Policy on Purpose

Episode 24: Democracy Rebellion in Texas

Narrator: This is Policy on Purpose. A podcast produced by the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin. We take you behind the scenes of policy with the people who help shape it. For more, visit lbj.utexas.edu.

Angela Evans: Hello everyone, this is Angela Evans:, the Dean of the LBJ School and here is another one of our great podcasts called Policy on Purpose and I'm very excited to have someone-- I'm trying to describe him to you, he's like a Renaissance man, I don't know what else he hasn't done and it's Hedrick Smith. And Hedrick is coming to us because he has completed a documentary and it's called "The Democracy Rebellion." And this documentary is upcoming, it's going to be-- it's going to air on PBS but we were fortunate enough to be able to see this documentary before it's actually going on PBS.

Hedrick Smith: You got a sneak preview.

Angela Evans: We got a sneak preview of this documentary. And what I loved about the documentary, it's taking normal people in several states and in different aspects of the whole experience of voting and being a citizen, normal people who just said, "You know, I need to do something about it," and shows their stories and the impact of their stories. So before--

Hedrick Smith: I'm fixing the democracy, which is amazing.

Angela Evans: So here you go-- you heard it here first on this podcast, we've got a way to fix the democracy, right? But before I do that, I need to really tell you about this gentleman, he's a Pulitzer prize winning, former New York Times reporter and editor and he's won Emmy awards as well. So he's Pulitzer prize, Emmy award. He has worked four years on this documentary, going all around, you know the country, sleuthing out stories, looking at stories that were not only in the nascence but things that had actually taken place so that you could see the success or failure of these stories and how they've lived out after the initial energy of that start up weighing down. He's an author, he's written several books. One of the books "The Russians" was based on his years in the New York Times when he was the Bureau Chief of the New York Times from '71 to '74. It was the number one bestseller, so I'm sitting across from a number one bestseller on "The Russians" he has "The Power Game: How Washington Works." He has done 26 prime time specials, and he's worked on anything-- everything from like Enron to Duke Ellington. So I mean it's a whole range-- what I love about it is it just shows this inquisitive mind and this mind that wants to probe and talk about things. So when you take that mind and you apply it to our world, which is a policy

world, I'm so pleased we have him here today, so let's just get on with some of the questions. One of the things I really want to know is you've been in this business a long time, so what kinds of shifts have you seen in the way that journalism has had to adjust to this new world of information, these transformative type of technologies, the social media, you know, the internet, the Instagram-- people going to authoritative sources which you know journalists, we've been--

Hedrick Smith: The trends haven't been good in mainstream legacy journalism. In the first place, money is just dried up for an awful lot of newspapers and television stations to the point where they've had to drastically cut their staffs. So they don't have the kind of resources that they used to have to take time to dig into stories. So what that's done is it made a lot of news coverage much more shallow than it used to be. The 24/7 cycle, the need to try to get a story out there even before you've finished reporting it. And I've talked to reporters, people I know, who feel as though they didn't get to finish their reporting before they had to put it on the air. So you get a lot of half-baked stuff. So that's not very good. And what you wind up by getting is what I call the equivalent of fire engine coverage, the easiest thing to do if you have a local television station, is to get a police radio and listen to when there's a fire, chase the fire engine, get dramatic pictures of flames and you go on the 10 o'clock or the 11 o'clock news, people say "Oh my god, they're really covering the news," No, in fact you're not learning very much at all. But it looks good and it's easy to do but it's got no depth and we have the same thing happening in our economic coverage, particularly in our political coverage. Covering a-- every once in a while, President Trump tweets something really important, but most of the time he tweets something that gets negated by another tweet within a few hours and yet every tweet is tweeted as though it's equally important. And that's shallow judgement. I'm not making a judgement about the president, I'm talking about the coverage of the news. So I think what's happened is that the news has gotten more shallow, on the other hand, you are seeing really excellent work. I mean I worked for the New York Times so I try to--

Angela Evans: Yes, I was going to ask you about this investigative reporting.

