

# How to win an Oscar

## A DATA DISSECTION OF THE ACADEMY AWARDS



For the first time this year, the film that triumphed at the BAFTAs and Golden Globes - *Three Billboards outside Ebbing, Missouri* - did not go on to win “best picture” at the Oscars. Was it a sign that the conventions of the annual awards were changing? As our analysis shows, Hollywood and the members of the Academy still have a long way to go to slough off past voting patterns and behaviour.

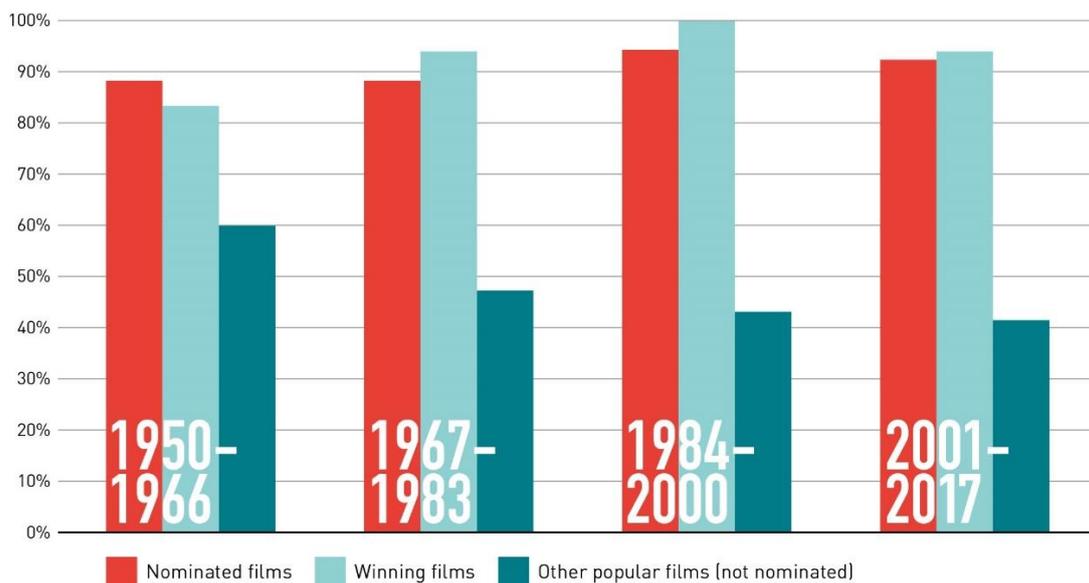
Something was clearly needed this year to revive the Oscar brand. The television audience was way down on 2017. Was that because last year’s ceremony had been marred by a messed-up announcement? Or because Hollywood had been badly tarnished by the Harvey Weinstein scandal? We thought it was time to analyse the way Oscars are awarded, and raise some questions about the in-built tendencies to award the prizes to certain kinds of movies - and their directors.

So in preparation for this year’s Oscars, we examined the performance of thousands of popular movies going as far back as 1950. Our analysis suggested a number of characteristics that have made a film more likely to be nominated for, and indeed to win, the best picture award. Only, some of those “rules” were overturned in 2018.

### Over-dramatic Oscars?

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, to use its full title, is clearly loaded with drama kings (most of its 6,687 members are believed to be male). Roughly 90% of all films that have been nominated for the best picture award and, more importantly, about the same percentage of those that have gone on to win have been in the drama category.

**Figure 1** Share of films in the drama genre



Animated films and sci-fi movies are nominated remarkably rarely. Only one fantasy film (*The Lord of the Rings*, 2003) and one horror movie (*The Silence of the Lambs*, 1992) have ever won. Westerns have become thin on the ground. No documentary has ever even been nominated.

In fact, from 1984 to 2000 every single best picture winner was a drama, even though the category is less popular with the public than it used to be. Today, dramas make up only 41% of the annual IMDb list of top movies.

