

Knock Down the House

Here's one for political junkies (especially of the liberal bent): "Knock Down the House" is a fascinating electoral process film and a close-up look at a new kind of campaign that fosters female newcomers to politics. In this case, the film's idea came from the director Rachel Lears, who, right after the 2016 election, was on for the lookout for "charismatic female candidates" to follow in the 2018 election. With assistance from the non-profit groups Justice Democrats and Brand New Congress and money she raised through Kickstarter, she identified four progressive first-time candidates running in upcoming Congressional races. The film thus plays the long game, following the newly-minted candidates from their campaign origins in late 2016 to their eventual races.

Lear's choices were fortuitous in that each has a compelling story: Cori Bush, running for Congress in Missouri in the wake of the Ferguson riots, Paula Jean Swearengin, running for Senate in West Virginia on an environmental theme, Amy Vilela, a health-care advocate running for Congress in Nevada, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, seeking a House seat against a formidable primary opponent in a Queens-Bronx district. While all the women's stories have resonance (Vilela's is particularly touching, concerning the death of her son), Lear's prescience shows primarily in her picking of AOC, who has since become a national media star.

In this film, however, we see a much more diffident Ocasio-Cortez, both practical and charming, and struggling in her tentative, humble beginnings. . We see her with her supportive family, working the bar at a local saloon, and being shaped as a formidable contender right before our eyes. One extended (and now famous) sequence shows her triumphing on a campaign debate in which her opponent . . . In fact, the film's real worth comes not in "discovering" Ocasio-Cortez, but in showing, in intricate—but never numbing—detail the patient slog of political campaigning, how coalitions are formed, money is raised, staffs are trained...all the nitty-gritty leading up to the final race itself. Film documentaries about political campaigns have a now-lengthy history, beginning with the landmark Kennedy-Humphrey duel in Wisconsin shown in "Primary" (1960). "Knock Down the House" is as good as any of them.

While the film, released November 1, had a short big-screen life, it is reviewed here because politically-minded DC viewers can still see it on Netflix. (*The film runs 86 minutes and is rated "PG."*)

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