

OSCE observers view U.S. electoral reforms as work in progress

WASHINGTON, D.C., 4 November 2004 - The 2 November elections in the United States were conducted in an environment that reflects a longstanding democratic tradition, including institutions governed by rule of law, free and professional media and an active civil society involved in all aspects of the election process.

The elections mostly met OSCE's commitments for democratic elections, agreed to by the 55 OSCE participating States, concludes the Election Observation Mission of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The Mission focused primarily on election reforms, particularly the implementation of the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) of 2002.

"The high turnout indicates the importance of this election for the electorate and the strong democratic tradition in this country. Although it was not possible for our observers to access polling stations in all states, due to lack of provision in federal or state legislation, it appears that the voting and the processing of ballots proceeded in an orderly manner," said Barbara Haering, Vice-President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and Special Co-ordinator of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office for the Short-Term OSCE Observation Mission. "We commend the interest and patience of voters who often had to wait in long lines to cast their votes."

Professor Rita Suessmuth, Head of the OSCE/ODIHR long-term election observation mission, said: "The impact of the HAVA reforms was positive but limited due to delays in its implementation and varying interpretation of parts of it. It is a work in progress. Clearer rules for handling of provisional ballots are undoubtedly needed. In order to meet all the country's OSCE commitments the U.S. election reforms will have to go beyond HAVA, particularly regarding access for international observers."

According to the limited OSCE observations on election day, staff in polling stations appear to have coped well with new voting procedures across many parts of the country, despite warnings of a significant shortage of poll workers and the introduction of new technology. The use of electronic voting machines was broadly successful.

The OSCE observers were able to assess aspects of the pre-election environment and were granted access to polling stations in a number of states, sometimes only in specific counties. The OSCE believes that in order to further enhance transparency and to meet U.S. international commitments, Congress and individual states should consider introducing legal provisions allowing unimpeded access for international observers invited by the U.S. government.

The Mission was deployed by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. It published its preliminary findings today, based on the work of 92 observers from 34 countries, including 56 parliamentarians.