



# Political Campaigns & Elections

BY JESSICA TEISCH

Politics, and its depiction in literature, is a fact of life. The ancient Greek writer Aristophanes ridiculed Athenian democracy in his comedy *The Birds*. Shakespeare, who lived during the reign of Elizabeth I, celebrated the founders of the Tudor dynasty in his history plays. Anthony Trollope, an English novelist of the Victorian era, centered some of his best-known novels on political issues. More recently, we've seen alternative, what-if novels by Philip Roth (*The Plot Against America*) and a satire on President Bill Clinton's first presidential campaign (*Primary Colors*). In most of these depictions of power, change comes slowly, if at all, and usually at great compromise.

As the following novels frequently demonstrate, the more things change, the more they stay the same. Writers

across time and place have identified the common machinations of politics: the very human urge for power; the bribery and "buying" of some elections; the fear and excitement of change; the corruption of governments; the struggle to steer the honest course.

As we approach the November 2012 election, we've put together a list of fiction—some well known, some lesser known, and some more serious than others, but all written in the last century or so—that deals with political campaigns and elections in all their brutal, glorious permutations. We've divided our selections into International, National, State/Local, and Thriller categories.

## MODERN-DAY ELECTIONS

(THE MORE THINGS SEEM TO CHANGE ...)

### INTERNATIONAL

#### The Suffrage of Elvira (1958)

By V. S. Naipaul

In this short, comic novel about a local election in the developing world, Naipaul, who grew up in Trinidad, pokes fun at the democratic process in that region. The story is simple: In 1950, the elderly Pat Harbans, who stands to benefit from public works contracts, decides to run for Member of Parliament. As he tries to garner support for his candidacy from various Hindu and Muslim enclaves in the village of Elvira, he hands out bribes. “You must try and feel that you giving to the people,” his friend explains when Harbans complains of the terrible expense. “After all, is the meaning of this democracy.” But for Harbans—who runs over a dog and almost hits two American Jehovah’s Witnesses on bikes as he canvasses—his candidacy might not be worth all the trouble.

#### A Man of the People (1966)

By Chinua Achebe

*A Man of the People*, a bleak satire by the acclaimed Igbo/Nigerian author of *Things Fall Apart* (1958), might better be termed a “military-coup” rather than an “election” novel, since it foreshadows the Nigerian coup of 1966. Chinua Achebe follows the story of Odili Samalu, a young, educated teacher in an unnamed country resembling postcolonial Nigeria, and his clash with Chief Nanga, a former mentor who rises to become the corrupt, opportunistic Minister of Culture. Odili, seeking vengeance for a personal slight and hoping to quell the greed of the rulers while easing the suffering of the people, leads an opposition party in the upcoming elections—but a military coup dashes both men’s dreams. Achebe’s novel is a penetrating exploration of bloodshed, military regimes, contested elections, and a society in transition.

#### Seeing (2006)

By José Saramago

What if there was an election and no one voted? That’s the question the 1998 Nobel Laureate explores in this part

social commentary, part detective story, part allegory, and sequel to *Blindness* (1998). In an unnamed country of unnamed inhabitants, two successive elections in the capital city reveal the same surprising outcome: 83 percent of the cast ballots are blank. Government officials, angered by such an ironic affront to democracy, declare a state of emergency and attempt to ferret out the guilty parties by interrogating the capital’s inhabitants. One more surprise: when the politicians leave town, expecting the capital to collapse, the state continues to operate just fine without them. (★★★ July/Aug 2006)

#### Much Obligated, Jeeves (1971)

By P. G. Wodehouse

(Published in the United States as *Jeeves and the Tie That Binds*)

The Jeeves series—11 novels and 35 short stories, which all take place in Britain around the World War I era—are among the British satirist’s most satisfying works. Light and comedic, they are narrated by the wealthy Bertie Wooster and feature his intelligent butler Jeeves. Though the plots can be formulaic, P. G. Wodehouse creates complicated human dramas, often involving politics, women, and happy endings. In this installment, Aunt Dahlia invites her nephew Wooster to her house in Market Snodsbury to help canvass for their friend, Ginger Winship, who desires a position in the House of Commons (and whose marital engagement rests on his election). The election takes a turn for the worse when a book belonging to the butler’s club, which reveals secrets about Ginger’s past, disappears.

### NATIONAL

#### Echo House (1997)

By Ward Just

◆ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST

From the seat of their family mansion, three generations of Washington power players vie for control in 20th-century America. Democratic Senator Adolph Behl unsuccessfully jockeys for the vice presidential nomination, but his son, Axel, and his grandson, Alec, become Washington’s movers and shakers, skilled at manipulation. What makes Just’s story so interesting is his contention that compromise—of ethics, morality, and great causes—keeps the government oiled. He posits that even lower-profile appointees in Washington are more influential than the average voter suspects—or, perhaps, wants to know.



