Rigging Elections in Georgia, Russia and the United States?

Whenever national-level elections take place in any country, other countries have an interest in the outcome. Major powers want to make sure smaller ones continue to toe-the-line, or are ripe for conversion to their side of the argument. Smaller countries want to remain, or become, first in the queue when new aid or partnership arrangements are discussed. So every country tries to influence elections, in the same way they try and influence governments when they are in power.

Sometimes this attempt to influence takes absurd forms. At the 2008 US Presidential election Mikheil Saakashvili and his cronies in Georgia were openly canvassing for John McCain, and putting McCain bumper stickers on their cars. Very few Georgian citizens are able to vote in US elections, and those who can are not likely to be swayed by the antics of some other country's president. Then when McCain lost, Saakashvili said how much Barack Obama had supported Georgia and spent three months running round the US trying to force him to meet him, while Obama's agents tracked his movements and shepherded their boss out of any place Saakashvili turned up.

But for over two centuries it was Russia, not Georgia, which was thought to be the world leader in vote rigging. The classic example of a country influencing another’s election was held to be the Russian army surrounding the Polish nobles who were electing their new king in 1764. Though the Russians didn't actually surround the field as depicted, this behaviour resulted in an association being made in the public mind between "Russia" and "rigged elections". The
long years of Russian domination of Eastern Europe under the Soviet system only magnified this perception.

So perhaps it is surprising that the Russia-hating West is only now accusing The Kremlin of rigging a Western election, despite the hundreds we have seen in Western Europe since then. As a result of the allegations against Donald Trump, and the widespread desire to pin anything on him which might remove him from office, the hand of Russia is now being seen everywhere: for example, links have been alleged between The Kremlin and Robert Mercer's Cambridge Analytica, which has targeted articles in this journal, even though Mercer's politics are far removed from Putin's.

But is rigging elections a uniquely Russian phenomenon? Is it even a largely Russian trait? If you want to know about rigged elections, you need to ask those who know. You won't have any difficulty understanding the answer because these experts speak English, after a fashion. What Russia did in 1764 has been developed into such a sophisticated weapon by its enemies that it is like comparing a bicycle with a motor car.

**Blank cheques for marked ballots**

When Watergate was being investigated one of the key figures in the scandal was the lawyer Don Segretti, who had run the dirty tricks campaign undertaken by Nixon's Committee to Re-Elect the President. Amongst other things, Segretti had produced faked letters on stolen notepaper which smeared every serious Democratic candidate and caused each one to drop out, one by one. Segretti himself regarded this behaviour as inconsequential, compared with what he had been doing in college whilst studying for a career serving justice.

In consequence Nixon ran against George McGovern, the opponent he had wanted all along, who could be presented as a wild, anti-American radical out of touch with "decent" people. Nixon won by a landslide, and only when the actions of people like Segretti become known was he forced to resign.

Segretti was sent to prison. But apparently he is still seen as a good man to have around, even today. He lives in Orange County, California, and as recently as 2000 was the co-chair of the presidential campaign of - you guessed it - John McCain.

Five years before he had stood for election as a judge in the county, and had to withdraw when he realised people had still not forgiven him for Watergate. That didn't stop McCain believing him to be a suitable person to help his own ambitions, aided by a strange silence from the Senate's Ethics Committee.

The US and its compliant allies don't rig elections by sending the army to surround the polling stations. They send the army in if the results are not to the White House's liking, as in Ukraine, Iran and many other places.

But there are many ways to skin a cat. The Western world is able to identify alleged election rigging because most of the examples it has seen are not Soviet, the sort of thing you would expect in a dictatorship you don't agree with, but American, and therefore attract greater suspicion and comment.

**Bend it, break it**

A common rigging tactic is limiting choice. In any "reconstruction", it is the "liberators" who decide which parties are allowed to stand for election. Those they deem unacceptable are treated as anti-state forces which should not exist. Yet nevertheless the world is told that the options available represent the entire political spectrum, and thus the government is a product of democratic choice.

Uganda is one place where this has happened again and again. The old president is removed, and then his supporters are declared enemies and either excluded from participating in elections or massacred. When that still doesn't work, other methods are used.

The 1980 elections were held after the overthrow of the notorious Idi Amin, who had alienated all Western nations. The West wanted his predecessor Milton Obote to return, rather than the once-dominant Baganda people, represented by the Democratic Party, being allowed to run the country. Though the Democratic Party got fractionally more votes than Obote's UPC it won 25 fewer seats because many UPC candidates were elected unopposed. Strangely enough, they had stood in Baganda areas known to be Democratic Party strongholds.

But often restricting choice has the opposite effect. You end up with a bunch of people all as bad as each other, because no one has ever had to respond to public opinion. In such cases, the opposite is done: a new saviour is parachuted in from nowhere as the favoured son of the Western sponsors who provide the only way out of the mess the politicians are alleged to have made, though it was those who restricted public choice who actually created this
Spinning Yeltsin

Russians remember who gave them Yeltin, and how they did it. There was even a movie made about it. Even today the media is speaking of how highly paid and catered US advisors used polling company methods, focus groups, negative campaigning and rigging polls to ensure that Yeltsin won that election. This was followed by the wholesale looting of Russia under the guise of market economics, conducted by hired gun economic advisors, often funded by USAID and the World Bank. So this practice isn't going to end anytime soon, if ever.

