ELECTION DAY
JANUARY 28, 2008
TRIBECA CINEMAS
CO-PRESENTED WITH BIG MOUTH FILMS

STUDY GUIDE
TRIBECA YOUTH SCREENING SERIES
Katy Chevigny, the director of *Election Day*, is an award-winning filmmaker who runs the non-profit Arts Engine, a leading independent media organization, and its production arm, Big Mouth Films. In 2004 she co-directed the documentary *Deadline* with Kirsten Johnson. The film is an investigation into Illinois governor George Ryan’s commuting of death sentences. After premiering at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival, *Deadline* was broadcast on NBC to an audience of over 6 million, was nominated for an Emmy, and won the Thurgood Marshall Journalism Award. Chevigny also directed *Journey to the West: Chinese Medicine today*, a feature-length documentary about traditional Chinese medicine and its influence in the West. She has produced five award-winning documentaries: *Arctic Son*, *Innocent Until Proven Guilty*, *Nuyorican Dream*, *Brother Born Again* and *Outside Looking In: Transracial Adoption in America*. These films have screened at festivals around the world, including Berlin and Full Frame, and have been broadcast on public television and HBO/Cinemax, among other outlets. *Election Day* premiered at the South by Southwest Film Festival in 2007 and will be broadcast on PBS in 2008. Chevigny is currently in post-production on *The Dishes*, the story of a punk rock band that juggles family and careers in Chicago. Through her work at Arts Engine, Chevigny also oversees MediaRights.org and the Media That Matters Film Festival.

**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 people 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.

The film *Election Day* follows an eclectic group of voters over one day, namely Election Day 2004, from the early morning until well after midnight. Capturing people from all walks of life, including an ex-felon voting for the first time at age 50 and a factory worker debating gay marriage with his co-workers, the film presents a glimpse of the real life stories that lie underneath the complex electoral process.

Jim Fuchs, a Republican poll-watcher, takes us on an energized ride through the precincts of largely Democratic Chicago, railing against the city’s “machine” politics. Rashida Tlaib of Dearborn, Michigan, mobilizes Muslims to vote. Eighteen-year-old Franny Fisher, of Stockholm, Wisconsin registers and votes at the same time in a one-room building staffed by her neighbor from down the road. Meanwhile, an international elections observer in St. Louis, Missouri is shocked to see voters waiting in line for two hours. A Native American activist works to get out the vote in Pine Ridge, South Dakota.

As these stories intertwine, audiences take in a portrait of American elections that is expansive, revealing and intimate. It is an entertaining and sometimes unsettling tapestry of the stories of citizens who are determined on one fateful day to make their vote count.
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 people 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.

A big part of the puzzle was to film this same “one-day” in many different locations at once. With the wide variations in voter experiences, we believed that no one location (or even two or three) would be sufficient to capture the breadth and character of this public election endeavor. And again, the creative challenge appealed to me: Can we weave together footage from all over the country into one cohesive piece? The safe route would have been to stick with two or three characters, but I wanted to get a richer texture. Inspired by filmmakers who celebrate the invigorating chaos of multiple characters such as Robert Altman or Jean Renoir, I decided to try to work with what would traditionally be considered too many situations, too ambitious, and, by some, undoable. In my mind, I wanted the film Election Day to be as broad a portrait of the real Election Day as we could get.
**WHAT IS CINÉMA VÉRITÉ?**

*Election Day* has a unique *cinema-vérité* structure—that name is French and means, more or less, “cinema of truth.” It is a style of filmmaking that uses documentary techniques with stylized editing and camerawork to create a film that is very true to real life. A signature of *vérité* is the aggressive camera, meaning that the camera is used as a tool to provoke people. For instance, someone making a *cinema-vérité* documentary might walk up to a politician with a camera and ask them a controversial question without discussing it beforehand. The politician might be caught of guard, get angry, or say something wrong—and that natural reaction is used in the film (think Michael Moore or Ali G). It very different from most narrative movies or TV shows, where actors practice their lines and then pretend to be another person. A *cinema-vérité* film attempts to capture realism.

Very often this type of filmmaking is concerned with issues and themes of social responsibility, like voting or human rights.

Typically the equipment in making a *cinema-vérité* film is lightweight and portable, like hand-held cameras and sound equipment. This way filmmakers can maneuver easily and capture everyday situations, authentic dialogue, and natural movement. By capturing everyday exchanges and conversations, filmmakers can expose the humanity of their subjects.

*Hoop Dreams* and *West 47th Street* are good examples of *cinema-vérité* documentaries, and on television you can see the same style in shows like *COPS* or *The Real World*. Fictional movies that borrow the technique of *cinema-vérité* include *The Blair Witch Project* and *Cloverfield*.

