

Synopsis for "Margin of Error"  
by David White

When Frank and Jesse Jameson survive another birthday as twins, complete with yet another year of super-competitive birthday presents, they decide on the ultimate competition: being rich, they pool their money to buy the top ten largest polling organizations and try to influence the current top-running candidates to do the most outlandish stunts, all based on their polling results.

One candidate, Alan Fitzgerald, is an established intellectual, but his numbers continue to decline until he does one stupid act — a pratfall reminiscent of the best Chevy Chase spoof of Gerald Ford — and then, inexplicably, his numbers soar! From then on, he continues to goof off, act completely insane, and his numbers increase wildly.

At the same time, George Hughes, the personable but ignorant ex-Senator, is doing well, until he tries to act friendly to some female fans at a press-op. Suddenly, his numbers plummet, and he's forced by his handlers to remake himself in the image of an uncaring, almost mean-spirited father-figure, which pulls his numbers back up.

The third-party candidate, Jeremiah Grace, an aged but affable fellow, climbs in the polls to a respectable level (if you consider 4% "respectable") when, at the urging of his nephew, he tries white water rafting. From then on, he's encouraged by his staff to try ever more dangerous stunts, from parachuting and bungee-jumping to downhill street luge. But he's not given much chance, and is seen as an outside shot at best.

Throughout the film, TV correspondents drool over the fluctuating numbers, and read all sorts of outcomes into the false polls. A couple of stations even run nightly "poll updates," reminiscent of happy-time weather reports, complete with narrow hipped, always-smiling girls waving across huge screens of polling numbers, as if they're describing the next storm front moving through.

In an effort to appease the polls, both parties run outlandish ads aimed at casting the opposition in the worst possible light, including powerful soundtracks with songs like "Goddam the Pusherman" and "Hey There, Georgie Girl." The worse the ads, the better the numbers.

During the campaign, one voice in each of the leading parties tries to talk sense into the candidates, who are blinded by the polling numbers. These two, Frankie Watson, a tom-boyish girl for the Fitzgerald campaign, and Meredith Christie, a feminine-appearing guy with the Hughes camp, find each other (on the day they both wind up at the leading polling company with complaints about the numbers), and discover it's not what people think about you, it's what you think about yourself.

the campaign grows more bitter, with each side assuring their supporters of ultimate victory. We peek in on a few homes as families warm themselves around the glowing Tube. Many of them are taken in completely with the polls and the reports by the news bureaus giving them support. but a few astute watchers figure out the polls mean absolutely nothing. "Hell, Fitzgerald could fall on his butt and ship a bone, and he'd climb four points on CNN." Sure enough, the very next scene is a tape of Fitzgerald doing a badly acted pratfall on a Little Rock tarmac, and the reporter intones, "Fitzgerald's numbers rose five percentage points overnight. His base seems stronger than ever."

And at the end of the campaign, the surprise winner is the Third Party Candidate, "Jerry" Grace, who's perceived by the voters (an all-time low turnout, by the way) as the only candidate who was really himself.

Frankie and Meredith stroll off arm in arm, and swear off all politics — "At least, for four years," Meredith says.

As the film ends, we watch a pair of despondent losers, as Hughes and Fitzgerald wind up leaving Washington at the same time. They congratulate each other as they watch an interview of Jerry Grace, talking about what his presidency will entail. His first promise: to outlaw all pre-election polls.

Back in their home town, both brothers claim victory, and promise to outdo each other "next time."