## Advise and Consent (1959)

By Allen Drury

♦ PULITZER PRIZE

Along with *All the King's Men* (see below), *Advise and Consent* is considered one of the best novels about the ebbs and flows of power. Loosely inspired by the Alger Hiss affair, the novel centers on the controversial nomination of Robert Leffingwell, a left-leaning nominee for the Secretary of State, during the Cold War era. The senate investigation that follows exposes the nominee's past Communist sympathies and leads to a showdown with a senior senator. *Advise and Consent* remained on the *New York Times* best seller list for 102 weeks, and six sequels followed. Ultimately, the novel reveals Drury's faith in the political system to withstand power plays.

## American Savior

A Novel of Divine Politics (2008)

By Roland Merullo

Narrated by TV-reporter-turned-campaign-worker Russ Thomas, *American Savior* envisions a campaign season enlivened by some serious divine intervention. Thomas joins the campaign staff for presidential candidate Jesus, a divine-presence-cum-politician who marches to the beat of his own drum. Jesus is a West Coast–surfing, rodeo bull-riding Elvis impersonator who promises to end greed and stupidity. Then he picks a running mate, and *American Savior* becomes election entertainment at its best. Roland Merullo has created a niche for himself in religious satire, but he manages to shirk the bitterness that often befalls his peers, even if this Jesus's statements never reach true religious epiphany. (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2009)

## The People's Choice (1995)

By Jeff Greenfield

Jeff Greenfield is one of American television's most knowledgeable political correspondents, and this satire on the electoral college entertains while it educates. In this cautionary tale, President-elect MacArthur Foyle, a conservative Republican, dies in a freak rodeo accident after the general election. The reins should, of course, go to Vice President-elect Ted Block—admittedly, not the sharpest tool in the shed, but the rightful heir nonetheless. Then a member of the electoral college who doesn't want to see a dummy in office starts asking questions about the constitutionality of it all, and suddenly, the American political system is turned upside down.

## The Plot Against America (2004)

By Philip Roth

When aviation icon Charles A. Lindbergh, running on a "Peace with Hitler" and "America First" platform in the 1940 presidential election, defeats incumbent FDR, he embraces isolationism, Aryan supremacy, and anti-Semitism. He then signs nonaggression treaties with Germany and Japan and befriends Nazi luminaries. When he disappears in *The Spirit of St. Louis* after a campaign stop, Vice President Burton Wheeler seizes power and initiates an anti-Semitic witch hunt across the nation, wreaking havoc on an ordinary working-class Jewish family in Newark, New Jersey. (★★★★ SELECTION Nov/Dec 2004)

## Primary Colors

A Novel of Politics (1996)

By Anonymous (Joe Klein)

*Primary Colors* takes inspiration from former President Bill Clinton's first presidential campaign in 1992. Henry Burton (a stand-in for George Stephanopoulos) is a young, half-black campaign aide for southern Governor Jack Stanton (Clinton), a brilliant but flawed politician seeking the Democratic nomination. As they slog through the New Hampshire Primary, Burton guides Stanton through untold challenges as the candidate's campaign—and his integrity—come under attack. While *Primary Colors* is a sophisticated insider's look at a presidential campaign, half the fun is the gossip and the guessing who's who—as long as you know the Beltway's movers and shakers.

## Washington, D.C. (1967)

By Gore Vidal

In his six-volume *Narratives of Empire*, Vidal (who was raised in Washington, D.C.) charts America's past—from its birth to the McCarthy era. In this installment, Vidal fictionalizes the era between 1937 and the Cold War through the families—and fortunes—of conservative Senator James Burden Day, who is vying for the presidency, and of Blaise Sanford, an unfeeling newspaper baron focused on the role that money plays in politics. Here, Vidal exposes the dark, debasing side of American politics.

## STATE AND LOCAL

## The Last Hurrah (1956)

By Edwin O'Connor

♦ ATLANTIC FICTION PRIZE

A swan song to a lost era, *The Last Hurrah*, through the career of fictionalized veteran Mayor Frank Skeffington,



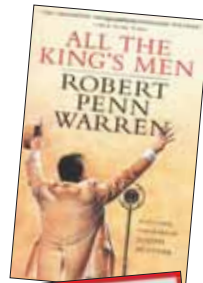
whom O'Connor modeled after real-life Boston Mayor James M. Curley, charts the end of old-style, big-machine politics as "Government by Pigmies"—Washington and the New Deal—prevails. The novel recounts a mayoral election in an unnamed American city as the Irish Skeffington, 72, runs for one last term. While detailing graft and corruption, religious and ethnic tensions, and the rise of television and moneyed campaigns, O'Connor offers a more benevolent and sentimental, though no less compelling, portrayal of a big-city political machine than, say, Mike Royko's nonfiction *Boss* (1971).

