The 34 best political movies ever made

Our critic's list includes 'Malcolm X' and 'Mean Girls.' What's your vote?

By Ann Hornaday
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Election years are often called "the silly season." But in 2020, the stakes feel much too high for such lightheartedness. We need inspiration, edification and, quite frankly, a massive course correction when it comes to the American project: its most aspirational ideals, its most perilous pitfalls, and the part strong institutions and informed citizens play in keeping the whole crazy experiment from exploding into hyperpartisan smithereens.

Political movies can help. But first we must define the term. John Sayles — perhaps the greatest American political filmmaker of his or any generation — once wrote in Mother Jones that movies as disparate as "Rambo" and "Adventures in Babysitting" could be described as political, because "they served only to maintain the status quo, strengthen stereotyping, and push people apart." He makes an excellent point: A political film can be great — or at least jarringly effective — even though it's not political on purpose.

A few movies like that are on this list. But there's also the usual collection of thrillers, biopics, satires and straight-ahead dramas. Many are fact-based, set amid the imposing edifices and featureless bureaucracies of Washington. Others are more speculative and metaphorical, taking

viewers to the Texas border or an Omaha high school to explore the vagaries of power as they play out within communities and individual relationships.

There are titles not on this list that are sure to launch a million “How could you leave out … ?” objections. Oliver Stone’s “JFK” isn’t here (it’s more profitably understood as a deeply psychological movie than a political one), nor are classics such as “The Great McGinty,” “The Candidate” and “Lincoln” — not because they aren’t worthy, but to make room for films that may be more obscure but are no less revelatory or fun to watch. And we’ve limited this list to 34 films, with the 35th title to be filled in by you. One person, one vote, just as the framers intended.

1. Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939)

Have you watched it lately? You should. (And by "you," we mean every sentient being on Capitol Hill.) Frank Capra's classic is still the granddaddy of America's small-d democratic, participatory ideals. And James Stewart's portrayal of a small-town nobody and his quixotic battle against self-dealing politicians still claims pride of place as Hollywood's most stirring, convincing and timeless reminder that the Constitution is a sacred trust that all American citizens — and their representatives — have responsibility for bearing.

2. All the President's Men (1976)

For many viewers — especially the untold number who became reporters after being inspired by it — this flawlessly crafted Watergate procedural is a journalism movie. But in the process of untangling the skein of lies, malfeasance and coverups that defined the scandal, Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward (Robert Redford) and Carl Bernstein (Dustin Hoffman) wind up exposing the seamy underside of partisan realpolitik, and underline the crucial role of a free press in holding leaders accountable. Bonus points for featuring Jason Robards as history's best big-screen Ben Bradlee.

Frank Sinatra and Janet Leigh star in "The Manchurian Candidate," released in 1962. (Everett Collection)

3. The Manchurian Candidate (1962)

The 1960s and ’70s produced their share of great paranoid thrillers, but this one proved shockingly prescient, not only regarding the era of assassinations that immediately followed its release, but of today, when foreign influence on our elections poses a credible and escalating threat. Masterfully directed by John Frankenheimer and featuring Frank Sinatra’s finest acting performance, this hallucinatory masterpiece still manages to be darkly funny and queasily discomfiting in equal measure. (Which unfortunately can’t be said of Jonathan Demme’s forgettable 2004 remake.)

4. Primary (1960)

Robert Drew's chronicle of John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey's contest for the Democratic presidential nomination marks a watershed in an emerging documentary form alternately called "cinema verite" and "direct cinema." However you describe it, this startlingly intimate glimpse of the candidates and the people who surrounded them reminds audiences of a time when media access, brand identity and messaging had yet to be weaponized — and it anticipates another classic, "The War Room" (1993), which captured the presidential campaign of an unknown named Bill Clinton with similar candor.

5. The Battle of Algiers (1966)

This tense, closely observed drama about the guerrilla war of independence with France is so realistic that it was screened at the Pentagon for counterinsurgency training in 2003. Director Gillo Pontecorvo cast mostly nonprofessional actors in the film, which helped codify the jangly aesthetic of handheld cinematography. But Pontecorvo never lost his cool, cinematically or ideologically. As the filmmaker said himself, "I am on the side of the Arabs, but I feel compassion for the French even if historically they were at fault."

6. Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1964)

When Stanley Kubrick first set out to adapt the novel “Red Alert,” about the horrifying and all-too-likely possibility of a hair-trigger nuclear war, he considered it a drama. But as he began contemplating concepts such as “mutual assured destruction,” “massive retaliation” and “megadeaths,” he realized the only suitable vernacular was satire as black and polished as onyx. If “The Manchurian Candidate” is the era’s finest Cold War thriller, “Dr. Strangelove” is its most lacerating comedy, one that still cuts deep as a funhouse mirror version of hubris, belligerence and staggering self-deception. (For a good approximation of what “Dr. Strangelove” might have looked like as a drama, check out “Fail-Safe,” which came out the same year.)

7. The Lives of Others (2006)

For many Americans, this exquisitely staged and acted drama provided their first exposure to the East German secret police, known as the Stasi, and their methods of political and social control. Reminiscent of Francis Ford Coppola's 1974 thriller, "The Conversation," Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's stunning feature debut brought viewers inside the experience of both the watchers and the watched. The film's hushed restraint made its conclusion all the more shattering. And, less than two decades and one Edward Snowden later, it feels even more Cassandra-like in its depiction of the surveillance state.

8. Mean Girls (2004)

Yes, “Mean Girls.” Lindsay Lohan has never been better than in this frothy teenage coming-of-age comedy. But in addition to the usual adolescent high jinks and catty comebacks, screenwriter Tina Fey managed to create an incredibly insightful taxonomy of hierarchical power as it is amassed, wielded and ultimately dismantled — all within the complicated context of high school politics, Queen Bee-enforced gender norms and internalized sexism. That’s a lot to accomplish, even if we never exactly made “fetch” happen.

9. Born Yesterday (1950)

Fans of the epic political biography “All the King’s Men,” in which Broderick Crawford channels Louisiana populist Huey Long, will notice that title is missing here — not out of disrespect, but in deference to Crawford’s equally titanic performance in a similarly bumptious role: a coarse blowhard seeking to buy the political fealty of a U.S. congressman. The sublime Judy Holliday brings her signature brand of intelligence and sensitivity to his girlfriend Billie Dawn, who may be daffy but is anything but dumb, especially when she catches on to the cynical influence-peddling in her midst. What would Billie make of the excesses of today’s lobbying industry, not to mention Citizens United? One hopes she’d say they “just aren’t couth!”


Chris Cooper stars in “Lone Star,” released in 1996. (Sony Pictures Classics/Everett Collection)

10. Lone Star (1996)

As previously noted, John Sayles is our poet laureate of political cinema. His films “Return of the Secaucus 7,” “City of Hope” and “Matewan” could have easily made this list, along with several others. But “Lone Star” is his masterwork. A simultaneously epic and finely drawn intergenerational and time-shifting murder mystery set on the Texas-Mexico border, “Lone Star” interrogates history, narrative and tidal shifts in power through the lens of race and immigration, but never at the expense of their complexities. Timely when it first came out, today it feels more relevant than ever.

11. Citizen Kane (1941)

The same hairsplitting argument regarding politics-vs.-journalism applies here as with “All the President’s Men.” And it forms an antipode to the idealism of that movie, demonstrating the malign effects of an unaccountable press harnessed in service to insecurity, arrogance and insatiable hunger for personal aggrandizement. Visually, “Citizen Kane” was a breakthrough that helped shape film’s classical vocabulary; as a cautionary tale, it’s no less formative or necessary.

12. Wag the Dog (1997)

As an example of art almost instantly becoming life, this satire — about a president embroiled in a sex scandal who, for distraction, hires a movie producer to stage a phony war — would have been thoroughly entertaining. But just as the movie was hitting theaters, Bill Clinton became embroiled in his own sex scandal; months later, he decided to bomb a pharmaceutical factory in Sudan. Suddenly, the film’s outlandish premise felt all too real and “Wag the Dog” had become a metonym for political theater at its most craven and mendacious.

From left, Russell Simpson, Frank Darien, Zeffie Tilbury, Charley Grapewin, Jane Darwell, Darryl Hickman, Shirley Mills and Frank Sully star in “The Grapes of Wrath,” released in 1940. (Twentieth Century Fox/Everett Collection)

13. The Grapes of Wrath (1940)

Critics have pointed out that John Ford's production of John Steinbeck's Depression-era novel excised the author's most radical messages and expansive vision of collective action. But Ford's masterful interpretation — anchored by a perfectly calibrated performance by Henry Fonda as Tom Joad — shares Steinbeck's core values of compassion and mutual caring in response to a bankrupt American Dream. "We'll go on forever," Jane Darwell's Ma Joad says in the film's final scene, " 'cause we're the people."

