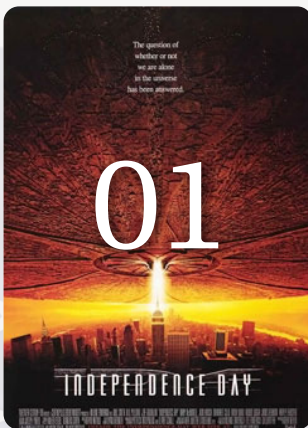nrg

Fictional Front-Runners

What America's favorite presidents from movies and TV can teach us about the state of politics in 2024

Out of all the world's political leaders, few have been fictionalized so often—or so memorably—as the president of the United States of America. Hollywood has long been fascinated by the leader of the free world, and fictional presidents have popped up as central characters in action movies, political dramas, satirical comedies, and everything in-between.

But of all the fictional presidents that have graced our screens, which of them have had the most enduring appeal with the general public? And how do the movies and TV shows we watch about presidents inform and reflect politics in the real-world?

As the race for the White House enters its final stages, NRG set out to explore consumers' attitudes towards movie and TV presidents, and to find out which of them would have the greatest chance of success were they running in this year's election against Vice President Harris and former President Trump.

In this paper, we'll unpack the findings of that study, focusing on the question of what attitudes towards fictional presidents can tell us about our contemporary political landscape—and we'll identify the white space for studios and streaming services looking to tell original stories about the office of the president.

METHODOLOGY

To identify the most popular movies and TV shows featuring fictional presidents (data summarized below), we surveyed 3,000 US streaming viewers, aged 13 to 54.

To further understand attitudes towards these fictional presidents, we conducted a follow-up study of 1,000 US consumers, aged 18 to 64. Unless otherwise noted, all data referenced in this paper comes from this study.

Respondents for both of these studies were selected and weighted to reflect national demographics in terms of age, gender, and race.

AMERICA'S FAVORITE MOVIES AND SHOWS ABOUT FICTIONAL PRESIDENTS

UNAIDED RESPONSES

James Marshall,
Air Force One,
Beacon Pictures

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If he were running in 2024, Harrison Ford's James Marshall would have the best shot at the Oval Office

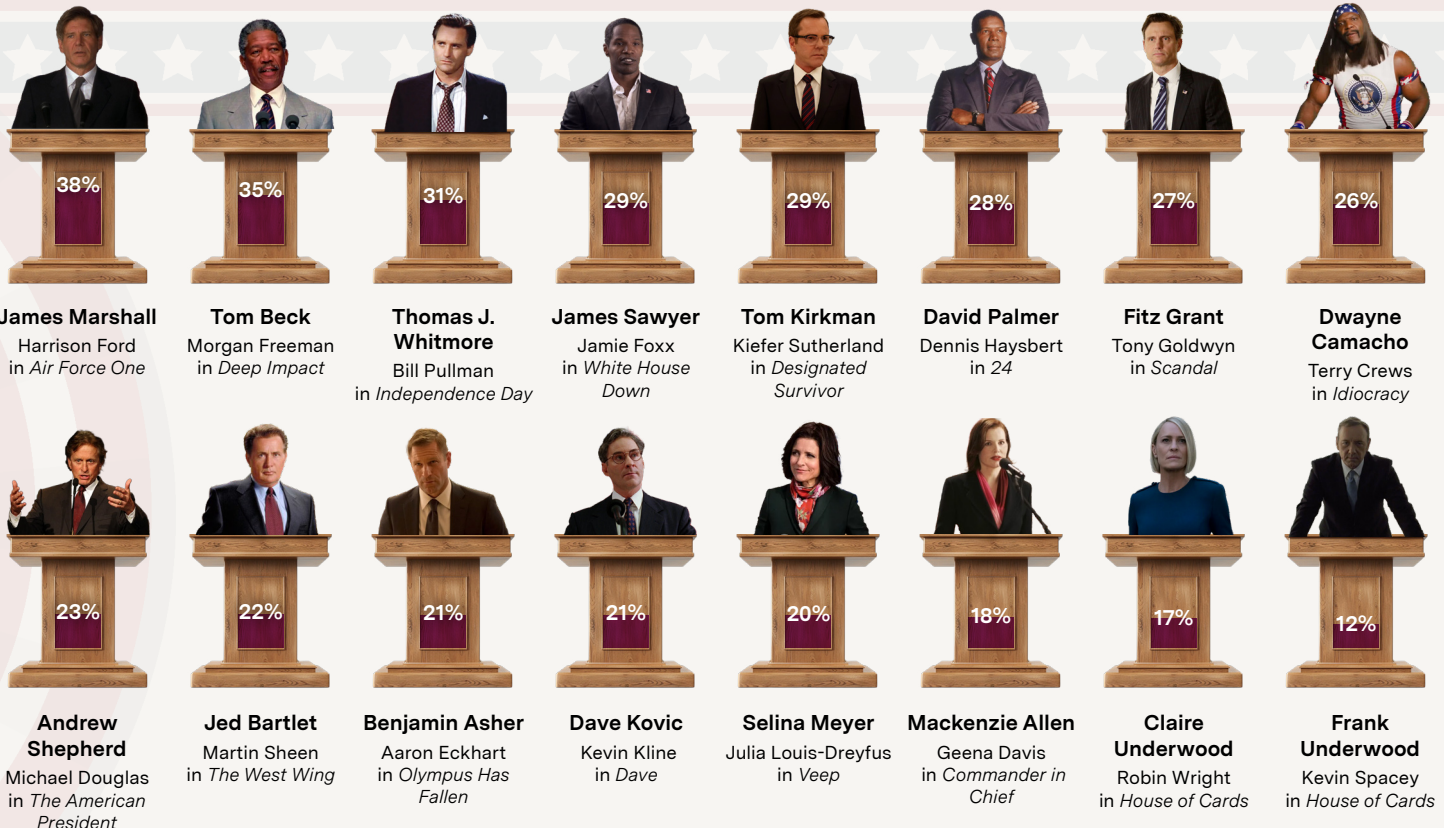## Fictional female presidents, however, would struggle to secure the same level of support