Hedrick Smith: Yeah, well if you look at the quality of investigative reporting now it's the New York Times or the Washington Post or sometimes at the Los Angeles Times or The Economist, I mean really quality outlets, then I think you're seeing even better reporting. I mean I can say the political reporting is better now at the New York Times than it was when I was there, I don't think the national security reporting is as good. But we were in the Cold War with the Russians when I was there and arms control and those issues were really important and we really invested enormous resources. We don't do so much of that now because the story has shifted to being a domestic political story. So you see two things happening, you see the quality publications and a quality journalistic organization and they may be going online and they may be using social media, it isn't the vehicle that matters so much, it's the collecting and gathering and sifting organization that really matters. Whatever its medium is. Those quality organizations are

getting better and stronger and they're financially strong because there are-- there is an elite audience that wants real quality news. But for the rest of the folks, they're getting a mile wide and a millimeter deep, I mean we thought if we got 80 cable channels-- and Christ, now what do we have? Hundreds. I mean my wife says, let's tune into whatever HBO and it's channel 400 or channel 500-- a zillion channels, but you don't get the depth, they're often very repetitive. I mean I'll watch MSNBC occasionally, I don't watch it very much, but one newscast after another is covering the same story, it goes on for four or five hours. Now they get a slightly different snippet or a slightly different-- but you're not getting the depth, you're not getting the added value that you want to get if you're listening to that much news. So frankly I don't watch it very much.

Angela Evans: Well one of the things that I have found when we're talking about preparing students who are going to go in this, you know this steady flow of expertise that comes out of our universities who teach public policy, public administration, civic engagement, is that we're trying to have this steady flow of expertise that can fill these different gaps. Is that I often think about investigative journalism doing some of the best kind of research and looking at, you know, the New York Times did this sort of big article on air strike in Syria and looking at--

Hedrick Smith: Sure.

Angela Evans: And it was enormous amount of work and that's coming closer and closer to what we're trying to do in the analytic sphere in policy, so I see our two discipline really melding and getting married more and more together in terms of trying to find the right problem and trying to get authoritative information around that problem and then trying to present it in a narrative that people-- everyone can understand. So we're just not talking to an audience that's too sophisticated.

Hedrick Smith: Right, and also getting it in a timely fashion.

Angela Evans: Yes, relevance.

Hedrick Smith: So your audience feels as though you're connected, I mean, the whole problem with the Boeing MAX aircraft-- well I mean the investigative journalism that's gone on there has run actually ahead of Congress and certainly ahead of what Boeing wants to reveal. So it's still performing a very important function and that's why the quality outlets are so important. But still, I would argue as a former foreign correspondent that we have news in America that's way too Washington based. One of the things I learned in being the bureau chief in Moscow or in Cairo or in Saigon or I was also a reporter in Paris for a while too, you cannot cover a country by sitting in the capital. If you want to find out what's going on in Russia, you got to get out-- I mean you have to get at least to St. Petersburg but you have to get to their

auto industry, you have to get to their aircraft industry, you have to get to their space center, you have to go see what family life is like and what's it like in Siberia? What about minority populations? You can't sit in Washington. Well when I came home to America, I brought those habits with me and so I mean this documentary I've made, "The Democracy Rebellion," it reflects reporting that is in North Dakota, South Dakota, North Carolina, Florida, California-- all over the country, New Mexico, wherever, I'm here in Texas. I've been on the phone reporting while I've been in Texas. I came here to give a talk about this and to do this interview with you, but I've-- this morning I was on the phone, yesterday I was on the phone with sources in Texas because I want to catch up on Texas politics. So it's that attitude of being curious and reaching out to find out what is happening wherever you're going and that the world is your beat. There is no limited, geographical beat, there is no limited, "I got to cover just Trump's tweets" beat or-- and I think that's a very important attitude and I think the American media hasn't kept that attitude enough.

Angela Evans: I think some are starting to-- something like your film actually shows us, there seems to be this swell, both in terms of the populace but also people who cover the populace that something has got to change, something's changing, we're in the middle, or we're verging onto something a little bit different. I wanted to ask you something that I thought was very interesting, you really moved from print journalism to really the film, you know, and when we start thinking about film, film is sometimes an easier medium to get messages across because people are watching, they're-- not being entertained, but you know, they're not spending a lot of time reading, you're showing them. Do you see this as a more powerful tool in terms of telling a story or getting down into some real basics of a news story to do it by film? Because you've--

Hedrick Smith: Well it depends upon what you're trying to do, if you're trying to reach a mass audience, yes, the answer is clearly yes. What's interesting is sometimes the writing is harder, if it's really good--

Angela Evans: How so?

