

News from Copenhagen

United States welcomes OSCE PA election observers



Former OSCE PA Vice-President Ben Cardin, Head of Mission Isabel Santos and Secretary General Spencer Oliver.



Head of Mission Isabel Santos (MP, Portugal) examines a sample ballot at a Washington, D.C. polling station, 4 November.



Hugues Hiltbold (MP, Switzerland) speaks with an activist outside a Washington, D.C. polling station, 4 November.

In a statement issued in Washington, D.C. on Wednesday, OSCE PA observers noted that the midterm elections in the United States were professionally administered but overshadowed by the increasing role of money.

“This country has once again demonstrated that its commitment to democracy is undiminished,” said Isabel Santos, leader of the OSCE PA observers. “However, the amount of money involved in campaigns has become truly staggering. With certain individuals and groups now spending millions on elections – amounts wildly beyond the capacity of average citizens – there is increasing inequality in the process.”

The increasing role of money in political campaigns threatened to overshadow the real issues at stake in the elections. While the elections benefitted from extensive media coverage, with diverse and critical analysis of many aspects of the campaigns, the actual interest of the public appeared limited.

The OSCE PA deployed a limited election observation mission to the United States of America following an invitation by the United States Government in line with OSCE commitments. On election day, the U.S. State Department issued a statement officially welcoming the OSCE PA observers. OSCE PA observers were warmly welcomed at polling stations throughout the day and experienced good co-operation at every level. The mission, headed by Isabel Santos (MP, Portugal), included parliamentarians from 18 OSCE countries.

The two main parties’ campaigns were widely covered in the media, although interlocutors noted that much of the focus was on campaign funding and polling data rather than substantive policy issues.

“The campaign was active and competitive, but often with negative advertising and mutual accusations lowering the quality of debate and turning voters off. Discussion of the real policy challenges facing the country suffered as a result,” said Santos.

The ability of independent special interest groups to produce and air campaign-style advertisements without disclosing their sources of funding limited the ability of voters to judge the quality and accuracy of the content. This lack of transparency

undermined the ability of legally mandated bodies to provide accountability. Further, the purely legalistic interpretation of what constitutes co-ordination between campaigns and political action committees undermined the legal framework intended to bring transparency to campaign spending.

The legal framework governing elections in the United States is highly decentralized, with most of the key legislation at the state level. While the laws are well understood and the elections are professionally administered, the decentralized system results in varied access for both contestants and voters to the electoral system.

A number of high-profile judicial rulings as well as legislative changes in recent years have significantly impacted the framework governing elections, including in the politically sensitive fields of campaign finance, redistricting and identification requirements. The observers welcomed increasing efforts to facilitate voting through early balloting and mail-in voting. They expressed concern regarding requirements in some states that voters present photo identification in cases where the authorities do not freely and readily provide such identification.

“Governments have a responsibility to facilitate voting for their population, and I hope that efforts will continue to make access as simple as possible for all American citizens. The requirement in some states that voters must first acquire photo identification can potentially inhibit voting by some, particularly those at lower socio-economic levels,” said Santos.

Voting rights of felons and ex-felons are determined by state law and the content of these laws varies broadly. The United States, as all OSCE countries, has committed itself to guaranteeing universal and equal suffrage to all adult citizens. The lack of voting rights for felons, including permanent disenfranchisement in some states, is at odds with this commitment, as is the lack of a voting representative in Congress for citizens in the District of Columbia.

The limited election observation mission included parliamentarians from 18 countries. Following extensive briefings by election experts and practitioners in Washington, on election day the observers visited a limited number of polling stations in Washington, D.C., Maryland and Virginia.