



ELECTION COLLECTION

Get prepped for political overload with a spate of election-themed DVD releases.

By Eric Kohn

If the purpose of election-season movies is to get people interested in the political process, this year's mainstream offerings suffer from a nasty case of untimeliness.

Oliver Stone's *W.* arrived when most Americans feel they've already got him figured out. And David Zucker's untraditional lampooning of lefty stereotypes primarily takes Michael Moore into its pejorative crosshairs, choosing a target whose relevance in national discourse faded long ago. Moore's own election-season release, *Slacker Uprising* (available for free download at SlackerUprising.com), is also out of touch. It's a slovenly assemblage of clips from the documentarian's miscalculated attempt to embolden the nation's youth vote in 2004—which seems archaic in the era of Yes We Can. Unfortunately, this dated, narcissistic portrait of irrelevant activism belongs in the archives and not in anyone's hard drive. Instead, relevant snapshots of the modern climate emerge in the sharper lenses of the newly released documentaries *Free for All* and *The End of America*.

In *Free for All* (streaming at freeforall.tv and available on DVD), citizen journalist John Wellington Ennis tracks the history of voter prevention and other nefarious fixed election maneuvers in Ohio, with former Secretary of State Kenneth Blackwell as his principle villain. A nonpartisan independent, Ennis makes for a calmer, more appreciable guide to governmental chaos than Moore, and his

directive has a fair amount of immediacy. While Ennis might include one too many cutaways to his own observant mug in the slew of interviews that comprise the bulk of the film, he does maintain a consistent focus on the process, with consistent reminders that the danger of another fixed election is right around the corner. While not a natural-born entertainer, there's an adorable sincerity to Ennis' attempts to liven up the narrative with lo-fi animated sequences and his personable narration, which never becomes too didactic.

Also instructive without condescending to audiences, Annie Sundberg and Ricki Stern's *The End of America* nevertheless adopts a far bleaker tone. Based on Naomi Wolf's recent book of the same name, this concise document of Wolf's 2008 tour uses her lecture on the parallels between national socialist discourse and modern government policies to invoke a sense of urgency into the need for transparent leadership. The movie (streaming at snagfilms.com and screening at the IFC Center in December) favors Wolf's direct, poised mannerisms, with ample B-roll and supporting characters like Penn & Teller. Despite the fleeting appearance of that perennially foul-mouthed duo, however, the tone in *End of America* never goes light, but even its relentlessly dour approach can't tramp the intensity of Wolf's message. If its central tenets are timely, they're also timeless.

Still, that doesn't mean that only movies with up-to-date scenes from 2008 can speak to our current state of affairs. *Election Day*, Katy Chevigny's sprawling depiction of voting-booth mayhem across the country on November 4, 2004, draws attention to the minutiae involved in the process for both parties with hardly a judgmental slant (you can find it on a newly released 10th anniversary DVD box set celebrating Chevigny's production company, Arts Engine). The narrative works against cynical

types afraid of the voting system, urging people to believe they're in good hands so long as they can keep their eyes open.

Which brings us to the infamous realm of the dirty campaign. A sort of bookend to the Bush years, *Boogie Man: The Lee Atwater Story* tracks the engineer of the tactics that put both Bushes in the White House. An early guru to Karl Rove, Atwater pushed the misleading campaign ads against Bob Dole in a definitive primary race and Mike Dukakis in his subsequent 1988 presidential run. As a result, he was a progenitor of what's now known as "Swiftboating"—and he also played a mean blues guitar. When Atwater died prematurely of a brain tumor in 1991, he famously decried his smear work from his deathbed, leading many to wonder what sort of neuroses led to his deception in the first place. Maybe William Ayers has some insight on the topic.

The dirty campaign also takes center stage in several smaller narratives hiding in the shadow of *W*. My favorite, a sharply scripted, highly unorthodox approach to the familiar tale of small-town political corruption, Luke Eberl's *Choose Connor*

stars Steven Weber as a darkly motivated congressman whose 15-year-old protégé quickly immerses himself in a series of murky conflicts. A sharp right turn from politics to sexual scandals in the third act analogizes animalistic greed to professional dominance, building to a climax in praise of individualistic decisions. Sappy? Try accurate.

That outlook supplies the primary lament in *Recount* (recently released on DVD), Jay Roach's fictional depiction of the crazed struggle in the weeks following the 2000 election. Kevin Spacey puts on a controlled, intelligent performance as former Gore staffer Ron Klain, perpetually on the brink of getting his man in office but never quite capable of sealing the deal (the verdict seems to be that he's too nice). Roach's directorial style occasionally becomes too preachy and obvious, but for those who saw *W*. out of sheer morbid curiosity, *Recount* provides a chronological bookend to the genre of too-soon storytelling that sensationalizes history as it happens. Then again, in the era of Sarah Palin, perhaps all we need for that fix is *Saturday Night Live*.