14. A Face in the Crowd (1957)

Every administration, it seems, inspires a debate about which movie predicted it most accurately. Over the past three years, it has been neck and neck between satires such as "Idiocracy" and "Bob Roberts" and more foreboding, serious-minded dramas such as "All the King's Men" and "Citizen Kane." This wryly amusing and terrifying portrayal of a TV-personality-turned-demagogue has them all beat. Andy Griffith makes a searing big-screen debut as Larry "Lonesome" Rhodes, a cracker barrel philosopher who first hoodwinks a gullible producer, then a cadre of New York network and advertising executives and, finally, an entire nation. Written by Budd Schulberg and directed by Elia Kazan, "A Face in the Crowd" offers an edgy, more confrontational counterpoint to the team's 1954 movie, "On the Waterfront," which easily could have made this list.

15. Malcolm X (1992)

Name your favorite political biopic: “Young Mr. Lincoln”? “Gandhi”? “Nixon”? We’re spoiled for choice when it comes to a genre that at its best illuminates an entire era through one life, and at its worst slips into simplistic hagiography. Spike Lee’s magnificent, sprawling interpretation of the life of one of the civil rights era’s most pivotal and controversial leaders — featuring a phenomenal performance by Denzel Washington in the title role — transcended polemics and easy platitudes to encompass an often contradictory evolution. The result is a moving if tragic testament to the human capacity for spiritual and political growth, one that does justice, in Lee’s words, to “all the different Malcolms” who lived within one man.

16. Election (1999)

Alexander Payne's note-perfect adaptation of Tom Perrotta's novel featured a breakout turn from Reese Witherspoon as Tracy Flick, the candidate for student body president whose indefatigable self-belief has been credited with inspiring everyone from Sarah Palin to the fictional Leslie Knope on "Parks and Recreation." There was no doubt at the time that Tracy was the film's antihero, as the unethical and overachieving foil to Matthew Broderick's beleaguered social studies teacher. But in the fullness of time, the Flick archetype of female political ambition has taken on more nuance, with viewers understanding Tracy less as a villain and more as a creature of sexist and classist circumstance.

17. Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956)

A classic sci-fi film (which got a more than respectable remake in 1978) that also serves as a Trojan Horse for all manner of themes that were germane during the 1950s, "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" would lend itself to as many interpretations as there are agendas. At its most obvious, the story of extraterrestrial creatures who take on the identities of Earthlings — creating a race of blank-eyed "pod people" — was the perfect metaphor for the communist threat. But wait, it was also the perfect metaphor for Eisenhower-era conformity! No, those are both wrong; it's about McCarthyism, you dummies! The film's director, Don Siegel, always denied injecting a political subtext into the film, but it's still a brilliant reflection of the civic and psychic anxieties of its time.

18. Thirteen Days (2000)

When this ticktock of the Cuban missile crisis came out, some observers carped that the role of Kenneth O'Donnell — special assistant and appointments secretary to President John F. Kennedy — was inflated. (When you're played by Kevin Costner, that tends to happen.) But it turned out that this no-nonsense, refreshingly direct thriller got high marks for tacking close to the truth of how events unfolded in October 1962, when the Soviet Union deployed nuclear missiles just 90 miles from the United States and Kennedy and his advisers debated how to respond. "Docudrama" is a backhanded term these days, often connoting cheesy reenactments or cheap theatrics. This sleek, sophisticated film shows how it can be done right — while doing right by its subjects.

19. Bulworth (1998)

Warren Beatty wrote, directed and starred in … "Reds," which is often included on lists of great political films. And that's fine! But he also wrote, directed and starred in this completely bonkers comedy, in which he plays a presidential candidate who, for reasons we won't go into, hires his own assassin. In a liberated fit of fatalism, he begins to speak truth to power, i.e. his handlers, his financial backers, the news media and anyone else who will listen. Touching on everything from race and class to single-payer health care, this bracing exercise in unvarnished honesty is a nervy tightrope act that feels as vertiginous as its protagonist's own madcap journey to clarity. And the result is just as infectiously exhilarating.

"The Fog of War" is an up-close-and-personal documentary about former defense secretary Robert McNamara. (Claire Folger/Sony Pictures Classics)

20. The Fog of War (2003)

This up-close-and-personal documentary about former defense secretary Robert McNamara is ostensibly a first-person memoir of his time as an air force officer serving under Curtis LeMay during World War II, his stint at Ford and his role as "architect" of the Vietnam War. But in the expert — and often ironically skeptical — hands of filmmaker Errol Morris, what could have been an exercise in self-justification becomes a haunting memoir of the ultimate Washington insider, whose willingness to recognize his mistakes is offset by an unmistakable moral certitude that lingers, even when he admits he and the men he was advising were grievously wrong.

