

Drafting Election Statements and Reports

A Field Guide for Election Monitoring Groups



Drafting Election Statements and Reports

This field guide is designed as an easy-reference tool for domestic non-partisan election observers. Field guides are intended to complement other reference tools available on domestic election observation, in particular the NDI handbooks:

- ✓ How Domestic Organizations Monitor Elections: An A to Z Guide
- ✓ The Quick Count and Election Observation
- ✓ Building Confidence in the Voter Registration Process
- ✓ Media Monitoring to Promote Democratic Elections
- ✓ Promoting Legal Frameworks for Democratic Elections
- ✓ Monitoring Electronic Technologies in Electoral Processes

These handbooks and other materials are available on the NDI website: www.ndi.org

The Drafting Election Statements and Reports field guide explains how to effectively communicate the findings of your observation exercise to the public.

This field guide is part of an ongoing series of guides to facilitate election observation efforts by domestic monitoring groups in the Middle East and North Africa.

Table of Contents

- 1. Public Information Strategy**
- 2. Types of Statements**
- 3. Timing of Statements**
- 4. Main Elements of Statements**
- 5. Tips for Effective Statement Writing**
- 6. Writing Press Releases**
- 7. Compiling a Final Report**
- 8. Getting your Message Out**

1. Public Information Strategy

Reporting accurate findings in a timely manner is one of the key indicators of a successful observation effort. Without effective reporting, an observer group does not meet its commitment to provide an impartial assessment of the election process to the public. Only by providing this critical information does a group meet its responsibility to citizens.

When planning your observation effort, it is important to consider your public information strategy. In particular, how will your group communicate its findings to the outside world? Designing a public information strategy from the beginning will help to ensure that your group has a consistent approach for reporting throughout the duration of your project.

Here are some key issues to consider:

Define your audience

Who is your main audience for reporting? Are you most interested in communicating with citizens, or targeting government officials and policymakers in an advocacy effort? Or both? The structure of a statement depends on its intended audience. It should be aimed at the stakeholders who the group would like to influence.

Assign a Public Information Officer

Who in your organization will be responsible for reporting to the public? It is good to designate a Public Information Officer to oversee the reporting process as well as identify contacts and manage relations with the media.

Issue media guidelines

The information your group collects is politically sensitive and should be treated carefully by everyone in the group. If information is leaked to the public or taken out of context, it could have negative implications for your group and possibly for the political situation. Media guidelines should be issued to staff and volunteers explaining how sensitive information should be treated and who is designated to talk to the media.

Decide on timing and frequency of reports

The timing and frequency of your reporting will depend on your group's objectives, what activities you conduct and the political context of the country. While you should define in appropriate terms when and how often you expect to make public reports, this may change during the course of observation due to external circumstances.

Organize a drafting committee

While the Public Information Officer is responsible for overseeing public information, including reporting, that person will not be able to write all the reports. For the actual drafting of reports, you might want to organize a report-writing committee and assign tasks within the committee for the collection and analysis of data, as well as writing different segments of the reports.

[Tip] Develop an FAQ document

There are many people, including election authorities, political parties, citizens, and journalists who may not know your organization or do not understand the role of observation in the election process. It is useful to develop a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document that provides basic information about your group, objectives, and activities that can be shared with stakeholders and the media.

2. Types of Statements

Most observer groups release several different statements and reports over the course of their observation effort. Generally, statements focus on a particular phase of the election process or on the election process as a whole. The following are the most common types of election statements.

Launch Statement

It is good practice to release an initial statement or press release at the beginning of your activities to introduce the observation project and explain your objectives to the public and the media. This can be a short and simple document.

Pre-election Statement

If your group is conducting observation of pre-election processes (e.g. voter registration, candidate registration, campaigning, etc.) then you will need to report those findings. A report can be issued on each phase of the process that is monitored, or pre-election reports can be issued on a periodic basis, for instance every two weeks.

Incident Statement

Should a serious or violent incident occur, either during the campaign or on Election Day, you should report on it in order to provide impartial information about what happened. Your group might also be able to call for next steps, such as an investigation by authorities or mediation between parties.

