

The Observers Observed

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[*The Rise of Election Monitoring*](#)

The scenario by now is familiar. Elections are announced in a politically transitional country of importance to the international community, elections that look as if they will be pivotal to the country's democratic prospects. Several months before the vote, the first foreign observers arrive, a few people from the United States or Western Europe who settle in to monitor the electoral process from start to finish. Around the same time, a small team of Western technical advisors sets up shop in the country to assist the national election commission with its task of administering the elections. After the electoral process gets under way, with candidates registering and the campaign starting, several preelectoral survey missions arrive from abroad. These teams assess the political climate, the administrative preparations, and the early campaign period. They then issue reports--which are much debated in the country under scrutiny--calling attention to deficiencies in the process and exhorting the political authorities to take remedial steps.

The campaign intensifies, and more foreign observers join the early arrivals. As the administrative preparations advance, foreign technical assistance to the election commission also expands. A week before the elections, the international observation effort moves into high gear. Delegations of foreign observers arrive daily, a stream that becomes a flood late in the week as hundreds or thousands of observers descend on the country. They fill the hotels and restaurants in the capital, as [End Page 17] well as the schedules of the election commissioners and the major candidates. The day before the vote, the observers fan out around the country, overwhelming the local airlines, renting every four-wheel-drive vehicle available, and hiring every plausible interpreter in sight.

Election day finally arrives. The observers rise early and travel in small groups from polling station to polling station, posing questions to poll workers and watching people vote. The day is long, but eventually the polls close and the vote counting begins. Most of the foreign observers stay for a few hours at polling stations to watch the laborious ballot-counting process get under way before they go to bed or head back to the capital. A few hardy souls in the observer ranks stay up all night to watch the counting.

The next morning, though the results are not yet in, the larger observer delegations hold press conferences in hotels in the capital, each racing to be the first to go public with its assessment. Their initial statements released (and often already reported on local television), many of the foreign observers leave that afternoon, jostling for seats on long-overbooked flights out. Within a day or two, most are gone, already back at home sharing their experiences with friends and co-workers. A few stay on, usually those who arrived months before, to monitor the eventual release of the official results and the disposition of claims by the losing parties of electoral wrongdoing. Weeks or even months later, the major observer groups release their final reports, although the election is by then old news.

This scenario could be Nicaragua, Bosnia, or Russia in 1996, South Africa a few years back, or any of the other recent high-profile cases of countries attempting transitions to democracy. International election observation has mushroomed in the past 15 years, paralleling the global spread of democratization. ¹ Not all transitional elections receive the kind of intense scrutiny described above, but international observers are now present at most elections that appear significant for a country's democratic development. Election observation is the best-established, most visible, and often best-funded type of democracy-related assistance. The United States is a major source of election observers, who are sent by groups specializing in democracy promotion such as the Carter Center, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, and the International Republican Institute as well as by myriad other nongovernmental organizations with interests in particular regions or countries. ² Countless observer delegations also originate in Europe, sponsored by the European Union, the Council of Europe, European governments, parliamentary groups, political parties, and many other European associations and organizations. A number of international organizations have also gotten into the act, including the United Nations, the Organization of American States (OAS), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the Organization of African Unity. **[End Page 18]**

All this activity has clearly had positive effects on many elections and represents an important evolutionary step by the international community in promoting the principle of democracy around the world. At the same time, however, there lurks the troubling sense that election-observation efforts often involve as much show as substance. It is difficult to get close to a major international election-observation effort without feeling that something is amiss in the zoo-like atmosphere on election day, and that many of the observers are motivated as much by vanity and a tourist's taste for the exotic as by a serious commitment to supporting democracy abroad. Furthermore, government officials, journalists, and others have made a habit of misunderstanding and misusing election-observation efforts in ways that end up deforming the observation efforts themselves. It is time, therefore, to step back and take stock of this now ubiquitous but still relatively unexamined feature of contemporary international affairs.

Positive Contributions

A basic function of international election observation is detecting--and, if possible, deterring--electoral fraud. Election observers have indeed helped draw attention to fraud in many countries. Two prominent such cases occurred in the 1980s in the Philippines and Panama. U.S. observers cried foul, to great effect, when President Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines tried to steal the 1986 "snap" election and when General Manuel Antonio Noriega did the same for his chosen candidate in Panama in 1989. More recently, international observers usefully highlighted substantial problems with the 1996 presidential election in Armenia and parliamentary elections in Albania, as well as with Haiti's local and parliamentary elections of 1995 and the Dominican Republic's parliamentary elections of 1994.

