“The Candidate” [1972, directed by Michael Ritchie and starring Robert Redford] addresses a number of issues pertinent to classes in American government and politics, society, and the mass media; also issues such as the electoral process and political behavior. Ritchie was an interesting director who seemed to like doing films connected to competition, such as: “Bad News Bears,” “Smile,” and “Downhill Racer.”

A good starting point is to consider the idea of historical sociology: What in the film seems to be the same as [or similar to] what we saw in the political campaign in 2008? What seems different? This film was released in 1972, the last year of Richard Nixon’s first term, before Watergate and while the war in Vietnam and the military draft were still going on. The script was written by Jeremy Larner who had written campaign speeches for Eugene McCarthy in 1968. Even though the country was very divided, Nixon won the 1972 by a huge margin. His opponent, George McGovern, won only Massachusetts and the District of Columbia.

Some of the issues prominent in the film seem a bit [only a bit] outdated: busing, welfare, property taxes. Others continue to be prominent. Obviously, the technology has changed if one considers cell phones, the sophistication of computers and video. Is this important? Some key issues to consider include the following

- The importance of appearance and one’s television image.
- Gender elements in politics.
- Generalities vs. specifics when it comes to communicating with voters.
- Style vs. substance.
- The significance of Redford’s last line in the film.
- The images of Democrats and Republicans.
- Is the film cynical? How so?
- What the film says regarding the electoral process, the outlook and behavior of voters, the behavior of politicians and campaign workers, and the like.
- The relevance of the father-son relationship.

[A side note: Melvyn Douglas who plays Redford’s father was a very respected romantic lead and, then character actor, from the 1930s until his death in 1981. He is also known for being married to Helen Gahagan Douglas, an actress who became a “liberal” Democratic congresswoman from California. Richard Nixon ran against her for the Senate in 1950 with a campaign that has generally been seen as particularly dirty, stressing her supposed Communist/Red connections during this Cold war election. (The Korean War had begun in June, 1950.) Nixon’s campaign dubbed her “The Pink Lady.” He won. There is also strong evidence that she had an affair with Lyndon Johnson when both were in the congress and married to others.]