

# **Precinct Election Training – National Assembly Elections for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s Yerevan Office**

Submitted on June 21, 2012



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## **About IFES**

The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) supports citizens' right to participate in free and fair elections. Our independent expertise strengthens electoral systems and builds local capacity to deliver sustainable solutions.

As the global leader in democracy promotion, we advance good governance and democratic rights by:

- Providing technical assistance to election officials
- Empowering the under-represented to participate in the political process
- Applying field-based research to improve the electoral cycle

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## **Executive Summary**

With support from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Yerevan office and the European Union delegation in Armenia, and in the framework of the project "Support to Two Electoral Cycles in Armenia," the International Foundation for Electoral System's (IFES) Yerevan office conducted ethical and procedural election administration training for 13,811 appointed Precinct Election Commissioners (PEC) in 1,982 precincts from April 15 through May 3, 2012. The training sessions over this 19-day period were conducted by 43 trainers identified and trained by IFES and Central Election Commission staff during a Training of Trainers program the week of April 7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> with support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The PEC training was interactive, with training materials presented and distributed to all participants. Perhaps the key document consisted of what became known before and during Election Day as the "red book," a comprehensive informational instructional manual formally titled, "Manual for Precinct Electoral Commissioners" which was referenced throughout Election Day by the PECs as observed by IFES and OSCE/ODIHR.

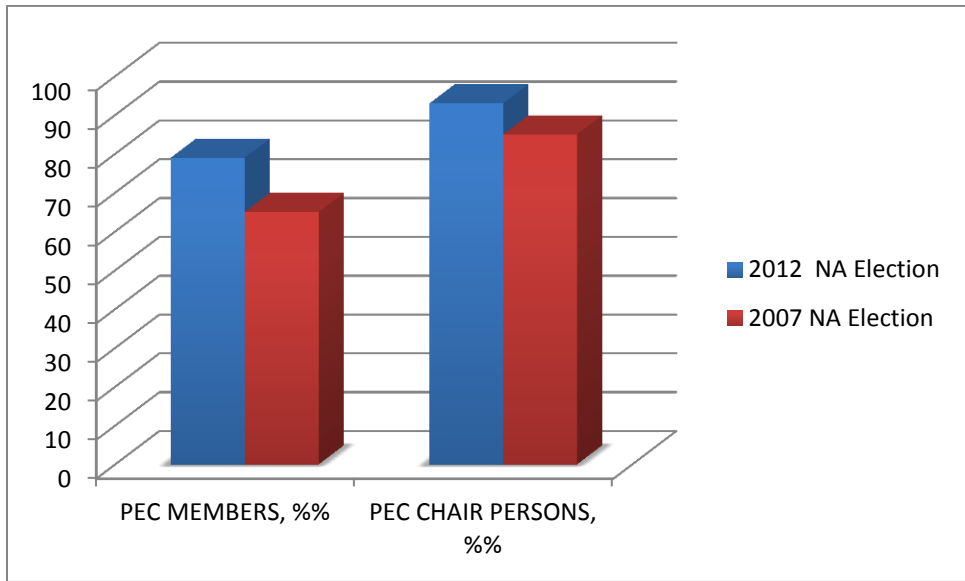
The training's objective was to familiarize PEC commissioners operationally with the relevant provisions of the new electoral code affecting management of the voting process and the attending election administration procedures – approved by the National Assembly and signed into law by President Sarkisian in June 2011 – 11 months before the May 6 parliamentary elections. It focused on the importance of *why* precinct commissioners need to do their jobs, balancing party loyalty with their obligation to all voters of Armenia, within the context of administering these parliamentary elections, and emphasizing the important role that election officials at all levels, particularly precinct commissioners, have and the duties of transparency and fair play they are entrusted with.

One important element of the new electoral code is the PEC appointment process, which allowed all five parliamentary factions to nominate one Central Election Commission-accredited commissioner to each of the 1,982 precincts. Under the new code administered for the May 6 elections, the supervising Territorial Election Commissions appointed an additional two CEC-accredited members to the PECs so that seven commissioners sat on each PEC. The positions of PEC chairs and secretaries were randomly assigned according to procedures adopted by the CEC and a formula based on the political weight of political parties in the National Assembly. The code mandates PEC commissioners be appointed no later than 25 days before Election Day – in this case, no later than April 11. The first PEC session was conducted on the fourth day after commission formation – April 15. Because PECs have specific functions to perform two days before the elections (May 4), the time frame for conducting PEC training was limited to 19 days.

