IT DON’T MEAN A THING
IF IT AIN’T GOT THAT SWING:
OHIO CAMPAIGN DOCUMENTARIES

David Wolfford, Mariemont High School

Abstract
No Republican candidate has won the presidency without Ohio, and John F. Kennedy was the last Democrat to do so. Ohio has become a chief battleground in the presidential elections, attracting candidates and bringing national attention to the state. This relevance and the availability of resources related to presidential politics in Ohio—historic and current—should encourage government, civics, and other social studies teachers to capitalize on this phenomenon and make campaigns and elections real. Three documentaries, . . . So Goes the Nation and Swing State Ohio, both shot in 2004, and Swing State, filmed in 2006, can assist that endeavor. This article looks at these elections, the films, and classroom activities that foster understanding of the electoral process and Ohio’s role.

Ohio has a strong history in national politics and has become a pivotal state in presidential elections. Few candidates have won the presidency without Ohio, the last being Kennedy in 1960, and no Republican has ever done so. In recent elections, presidential candidates have descended on the state, staffed field offices, and poured cash into local media markets. In 2004, candidates and their surrogates appeared in Ohio more than in any other state. In 2008, the Buckeye State led in purchased ad time (Coffey, Green, Cohen, & Brooks, 2011). Ohio’s importance also drew documentary filmmakers to capture the state’s electoral politics in the wider context of the nation’s politics. . . . So Goes the Nation and Swing State Ohio cover the presidential campaigns in Ohio in 2004, while Swing State follows the 2006 governor’s race. These movies are useful archival documents for teacher knowledge and classroom viewing. All three include the elements of a general election campaign: colorful candidates, televised debates, TV commercials, stump speeches, street hecklers, citizen views, and political strategy. These films are available in Ohio libraries and can be purchased online. As Ohio continues to be an all-important battleground, Ohio teachers have a unique opportunity with this political attention, and should consider using one of these films to make presidential politics more relevant to students.

Tips for Classroom Use of These Films
Teaching with a documentary film is an investment of instructional time that must be weighed against concerns of covering state standards or material for the Advanced Placement (AP) Government exam. The Ohio Model Curriculum calls for encouraging participation in the public policy process, an understanding of the roles individuals and organizations play, and a realization that democratic government is enhanced when citizens exercise their skills in civic affairs. Indeed, Content Statements #2, #3, #4, and #22 can be addressed with dedicated use of any of these documentaries, as registration, voting, and campaigning are included. The AP Government and Politics course calls for an understanding of campaigns and elections, polling, citizen participation, and the media’s role—all seen in these movies.
Students benefit from viewing documentaries. Social studies film expert William Russell (2009) says film in the classroom can “arouse emotions and stimulate feelings . . . allowing [the subject] to become more meaningful and relevant to the student.” (pp. 1-2). Discussions around documentary film, says Marcus, Metzger, Patterson, and Stoddard (2010) “develop students’ critical thinking abilities, and bolster students ability to thoughtfully analyze sources” (p. 114). This explains why 82% of teachers use some portion of a documentary film at least once per week (Marcus & Stoddard, 2009). Swing State Ohio, . . . So Goes the Nation, or Swing State, largely shot in Ohio in a modern election, provide for real and somewhat local examples to heighten student interest.

**Preparation**

Before showing one of these films, remind yourself of the 2004 or 2006 election. Consider reading a portion of a campaign memoir or an analysis. Ohio’s secretary of state provides online election data from past elections by county-level results (http://www.sos.state.oh.us/). Your local board of elections likely provides precinct data as well.

A proper introduction in class will assist student understanding and increase the film’s legitimacy in students’ eyes. Before hitting the play button, describe the relevant players with biographical information and/or a digital image. Discuss the events and concepts in the film. You might start with an electoral college map depicting the outcomes in 2004, noting Ohio’s relevance in this contest, then segue into the movie. Discuss Ohio’s demographic and geo-political makeup. The state’s competitiveness and this national attention come from its diversity. It is a microcosm of the nation and a national political bellwether. Coffey, Green, Cohen, and Brooks (2011) divide the state into five sections and offer an overview of each one. You could also assign students or groups to look up basic biographical and political information on the candidates or others in the film.

**Incentives**

Hopefully an in-class film about an Ohio election with national consequences will excite students, but realistically, today’s teenagers need incentives to watch video more than ever. The competitive marketplace of video in this YouTube world has greatly diminished the relative impact of a social science documentary. Therefore, consider one or more basic student tasks to instill attentiveness. A brief list of vocabulary words for students to define in context while watching the film could introduce new terminology. Foreshadow a prompt they will be expected to answer after viewing a portion or the entire film. A post-viewing assignment, like writing a movie review or groups scripting a simulated press conference could prove effective.

