

Observers: freedoms respected in US elections characterized by intolerant rhetoric



Christine Muttonen and Makis Voridis observing in Washington.

The 8 November general elections in the United States were highly competitive and demonstrated commitment to fundamental freedoms of expression, assembly and association, OSCE observers said Wednesday. The presidential campaign was characterized by harsh personal attacks, as well as intolerant rhetoric, particularly by one candidate, said the statement delivered by Christine Muttonen, Special Co-ordinator and leader of the short-term OSCE observer mission, at a press conference in Washington.

“Yesterday’s elections followed a particularly divisive campaign, but Americans in high numbers took the opportunity to freely choose their leadership,” said Muttonen. “Recent legal changes and limitations on some citizens’ rights added unnecessary obstacles for voters, but I’m pleased that the casual talk of ‘vote-rigging’ during the campaign proved to be just that – talk.”

Diverse media coverage allowed voters to make an informed choice. Recent changes to election laws and decisions on technical aspects of the process were often motivated by partisan interests, causing undue obstacles for voters, and suffrage rights are not guaranteed for all citizens, leaving many sections of the population without the right to vote, the statement says. These elections were administered

by competent and professional staff, including on election day, which was assessed positively by the observers, despite instances of long queues and malfunctioning voting equipment.

Variations in rules make it cumbersome for third-party or independent candidates to register across all states for presidential elections, and the two such candidates in these elections drew minimal attention.

“The highly decentralized approach to elections here means that it is almost better to think of this as 50 different elections. Even key issues like whether prisoners can vote and what ID voters need to have varies from one state to the next, and this lack of country-wide standards is a weakness,” said Makis Voridis, Head of the OSCE PA delegation.

In 2013, provisions of the Voting Rights Act were struck down, removing a timely and effective safeguard for the protection of rights for racial and linguistic minorities. As a result, a wide range of ongoing electoral litigation, including on voter identification, continued up until election day, generating confusion among voters and election officials, the statement says. Voter identification rules are politically divisive and vary from state to state, the observers noted.

The OSCE PA delegation consisted of 104 parliamentarians and staff from across Europe and Canada, and worked closely with the mission of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, led by Amb. Audrey Glover. OSCE PA observers, supported by eight staff members of the International Secretariat, including Chief of Staff Andreas Baker and Secretary General Roberto Montella, deployed to nine states and the District of Columbia.

President Muttonen and SG Montella continue their trip in the US with a visit to UN headquarters in New York.

Secretariat prepares for 2017-18 meetings

Deputy Secretary General Gustavo Pallares and Head of Conference Services Odile Lelarge have recently conducted preparatory visits to the Principality of Andorra and to Germany in order to begin preparations with the host parliaments for the Assembly’s Autumn Meeting in 2017 and the 27th Annual Session in 2018, respectively. From 26 to 28 October Lelarge and Pallares met with the Delegation and staff of the Andorran Parliament to co-ordinate the necessary preparations for the 2017 Autumn Meeting which will be held in the in Andorra la Vella from 3 to 5 October 2017.

In Berlin on 31 October and 1 November the two staff followed a thorough programme of meetings organized by the staff of the German Bundestag in preparation for the Assembly’s 27th Annual Session which will be held in July 2018 in the premises of the German Bundestag in Berlin. Both parliaments will be hosting PA meetings for a second time.

Kanerva participates in election seminar

Ilkka Kanerva, OSCE PA President Emeritus and Special Co-ordinator of the OSCE’s short term observers of the recent Russian elections, delivered an address on 2 November at an OSCE/ODIHR seminar in Vienna on election observation and follow up of recommendations. He underlined the importance of elections in maintaining and developing a democratic society, particularly given growing disillusionment with established political norms.

“One of our major challenges today is how to deal with the crisis of democracy itself. Low turnout and the inability to form governments are signs of growing disbelief in the very system that was meant to give everyone a voice,” said Kanerva.

Special Representative Amb. Andreas Nothelle also spoke, emphasizing that election observers are not mandated to validate or invalidate the results of an election.