

## Boys State

“Boys State” (winner of the Grand Jury Prize for documentary at this year's Sundance Film Festival) is a week-long annual program in which rising Texas high school seniors gather for an elaborate mock exercise: building their own state government (there is a matching session for girls). Filmmakers Jesse Moss and Amanda McBaine closely tracked the 2018 edition of the program, held at the University of Texas at Austin, where 1,100 17-year old young men participated in a riveting gubernatorial race

The Boys State participants, each selected by local American Legion clubs throughout the state, represented an intriguing mix of young political junkies. The attendees are all divided into the “Federalist” and the “Nationalist” parties, neither of which is associated with any particular ideology but is rather guided by their respective elected leadership.

The movie makers, showing a good eagle eye, focus on a quartet of committed and distinctive kids to carry the drama. There is conservative Ben, a Reagan fan with a love for politics who bubbles with confidence and savvy even though he is disabled; modest Steven, a Bernie Sanders fan and thoughtful child of Mexican immigrants who, though diffident in demeanor, bravely puts himself forward against a conservative tide; handsome Robert, a stud and athlete whose run is only semi-serious but who reveals surprising views that belie his rowdy campaign; and glib René, an African-American from Chicago new to Texan mores whose wit and speaking skills mark him as a natural leader. All these principal figures (among others) also reveal themselves touchingly in personal interviews away from the turmoil of campaigning.

The film covers a week of political activity, from party nominations and committee assignments through platform-making to party conventions and primaries. This is political activity that is vertiginous to watch, electoral action at warp speed. And some of it is not exactly serious: in the platform debate, for example, the big achievement is a silly, short-sighted victory for a plank that would have Texas secede from the union. One wise-ass fellow asserts that his “masculinity shall not be infringed.” The kids’ issues also cannot avoid the slop over from national politics, so, it turns out, the principal items of debate reflect national hot-button issues with little resonance in their own lives, i.e., gun rights and abortion!

All the whirl leads up to the Big Kahuna, the governor’s race, wherein Robert, for the Federalists (under cynical party chairman Ben), competes against Steven for the Nationalists (under righteous party chairman René).

Luckily for the filmmakers, their contest is a nail-biter, with enough drama for two or three films.

It is a kind of miracle that Moss and McBaine were able to pull off the documentary from this ten-ring circus over a week, but they managed. One reason is that they collared seven different sound-and film crews to troll the university campus, collecting hundreds of offhand conversations, speechifying moments, myriad tactical discussions, and those personal interviews with the boys themselves. It occurs to me that, during our own restricted and sour national campaigns, we might be better served—and entertained--by “Boys State.”

*(The film is rated “PG-13,” runs 109 minutes, and can be viewed on Apple platforms).*

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