The two 2017 “finalists” - *La La Land* and *Moonlight* - were in the drama category; and so were the two thought to be in closest contention in 2018 - *Three Billboards* and *The Shape of Water*. The nomination lists for both years demonstrate the extent to which other kinds of movies continue to start a disproportionately long way back in the race.

### More is more and cheap is cheerful

Perhaps less obviously, it’s clear from the data that members of the Academy really do prefer a long movie. Maybe they’re looking for value for money, which seems unlikely, or maybe they just have more patience with their subject than the rest of us do...

Whatever the reason, there’s a marked difference in length between those films that have been nominated and those that have not. And, as the table shows, the winners on average have run comfortably over two hours. (Sure enough, this year’s “loser”, *Three Billboards*, was a few minutes short of that two-hour benchmark!)

Another, even more surprising, finding has to do with budgets. Making any Oscar candidate costs real money, but top dollars don’t seem to yield increased Oscar returns. Our analysis suggests that historically, those films that have been nominated - and those which have gone on to win - have been significantly less expensive to make, on average, than those popular movies that failed to make the short list. Maybe Academy members really do favour low cost-per-minute movies.

Understanding this particular preference might have helped last year’s Oscar presenters think twice before reading out the wrong result. *Moonlight* (the actual winner in 2017) was a lot cheaper than *La La Land* (the film mistakenly announced as having won).

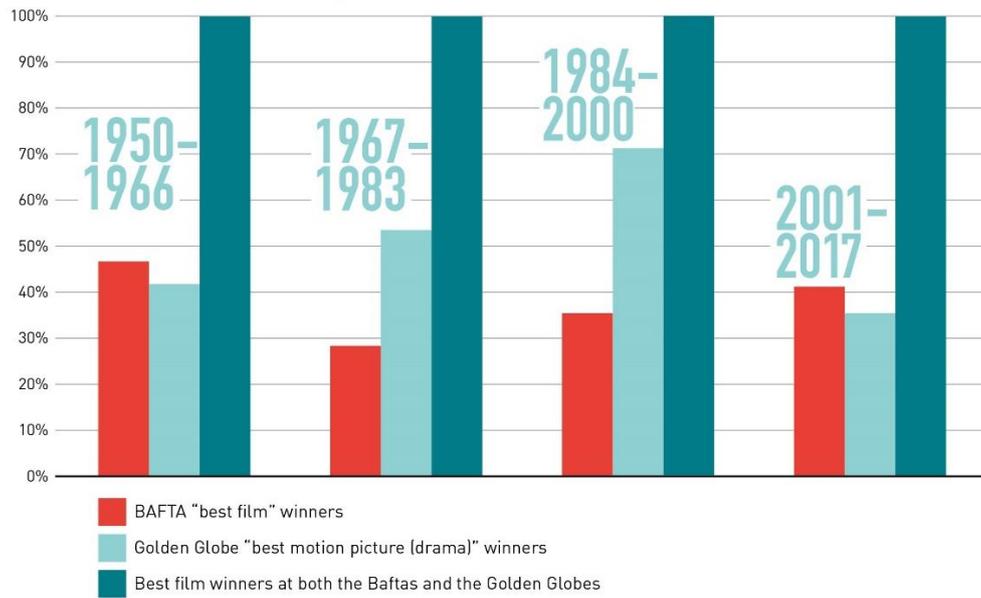
However, money wasn’t much of a guide this year because both *Three Billboards* and *The Shape of Water* were, in Oscar terms, really cheap. But one other factor did lean heavily the *Three Billboards* way.