## **IFES Training**

IFES provided training to 99.5 percent of the 1,982 PECs. Nearly 11,000 commissioners (10,847) were trained in 19 days from April 15 through May 3 in 10 Marzes and Yerevan. Almost 5,000 of these commissioners were female (4,924, or 45.4 percent of the commissioners). This represents an overall 78.5 percent participation rate. For comparison, during the 2007 National Assembly electoral cycle, 65 percent of PEC commissioners were engaged and trained. This year's attendance and participation was

significantly higher among PEC chairs (1,825 or over 92.4 percent attended and participated) while attendance and participation of PEC secretaries was slightly higher compared to overall attendance rates (1,582 or 80.4 percent of all PEC secretaries attended and participated). Each training group was comprised of two trainers, identified and appointed by IFES and the CEC and an assistant. Each group of PEC commissioner trainees consisted of participants representing three commissions, and 21 commissioners in total. Overall, 631 training sessions were conducted during the 19-day training period in advance of the May 6 National Assembly elections.



Forty-three trainers were identified and trained by both IFES and the CEC in early April and participated in the intensive three-and-a-half day Training of Trainers program. In this training program, they received training materials, trainers’ guides and individual schedules to conduct the PEC training. The Training of Trainers program was financed by USAID and jointly administered by IFES and the CEC from April 7 through 12 in Tsakhadzor.

The PEC interactive training program was developed by IFES in close consultation with the CEC. All elements of Election Day administration were discussed and covered in interactive sessions, including modules which forced commissioners representing different political parties to work together on vote counting, ballot sorting and protocol completion. Training programming included voter list modules; reviewing rights of political party and candidate proxies, election observers and news media representatives; election material distribution and presentation; reviewing voting room arrangements; discussing polling steps and special polling cases ; polling station closing procedures; sorting and counting; ballots; preparing summary protocols; and, submittal of election materials to the Territorial Election Commissions. IFES-produced manuals covering Election Day procedures (attached) which were distributed to and discussed in the training to assure familiarity with expected questions and challenges from voters on May 6. Among the materials distributed during the training, IFES-produced PEC Journals – financed by USAID – were displayed for commissioners by the PEC trainers. The Journals were a tool

for PEC commissioners to chronicle and record Election Day developments and observations and to reference election code-based protocols.

Posters displayed in polling stations on Election Day were also distributed to each commissioner to reinforce familiarity with voter information; including a four-step voting poster, a voter registration confirmation poster and an election procedure complaint poster. The PEC manuals, PEC Journals and other informational materials were important components in supporting considerably improved election procedures (and their administration) witnessed by all who participated in or observed the National Assembly elections.

Vote counting, tabulation and report preparation was emphasized in an interactive module to prepare commissioners for the most critical aspect of the job, one undertaken after a long day of processing Election Day balloting. IFES developed and compiled information sets containing 26 mock envelopes and ballots which should be sorted and counted by each PEC on Election Day. The exercise received positive feedback from the PEC commissioners and facilitated better implementation on Election Day.

A sample Armenian-language PEC training agenda is attached.

## **Challenges**

Training nearly 11,000 PEC commissioners in less than three weeks offered its share of logistical challenges which IFES was able to overcome to ensure all participating commissioners received preparation for their duties on Election Day. Those challenges included:

- A new Election Code was adopted and those PEC commissioners with prior commission engagement were often resistant to acknowledge changes in voting procedures;
- Based on feedback from IFES trainers as well as TECs, approximately 70 percent of PEC members had no prior experience working at polling stations;
- As required by the Election Code, only candidates who have passed the CEC accreditation process are eligible to be appointed as PEC commissioners. During the training and accreditation process administered by the CEC in the fall and winter of 2011, around 40,000 PEC candidates passed the test. However, the IFES training revealed a significant number of PEC members with literacy and comprehension challenges and lacking basic mathematics skills. All PEC trainers reported cases of appointed PEC commissioners who resigned because they believed they were not capable of performing their duties as poll workers on election day;
- During training, about 25 percent of PEC commissioners were replaced by the nominating political parties or by the supervising TECs, meaning that many commissioners who participated in IFES' training were replaced by new PEC members who had no opportunity to undergo training because there was time for only one training session for each PEC;
- There was limited training duration because of the electoral code-mandated PEC appointment timeframe. PEC commissioners are not required to be appointed until 25 days before election day, leaving limited time to train and prepare;



- Some PEC commissioners were lacking leadership and management skills before the training, which was particularly important for PEC chairs and secretaries, especially those nominated for the first time based on the random assignment formula by opposition political parties;
- Forty-five percent participants indicated they were attending training for the first time and this is critical to their ability to administer their duties on election day;;
- Political parties and TECs did not always appoint qualified PEC commissioners and also did not encourage commissioner participation in the IFES training until IFES initiated communication with party leadership at the beginning of training; and,
- Some training venues were not up to par with problems with electricity and heating, providing less-than-ideal training conditions.

