

OSCE PA observes elections in the United States



President Joao Soares looks on as U.S. House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer addresses OSCE PA election observers

The 4 November 2008 elections in the United States clearly reflected the will of the people and demonstrated convincingly the country's commitment to democracy, reported the OSCE PA Election Observation Mission. At a press conference in Washington D.C. on 6 November, OSCE PA President Joao Soares, who led the Election Observation Mission, noted that "there has been a lack of trust in many parts of the world towards the U.S. election system, but Tuesday's elections were a display in democracy and they regained trust in the American electoral system."

In its Post-Election Statement, the OSCE PA noted that despite concerns expressed by some interlocutors over the capacity to deal with record-high voter turnout, observers noted only minor problems, including long lines in some voting precincts and isolated cases of voting machines malfunctioning. In this regard, the observers particularly stressed the positive effects of early voting, which was offered in over 30 states. It also emphasized that further reforms would be beneficial in ensuring the smooth functioning of future U.S. elections. "The decentralized and highly diverse electoral system lacks uniform standards," the OSCE PA noted. This creates "vulnerabilities in the system, particularly with regard to the integrity and complexity of voter registration, voter identification, and electronic voting machines." The statement also recommends looking into the lack of secrecy of the vote, particularly with regard to the use of optical scanners.

OSCE PA Vice-President Pia Christmas-Moeller, who served as Deputy Head of the Mission, spoke about her experiences from her pre-visit to five different states as well as from her election observations in Cleveland, Ohio. She

noted the progress that has been made in the U.S. electoral system since 2004 but stressed that the decentralized election system can be a challenge for voters and officials.

The OSCE PA's election observation mission fielded 94 observers, including 76 Members of Parliament from 28 countries. From the International Secretariat, the Mission was headed by Deputy Secretaries General Tina Schoen and Gustavo Pallares and included most other professional Secretariat staffers. Preparations for this mission started in the early summer when initial arrangements were made and the research team began the preparation of briefing material and a media analysis. The OSCE PA established its full-time Mission in the U.S. on 12 October when Vice-President Christmas-Moeller began her pre-election observation tour. Prior to this, on 22-23 September, the OSCE PA held a two-day election seminar for almost 50 parliamentarians representing 17 countries in Washington D.C. with the assistance of the U.S. Delegation to the OSCE PA and the Helsinki Commission.

On 31 October, OSCE PA observers attended a day-long briefing in Washington D.C., which included presentations from the Federal Election Commission, the Election Assistance Commission, party officials, journalists and NGOs. U.S. House Majority Leader and former PA Vice-President Steny Hoyer made a special presentation to the observers. The PA observers deployed four days prior to Election Day to: Florida, North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Washington D.C., New Hampshire, Ohio, Missouri, New Mexico and Colorado.

PA Members observed early-voting in several states and met with key election officials as well as with representatives of the main political parties in the states where they were deployed before Election Day events.