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‘How Democracy Works Now’

By [LAWRENCE DOWNES](#)



Jose Luis Magana/Associated Press
An immigration demonstration at the National Mall in Washington, D.C., on Oct. 8, 2013.

Americans who find politics and political reporting glib, unsatisfying and depressing now have an antidote for all time.

It’s a series of feature-length documentary films, more than a decade in the making, running [Thursday through Saturday](#) at the New York Film Festival. The subject is the battle over immigration reform in Washington, but the title of the series — [“How Democracy Works Now”](#) — signals its larger scale and ambition.

The series comprises 12 films in all, 10 of which are being screened at the festival. Though parts of the series have appeared on HBO, this is the first time the films are being shown together, meaning the first chance to binge-watch a political epic.

The filmmakers, Michael Camerini and Shari Robertson, got the story by showing up and not leaving. They started in 2001, when the new president, George W. Bush, was planning to push for a long-overdue, comprehensive overhaul of the immigration system, and success seemed assured. It was a time of compassionate conservatism. Bipartisanship was endangered but not extinct. Hope, as they say, was in the air.

But 9/11 threw those stars out of alignment, and Mr. Camerini and Ms. Robertson spent the ensuing decade and then some watching the reform effort come together, fall apart, revive, retreat and stagger on, a process

that continues to this minute.

To show how a bill gets made, the films follow senators and Congress members, staff members, advocates, lobbyists and bureaucrats in the act of doing their jobs.

They trudge through Congressional corridors and airports, they argue in conference rooms, they woo T.V. cameras and constituents. They strategize and compromise. They harangue, badger, flatter, mislead and cajole. Sometimes they weep.

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And it's all real, with a cast of hundreds — heroes and villains, cowards and sleazeballs and characters who defy easy categorization. It's worth watching just to see Senator Edward Kennedy toiling on one his last great projects, and to see immigrant advocates in places like Arizona and California fighting against daunting opponents.

I've seen several of the films, and could make comparisons to other long-running sagas that tell you what you need to know about America — Robert Caro's books on Lyndon Johnson, "Roots," "The Godfather," "The Simpsons," the celebrated PBS series on the Loud family. But it's probably best to just look at this achievement on its own terms.

The story isn't over yet, because we don't know whether immigration reform will succeed or fail. The story is epic either way. And Mr. Camerini and Ms. Robertson are still on the job. When thousands of advocates gathered on Tuesday, on the Mall, to push for the bill that is stalled in Congress, they were there, too, filming as always.

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