

THE RIGGED WORLD

Donald Trump didn't invent the complaint of a political fix

David Arnold

Michael Svetlik is vice president for programs at the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, a non-governmental organization in northern Virginia that assists election administrators in more than 25 countries on how to improve the way people can choose their governments. Their efforts are supported by the U.S. State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development and the governments of Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom.

Svetlik says their goal is “to give people a voice in who governs them and how they are governed.” After 30 years in about 145 countries, they’ve seen lots of elections in which candidates have said the election was rigged, in case they don’t get enough votes to win.

During his presidential candidacy, Donald Trump charged that the U.S. electoral system was rigged—from primaries to the conventions of both major political parties and to the manner in which the secretaries of 50 states can rig this 2016 presidential election.

The people at IFES probably know all there is to know about the rigging of elections in other countries.

“The idea of elections being rigged in the United States on the national stage is outlandish and outrageous,” Svetlik says. “It just hasn’t happened.”

IFES has worked with all kinds of political environments. Take Nigeria, where a Christian from the south peacefully turned presidential powers to the winner, a Muslim from the north. Or, Zimbabwe, where a 92-year-old president has managed to keep his political opponents divided for most of his 19 years in office as the nation’s economy stumbles.

It’s not always a question of who has the best platform, the best campaign or the best

candidate. Millions of voters will make that decision. IFES focuses on how the electoral system must be free and fair and open.

The art of rigging

Trump didn’t invent the concept. Politicians who face loss around the world have made the claim and, possibly, weakened their system in the process.

A *Washington Post* op-ed in early September expressed concern with Trump’s frequent and unsubstantiated charges and offered some examples from other countries.

William Sweeney, was a co-author of the editorial. He cautioned that the credibility of elections—and a stable voting environment—depends on “the ability of electoral institutions, and in particular the election dispute resolution process, to withstand increasingly sophisticated political manipulation.”

Sweeney also wrote about Prabowo Subianto—former military leader and ex-son-in-law of longtime president Suharto—who charged that his electoral failure in Indonesia was caused by



On the eve of Georgia's 2012 national elections, a cleric of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Tbilisi appealed for the protection of the voices of all voters in a post-Soviet nation struggling with political and economic reforms.

Three years ago in Afghanistan, Abdullah Abdullah cried out that the rigging of his defeat was “industrial scale.” His supporters threatened violent demonstrations. Abdullah boycotted a straight-forward legal challenge and by threatening to set up a parallel government, managed to broker an agreement in which the voting results that showed Ashraf Ghani’s million-vote level of victory were never published and the voters would not learn the size of his loss in the election.

The president of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems,

“massive, structural and systematic” fraud in the process. Before the count was finished, he withdrew from the race and claimed victory. There were weeks of televised courtroom drama before nine judges found for his opponent, Joko Widodo.

Widodo won a fairly run election, Svetlik says. He was a former mayor and the first elected president who did not come from the nation’s political and military elite. “But his opponent used the charge of fraud to cast doubt on Widodo’s victory,” says Svetlik.

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Souvenirs

On a shelf in his northern Virginia office Svetlik displays an invitation to the 2011 independence ceremony for the Republic of South Sudan. On a bookshelf stands a silver statue of Vladimir Lenin. Svetlik picked up the statue traveling in Armenia. Both are souvenirs of global work that began with his years as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Poland from 1992 to 1994.

“We like to distinguish between fraud on the one hand, in which there is the intention to subvert the will of the people, and malpractice, which is perhaps the result of poor training and poor preparation that impact elections. The question is whether it has a material result on the election.

“Rigging covers a number of practices from more crude things like ballot-stuffing, where there are more ballots in the box than people showing up to vote. Other rigging might be the systematic manipulation where you create a law that creates barriers that favor one party over another.”

In a few cases, international communications strategists have persuaded candidates to cast doubt on the integrity of an electoral process in order to manage it, says Svetlik. And they've initiated post-election litigation “challenging the results and taking advantage of vulnerabilities in the process to derail or establish lasting doubts about the legitimacy of the outcome.”

The intent of the foundation's work is not to monitor elections but to assist over a much longer period than a single election on a government's creation of an electoral system—commissions, constitutional amendments and regulations that establishes an open and efficient process for each election. They are increasingly looking for ways to improve a government's efficiency and timeliness. “Often there's an assumption that the longer it takes to count the ballots, people assume there is funny business going on.”

A slow process

Svetlik declines to discuss some of their clients, but offers views about some of the

best and the worst of democracies where elections have worked. He praises Nigeria, Burma and Indonesia.

“What’s happened in Burma in the last two years is really pretty astounding.” The military rulers permitted an election that turned an opposition leader who spent a couple of decades under house arrest into the foreign minister of a new government.”

Venezuela, Turkey and most of the Central Asia democracies are a cause for concern, he says. So, too, is the Democratic Republic of Congo where Joseph Kabila did not step down after his two terms expired. Svetlik worries about Congo Kinshasa because, “It’s a country that can continue to influence its neighbors.”

The shining Lenin statue and the certificate on Svetlik’s desk serve as reminders of what can go wrong in democracies.

There are many ways to achieve power in a nation through elections that do not meet the definition of elections IFES promotes. Svetlik says in a single decade Vladimir Putin achieved absolute control of Russia by creating laws to engineer the political parties and clamp down on media and their ownership.

“Over a decade, most political parties became less and less visible and the strong nationalism of Putin’s government and the use of media and being the incumbent created a strong ruling party. The duma is no longer an active legislature, more of a rubber stamp for the Kremlin.”

And there are ways to lose the power to govern. Svetlik was in southern Sudan a few years ago working on a peace accord, an election and a referendum for independence that would bring peace to the newest of African nations. Two weeks before the referendum, he saw a banner flying over a Juba polling station declaring, “For 30 years we fought in the bush and we are prepared to fight for 30 more.”

He thought the banner was directed toward Khartoum and the Muslim north. It turned out to be a local message. After this year’s bloody conflict, Svetlik now believes the banner was a warning of “long-standing cleavages within southern

Sudan between two groups, the Dinka and the Nuer, who came together to win independence from Sudan but now continue to battle each other.”

That election eventually led to a conflict that has cost the lives of thousands, and forced more than a million—many of those who voted for

independence—to flee their homes

“There is no such thing as a perfect election,” Svetlik says.


David Arnold is editor of WorldView and taught English as second language in Asbe Teferi, Ethiopia from 1964 to 1966.



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