21. Selma (2014)

For decades, the civil rights movement had somehow eluded cinematic storytelling. It took Ava DuVernay's vision and tenacity to bring it to the big screen with proper sweep and gravitas. David Oyelowo's Martin Luther King Jr. is the protagonist of this fact-based story about the historic 1965 march in Alabama; but DuVernay managed to make a movie bigger than the man, casting Tom Wilkinson as Lyndon B. Johnson, a president grappling with his own political exigencies and pulling her lens back to include the countless community leaders and activists who made King's work possible and lasting.

22. The Incredibles (2004)

This delightful animated comedy about a family of superheroes trying to live a normal life while stealing away to save the world exhibits all of the trademark strengths we've come to expect from Pixar movies, including bright writing, rich and fully realized characters, and gorgeous visuals. More than a few viewers have also noticed that its story line serves as a covert critique of some cherished shibboleths, especially the kind of everyone-gets-a-ribbon egalitarianism that post-boomer generations have grown up on. One of the film's most memorable tag lines — "When everyone's super, no one is" — is considered by some as welcome pushback to the kind of liberal sanctimony long buried in Hollywood films; others see a barely concealed case for elitism. The film's superpower is that it's adroitly crafted enough to withstand both those critical interpretations and anything else you want to throw at it.

23. Gabriel Over the White House (1933)

This little-known curio stars Walter Huston as a corrupt, apathetic and adulterous president who, after nearly losing his life in an accident, undergoes a humanistic change of heart, becoming an all-powerful but benevolent leader under the tutelage of the titular angel and, ahem, Abraham Lincoln. This is a surpassingly strange slice of cinematic arcana, the product of a team of pro-Roosevelt filmmakers who rushed it into production to support the newly elected president and his Depression-era reforms; the fact that it actually seemed to support the fascist idea of a tyrannical executive was either lost on them or beside the point. The movie is fascinating, not despite but because of these contradictions, which suggest how perilously easy it is for even the loftiest ideals to curdle into their exact opposite.

24. Being There (1979)

This allegory about Chauncey Gardener — a childlike cipher who becomes a shamanic adviser to Washington's elite — feels exceptionally well suited for the present moment. Director Hal Ashby made "Shampoo" with Warren Beatty a few years earlier, and that film endures as a piquant time capsule of the 1968 election. "Being There" is a weirder movie, and in its own way far more incisive. Like "A Face in the Crowd," it's about credulousness and lack of critical thinking. But here, they're not couched in bovine passivity but the active projections of narcissists eager to see their most flattering reflections in the enigmatic pronouncements of Gardener, played by Peter Sellers as a perfect blank slate. The film is also an astute commentary on unearned privilege, summed up by Chauncey's onetime caregiver when she observes his rise despite his lack of intellectual capacity or curiosity: "It's for sure a white man's world in America."

25. Born in Flames (1983)

Its romanticization of armed struggle hasn't aged well, and its ragged production values often reflect the constraints of its budget. But Lizzie Borden's speculative action thriller brims with punk-rock defiance, as a group of lesbian feminists prepare to overthrow their patriarchal overlords. The twist is that the baddies aren't right-wing Reaganites but the socialist left; the value of "Born in Flames" lies less in its putative action than in the debates going on between the characters (one of whom is played by legendary activist Flo Kennedy and another who turned out to be an Oscar-winning director). Its footage of real-life women going about their daily work is of a piece with "9 to 5" and "Tootsie," which had arrived in theaters just a year or two before.

26. The Contender (2000)

This nifty White House drama stars Joan Allen as a U.S. senator who is considered for the vice presidency until a past indiscretion threatens her future. Written and directed by Rod Lurie (who went on to create the TV series “Commander in Chief”), this is the kind of sleek, mainstream entertainment that is increasingly endangered in Hollywood, buoyed by terrific performances from Allen, Jeff Bridges and Gary Oldman. Made as Lurie’s response to the Clinton era, the film also raises provocative questions about gender, female sexuality and double standards that still ring dispiritingly true today.

