

## GERALD LOFTUS

To our hosts and organizers of this timely conference, I extend my thanks for the opportunity to return to Uzbekistan, which I only started to get to know in this same room, two months ago. At that time, it was a chance to learn about the ways that this important country is coping with the world economic crisis. Now, we will have an opportunity to share lessons on comparative approaches to political parties and elections. I can offer limited experience, as a former diplomat who has observed elections and political parties in countries as different as Algeria and Luxembourg, but also as an American who has participated in my country's elections, as an expatriate.

This is a reference to my role (minor, I assure you!) in the 2008 US Presidential election campaign, as a spokesman for Democrats Abroad Belgium (DAB). I hasten to add that I am speaking here as a private citizen, and that my comments are mine alone. The standing of Democrats Abroad should be of interest to countries with large expatriate populations. There are an estimated 6 million American citizens living outside the United States. Even when you remove children, that leaves millions of potential voters, whose right to vote is enshrined in law.

But their right to vote does not mean that voting from outside one's country is either easy or prevalent. I saw a recent headline in a major British newspaper, which said that of the 5.5 million UK citizens abroad, only some 13,000 were registered as of now for the next general election.

In the very *decentralized* American electoral system, where thousands of counties – the key administrative jurisdiction in matters of voting – set their own rules, there exist sometimes rather anti-democratic barriers to full citizen participation. Democrats Abroad have a unique advantage over their Republican counterparts living outside of the US. Instead of being diluted among the 50 states that they call "home," their votes in presidential primary elections are counted as if Democrats living abroad constituted a virtual "51<sup>st</sup> state," that is, electing delegates among overseas Americans to the Democratic Party convention, which in turn chooses the party's candidate for President.

One of the reasons I wanted you to know about this not-negligible detail on American elections is this: understanding the details, getting the ground rules right, is essential in elections, whether they are in Chicago or Samarkand. Since I have mentioned Chicago, let me tell you about someone from there whose attention to detail, and whose understanding of and adherence to the rules helped get him where he is today: President Barack Obama.

Little more than 5 years ago, Barack Obama was known only to his constituents in Illinois' largest city, where he was serving as a State Senator. After his appearance at the 2004 Democratic Convention, he was elected to the US Senate, and the rest, as they say, is history. How did a relatively unknown man rise so rapidly? Much is due to his great speech making abilities, to his charisma. Certainly the morose domestic and international context of war and economic chaos reigning during the 2008 campaign created space for an inspiring candidate. But here is an insight on Obama's secret weapon, how he

## GERALD LOFTUS

clinched the Democratic nomination from someone as astute as Hillary Clinton: he understood the rules, and used them to his advantage.

Let me use a possibly childish analogy. Are you familiar with the board game called "Monopoly?" I understand that there was a similar (perhaps non-capitalist!) game during the Soviet days called "Manager." If so, you may recall that there are several ways to win, where winning is defined as owning real estate and collecting rent money. You can land on expensive streets, in the wealthy parts of town, and buy up a few select houses and hotels where the jet-set can stay. Or you can invest in many cheap or middle class houses and hotels in less wealthy areas, and earn as much money through the accumulation of lots of smaller rental payments.

Now I will ask you to apply this Monopoly image to last year's US presidential election primaries. Because the US Democratic Party adheres to proportionality in its primary elections (as opposed to Republican Party primaries, and as opposed to the winner-take-all rules that apply in US general elections), the Obama team decided to campaign in states large AND small, even in states where Democratic candidates had traditionally lost to Republicans. By competing in the "low-rent" districts or states which represented relatively few delegate votes, Obama often had the field to himself, and his early victories in these states earned him valuable momentum. He carried this momentum to larger states, some of which he won by large majorities, some of which were won by his primary rival Hillary Clinton – whose campaign focused primarily on the big states.

But just like the Monopoly or "Manager" player who controlled lots of small hotels, Obama kept his lead – thanks to the accumulation of wins in many small and mid-sized states. He and his team understood the ground rules, worked hard to ensure good voter turnout on election day, and the results showed. You compete in the game of democracy with the rules and the tools that are the foundation of the system, whatever the country.

I recall election day in Algeria in June 1990, elections to choose representatives for local and regional assemblies. These were the country's first democratically-contested elections, after almost three decades of one-party rule. Taking a lunch break after observing polling places throughout the capital Algiers, I spoke to a man at a nearby table in a small restaurant. I asked him, "Did you vote yet?" The man, who was a mid-level civil servant in one of the ministries, answered "No, why would I bother? The government party will manage to win, like they always do." He had a point. It *had* always been like that. After all, the street signs in Algiers pointed to "Headquarters of THE Party." The *only* party.

It turns out that this time, the man was wrong. New parties had emerged, some more adept in the dynamics of elections than others. The party that won the elections that day in fact was one of the new opposition parties, and their victory was due to their taking the electoral rules at face value, and applying them in a disciplined, serious manner. They encouraged their

## GERALD LOFTUS

committed members to get out the vote across the country, and they stationed election observers in polling places when often the government party representatives assumed the same attitude as my non-voter in the restaurant: "why bother?" The results were surprising to those who assumed "fixed-elections-as-usual."

Democracy is a participatory sport. Those who take part, who learn the rules, have a better chance than those whose idea of politics is limited to arguing or complaining, but whose voices are lost in the wind. It's the ballot that counts, on election day. This does not guarantee honest results, as elections all over the world have shown. Even in countries that have long histories of freely-contested elections – my own country included – constant vigilance is required to ensure that those who want to vote, whose right it is to vote, are allowed to do so. And that their vote is counted – especially in these days of electronic voting machines, which may (or may not) have paper records.

NDI, Regional Dialogue, the OSCE – all of these worthy organizations are here to provide Uzbek political parties examples of best practice from countries that have long experience in applying a crucial test of democratic evolution: free and fair elections. I wish you all the best in running your campaigns in the best tradition of democratic inclusiveness, but I will underscore what I sure you have come to realize, as President Obama and his Democratic Party allies are very aware of, almost a year after their stunning victory. Campaigning and getting elected to public office is the relatively easy part. The hard part is what is next: governing, or carrying out responsible opposition, in a way that is best for the nation, not just one's own party. Beyond elections, that is the true test of democracy. Thank you.