Election observers not only publicize electoral fraud but sometimes help prevent it. Out of fear of being caught by foreign observers, political authorities may abandon plans to rig elections. Of course, few foreign officials would readily acknowledge having had such plans, making it hard to measure precisely the deterrent effect of electoral observation. Yet that effect should not be underestimated. In reality, the ability of many observer missions to detect fraud, beyond blatant ballot-stuffing, is weak. Very well designed observation efforts mounted by experienced organizations (with extensive preelection coverage, close coordination with domestic monitors, and a parallel vote count) do have a chance of catching the subtler forms of wrongdoing, such as manipulation of voter-registration lists, strategic ballot-tampering, and small but significant

distortions in vote tabulation.³ But the numerous teams of inexperienced observers who stay for only a short time around election day are unlikely to see beyond the obvious. Yet government officials [End Page 19]planning elections in transitional countries often overestimate the ability of foreign observers to detect fraud, at least the first time they deal with them. Thus the deterrent effect of foreign observers can be substantial.

In addition to detecting and deterring fraud, election observation, if properly structured, can help hold together shaky electoral processes in transitional countries. The sustained engagement of international groups can encourage a wary citizenry to take the electoral process seriously and participate in it. The involvement of international observers may also convince skeptical opposition politicians that competing in the elections is preferable to engaging in civil disobedience or violence. Last year in the Dominican Republic, for example, politicians opposed to President Joaquín Balaguer were steered away from boycotting or otherwise disrupting the national elections, largely by the assurance that credible international observers would monitor the process. Observers can help keep an electoral process on track when an entrenched leader loses the election and then balks at giving up power. The presence of international observers at the 1990 Nicaraguan elections, for example, helped bring about President Daniel Ortega's acceptance of the results.⁴

More generally, international election observation has contributed greatly to the dissemination and strengthening of basic standards of election administration. For more than ten years, observers have stressed to election officials, politicians, and others in countries attempting democratic transitions that, for elections to gain international credibility, certain procedures must be followed: ballots must be counted at the polling stations and the results for each station posted at the site; measures must be taken to ensure that voters cast only one ballot; voter-registration lists must be posted in public areas before election day; poll workers must be trained; local political-party observers and domestic monitoring groups must be allowed to monitor the process; and so forth. In combination with extensive technical assistance to help election commissions effect such reforms, these efforts have led to significant improvements in the quality of many elections. They have also established a much broader recognition of a set of "best practices" concerning the administration of elections.

Election observation not only helps propagate standards for the conduct of elections, it advances the principle that holding genuinely competitive elections on a regular basis is an international norm. The right of people in every society to express their will through "periodic and genuine elections" is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 21.3) and other basic international human rights instruments.⁵ The right to elections was overlooked by most human rights advocates throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The political relativism of many in the human rights movement led to a disinclination to emphasize a right that seemed tied to a particular kind of political system. Moreover, in a period when numerous dictatorships were inflicting horrendous [End Page 20] violence on their citizens, human rights advocates naturally focused on more basic rights issues like torture and political murder.

With the recent increase in democratic transitions (or at least attempted transitions) in many parts of the world and with the end of the Cold War, the idea that elections are a political right rather than merely a political option has gained considerable ground internationally.⁶ By sending out more and more delegations to monitor elections in politically transitional countries, the established Western democracies have reinforced the basic idea that holding elections is something that civilized countries do. Like all internationally established political and civil rights, the right to elections is still often breached, but it is increasingly acknowledged as an important principle.

Although international election observation has developed considerably over the past decade and has helped improve elections in many countries, it is not a cure-all. Flawed or even fraudulent elections still occur frequently despite the presence of international observers. The massive involvement of foreign observers in the Nicaraguan presidential and parliamentary elections of October 1996, for example, failed to prevent numerous technical flaws in the voting process, a highly politicized and inefficient election commission, and an extremely slow and problematic vote-counting process.⁷ The extensive international support for the Bosnian elections of September 1996 was insufficient to ensure that they were free and fair. Observers noted--but could not forestall--the significant problems surrounding the Albanian parliamentary elections and the Armenian presidential elections of 1996.

In part this reflects the inevitable limitations of observing. Foreign observers cannot force profoundly polarized political factions to cooperate with one another. They cannot counter the deeply antidemocratic instincts of a strongman intent on holding on to power. And they cannot guarantee that the international community or individual nations will back up findings of electoral fraud with any punitive action. More generally, the continuation of problems with elections in many countries indicates that, despite significant evolution in recent years, international election observation still has a number of shortcomings.

To begin with, election observation has attracted too many groups, many of whom do amateurish work. For example, more than 80 different foreign groups observed the 1996 elections in Nicaragua.⁸ There is a small core of organizations with a serious commitment to high-quality election observation and assistance, including the two U.S. political-party institutes, the Carter Center, the International Foundation for Election Systems, the Democracy Promotion Unit of the OAS, the UN Electoral Assistance Unit, and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the OSCE. Many of the rest are "dabblers" who come in for high-profile elections with short-term, poorly prepared delegations. They obtain little information of any value. Their observers often behave in embarrassingly unprofessional, patronizing ways. They deluge election commissions with requests for briefings during the most critical period of administrative preparations. And they usually make hasty postelection statements that divert attention from the more important reports issued by the organizations with more experience and a longer-term presence. European parliamentary and political-party groups seem particularly inclined toward this sort of "electoral tourism," although the United States makes its own contributions, with a variety of nongovernmental groups that seem motivated to observe foreign elections--particularly in Latin America--by political curiosity or a desire to express solidarity. Like any high-growth industry, election observation has become hindered by an excess of supply.

Another problem is the disproportionate attention that observers tend to give to election day itself, which is actually just one part of a long process that also includes the passage of the election law, the registration of parties and candidates, the preparation of voter lists, media coverage of competing parties during the campaign, campaign financing, the adjudication of complaints lodged against the election commission, and so on. The more professional observer organizations have modified their programs over time to give more attention to such elements, though they still tend to devote too great a share of their resources to the balloting process. The less experienced organizations devote almost all of their attention to election-day events, undermining the efforts of more professional groups to promote a more balanced approach.

An overemphasis on election day often leads observers to produce overly favorable assessments of the electoral process. In many cases the mechanical aspect of the voting is reasonably fair but the preelection period is plagued by numerous problems, such as obstacles to the registration of certain

candidates, unequal access to the media, and the governing party's use of state resources to finance its campaign. Such problems have become increasingly common in the past few years. Although blatant electoral fraud still occurs, efforts by entrenched leaders to manipulate electoral processes to their advantage have become more subtle as such leaders have been socialized into the new world of global democracy and internationally observed elections. The distortions now usually occur during the run-up to the election rather than on voting day itself. Short-term observers focused on election-day events miss this story altogether. Even the groups that monitor the entire process tend to base their postelection statements primarily on election-day events. They often begin by praising the authorities and the citizenry for the relative orderliness of the elections and only touch briefly on the many problems observed during the preelection period, such as a biased election **[End Page 22]** commission, a lack of any serious civic-education efforts, grossly unfair campaign coverage on state television, or blatantly unequal resources.

The Russian presidential election of June 1996 exemplified this pattern. In general, the dozens of observer groups that collectively fielded well over a thousand foreign observers on election day issued ringing endorsements of the process, highlighting the lack of apparent fraud or widespread administrative problems with the voting. The fact that Boris Yeltsin's campaign almost certainly used significant state resources for its own purposes, benefited greatly from biased coverage on state television, paid journalists to write favorable stories, and used various other stratagems to ensure Yeltsin's victory received relatively little attention from the foreign observers. ⁹ This is not to say that the Russian elections were illegitimate, or not valuable to both Russia and the West. Yet the picture of the elections presented by the international observation effort was neither particularly revealing nor accurate.

A broader shortcoming of most observation efforts is that they give little attention to the deeper political functions and contexts of elections. An implicit assumption of most observers is that elections are perforce a good thing. Yet the experience of the past several years shows that elections in countries attempting democratic transitions are sometimes problematic. Elections may fail as a capstone of a conflict-resolution effort and trigger a return to civil conflict, as occurred in Angola in 1992 and Burundi in 1993. They may be a means of legitimating the power of an entrenched undemocratic leader who is able to make elections turn out in his favor without using too much fraud, as in Kazakhstan in 1995 or Gabon in 1993. Or elections may be part of a longer-term struggle for power that has little to do with democratic practices and outcomes, as in Pakistan in recent years.

In such situations, reporting on the technical conditions of the elections without confronting their deeper political function tells a dangerously incomplete story and risks legitimating undemocratic political processes. International election observation can thus end up feeding the broader tendency of the United States and other Western countries to push elections almost reflexively as a short-term solution to political problems of all sorts in countries racked with chronic instability, civil conflict, and other woes.

Elusive Standards

In addition to these methodological shortcomings, international election observation faces problems related to the standards it applies. It is widely believed in the international community that elections can be judged according to a clear standard of "free and fair." Indeed, what journalists, policy makers, politicians, and others usually expect from election observers after important transitional elections is a simple **[End Page 23]** answer to a basic question: "So, were they free and fair?" Paradoxically, the more experienced and professional an observer organization is, the more hesitant

it will be to provide a clear-cut answer.

As mentioned above, the growth of international election observation during the past ten years has done much to spread the idea of a set of "best practices" or specific criteria for electoral competition. Yet in many cases it is still difficult to render an overall judgment about whether a particular election is free and fair. If an election meets all or nearly all the criteria, it is clearly free and fair; if it violates nearly all of them, it is clearly not free and fair. Many elections in politically transitional countries, however, fall somewhere in between. There is no set answer to the question of how many specific shortcomings must be observed, and how serious they must be, before an election can be called "*not* free and fair." For example, what are we to make of an election that was fairly well organized on election day but featured problems with the registration of candidates and unequal access to the media, as well as occasional but serious incidents of harassment of opposition parties? Can such an election be judged free and fair? What about an election with a relatively open, equitable campaign but with major administrative disorganization in a few parts of the country on election day and evidence of manipulation of the vote counting in one major region?

There are no simple answers to such questions. The idea that there exists an unambiguous standard of "free and fair" that permits definitive judgments about profoundly complex transitional elections is an unhelpful illusion. As Jørgen Elklit and Palle Svensson conclude, "The phrase 'free and fair' cannot denote compliance with a fixed, universal standard of electoral competition: No such standard exists, and the complexity of the electoral process makes the notion of any simple formula unrealistic." [10](#)

The more seasoned election-observation organizations have come to understand this by dint of experience. They may refer to obviously problem-free elections as "free and fair" or to blatantly fraudulent elections as "not free and fair." For many transitional elections, however, they avoid those magic words, instead describing the positive and negative aspects of the process and leaving it to others to draw conclusions. Or they stick with more basic, and obviously subjective, judgments such as whether an election reflected the overall will of the people. The less experienced observer groups, less aware of the complexities of the "free and fair" standard, are more likely to offer the sound bite that journalists and others seek. In the process they hinder the efforts of more professional groups to present an accurate picture of elections that may have been sensitive, ambiguous, and complex.

A related problem is that international observers are often too easy on electoral wrongdoing. To be sure, they condemn blatantly fraudulent[**End Page 24**] elections. Yet they frequently go relatively lightly on elections that, while not obviously fraudulent, nonetheless have significant flaws. This results in part from observers' tendency to overemphasize election-day events at the expense of other elements of the process. There are other reasons as well. In elections in countries with little history of democracy, particularly in Africa and the former Soviet Union, foreign observers sometimes take the attitude, "Well, what can you expect?" The notion that it is important to offer at least some encouragement to societies that are struggling with the basics leads them to downplay serious problems.

Some groups find it difficult to criticize governments that have extended the courtesy of opening their doors to the observers. Intergovernmental organizations like the UN, the OSCE, and the OAS are understandably reluctant to direct harsh criticism at member states, although in the past several years the OSCE and the OAS have begun to overcome this tendency and to speak out forthrightly against electoral abuses. Observer organizations are sometimes involved in other assistance programs in the countries whose elections they are observing. Coming down hard on a flawed election can mean being shut out of that country altogether, a consideration that can weigh against

observers' taking a tough stance. After the National Democratic Institute issued a critical statement on the 1992 presidential elections in Cameroon, for example, the Cameroonian government made clear its disinclination to allow the group to do further work in the country.

Local political realities can also inhibit observers from expressing critical views of an election. Elections are sometimes held in an environment of great civil tension and potential conflict. A sharp condemnation by foreign observers of a flawed election could precipitate serious violence or political instability. Observers inevitably seek to avoid this outcome, even if it means soft-pedaling their findings.

Partiality and Other Problems

If international observers are often too lenient, they are also not always impartial. The image of objectivity that election observers cultivate is sometimes undeserved. Observers can and do pursue partisan political agendas, to the detriment of their work. Among U.S. observer groups, such divisions were often obvious during the Cold War: many ideological clashes occurred over accounts of elections in El Salvador and Nicaragua during the 1980s. The end of the Cold War has not eliminated this tendency. With regard to the June 1995 legislative and local elections in Haiti, it was hardly surprising that the official U.S. observer delegation, representing an administration intent on proving that its policy of establishing democracy in Haiti had been a success, reached a favorable conclusion about the elections, whereas the International [End Page 25] Republican Institute, affiliated with a political party harshly critical of the Clinton administration's policy toward Haiti, found much to condemn in the process. [11](#)

Partisanship among international election observers is by no means limited to U.S. groups. The findings of observer missions sponsored by European political parties or the party internationals--such as the Socialist International or the Liberal International--sometimes seem to reflect party allegiances, particularly in Eastern Europe and Latin America, where certain parties are linked in various ways to European counterparts. In the disputed Albanian parliamentary elections of May 1996, for example, OSCE observers publicly split over their assessment of the elections, at least in part along ideological lines. The faction taking the more critical line consisted primarily of representatives of a Norwegian left-of-center party whose participation in the observer effort was facilitated by the Socialist International in cooperation with the Albanian socialists, who were the principal aggrieved party in the elections.

A final shortcoming of international election observation is its underemphasis on domestic election monitors. Domestic election monitoring in transitional countries, which consists of efforts by nonpartisan civic groups as well as local political parties, has gained considerable ground in recent years. There are still cases in which international observers are clearly needed, such as first-time elections in highly polarized societies emerging from civil conflict. Yet domestic monitors can largely fulfill the need for observation in many transitional situations. They have played a significant role in elections in many countries, including Chile, South Africa, Nicaragua, Peru, the Dominican Republic, Romania, Bulgaria, Benin, Paraguay, Mexico, Panama, Bangladesh, Zambia, and the Philippines. [12](#)

Domestic election monitors, if properly organized and prepared, have important advantages over foreign observers. They can much more easily turn out in very large numbers, usually in the thousands. They know the political culture, the language, and the territory in question and consequently are capable of seeing many things that short-term foreign observers cannot. As citizens, they embody the crucial idea that the society in question should take primary responsibility

for improving its own political processes. Domestic monitoring often involves the establishment and development of substantial local organizations that stay in place after the elections are over, using their newly honed skills for civic education and other prodemocratic undertakings, in sharp contrast [End Page 26] to the "here today, gone tomorrow" nature of foreign observers. And domestic monitors can deliver much more "bang for the buck" than can foreign groups, given that their travel, accommodation, and other logistical costs are much lower.

Despite these significant strengths of domestic monitors, most international observer groups have done relatively little to support them. International observer organizations do sometimes work cooperatively with domestic groups where such groups already exist, but most have not invested substantial resources in supporting the formation, training, and development of local monitors. A major exception is the National Democratic Institute, which has a notable record of fostering domestic observation efforts in a number of countries and has done much to establish nonpartisan domestic monitoring as an accepted part of the international electoral scene.

This pattern of neglect in part reflects international observer groups' lingering fear that domestic monitors will prove incompetent and too caught up in local political affairs to be impartial. Clearly, this approach fails to acknowledge the frequent problems of amateurism and partiality among international groups themselves. It also ignores the many recent examples--of which Nicaragua is just one--of elections in which domestic observers have proved themselves capable of highly professional, nonpartisan work. There is another, equally important, reason for the neglect of domestic observation: many international groups prefer to send out their own high-profile, exciting missions around the world rather than engage in the unglamorous and painstaking work of helping local groups to do the work themselves.

Looking Ahead

The recent wave of international election observation has probably crested, but has not yet run its course. In Latin America, the first region where election observation became widespread, the need for international observers is diminishing as more and more countries regularize their electoral practices. International observers will, however, still have a role to play in a few countries in the region over the next several years, most notably Mexico and a few Caribbean and Central American states. Similarly, the hour for large-scale foreign observer missions in Central and Eastern Europe has passed, with the important exceptions of Albania, Bulgaria, and parts of the former Yugoslavia. In Asia, the utility of further election observation will depend largely on whether political openings occur in some of the region's currently nondemocratic countries, such as Burma, China, Indonesia, and Vietnam. With so many elections going awry in the former Soviet Union and sub-Saharan Africa, it appears that observers are still much needed in those regions. And if the Middle East ever decides to get serious about political liberalization, [End Page 27] foreign observers will undoubtedly expand their activities (to date limited) in that region.

Given that international election observation will continue for some time, it is worth considering how it can be improved. In general, the evolution away from short-term, in-and-out missions to longer-term, more comprehensive efforts should continue. In parallel fashion, observers must continue to strive for professionalism and adherence to high standards. They should work to counteract the pressures that lead observers to be too lenient in their assessments; take much greater pains to be impartial; and become warier of facile invocation of the often-misused "free and fair" standard. Observer groups must pay closer attention to the political setting of the elections that they observe, being careful not to perpetuate the flawed notion that early elections are desirable in every case. Finally, international observer organizations must devote more of their resources to building

up domestic monitoring groups and pressing for the acceptance of such groups by the international community.

The single most obvious solution to many of the problems of international election observation is a reduction in the number of international observation groups. Bluntly stated, the amateurs need to leave the field to the professionals. Bringing this about will not be easy given that there is not--nor should there be--a central body that decides who will observe each election. Donor agencies can help by resisting the temptation to overfund observation efforts for prominent elections. It is not clear, for example, why the U.S. government had to fund five separate U.S. observer missions to the 1996 Nicaraguan elections, in addition to the official U.S. delegation. Governments should resist the temptation to send symbolic observer teams to prominent transitional elections. Having 12 separate official European delegations (averaging five members each) in Nicaragua for the 1996 presidential election was an example of unnecessary observer clutter, especially given the presence of a large European Union delegation and more than 20 other European delegations made up of European parliamentarians, local politicians, and political activists. Some attrition may occur in the ranks of the foreign observers as the number of exciting breakthrough elections in such popular places as Chile, Poland, and South Africa declines relative to more ambiguous, problem-ridden elections in less fashionable places like Azerbaijan, Sierra Leone, and Pakistan. The current effort by the Stockholm-based International Institute for Democracy and Electoral [End Page 28] Assistance to establish a code of conduct for election observers may help to solidify basic professional standards for international election observation. [13](#)

Election-observation groups and their funders must take primary responsibility for improving election observation. Yet change can and should come from other sources as well. Government officials and members of the media frequently misunderstand and misuse election observers. Because they are among the most important consumers of the work of election observers, their mistaken approaches end up deforming the overall enterprise.

In important transitional elections, officials of governments with strong diplomatic ties to the country in question are often committed to helping ensure that the elections go reasonably smoothly. These governments frequently send observer delegations in the hope of producing an independent stamp of approval for the electoral process. Not surprisingly, these officials become alarmed if the observers uncover problems. Embassy officers of the interested governments respond to such situations by trying to "massage" the postelection statements of observer groups. They often attempt to persuade observers to tone down their criticisms and put the elections in what embassy officers like to call a "broader perspective"--in other words, concluding that they were, in effect, "not that bad considering the country's atrocious history." Such reeducation efforts start with the briefings that embassy officers give to observers when they arrive in the country and then take the form of insistent phone calls and emotional meetings in the often frenetic morning hours on the day after the election, when observers are finalizing their postelection statements. The less experienced groups are sometimes greatly influenced by such efforts. The more professional groups have learned to maintain a certain degree of independence. Yet given that the major observer groups are usually operating with government funds and relying to some extent on the services provided by their local embassy, such efforts are never completely ineffectual.

Another common--and equally problematic--idea entertained by government officials is that their country should send observers to a particular election in order to "show the flag." This assigns to observers the hollow and essentially inappropriate role of simply affirming their government's support for the electoral process in question. It detracts from the idea that the observers' mission is to uphold international standards rather than to advance bilateral policy interests. It leads to the sending of observers to elections where they are not needed. More generally, it works against the

more discriminating use of the relatively scarce resources available for election assistance.

Not only do government officials sometimes misuse observers, they also often misunderstand their capabilities and methods. Journalists are also guilty on this score. Officials concerned about a possibly shaky [End Page 29] electoral process in another country tend to overestimate the beneficial effects of observers. Often, they seem to envisage squads of objective, tough-minded outsiders descending on the local scene, nipping fraud in the bud and providing a certificate of good health, much like a team of incorruptible customs inspectors going through a shipment of dubious foreign meat. Journalists will report that international observers have blessed an election in some conflict-ridden foreign land, with little understanding of what those observers could actually accomplish, along with a naive assumption that observers can always be trusted.

Like election observers themselves, many government officials and journalists evaluating elections in transitional countries devote too much attention to voting day and too little to the rest of the electoral process. Journalists often behave the same way as inexperienced observers, flying in a few days before crucial elections, having a look around on voting day, then issuing proclamations the day after. The questions that officials and journalists pose to observer groups too often focus on whether the voting was calm and orderly, and whether ballot-stuffing or other obvious fraud was observed. They also attach too much importance to the concept of "free and fair" as a sharp dividing line. Both groups display a strong need to boil down the complexities of transitional elections into simple "either-or" judgments. And they try to force this need onto election observers. Finally, officials and journalists tend to give short shrift to the work of domestic monitors. They are often unfamiliar with the operation of such efforts and inclined to believe that domestic groups' conclusions will be biased. They want the word from the foreign observers, not the locals; they thus reinforce the tendency of many international organizations to give inadequate support to domestic monitoring programs.

Election observation will continue to be an important part of international politics for at least the next five to ten years. Its capacity to detect and deter fraud, and to reinforce shaky electoral processes, will be put to many hard tests in regions such as the former Soviet Union, Africa, and Asia. Election-observation groups must push themselves to further the professionalization of election observation that has begun to occur, and their efforts in this area must be supported by donors. At the same time, consumers of the work of observers, particularly government officials and journalists, must aim to improve their own understanding of the observers' roles. If these goals are faithfully pursued, election observation will continue to mature, and its already significant contributions to the spread of democracy around the world will increase.

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Notes

1. For a broader historical perspective on international election observation, see David Padilla and Elizabeth Houppert, "International Election Observing: Enhancing the Principle of Free and Fair Elections," *Emory International Law Review* 7 (Spring 1993): 73-132.

- [2.](#) The Washington-based International Foundation for Election Systems is a major actor in elections in politically transitional countries but concentrates more on technical assistance to election administrators than on election observation.
- [3.](#) On parallel vote counts, see Larry Garber and Glenn Cowan, "The Virtues of Parallel Vote Tabulations," *Journal of Democracy* 4 (April 1993): 95-107.
- [4.](#) On the broader issue of the role of international actors in keeping shaky political transitions on track, see Jennifer McCoy, "Mediating Democracy: A New Role for International Actors," in David Bruce, ed., *Security in a New World Order* (Atlanta: Georgia State University Press, 1992), 129-40.
- [5.](#) See Padilla and Houppert, "International Election Observing," 80-85.
- [6.](#) See Thomas Franck, "The Emerging Right to Democratic Governance," *American Journal of International Law* 86 (January 1992): 46-91.
- [7.](#) See Jennifer L. McCoy and Shelley A. McConnell, "Nicaragua: Beyond the Revolution," *Current History* 96 (February 1997): 75-80.
- [8.](#) Data on the Nicaraguan election observation were provided by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (Stockholm).
- [9.](#) On Yeltsin's campaign methods, see Lee Hockstader, "Yeltsin Paying Top Ruble for Positive News Coverage," *Washington Post*, 30 June 1996, A1; and European Institute for the Media, "Media and the Russian Presidential Elections" (Dusseldorf, 4 July 1996).
- [10.](#) Jørgen Elklit and Palle Svensson, "What Makes Elections Free and Fair?" p. 43 below. On the free and fair standard see also Guy S. Goodwin-Gill, *Free and Fair Elections: International Law and Practice* (Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1994); and Gregory H. Fox, "Multinational Election Monitoring: Advancing International Law on the High Wire," *Fordham International Law Journal* 18 (May 1995): 1658-67.
- [11.](#) U.S. Agency for International Development administrator Brian Atwood, who led the official U.S. observer delegation, described the 1995 Haitian elections as "a very significant breakthrough for democracy." By contrast, on the same day, the International Republican Institute criticized "the nationwide breakdown of the electoral process" in Haiti. State Department Briefing, 27 June 1995; International Republican Institute, "Haiti Election Alert," 27 June 1995.
- [12.](#) For an analysis of domestic observation efforts, see Neil Nevitte and Santiago A. Canton, "The Role of Domestic Observers," pp. 47-61 below.
- [13.](#) International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, "Draft Code of Conduct for the Ethical and Professional Discharge of Election Observation Activities" (Stockholm, 1996).