Thoughtful questions, whether assigned to the entire class or asked in a Socratic-style discussion, will illicit greater student understanding. Some generic questions include: Who are the candidates and what do they believe? Who did the filmmakers interview and why? How did voters in the film differ in attitudes? How did voters make decisions? Why did this election result as it did? Did the filmmaker have an agenda? In addition to these questions, create a few specific ones based on the movie you show.
Film Overviews

Now that we have discussed some teaching ideas, let us look a little closer at these films. As far as appropriateness, none were rated by the MPAA, but all have occasional unsavory language from impassioned activists.

\textit{. . . So Goes the Nation} (2006). Not Rated. 90 Minutes. James D. Stern and Adam Del Deo

This film opens with dramatic audio and video clips from the final hours of the 2004 election between incumbent George W. Bush and Democratic challenger John Kerry. A map of blue and red states appears as Dan Rather, Wolf Blitzer, and other broadcasters remark, “It all comes down to Ohio. . . . All eyes on the Buckeye State.”

\textit{. . . So Goes the Nation} then follows the general election campaign in Ohio with reflections from high-level strategists from both parties. It provides fair analysis of why Bush won and why Kerry lost Ohio and the United States. Candid and often critical comments from managers and pundits make the movie believable, while the Monday morning quarterbacking surely irritated Kerry’s chief deputies.


These filmmakers traveled to Ohio, rented an apartment for a month and a half, and crisscrossed the state to capture the character of the 2004 presidential race. Loren Larsen and Lauren Davison appear in the film and interact with politicians, average citizens, journalists, and fringe activists as they examine attitudes and issues. They bounce around the state, “just wildcatting” their way through Ohio, as Larsen (2007) explains, filming at rallies, aboard campaign buses, in churches, and on election day. “We went there in late September, and you could feel the fervor everywhere,” recalls Larsen, “Everyone was tuned in, and people were eager to talk to us” (2007). This crew had minimal access to the campaigns, making \textit{Swing State Ohio} more a citizen’s view. The original music score by Brendan Ryan helps convey political emotions in 2004’s intense contest.


New documentary \textit{Swing State} closely follows his father, lieutenant governor candidate Lee Fisher, during the 2006 gubernatorial campaign that pitted Ted Strickland against Ken Blackwell. Jason Fisher has intimate access to his subject—so much so that we see Lee Fisher in athletic gear, in pajamas, shirtless, and in old family footage more than buttoned-downed on the stump. This work is as much a Fisher family album and Jason’s sentimental memorial to his father as it is a commentary on Ohio politics or an insight into political strategy.

Film Analyses

These documentaries have unique perspectives and explain well why George W. Bush defeated John Kerry in 2004, except for some suggestions of election impropriety, and how Lee Fisher and Ted Strickland campaigned against Republican Ken Blackwell in the 2006 gubernatorial race.
Perspective
These films do not claim to be journalistically objective and have a slight left-of-center slant. Paul Davison calls his Swing State Ohio “a bipartisan view” on his IMDB.com plot summary, but Larsen and Lauren Davison reveal their leanings on camera. Larsen, a self-proclaimed “liberal” and “Democrat” takes a noticeably pro-gay marriage view as she interviews a “values voter.” Producer Jed Wolfington also acknowledges that Larsen and Davison’s reactions to events reveal their political perspectives while providing a unique narrative voice. Jason Fisher, brought up around Ohio Democratic politics, is fair to Republicans, with Swing State, but his film is more a motivator for Democrats looking at 2008 than a balanced account of the 2006 race. The younger Fisher canvasses door-to-door and appears on stage with his father. In . . . So Goes the Nation’s DVD extras, one of the filmmakers acknowledges their leftward leanings, but of these films it is the least biased. Leslie Ghiz, one of the film’s Republican characters from Cincinnati, willingly admits that . . . So Goes is “very, very fair and unbiased” (Ghiz, 2012).

Though these films have bias, they are still classroom-worthy and provide opportunities in critical thinking and in media literacy. In one survey, students gave documentaries an average of 4.10 on a scale of 1-to-5 for accuracy and trustworthiness, just below their faith in textbooks, 4.43 (Marcus & Stoddard, 2009). Social studies teachers should be aware of this assumption and remind students that documentaries often have agendas. “Better for us, as social studies teachers,” says Hess (2007), “to understand documentary films as what their makers intend them to be—perspective-laden narratives” (p. 195). Then and only then can we teach students how to be critical of documentaries. Consider having students read about the election or the candidates from at least one additional source. Marcus and Stoddard (2009) say documentary films “are not adequate as a stand-alone source and should be shown in conjunction with other sources and perspectives” (p. 283). Consider adding primary sources, memoir passages, interviews, and newspaper accounts to the lesson.

