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Vox News

'2016: Obama's America' – Will political documentary sway undecided voters? (+video)

'2016: Obama's America,' which is being screened at Tampa hotels hosting Republican National Convention-goers, is already the top grossing non-nature documentary of the year.



This undated image provided by Rocky Mountain Pictures, shows an undated film clip from "2016: Obama's America".
(AP Photo/Rocky Mountain Pictures)

By Gloria Goodale, Staff writer
posted August 27, 2012 at 8:57 pm EDT

Los Angeles

August may be the laziest month for Hollywood blockbusters, but it has become open season for little-films-that-can. And this year is no exception, with the political documentary “2016: Obama’s America,” pulling in more than \$9 million to become the top grossing non-nature documentary of the year.

The film, from conservative author Dinesh D’Souza, which began playing in theaters nationwide this past weekend and has gone viral online, is a slow – and selective – trip through Obama’s backstory. It leads viewers to the narrator’s conclusion that the president’s goals are to realize his Kenyan father’s anti-imperialist dreams.

The documentary is currently screening in Tampa hotels hosting guests at the Republican National Convention, where its themes have been warmly embraced.

But the real question is, at this late date, will such a film make a difference in an election that by most accounts will be determined by a razor-thin margin of voters who have yet to make up their minds?

The film most likely will not sway many independent voters directly, says David Mark, editor in chief of Politix, an online and mobile site for citizen's input, and author of "Going Dirty: the Art of Negative Campaigning." But, says Mr. Mark, a former senior editor of POLITICO, where the film might have an impact is in the nitty-gritty of an election.

"It could energize the base into all the kinds of things that can turn out voters, like walking the precinct, manning phone banks, and all the kinds of volunteer stuff that juices up supporters," he points out.

Soon-to-be Republican nominee Mitt Romney will be the most likely to benefit, adds Mark, who says the film has been a hot topic on conservative talk radio, where hosts have been urging supporters to go see the film. "Everyone likes to say they don't want negative campaigning and movies like this, but the truth is that the reason we continue to have it is because it works," he says, adding, "negativity gets people to participate."

The surprise success of the film suggests it is part of a "new normal" in US politics, says John Johannes, a professor of political science at Villanova University in Philadelphia.

Filmmaker Michael Moore "probably should be credited (or blamed) with advancing this type of political advertising, an effort to add a veneer of respectability and authority to coat anti-candidate politics," Professor Johannes says via e-mail. This type of politicking is more likely to appeal to those already committed for or against Obama, he notes, adding that he would be surprised if this movie changed any minds.

"It is, however, yet another indicator of what is happening to American politics," he says: "Trying to pin down candidates for their backgrounds more than their policies; a focus on personalities more than issues; and a play to anger and fear rather than to thoughtfulness and judgment."

But some say this film suggests otherwise – that this election may actually hinge on more than negativity, says journalist John Graves, editor of The Retirement Journal and author of "The 7% Solution."

Mr. Graves says he and his wife went to the film over the weekend.

"The film itself was instructive for its view from outside the inner workings of the US politic," he says via e-mail, adding that it was valuable to witness what he dubs "the raw exploitation of power by a man who knows himself and his destiny very well." Beyond that, he says, "if the issues as described in the film are also descriptive of the 'whole piece' landscape, it will be a metaphysical

election (one guided by principles).”

The film’s power may also be a harbinger of things to come, points out April Masini, online advice expert at askapril.com.

She says a large part of the audience will be already-decided Republican voters, those “who want verification that they're doing the right thing, and something to talk about among themselves.” But the valuable audience, she points out, will be those undecided voters who can make or break a popular vote in a close race.

But she adds, “The anti-Obama documentary will also be a measure of how important films and documentaries are to swinging a vote in the age of fast technology like Twitter, e-mail and tabloid news. If this documentary is perceived as being effective, buckle up for more politicians in Hollywood.”

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