Hedrick Smith: Well if it's really good writing because it's got to be more compact, your thinking has to be more precise, it has to be sharper. If I'm writing for a documentary film, doing a script I've got to write it to pictures and often I've only got 15, 18, 20 words to get from one thought to the next thought and I've got to do it accurately and I've got to do it quickly, concisely, and I've got to be really true to what-- to both the facts but also the story I'm trying to unfold. A documentary is a series of unfolding discoveries, it's not-- and the architecture of a documentary is much more complicated than the people who are watching it are aware of. It's much more like writing a novel, it's much more like writing a book, so you have to have that storyteller's ability and you have to have the facility of working with the video. And if you're writing a book, you're writing a lot more words, you're taking time to go into a subject, people can

go back and re-read it if they didn't get a paragraph or they want to get-- or they put the book down and they have to--

Angela Evans: Or you're describing the setting that somebody-- where you could see it visually. Yeah, yeah.

Hedrick Smith: Or you're doing something logical, when somebody puts the book down, they get interrupted, they come back, they can pick it up-- so you take more time, you go into more depth there, you got to get that depth much faster in writing for a documentary. I find it really challenging, I find it really interesting, and I found my own sensibilities changing as a reporter. I was much more visual, I happen to have-- my mother was an artist, my wife is an artist, I happen to have some visual ability myself it turns out, being related to those folks. And I found that I wasn't using that as much when I was a print reporter as when I became a video reporter and producer because I not only go do the interviews, but I sit down with the editor in the edit room and when I see how the editor is editing and I work with him, then when I go out and do the reporting, I do the reporting differently because I know what's actually going to be useful when you're in the editing room. What kind of-- and you learn, you learn to use pauses. You learn to use silences. You learn to let questions hang if somebody doesn't want to answer a question that's awkward, whereas in print there's this tendency to step in. Or in print you can say, "Well, you know, Senator if you really weren't supposed to be signing that agreement and getting involved, then why were you there and I understand people saw you." And the guy says, "Well maybe" and you can write it out-- the guy sort of, "Yeah I was there." You can write it out that he conceded it. When you see it acted out, it's much more dramatic.

Angela Evans: Well it's the whole picture.

Hedrick Smith: I mean, I've literally had people get up in the middle of interviews and leave-- not often, but every once in a while, I've had it happen, and that is itself enormously important to the viewer because the viewer can see, "Hey this guy doesn't want to answer that question," so I know what the answer is even though he didn't say a word. You can't do that in print, somebody says, "I'm not going to talk to you about that in print," the silence doesn't communicate the same way.

Angela Evans: Well what's powerful too is you actually see the individuals, you have a physical picture of the individuals, you have a visual picture of the setting which I thought was very powerful in this film. And I want to get to the film because I want people who are listening just to understand. This film is about a lot of grass-roots efforts around political--

Hedrick Smith: Grass-roots heroes, it's not just efforts, it's people, okay?

Angela Evans: Yes. And these, as I said, it's individuals who, you know at the beginning of this podcast I said they saw something wrong, they said, "I'm in. And I'm in 100%" Right? And they were looking at things that have been troubling, you know, dark money, political, you know, finance-- you know campaign finance reform, looking at gerrymandering, looking at how to get out the vote-- these are all things that swirl around our, really challenge now, to keep our republic alive and well and making sure if people are engaged in what happens. When you were doing this film, what surprised you the most? Now I know you wrote a book and you were writing something so that this film is based on, you know, a lot of thinking and framing these problems, but when you went out and you looked at the whole film and you sat back and you just said, "Wow, this is what I learned by making this." What is it?

Hedrick Smith: Well some of it is sort of obvious, but it's different when you see it face to face. I think one of the most amazing things to me was the quality of these grass-roots heroes-- I use the word "heroes." I mean you meet a woman like Cindy Black in Washington state and she's been an aircraft mechanic, she goes to college, she becomes a family counselor, she then becomes a small business person, and she gets exercised about all the money flooding into political campaigns basically from corporations. And she said, "I don't believe corporations are the same as people, I don't believe money is the same as free speech. I don't think the Supreme Court was right when they made the Citizens United decision. I'm going to run a movement to get out against it." And it's utterly amazing to see what-- this woman is like 57 years old, she's a young grandmother and you look at her and she looks like a nice, sweet woman that you might meet in the grocery store. And this is a woman with tensile strength and passion and commitment and an ability-- amazing ability to organize people. Or you meet a woman like Ellen Freedan in Florida, a very smart, savvy attorney with campaign experience, but she then has to negotiate this whole business of pulling together a coalition of blacks and Latinos and white and Democrats and Republicans and Independents to mount this gerrymander reform and they win a ballot 62.9% of the vote. Unbelievable majority that says, "We want to stop politicians from rigging elections by drawing district lines so they can get re-elected and stay in power." So I mean you meet people like that. I meet these guys out in South Dakota, TakeItBack.org and one guy runs a restaurant, the other guy has been a congressional staffer for 28 years in Washington, he says, "I gave up on Washington." I said, "Why are you back in South Dakota pushing for reform for an anti-corruption reform in South Dakota?" South Dakota of all places, we don't necessarily think of that being a terribly corrupt place compared to, I don't know, Boston, New Orleans, San Francisco, what have you--

Angela Evans: Be careful, you're going to get into trouble with these cities (laughter).