To assess the training impact and receive feedback on its specifics, an evaluation form for training participants (the PEC commissioners) was developed and distributed among 508 randomly-selected training participants. The sampling size has 95 percent confidence level with an interval of +/- 3%.

Forty-five percent of participants indicated they were attending training for the first time (Q#1), 96.1 percent agreed there should be similar trainings in the future and 93.7 percent expressed interest in attending those trainings. Overall training feedback was very positive. Details of the findings are presented below.

**Table 1: General Training Feedback**

	<b>Fully agree</b>	<b>Partly agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>
<b>Q#2 The aims of the trainings meet my expectations</b>	95.3% <sup>1</sup>	3	1.4
<b>Q#3 The length of the training was enough to meet its aims</b>	93.3	5.3	1
<b>Q#4 The trainers were competent enough to conduct this training</b>	98.2	1.2	0.4
<b>Q#5 Training contained information crucial for PEC member to manage elections</b>	97.8	1.4	0.4
<b>Q#6 Training content was presented in an easy and accessible manner</b>	99.2	0.4	0.2
<b>Q#7 Practical exercises allowed me to develop skills required to implement responsibilities of PEC members.<sup>2</sup></b>	97.6	1.2	0.8
<b>Q#9 Attendance in the training is sufficient for me to carry out my responsibilities as a PEC member in accordance with the legislation</b>	93.9	3.1	0.4
<b>Q#10 The training was effective as it increased the knowledge and skills of PEC members</b>	96.7	1.2	0
<b>Q#11 Similar trainings for PEC members should be organized in future</b>	96.1	1	0.6

<sup>1</sup> Percentages in Table 1 and Table 2 are based on the total number of responses received, and in the case of certain questions, responses may be less than 100% as some participants did not answer all questions.

<sup>2</sup> There was a separate question in the evaluation form (Q#8) intended to receive feedback regarding the effectiveness of practical exercises. All eight exercises received 95%+ positive feedback. Exercises #1 and #5 received the highest positive feedback while #6 and #8 received less positive feedback.

**Table 2: Feedback on the Effectiveness of Training Components**

<b>Name of the component</b>	<b>Useful</b>	<b>Partially</b>	<b>Not Useful</b>
Q#14.1 Rights and responsibilities of PEC members and safeguards of their activities	95.5	1.6	0.2
Q#14.2 Voter lists	94.7	3	0.4
Q#14.3 Electoral materials, receiving electoral documents from the TEC	95.9	2.2	0
Q#14.4 The day before the vote	95.5	2.6	0
Q#14.5 Voting room arrangement	93.7	4.1	0
Q#14.6 Distribution of TEC members' responsibilities	95.7	2.2	0
Q#14.7 Voting procedures	96.5	1.6	0
Q#14.8 Special cases that need PEC attention	94.9	2.8	0.6
Q#14.9 Voting with the mobile ballot box	90.2	6.7	1
Q#14.10 Closing of the polling station	96.5	1.6	0
Q#14.11 Sorting of envelopes and ballots	97.2	0.6	0.2
Q#14.12 Compilation of protocols	97	0.8	0
Q#14.13 Submitting electoral materials to PEC	95.9	1.6	0.2
Q#14.14 Rights and responsibilities of proxies, observers and journalists	94.5	3	0
Q#14.15 Criminal and administrative liabilities of PEC members	90.2	4.7	2.2

### Observation and Results

Given the amount of material to be covered in the timeframe provided, one can be generally satisfied with the training results and that the aforementioned challenges were largely addressed, as 79 percent of the electoral code-mandated 13,811 commissioners participated. This represents a 14 percent increase over the 2007 PEC training in advance of the National Assembly elections in May of that year.

