

Nicaraguans went to the polls in large numbers Sunday, November 4 to elect a new president and vice president, members of the National Assembly, and representatives to the Central American Parliament. The Carter Center monitored the election at the invitation of the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) and with the encouragement of political parties and civic groups. We found that the election met international standards and the results were an accurate reflection of the will of the Nicaraguan people. Nicaraguan citizens demonstrated their strong democratic commitment and are to be congratulated for their civic spirit.

Voting day went very well, and the presidential candidates recognized the results in a timely manner with only limited official results reported, showing statesmanship that bodes well for the consolidation of democracy. The election campaign allowed candidates to convey their messages to the voters, and the balloting was conducted according to the law. Although the vote tabulation process at the National Counting Center of the CSE in Managua suffered serious delays that were exacerbated by the partisan structure of the election authorities, we do not expect these problems to diminish the accuracy of the results.

The Carter Center sent 50 observers to monitor electoral developments in the 15 departments and two autonomous regions. Our observers visited 246 voting sites on election day and conducted a systematic survey of the quality of the election at those sites. Carter Center observers also carefully monitored the transmission of faxes from the municipalities to the National Counting Center in Managua, and witnessed the Departmental Electoral Councils' deliberations about challenges to the vote.

The Carter Center also placed specialized observers in political party headquarters to assure a smooth flow of information on election day and allow us to identify party concerns as they emerged. We assigned a technical specialist to monitor the reception and tabulation of the vote at the National Counting Center. We were granted the highest level of access to observe ongoing electoral activities, and we thank the CSE for its cooperation.

Our observers found pollwatchers from the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in all of the 246 polling stations we visited, and pollwatchers from the Liberal Constitutionalist Party (PLC) in all but three. The Conservative Party (PC) pollwatchers were present in 170 of the 246 polling sites. Of the 24 polling sites Carter Center observers visited on the Atlantic Coast we encountered 33 pollwatchers from regional parties. In addition, we saw domestic observers in 175 of the polling sites.

The election officials were drawn from the three parties participating in the presidential race. The PLC and FSLN placed officials everywhere, and in the vast majority of polling sites the PC also had named an election officer. By contrast, regional parties had no opportunity to name election officials.

The voting process during the day was normal. Many polling stations opened late, in part due to the diligence with which election officials followed the complicated opening procedures. Voters demonstrated exemplary patience while awaiting the opportunity to cast their ballots. All the polling sites we visited opened, but eight briefly suspended voting for at least part of the day, most often because either the ultraviolet light or the hole punch ceased working and officials concluded that the examination of voter documents under ultraviolet light and the perforation of the voter document after voting were essential to the security of the voting process. In fact, these safeguards are extra guarantees that are not essential, and it would have been preferable to continue voting, as was done in other locations where the equipment failed.

All but 13 of the polling sites we observed received the complete set of materials needed to conduct the vote, the missing items were of minor importance, and voting was able to proceed. Ballot secrecy was adequately respected. All voters had obtained their voter identification documents. Of 239 sites evaluated, 181 functioned normally, 52 had minor irregularities that did not affect the outcome of the vote, and only six suffered serious problems that could have affected the outcome of the vote. However, 38 voters at sites we observed were denied the right to vote when their names were not found on the list and they were unable to demonstrate to officials' satisfaction that they lived within the district.

The election was conducted peacefully. We consulted throughout the day with security forces as well as election officials and learned of only four minor security problems. None of our observers witnessed harassment or intimidation of voters. Judging from the long lines we encountered across the country, Nicaraguans were eager to participate in the selection of their leaders. On election night, the public waited patiently for the official results.

All elections have minor irregularities without necessarily affecting the outcome of the vote. We want to emphasize that these incidents did not constitute a pattern favoring or discriminating against one party or another. The procedural quality of the voting process clearly met international standards; and the polling officials, party pollwatchers and observers displayed conscientious dedication to their tasks.

Voting results transmission was a source of concern as we entered the elections. Five simulations had been run, but these were partial tests that did not demonstrate conclusively that the transmission system would work. In addition, the method of transmission in Managua was changed less than a month before election day and underwent limited testing. Fortunately, on election night the transmission process went smoothly, such that by midnight 93 percent of the tally sheets had reached the National Counting Center in Managua.

Regrettably, the tabulation process at the CSE in Managua suffered serious breakdowns, delaying timely reporting of results. The software had not been sufficiently tested, and repeatedly malfunctioned. The delays were exacerbated by partisan insistence in the CSE on personnel changes in the three days leading up to the elections, which placed tabulation in the hands of untrained data entry clerks named by the parties. The CSE was unable to begin entering data until early Monday morning, and entered only 25% of the tally sheets successfully before the system malfunctioned. Nearly complete preliminary results were not available until the afternoon of Wednesday, November 7.

The fact that political parties received copies of the tally sheets at the voting site, and were also given copies of the tabulated results, meant they could compare the two in order to assure that the results were accurately recorded. This helped allay concerns that the delays in the tabulation process could provide an opportunity for fraud. Further, the availability of a reliable “quick count” on the presidential race helped parties confirm their internal tabulations; and losing candidate Daniel Ortega accepted the victory of winning candidate Enrique Bolaños even though only some five percent of the tally sheets had been officially tabulated and reported.

Another concern was that massive numbers of challenges to the vote might be filed, and cumbersome decision-making processes would follow, slowing the transmission of challenged tally sheets and ultimately the tabulation of results. This fear proved unfounded. Party pollwatchers respected the laws and regulations concerning challenges so that challenges were not filed indiscriminately. The challenges filed are being resolved through careful consideration by the Departmental Electoral Councils, and only a few cases are likely to require the attention of the CSE.

Our observation of the election process makes it clear that the excessively partisan structure of the election authorities engendered controversial exclusionary decisions and had a serious negative impact on the efficiency of election procedures at all stages of the

The Carter Center will issue a final report on the Nicaraguan electoral process in the near future, with further detailed analysis and recommendations. We wish to thank again the Nicaraguan people for the warm welcome we received here.