Among high-profile fictional presidents, it's James Marshall—played by Harrison Ford in 1997's *Air Force One*—who would be most likely to win if he were to run in this year's election. More than a third (38%) of voters say that they'd "definitely" cast their ballot for him, while an additional 46% would consider doing so. The combination of Harrison Ford's rugged charisma coupled with the dashing heroism exhibited by the character in the movie—as he saves the passengers of the presidential plane from armed hijackers—is, it turns out, a winning combination for voters.

Marshall benefits, perhaps, from the fact that the movie doesn't dive too deeply into his administration's political agenda; the same can be said for other "action movie presidents" such as Tom Beck in *Deep Impact,* Thomas J. Whitmore in *Independence Day,* and James Sawyer in *White House Down.* In the absence of a clearly defined set of policy goals, viewers are able to superimpose their own beliefs and values—resulting in strong appeal across the aisle.

Conversely, presidents from movies and shows more concerned with the gritty realities of governing, as well as those with more clearly defined political views, tended to perform poorly. *The West Wing'*s Jed Bartlet, for example, while highly popular among Harris voters, would attract almost no switchover support from Trump supporters. Unsurprising, given that the very first episode of the series features him vocally dressing down a conservative activist.

1. Excludes consumers with no awareness of each character

% WHO WOULD "DEFINITELY" VOTE FOR THIS CANDIDATE IN THE 2024 ELECTION[1]

