The Observability of U.S. Elections Project

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NCSL Legislative Summit – August 2016
Overview

- The Carter Center’s work on elections
- What is election observation and how can it be helpful?
- The Carter Center/NCSL Collaboration
- Key Take-Aways
The Carter Center and Elections

• Founded by Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter in 1982
• 27 years of non-partisan, international election observation
• 102 (soon to be 103) elections observed in 39 countries
• 3-5 missions a year based on invitations to observe
• Work with other organizations on setting standards for good election observation
  • Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation

• The Carter Center does not observe U.S. Elections
What is Nonpartisan Election Observation?

The process by which observers who are not affiliated with political parties or special interest groups make objective, data-driven assessments of the electoral process.

- Training and accrediting observers
- Observing (not interfering in) some or all stages of election
- Systematically collecting and analyzing data
- Providing information to election administrators, legislatures, and the public on their findings

**Goal**: Improving the electoral process
What are the benefits of nonpartisan observation?

Electoral Integrity

Public Trust

Citizen Participation
Election Observation in the U.S.

- Election observation in the U.S. is complex.
- In 1990, the U.S. signed the OSCE/CSCE Copenhagen Document.
- In 2016, the OSCE and the OAS will deploy international observers to the United States.
- There are many citizen based organizations that conduct election observation in the United States.
The Carter Center U.S. Elections Project

Our questions:

- Who can observe what, where in the United States?
- How is observation regulated?
Research: The Carter Center and NCSL

Focus
This study examines the regulations and practices that govern election observation in the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Approach
- 50-state statutory research, partnering with NCSL’s Elections and Redistricting team
- Website to present research and findings
Research Methodology

Groups that observe U.S. elections
- Partisan citizen observers
- Nonpartisan citizen observers
- International nonpartisan observers
- Academic observers

Key Questions
- Statutory specifications
- Access to different stages of election
- Accreditation procedures
- States’ experiences with observers
Research Methodology... and Challenges

Election codes

- Interviews
- Academics
- Partisan and Nonpartisan observers
- International experts

Poll worker and Observer Handbooks

- News Articles

Election directors

- County Websites
- State Websites
## Summary of Findings

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<th>Partisan Citizen Observers</th>
<th>Nonpartisan Citizen Observers</th>
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<td>Almost all states, with a few exceptions, have statutory provisions for partisan citizen election observers. It is common practice for political parties and candidates to appoint poll watchers and/or challengers to observe elections.</td>
<td>35 states + DC allow citizen nonpartisan observers to be present at elections. This includes explicit access in statute, access in practice, and public access to observe the elections.</td>
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<td>Of these, 9 states + DC have explicit statutory provisions to allow for nonpartisan citizen observers.</td>
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<td><strong>International Nonpartisan Observers</strong></td>
<td><strong>Academic Observers</strong></td>
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<td>At least 33 states + DC allow international nonpartisan observers to be present at elections. This includes explicit access in statute, access in practice, and public access to observe the elections.</td>
<td>16 states + DC have permitted academic observers in recent elections, although these observers are rarely named in statute.</td>
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<td>Of these, 6 states + DC have explicit guidance in statute or rule to allow for international nonpartisan observers.</td>
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What else we know...

- Levels of access vary by state, observer type, and which stage of the election observers seek to watch.

- Several states do not specify rules for observers.

- No statutory specification does not mean “no access.”

- Good relationships between election administrators and observer groups is a factor in determining access.
NCSL and Carter Center Webpages

To learn more about The Carter Center and NCSL’s research on election observers, visit NCSL’s webpages:

“Policies for Election Observers”

“International Election Observation Abroad and at Home”
4 Key Take-Aways

• Elections belong to the people

• Non-partisan, data driven observation can help improve the voting experience

• Observation of elections by anyone is a two-way street – information should flow both ways, and with the ability to observe comes responsibility

• Certainty about the regulatory framework for observation is beneficial to everyone, and can help institutionalize trust.
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