Interim Statement

Depending on how you are collecting information, you may be in a position to release some findings on Election Day, such as analysis of the opening of polling stations or the

voting process to that point. Such statements should only be released if you are able to collect and analyze sufficient information from observers. It is important to stress that the findings are preliminary in nature and that your group is continuing to monitor the process.

Preliminary Statement

Typically observer groups release their overall initial findings on or the day after Election Day in a preliminary statement. This statement contains findings on aspects of the pre-election period as well as an initial assessment of the conduct of voting and counting on Election Day. It is important to stress that the findings are preliminary in nature and that your group is continuing to monitor post-election developments.

Interim Report

Should events following Election Day need to be reported, such as an update on the counting and tabulation process, or complaints and appeals, an interim report can be released. Depending on the nature of post-election events, such a report may change the initial assessment of the elections.

Final Report

Following the official announcement of results and the resolution of complaints and appeals, an observer group should issue their comprehensive findings in a final report. The final report should also include recommendations on how the election process can be improved in the future.

[Tip] Create a website and use social media

A website that is regularly updated and contains information about your observation group, objectives, and findings can be a good source for the media to learn about your efforts. Social media networking sites provide a way for your group to provide updates on your activities to the public and share your statements with fans and followers.

3. Timing of Statements

It is important to consider at what points your group should release statements. In general, statements should be released as soon as information is received and analyzed. Here are some guidelines on the timing of statements:

- ✓ Launch statements should be released at the outset of the election process as soon as your group has established its objectives and activities plan.
- ✓ Release pre-election statements for each stage of the election process your group is observing (e.g. voter registration, candidate nomination, campaign, etc.).
- ✓ Incident statements are only released when a serious event affecting the elections has occurred.
- ✓ Interim statements are typically released on Election Day during the voting process.

- ✓ Preliminary statements are typically released one or two days after Election Day. Preliminary statements are most often released prior to the announcement of official results (unless prohibited by law).
- ✓ Interim reports are generally issued after elections and can sometimes play an important role in the resolution of post-election disputes.
- ✓ Final reports should be released no later than two or three months after the elections have ended.

4. Main Elements of Statements

The format of an election statement will depend largely on the group's objectives and findings. Still, there are certain elements that are considered standard and should generally appear in all election statements. In some cases, certain elements may be combined. Here are the main elements in order:

- ✓ Executive Summary
- ✓ Introduction
- ✓ Context
- ✓ Findings & Analysis
- ✓ Conclusions
- ✓ Recommendations

The **Executive Summary** catches the interest of readers and should give a concise overview of findings, conclusions and recommendations. This section should be able to stand alone

because some people, including your target audience, may not take the time to read the entire document. All points in the summary should appear in the body of the statement. It may be useful to organize the summary using bullet points. If possible, keep the executive summary to one page or less.

The **Introduction** section should present the objectives of the observation effort and include brief information on the observer group and methodology. Be sure to mention if you observed elections in the past, when you began your activities for the current election, the observation deployment plan, and any other information that you feel is important for the reader to understand about your work.

The **Context** section should give basic and brief information on the election itself and its significance, e.g. if the election is the result of a post-conflict resolution, major political event, etc. If necessary, you may also provide background on the political environment, legal framework, or election administration.

The **Observations** will form the main body of the statement. What were the findings of your observers in the field during the course of the election period? Be as concise as possible, but give enough detailed facts to support your analysis and conclusions. It may be useful to organize this section by issue area, such as election administration, voting, counting, etc.

The **Analysis of Observations** section gives a critical assessment of the observations and the impact that any problems might have had on the integrity of the election process. This can be a separate section or included in the "Observations" section, particularly if there are sub-headings.

The **Conclusions** section should state your group's overall assessment of the election process, based on the findings contained in "Observations" and "Analysis of Observations." Did the elections meet international standards? Were they genuinely competitive? Was there a level playing field for all stakeholders? Could all eligible voters participate? Your main conclusion should also appear in the "Executive Summary."

Recommendations to all stakeholders on how the election process can be improved in the future are generally included in the final report. However, it may be good to issue short-term recommendations for steps that could be taken during the election process to address immediate problems.