### The Ninth Wave (1956)

By Eugene Burdick

Eugene Burdick (1918–1965) was a political scientist and writer (*The Ugly American* [1958]), and *The Ninth Wave* was a best seller in its time. It discusses class and race; college life; love, marriage, and friendship; surfing; Hollywood; Communists; World War II; and more. But it's Burdick's look at California politics in the 1940s and 1950s that resounds today. "Most voters don't care about politics," says one protagonist. "They vote out of habit, because they've been told to vote. And they always vote Democrat or Republican. ... But the really important ones are the eight or ten per cent that're scared. They're the real independents, the people whose vote can be changed." And money, power, and voter manipulation can change those votes. Burdick also wrote the novel *The 480* (1964), in which a man seeks the nomination for

the Republican Party candidate in the 1964 presidential election, after JFK's assassination.



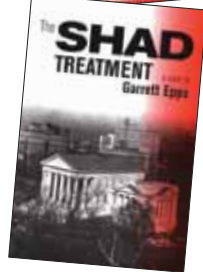
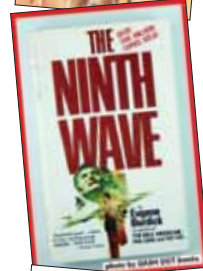
### All the King's Men (1946)

♦ PULITZER PRIZE

♦ TIME MAGAZINE ALL-TIME BEST 100 NOVELS

By Robert Penn Warren

In the 1930s, populist Governor Willie Stark (based on real-life strongman Governor Huey Long of Louisiana) comes to power by appealing to the common people. Jack Burden, Stark's press agent and right-hand man, chronicles the increasingly dirty politics required of him as he tries to maintain his idealism and conscience in the face of Stark's own political corruption. Widely regarded as one of the best novels about American politics, it is a true page-turner. Warren was one of the nation's first poet laureates, and besides telling a compelling story, he writes beautifully.



### The Shad Treatment (1977)

By Garrett Epps

*The Shad Treatment* by legal scholar and novelist Garrett Epps was hailed as an *All the King's Men* for Virginia when it was first published, though it never achieved its predecessor's wide readership. Nonetheless, it is a compelling chronicle of a fictional 1973 Virginia gubernatorial race in the Old Dominion during the Byrd regime's decline. When

Thomas Jefferson "Tom Jeff" Shadwell leads a people's crusade to free the Governor's Mansion from the conservative political machine that has controlled the state for a half century, he starts to learn about the racists, the giant corporations, and the elite families that have kept the machine oiled. And for Mac Evans, Shadwell's key aide, the election—nasty, scandalous, gripping—offers him the opportunity to redeem his family name.

### Election (1998)

By Tom Perrotta

Sure, it's only a high school election. But inspired by the three-candidate 1992 U.S. presidential race, the stakes seem just as high—for the less serious political junkie, anyway. At a suburban New Jersey high school, the intelligent, popular, and ambitious Tracy Flick decides to run for student council



Iraqi police display their ink-stained index fingers – proof that they visited the polls to cast their ballot in Iraq's parliamentary elections in 2005.

president. One of the teachers, the idealistic Jim McAllister (Mr. M.), knows of her sordid past (an affair with a married teacher), and persuades Paul Warren, a likable football hero, to enter the race. Enter Paul's misfit sister, and in this black political satire, the stage is set for a nasty election, with smear campaigns and an obstructed democratic process that compete with the best of them.

## Roscoe (2002)

By William Kennedy

Roscoe Conway, a Democratic Party boss in Albany, New York, believes that "fraudulence is the necessary modality for human existence." He rigs elections, covers up deaths, and harbors terrible secrets. The novel opens on V-J Day, 1945, just as Roscoe decides to quit politics. It flashes back to his romantic entanglements; his relationships with colleagues, his "thrice elected, once-ejected mayor of Albany" father, and cops, madams, and bootleggers; his World War I service; and the ghosts of his past. In the present, there's a challenge from New York's Republican governor, who is determined to bring the Albany machine down. Kennedy's seventh novel in the Albany Cycle, based on the O'Connell political machine, contains his usual wit and humor.

## POLITICAL THRILLERS

### The Manchurian Candidate (1959)

By Richard Condon

Okay, so Condon's novel is really more of a classic political thriller about anti-Communist hysteria than an election novel per se. During the Cold War, Chinese captors brainwash American soldiers, who return to the United States as political assassins. Sergeant Raymond Shaw, an ex-prisoner of war, a Medal of Honor recipient, and the stepson of a drunken U.S. senator intent on seeking higher office, returns from captivity in North Korea programmed to kill a U.S. presidential nominee (the right prod—a game of solitaire—will do it, and guess who the nominee is?). *The Manchurian Candidate* is a brilliant, controversial, and cynical novel about the subversion of the democratic process by those vying for power. So we thought we'd mention it.

