



## POV: Election Day

Regular airtime: Tuesday, 10pm ET (PBS)

**Cast:** Bob and Traci Buzbee, Shanta Guate, Leon Batts, Jason Drapeaux, Jim Fuchs, Brenda Holt  
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### I Would Call It a Right

It's 2 November 2004, and 50-year-old Leon Batts is looking forward to voting for the first time. Wearing a "Vote or Die" t-shirt, he's an ex-felon who's completed his parole and so has had his voting rights reinstated. Driving to his polling place, Batts smiles: "I don't think Bush is a bad person per se," Batts smiles, "Maybe he'd be better at a different job, restaurant clerk or garbage man, probably." His faith in a system that disenfranchises millions of felons and ex-felons feels palpable, and he means to make a difference.

As Batts makes his way toward the polls in New York City, Jason Drapeaux is organizing his volunteers in Pine Ridge, South Dakota, urging Native Americans to participate in tribal and federal elections. His workers do everything from driving voters to polls and making sure poll-workers get lunch. His job is a tough one, as more than a few tribe members are cynical. One man explains his reasons for not voting. "If it made a difference, we would have our land back here, we would have our Black Hills back," he says. "They give us this song and dance constantly. Once this is done, all these Republicans all these Democrats are going to go and they're gonna forget us again. All it is, is, 'I'm a friend of the Indians for now.'"

Batts and Drapeaux's stories are two of many in *Election Day*, Katy Chevigny's bracing, insightful documentary on what happened four years ago. Motivated to make the film following the failures of the 2000 elections, she describes it as "portraits of real people who make our democracy work, whose actions are not the kind of thing that would make the evening news." Multiple film crews follow individuals in different locations across the U.S., beginning with Jim Fuchs, a Republican poll-watcher in Chicago (whose day begins at 4:30am). Frustrated by what he sees as the corruption of Democratic machinery ("Knowing that you're outnumbered," he says, "is a tremendous psychological hurdle that you have to overcome"), he travels all over the city, noting the Democratic poll-watcher who sits too close to voters and encouraging his own team to keep their hands off *all* election materials, especially ballots that appear to be "compromised."

Fuchs is focused on ensuring that the operations run as smoothly as possible, though he runs into his own polling problem near the end of the day, believing his ballot is faulty until a Democratic poll judge points out that she's able to make it work perfectly well. In Dearborn, Michigan, another ballot has to be replaced when Fayeze, a first time voter and recently

naturalized citizen, makes a mistake as he's marking it. Accompanied to the polling station by his wife Rashida Tlaib (who works at the Arab-American Institute), Fayez explains to a poll-worker that he has "misspelled the name," she's briefly baffled, unable to understand him. When Rashida fills in ("He messed up"), the poll-worker comprehends: this appears to be a bit of American lingo Fayez hasn't yet mastered.

In St. Louis, Missouri, Shanta Guate, an international elections observer from Australia, is plainly troubled by the other kinds of "messaging up" she witnesses. While the voters in lower-income, largely black areas stand for hours on line (the polls being understaffed and underequipped), Guate notes that the polls in middle-class neighborhoods are nearly empty. A nice white lady at this site, at Reed School, offers her explanation for the difference: "People who vote here generally know where they're supposed to go and what they're supposed to do when they get here." When she calls voting a "privilege," Guate interjects, "I would say it's a right." The lady smiles, stiffly.

While the long lines and "mass confusion" in St. Louis are surely daunting, other subjects in *Election Day* face sorts of daily hurdles, for instance, Sapulpa, Oklahoma's Bob and Traci Buzbee. The couple works opposite shifts at a glass bottle factory in order to finance their son's treatment for kidney disease (she says she hopes one day to "take some school" and change her course, but for now, and for the last 11 years, the night shift has been her routine). When Bob arrives at the factory, he briefly engages with coworkers in a political discussion. When the topic of gay marriage comes up, Charlie says, "We spend far too much time catering to the little squeaky minority groups, not enough time dealing with the major population old people that need prescription drug help and Medicaid, and middle class working people." Bob nods, knowing exactly what Charlie's talking about.

Each story resonates in its own way, the film's insistent focus on local contests underscoring that the presidential election is only one part of many in an enormous, vital, and frequently frustrating apparatus. When Brenda Holt, a volunteer at the polls in Quincy, Florida, starts her day, she carefully puts on her makeup while noting that Gadsden County, 70% black, hasn't had a black sheriff since the 1800s. She's supporting this year's black candidate, Morris Young ("He's a very good person, but he's an underdog"), and keeps a keen eye on how votes are counted in what turns out to be an excruciatingly close election against Deputy Sheriff Ed Spooner, the white candidate. Another observer, an elderly black voter, sighs, doubting that the county will ever elect a black sheriff. "I think we have a black chief," he sighs, "but that's as far as we're going to go."

After covering so many stories all day long, the film ends in Quincy, as the votes are counted and celebrations begin. At the same time, supporters of the seeming winner warn those celebrants to keep a careful eye on the counters, because you can't be sure until the results are official. It's a fittingly open end to *Election Day*, hopeful but also wary, remembering the past and working toward change in the future.

RATING: 

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