Study reveals strongest predictors for Oscar nominations

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If you're an actor angling for an Academy Award nomination on Tuesday, you better hope you didn't leave the audience rolling in the aisles, suggests a new study from UCLA's California Center for Population Research.

"The odds of being nominated for an Academy Award are so much greater for performers who appear in dramas that — at least this time of year — it really pays to be a drama queen," said Gabriel Rossman, one of the study's two authors and an assistant professor of sociology at UCLA.

Albeit to a lesser degree, it also helps to have a major film distributor, prior Oscar nominations, a high spot in the pecking order in past movie credits, fewer films competing for attention and good collaborators. And it doesn't hurt to be a woman.

"A performer's odds of being nominated are largely set before the cameras even start rolling, back when the script was bought, the director was signed and the film was cast," said Nicole Esparza, the study's lead author and a Robert Wood Johnson Scholar in Health Policy Research at Harvard University. "It's surprising how many variables other than a performer's talent play a role in determining who gets nominated."

The 80th Academy Awards nominations are scheduled to be announced at 5:30 a.m. on Tuesday at the Academy's Samuel Goldwyn Theater in Beverly Hills.

Using Internet Movie Database (IMDb) records for every Oscar-eligible film made between the founding of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences in 1927 and 2005,
Esparza and Rossman looked for conditions that improved the odds of a performer getting the nod.

The researchers looked at number of Oscar-eligible films in any given year, the distributors and studios behind each performer's films, the film's tone or subject matter, the cast size, the sex of the performer, the performer's contacts within the industry, and past Oscar nominations among a film's cast, directors and writers.

The single greatest predictor of a nomination proved to be serious subject matter — or at least a film that was classified by IMDb as a drama, despite the possible presence of comedic elements. In examining IMDb records on 171,539 performances by 39,518 actors in 19,351 Oscar-eligible films, the researchers found that actors were nine times more likely to receive a nomination for their work in a drama than in a non-drama.

"In the entertainment industry, there's long been a sense that the nomination process prefers dramas, but I don't think anybody is aware of the magnitude of the effect," Rossman said.

The second strongest predictor of a nomination proved to be the number of films screened in any given year.

"It's better to be nominated in a year when fewer films were screened, because there's less competition come awards time," Rossman said.

Actresses, meanwhile, proved more than twice as likely to be nominated as actors for any given performance, making being female the study's third strongest predictor of a nomination, the authors say.

"At least in this case, being underrepresented on the job works in women's favor," said Esparza. "Because there are fewer female than male performers in films, and both are eligible for the same number of awards, actresses stand a better chance of being nominated than actors. It's a simple matter of arithmetic, but as far as I know, nobody has ever raised the point."

The higher a performer ranked in past movie credits, the more likely he or she was to be nominated. A history of high rankings in the movie-credit pecking order more than doubled the odds of a nomination, making pecking order in past credits the fourth strongest predictor, the researchers found.

"It turns out the performers with enough clout and respect from their peers to push themselves to the top of the credits also have enough clout and respect from their peers to be nominated for Oscars," Rossman said. Having a major distributor also provided a boost. Coming in as the fifth most likely predictor, appearing in a film represented by a major film distributor nearly doubled a performer's chances of being nominated.

Having been nominated for an Oscar in the past also improved the odds of being nominated.

"This is an instance of what sociologists call the 'Matthew Effect,' after Matthew 25:29, in which Jesus says, 'For to everyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich,'" Esparza said. "Just as the rich tend to get richer and popular Web sites get even more traffic, so do honors seem to pile onto those who have already been honored, be they scientists or movie stars."

Performers also got a lift when they appeared with previously nominated writers and directors — what the researchers dubbed the "Robert Forster Effect," after a prolific but undistinguished character actor who never

received a nomination until he appeared in the 1997 film "Jackie Brown," which was written and directed by Oscar-winner Quentin Tarantino and co-starred Oscar-winner Robert De Niro and Oscar nominee Samuel L. Jackson.

"There's a very good reason that Academy Award acceptance speeches are so long — an actor's collaborators are responsible in no small measure for their achievements," Esparza said.

However, performing alongside previously nominated cast members proved to be a mixed bag. Appearing with past nominees did not improve the odds of being nominated as a leading performer, but it did improve the chances for performers in supporting roles.

"If there are other good people in the cast, they appear to be competition for the lead performer nomination," Rossman said. "But there's no downside if you're in a supporting role. Working with really good performers may elicit a better performance from you or it may simply bring attention to your previously unrecognized talents, but either way, working with good co-stars definitely helps you get a supporting nomination."

There were limits, however, to the value of contacts. The researchers were surprised to find how little influence industry ties had. Performers who had worked over the years with a wide array of Academy members were no more likely to earn a nod than those with fewer industry ties. This was even the case, the researcher found, during the height of the studio system, when studio heads allegedly ordered talent to vote in blocks for other studio talent.

Source: University of California - Los Angeles