

# United States Foreign Policy in Latin America: Promoting or Subverting Democracy?

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While violence and the threat of violence are the ultimate tools by which the U.S. maintains its influence in the world, it does have other tools in its foreign policy toolbox. “Democracy building” is one of the tools by which the US protects its hegemony in Latin America, and not just in Latin America I should note, but that is the region of my own expertise, so that is where I’ll focus this article.

## **WHAT IS DEMOCRACY AND WHAT ARE THE MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS FOR A COUNTRY TO BE DEMOCRATIC?**

Surely one of the first responses to that question would be that you need to have elections, right? But then the issue comes up: who gets to vote? Is it a democracy if the only people who can vote are European-descended, male, property owners? That was the situation in the first century of the United States of America. African American men won the right to vote with the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution, ratified in 1870, but we all know that it wasn’t until the 1965 Voting Rights Act that most of them got to exercise that right. Women didn’t win the right to vote in the US until 1920 when the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified. Was the US a democracy before then? That’s an interesting question.

Then there’s the common qualifier: “free and fair” elections. Dozens of groups from the United Nations, to the Organization of American States, to the Carter Center, to groups like mine, the Alliance for Global Justice, send election observation delegations to monitor elections and rule whether they are free and fair. Actually my group doesn’t send election observation delegations because we think that most US citizens don’t know how our own electoral system operates, so wouldn’t recognize “unfree” and “unfair” elections except in the most gross manifestations such as military abuses or closed polling places.

Still, free and fair is an important test and we can see what happens in cases such as Afghanistan where international election monitors declared there was massive fraud. We also witness the case of Honduras where the international community’s threat to not recognize the November 29, 2009 election was the only thing holding the coup government back from even worse repression. Other components of whether an election is free and fair are: who pays for it, and who controls or influences the voters’ access to information about the candidates and parties.

These are the issues on which I will concentrate, but first let me run a couple of imaginary scenarios involving our own country.

Imagine a US electoral race in which a marginal candidate like Ron Paul (libertarian Republican of Texas) or Cynthia McKinney (liberal Democrat of Georgia) suddenly receives major funding from a foreign source. Suppose that funding was equal to twenty dollars per US voter? For reference, the total spent per voter by both Obama and McCain for the 2008 election was \$7.81. Expenditures of twenty dollars per voter would be a pretty important factor in the campaign, wouldn't it? Now suppose that same foreign power was threatening war and economic embargo if the wrong candidate won. Would we accept that as a free and fair election, even if everyone was allowed to vote by secret ballot? No, clearly we would not.

Yet that is exactly what happened to Nicaragua in the 1990 election when the Sandinistas were defeated in supposedly free and fair elections. The US government combined fourteen minor parties and even dictated who their candidate would be. Then the US spent twenty dollars per eligible voter on behalf the coalition while at the same time continuing to fund the Contra war and economic embargo. In the US, it is illegal for foreign governments, groups, or individuals to contribute to a political campaign. [Note: a recent Supreme Court ruling may open a loophole which will allow foreign corporations to contribute to candidates.] But free and fair take on a whole different meaning if the US government wants to insure a particular outcome in another nation's election.

Let's go even further with our imaginary scenario. Suppose that this hypothetical foreign nation funded and trained a group of US citizens and organizations that were hostile to the current president and were calling for "regime change." Suppose it trained and funded their armed wing just across the border in Canada. Imagine that the armed wing launched a violent urban and rural terror campaign and that our mythical country used that as a pretext to kidnap President Obama, send him into exile, and install the violent opposition minority as the new government. Imagine the new government began killing and imprisoning Democrats.

Needless to say we'd fight. I believe even many people who hate President Obama would fight against a foreign-imposed puppet government in his place. Do you think that US citizens would peacefully accept a new election while under foreign occupation and with the Democratic Party banned from running a candidate? Would we accept President Obama's continued forced exile in South Africa?

