Elections Overview

The Commonwealth Charter recognises “the inalienable right of individuals to participate in democratic processes, in particular through free and fair elections in shaping the society in which they live.”

A democratic election takes place in an environment where there are multiple political parties, where there is confidence, transparency and accountability in the electoral process, and where voters are free to exercise an informed choice between alternative candidates for office.

The Commonwealth Secretariat

The Commonwealth Secretariat helps member countries to strengthen democratic institutions and processes and enable citizen participation and representation at national and local levels during elections.

We do this by supporting electoral management bodies to exchange good practices in electoral administration through the Commonwealth Electoral Network and by responding to national requests for technical assistance and capacity building, including training for junior election officials.

Election observers

Election observation is a valuable tool for improving the quality of elections and is a visible sign of a country’s commitment to strengthening democracy.

At the invitation of a country’s government or election commission, the Commonwealth Secretary-General will send a team of independent observers to give an impartial assessment of the conduct of an election and, where necessary, offer recommendations where improvements can be made.

Over the past quarter of a century, the Commonwealth has observed around 140 elections in nearly 40 countries across the globe.

For more information, visit: thecommonwealth.org/elections

The Commonwealth

The Commonwealth is made up of 52 independent countries that work together to pursue common goals which promote development, democracy and peace.

Our combined population is 2.4 billion, of which more than 60 per cent is aged 29 or under.

The Commonwealth spans the globe and includes both advanced economies and developing countries. It encompasses Africa (18 countries), Asia (7), the Caribbean and Americas (13), Europe (3), and the Pacific (11).

The Commonwealth’s strength lies in its shared values and diversity. Thirty of our members are small states, usually with a population well under 1.5 million, and 24 members are small island developing states.

All members have an equal say, regardless of their size or economic stature. This ensures that even the smallest countries have a voice in shaping the Commonwealth. In the past two decades, countries which have joined include Mozambique, Cameroon and Rwanda.

Our organisations

The Commonwealth is connected by an active network of more than 80 intergovernmental, civil society and professional organisations, including:

- The Commonwealth Secretariat - supporting member states
- The Commonwealth Foundation - supporting civil society
- The Commonwealth of Learning - promoting distance learning and education
- The Commonwealth Games Federation - promoting sports development

Commonwealth Day

Commonwealth Day is celebrated by young people, schools, communities and civil society organisations on the second Monday in March every year. It is an opportunity to promote understanding on Commonwealth values.
Elections Observation

The Commonwealth has been observing electoral processes since 1967 when we observed a referendum in Gibraltar. Since then, we have observed around 140 elections in nearly 40 countries.

The Commonwealth’s approach to election observation is rooted in the Guidelines for the Establishment of Commonwealth Groups to Observe Elections in Member Countries, which was adopted at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Harare in 1991.

We were one of the original signatories to the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation, agreed at the UN in 2005, which is followed by election observers all around the world.

Today we work alongside citizen observer groups and other international organisations who also observe elections, including the African Union, the Southern African Development Community, the Pacific Islands Forum, the Caribbean Community, the National Democratic Institute and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems.

Composition

Commonwealth electoral observation missions are composed of eminent persons from a range of fields, including electoral commissioners and parliamentarians, and legal, gender and human rights and media experts.

Larger observer teams, known as Commonwealth Observer Groups, range from between 10 to 25 members. Usually headed by a former Head of Government or senior political figure as Chair, our observer groups are independent and autonomous, with members drawn from all regions of the Commonwealth.

Smaller observer groups, known as Commonwealth Expert Teams, may only include two to four independent observers. All teams are supported by a small team from the Commonwealth Secretariat.

Mandate

Commonwealth election observers are given a mandate to observe and consider the factors affecting the credibility of the electoral process as a whole.

Observers will judge whether the elections have been conducted according to the standards for democratic elections to which the country has committed, including national legislation and relevant regional, Commonwealth and international commitments.

Methodology

Before deploying an observer team, the Commonwealth Secretary-General will receive an invitation from a member government or electoral commission.

The observers visit the country ahead of polling day and meet with a broad range of stakeholders, including the electoral commission, major political parties, the media and civil society groups.

After being deployed across the country, Commonwealth observers will assess the pre-election environment, voting, counting and results processes. The observers will then issue an interim assessment after election day, and issue a final report which is shared with the government and opposition parties before is made public.

Good Offices

In circumstances where a governing party does not accept a credible election result, sometimes the Chair of a Commonwealth Observer Group may be asked to exercise a ‘good offices’ role by the Commonwealth Secretary-General, to help ensure a peaceful transition.

“In working closely with the Chair of the Commonwealth Observer Group, or ‘COG’, I sometimes had to use my good offices to encourage a President or Prime Minister to accept a manifestly fair result and agree to relinquish power; and to persuade others, in their moment of electoral triumph, to behave with magnanimity and decency.” - Former Commonwealth Secretary-General Chief Emeka Anyaoku (1989-1999)
Fast Facts: The Commonwealth & Elections

The Commonwealth Electoral Network

Launched in 2010, the Commonwealth Electoral Network contributes towards strengthening the role, independence and capacity of national election management bodies.

The Commonwealth Electoral Network (CEN) aims to promote good practices in the field of elections management, to facilitate experience-sharing and to foster a sense of community among Commonwealth election management bodies.

The network is supported by the Commonwealth Secretariat and a steering committee composed of national election commissioners.

The CEN has working groups on voter education and electoral participation, voter registration, the independence of election management bodies, managing the influence of incumbency, and political party expenditure and campaign financing.

The network operates an online platform, Commonwealth Connects, which provides a secure online community for members to share their experiences, ask questions, and learn from each other.

Biennial Conference

Every two years, the members of the Commonwealth Electoral Network gather for a Biennial Conference, convened by the Commonwealth Secretariat.

Past conferences were held in Accra, Ghana in 2010; in Toronto, Canada in 2012; and in Nairobi, Kenya in 2014.

The next conference is in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, between 22-24 June 2016. Find out more: www.thecommonwealth.org/cen2016

Junior Election Professionals Initiative

In June 2013, under the direction of the Commonwealth Electoral Network, the Commonwealth Secretariat launched the Junior Election Professionals Initiative to build the capacity of the next generation of electoral administrators.

“These are the next generation of Commonwealth administrators and it is important that they are trained to be effective. It is all about promoting public confidence and trust - the end goal is that the elections are accepted by all” - Jonathon Milligan, Programme Manager of Junior Election Professionals Initiative, Commonwealth Secretariat

Since 2013, almost 100 junior election professionals from across the Commonwealth have received training and professional development, helping to increase their technical capacity as well as their understanding of international election standards.

The initiative has reached all regions of the Commonwealth, supporting men and women from more than 40 election management bodies. Ninety per cent of participants have reported that the initiative increased their skills, knowledge and effectiveness as electoral administrators.

The Commonwealth Secretariat is currently seeking financial support for a second phase of the JEP Initiative, building on the success of phase one.