

## **US elections largely meet electoral reform targets and highlight continuing challenges**

WASHINGTON, D.C., 8 November 2006 - The electoral environment in the United States is characterized by a high level of transparency and professionalism of election officials. The electoral reforms, initiated by the 2002 Help America Vote Act (HAVA) appear to have been fully or largely implemented in most States. However, the introduction of new electronic voting systems has sparked nationwide debate regarding their reliability and voter confidence in the process.

Those are the main preliminary conclusions of an Election Assessment Mission, deployed by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) to follow the 7 November mid-term congressional elections at the invitation of the U.S. authorities.

"The overall election administration, including the processing of voters on election day, seemed professional and efficiently organized in most polling stations we visited," said Giovanni Kessler, who headed the mission.

"However, the swift introduction of Direct Recording Equipment (DREs), at times without a voter verifiable audit paper trail, appeared to negatively impact on voter confidence. This remains a challenge for the future."

Commenting on the campaign, Kessler raised his concern that a large number of political advertisements consisted of personalized attacks on opponents.

The OSCE/ODIHR assessment mission focused on the administration of the process, in particular on specific issues related to the 2002 Help America Vote Act (HAVA) including new voting technologies, voter registration, and absentee and provisional balloting. The analysts examined the long-standing issue of drawing district boundaries in conjunction with that of unopposed candidacies, which in recent years have impacted on the competitiveness of congressional races. Additionally campaign finance regulations and aspects of the media coverage of the election were reviewed.

The implementation of key HAVA requirements including the introduction of State-wide voter register data bases highlights the determination of election stakeholders to continue the electoral reform process. The recent renewal of specific provisions of the 1965 Voter Rights Act underscores the willingness of the US to further uphold voter rights. No provisions have, however, been made to address the long-standing issue of representation of those residents of Washington DC who are not eligible to vote in another State.

The broad range of activities of the Election Assistance Commission and the Federal Election Commission under their respective mandates form an integral part of reform efforts in the United States of America. Meanwhile the 2005 Carter-Baker report outlines a number of areas for further reform, including uniform system of voter identification combined with enhanced responsibilities of States to register citizens, as well as full access of all legitimate domestic and international observers to the process.

In a decentralized system of government, where elections for federal office are conducted under State law and additionally regulated by individual county, a variety of electoral practices coexist. Although most of the State's laws still do not provide for the presence of international observers invited by the US government, which is contrary to OSCE

commitments, members of the OSCE/ODIHR mission were granted access to all levels of election administration in most cases, including polling stations on election day.

The mission consisted of 18 international election analysts from 15 OSCE participating States who were deployed to 14 States to assess the electoral environment and procedures, meet representatives of State and local election administration, political parties and candidates, and civil society.

A limited number of polling stations in California, Connecticut, Louisiana, Maryland, New York, Tennessee, Ohio, Virginia and Washington were visited by OSCE/ODIHR, but no systematic observation of polling and counting procedures was conducted.

The OSCE/ODIHR will continue to follow the election process and will prepare its Final Report, including recommendations, approximately two months after its completion.

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Information about previous OSCE/ODIHR election observations in the US, is available on <http://www.osce.org/odihr-elections/14676.html>*