2004 Presidential Election
Because . . . So Goes the Nation and Swing State Ohio cover the 2004 presidential election, we should recap and reconsider this contest in light of these films. As they both show, Ohio became the finish line in the 2004 Bush-Kerry contest. Bush visited the state 19 times, Vice President Dick Cheney, 14. Kerry came to Ohio 27 times, his Vice Presidential candidate John Edwards, 17. The campaigns, parties, and their allies spent roughly $102 million in Ohio (Coffey, Green, Cohen, & Brooks, 2011). Both campaigns made 11th-hour appearances. Bush supporters filled Cincinnati’s Great American Ballpark on Sunday night before the election. Kerry appeared with Bruce Springsteen in Cleveland on election eve. On election day, Bush flew to Columbus to thank volunteers and staff.

Buckeye voters were split along a north-south divide, Democrats and labor unions dominated the industrial northeast region, while conservatives outnumbered liberals in southern Ohio. Voters in the northeast were more concerned about the bad economy and the war in Iraq, while those in southwest Ohio were concerned about terrorism and moral values. An urban-suburban dichotomy was also apparent as Kerry outpolled Bush in major cities, while the president was favored in the suburbs and exurbs (Coffey, Green, Cohen, & Brooks, 2011).
As . . . So Goes the Nation shows, Bush won Ohio and the nation with a well-oiled, disciplined, and unified Republican campaign machine focused on motivating likely Republican voters more than swing voters. Streamlined messaging and effective grassroots mobilization assisted Bush more than the anti-gay marriage ballot measure that passed on the same day. And, though some have alleged Bush owes his victory to the machinations of a corrupt secretary of state and underhanded partisan electioneering, these allegations are unwarranted. To varying degrees, these films address Ken Blackwell’s conflict of interest serving as both secretary of state and Bush’s Ohio campaign point man; Swing State Ohio and Swing State rather irresponsibly.

The Bush Team

Swing State Ohio producer Wolfington (2007) noticed the difference in discipline and structure among the Bush and Kerry camps when he sought access to both campaigns. “It’s very streamlined on the Republican side and decentralized on the Democratic side,” said Wolfington. “You walk into a Republican campaign headquarters and it’s more like a corporate hierarchy,” while at Democratic headquarters, one has “no idea who’s in charge there.”

The Bush team began efforts in Ohio during summer of 2003, connecting with local voters and naming local chairmen, roughly a year before the Democrats arrived, according to RNC Chairman Ed Gillespie in . . . So Goes the Nation. The team had a volunteer network in nearly every precinct. With unique titles and a distinct hierarchy, this organization replicated an Amway sales pyramid structure, in that it allowed fairly new entrants into the organization to bring in even newer ones to quickly move up the chain. Bush’s team also sought less to change minds and more to motivate conservatives. Instead of persuasion, said Matthew Dowd of the Bush campaign, “We spent more resources on motivation.”

Defining Kerry

Ever since Joe McGinnis analyzed marketing the presidential candidate in The Selling of the President in 1968, we have better understood how messaging, image making, and television impacts elections. As interviews of pundits and participants in . . . So Goes the Nation show, the Bush team understood this better than Kerry’s team. Partisans from both sides tell how Republicans made the right marketing moves, keeping to a concise, consistent message, while defining their competitor and putting him on the defensive. Bush repeatedly noted in his Ohio stump speeches his “strength,” in an attempt to frame Kerry as the weaker president. With Bush, his campaign pounded, independents felt safe with a decisive leader. “You may not agree with me on every issue,” Bush repeatedly said at Ohio rallies, “but at least you know where I stand.”

The literature on the 2004 campaign and a practical recollection reveals that Bush’s team also defined Kerry as a less-than-patriotic elite who changes positions on serious issues. In 2004 when Kerry voted against an $87 billion appropriation to continue the Iraq mission, the Bush team pounced with a TV spot, quoting Kerry as saying, “I voted for the $87 billion before I voted against it.” They focused on painting Kerry with a weak foreign policy agenda and less supportive of the military. Providing a handy mnemonic, “flip-flopper,” made it easy for the undecided voter to see Kerry as indecisive and uncertain, as well as overly dovish in times of uncertain national security.
When Kerry’s team showcased their candidate as a reliable commander-in-chief despite his anti-war activism and his vote against support for the US military in a current war zone, the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, one of 527 groups, embarked on a full-frontal assault on Kerry’s reputation and added “swift-boating” to our political lexicon. When Kerry’s camp tried to front the candidate as a regular guy—one photo op had Kerry duck hunting in eastern Ohio—the GOP asked rhetorically, how can an Ivy League-educated northeastern elite be in touch with Midwestern voters? They made the answer easy with images of Kerry windsurfing and snowboarding.