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**DIRECTOR KATHY CHEVIGNY ON CINEMA-VÉRITÉ IN ELECTION DAY**

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.

There is no way of knowing where your film is going to end up when you edit a *cinema vérité* film. We had a couple of governing principles for our edit process but everything else was up for grabs as we followed the guide of the footage itself.”

**DEFINITION:**

**Realism:**

concern for fact or reality and rejection of the impractical and abstract; the tendency to represent things as they really are

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ONE VOTE: WHAT A DIFFERENCE A VOTE MAKES!

IMPORTANT DECISIONS ABOUT OUR NATION HAVE SOMETIMES BEEN DECIDED BY ONLY ONE VOTE! TAKE A LOOK AT THESE INSTANCES WHEREIN IT TOOK ONLY ONE VOTE TO DECIDE WHO OUR PRESIDENT WAS, WHEN TO GO TO WAR, OR WHEN TO EXPAND THE COUNTRY

→ 1845
One vote made Texas one of the United States. In 1845, the Republic of Texas asked to become part of the United States. Many Americans, however, feared that another southern state would bring trouble. When the Senate voted on this issue, a tie occurred. Then one senator changed his vote, and by this single vote, Texas became the 28th state.

→ 1846
One vote decided on war with Mexico. In 1846, the Mexican army invaded Texas and President Polk asked for a Declaration of War. The Senate did not want to go to war, and the declaration passed by only one vote. The United States won the war against Mexico and with that victory added five states — Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah and California.

→ 1867
One vote gave the United States the state of Alaska. The Alaska Purchase of 1867 was ratified by just one vote — paving the way for the territory to be America's largest state when it became part of the United States in 1958.

→ 1868
One vote saved President Andrew Johnson from being removed from office. The House brought charges of impeachment against Johnson, but the Senate, which decides impeachment cases, found him innocent by one vote. Impeachment is the first step by which officials, such as the president, may be removed from office. President Johnson was not convicted by the Senate and therefore he was not removed from office.

→ 1916
One vote in each of the voting districts of California reelected President Wilson. If Wilson's opponent, Charles E. Hughes, had received an additional vote in each one of California's voting precincts, he would have defeated Wilson.

→ 1960
One vote per voting precinct would have elected Richard Nixon rather than John F. Kennedy president.

→ 2000
The election on November 7, 2000, was the closest presidential race in history. In the final count, Governor George W. Bush of Texas won by 4 electoral votes, but Vice President Al Gore had won the popular vote by 337,576 votes. Bush was the first presidential candidate in more than a century to win the presidency while losing the popular vote. The deciding factor in Bush winning the election was a victory in Florida by just 537 votes over Gore!

Examples taken from PBS By The People www.pbskids.org
If you are 18 years old and a citizen of the United States, you have the right to vote for your elected officials.

This wasn’t always the case though – many people had to fight long and hard to earn the right to vote.

- Even after the 1776 Declaration of Independence, a number of the colonies denied the right of holding office and the right to vote to people of several faiths. Jews, Quakers, and Catholics were often not allowed to participate politically.
- The Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution changed the shape of voting in the United States—it prevented any state from denying the right to vote to any male citizen twenty-one years old or older on account of his race in 1870.
- The Nineteenth Amendment states that a citizen cannot be denied the right to vote because of the citizen's sex. The Amendment became effective in time to allow voting by women in the Presidential election of 1920.
- The Twenty-Sixth Amendment, passed in 1971, lowered the voting age from 21 to 18. People found it unfair that most of the young men who were being drafted to fight in the War were too young to help the very leaders who were sending them to fight.
- Today, most U.S. states hold voting restrictions against felons.
- Check out the PBS voting time machine! You can step into a voting booth at different stages of American History – or you might find that you would have been denied the right. www.pbskids.org/democracy/vote/timemachine.html

DEFINITION:

THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE

The United States makes use of an Electoral College system, which is an indirect way of electing the president. When you vote for a presidential candidate you are really voting to instruct the electors from your state to cast their votes for the same candidate. For example, if you vote for the Republican candidate, you are really voting for an elector who will be “pledged” to vote for the Republican candidate. The candidate who wins the popular vote in a state wins all the pledged votes of the state’s electors. Each state gets a number of electors equal to its number of members in the U.S. House of Representatives plus one for each of its two U.S. Senators. The District of Columbia gets three electors.
TAKE ACTION - EVEN IF YOU ARE NOT YET OLD ENOUGH TO VOTE IN A POLITICAL ELECTION, THERE ARE PLENTY OF WAYS THAT YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE AND GET YOUR VOICE HEARD!

