

*The Hubert H. Humphrey Fellows 2004 United States Presidential Election
Observation Report
(November 2, 2004)*

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As Hubert H. Humphrey Fellows and International Visitors at American University Washington College of Law (WCL), we observed the U.S. Presidential Elections in Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia on Tuesday, November 2, 2004. Our delegation represented judges, law professors, human rights activists, and legal practitioners from Armenia, Cambodia, Ecuador, Egypt, Pakistan, Serbia, and Uruguay. Led by Dr. Robert Pastor, Director of the Center for Democracy and Election Management, we visited to six polling stations through out the day. We observed how Americans vote and the contrasting practices in the U.S. voting process. We then reported our observations to the WCL community on Wednesday, November 3. The following is a summary of our findings.

To begin, the main reason for many of the differences between the US and our countries was the absence of a national election committee to regulate how the country runs an election, and specifically, who works at the polling stations. In our systems, the poll workers tend to be judges, lawyers or state employees who are required to work and paid for their time, while in the U.S. poll workers are generally volunteers from the community. We observed how the elections in the U.S. are for the people by the people with representatives of both political parties working together. The volunteers seemed to be mostly senior citizens, although a few high school students were there to assist voters as well. These dedicated workers were required to work over 14 hours, which could be strenuous for senior citizens. It seems that this could affect the integrity of how the voting process is administered.

We noted how much trust Americans have in each other. For instance, official identification was not requested or always required to vote in DC or Maryland. In Uruguay, a voter identification card used only for elections must be presented, and in all of our countries some form of state issued identification is required to vote. Depending on the country, a card or hand is then stamped or sprayed with an identifying ink to show that we have voted. In comparison, Americans are given a sticker stating "I voted" and no other such proof of voting is given. It seemed that people could take advantage of this trust to vote in other locations or vote under another person's name. We admire this sense of trust between Americans; however, this is another way the integrity of the election could be questioned.

Another point for comparison between the precincts is how ballots are cast and counted. D.C. used paper ballots, while Maryland used only electronic machines. Some votes were cast using a provisional ballot, which is not an option in our countries. We noticed that in Maryland, provisional ballots were encouraged. However, in Virginia, poll workers tended to direct people to the precinct where they were registered to vote.

We observed in Maryland that the work to count the votes after the polls closed is divided among poll workers. Some closed the machines to receive an electronic printout and others counted the number of voting cards and the number of voter signatures. At the end, the numbers did not correspond to each other. The discrepancy was noted but ignored. This was shocking, coming from countries where each vote is counted out loud in front of all poll workers to ensure accuracy.

We learned that the reporting of provisional ballots is handled differently between precincts. Provisional ballots are reported immediately at closing in Maryland, while in Virginia a poll worker takes the provisional ballots home with them, and reports them the next day. This would not be possible in our countries.

In conclusion, we were impressed by the organization of the elections in the U.S. and the number of people who voted. In some of our countries voting is mandatory, so we were surprised by the number of people who stood in line to vote in a country where it is not.

Over all, we believe that the U.S. should have a unified system of voting for president. While we realize that the current system recognizes States' rights, a national system for electing a national office would be more appropriate and accurate. To unify the system, we suggest the method used in our home nations where paper ballots are used and these can be counted and recounted for verification. While such a system would be very time-consuming for a nation of 295 million people, it would represent true democracy where every vote is counted.

We appreciate the unique opportunity given to us to observe the U.S. presidential elections. Thank you.