

A tale of two elections

IT'S as if cartoonist Tom Tomorrow's Parallel Earth concept has come to life – with the Ukraine's tainted presidential election mirroring the United States' last two presidential races. The official Ukrainian results place ruling party hack and ex-Soviet lackey Viktor Yanukovich with 49.46% of the vote, winning over his pro-west challenger Viktor Yushchenko, with 46.61% of the vote. The three-point spread between the winning and losing Viktor "Y"s is roughly identical to the official three-point spread separating Yalies Bush and Kerry.

But oops, whadya know. There's a wrench in the Ukrainian machinery casting a doubt on which Viktor was ultimately victorious. It seems the exit polls predicted a win by challenger Yushchenko by a margin of 49.4% to 45.9% — roughly equivalent to the three-point winning margin that exit polls predicted for John Kerry over George Bush.

As we go to press, the outcome of the Ukrainian election is being decided by that country's Supreme Court. Sound familiar? And Ukrainian pundits are crunching the official results, writing about the "two Ukraine's" that have emerged in the post-election fracas. The Washington Post tells tale of a country split in this election along old fracture lines of identity, culture and religion "broadly defined in an east-west divide." The emerging red-blue map is not unlike our own – except it's been rotated 90 degrees.

And as in the U.S., Ukrainians see the future of their country riding on this election. Yulia Tishchenko of the Ukrainian Center for Independent Political Research, explains to the

A TALE OF TWO ELECTIONS / 2

Post, "Everyone thinks if they lose [this election], they lose everything."

And the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) reported major problems with the Ukrainian vote, just as they did earlier in the month with the American vote. Both elections, they reported, were not up to snuff as democratic contests.

And finally, the Ukrainian TV networks prematurely called the election as a win for the establishment candidate, Viktor Yanukovich, in an attempt to cast him as a winner in the public mind – just as Fox News' presidential elections desk chief John Ellis called the 2000 American election prematurely in favor of his first cousin, George W. Bush.

We like these exit polls

Here's where the similarities between our world and Parallel Earth end. In the aftermath of the Ukrainian vote, Republican Richard Lugar of Indiana (Red States of America), Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, declared his outrage at the official Ukrainian results, which he dismissed as fraudulent. The evidence, he argues, is in the exit polls, which uncharacteristically failed to match up with the final official tally. That does sound suspicious indeed. Familiar too. But I suppose we're not supposed to go there. Goldfish, I'm told, have no memory. So why should we? Why should Lugar? Why should the Washington Post?

The most important difference between the American and Ukrainian presidential elections was not so much in the way American politicians responded, but more importantly, the way the Ukrainian people responded. Put simply, they took to the streets in an unprecedented showing of outrage. And Ukrainian journalists staged a one-day strike against press bias – demanding the right to cover the protests and the contestation of the election.

This is a sharp contrast to the American response to our nation's 2000 election, which as we now know, was in fact stolen. It was stolen through the organized disenfranchisement of eligible black voters. It was stolen by the assignment of archaic voting technology to Gore strongholds. And ultimately, it was stolen by the Supreme Court, which stopped the Florida vote count. The final non-binding post-coronation tally, scheduled to be released in mid-September of 2001, showed a slight plurality for Al Gore. But after September 11th, nobody wanted to hear that our supreme commander lacked the legitimacy of an election. And ultimately, the fact that Al Gore won the 2000 election is destined to be a trivial sidebar in future history books.

Al Gore slithers like a worm

This is ultimately where the two stories diverge: Al Gore is an invertebrate. Like John

Kerry, he represents the Invertebrate Party. Ukrainian challenger Yushchenko, by contrast, has a spine. He went to jail for his political convictions during the Soviet era. Kerry might have had a spine once, but that was a very long time ago. Gore never showed signs of being able to stand upright against a stiff breeze and wouldn't tell you the time of day without first asking opinion pollsters what time they surmised you wanted it to be.

And so it was, Al Gore pleaded with his supporters in 2000 to stay home. To not raise hell. To abide by the theft. Ultimately he asked them to abandon democracy, to forgo their patriotic duties, and to acquiesce to what ultimately proved to be the first documented theft of an American presidential election. The renegades who ignored Gore and marched against Bush's inauguration were rendered invisible by a compliant press corps that would never dream of striking for the right to be real journalists.

The 2004 election followed predictably on the heels of the 2000 election. If the U.S. abided by the basic rudimentary standards in place in Guatemala, for example, George W. Bush would not have been allowed to stand for election in 2004 (Guatemala forbids rulers who came to power in any sort of coup to ever run for election). His ill-gotten advantage of incumbency, his privilege to start and name wars, his ability to set the technical ground rules for successive elections and his power to scare the American public and influence the language of the American political dialog would never have played into the 2004 election. Al Gore's spineless retreat in 2000 gave us not only four years of Bush. It gave us a Bush incumbency to contend with in 2004.

Ukrainians stand upright

By all accounts this will not be the case in the Ukraine. Yushchenko's willingness to stand up against a coup and the Ukrainian people's courage in backing him will change that nation's history. Their election, whatever the final outcome, will not be stolen. The hundreds of thousands of peaceful but firm voices in the street have made business-as-usual in the Ukraine impossible. The Ukrainian people are involved in the process. The votes will be counted. Democracy will prevail.

We've come a long way since the fall of the Soviet Union – with Americans now looking to the east for examples of popular democracy in action. Perhaps it's their relatively recent encounters with totalitarianism that gives the Ukrainian people the strength to stand up for democracy. And by the same account, perhaps mainstream Americans have grown politically fat and lazy with no societal memory of totalitarian oppression. Perhaps in the end, four more years of the Bush junta will cure us of our political dislocation and apathy. Then, maybe we can follow the Ukrainian model and put our bodies on the line to stand up for Democracy and American ideals.