→ Be an informed citizen! Know the opinions and actions of policymakers, after all, they are representing you!
→ Register others to vote
→ Volunteer for your favorite candidate
→ Join a youth voting association
→ Make your views clear on facebook or youtube

ORGANIZATIONS TO CONSIDER

→ LEAGUE OF YOUNG VOTERS: The League makes politics relevant, fun and meaningful to young people. We meet young people where they are, work on issues that affect their lives, and provide tools and training to make them viable players and winners in the political game.
  www.theleague.com

→ 18 in ’08: 18 in ’08 is leading an unprecedented peer to peer movement to register, engage, and mobilize America’s youth. The site is designed as a place for you to join our efforts, engage in the political process, and of course register to vote.
  www.18in08.com

→ STUDENT ASSOCIATION FOR VOTER EMPOWERMENT: The Student Association for Voter Empowerment is a non-profit, non-partisan, organization whose purpose is to increase accessibility for young voters. SAVE maintains chapters at various colleges and universities in order to coordinate a grassroots effort to reform elections, enhance voter opportunity, and foster a virtue for civic engagement among our generation’s youth.
  www.SAVEVoting.org

→ MOVE ON: The MoveOn family of organizations brings real Americans back into the political process. With over 3.3 million members across America - from carpenters to stay-at-home moms to business leaders - we work together to realize the progressive promise of our country. MoveOn is a service - a way for busy but concerned citizens to find their political voice in a system dominated by big money and big media.
  www.moveon.org

→ ROCK THE VOTE: Rock the Vote is a non-profit, non-partisan organization, founded in 1990 in response to a wave of attacks on freedom of speech and artistic expression. Rock the Vote engages youth in the political process by incorporating the entertainment community and youth culture into its activities. From actors to musicians, comedians to athletes, Rock the Vote harnesses cutting-edge trends and pop culture to make political participation cool.
  www.rockthevote.com

→ FUTURE 5000: CONNECTING THE YOUTH MOVEMENT FOR CHANGE: Future 5000 reflects the best of youth organizing and movement building. With an active directory of over 600 youth organizations, Future 5000 creates a unique and dynamic webspace for organizers to share resources, build campaigns, and develop partnerships. Log on. Build power.
  www.Future5000.com
FURTHER WATCHING


→ 12 Angry Men (1957): A dissenting juror in a murder trial slowly manages to convince the others that the case is not as obviously clear as it seemed in court. Explores the American judicial system and the concept of innocent until proven guilty.

→ Bulworth (1998): A suicidally disillusioned liberal politician puts a contract out on himself and takes the opportunity to be bluntly honest with his voters by affecting the rhythms and speech of hip-hop music and culture.

→ 18 in ’08 (2007): The film aimed is the product of two years traveling the country, interviewing over 60 Congressmen, Senators, presidential candidates, policy makers, activists...young and old.

FURTHER READING

→ Dreams From My Father: A Story Of Race And Inheritance by Barack Obama (there are tons of books by or about the candidate’s available – we aren’t biased!)

→ At Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68 by Taylor Branch

→ Is Democracy Possible Here?: Principles for a New Political Debate by Ronald Dworkin

→ Also Check out The Living Room Candidate, and excellent online exhibition of campaign commercials from 1952-2004. See how candidates use media to influence their voters! www.livingroomcandidate.org

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & PROJECT

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

→ In Missouri, a poll worker argues that voting is a privilege rather than a right. Do you agree or disagree with her statement?

→ Voter Apathy was expressed by members of both the Native American and African American communities. What frustrations did these citizens express with respect to the government and electoral system? To what extent does discrimination against their respective communities shape their willingness to participate on Election Day?

→ How does the structure of this movie (the way it was shot, the fact that it was shot in just one day) affect you as a viewer?

PROJECT

→ Pick three countries and research their electoral processes. Compare and contrast them to the U.S. How can the U.S. learn from these countries’ policies? In what ways do you consider the U.S. electoral system to be an improvement from those of the countries you’ve researched? Or how is it worse?

DEFINITION:

APATHY:
Lack of interest or concern, especially regarding matters of general importance or appeal; indifference, lack of emotion or feeling

→ Voter Apathy: One of the biggest political problems in the United States today is the lack of voter turnout. In the 2000 election, just over half the population (51%) voted. As you can see, the people who did not vote were giving up a chance to make a difference!

DEFINITION:

DISENFRANCHISE:
to deprive of the right to vote

→ Felon disenfranchisement is one of the film’s major themes. Do you agree that ex-felons should have the right to vote? Why or why not?