According to the International Election Observation Mission Preliminary Report issued on May 7, “PEC training was overall assessed positively by OSCE/ODIHR EOM long-term observers (LTOs).” The report cited trust in the PECs from parliamentary political parties who were, by law, able to appoint one member to each PEC. The Armenian National Congress, which before the May 6th National Assembly elections, did not have a parliamentary presence and, therefore, had no representation on the PECs, expressed distrust.

Specifically, Election Day use of the Manual for Precinct Election Commissioners (a.k.a., the “red book”), used and distributed in the PEC training, has been cited by both Armenian and international election observers as necessary in the course of balloting and vote counting. PEC commissioner reference to the manual and the PEC Journal were important in the professional and transparent administration of Election Day responsibilities.

In terms of Election Day performance, IFES-Armenia conducted an election observation mission on May 6 in central, northern and southern Armenia as well as in Yerevan. IFES-Armenia representatives were present for the opening of four polling stations at 8:00 a.m. in Apna, Hrazdan, Goris and Kapan. IFES observed polling stations throughout Election Day in Qajaran, Meghri, Shinuhayr, Usni, Artsvanik, Masis, Ararat, Spitak and Hrazdan as well as in Yerevan's Malatya-Sebastia, Arabkir and Avan districts. They observed balloting in 42 polling stations and witnessed the vote count in four polling stations upon the conclusion of balloting at 8:00 p.m. IFES also visited 13 Territorial Election Commissions and the Central Election Commission media center to observe their administrative activities.

Polling stations were chosen randomly to maximize observation exposure and quality. IFES worked to visit large, medium and smaller-sized polling stations to gain greater perspective on the range of voting experiences.

This election observation afforded IFES the opportunity to assess election management capabilities at all levels following two sets of election management training in February and April and to determine progress in election administration with Presidential elections scheduled in February 2013. In its technical observation, IFES examined the conduct of the administration of the voting process from the opening of the polls through the voting process and to the vote count and results recording and reporting. All factors were considered during election day, from the overall "operating environment" of the polling station at the time of the visit to factors such as weather conditions and performance and behavior of polling station officials, election observers, candidate and political party proxies, police, and voters.

In general, PECs performed fairly and efficiently with some exceptions. There were organizational issues at some of the precincts' openings and with vote counting at the conclusion of balloting, which was laborious in some polling stations. Further:

- PECs generally processed crowd surges in the precincts well.
- Use of IFES-supplied magnifying glasses were observed in multiple polling stations, which was positive given their limited number and the short time window available for distribution. The magnifiers were not always kept in a place accessible to voters with vision impairments; and, it is recommended in the future they be kept near the voting booth and voters notified accordingly.
- The PEC reference manual was used extensively by PEC commissioners and referenced frequently throughout Election Day, particularly during the vote count.
- The voting process in the PECs visited by IFES was handled with professionalism and efficiency, with general impression and problems in individual cases noted as follows:
- PECs, by and large, handled voter surges with voters moving expeditiously through the check-in and voting processes.
- Voter informational posters were posted within voters' view at nearly every polling station visited on Election Day.
- Police knew their role, and their presence on Election Day was not ubiquitous.

- Most PECs were absent groups of unauthorized persons lingering inside or near the polling station.
- There was no overt voter intimidation observed, although there were proxy and observer reports of persons attempting to influence voters' choices.
- Polling stations were entirely accessible by election observers and candidate and political party proxies with few or no restrictions observed.
- PEC officials were helpful and appeared eager to serve the voters, taking pride in their work as they were doing so.
- PECs visited appeared well-organized and were arranged in accordance with the election law and procedural instructions. Some areas where voters waited, including outside the doors, became crowded during peak times.
- Police maintained an appropriate presence outside voting rooms, maintaining reasonable security without interfering in the vote process.
- There was a relatively high number of voters needing assistance during the signing and voting processing many polling stations observed.
- In other cases:
- In many polling stations, political party proxies and local election observers did not fully realize their rights and responsibilities. In some cases, chairs designated for proxies were empty. Many observers did not know their organization's name and some, when asked which organization they were representing, mentioned a political party (either the Republican Party or Prosperous Armenia).
- In several occurrences the political party and candidate proxies appeared to play an expanded role beyond their observation duties, directing voters and, even in some cases, handling ballots during the vote count. The later occurrence was the result of PEC officials needing a break during the extremely long vote-counting process. While this appeared to be largely benevolent in intent, it nevertheless ran afoul of good practice, if not the law itself.
- In many polling stations, persons inside the voting room couldn't be identified as they didn't have appropriate identification (a political party or candidate proxy, a local election observer and a PEC commissioner).

