally loses its way in terms of a more general assessment of the current political landscape. Overall, however, Murphy and his team have put together a perceptive, well-performed and carefully constructed project.

In the opening scene, Payton Hobart (Ben Platt), a tense, overly self-aware high-school senior, tells a Harvard admissions officer he has been planning and studying every detail of the lives of former presidents in the service of his ambition to one day hold the highest office in the land. But his supposedly in-depth research has stopped at the limits of the Reagan administration: “As far as I’m concerned, he [Reagan] created the modern presidency, the presidency of television and celebrity.”

Payton boasts about his advantage, being able to say he had “the good fortune of being born both rich and poor.” The biological son of a cocktail waitress, he claims humble, Lincoln-esque roots. Payton entered the realm of the super-rich when he was adopted by the Hobarts, the fabulously attired, New Age (and unfaithful) matriarch Georgina

(Gwyneth Paltrow) and the nonentity of a patriarch Keaton (Bob Balaban).

Payton’s path to the White House now involves becoming student president of the elite St. Sebastian High School (a school complete with a “harassment czar” and stagings of musicals about famous assassinations) in Santa Barbara. He leaves no stone unturned and nothing to chance, plotting endlessly with his friends and advisor/classmates McAfee (Laura Dreyfuss), the gender fluid James (Theo Germaine) and his girlfriend Alice (Julia Schlaepfer). But his close friend and occasional lover River (David Corenswet) becomes Payton’s electoral opponent, much to the latter’s rage. Worse still, River’s running mate Skye (Rahne Jones) can tell an audience of students they have “the historic opportunity to elect a gender nonconforming African-American to be their vice president.”

In the initial election debate, Payton, to his credit, defends the much-maligned Mark Twain, a *bête noire* of the identity politics industry: “We should not be rewriting literary giants like Mark Twain. Mark Twain loathed racial inequality, and through the eyes of Huckleberry Finn, he was attempting to shine a light on the heinous, shameful sin of slavery, and the systemic racism that pervaded every aspect of his life in the environment in which he was raised.”

He hedges his bets, however, by quickly adding, “But make no mistake, the racism that Mark Twain wrote about has not been banished to the ash heap of history, it’s with us in this room today.”

Predictably, the gender-forward ticket (River and Skye) takes the lead. Payton fights back with a ploy of his own—enlisting a cancer-stricken running mate, Infinity (Zoey Deutch). The hapless girl is also being used by her conniving grandmother Dusty (Jessica Lange), who piles up “freebees” by using Infinity’s medical condition. Questions surface and must be suppressed about the latter’s true state of health—a potentially campaign-ending revelation.

Adding insult to injury, Payton gets wait-listed by Harvard, in spite of a “lifetime of focus and planning, carefully studying applications obtained on the black market

to pinpoint the exact combination of extracurriculars and test scores that would optimize my chances at acceptance. Three years on that stupid literary magazine.”

Georgina reminds her distraught adopted son that her biological sons—the spoiled-to-the-point-of-psychopathy Hobart twins (the wonderfully detestable Trevor Mahlon Eason as Martin and Trey Eason as Luther)—had their admissions to Harvard arranged and paid for by their parents. Hints at the ongoing college admissions scandal hover in the air.

Momentarily stymied, Payton is afraid he can only “pretend “ to feel. “Does it matter, if you can’t tell the difference?” asks his mother. Emotions can be counterfeited as the need arises.

(Along the same lines, after complaints from River that she seems to be pretending during sex, Astrid—Payton’s nemesis and rival—promises to “do better at appearing more authentic from now on.” When River protests that “I don’t want you to *appear* authentic, I want you to *be* authentic,” Astrid replies, bemused, “I don’t understand. What’s the difference? ... I promise to be more real from now on.”)

In any event, Payton continues to live up to his motto: “I will be president someday because I will stop at nothing.”

Harvard eventually offers Payton a place if he uses the family millions to finance a new department (and such a department, the university’s representatives point out, “is not an inexpensive undertaking. We need to hire staff, create new software, curriculum, uh, build a new facility”), a proposal he haughtily declines (“I need to be accepted on my merits... I’m going to be running for president. This will be weaponized against me.”)

Nicely, the “gender nonconforming” characters and future politicians prove to be just as corrupt and self-seeking as their “straight” (or pretend-“straight”) counterparts.

Skye tells McAfee at one point she wants to make history, introducing “a gender, nonbinary history curriculum, and making every bathroom and locker room at the school unisex, and staging a schoolwide sit-in until they abolish Columbus Day.” It’s the sort of exchange that makes the show worth watching.

In *The Politician*, in idyllic, affluent Santa Barbara, the police and college officials are bribable, the rich are arrogant frauds and opportunist money-grubbers abound. In a key scene, Astrid tells her wealthy father (Dylan McDermott) to “take a good look at me, Daddy. At me, at the house, at the car and furniture that you’re leasing because your credit sucks? It’s all a mirage. We’re not winners, Dad. We’re a family of fakes. You know, Mom’s usually a pretty typical drunk pill-head, till she mixes Xanax and Pinot and then it’s like she’s on truth serum. And she talks. About everything . Neighborhood gossip, sex, how you make your money.”

More generally, the creators point to the deception being perpetrated in so many spheres of American life: the politicians are phony through and through, the well-heeled live in their own dream world, the young pretend during sex, people fake diseases and social concerns, they even manufacture relationship breakups—all to gain some largely imaginary advantage that only blows up in their faces.

The falsity and emptiness of the official political process and its vast alienation from the population is a central theme. In one pivotal episode, a male high school student, the “average voter,” who only obsesses about girls and sex, is the target of relentless harassment by both election campaigns, who have nothing to say to him anyway, until he explodes.

All of this is a comment about the unreality and *unsustainability* of the current American situation.

“It’s wealthy people behaving badly,” says Murphy in an interview with *Hollywood Reporter*. “All of this has been percolating in the culture, particularly under this president and this idea of Ivanka and Jared [as] the sort of satanic poster boy and girl for privilege and nepotism.” The show’s creators indicate that the president’s son-in-law’s dubious acceptance into Harvard was one of the inspirations for the show’s storyline. Jared Kushner’s real estate developer father pledged \$2.5 million to the prestigious university before his son was admitted.

The cast of *The Politician* is generally outstanding. In one of the most sensitive scenes—a gentle interlude in the otherwise acid-lined narrative—the talented Platt sings Joni Mitchell’s “River” at a memorial for someone he has been close to. (Teen suicide is another concern of the series.)

The final episode, set three years after the rest of the goings-on, is the series’ weakest. It would probably have been better if *The Politician* had concluded with the Santa Barbara student elections, rather than jumping forward and setting up Season 2 devoted to “grown-up” elections in New York City. But on the whole the series is fresh and amusing. It stands out from the usual conformist fare.



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