



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

The OSCE and election observation

The Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE) is the world's largest regional security Organization, bringing together 57 countries known as "participating States" from Europe, Central Asia and North America, including the United States. The OSCE promotes security, democracy, and human rights, including by observing elections in participating States, which have committed themselves to uphold the key principles of democratic elections: universality, equality, transparency, vote secrecy, accountability, fairness, and respect for fundamental rights and freedoms.

As the main OSCE institution responsible for election observation, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) assesses the degree to which elections meet OSCE commitments and other international obligations and standards for democratic elections, as well as for their compliance with national legislation. Since its establishment in 1991, ODIHR has been invited to send observers to more than 350 elections, in 56 OSCE participating States. Already this year it has carried out activities in Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Italy, Hungary, Montenegro, Russia, Slovenia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, and plans to observe a number of elections yet to come, including in Sweden and the United States.

Election observation is an important part of efforts by the international community to promote democratic elections as part of broader democratic development, including the promotion of respect for human rights and the rule of law. It is a tool for assessing whether electoral processes meet international standards and commitments for democratic elections, while recognizing that it is the citizens of a country who ultimately determine the credibility and legitimacy of that process.

The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) will observe the 6 November mid-term congressional elections in the United States

As an OSCE member, the United States has invited ODIHR to observe its elections many times in the past. This will be the eighth set of elections that ODIHR has observed in the United States. The decision to send a limited election observation mission (LEOM) is based on the recommendation of a [needs assessment mission](#), carried out by a team of election experts who visited the United States in May. The LEOM will consist of a core team of experts, based in Washington, D.C., as well as a team of long-term observers who will meet with electoral stakeholders across the country. The observers will arrive in the beginning of October.



Questions & Answers about the ODIHR Observation of the 2018 Mid-Term Congressional Elections in the United States

Why is ODIHR observing these elections?

The United States is a participating State (member) of the OSCE and has committed itself to promoting and ensuring consistent, high standards for democratic elections, as have all other participating States. To promote this, OSCE participating States have agreed to invite international observers to follow their elections. This is why ODIHR received an invitation from the United States government to observe. In 2015, the National Association of Secretaries of State renewed its 2010 resolution, welcoming “OSCE international election observers from the OSCE member countries to observe elections in states where allowed by state law.”

The United States is one of the world’s oldest democracies. Does it need international observers to assess how it conducts democratic elections?

The United States, indeed, has a long-standing tradition of democratic elections, as well as a tradition of inviting international observers. Election observers do not interfere with the election process in any way. They only observe the process and do not monitor or police elections. No electoral system or process is perfect. Past [elections](#) have shown that there are areas where improvements can be made. ODIHR is one of the leading election observation institutions in the world, with extensive experience gained through the observation of more than [350](#) elections across 56 countries. On the basis of its experience and expertise, ODIHR can identify possible shortcomings and make recommendations about how to address them.

On what basis are elections assessed?

The basis for our assessment will be the OSCE commitments outlined in the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document and other international obligations and standards for democratic elections, as well as federal and state legislation. State legislation is particularly important, given the specific role in organizing elections that is afforded to the states in the U.S. Constitution.

How many observers will be sent to follow the elections?

In addition to a core team of some 12 to 15 election analysts, based in Washington, D.C., the OSCE participating States have been asked to provide 100 long-term observers (LTOs) to follow the electoral process countrywide at the state level. The ODIHR mission will work closely with observers from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, who expect to deploy some 100 members of parliaments in OSCE countries to observe election day procedures across the country.

What will the observers observe?

LTOs are assigned to work in teams of two, with each team composed of observers from different countries. During their work, LTOs meet with various state officials, as well as representatives of political parties, civil society and the media, and report the information gathered to the core team. They will also observe election day procedures at a limited number of polling stations. After the elections, they compile their observations into a report which they share with the United States government and the public.

How do you decide where the observers will be deployed?

ODIHR aims to ensure balanced geographical coverage in its election observation, taking into account the different electoral laws and practices across the United States. Observers will be deployed to a broad variety of states to ensure this coverage.



Is there anything election authorities should do to prepare for observers?