**Issue 1**

Issue 1, the traditional marriage amendment on Ohio’s ballot in 2004, appears in these documentaries and is worthy of discussion, especially considering evolving attitudes toward gay rights in just two election cycles. From the bully pulpit months in advance of the election, Bush called for a national constitutional amendment to define traditional marriage and motivated the so-called “values voters.” By November, organized conservative groups had placed similar proposals on their states’ ballots. Ohio passed its traditional marriage initiative and voted for Bush, causing most onlookers to assume the gay-marriage debate and motivating the religious right in Ohio gave Bush the win. Action reports and deeper research called such a contention into question. Coffey, Green, Cohen, and Brooks (2011) say, “there is no clear consensus as to whether the issue was decisive” (p. 112). The ticket splitting in the populist areas of southeast Ohio, where Issue 1 prevailed and Bush did not make illustrative examples of how Kerry voters often at the same time favored traditional marriage.

**Rigged?**

Partisans pointed fingers at Republican Secretary of State Blackwell who served as both the state’s chief elections official and as the statewide chairman for the Bush-Cheney re-election campaign. When Kerry lost, Blackwell became the chief bogeyman for some Kerry supporters—generally the less-accountable voices, celebrities, lower level activists, offshoot organizations, and watchdogs. A handful of groups filed lawsuits in pursuit of finding voter suppression or compromised ballots. Robert F. Kennedy Jr. (2006) published a piece in *Rolling Stone* (and he appears briefly in Fisher’s *Swing State*) to essentially argue that the election was stolen. Both *Swing State Ohio* and *Swing State* partly portray Blackwell as an ominous Svengali-like controller of Ohio elections and as a Bush toady. The creators of . . . *So Goes the Nation* barely addressed the issue in their film because it was hardly more than a possible conflict of interest.

**Election Follow-up**

Though there were accusations that Blackwell manipulated or the GOP stole the election, experts, professionals, and the courts found no evidence of illegal actions. One suit alleged that poll workers had pre-punched ballots so to not count these when voters cast votes for anybody but Bush. Hamilton County’s director of elections John Williams (Siegel, 2006) reassures, “Such a conspiracy would have to involve both Democrats and Republican election workers.” Ohio’s Boards of Elections are arranged with bipartisan membership, an even number of seats, so local parties can check each other. County chairs are typically in the opposite party of the secretary of state. There were 93,000 presidential votes that went uncounted in 2004, fewer than in 2000,
and fewer than would have affected the 2004 margin of victory for Bush (Siegel, 2006). This lawsuit and others were dismissed out of hand by independent judges who otherwise check other government institutions.

The Akron Beacon-Journal's Steve Hoffman (2006) points out flaws in Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s 2006 article and declared Kennedy “should have spent more time in Ohio than on the internet.” Hoffman goes on to point out a Democratic National Committee report that concluded only about 2% of voters departed crowded polling places, and they were evenly divided among Republican and Democratic voters. And though exit polls favored Kerry slightly, later research found that Kerry voters were more likely to disclose their votes to pollsters, making the exit poll samples disproportionately in Kerry's favor (Hoffman, 2006).

Perhaps the most reliable refutation to 2004 conspiracy charges came from political prognosticator Charlie Cook (2010), the centrist's centrist. In response to a question while appearing on C-SPAN's Washington Journal about vote tampering in Ohio, Cook (2010) shook his head and said, “I don't believe in someone on the grassy knoll, and I don't believe in 99.9999 percent of a lot of these election frauds stories. . . . I have absolutely no reason to believe that the vote in Ohio in 2004 wasn't entirely straight up.” He goes on to acknowledge how various Web sites and armchair experts “just sort of get off on conspiracy theories.” Teachers should take this analysis into consideration and encourage student viewers to check the claims of documentary films—especially Swing State and Swing State Ohio—with reliable sources like journalists, academics, and elections officials.

2006 Gubernatorial Election and Swing State

Jason Zone Fisher's Swing State, for the most part, follows the 2006 gubernatorial race through the experience of the elder Fisher as the second candidate on the Democratic ticket. Attitudes in Ohio and across the nation had shifted. Recall, costly US operations in Iraq and Afghanistan continued to lose popularity as the economy began to slide. Ohio's Republican Governor Bob Taft left office in disgrace when he was convicted of failing to report campaign gifts. Ohio Republicans were implicated in the Coingate scandal and aligned with convicted lobbyist Jack Abramoff. With this backdrop, Ken Blackwell and Ted Strickland both filed to run for governor.

