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# The Greatest Films On Government Ever Made

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Without question "How Democracy Works Now" is the best documentary film series on government ever produced. There is nothing even close.

Viewers are inside the room as key Senate staffers meet with one another and their Senators to craft legislation. We are there when advocacy groups across the ideological spectrum meet with Senators and Congressional staff. In short, viewers go where they have never gone before.

While the films are based on the legislative battles over immigration that took place between 2001 and 2007, they tell a much broader story about democracy. Anyone who wants to learn how American government functions should watch these films. Nine of the films are completed and three more are on the way. (They can be found [here](#).)

Based on an incredible 1,500 hours of footage – the equivalent of more than 187 8-hour days – Shari Robertson and Michael Camerini show the ins and outs of Congress, as well as local battles in Iowa and Arizona.

I knew about the project because in 2001, when I worked for Senator Sam Brownback (R-KS), then chair of the Senate Immigration Subcommittee, Robertson and Camerini asked me to discuss with Senator Brownback the possibility of filming the legislative process. Robertson and Camerini later also gained permission from other Congressional offices. I changed jobs months before the shooting started and do not appear in any of the films. In fact, although a few of the films had aired on HBO, until recently I had not seen any of them.



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Given the "fly on the wall" nature of the footage it's clear that after a while most of those being filmed simply went about with their jobs and forgot about the camera. Once in a while a Senate staffer would alert the person on the phone they were being filmed but it didn't seem to matter. There are no Kardashian-style moments staged for the camera. This is all real – and the stake are high, affecting the fortunes of millions of people.

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I am the Executive Director of the National Foundation for American Policy, a non-partisan public policy research organization focusing on trade, immigration and related issues based in Arlington, Virginia. From August 2001 to January

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Why are the films so good? They capture the reality of democracy and the legislative process in a way no Hollywood movie or textbook ever could.

When covering the Senate, the films show a key part of the legislative process often overlooked – the committee markup, where bills are shaped. There is even footage of Senators whispering strategy to each other and deriding “stupid” questions from a colleague. The importance of gaining 60 votes for cloture is illustrated more than once.

The most important action takes place off the Senate floor. Advocates and Senate staffers are seen shuttling from one office to another. The camera is

there during almost all these meetings. And even when the camera is not allowed, advocates or staffers emerge and debrief each other and the viewer.

Working parents can sympathize with the vignettes of children who wished they saw their parents more often. “My daughter gets up at 5 o’clock so she can see me,” says immigration attorney Laura Reiff. The daughter of Angela Kelley, then with the National Immigration Forum, sweetly asks over the phone: “Mommy when do you *predict* you’ll be home.”

While working in Congress can be thrilling and memorable, the films portray the insecurity of such jobs. David Neal, a key immigration staffer for Senator Sam Brownback (R- KS), is shown over the course of a few films working hard for his boss and alongside Senator Ted Kennedy’s (D-MA) key immigration staffer Esther Olavarria. Yet when the Republicans take the Senate in 2004, Sam Brownback can choose new committee assignments. If he does not choose to remain on the Senate Judiciary Committee, then David is out of a job. The viewer is drawn into David’s fate.

The House of Representatives is depicted as well. When Arizona Republicans Rep. Jeff Flake and Rep. Jim Kolbe wanted to introduce a bipartisan immigration reform bill they turned to Texas Democratic Congressman Silvestre Reyes. What they didn’t know is how fiercely the AFL-CIO would work to make sure Rep. Reyes never signed on to the bill. In extraordinary footage, the filmmakers capture a Reyes staffer in phone calls with AFL-CIO personnel who feed Reyes legislative language to which they know Flake and Kolbe could never agree. It is like watching video of an undercover sting operation.

In many ways, Senator Kennedy’s staffer Esther Olavarria is the star of the film series. She is appealing and sympathetic but at times tough. She is also at the center of many of the films’ action.

Senator Kennedy comes across in the films as I remember him – someone who possessed a great sense of humor and a keen legislative mind. And he treated his staff extremely well. The viewer is there for key meetings with his staff. At one point while they watch Lou Dobbs on CNN denouncing immigration proposals in Congress, Senator Kennedy jokes, “If we don’t get this bill passed, then we’re going to make Esther go on there with Lou Dobbs.”

If you live in a foreign country and want to understand how American-style

democracy works, then see these films. If you live in America and want to appreciate how the legislative process functions, then see these films. Whatever your views on immigration these films are worth seeing.

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