Sharing materials including basic facts about the elections in their particular state can be very useful for observers. This may include, for example, the number of voters, methods of voter registration and identification, candidate registration information, the composition of electoral boards, election timeline, early voting methods, the use of electronic voting systems, the number and location of polling stations, and any requirements to register as an observer on election day.

Given the range of countries from which the observers come, are they all qualified to assess elections in a long-standing democracy like the United States?

The OSCE includes a broad variety of countries; some with long-standing traditions of democratic elections, and others that have only relatively recently begun their transition to democracy. The experts in the core team in Washington are recruited directly by ODIHR and are leading international experts in their field. Most LTOs are “seconded” by participating States, i.e., they are selected and have their expenses paid for by the governments of their countries. This is standard ODIHR practice. The diversity of countries from which the observers come protects the observation mission from being dominated by observers from any one country, or from one group of countries. Most importantly, observers do not represent their respective governments. They are thoroughly briefed by ODIHR, are obliged to follow ODIHR’s election observation methodology, and are bound by ODIHR’s code of conduct for election observers. Observers must meet the existing visa requirements of any country they are entering for election observation. ODIHR election observation is funded by voluntary contributions of the 57 participating States of the OSCE.

Has ODIHR observed previous elections in the United States?

Yes, ODIHR has observed elections on seven previous occasions, dating back to 2002, and most recently the 2016 general elections. All ODIHR reports on United States elections can be found on the ODIHR website: <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/usa>.

What was ODIHR’s assessment of the last elections in the United States?

In its final report for the 2016 general elections, ODIHR concluded that the elections “were highly competitive and demonstrated commitment to fundamental freedoms of expression, assembly and association.” At same time, the report noted that suffrage rights were not guaranteed for all citizens, leaving sections of the population without the right to vote. The report said that, while elections were administered by competent and professional staff, including on election day, “recent legal changes and decisions on technical aspects of the electoral process were often motivated by partisan interests, adding undue obstacles for voters.”

Does ODIHR support the United States in the follow-up of electoral recommendations?

ODIHR’s final reports include recommendations to the authorities on how electoral processes could be further improved and brought more closely in line with OSCE commitments. ODIHR regularly returns to the United States to discuss its recommendations with federal and state authorities, including at conferences of the National Association of Secretaries of State. Over the years, the United States has addressed many recommendations made by ODIHR, including in respect of voter registration, support to election administrators, early voting methods and new voting technologies. After these elections, ODIHR will be ready to continue its support to the United States.



Limited Election Observation Mission Timeline:

Early October – mission opening:

Core team of 12 to 15 experts based in Washington D.C.
Up to 100 long-term observers (LTOs) deployed across the country
ODIHR will be in contact in advance to arrange initial meetings for LTOs with the relevant Secretaries of State and other relevant stakeholders in the state.

7 November:

Presentation of preliminary findings and conclusions at a press conference in Washington D.C.

Approx. two months after the elections:

Publish final mission report with recommendations

Contact:

Radiwoje GRUJIĆ
OSCE/ODIHR Election Adviser/Desk Officer
for the United States
E-mail: radiwoje.grujic@odihr.pl
Phone: + 48 22 5200 681
www.osce.org/odihr/elections

Further Information

Video on ODIHR Election Observation:

<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/179516>.

ODIHR United States Needs Assessment Mission Report:

<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/usa/386292>.

All ODIHR United States reports:

<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/usa>.

ODIHR Election Observation Handbook:

<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/68439>.

Interested in observing elections in other countries on behalf of the United States?

Each year the United States sends more than 100 observers to join ODIHR's election observation missions in other countries. In the last year, this included 13 long-term and 188 short-term observers. For more information on how to observe elections in other countries, please visit:
<https://www.pae.com/career>.
ODIHR encourages all prospective observers to undertake its free online learning course, available at:
<http://www.odihrobserver.org/>.

More information

For detailed information about ODIHR's activities, or to read any of ODIHR's publications and reports, please visit www.osce.org/odihr

or contact ODIHR at:

OSCE Office for Democratic
Institutions and Human Rights
Public Affairs
ul. Miodowa 10
00-251 Warsaw
Poland

Phone: +48 22 520 0600
Fax: +48 22 520 0605
E-mail: office@odihr.pl
www.osce.org/odihr