And yet, this again is an accurate description of what the US government did to Haiti on February 29, 2004 when US marines forced democratically elected President Jean Paul Aristide onto a US military plane at gunpoint, flew him to the Central African Republic, and asked that government to hold him incommunicado. Only when a small group of people from the International Action Center in New York City flew to the CAR and smuggled a cell phone to Aristide did the lies the US government was telling

about Aristide's supposed resignation begin to unravel. The Central African Republic was embarrassed and Aristide was allowed to leave, but to this day the US government has blocked his return to Haiti and Haiti continues to bleed.

I could go further and make up imaginary scenarios comparable to the US role in the 2002 failed coup against President Chavez in Venezuela, its role in the 2004 presidential election in El Salvador, its role in elections in Mongolia and the Ukraine – indeed all of those color coded, so-called revolutions in the former Soviet bloc. I could even make up scenarios for the unsuccessful efforts by the US government to sway the outcome of the 2006 presidential elections in Nicaragua and Venezuela and its failures to sway elections in Bolivia and El Salvador. But I think you get the point.

### **HOW DOES THE US MANIPULATE THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES IN OTHER COUNTRIES?**

The best known agency of “democracy building” is the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a supposedly private organization that operates almost 100% with our tax money. The NED, as it is known, was created in 1983. As Allen Weinstein, a founder and theoretical planner for the NED, noted in a 1991 interview with the *Washington Post*, “A lot of what we do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA.” It's questionable how overt the work is that they do now. Try, for instance, as we did, to track NED grants in Honduras. We could tell they increased as President Zelaya moved to the Left, but we couldn't track who got the money. And, of course, current expenditures aren't available at all.

The National Endowment for Democracy is made up of four core groups: The International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) are affiliated with the two political parties. Sen. John McCain is chair of the IRI and Bill Clinton's Secretary of State, Madeline Albright, chairs the NDI. The AFL-CIO has its own affiliate, the American Center for International Labor Solidarity also known as the Solidarity Center, and to round out the engines of empire, the Chamber of Commerce has its affiliate the Center for International Private Enterprise.

To further confuse things, the NED operates its own grants and also makes grants to its sub-groups which they then give out under their own names to groups who in some cases break it down into even smaller grants. If you or I did that, they'd call it money laundering. And, if you find this all to be confusing, we can assume that they intend for us to be confused. George Orwell certainly wouldn't be surprised to learn that they call their electoral manipulation projects “democracy building” when they are actually just the opposite. NED's first success was to defeat the Sandinista government in Nicaragua in 1990 which I talked about earlier.

The International Republican Institute trained and funded the groups from which the Haitian thugs were drawn whose violence created the pretext for the US to kidnap President Aristide and remove him from the country in 2004. For quite awhile they had a program to train municipal police in Caracas,

Venezuela who are not under President Chavez' control and who have committed many extrajudicial killings. I couldn't find out if that program is ongoing.

The National Democratic Institute specializes in polling and quick counts. Its blatantly manipulated poll in the Venezuela recall election of 2004 claimed Chavez lost when he actually won with sixty percent of votes. Its quick count in the Ukraine in 2003 succeeded in casting doubt about the socialist victory there and spawned the so-called Orange Revolution. Apparently they hoped the same thing would happen in Venezuela as a result of their phony poll. NDI's pollster was none other than Mark Penn who was Hillary Clinton's top presidential campaign strategist until he ran afoul of conflict of interest charges.

The AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center, another core group of the NED, funded the anti-Chavez labor federation whose leader, Carlos Ortega, was one of the coup leaders in the 2002 coup. That coup failed because a million Venezuelans poured down from their hillside neighborhoods into the streets and demanded the return of their president.

Some people say that the Solidarity Center runs good programs in some countries, but as long as it receives ninety-four percent of its money from the US government and only six percent from unions, its programs will remain suspect. There should be international solidarity between workers, but that solidarity needs to be funded by the workers themselves, not with U.S. government money.