Runtime and Budget:	Duration (minutes)	Budget (current \$m)
Winners	137	\$39m
Nominated films	128	\$38m
Other popular films	108	\$50m

### Winner takes all?

The Oscars come third in the calendar of movie award ceremonies, so a fairly obvious indication of who is in with a chance comes with the results of the first two, the Golden Globes and the BAFTAs. Indeed, if a movie wins both of these - an event which only happens about once every five years - history had told us it would be 100% certain to triumph at the Oscars too. When *Three Billboards* followed its Golden Globe win with success at the BAFTAs (historically the better Oscar-predictor of the two), that seemed to settle matters. But not this year.

**Figure 2** Share of films that have gone on to winning “Best Picture” Oscar



**Lights, camera, action!**

The table below shows how our analysis of the movies in the frame for the 2018 Oscars put *Three Billboards* in the lead, with *The Shape of Water* statistically the only other contender. But we also raised the nagging question: would this be the year when the iron rules for success finally broke down?

There were certainly some other strong candidates, such as *Dunkirk*. However, a best picture Oscar for the war movie would have gone right against the statistical grain, since it was massively expensive. In the event, the *Dunkirk* team had to be content with “only” three Oscars - rather techy ones for sound editing, sound mixing and film editing. Meanwhile, another war film - *Darkest Hour* - landed the leading actor award for Gary Oldman.

More intriguingly, there was speculation this year that the members of the Academy might have a twinge of conscience about the historic under-representation of female talent. If so, they had an opportunity to put things right, since there was one (and only one) highly acclaimed film on the list of nominations for best picture that had a female director.

However, as our analysis showed, *Lady Bird* didn't look like a winner on past statistical precedent - even if it was the shortest movie on the short list.

**Figure 3** Best Picture nominees and statistical likelihood of their winning

Movie	Is it a drama?	Runtime (minutes)	Budget current \$m	GG Drama Winner?	Bafta Winner?	Chances based on past data
<i>Dunkirk</i>	Yes	106	100	No	No	Very unlikely
<i>Get Out</i>	No	104	5	No	No	Very unlikely
<i>The Post</i>	Yes	116	50	No	No	Very unlikely
<i>Call Me By Your Name</i>	Yes	132	4	No	No	Unlikely
<i>Darkest Hour</i>	Yes	125	30	No	No	Unlikely
<i>Lady Bird</i>	Yes	94	10	No	No	Unlikely
<i>Phantom Thread</i>	Yes	130	35	No	No	Unlikely
<i>The Shape of Water</i>	Yes	123	19	No	No	Possible
<i>Three Billboards...</i>	Yes	115	15	Yes	Yes	Most Likely

### What about the women?

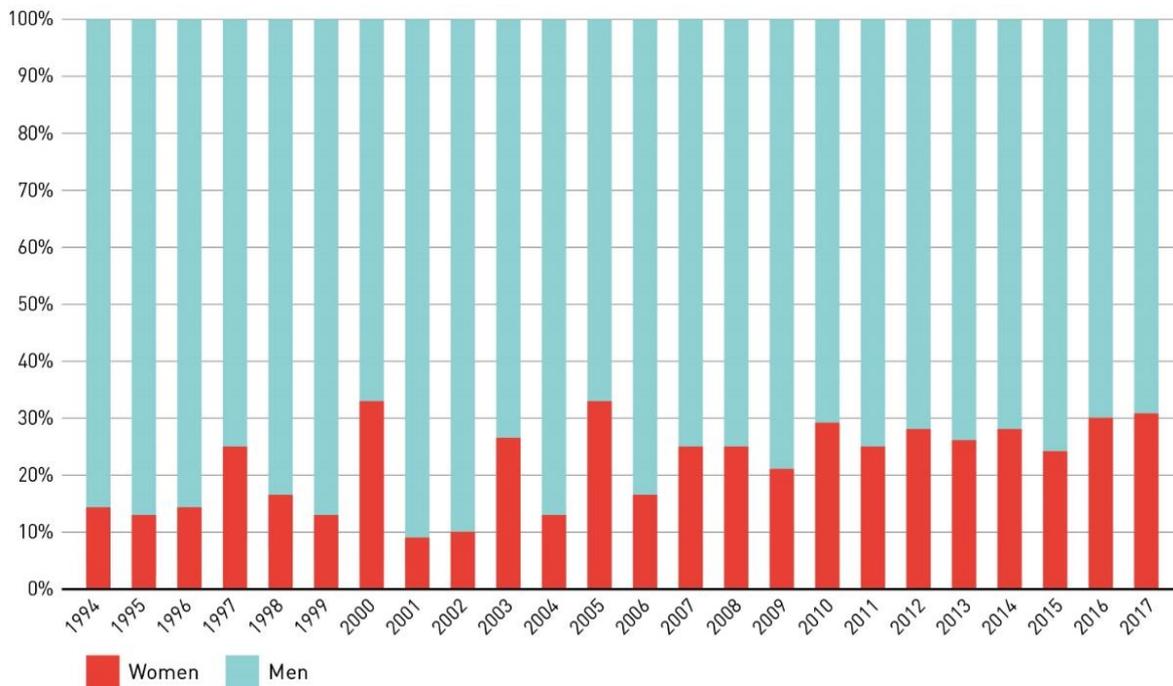
And, as it turned out, the Academy members did not depart so far from the statistical past as to pick *Lady Bird* as best picture. Indeed, Greta Gerwig didn't even win best director. So that left the record for women unchanged. Only one female-directed movie has ever won best picture: Kathryn Bigelow's *Hurt Locker*, in 2009.