### House of Cards (1989)

By Michael Dobbs

Michael Dobbs is a former British Conservative politician (and advisor to Margaret Thatcher) and a best-selling author, and his novels have the ring of historical truth. *House of Cards*, the first of the Francis Urquhart trilogy political

thrillers that were made into a popular BBC miniseries starring Ian Richardson, introduces the Machiavellian Chief Whip Urquhart. It explores issues of ambition and power as the contemptuous Urquhart schemes to become the Prime Minister after the resignation of Thatcher. The novels draw on Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Richard III*, and while they are compelling as an examination of political ambition and corruption, they are no substitute for Shakespeare's originals.

### Shelley's Heart (1995)

By Charles McCarry

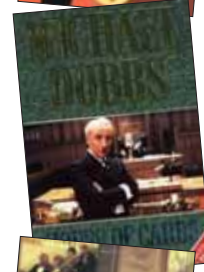
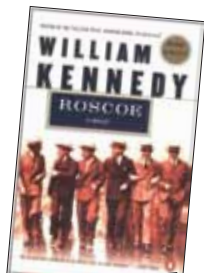
In the first election of the 21st century, Franklin Mallory, a defeated conservative former president, informs Bedford Forrest Lockwood, the liberal, reelected incumbent, that votes stolen in New York, California, and Michigan would change the election's outcome. When Lockwood refuses to resign, Mallory goes public with the evidence—and a constitutional crisis over succession ensues as a conspiracy by a secret order of liberals deepens. Perhaps overplotted at times—the novel contains conspiracies, assassination, espionage, and more—this political thriller exposes Washington at its worst.

## ELECTIONS PAST (... THE MORE THEY MAY HAVE STARTED OUT THE SAME ...)

### The Prime Minister (1876)

By Anthony Trollope

Though written more than a century ago, Anthony Trollope's Palliser novels still offer great British political fiction today. Subplots in *The Prime Minister*, the fifth in the six-volume series, abound: an inauspicious marriage; an unsuccessful run for Parliament by the unscrupulous Ferdinand Lopez, who hopes to rise in British society but compromises the integrity of the Prime Minister's family; interference in the election; and a suicide. But essentially, the novel centers on Plantagenet Palliser, the wealthy, honorable Duke of Omnium, who reluctantly becomes Prime Minister of a coalition government when neither the Whigs nor the Tories are able to prevail on their own. Also of note is Trollope's masterpiece *The Way We Live Now* (1875), which features a social-climbing crook who bribes his way into Parliament by contesting an election.





President Lincoln delivering his inaugural address on the east portico of the U.S. Capitol, March 4, 1865.

## The Tragic Muse (1890)

By Henry James

*The Tragic Muse* isn't one of Henry James's more famous novels, but like his best work, it exposes our moral and personal dilemmas and the unconventional choices people make. In 1880s London and France, one man confronts the role of the artist in society. Nick Dormer has no political beliefs and wants to be a painter, but his family pressures him into standing as Member of Parliament. Despite his misgivings, Nick wins a seat. Following his heart and his actress friend, the "tragic muse" of the title, Nick forsakes his political career and marriage for the life of a portrait painter.

## The Pickwick Papers (1836)

By Charles Dickens

Sure, Dickens's novel is not exactly about an election. But we can't help including his first novel on our list. In the 1820s, the wealthy old gentleman Samuel Pickwick, Esquire, and three of his friends travel throughout the English countryside. A couple of chapters concern an election at Eatanswill between identical parties with platforms of no real significance. It is noisy, contentious, full of hand shaking and baby kissing, bribery, rudeness, the dumping of a group voters into a canal, and other chicanery. ("Fizkin's people

have got three-and-thirty voters in the lock-up coach-house at the White Hart ... The effect, you see, is to prevent our getting at them. Even if we could, it would be of no use, for they keep them very drunk on purpose," a political agent explains.) Touché.



## Middlemarch

A Study of Provincial Life (1874)

By George Eliot

*Middlemarch* doesn't focus on a single election, either, but British politics casts a wide net over this classic work of realism. Set in the fictitious Midlands town of Middlemarch in the early 1830s, the novel follows a large cast of characters and issues—from marriage to religion, education, the status of women, political reform, and the often unwelcome signs of modernity. A main plot involves the mismatched union between Dorothea Brooke, a young idealist, and an aged, pedantic scholar; a subplot involves Dorothea's befuddled uncle. An enthusiastic proponent of reform despite his reputation as the worst landlord in the county, he decides to stand for Parliament but is pelted with eggs during his speech. *Middlemarch* offers great insight into English politics and the difficulty of enacting reform when people, as one character explains, "vote their pocketbooks." We'll end with those words. ■