



## OSCE PA election observation: upholding democratic standards, building trust

# The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly

Bringing together 323 parliamentarians from 57 countries spanning Europe, Asia and North America, the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE provides a forum for parliamentary dialogue, leads election observation missions, and strengthens international co-operation to uphold commitments on political, security, economic, environmental and human rights issues.

As the parliamentary dimension of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the Assembly's primary task is to facilitate inter-parliamentary dialogue, an important aspect of the overall effort to meet the challenges of democracy throughout the OSCE area.

## The OSCE PA and election observation

The Assembly's election observation programme is an important contribution to consolidating democracy in the OSCE region. Since 1993, the OSCE PA has played a leading role in election observation across the OSCE area, with more than 5,000 parliamentarians and staff having observed more than 130 different elections in more than 30 countries.

The observation of elections is a common endeavour involving OSCE parliamentarians from all 57 countries, along with long and short-term observers deployed by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). OSCE PA observers work closely with colleagues from the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and the European Parliament, as well as with the OSCE/ODIHR.

The main objective of election observation missions is to hold OSCE countries accountable to the election-related standards they have committed to. It is also an important exercise in bridging differences and building trust.



## Democratic commitments and Code of Conduct

OSCE participating States agreed in Copenhagen in 1990 on a framework for the conduct of democratic, free and fair elections. In recognition of the added value that election observers can have on electoral processes, the participants agreed to welcome representatives of other participating States to observe the course of their national election proceedings.

Observers assess elections for their compliance with these shared commitments to ensure all OSCE participating States are held to one common standard. Under the 1990 Copenhagen Document, participating States agreed to several commitments:

- holding free elections at regular intervals
- equal suffrage for all adult citizens
- honest and transparent vote counting
- separation of State from political parties
- right to seek political or public office individually or as a political party
- right of citizens to discuss views and cast votes without the fear of retribution
- unimpeded media access for parties and candidates



(The full election-related Copenhagen commitments are available at [www.oscepa.org](http://www.oscepa.org).)

Observers must also be impartial, identifiable, professional, comply with local laws, and not interfere with the election process, following an OSCE Code of Conduct



## How observation works

### Mission leadership

The OSCE PA president appoints a senior representative of the Assembly to head each mission. This senior official is tasked with conducting official visits in the country being observed, chairing pre-election briefings for parliamentary observers, convening advisory group meetings to exchange views with OSCE PA observers, and delivering the statement on behalf of the observation mission.

### Proceeding

Before the election, observers review the country's election-related legislation; candidate, party and voter registration; campaign activity; media coverage; election administration; and the handling of electoral complaints and appeals. Observers also receive briefings from government, political parties, civil society and media representatives. This is in addition to the work and

observations conducted for several weeks by the OSCE/ODIHR long-term observers across the country.

Visiting an average of ten polling stations on election day, observers carefully watch the conduct of the election, including the counting of ballots, handling of spoiled or unused ballots, and the transmission of polling station results to a regional election body.

### What is observed

- whether ballot boxes are empty and properly sealed
- whether all ballots are accounted for
- how voters are processed
- the accuracy of voter registries
- whether voters are able to vote in secret and free from intimidation

## Role of parliamentarians

Parliamentarians rely on election day observations, their substantive briefings, and their own electoral experience to objectively analyze the election and draw an overall preliminary conclusion about the election.

The presence of parliamentary observers at elections emphasizes the importance of legislatures to provide a balance to executive authority. As politicians who have stood for elections themselves, parliamentarians have particular expertise in political campaigns and electoral processes, bringing added credibility to the conclusions of observation missions.

Their participation in observation efforts also brings added international visibility, as parliamentarians are often sought out by journalists from their home countries to express their expert opinions. As Members of Parliament, they are also in an excellent position to relate their experiences directly into policy circles in their national parliaments.

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