



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

# The OSCE and election observation

International 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 Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE) is the world's largest regional security Organization, bringing together 57 members 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 key principles of democratic elections: universality, equality, transparency, vote secrecy, accountability, fairness, and the 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 300 elections, in 56 OSCE participating States, and already this year has carried out activities in Belarus, Iceland, Ireland, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Serbia and Russia, and plans to observe a number of elections yet to come, including in Georgia, Montenegro, and the United States.

## The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) will observe the 8 November general 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 seventh elections that the ODIHR has observed in the United States. The composition of the visiting election observation mission (EOM) is based on the recommendations of a needs assessment mission, a team of election experts, who visited the United States in May. The EOM will consist of a core team of experts, based in Washington, D.C., as well as long-term and short-term observers who will visit polling locations across the country. Long-term observers (LTOs) visit for six weeks, short-term observers (STOs) visit for 8–10 days.



## Questions & Answers about the ODIHR Observation of the 2016 United States General Elections

### 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 come 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 inviting international observers. Election observers do not interfere with the election process in any way. They are there only to observe – they 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 300 elections across 56 countries. On the basis of its experience and expertise, ODIHR can identify possible shortcomings and make recommendations on 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, and 400 short-term observers (STOs) to follow Election Day proceedings at polling stations. 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 and STOs are assigned to work in teams of two and, as a general rule, each team is 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 on their findings. STOs observe Election Day proceedings, usually visiting up to 10 polling stations. After the election, 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 coverage in its election observation. Observers will be deployed to a variety of states to ensure this coverage.

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

A number of materials can be very useful for sharing with observers, including basic facts about the elections in their particular state (for example, the number of voters, methods of voter registration and identification, the composition of electoral boards, election timeline, absentee voting methods, the use of electronic voting machines, 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. All ODIHR observers – except the experts in the core team in Washington – 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 the 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 not funded by the United Nations and is supported by voluntary contributions of the 57 participating States of the OSCE.

### Has the OSCE/ODIHR observed previous elections in the United States?

Yes, ODIHR has observed elections on six previous occasions, dating back to 2002, and most recently the 2012 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 2012 general elections (<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/99573?download=true>), ODIHR concluded that the elections “took place in a competitive environment and were administered in a professional manner. However, decisions on technical aspects of the electoral process were often unduly politicized.” The report said that, while the elections were generally characterized by broad public confidence, “further steps should be taken to improve the electoral process, in areas such as voting rights, the accuracy of voter lists, campaign finance transparency, recount procedures, and access of international election observers.” The report included recommendations to the authorities on how electoral processes could be improved and brought more closely in line with OSCE commitments.



## Election Observation Mission Timeline:

### 3 October – mission opening:

Core team of 12–15 experts based in Washington DC, led by Ambassador Audrey Glover  
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 interlocutors in the state.

### 4 November:

Up to 400 short-term observers nationwide for election day, joined by some 100 Members of Parliaments from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly

### 9 November:

Presentation of preliminary findings and conclusions  
Approx. two months after the elections:  
Publish final mission report with recommendations

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### Further Information

Video on OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation:  
<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/179516>.  
OSCE/ODIHR United States Needs Assessment Mission Report:  
<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/usa/246351?download=true>.  
All OSCE/ODIHR United States reports:  
<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/usa>.  
OSCE/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 the OSCE/ODIHR's election observation missions in other countries. In the last year, this included 24 long-term and 127 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](http://www.osce.org/odihr)

or contact ODIHR at:

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