5. Tips for Effective Statement Writing

Five "Do's":

- ✓ **Keep statements brief.** Include necessary facts and examples to support analysis and conclusions. Provide an overview of the big picture; talking about events at individual polling stations does not provide useful context or analysis. It is important for your group to provide the public with an understanding of the quality of the process as a whole.
- ✓ **Highlight positive aspects.** The role of an observation group is not simply to focus on violations, but to offer a fair and balanced account of the election process. A

statement that ignores the positive aspects of the process is not a fair and balanced statement.

- ✓ **Quantify your findings.** Be specific about how often a violation was observed. Be sure to distinguish between isolated errors and general trends as well as whether violations occurred in one region or nationwide.
- ✓ **Pay attention to tone and language.** Be diplomatic in your presentation and avoid hasty judgments that may be based on incomplete information. It is important to be objective and neutral in your public statements.
- ✓ **Reference international standards.** While it is important to assess the elections against domestic law, a country's rules may be flawed and undermine international standards. It is useful to reference international instruments to which the government has committed when evaluating the process.

Five "Don'ts":

- ✓ **Don't exaggerate.** Let your findings speak for themselves and present them in a straightforward manner that does not mislead the reader. Don't distort data to try and make analysis that you believe may be accurate but lack evidence for.
- ✓ **Avoid hearsay.** Your group's findings must be your own. It is good to coordinate with other observation groups to share information, but you should only report findings that your observers have verified.

- ✓ **Don't include opinion.** While everyone in your group may have some preconceived notions about the political process and elections, it is important to make sure that you stick to the facts. Your findings should reflect your observations, not your opinions.
- ✓ **Avoid inflammatory language.** While you have a role to play in providing information, you also have a responsibility to the public. Remember that your statements could incite tensions and violence or be used by spoilers who wish to discredit the process.
- ✓ **Don't jump to conclusions.** Ensure that your analysis and conclusions are based on your observed findings and give relevant examples. Conclusions that are incorrect can undermine your group's integrity and lead stakeholders to question your neutrality.

6. Writing Press Releases

In order to maximize media attention, your group should issue press releases when it issues statements and reports. A press release should be very short and highlight the main points your group wants to get across to the public. The press release should help convince the media that your statement or report is newsworthy and should be discussed.

Before you send out a press release, you should consider a number of factors that will improve your media coverage:

- ✓ **Create a press contact list.** Identify the media outlets that you believe should cover your statements and

reports, including state-owned and private media. Compile and regularly update a list of contact phone numbers, email addresses, and fax numbers.

- ✓ **Develop good relationships with media.** A good rapport with reporters at news organizations will help to increase your likelihood of getting coverage.
- ✓ **Identify deadlines for media outlets.** It is important to understand that news organizations work on deadlines. Be mindful that missing deadlines may result in your statement being viewed as out of date by press time and thus no longer newsworthy.
- ✓ **Try to limit your press release to one page.** You should only summarize the major points or issues and their significance in your press release. It's also good to include a headline and byline in your press release to help facilitate the media's coverage.
- ✓ **Say something newsworthy.** If a reporter receives press releases that are not worthy of media attention, i.e. thin on content, poorly written, or repetitive from previous releases, a media outlet may dismiss your future releases without reading them. Be sure to put the most important points you want to get across in the first paragraph of the press release.
- ✓ **Follow-up on your press release.** It's good practice to call your contacts at media outlets to which you sent the press release to ensure they received it. This will ensure that your statements are not accidentally overlooked and should help to build media relations.

- ✓ **Insert your contact details.** It's important to include the name and contact information of your public information officer or whomever is authorized to speak on your group's behalf. It's also useful to insert website and social media details if you have them.
- ✓ **Include quotes and photos.** Inserting quotations from your group's leadership on your findings and analysis is especially useful in television and radio coverage. If you have photos, it can be useful to include them as visual aides for publicity purposes.

[Tip] *Spread the news via social media*

Using social media to publicize your statements and reports can help to reach interested audiences that you otherwise may not have identified. Many media outlets use social media to stay up to date on developments and friends can share your news with friends in their network.

7. **Compiling a Final Report**

After your group has completed all its observation activities, you should compile a final report that includes all your findings and analysis. This report, which you may release within weeks or a few months after the election, should provide readers with all the information that is relevant to understanding the election, your activities, and all final recommendations to stakeholders to improve the process.