What's more, including *Lady Bird*, only 13 films made by a woman have ever even been nominated for best picture (the first was Randa Haines's *Children of a Lesser God*, in 1986). And of those 13, only five in total, including Greta, have also made it onto the short list for the best director award. Although the data set is too small to permit detailed statistical analysis, this proportion looks suspiciously low, given that about two-thirds of all male-directed best picture winners also secured the best director award. As, indeed, happened with *The Shape of Water* this year, as best director went to Guillermo del Toro.

There have been rather more best picture nominations for movies which had a woman as producer - a role which does not merit a separate Oscar award. One reason perhaps is that so many films are co-produced. The first female-produced best picture winner was in 1973, when Julia Phillips (along with her husband, Michael, and Tony Bill) won for *The Sting*.

But women producers of best picture nominees, let alone winners, continued to be thin on the ground. As the chart below shows, it has only been in the past 10 years that they have consistently accounted for at least 20% of the producers of nominated best pictures. And *The Shape of Water* followed in the old (male) tradition.

**Figure 4** Share of producers nominated for Best Picture who are women



So while the Academy members talked the talk in their Oscar speeches about the need for Hollywood to change its ways, have yet to walk the walk. Yes, they gave the leading actress award to Frances McDormand in *Three Billboards*, who did a stunning job in a part that epitomised the feisty female out for justice. But they didn't make any other moves that could be said to show they recognise the gender issue. If Hollywood has been busy displaying a guilty conscience about Harvey Weinstein, it's a lot less clear what it intends to do about it.

But do harassment scandals always lead to an increase in female representation? Well, whether because of male guilt or female determination in the aftermath of scandals, there are certainly examples in other spheres where that has happened.

Notably, it's argued that the manner in which the all-male Senate Judiciary Committee challenged and dismissed Anita Hill's accusations of sexual harassment against Clarence Thomas fuelled the rise in female representation in Congress. Statistical analysis would seem to support this argument. In the elections after her testimony in 1991, the share of women in the next congress jumped from 6.2% to 10.3%; thereafter the previous glacially slow rate of increase quadrupled.

But that was - or was said to be - because women started voting for women. So the question for the Academy is this: when will the drama kings change their tune? Or does the body's membership need to change first?



**Eirikur Ragnarsson**

+49 22 133 713 116

eirikur.ragnarsson@frontier-economics.com



**Stefano Piano**

+44 (0)207 031 7039

stefano.piano@frontier-economics.com