Hedrick Smith: Maybe Texas as well. No, it's all over the place, let's acknowledge it. But what's amazing is these people, all of them, they said, "Hey the politicians aren't fixing this. The lawyers aren't fixing this, the courts aren't fixing this," and they said, "We have to do it ourselves." And so I was astonished first of

all by just meeting the people and watching them and listening to their stories. The second thing I would say is I was really amazed that people power still works in this country to the degree that it does. I mean in Connecticut they adopted a system of public funding of campaigns and you will-- I mean I couldn't believe it. I didn't, you know and I thought about it before, that's a smart idea, you don't have big money dominating the campaigns but what real difference does it make? Well it makes an enormous difference, suddenly you've got a whole bunch of middle class people-- and maybe lower middle class people who can run for elections because there's a subsidy. Now they have to prove themselves, they have to go get 300 of their neighbors to give them some kind of small donations to show that they're not just a guy or a gal who would like to run for office, they've actually got public support. But then they get elected and they go-- there's this one woman I met up in Connecticut, Ellen Moore, she's a state senator. She comes from Bridgeport, poor part of Bridgeport, she says to me, "I was a young mother, I had kids too young, I was on food stamps." Today she runs a statewide organization, a non-profit for African-American women who have breast cancer. This is what she does! She said, "Oh I never could have thought of running for office without this public funding." And then she gets elected, she's now in her fourth term, she is chairman of the legislative committee on health policy.

Angela Evans: Yeah, it's an amazing story.

Hedrick Smith: And so, I mean think about what that means, it isn't just-- it isn't mostly about switching votes on Democrats to Republicans, that really-- the party thing, as a matter of fact Republicans in Connecticut have actually gained strength thanks to public funding because it used to be the Democrats who dominated the private funding of politics in Connecticut, opposite of Texas where Republicans dominate the money, but it's different in different states. But the thing that's happened is different people are there. There are twice as many women in the Connecticut legislature today as there were a decade ago when the system started, there are three times as many people who are a minority, either Asian Americans or Hispanics or blacks. Well it changes the whole agenda. The power of lobbyists is reduced because when politicians agree, voluntarily, they have to make the choice and 80% of the people running for the Connecticut legislature--

Angela Evans: That was an amazing statistic, really. Yeah.

Hedrick Smith: 80% voluntarily choose to take public funding rather than private funding. And one of the reasons is by now it's ingrained in Connecticut, if you don't take it, people say "How come you're not taking public funding? Who's buying you? Who's owning you? Who's the power? Who's pulling--?"

Angela Evans: And it was in a matter of a few years, that wasn't a matter of generation, that happened very quickly in the political time clock.

Hedrick Smith: So, I would say, I was blown away by seeing the political landscape, not in terms of parties, but in terms of the social engagement of people and the social transformation of policy that occurred in Connecticut because of this reform. I was interested in seeing, you made the point earlier, but it's worth underlining, that I wanted to look at reforms that both, reforms that were being happened, that is in campaigns and seeing the campaigns happen, and then looking at other reforms that had been in place for three or four or five election cycles to see what difference does it make? Does it make a difference? And, you know, you see the reform in California to bring out dark money. The reform got passed in the 1970s, but the case you see that we unfold is in 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015. And you see that Koch financial network and how it works: how people hide money and pass money from one non-profit to another, and so in the end you don't know who is behind the candidate or behind the ballot initiative. But in this case, they tracked it back and they found out who donated the money.

Angela Evans: One of the things that was really interesting to me when watching the film was how people pivoted with opposition. How the opposition, you know, there's a lot of opposition. You know, you get you, you actually get to experience some of the opposition of these heroes, and how they stood up to that opposition, but how that opposition actually turned around helped them in some of these situations. Like when you're talking about the Connecticut, that's one of those experiences where all of a sudden it was like, "Oh no, no, no, no!" You know, "We're not going to vote this town, you're not going to take the money away from this because there was a budget, you know, attack on this." Oh no, no, no! In Florida, same thing, it's like, you know, the woman standing there and is sitting there in testimony. She's just getting beaten up on this, and it turned around because people saw this as, "Wait a minute, that's not how you behave." And she had the facts, so some of what the film shows is, the heroes not only had the passion, but they're able to endure the opposition and move the opposition to a place where you had a solution.