27. High Noon (1952)

Speaking of Clinton: This is reportedly his favorite movie, so much so that he screened it 20 times when he was in the White House. And he's not alone: American presidents often mention this classic western as their personal No. 1. Gary Cooper's courageous lawman — pulled out of retirement when no one else in his town will agree to do battle with a posse of evildoers — perfectly captures the isolation of leadership, as well as the heroic self-mythologizing it takes to believe that you alone can fix things. There's another political subtext as well: Screenwriter Carl Foreman, who refused to name communist colleagues during the McCarthy-era Red Scare, insisted that "High Noon" was meant to celebrate the political courage of dissent. Like all great films, this one allows for a wealth of interpretations.

Luz Maria Collazo stars in "I Am Cuba," released in 1964. (Everett Collection)

28. I Am Cuba (1964)

One of the most visually gorgeous films ever made, this tone poem to the Cuban revolution was commissioned as a piece of communist propaganda, but its depiction of Batista-era Havana proved so sensuously inviting that it was shelved by the Soviet ministry that produced it. Revered for its velvety black-and-white photography and sensational tracking shots (one of which travels down an elevator to a hotel swimming pool, then dives in), "I Am Cuba" still reverberates, most recently in Alfonso Cuarón's "Roma."

29. Triumph of the Will (1935)

If “I Am Cuba” allows art to break free of even the most suffocating ideological straitjacket, Leni Riefenstahl’s documentary of a 1934 Nazi rally in Nuremberg offers chilling evidence of how effectively formal beauty can be husbanded to the vilest content. It’s included here less for its technical dexterity and aesthetic sophistication than as a warning — proof of cinema’s singular power to lie, seduce and capture our deepest fears and most grotesque aspirations.

30. Milk (2008)

This engrossing, intricately structured drama traces the improbable career trajectory of Harvey Milk, who, as a San Francisco city supervisor, was the first openly gay politician to be elected in California. But Gus Van Sant’s drama about Milk’s career isn’t commendable just as a superbly

crafted biopic, or as a vehicle for a remarkable Sean Penn performance. Like “Selma,” the film focuses just as much on the movement, in this case the LGBTQ community that coalesces with Milk as a leader and that comes into its own as a political force with him as a martyr.

31. In the Loop (2009)

Co-written and directed by “Veep” creator Armando Iannucci, this fast-talking Iraq War satire introduced Iannucci’s scabrously funny voice to Americans, who instantly recognized his cast of backbiting underlings and their knife-fighting bosses, even if they reported to Tony Blair instead of George Bush. Filmed as a shaky-cam mockumentary, the film is amusing not just for its f-bomb-throwing one-liners, but for its uncanny grasp of the deep state at its most shallow.

32. The Spook Who Sat by the Door (1973)

Based on the novel by former U.S. Information Agency officer Sam Greenlee, this uneven but occasionally electrifying satire centers on a CIA recruit who becomes the agency’s first black operative and later uses his skills to foment armed guerrilla warfare. Adapted by Ivan Dixon, the movie traffics in the same set pieces and cliches of the era’s blaxploitation classics, but for a far more serious purpose than cheap thrills. This is a flawed film, weighed down by sludgy pacing, awkward acting and choppy editing. But it bursts with the most volatile arguments and impulses of its era. (Greenlee believed the FBI pressured theaters to stop playing the movie because of its radical message.) And it dares to speak truths that still sting, about such topics as the wages of tokenism and assimilation as well as liberal hypocrisy.

Jeffrey Wright plays Bobby Seale, left, being held, and Hank Azaria plays Abbie Hoffman, front right, in "Chicago 10," released in 2007. (Roadside Attractions/Everett Collection)

33. Chicago 10 (2007)

Brett Morgen's documentary about the trial of antiwar protesters who were arrested during the 1968 Democratic National Convention is as sly a piece of agitprop as the trial itself. Morgen intercuts archival footage with rotoscoped animation to create images that are simultaneously stylized and dazzling in their verisimilitude. With Hank Azaria, Mark Ruffalo, Jeffrey Wright and Liev Schrieber on hand to voice Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, Bobby Seale and lawyer William Kunstler, a brief and otherwise forgotten chapter of history comes back to life with riveting and provocative force.

34. The Queen (2006)

As smooth and silky as a royal sash, this two-hander — about the relationship between British Prime Minister Tony Blair (Michael Sheen) and Queen Elizabeth II (Helen Mirren) in the wake of Princess Diana's untimely death — is delectably entertaining as a psychological cat-and-mouse chase. But it also gets to the heart of how power is deployed, most adeptly by those who insist they're above politics — a theme screenwriter Peter Morgan has spent a career exploring with the equally absorbing "Frost/Nixon" and, most recently, "The Crown."