

Introduction

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FROM THE LATE 1950s, when Latin American governments began inviting international election observation, we have arrived at a particularly exciting point in the history of international election monitoring.¹ International election observation, or monitoring, has become an international norm. As two books reviewed in this issue demonstrate, countries holding elections today are expected to invite international observers, and those that do not are often judged as undemocratic before their elections have even occurred. The wealth of observation experiences that helped to generate this norm provide us with opportunities for analysis and a real need for critical reflection. On one hand, the fact that international election observation has become the norm means that advocates and practitioners have less work to do when it comes to promoting observation and demonstrating its value. On the other hand, the normalization of international election observation means the activities of observer groups are under increased scrutiny as performance expectations are raised.

The fact that observers have conducted election observation missions (EOMs) in the United States in recent years is both evidence of the extent to which international observation has become a norm, and also one reason that readers who are focused on electoral laws and processes in the United States should still find this symposium interesting and useful.² The articles presented in this issue identify many of the strengths and limitations

of international election observation, which, at its core, attempts to support democratic electoral processes and provide accurate information on the extent to which governments around the world are honoring both domestic and international legal obligations to provide their citizens with democratic representation. The United States' long history with democratic elections notwithstanding, the decentralized nature of election administration in the U.S., and recent controversies surrounding issues like voter identification and voter fraud, make the questions of procedural fairness and democratic representation that international election observers have been tackling for decades relevant for the U.S. context.

Public opinion surveys have found that a substantial portion of the U.S. population believes election fraud is common, and the Supreme Court has argued that perceptions of election fraud could discourage honest voters from participating in elections.³

¹It should be noted that these early requests from Cuba and Costa Rica were unsuccessful. Costa Rica's 1962 elections, observed by a delegation from the Organization of American States, are widely cited as the first where international election observers were present (Hyde 2012). One instance of election observation can be found before the era of the modern nation-state, when a European commission established by the Treaty of Paris observed elections in the newly unified territories of Moldova and Wallachia following the Crimean War in 1857 (Kelly 2012).

²Monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have been conducting EOMs in the U.S. since the 2002 election.

³Ansolahehere, Stephen and Nathaniel Persily. 2007. Vote Fraud in the Eye of the Beholder: The Role of Public Opinion in the Challenge to Voter Identification Requirements. *Harvard Law Review* 121: 1737–1774.

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These trends, coupled with even more recent research showing that fraud perceptions in the U.S. are contingent on partisan influence and affiliation, suggest that objective assessments of electoral procedures could be valuable for voter confidence in the U.S.⁴ The authors in this issue provide an excellent overview of the ways in which international election observers are continuing to improve the objectivity of their methodologies, offer insights into the latest innovations in the field, and identify continuing challenges.

Carroll and Davis-Roberts describe a methodology that has been developed by the Carter Center, a leading election monitoring organization, to help observers ground their assessments in countries' international obligations to democracy. This methodology aims to evaluate the extent to which elections reflect commitments governments have made by ratifying specific international treaties or through consistent practice (which can also become the basis of binding international law). The authors present a persuasive case for how this methodology can improve the transparency and standardization of the monitoring process across different EOMs, but they still caution that each election will need to be evaluated in light of the specific context in which it occurs.

Munoz-Pogossian also describes the development of an observer methodology with its basis in international obligations. This methodology has been developed by the Organization of American States (OSA), which also has a long and distinguished record of election observation, to assess the specific issue of gender equity in elections. The promotion of gender equity is consistent with a number of legal commitments made by member states in the OAS, but the author argues that very few governments and organizations have focused any specific attention on gender equity in making assessments of the democratic quality of elections. The innovations described here represent an attempt to rectify previous neglect of gender equity, and the results from preliminary implementation of this methodology uncover striking information about gender inequity in many "democratic" elections. Furthermore, this evidence shows how the implementation of a standard observer methodology can allow for interesting comparisons across different electoral contexts that might be used to inform future policy recommendations.

Kabli's piece on Egypt offers an insightful example of exactly the kinds of contextual factors that Carroll

and Davis-Roberts caution observers must still take into account even as they improve the objective standards by which they gauge elections. In providing detailed information from recent election events in Egypt, this piece makes two important points: one regarding the connection (or possible disjuncture) between democratic electoral procedures and a genuine spirit of democracy; and the second regarding the ways that popular sentiment might influence perceptions of even the more basic procedural issues. This article is an excellent reminder of many of the challenges that observers will face when conducting EOMs in countries where the spirit as much as the letter of the law may still be in question.

Finally, Tuccinardi and Balme provide an excellent overview of methods within the community of international election observers to improve their observation methods and offer a glimpse of the future of election monitoring. They argue that international election observers are going to be hard-pressed to provide comprehensive observation of electoral processes outside of the narrow window of election campaigns and election day—something that has become increasingly necessary as governments adjust their electoral manipulation to the presence of EOMs. Here Tuccinardi and Balme see domestic, citizen-based observer groups as fulfilling a critical role—the same kinds of domestic groups that Kabli references as providing oversight in the case of Egypt. Tuccinardi and Balme highlight recent efforts to strengthen the mandate of these citizen observer groups, noting that they are often the source of much of the innovation that is subsequently diffused through the international election observer community. These authors argue that, with the exception of post-conflict situations where civil society may need time to rebuild, the future of election observation will be led by citizen observation groups, with international monitors playing a more supportive role.

Thus, those interested in election integrity around the world will find, in these contributions, an excellent overview of global efforts to improve international election monitoring and important insights into the question of what international election observers "can and can't do."⁵ Nearly all of the

⁴Beaulieu, Emily .n.d. From Voter ID to Party ID: How Political Parties Affect Perceptions of Election Fraud in the U.S.

⁵This reference is from Hyde and Kelly's (2011) piece in *Foreign Affairs*.

authors discuss some aspect of recent international efforts at improving election monitoring, from the *Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation* developed by the United Nations and the National Democratic Institute in 2005 and endorsed by over 42 organizations today to the more recent (2012) *Declaration of Global Principles for Non-Partisan Election Observation and Monitoring by Citizen Organizations*, and several of the pieces discuss impressive innovations in the field from considerations of gender equity to use of new technologies such as open-source, geospatial crowdsourcing software to provide real-time data on election fraud and violence. For readers who are most

concerned with the U.S. electoral context, our hope is that many of the innovations described here—and the underlying issues related to objective assessments of election quality—will encourage critical reflection on our own elections and what we might learn from 50 years of international election observation.

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