Compiling a final report can be a tedious exercise for any group. However, it is an important effort because it provides your group with an opportunity to present all your conclusions and recommendations, including information that may have been omitted from your initial statements, and correct any inaccuracies from your preliminary statements.

Much like your election statements, your final report will depend on the context and conduct of the election observed, but it should include the following standard elements:

- ✓ Executive Summary
- ✓ Introduction
- ✓ Context
- ✓ Findings & Analysis
- ✓ Conclusions
- ✓ Recommendations
- ✓ Appendices

The description of the content in these sections should be similar to those in “Main Elements of Election Statements.” However, there are some slight differences in the content of your election statements and that of your final report.

- ✓ The **Executive Summary** should give a clear and concise assessment of your main findings, conclusions, and recommendations from the entire election process. You should highlight the key recommendations that your group believes are most important for improving the election process in the future. If possible, keep the executive summary to no more than four pages.

- ✓ The **Observations** and **The Analysis of Observations** section(s) will form the bulk of the body of the report. These sections should cover all of your findings and ideally be organized by issue area, including election administration, voter registration, candidate nomination, campaigning, voting, counting, complaints & appeals, and any other aspects of the process which your group observed.
- ✓ The **Recommendations** section should include all steps that could be taken by government officials, election authorities, political parties, and other stakeholders to strengthen the process. It is useful to prioritize the most important steps to be taken by placing them up front, explaining why these steps are important, and specifying which stakeholders should be responsible. Referencing international standards can help strengthen your argument for reforms.
- ✓ An **Appendices** section is where you might include information such as preliminary statements that your group issued, maps or official election results that may be helpful as reference materials for readers, and any photos that your group may have taken.

8. Getting your Message Out

Once a statement or report is written, what do you do with it? With all of the effort that goes into the production of your statements and reports, it is important that they are

being used to inform public opinion on the electoral process and effect reforms that strengthen the process. There are many ways to get your message out to the public, such as:

- ✓ Press conferences and briefings
- ✓ Stakeholder meetings
- ✓ Media interviews
- ✓ Buy advertising
- ✓ Post-election roundtable discussion
- ✓ Electoral reform campaign

Press conferences and briefings require good organization, advance planning, and logistical support, but they are great ways to gain publicity and share your findings with the broadest audience possible. In addition to your media contacts, you should invite stakeholders that you wish to influence, such as government officials, election authorities, political party representatives and other key stakeholders.

Private and direct **stakeholder meetings** with election authorities, candidates, and political party representatives can help all actors better understand the process from a neutral perspective and increase the likelihood that your recommendations will be received and implemented. In politically tense environments, meetings with political actors can also help to mitigate possible conflict if there are unfounded rumors of fraud.

Conducting **media interviews** is less efficient than holding a press event, but it is a good way to build relationships with the media while promoting your group, its objectives and its work. You should reach out to both state-owned and private media to avoid possible accusations of bias.

Your group might **buy advertising** in the media if you are concerned that your statements may not be reported or may be misrepresented. This would ensure that your messages are represented clearly in newspapers or on television and radio.

A **post-election roundtable discussion**, like a press event, requires good organization and planning. However, it is an excellent way to engage stakeholders in dialogue as it provides a meaningful opportunity for debate on electoral reform between election authorities, government officials, parliamentarians, political party representatives, and other election observation groups. The aim should be to get participants to agree on steps that should be taken before the next election cycle. Inviting media to the discussion can be a good way to raise your group's profile while promoting public awareness of the need for electoral reform.

Conducting an **electoral reform campaign** based on your group's recommendations is a great way to remain engaged in the process between elections. Such a campaign targeting electoral stakeholders, the media, and / or the public writ large could be launched from a post-election roundtable discussion and involve activities such as drafting proposals for electoral law reforms or inviting experts from other countries to speak about best practices from their own elections.



The **National Democratic Institute (NDI)** is a non-governmental, non-profit organization established in 1983 working to strengthen and expand democracy worldwide. Calling on a global network of volunteer experts, NDI has worked to form and develop non-partisan domestic election monitoring groups in more than 70 countries and has helped to develop regional associations of monitors in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Eurasia, Latin America and the Middle East.