



Fast Facts: The Commonwealth & Elections

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 Electoral Cycle Approach

The Commonwealth Secretariat helps member countries to strengthen democratic institutions and processes and enable citizen participation and representation during elections. This is achieved using the full electoral cycle approach in our engagement with member countries.

Between elections, the Secretariat provides technical assistance to a variety of stakeholders in member countries on issues as diverse as voter education, women’s political participation, constitutional reform, and electoral cybersecurity.

For the election itself, and on receipt of an invitation, the Commonwealth Secretary-General will often deploy an independent observer group to give an impartial assessment of the conduct of the election, and offer recommendations on possible improvements.

After the election, the Secretariat works with national stakeholders to help implement observer recommendations through the provision of further technical assistance.

The Secretariat also promotes good electoral practice through the publication of expert guides and handbooks, and fosters knowledge exchange and capacity building through the Commonwealth Electoral Network and Commonwealth Election Professionals Initiative.

For more information, visit our [democracy and elections page](#)

The Commonwealth

The Commonwealth is made up of 54 **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 (19 countries), Asia (8), the Caribbean and Americas (13), Europe (3), and the Pacific (11).

The Commonwealth’s strength lies in its shared values and **diversity**. 32 of our members are small states, usually with a population under 1.5 million, and 25 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.



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Election Observation

The Commonwealth has been observing electoral processes since 1967 when we observed a referendum in Gibraltar. Since then, over 160 elections have been observed in nearly 40 countries.

The Commonwealth's approach is rooted in the [Revised Guidelines for the Conduct of Election Observation in Member Countries](#), adopted at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in London in 2018. These are based on the 1991 [Guidelines for the Establishment of Commonwealth Groups to Observe Elections in Member Countries](#), but updated to reflect changes to international best practice, for example the transition to the full electoral cycle approach.

The Commonwealth was one of the original 22 signatories to the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation (DoP), agreed at the UN in 2005 to ensure the professionalism and credibility of the field. There are now more than 50 endorsing organisations, which meet every year to ensure that the Principles remain relevant and are implemented. The Commonwealth hosted the first DoP meeting in 2006. It was also the host for the meeting in 2018.

Today Commonwealth Observer Groups (COGs) work alongside citizen observer groups and other international organisations, including the African Union, the Caribbean Community, the European Union, the Pacific Islands Forum, the Carter Center and the National Democratic Institute.

Composition

COGs are independent and autonomous and will normally be chaired by a former Head of Government or senior political figure. They are composed of eminent persons from a range of fields, including electoral commissioners and parliamentarians, and legal, gender, human rights and media experts. Most COGs will also have a youth representative. Members are drawn from all regions of the Commonwealth and are appointed in their individual capacities. All missions are supported by a small team from the Secretariat.

Mandate

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

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



Methodology

Each COG is constituted by the Secretary-General following an invitation or welcome from a country's election commission or government.

The COG arrives in 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.

Shortly before election day, observers are deployed in teams across the country, where they assess the pre-election environment, voting, counting and results processes. An interim assessment is issued shortly after the vote. Observers then compile the final report, which is submitted to the Secretary-General and subsequently shared with the country's electoral stakeholders and made public.

Good Offices

In the exceptional circumstance of a deteriorating political environment, and if invited by the host government and other political actors, the Secretary-General may request the COG Chair to undertake a good offices role.

"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)



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Technical Assistance

The Revised Guidelines state ‘Commonwealth election observation has a far greater impact and value when the recommendations offered by a COG, and other observers, are addressed so as to reduce the risk of shortcomings in future elections.’ This provides both the rationale and mandate for the delivery of technical assistance to member countries.

In recent years, the Secretariat has provided technical assistance on the following issues:

- Voter education and youth engagement;
- Electoral cybersecurity throughout the electoral cycle;
- Electoral and constitutional reform;
- Boundary delimitation;
- Women’s political participation;
- Media training for election reporting.

Commonwealth Electoral Network

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

Since its establishment in 2010, the CEN has convened four Biennial Conferences and a host of working groups on topics including voter education and electoral participation, voter registration, the independence of election management bodies, managing the influence of incumbency, election cybersecurity and political finance.

A number of publications have been produced by CEN working groups, or benefitted from CEN consultation in the course of their development. These include:

- Election Management: A Compendium of Good Practice;
- Good Electoral Practice Guide Series on Voter Registration; EMB Independence; Managing Incumbency; and New Media.
- Handbook for Gender-inclusive Elections in Commonwealth Africa;
- Cybersecurity for Elections: A Commonwealth Guide on Best Practice Political Finance Regulation: A Best Practice Guide of Commonwealth Legislative Approaches

Commonwealth Election Professionals

Launched in 2013, the Commonwealth Election Professionals Initiative provides a platform for knowledge sharing and peer support to electoral administrators across the Commonwealth.



Now in its second phase, over 220 election professionals have received training and professional development since 2013, helping to increase their technical capacity as well as their understanding of international election standards. In addition, the networking and peer support opportunities offered have strengthened relationships and cooperation between regional election management bodies.

The Australian-funded initiative has reached all regions of the Commonwealth, supporting men and women from more than 48 election management bodies.