| 38% | 35% | 31% | 29% | 29% | 28% | 27% | 26% |

James Marshall
Harrison Ford
in *Air Force One*

Tom Beck
Morgan Freeman
in *Deep Impact*

Thomas J. Whitmore
Bill Pullman
in *Independence Day*

James Sawyer
Jamie Foxx
in *White House Down*

Tom Kirkman
Kiefer Sutherland
in *Designated Survivor*

David Palmer
Dennis Haysbert
in *24*

Fitz Grant
Tony Goldwyn
in *Scandal*

Dwayne Camacho
Terry Crews
in *Idiocracy*

| 23% | 22% | 21% | 21% | 20% | 18% | 17% | 12% |

Andrew Shepherd
Michael Douglas
in *The American President*

Jed Bartlet
Martin Sheen
in *The West Wing*

Benjamin Asher
Aaron Eckhart
in *Olympus Has Fallen*

Dave Kovic
Kevin Kline
in *Dave*

Selina Meyer
Julia Louis-Dreyfus
in *Veep*

Mackenzie Allen
Geena Davis
in *Commander in Chief*

Claire Underwood
Robin Wright
in *House of Cards*

Frank Underwood
Kevin Spacey
in *House of Cards*

From top left to bottom right: **James Marnshall,** *Air Force One,* Beacon Pictures; **Tom Beck,** *Deep Impact,* Paramount Pictures; **Thomas J. Whitmore,** *Independence Day,* 20th Century Studios; **James Sawyer,** *White House Down,* Columbia Pictures; **Tom Kirkman,** *Deisgnated Survivor,* ABC Studios; **David Palmer,** *24,* Imagine Television; **Fitz Grant,** *Scandal,* ABC Signature; **Dwayne Camacho,** *Idiocracy,* 20th Century Studios; **Andrew Shepherd,** *The American president,* Universal Pictures; **Jed Bartlet,** *The West Wing,* Warner Bros. Television; **Benjamin Asher,** *Olympus Has Fallen,* Millennium Media; **Dave Kovic,** *Dave,* Warner Bros.; **Selina Meyer,** *Veep,* Dundee Productions; **Mackenzie Allen,** *Commander in Chief,* Battleplan Productions; **Claire Underwood,** *House of Cards,* Media Rights Capital; **Frank Underwood,** *House of Cards,* Media Rights Capital

Concerningly, female fictional presidents would generally struggle in a real-world election. Among the characters tested for this research, the three female presidents—Mackenzie Allen from *Commander in Chief,* Claire Underwood from *House of Cards,* and Selina Meyer from *Veep*—performed worse than any male character save from Claire's husband, the devious and conniving Frank Underwood.

It's possible that this speaks to gender bias among the electorate. Recent polling, after all, suggests that 3 in 10 voters think the country still isn't ready to elect its first female commander-in-chief.[2] But at the same time, **it also reflects an imbalance in the kinds of presidential roles being written for men versus those created for women.**

Unlike many of the male presidents on this list, none of the female characters here could be described as "action heroes." Nor is their characterisation, in general, particularly flattering. Claire Underwood and Selina Meyer, in particular, are both ruthlessly ambitious, willing to betray their political principles and throw close allies under the bus in order to gain—or cling onto—power.

49%
of Americans think it's important for people to see **women playing fictional presidents** to help normalize the idea of a female president in real life

69%
of Harris supporters

37%
of Trump supporters

Knowingly or not, Hollywood may be helping to perpetuate culturally-entrenched gender roles. Research has consistently found that traits which are seen as admirable in men—ambition, confidence, self-assuredness—are viewed more skeptically when exhibited by women.[3] Men are "decisive," or "direct," whereas women are "bossy" and "controlling." If there were more shows and movies about truly inspirational female presidents—a female James Marshall, for example—that could go a long way towards helping to challenge viewers' preconceived notions about the relationship between political leadership and gender.

However, there are signs that suggest that cultural attitudes here are shifting already. Gen Z, notably, doesn't harbor the same reservations when it comes to voting for female presidents. In fact, Mackenzie Allen and Selina Meyer are the two *most* popular fictional presidents among this demographic: each of them would attract 39% of the youth vote were they to run in this election cycle.

2. Eden Teshome, "Number of Americans who say US ready for female president dipping: Survey," The Hill, July 26th, 2024

3. Chris Wofford, "Women are "Bossy" and Men are "Decisive," eCornell, January 24th, 2018

Claire Underwood,
House of Cards,
Media Rights Capital

Selina Meyer,
Veep,
Dundee Productions

Mackenzie Allen,
Commander in Chief,
Battleplan Productions

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In general, Harris supporters show considerably greater affinity for fictional presidents than Trump voters

Harris supporters would be more likely to vote for...

Trump supporters would be more likely to vote for...

