

Frequently Asked Questions About Election Observation Missions

How many elections has The Carter Center observed?

The Center has observed more than 110 elections in 39 countries since 1989. In addition, the Center has sent smaller teams of experts to assess key aspects of scores of other elections around the world, including the 2018 Zimbabwe election.

How big is a typical election observation mission?

Sizes vary but typically a Carter Center delegation ranges from 40 to 120 accredited observers, including Carter Center staff.

What is The Carter Center's status in Zimbabwe?

The Carter Center was invited to observe the Aug. 23 general elections by the government of Zimbabwe and is accredited by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission. Since deploying in late July, the team has established regular working relations with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Zimbabwean Election Commission.

What do international observers do?

Many people think election observation is about watching people vote on election day. That's only one part of it. Before short-term observers arrive to observe voting, counting, and tabulation, the Center assembles a core team of experts and long-term observers to analyze election laws, the work of election administration, and campaign rules and behavior, election dispute processes, and whether fundamental freedoms associated with voting and civic participation are being upheld.

They hold countless meetings — with political party representatives, election officials, journalists, and members of civil society. They observe political rallies. They analyze social media. They also stay after the election to observe the final tabulation and publication of results, and any electoral disputes and their resolution.

The goal is to assemble a comprehensive and accurate assessment of the entire electoral process.

What sort of standards do observers use when assessing an election?

Observers assess the electoral process against a country's own election laws and against regional and international obligations and standards as outlined in relevant treaties, conventions, and inter-governmental political agreements. In the case of Zimbabwe, these include obligations accepted through the Southern African Development Community, the African Union, and various U.N. conventions, among others

Do international observers interfere with the election process — and do they have any authority to certify elections or overrule election results?

No. Election observers follow a strict code of conduct that prohibits them from interfering in any part of the electoral process. They are present to observe and to report on what they witnessed. They simply issue their assessment of the process, what went well, and what could be improved.

How can having international observers present be helpful?

Fundamentally, election observation is about providing transparency and objective information and analysis about election processes. In that way, observers can help facilitate peaceful, democratic, and credible elections, and offer recommendations for improvement. Observation missions commend the parts of electoral processes that are functioning well, highlight areas that fall short of standards or legal requirements, and provide constructive recommendations for improving them. Their reports can provide information that might bolster the legitimacy of successful electoral processes and increase public confidence in them. In addition, the presence of observers can sometimes ease citizens' fears of election-related intimidation and violence. Observer reports also can attract attention to poorly conducted elections, and possibly deter politically motivated misconduct while encouraging greater transparency.

What sort of principles and guidelines do credible international election observers adhere to?

The Carter Center conducts its work in strict accordance with recognized international and regional principles and guidelines for election observation, including the Guidelines and Principles Governing Democratic Elections issued by the Southern African Development Commission and the Declaration of Principles for International Observation endorsed at the United Nations in 2005. These guidelines require all mission members to be neutral and non-biased in their work, to respect the laws and regulations of the host country, and to not interfere in the electoral process.

How will you let the public know what observers found?

The Carter Center typically issues preliminary findings two or three days after election day and shares those findings on cartercenter.org and on social media. Months later, it will issue a final report, which it will share with key stakeholders and make available on cartercenter.org.