Writing the book again

In this field as in any other, if you want to see what the US wants to do anywhere given the chance you look at what is happening in Georgia. Georgians are used to both these methods being used. After the overthrow of the first democratically elected Georgian president Zviad Gamsakhurdia, with Western help, all the parties which supported him boycotted subsequent elections.

When the West got tired of its poster boy Shevardnadze it promoted Saakashvili to replace him, and after him Bidzina Ivanishvili, who was only necessary because no opposition politician in situ had any credibility. In all three cases, the public was left in no doubt what the West wanted and would get. Elections were meaningless, because the people would have to kick their Western sponsors out to change anything, and no one knows how to do it.

Jeffrey Silverman, Veterans Today Bureau Chief in Georgia, has seen it all. This is what he had to say about the forthcoming Georgian elections in a recent interview with the Georgian media:

"Whoever has the most money and government support will win, and that is already decided. Like it was before, with the UNM, the Georgian Dream has all the material resources it needs because it is the majority party. The margin of victory will not be large, but just enough for the winning party to claim “free and fair” elections.

"Georgian politics are really much more complicated than that, but much of the problem as to why “multi-party democracy” does not work in Georgia derives from who controls the media and the people's level of education. Real issues are not being discussed, and elections are more a beauty contest about who has the best looking family and most impressive dog. Debate is non-existent or superficial at best.

"The US government gave too much money and trust to so-called "democratic organisations", and then put "all its eggs in one basket" after the 2003 Rose Revolution, which was more a staged performance than anything close to a revolution. That is where most of the problem started with elections. For all practical purposes, Georgia still has a single party system. They can pretend to be different but they are all the same trash, "იგივე ნაგავი“– and that is the civilised translation.

Khurcha Incident

"I have seen with my own eyes how election fraud is carried out, as I was once an election monitor in Zugdidi with the Human Rights Centre in May 2008 and also was involved in investigating the Khurcha Incident together with the Georgian Human Rights Centre Norwegian Helsinki Committee. This investigation was the basis for the UN conclusion which confirmed that the attack was planned.

"The US and UNM worked hand in hand to provide a distraction from their stealing of the election back in 2008, and could have started a war over Abkhazia in the process. Let’s not forget what happened, and how the Potomac Institute, a Washington-based think tank, was involved in rigging elections in Georgia. I have written several reports and articles on this topic, and personally know many details which would seriously impact Georgia’s attitude towards the United States if totally made public.

"Democratic elections have never been a priority of the United States. It puts its own National Security Interests first, which is why it was so willing to support and turn a blind eye to election fraud and human rights violations. Just look at its track record in South America for starters, and they is no question as why they so hate the US government.

"Once the UNM got into power it cut back on funding independent NGOs and put money into government pockets. Much of the money stolen from various US-sponsored programmes was used as payoff for election fraud. That practice goes back to the period of Shevardnadze and the Citizens Union: even food aid, delivered under the American “Food for Peace Program” and other mechanisms of assistance to IDPs, was distributed during election
rallies as part of the US government efforts to influence elections.

Care International and UMCOR were two of the NGOs much involved in such schemes. I worked with another part of the US government, providing information, about such schemes, Office of Inspector General, OIG. They were able to investigate such manipulations, and found that many of these were organised by the US State Department and the CIA. However, nothing could be done but to move but were not able to do anything about it.

Free from political bias

Keep in mind; he adds that, "Assistance to Georgia is supposed to be free from political bias, at least in theory. But in practice a Georgian NGO could lose its funding if it started asking questions about the government in office. Having purchased the government it wanted, the UNM, the US was not going to have the Georgian people complaining about its choice. USAID, the United States Agency for International Development, is especially guilty of providing the means to meddle in the democratic process, but it is only one organisation at the top of a long list: for example, the NDI, National Democratic Institute, and the National Endowment for Democracy, NED, are simply fronts for manipulating and changing governments.

"One only has to compare the reports published by NDI with those of the OSCE and local NGOs, like the Human Rights Centre, to get a full picture of how far the US government is willing to lie about election processes and try and whitewash massive corruption. If you also look at the media coverage, especially in the English language press, you get a full picture of how the US supported the UNM over other parties, and either ignored or under-reported intimidation of opposition parties and voters, faked election lists, people voting at different polling stations on the same day, and how the electoral commissions were packed with people close to the ruling party".

Pattern perception

Hillary Clinton has emerged from hiding to make a series of statements about how and why she lost the presidential election to Trump. She has even begun to admit she might have made mistakes in that campaign.

But no matter what Clinton apologises for, she will never admit that one of the reasons for her defeat was that her own supporters had seen how she won the nomination. Long before it was mathematically certain, the press insisted she would be the candidate, and she had only got to that position by excluding registered voters in various states who supported Bernie Sanders. This may be OK in Third World countries the US sponsors, but not the US itself. However obnoxious Trump was to many, Hillary’s vote rigging made her the devil they knew only too well.

Why did she think she could get away with it? Because the US has made rigging votes in other countries a standard official practice. Getting the result which suits the US is more important than how it is done. As a political insider and former Secretary of State, Clinton would know the fine details of such schemes as well as anyone.

Duck Test

Next time you hear people talking about mysterious Russians rigging elections, ask how they know. The rest of the world can only identify vote rigging because they have seen it so often in the Western-backed countries they are more familiar with - and as Americans say, if it walks like a duck, and it talks like a duck, then it probably is a duck.

Americans wrote the play book as how to rig elections.

Seth Ferris, investigative journalist and political scientist, expert on Middle Eastern affairs, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook".