



The Case for Nonpartisan Election Observation

Growing sectors of the American public are increasingly distrustful of many of our democratic institutions, including political parties, mass media, and government officials. As citizen-led initiatives, nonpartisan election observation efforts have the potential to serve as independent and trusted sources of information. Assessments from trained nonpartisan election observers can build confidence in elections where warranted and can provide data-driven recommendations for reform, grounded in best practice, when election administration falls short.

A survey of 900 voters in Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Nevada, and North Carolina conducted by Public Opinion Strategies in May 2023 found that 83% of all respondents would “trust election systems more if they were monitored by objective nonpartisan observers.”¹ Similarly, a 2023 survey of registered Arizona voters conducted by Arizona State University found that the only institutions more trusted than mistrusted to provide election-related information were friends and family, universities, and outside election observers.² Research from Susan D. Hyde and colleagues in July 2022 found a positive effect on respondents’ willingness to accept the results of an election that their preferred candidate lost if they knew that nonpartisan observers had assessed the election positively first.³ The Carter Center has also witnessed this phenomenon in its decades of support to new and emerging democracies around the world.

The Carter Center and Nonpartisan Election Observation in the United States

Since 2020, The Carter Center has organized pilot programs to build acceptance and recognition for U.S. observation:

- In **Georgia** in 2020 and 2022, The Carter Center observed statewide risk-limiting audits, which use random statistical sampling to confirm the validity of announced results and issued public statements on the process. In 2022, The Carter Center also mobilized trained nonpartisan observers at voting locations in Fulton County during early voting and on election day; they monitored adherence to critical election procedures and produced a comprehensive assessment for the state’s bipartisan Performance Review Board.

"The thorough investigation ... conducted would not have been possible without the independent observation efforts of The Carter Center. ... Their assistance was invaluable, and their work was of the highest quality. The Performance Review Board is exceedingly grateful to The Carter Center for their time and effort."

— Ryan Germany, Georgia Performance Review Board member

¹ Hobert, Jim. *Pro-Democracy and Anti-Violence Target States Survey #3*. (22-23 May 2023). Public Opinion Strategies.

² From a list that included television, radio or print media; outside election observers; social media; clergy and religious leaders; universities; business leaders; friends and family; and political leaders. Hunting, Dan, Reilly, Tom, Salit, Jacqueline, Stewart, Cathy, and Lorentzen, Christian. *Consensus and Concern in Arizona’s Hot Political Climate: Voter Attitudes about Elections*. (July 2023). Arizona State University Center for an Independent and Sustainable Democracy. <https://spa.asu.edu/sites/default/files/2023-07/Consensus%20and%20Concern%20July%202023.pdf>.

³ Hyde, Susan D., Samet, Oren, and Barker, Jennie. *Domestic Election Observation Survey Experiment Summary of Results*. (11 July 2022). University of California, Berkeley.

- In **Arizona**, The Carter Center mobilized and trained nonpartisan observers during the stages of the 2022 midterm where such observation was permitted by law,⁴ releasing public statements on logic and accuracy testing before the election and before the state-mandated recounts, election day poll worker training, and the canvass of results. The Center also developed a guidance document on best practices for livestreaming tabulation based on attempts to monitor tabulation via statutorily required video feeds.
- In **Michigan**, and in partnership with Detroit Disability Power, The Carter Center supported the most comprehensive accessibility audit of voting locations in the state to date during the 2022 midterm.

Frequently Asked Questions About Nonpartisan Election Observation

What is nonpartisan election observation?

Nonpartisan election observation is an impartial process where citizens systematically gather data about an election to determine whether the election was fair, peaceful, and credible. Grounded by facts and evidence, trained observers not only validate the critical work being done by those on the front lines of our democracy, but they also serve as a reminder to those seeking to interfere in elections: No one is above the law, and others are watching.

Who participates in observation?

Nonpartisan observers are your neighbors. They're fellow citizens, voters, and community members. Observers cannot be party actors or advocates. In fact, observers agree to follow a strict code of conduct that ensures they remain impartial and don't interfere with the voting process.

How does observation work?

Throughout the election calendar, teams of observers are stationed at polling places, election offices, and other satellite locations where election operations take place. Each team collects data on a standardized set of questions about the election process, as well as recording general observations and anything noteworthy they see. That data is then collated, analyzed, and released to the public in an official assessment.

Unlike partisan observers — also called “challengers” or “poll watchers” — who generally look for activity that could undermine their own party's or candidate's interests, nonpartisan observers have no stake in the election outcome. They do not interfere in the election process, even if they see something take place that should not happen. They are trained to understand the election process as specified by law and report on whether election day procedures are being correctly followed.

More information about the Carter Center's support to nonpartisan election observation efforts in the United States can be found at: <https://www.cartercenter.org/peace/democracy/nonpartisan-election-observation-u.s.html>



A nonpartisan observer in Fulton County, Georgia, monitors adherence to election standards.

⁴ Nonpartisan election observation is not permitted inside of voting locations, nor during tabulation.