

Mayor Pete

Observers of feature documentaries about political campaigns are usually begin with “Primary” of 1960, covering the Wisconsin primary race between Humbert Humphrey and JFK, with a crew headed by renowned documentarians Richard Leacock and D.A. Pennebaker. Others have followed, including “Street Fight,” “War Room,” and the recent “Knock Down the House.” “Mayor Pete” follows in that tradition, with the expected minutiae of the campaign trail leavened with the unabashed youth of the candidate and his articulate, buttoned-down demeanor.

From the start, director Jesse Moss “was intrigued by Buttigieg. He had remarkable composure, evident intelligence, and a gift for conveying complex ideas in ways that felt graspable.... Could a small-town mayor ascend, in one bold step, to the highest office in the land? It was a story that Frank Capra might have concocted.”

“Mayor Pete” brings filmgoers inside Pete Buttigieg’s 2019-2020 campaign to be the youngest US President, providing an unprecedented intimacy with a most guarded candidate, his husband Chasten Buttigieg, and their redoubtable team. Opening a year before the Iowa caucuses, the film follows Buttigieg’s remarkable trajectory up to his unlikely, hair-breadth victory there. The campaign carries on to New Hampshire and beyond, ending only in Pete’s withdrawal after the South Carolina primary in March 2020. (Recently appointed U.S. Secretary of Transportation, Buttigieg serves as the first openly LGBTQ Senate-confirmed Cabinet member in U.S. history.)

This film reveals what really goes on inside a campaign for the highest office in the land. Mayor Pete is shown touring the country in his “Pete 2020” bus, appearing on network interviews, prepping for the Democratic debates, and in earnest conference with his chief aides, led by campaign manager Mike Schmuhl and head of communications, the feisty Lis Smith. A unique aspect of the Buttigieg campaign (among other things) is the steady presence of his spouse/partner, Chasten, who fulfills a role in the film as tactician and surrogate, as well as Pete-whisperer. In separate interviews, he offers insights into the candidate which Buttigieg, famously self-contained, does not reveal.

While overall laudatory, the movie does not avoid one major hiccup on the campaign. While Pete was campaigning, he was still mayor of South Bend, and in June 2019, a police incident involving a local white policeman shooting and killing a black man happened. This caused him to skip campaign stops and return to his home town. The film shows Buttigieg in

South Bend, facing a black population enraged at the incident and shows him, chastened and defensive, facing a hostile audience asking what actions he would take for justice. The troubling event gives us a different take on the ever-cool Buttigieg as he searches to explain a failure of his city's government.

"Mayor Pete" is director Moss' follow-up to last year's "Boys' State," which was honored with a 2021 Primetime Emmy Award as Outstanding Documentary. As in "Boys State," Moss achieves, with roaming, hand-held cameras, an intimate connection with the candidate and his campaign team, portraying a revealing and candid backstory.

(The film, now on Amazon., runs 97 mins. and is rated "R.")

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