



P.O.V.'s "ELECTION DAY"

By Katy Chevigny

Tuesday, July 1, 2008 at 10 p.m. on PBS (Check local listings)

Filmmaker's Statement

The Idea: A Different Story About Elections

In the fall of 2004, we started thinking about making a film on the upcoming 2004 election. We knew that there was ample coverage of the "horse race" of the campaigns, and that the close contest between "red" and "blue" states was at the forefront of everyone's minds, so we looked to cover something different. We set out to depict portraits of real people who make our democracy work, whose actions are not the kind of thing that would make the evening news. The jumping-off place for **Election Day** was the 2000 election, which had brought the failures of our voting systems into sharp focus. We decided to look at how the shadow of that election would affect the attitudes and experiences of voters and poll-workers across the country in 2004.

The Format: Many Locations, Many Characters, and One Day to Shoot

Election Day is one of the few days in the United States on which so many Americans are collectively engaged in a common activity. Over 100 million of them across the country vote together on a single day. This short span of time — less than 24 hours — encompasses a mammoth operation through which the people choose the leader of the Free World. We decided on a "form-follows-function" approach to the film's structure: what the United States populace does in one day, so would the film. We would shoot all the footage on November 2, 2004. There are many fiction films that use this one-day conceit, but constructing a *documentary* film on a national scale out of a single day's footage was a fantastic challenge.

The Plan: A Big One-Day Shoot

Starting in late September, our small production team set ourselves the task of "casting" the different characters, locations or stories we intended to follow on November 2, 2004. This was a massive undertaking that required calling upon colleagues, friends and family for leads on interesting, unusual or colorful Election Day scenarios. We also worked with some nonprofit election reform partners, such as the Global Exchange, the Brennan Center for Justice, Project VOTE and Demos, whose members provided valuable insights into locations where problems or improvements in the voting systems were apparent. Producers Maggie Bowman and Dallas Brennan Rexer, in tandem with Associate Producer Christina King and other staff producers at Arts Engine, created a giant grid on the wall — what we called the "matrix" — so we could cross-reference characters with locations and available crews.

In addition to the casting, the team was also tenacious in fighting for access to film in polling places around the country, something that is often discouraged by local election offices if not downright prohibited, as in the state of Florida. These prohibitions intensified our determination to get into polling places as much as we could.

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One of the dangers of working with multiple crews is that the look of the film might not be consistent across locations. To address this, I created a document that served as a set of guidelines for the kind of cinema-vérité style I was looking for. *Pay attention to the small regional detail, the quiet moment. We don't need talking-head interviews. Don't ask the subjects to repeat actions. We don't need to shoot it like we're TV news crews, but instead shoot it like this is a story of one person's daily activities.*

I also had extensive conversations with each DP and field producer, many of whom were acclaimed filmmakers who generously offered their time to work one long, grueling day. Our star crews included Kirsten Johnson, cinematographer and co-director of our previous film "Deadline"; Dana Kupper, award-winning cinematographer of "Stevie"; Juan Carlos Zaldívar and Vic Losick, among many others.

Putting It All Together

One of the governing principles of our edit process was that the film structure would loosely follow the chronology of the day, starting at 4:30 a.m. with Jim Fuchs in Chicago and ending after 1 a.m. in Quincy, Florida. Another principle was that we would steer away from the known story of the presidential race as much as possible, in order to focus on the local situations of our characters and places. Lastly, as a sort of creative philosophy, we wanted to ensure that we left space in the film for minor details of character, of place and of time. This was partly because the footage demonstrates how aptly the phrase "the devil is in the details" sums up many of the major problems in the electoral process. Also, by preserving the visual and auditory nuances of various locations around the country, we hoped to make the film a specific portrait of the U.S. in 2004 as well as a commentary on the election process itself.

With those broad guidelines, we then had the task of screening all 105 hours of footage and searching for the similarities and contrasts that would give the film vivid texture and drama. After narrowing the footage down to our favorite scenes, the rest of the process was essentially a Sudoku puzzle consisting of which scene goes where in the timeline. As we moved closer to the end of the process, it became increasingly clear that moving one scene caused a ripple effect that changed the emotional tenor of a number of surrounding scenes as well. The final film structure reflects this interdependence among the stories and the decisions we made within this puzzle. Our hope is that the effect of **Election Day** on the viewer is greater than the sum of its parts, showing a portrait of the U.S. election system that no one has seen before.

— Katy Chevigny, Director