Jason Zone Fisher and his colleagues filmed and produced Swing State around this election as a prelude to the 2008 presidential contest. Fresh off Syracuse's campus, Fisher follows his father along the campaign trail by day and interviews him casually at night at the Fisher home. Ohio Democrats make cameo appearances and countless national leaders agree to one-minute interviews that lack substance and redundantly reaffirm that Ohio matters in elections. As an aspiring documentary maker, the younger Fisher had also filmed much of his father's unsuccessful 1998 gubernatorial campaign and includes this amateur footage.

Mudslinging Exposed

Swing State shows how the wave of social conservatism that passed Issue 1 in Ohio began to subside. Blackwell had an uphill battle, and resorted to negative attacks and underhanded tactics. Swing State reveals a clip from a televised debate where Blackwell charged that Strickland was aligned with the North American Man-Boy Love Association (NAMBLA). With extremely low poll numbers, as Craig (2006) reported, Blackwell and the state GOP smeared Strickland
with insinuations of accepting pedophilia and practicing homosexuality. Strickland had refused to vote for a harsh federal measure against pedophiles on the particular point that the bill also declared that children who had been abused could not have healthy relationships as adults. NAMBLA praised his vote of “present.” It was also discovered that a former Strickland staffer had been arrested for exposing himself in 1998, and Strickland did not dismiss him. Thirdly, party members and Blackwell’s surrogates alleged Strickland had an unusual relationship with this aide. In the end, Strickland had no apparent relationship with NAMBLA or with staffers. This account in 2006 and this film give teachers an opportunity to teach future voters how to be critical of such campaign tactics.

A Family Affair
Fisher’s production is more a probe into a high-profile politician’s personal and family life during a campaign than an analysis of strategy. A montage of Lee Fisher wooing donors on the phone, a busy daily schedule of appearances on the trail, and midnight emailing take a toll on the candidate and his family. Jason Fisher alternately plays filmmaker and son, on a quest to both make a documentary and to spend meaningful time with his dad. He follows his father late at night in their home and prods him into interviews when he is already busy. In the end, Strickland and Fisher, handily won the election and Blackwell’s tactics failed. In fact the margin was so wide, 60.5% to 36.7%, Blackwell gave a concession speech soon after the polls had closed. Swing State makes a unique record of this campaign and Fisher’s persona, perspective, and presentation will likely help engage teenage viewers.

Conclusion
As his film concludes, Fisher presents an interview with then-Senator Barack Obama as the future president stumped for Strickland-Fisher. As Obama’s star rose, Anti-Republican and anti-incumbent fervor continued into 2008 as did Ohio’s importance. Republican candidate John McCain made 29 trips to the state, and indeed unveiled his vice presidential pick, Sarah Palin, in Dayton. Obama’s team hired more than 300 staffers statewide, established twice as many field offices as his opponent, and in the final stretch had a two-to-one advantage over McCain in TV advertising across the state (Coffey, Green, Cohen, & Brooks, 2011). NBC’s Chuck Todd (2009) explained the diminished turnout and Obama’s victory in Ohio. “A big group of voters decided that McCain wasn’t feeling their pain,” recounts Todd. “They didn’t show up” (p. 90). Obama won independent voters, 52 to 45, and the state 51.5% to McCain’s 46.9%. Once again, national attitudes paralleled those in the Buckeye State.

The November 2010 midterms gave the GOP a clean sweep of state constitutional offices and control of the legislature. John Kasich replaced Governor Strickland and Republican Rob Portman defeated Lee Fisher for the US Senate. The pendulum had swung again to the right. Republican state chairman Kevin DeWine (Sabato, 2011) said of the party’s midterm victory, “I’m drilling into our winners, that they did not win because people came running back to our party because they love it,” he conceded, “[Voters] were looking for an alternative” (p. 345).
This uncertainty, this political teetering over the last decade, has increased Ohio’s importance on the national stage. . . . So Goes the Nation, Swing State Ohio, and Swing State may not set the standard in campaign documentaries, but with the right activities or assignments, they make useful classroom tools with local perspective. As the state continues to be a microcosm, national candidates and strategists will continue to travel to Cleveland, Cincinnati, and other cities and regions of Ohio. Reporters and filmmakers, too, will keep their eyes on the Buckeye State and provide social studies teachers with useful vehicles to explain campaigns and elections.

References