In June and October 2006 I led delegations to Nicaragua and Venezuela several months in advance of their presidential elections to investigate U.S. intervention in those two countries. NED claims to be nonpartisan and that it does not support particular candidates or parties. However, Sandinista organizations in Nicaragua didn't receive any NED grants and U.S. Ambassador Paul Trivelli missed no opportunity to be photographed with the US favored right-wing candidate, Eduardo Montealegre. Our delegation met with the International Republican Institute in Managua. Their spokesperson apparently didn't research who we were because she was too honest. She said, "The relationship between the U.S. and Nicaragua is like a parent and a child, and a son should not argue with his father." Unbelievable.

She also said, "We created the Movement for Nicaragua." The Movement for Nicaragua is supposedly a nonpartisan civil group. It organized marches against Sandinista candidate Daniel Ortega and corrupt former President Arnoldo Aleman whose favored candidate threatened the viability of the US-favored candidate Eduardo Montealegre. When we revealed all this in a press conference in Managua, the spokesperson was fired but the policies didn't change.

Ambassador Trivelli told us himself that he had thirteen million dollars to spend on the Nicaraguan election. Per capita, that would be like spending \$780 million on the US presidential election. That's not as much as the US government spent on the 1990 Nicaraguan election, but imagine the outcry if a foreign power spent \$780 million to influence our election! Yet, despite the blatant US intervention,

the threats to cut off remittances from Nicaraguans in the US who send money home to their families, and despite thinly veiled allusions to a new war, the people of Nicaragua elected Daniel Ortega president.

The tactics that had worked so well in El Salvador's 2004 presidential election failed in Nicaragua, and, I'm happy to note, it failed this year in El Salvador's presidential election as well. So, the US, with all its money and might, does not always prevail.

The US also spent twenty-six million dollars on the 2006 Venezuelan election. Three million of it was NED money and the other twenty-three million dollars was from the US Agency for International Development. USAID is supposed to be the US humanitarian aid agency for developing countries. Until 2006 it was independent of the State Department. But that year the Bush regime ended its independence and since then its programs have been more aligned with the government's other foreign policy objectives than ever before.

The Neo-Conservatives' obsession with imposing their twisted version of democracy – by which they mean elections which put in power only those who support unrestrained access by transnational capital and unconditional support for US “interests” — has meant that USAID has converted much of its focus to direct election manipulation. This has not changed under the Obama administration.

In 2006 the Associated Press filed a Freedom of Information Act request for the list of USAID grant recipients in Venezuela. They got the list but the recipient's names were blacked out. About all we know is that there were no pro-Chavez groups on the list. Another interesting fact is that the money was administered by a U.S. embassy department called the Office of Transition Initiatives. We were refused a meeting with them. But it is a revealing name isn't it? Transition to what: a Venezuela without Chavez, of course. A transition back to when the international oil companies and a few local Venezuelans profited from the oil wealth while the vast majority lived in poverty. Is it any wonder Chavez won with 63% of the vote?

So U.S. democracy manipulation schemes don't work everywhere, but they do work often enough. Even the somewhat benign programs such as training poll watchers aren't really benign at all. Their intent is to train foreigners to accept that the only kind of democracy there is, is the free trade, liberal democratic system that we have in the United States where the citizen's only role is to periodically go to the polls to vote for one of two candidates representing nearly the same interests.

Their other intent is to mold the political process of other countries to serve U.S. corporate and political purposes. Let me give you a recent example from Nicaragua. In September 2009, eighty-eight young people graduated from a four-month-long political leadership development course funded by USAID and run by the NED's National Democratic Institute.