Hedrick Smith: And they hung in there.

Angela Evans: Persistence.

Hedrick Smith: And they hung in there. It's so important, because sometimes you have people say, "Well we tried to get reform, and it didn't work, so we gave it up." In Florida, the gerrymander reform was actually the sixth attempt in Florida. And so, I mean, so they hung in there. In Washington state, you didn't see that segment last night, but you're going to see it today. So in Washington state, there's a woman who collected 21,000 signatures to help put a ballot initiative on the ballot, a reform against citizens united and unlimited money in campaigns. And I'm talking to her, and I said, "What is it that motivates you?" She said, "I feel like I'm a Paul Revere. I feel like I'm continuing the American Revolution, and every signature I get is a vote for the Constitution and a vote for American democracy." I mean it's amazing, and

she said, "Democracy, you have to fight for it. You have to fight for it or otherwise it'll slip through your fingers." What, you know what I mean, who knows when you got to the Seattle fish market, you're going to run into somebody who has that kind of basic passion, and not just passion, but she's invested, I mean think of hundreds of hours, you don't collect 21,000 signatures without going out there every weekend and every rainy Saturday when you'd rather be shopping or relaxing or watching T.V. or playing with your grandkids or whatever. She's out there doing it. And it's one person after another. I think, you asked me what I learned, what I learned is, first of all, people power works. And that's really important to underline. People power works. There's a guy named Ernie Cortez, he's one of the best political organizers I ever met, and he said, "You know Rick," he said, "Power corrupts they say. Absolute power corrupts absolutely." But he said, "Powerlessness also corrupts. Powerlessness corrupts democracy at the core. If people feel they're powerless, democracy vanishes. We have to re-empower ourselves, and exercise our power, and believe in our power, if we want democracy to work." Well that was a, of course that's true. But to hear that articulated, and then to see people living that. That's a great experience as a reporter. It's a great story, but as a citizen I am moved by it, and as a reporter I'm really impressed, because I've seen all kinds of places in the world where people say, "Nothing works. We're not going to try. The other side has got too much power, or this is a corrupt place, and I'm out of here. I'm going sailing, I'm going fishing, I'm going bowling, I'm going to opt-out." And there are a lot of people doing that. But what's amazing to me in America today, and it's happened before in our history, think about it. We had the Progressive Era when women got the right to vote. It was popular demonstrations from the bottom up that won women the right to vote, that got direct election of Senators. You know, that Teddy Roosevelt was busting corporations and corporate money. Congress outlawed corporate money in campaigns in 1907. 1907! I happened to be covering the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, I knew Martin Luther King, I covered the Birmingham demonstrations, I covered the March on Washington in 1963, and that's the same thing. It was the bottom up. But there was a women's movement then. People forget it. There was an environmental movement then. There was an anti-war movement then. These were all from the bottom up, and they had tremendous impact on policy. People power does work. And we sort of have forgotten it. We had it working there for a while, and we thought, "Oh it's working, we've elected the right politicians, and we can sit back on our oars, sit back on our easy chairs, not worry about it, and they'll do it on their own." Uh-uh, uh-uh. The woman said, democracy, you got to fight for it, or it'll slip right through your fingers. And so, yeah, I knew those things even before I started the reporting, but to hear them, to see them, to feel them, the bone, the muscle, the grit of real-live people, it's moving. And it's important, and it's important for people to revive that spirit, otherwise our democracy's in real trouble.

Angela Evans: I don't know how else to, this is a perfect summary of your film, of your life, of the movement, and I can't thank you enough for sharing this, it's, I really urge everyone when it comes up in PBS to watch it, because everything that you just heard is what you're going to feel, what you're going to hear. You feel inspired by these people, and when you see the people, they look like normal, everyday

people that you pass by on the street, or in church, or in the supermarket. But they took the step, they stepped into the arena. And so I really thank you for spending time with me today, and I really hope you come back, and I hope you keep doing this for many, many more years to come, we need you! Thank you so much.

Hedrick Smith: Thank you, I really enjoyed talking with you.

Angela Evans: Same here. Thank you.

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