Concerning PECs closing and the vote count, though methodical and deliberate, the process proceeded according to the procedures established in the election law and outlined in the electoral handbook present at all PECs. The vote count averaged ten hours, which is considered very long. The translucent ballot boxes provided a measure of security to the secrecy of the vote, as did the ballot envelopes, though the use of envelopes (however well-intentioned) did appear to slow down the counting of votes, and its value as a security device is perhaps marginal at best. That said, the PECs worked as per their understanding of the law to count ballots as efficiently as possible and record these on the protocols, copies of which were provided to observers at the conclusion of the count. Although unused ballots were reconciled, the unused envelopes were not, which should be considered in the future. In addition, although PEC officials were dedicated to their jobs, the long counting process necessitated taking breaks, and instead of stopping the count for this purpose (although there was a break between counts of the political party list and majoritarian votes), at times party proxies played a hands-on role in the

vote count as they substituted for accredited PEC officials. The reconciliation process of the voters' lists (standard and supplemental, as well as mobile) took, on average, two hours. The sequence of these events was outlined in the handbook and was generally followed, with some exceptions.

## **Recommendations**

- The CEC-administered PEC accreditation examination must be more rigorous and more uniformly administered to ensure a quality pool of PEC commissioners.
- The CEC should administratively revoke current PEC accreditation, given that the examination process last year was not uniformly and electronically administered; and, administer a more coherent process in advance of the February 2013 presidential elections.
- The CEC must cooperate more closely with the parliamentary political parties to encourage selection of qualified PEC commissioners who will be more receptive to training.
- The CEC must cooperate more closely with TECs to encourage the selection of qualified PEC commissioners who will be more receptive to training.
- Though perhaps a longer-term recommendation, the CEC should consider establishing a full-time Training Center under the Commission's auspices which could administer training for new as well as returning commissioners in advance of future local and national elections.
- The electoral code should be adjusted to provide an earlier deadline before Election Day for the parliamentary political parties and the TECs to appoint PEC commissioners. This will allow more time for PEC commissioners to train and prepare, including targeted training for PEC Chairs and Secretaries.

## **Conclusion**

The vast majority of PEC commissioners conducted themselves professionally and administered the voting process effectively on May 6<sup>th</sup>, which is noteworthy given the short time between their appointments in early-to-mid-April (by the parliamentary political parties and the TECs) and election day. The International Election Observation Mission report complimented the work of the PECs on Election Day while also pointing out performance inconsistencies in the polling stations. In particular, the vote counting process was cited negatively in nearly 20 percent of all precincts and vote protocol production was not always evenly implemented.

Nevertheless, the training administered by IFES with support from OSCE-Yerevan and the European Union Delegation prepared a large majority of PEC commissioners to administer elections that are considered to be "competitive, vibrant and largely peaceful." This is an achievement for Armenia in light of recent past, national elections where intimidation and violence were prevalent in some parts of the country.

PEC performance contributed to this general, conditional approval of the Election Day experience in Armenia and that performance was due, in large part, to the IFES training provided from April 15 through May 3.

PEC capability is progressing. However, future training is necessary at the precinct level – as well as at the territorial and national levels – to enhance PEC performance on Election Day and improve elections in Armenia toward full international democratic standards. With the support of the CEC and its Chairman, Tigran Mukuchyan, the training process proceeded on schedule. The support of the CEC was crucial to the process and there is every indication that the CEC would like to expand the training in time for the February 2013 presidential election. Preparations for that election must begin nearly immediately in order to address accreditation and qualifying issues for potential PEC commissioners, building upon the lessons learned from the 2012 National Assembly training. It is anticipated there will again be novice members of Precinct Election Commissions, particularly given the fact that the Armenian National Congress now has representation in parliament, as well as from naturally-occurring turnover. Training plans should be configured accordingly to prepare all materials and training programs well in advance, to maximize effectiveness and solicit necessary buy-in from stakeholders including the CEC, TECs, political parties and candidate representatives.

IFES thanks the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s Yerevan office for the opportunity to collaborate on this important endeavor. The support provided by the OSCE, through the European Union, was instrumental in elevating the quality of election administration at polling stations across the country, and thereby increasing the confidence of voters in the results of the vote. Although there is additional work yet to be done, the 2012 parliamentary election process set a high standard that can be emulated and built upon to improve transparency and overall performance for February 2013.

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