Press reports stated that at their graduation ceremony they met the three Liberal Party (the main opposition party to the Sandinistas) factional leaders who appeared on the stage with a chant of “Unity,

Unity, Unity” and forced them to shake hands. Does that sound like a nonpartisan training? Where was the Sandinista party representative? Ah, but they don’t want unity with him. They want the warring factions of the traditional Nicaraguan Liberal Party of the Somoza dictatorship to unite so they can defeat the Sandinistas in the next election.

Those who have studied Latin America know that the Liberal Party doesn’t have anything to do with what we call liberal in the United States. Latin American Liberal Parties are rooted in the nineteenth century efforts by the urban capitalist class to wrest power away from the rural landed aristocracy and their Conservative Parties. Latin American Liberal Parties are today as right-wing as their Conservative Parties.

The last four U.S. ambassadors have had as their primary goal, unifying Nicaragua’s fractious Liberal parties. Their failure to do so in 2006 resulted in Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega winning the presidency with thirty-eight percent of the vote. The U.S. has no higher goal in Nicaragua than to unify the opposition before the 2011 presidential election so they can once again govern through a party subservient to U.S. interests. There is nothing at all nonpartisan about the youth training.

And I’ll tell you something else. You can take it to the bank that those eighty-eight young people will have their future personal, career, and political lives mapped out by the U.S. government. They are going to have a rich uncle who will see to it that they get the best education, the most lucrative jobs, and when the time comes, well-funded campaigns for political office.

Without any threats or arm-twisting at all, they will come to the logical conclusion that their interests are 100% in sync with US government interests — and they’ll be right. Whether the interests of the majority of Nicaraguans are in line with US interests is another issue entirely. I would also question whether your and my interests are the same as US government interests, but that’s a topic for another lecture series.

What gets me is their arrogance. Deborah Ullmer, director of NDI Nicaragua, stated that, despite criticism from the Supreme Electoral Council (Nicaragua’s independent fourth branch of government which is responsible for elections) the NDI would continue holding such training activities. During the Cold War, would the U.S. have allowed an agency of the Soviet Union to set up training programs for young, future politicians on U.S. soil? I don’t think so.

Current U.S. Ambassador Robert Callahan explained that this program is intended to help young politicians to develop their capacity as leaders in the areas of communication, political negotiation, strategic planning and the internal democratization of their parties, with the goal of developing more dynamic and transparent parties and political organizations.

I find it very useful, when thinking about democracy building programs, to ask myself, “Would the US allow North Korea or Iran to run a similar program in our country?” If the answer is no, then I would conclude that we should not be running those programs in other countries either.

My final point begins with the question: who controls the information that voters use to decide how they will cast their vote? If your answer is the media, then your answer is the same as mine. Who has the money needed to operate a major newspaper? Who has the money to buy a broadcast license for television and to fund a news department? Who has the money to operate a powerful radio station? Not you and me, that’s for sure.

It is the same economic interests that control the banks and big businesses. Therefore it makes perfect sense that the National Endowment for Democracy set up The Center for International Media Assistance whose website describes its aims as “to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of media assistance programs throughout the world. The Center approaches its mission by providing information, building networks, conducting research, and highlighting the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies around the world.”

Of course, their idea of independent media is the anti-Sandinista media of Nicaragua, the anti-Chavez media of Venezuela, the pro-coup media of Honduras. Most recently they’ve even been promoting community radio. After seeing how Venezuela has used community radio run by and for poor communities to break the strangle-hold that the private, corporate media had on the information available to Venezuelan voters, the NED has set out to co-opt that medium as well.

The vision of the NED and other so-called democracy building programs is a democracy of, by, and for the elites. The rest of us are just supposed to be props in their little kabuki play by going to the polls and voting periodically. I don’t accept that role, and I hope you don’t accept it either.

We don’t have space to go into the concept of participatory democracy vs. formal democracy, but if you are interested, take a look at Venezuela’s Community Councils as a model that might be applicable in other places where democracy movements are trying to wrest power from business and social elites. I’ll just leave you with the thought that perhaps we could use a democracy movement in the United States as well.