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US Elections: Neither Free nor Fair

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Media across the world are literally transfixed by the spectacle of US elections. The Donald Trump-Hillary Clinton, Republicans vs. Democrats battle is captivating enough to distract public attention from other issues.

Democracy promotion has been a centerpiece of US foreign policy for over half a century since the days when President Woodrow Wilson crafted a new foreign policy that involved active democracy promotion. The implementation of the «beacon on the hill» concept presupposes that the United States would act as a model of excellence for others to follow is analogous to contemporary soft-power democracy promotion efforts. Lecturing on democracy is a distinctive feature of American foreign policy. Does the US really provide an influential role model for how elections should run in other countries? Is America really a shining example of real democracy? «Forbear to judge, for we are sinners all».

Domestic and international experts rate the US elections as the worst among all Western democracies. According to Electoral Integrity Project, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden are at the top of the ranking, while the US scores 62.

The report gathers assessments from over 2,000 experts to evaluate the perceived integrity of all 180 national parliamentary and presidential contests held between July 1, 2012, and Dec. 31, 2015, in 139 countries. The 2014 US congressional elections rank even worse, 65th out of 180 worldwide.

In May, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights issued the OSCE / ODIHR Needs Assessment Mission (NAM) Report to assess the pre-election environment and the preparations for the US election on November 8.

It notes that in America election observation is regulated by state law, which does not explicitly provide for international observers at odds with the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document.

The paper says some 4.1 million citizens that are residents of US territories are not eligible and some 600,000 citizens that are residents of the District of Columbia can vote in presidential elections but do not have full representation in Congress. Some 5.8 million prisoners and ex-prisoners continue to be disenfranchised due to prohibitive and disproportionate legal regulations or burdensome procedures for reinstating voting rights in a number of states, particularly affecting minorities.

Women are generally underrepresented in public office, holding some 20 per cent of seats in the outgoing Congress and some 25 per cent of seats in the state legislatures. Some OSCE/ODIHR NAM interlocutors noted concerns about negative stereotyping of women. They are also concerned over an increase in inflammatory speech targeting minorities.

The OSCE report also notes that there are no limits on campaign spending: no aggregate limit on how much an individual may contribute. Spending by independent groups can be exempt from disclosure requirements. Boundaries of the districts to elect representatives are redrawn in line with partisan interests which may result in uncompetitive races.

The paper adds to numerous publications devoted to irregularities of the US voting system. Indeed, there has been a range of vulnerabilities in the conduct of American elections made public in recent years, recently, especially since the notoriously flawed ballot design in Florida in 2000.

There is a widespread suspicion of the role of money in politics. Regardless of their political affiliation, Americans agree that money has too much influence on the outcome of the vote, the wealthy have more influence on elections, and candidates who win office promote policies that help their donors.

The people think the country's campaign finance system needs significant changes. Americans do not think donating money to political candidates is a form of free speech.

Electoral laws are unfair to smaller parties like the Green Party, favor the governing party, or restrict voter's rights.

Gerrymandering of district boundaries to favor incumbents, waiting in line in excess of many hours, inaccurate state and local voter registers, insufficiently trained local poll workers, and the breakdown of voting machines are just a few examples in the list of noticeable shortfalls. In 2014 serious problems with electronic voting were reported. The polling machines recorded a vote for the Democratic candidate when the screen was touched to cast a vote for the Republican.

In Texas the statewide voter registration system crashed, forcing many to complete provisional ballots when poll workers were unable to confirm voter eligibility.

The 2016 race is disappointing enough. There was reported confusion about new photo ID requirements and long lines.

The system of superdelegates is evidently undemocratic. For instance, this year Democratic superdelegates, who aren't beholden to vote for a candidate according to the popular choice, could potentially sway the nomination. It caused discontent among rank and file party members who would prefer another candidate instead of Hillary Clinton. G.O.P. candidate Donald Trump called the delegate system «rigged».

Noam Chomsky, a famous American scholar and the author of *Failed States*, believes there is an enormous gap between public opinion and policy in the United States.

In the book *What We Say Goes: Conversations on US Power in a Changing World* he sets an example. In 2005, the Program on International Policy Attitudes did an extensive poll on what people thought the budget ought to be.

It turned out to be the inverse of the actual budget: where federal funding was going up, an overwhelming majority wanted it to go down. The public opposed increases in military spending overall and supplemental spending for Iraq and Afghanistan, which is going up even more now. Where the budget was going down—social expenditures, health, renewable energy, veterans' benefits, the United Nations—right across the board, the public wanted spending to increase. US media kept this fact out of public eye.

«...when Americans with different income levels differ in their policy preferences, actual policy outcomes strongly reflect the preferences of the most affluent but bear virtually no relationship to the preferences of poor or middle-income Americans. The vast discrepancy I find in government responsiveness to citizens with different incomes stands in stark contrast to the ideal of political equality that Americans hold dear. Although perfect political equality is an unrealistic goal, representational biases of this magnitude call into question the very democratic character of our society», says Martin Gilens, the professor of politics at Princeton University and the author of *Affluence & Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America*.

«Now it's just an oligarchy, with unlimited political bribery being the essence of getting the nominations for president or to elect the president. And the same thing applies to governors, and US senators and congress members», concludes former US president Jimmy Carter.

The US officials often recklessly accuse other countries of election tempering. There is a reason to believe they do it to obfuscate the real story of fraud and irregularities in their own electoral process. No doubt, America would do a better job of promoting democracy in other countries by setting an example to follow but it's voting system is broken and needs to be fixed. Today the United States is definitely not in the position to lecture and teach others. It has a long way to go if it wants to become a real democracy.