NEUTRAL

Harris	Neutral	Trump
Fitz Grant +23% ☑	James Marshall +0% ☑	Claire Underwood +6% ☑
Jed Bartlet +19% ☑		Benjamin Asher +5% ☑
Selina Meyer +14% ☑		
Mackenzie Allen +12% ☑		
Dwayne Camacho +12% ☑		
Tom Kirkman +9% ☑		
Thomas J. Whitmore +9% ☑		
Dave Kovic +8% ☑		
Andrew Shepherd +7% ☑		
David Palmer +6% ☑		
James Sawyer +4% ☑		
Frank Underwood +2% ☑		

Image credits: whitehouse.gov

While we might expect that Harris voters would be more open to backing female candidates, the reality is more complicated than that. While Selina Meyer and Mackenzie Allen both poll highly among supporters of the Vice President, Claire Underwood is actually slightly more popular among Trump voters—a reflection, perhaps, of the character's populist streak and pseudo-Trumpian qualities.
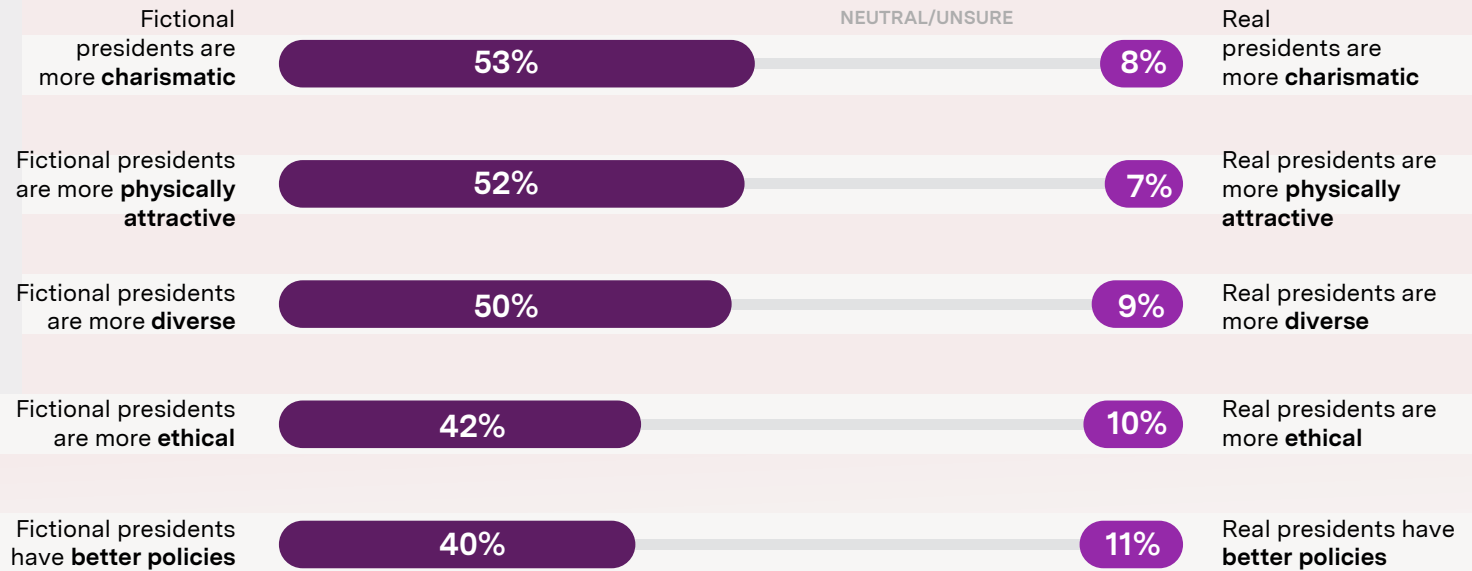
Underwood, however, is something of an outlier. With only one other exception (Aaron Eckhart's Benjamin Asher from *Olympus Has Fallen*), all fictional presidents tested for this research performed more strongly amongst Harris voters, or drew equal support from both camps.

This doesn't appear to be due to a lack of exposure: Trump and Harris voters surveyed for this research reported broadly similar levels of awareness for most of these characters. Whereas Harris voters were marginally more likely to have watched TV shows such as *Veep, The West Wing,* and *House of Cards,* Trump voters were more familiar with action movies like *White House Down, Deep Impact,* and *Olympus Has Fallen*. In both cases, however, the differences in awareness were relatively small—not big enough to suggest that large numbers of Harris voters are voting for the Vice President because their political views have been shaped by the types of fictional presidents they've seen on-screen.

