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'Election Day,' a documentary by Katy Chevigny

By Robert Lloyd, Times Television Critic
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"Election Day," airing at 9 tonight on KCET, is a terrific cinema verité documentary that quietly observes the events of Nov. 2, 2004, in city, town and country.

Director Katy Chevigny ("Deadline") quilts together footage from 11 locations -- from tiny Stockholm, Wis. (pop. 97), to somewhat more populous New York -- to make a wide-ranging picture of democracy's most basic exercise.

Republican poll-watchers haunt Democratic precincts of Chicago; Native Americans get out the vote on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. A 50-year-old ex-con prepares to vote for the first time, as does an 18-year-old farm girl. In Quincy, Fla. (in Gadsden County, where 12% of the ballots were tossed out on technicalities in 2000), a closely monitored election for sheriff comes down to the wee hours and ends with dancing in the street.

The process doesn't go smoothly for everyone; names are absent from the register, voting gizmos go bad, ballots run low. In a black St. Louis neighborhood, short on voting booths and staff, citizens wait as long as two hours to vote.

From the opening shot of a man smoking a cigarette in pre-dawn Chicago (which goes on what many might consider too long but signaled to me that good things were ahead), the film is finely observed and beautifully filmed -- with remarkable visual consistency, given the circumstances. Unfolding not only at polling places but at diners, kitchens, dinner tables and a barbershop, it's a lovely group portrait of Americans who care.

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