# Learning from Success
## The Implementation of Election Observation Recommendations in Sub-Saharan Africa

**FIRST FINDINGS**

**Susan Dodsworth** and **Nic Cheeseman**[1]
International Development Department
University of Birmingham

International election observers invest significant time and energy in making recommendations designed to improve the integrity and credibility of future elections. Yet observers do not always have the opportunity to monitor the implementation of their recommendations over time, nor the capacity to conduct in-depth research into why certain recommendations may be successfully implemented while others are not. With this in mind, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) has partnered with the University of Birmingham on a new project that tracks the implementation of observers' recommendations across five countries in sub-Saharan Africa: Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, and Uganda. Preliminary analysis reveals significant variation in terms of which recommendations are implemented, as well as some surprising successes – cases where, against the odds, the recommendations of international observers appear to have contributed to real and concrete improvements in electoral processes. Our initial analysis also identifies promising lines of inquiry for future research that will help to better connect international election observation with democracy assistance more broadly.

## WHAT WE'VE DONE

We have constructed a new database that tracks the implementation of recommendations made by international election observation missions in five countries in sub-Saharan Africa – Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, Ghana, and Liberia – in the period from 2002 to 2018. The database covers leading international and regional observers, including missions from the European Union, the Commonwealth, the Carter Center, the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, the African Union, and the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa. As such it is the first of its kind: previous efforts at collecting similar data focussed on a single observer – the Organization of American States. Drawing on the reports of election observation missions endorsed by these international and regional organizations, as well as desk-based research, we employed a coding strategy closely modelled on the approach previously used Ferran Martinez i Coma, Alessandro Nai and Pippa Norris to analyse the nature and impact of observation recommendations made by the Organization of American States (OAS).[2]

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At present, our database identifies 1292 recommendations. It classifies each recommendation along a number of dimensions, including the stage or aspect of the election it targets, its timing within the electoral cycle, its scope and specificity, the actors it identifies, the nature of the mechanisms it relies upon, and the type of the change it recommends. In most cases, the database also includes an assessment of whether these recommendations have been fully implemented, partially implemented or not implemented.[3]

## WHAT WE'VE FOUND (SO FAR)

Our data indicates that – across Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria and Uganda[4] – just under 14% of recommendations made by international observers are fully implemented, while a further 20% are partially implemented. However, these headline figures obscure some important variations, and in doing so mask significant evidence of success on the part of international election observers. In Kenya, for example, roughly half of all recommendations have either been fully implemented (19%) or partially implemented (31%). In contrast, rates of implementation are extremely poor in Uganda, where almost 80% of recommendations are not implemented – a statistic that suggests that international observers are right to question their continued presence at Ugandan elections.

Preliminary analysis also suggests that some types of recommendations are implemented more frequently than others. Recommendations targeted at the electoral commission are more likely to be either fully implemented (18%) or partially implemented (25%). This is significant, given that these recommendations (to electoral commissions) represent roughly a third of all those included in our sample. This finding also vindicates the investments that international observers typically make in building relationships with electoral commissions, demonstrating that they can generate returns over time. By contrast, recommendations have met with less success when directed towards legislatures: across our sample, only 3% of such recommendations were fully implemented, though a further 27% had been partially implemented. While this might appear disappointing, it likely reflects the challenge of generating consensus for reform within highly partisan parliaments. Moreover, the fact that 30% were implemented to some extent highlights the potential for gains to be made if observers and organizations – like WFD – with expertise in this area can better connect their work.

## OUR NEXT STEPS

A more in-depth analysis of our dataset reveals some surprising successes – instances where specific recommendations have been implemented despite very challenging environments. For example, in 2015 the Commonwealth's observation mission to Nigeria recommended a reduction in the age limit for election candidates in order to expand youth political participation, while the European Union mission recommended that citizens observers engage in more comprehensive and long-term observation, including the completion of parallel vote tabulation in the presidential race. Both implementations appear to have been fully implemented in Nigeria's 2019 election, despite the fact that Nigeria is a case where the recommendations of observers are, on average, less likely to be implemented. The next step for our research is to identify – and interrogate – more of these surprising successes. This will help us to understand why these successes have occurred, allowing us to identify what can be done in the future to increase the rate with which the recommendations of international election observers are put into practice.

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[3] At present, the database codes the implementation status of 876 recommendations. As implementation takes time, we have not coded the implementation of recommendations from the most recent elections held in each country. In addition, implementation status has not yet been coded for Liberia and for a small number of recommendations (from other countries) where information on implementation has proved particularly difficult to obtain.
[4] As noted above, coding for implementation in Liberia is not yet complete.