More likely, the causation here flows the other way: Harris voters are more willing to vote for these fictional presidents because their pre-existing views and values align more closely with those exhibited by most of these characters.

Hollywood is, after all—as Trump and his allies are fond of pointing out[4]—an industry that skews heavily to the left. Indeed, data from NRG's *Future of Film* research program has demonstrated that there's a broad sense among conservative Americans that their views are underrepresented on-screen—and that there's a growing appetite among this audience for media that reflects real-world social and political issues.

Even nominally conservative characters are often filtered through a liberal lens. *Scandal*'s Fitz Grant, for example, while a member of the Republican party, would in real life almost certainly be attacked by opponents within the party as a RINO, or Republican-In-Name-Only, due to his liberal stances on issues like abortion.[5] Similarly, *The West Wing's* Arnie Vinick—the Republican nominee for president in the show's final season, memorably brought to life by Alan Alda—was notable for his willingness to break with his own party on a wide variety of policy questions.

The fact that relatively few Trump supporters would be willing to vote for most fictional presidents suggests, ultimately, that **Hollywood could do a better job when it comes to writing fictional politicians that truly resonate with conservative audiences.** There is, in other words, a gap in the market for fictional presidents that feel like genuine reflections of modern conservative values—rather than pastiches of those values, or a version of them designed to be more palatable for liberal audiences.

4. Isobel Lewis, Ellie Harrison, "8 times Trump clashed with Hollywood," The Independent, October 27th, 2020

5. Lesley Goldberg, "Did 'Scandal's Republican President Just Say He Is Pro-Choice," The Hollywood Reporter, May 12th, 2016

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Real politicians struggle to live up to the standards set by Hollywood

Q: HOW DO FICTIONAL PRESIDENTS COMPARE TO REAL PRESIDENTS?

NEUTRAL/UNSURE

Fictional presidents are more **charismatic**	53% — 8%	Real presidents are more **charismatic**
Fictional presidents are more **physically attractive**	52% — 7%	Real presidents are more **physically attractive**
Fictional presidents are more **diverse**	50% — 9%	Real presidents are more **diverse**
Fictional presidents are more **ethical**	42% — 10%	Real presidents are more **ethical**
Fictional presidents have **better policies**	40% — 11%	Real presidents have **better policies**

These conservative reservations aside, Americans generally hold fictional presidents in much higher esteem than their real-world counterparts. Compared to real presidents, fictional presidents are seen as more charismatic, more attractive, more ethical, and as having better policy agendas.

In one sense, this might make for depressing reading for real-life politicians—suggesting as it does that Hollywood is setting a standard they are never going to be able to fully live up to.

There is, however, a more positive framing here. By showing us a highly idealized version of political leadership—whether in the form of daring action heroes like James Marshall, or committed public servants like Jed Bartlet—**movies and TV shows can help create a shared cultural mythology around the presidency, pushing us to expect more of our actual political leaders and acting as a source of inspiration and encouragement for those leaders themselves.**

Almost half of Americans believe that real-life politicians could learn valuable lessons from fictional Presidents. Indeed, many Democratic politicians and staffers have talked openly about the role that *The West Wing* played in encouraging them to take an interest in politics, and how the show shaped their political beliefs.[6] And the current administration has gone out of its way to invite comparisons to the series, including hosting a White House reception to commemorate its 25th anniversary[7]—hoping, perhaps, that some of the positive feelings many liberal voters have towards President Bartlet will rub off on President Biden and Vice President Harris.

Fictional presidents can also play a significant role in shaping how people outside of the US think about the American presidency. In this sense, shows like *The West Wing* and movies like *White House Down* can be seen as a form of soft power, exporting a glossy and idealized version of American leadership to global audiences. This is particularly relevant at a time when many of America's real-life leaders are struggling to command the same respect on the global stage that was once afforded to them.[8]

6. Emily St. James, "The West Wing is 20 years old. Too many Democrats still think it's a great model for politics." Vox, September 17th, 2019

7. Nomaan Merchant, " 'The West Wing' cast visits the White House for a 25th anniversary party," AP News, September 21st, 2024

8. Julie Ray, "U.S. Leadership Remains Unpopular Worldwide," Gallup, July 27th, 2020

47%
of Americans think that real-life politicians could learn a lot from fictional Presidents

45%
believe that fictional portrayals of US presidents can influence the global image of American leadership

Jed Bartlet,
The West Wing,
Warner Bros. Television

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Americans are keen to see younger presidents represented on-screen

So far, we've explored the current landscape of presidential fiction—but what does the future hold? What are the types of fictional presidents that viewers would like to see more of in the future?

Predictably, many Americans are keen to see greater on-screen representation of their own political values and beliefs. About half (49%) of Trump voters say they'd like to see more Republican presidents in TV shows and movies; similarly, 41% of Harris voters would like to see more Democratic presidents.

Additionally, Harris voters show broad support for the idea of more on-screen racial diversity when it comes to fictional POTUSes: many of them, for example, would like to see more Black, Hispanic, Asian American, or Indigenous actors cast in presidential roles.

One thing that unites Americans of all political persuasions, however, is a desire to see more younger presidents (i.e., presidents in their 40s or below) represented in movies and TV shows. This seems likely to be a response to real-world concerns about the fact that America's political leaders are, on average, the oldest they've ever been.[9]

The median senator is now 65 years old—older than at any point during the 20th century.[10] At 81 years of age, Joe Biden is the oldest sitting president of all time; before he suspended his campaign, concerns about his age and mental acuity were a major part of the narrative surrounding this year's election.[11] Donald Trump, at 78, is hardly much younger himself; he, likewise, has had to deal with questions about whether he's

healthy enough to successfully execute the duties of the office.[12] The 60-year-old Kamala Harris may be a spring chicken compared to her opponent, but even she would be considerably older than Clinton, Obama, or George W. Bush when they assumed the presidency.

Americans, it seems, would like fiction to provide them with an escape from the reality of our current gerontocracy—and to inject a level of dynamism and vigor into the presidency that they aren't getting from real-world political figures.
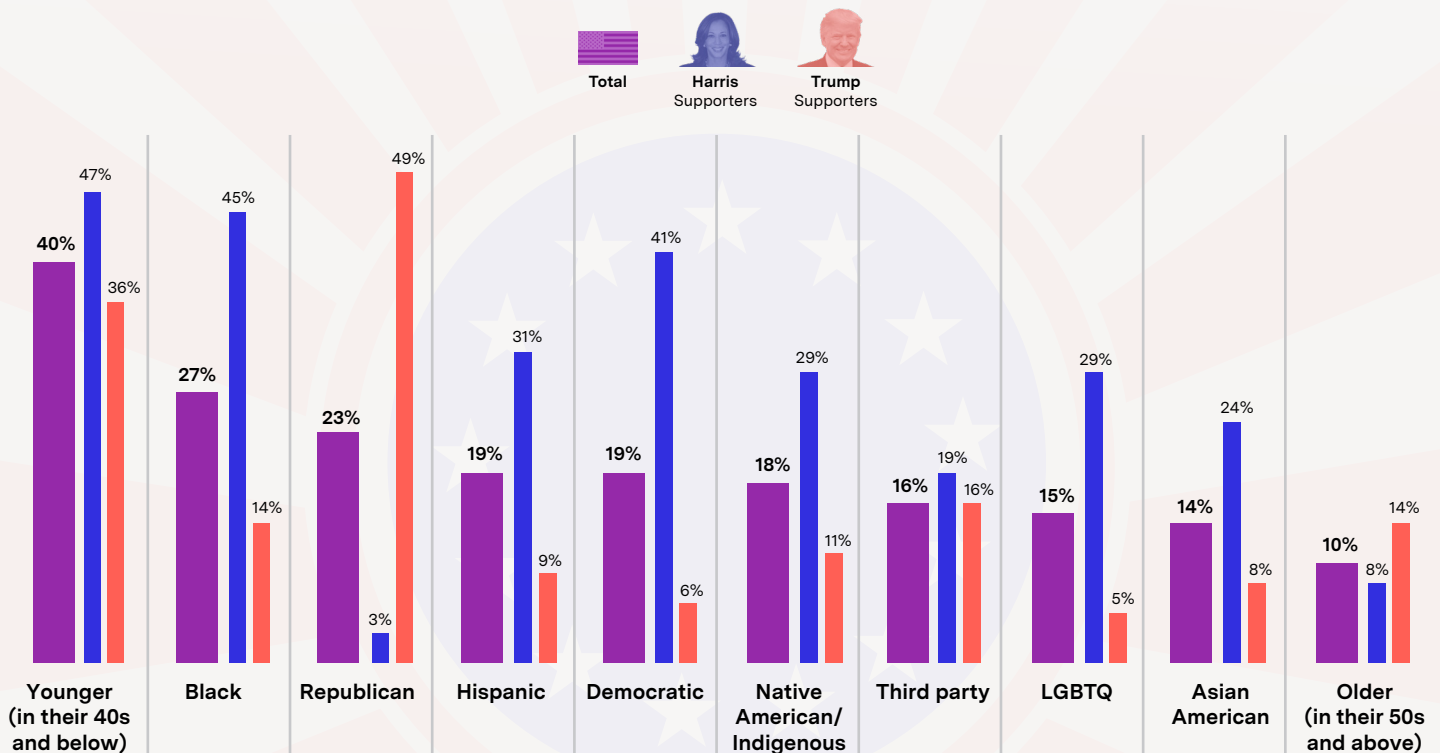
9. Abdallah Fayyad, "Why American politicians are so old," Vox, July 4th, 2024
10. Geoffrey Skelley, "Congress Today Is Older Than It's Ever Been," FiveThirtyEight, April 3rd, 2023
11. Maya Yang, "Majority of voters think Biden is too old to be effective president, new poll says," The Guardian, March 3rd, 2024
12. Steve Peoples, "Trump would be the oldest person to become president. He's not sharing health details," ABC News, October 16th, 2024

Q: WHAT TYPES OF FICTIONAL PRESIDENTS WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE MORE OF IN THE FUTURE?

Total | Harris Supporters | Trump Supporters

Category	Total	Harris	Trump
Younger (in their 40s and below)	40%	47%	36%
Black	27%	45%	14%
Republican	23%	3%	49%
Hispanic	19%	31%	9%
Democratic	19%	41%	6%
Native American/Indigenous	18%	29%	11%
Third party	16%	19%	16%
LGBTQ	15%	29%	5%
Asian American	14%	24%	8%
Older (in their 50s and above)	10%	8%	14%

As fiction and reality become harder to separate, more actors and other celebrities might start contemplating a run for the White House

**Q: WHICH CELEBRITY WOULD YOU MOST LIKE TO SEE ELECTED PRESIDENT?**

UNAIDED RESPONSES
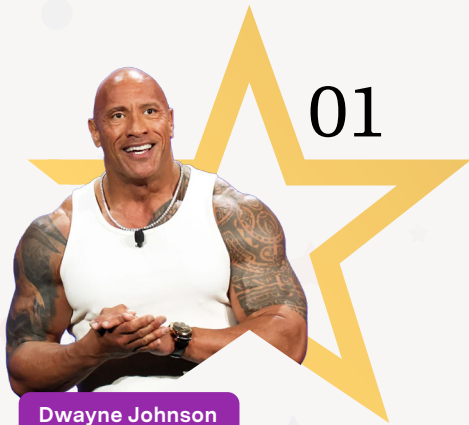
Of course, Americans can't actually vote for James Marshall, Jed Bartlet, or Selina Meyer for president. But what about the actors who play them?

Donald Trump and Ronald Reagan have both proved that it's possible to translate on-screen fame into a successful run for the Oval Office. And beyond the presidential level, America has had its fair share of entertainers turned politicians. Arnold Schwarzenegger served as governor of California from 2003 to 2011, while professional wrestler Jesse Ventura shocked the political establishment by winning the 1998 Minnesota gubernatorial election on a third party ticket.

Other TV and film personalities have had less success in their runs for office: Dr. Oz lost his Pennsylvania senate election in 2022, despite winning the Republican nomination, while Cynthia Nixon failed in her attempt to primary New York governor Andrew Cuomo in 2018.

And this isn't just an American phenomenon. From former Prime Minister Imran Khan in Pakistan to Senator Manny Pacquiao in the Philippines, we're living in an era in which it's easier than ever for well-liked celebrities to parlay their fame into successful runs for political office. In fact, we've already seen an example of an actor making the transition from playing a president on TV to serving as one in real life: Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy won his country's 2019 election after earning the public's trust through his role in the popular TV series, *Servant of the People*.

From top left to bottom right: **Dwayne Johnson,** Getty Images; **Keanu Reeves,** Marca.com; **Kanye West,** Getty Images; **Taylor Swift,** Glamourmagazine.co.uk; **Oprah Winfrey,** Getty Images; **Elon Musk,** Xprize.org; **Jon Stewart,** Poynter.org; **Arnold Schwarzenegger,** Getty Images; **George Clooney,** Getty Images; **Matthew McConaughey,** Getty Images

01 Dwayne Johnson
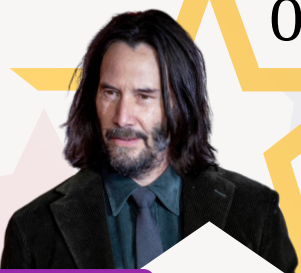
02 Keanu Reeves

03 Kanye West

04 Taylor Swift

05 Oprah Winfrey

06 Elon Musk

07 Jon Stewart

08 Arnold Schwarzenegger

09 George Clooney

10 Matthew McConaughey

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Among the specific celebrities Americans would most like to see run for office, the majority have already taken some steps to involve themselves in national or state-level politics. Taylor Swift, for example—one of the top picks for a future celebrity president among Harris voters—has made a number of political interventions over the years; as well as being a prominent critic of Donald Trump during his time in office, she has also made high-profile endorsements in senate races in her home state of Tennessee.[13] Similarly, Elon Musk—the top choice for Trump supporters—has become increasingly politically active since his acquisition of Twitter, and has now emerged as a key donor and surrogate for the Trump campaign.[14]

There are two celebrities, however, who, were they to run for office, would benefit from strong bipartisan appeal: Keanu Reeves and Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson. Reeves, unfortunately, as a naturalized Canadian citizen, is not actually eligible for the office. The Rock, on the other hand, has already flirted with the idea of a presidential bid. One poll in 2022 found that he would enjoy the support of 46% of Americans; in a podcast interview with Trevor Noah, the actor claimed that representatives from multiple political parties had approached him about running for the office.[15]

While it's impossible to tell whether Johnson's occasional flirtations with running for office are more than just a PR tactic, the fact that he has conspicuously refused to endorse a presidential candidate this year could be seen as a sign that he's keeping his options open for the future, and that he's keen to avoid alienating any part of the electorate.[16] If we are going to see another entertainer make a serious bid for the presidency, The Rock currently seems like the candidate with far-and-away the best chance.

13. Rania Aniftos, Hannah Dailey, "A Timeline of Taylor Swift's Political Evolution," Billboard, September 20th, 2024

14. Hugo Lowell, "Elon Musk gave $75m to his pro-Trump group in three months," The Guardian, October 16th, 2024

15. Sian Cain, "Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson: I was asked to run for US president by multiple political parties," November 10th, 2023

16. James Hibberd, "Dwayne Johnson Says He Won't Endorse Biden Again for President," The Hollywood Reporter, April 5th, 2024

Voters would most like to elect...

UNAIDED RESPONSES

Harris supporters

01 **Dwayne Johnson**

02 **Taylor Swift**

03 **Jon Stewart**

04 **Oprah Winfrey**

05 **Keanu Reeves**

Trump supporters

01 **Elon Musk**

02 **Dwayne Johnson**

03 **Kanye West**

04 **Matthew McConaughey**

05 **Keanu Reeves**

Image credits: whitehouse.gov

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FIVE KEY TAKEAWAYS

01

There's a clear imbalance in the presidential roles being written for male and female actors. To challenge cultural preconceptions and gender biases, Hollywood should try to tell more stories about truly inspirational female presidents.

02

The vast majority of fictional presidents resonate with liberal voters more than they do with conservatives. There's a gap in the market for characters that feel like authentic representations of conservative values.

03

As real-life politicians become older and older, viewers want movies and TV shows to provide an alternative vision—spotlighting younger, more dynamic political leaders.

04

On-screen depictions of presidents can have real-world implications, informing the way that politicians and their staffers think about the world, and shaping global perceptions of the office.

05

Among celebrities who could make a run for office in the future, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson may be the best-positioned, and would benefit from strong bipartisan appeal.

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