Understanding Parallel Vote Tabulation

An Explainer for International Partners

May 2025

Contents

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Acknowledgements

Understanding Parallel Vote Tabulation

What Is Parallel Vote Tabulation?[1]

Parallel vote tabulation (PVT) refers to the systematic verification of election results. It is conducted in parallel to the official counting process, using statistical projections. It is sometimes called a 'quick count' or, more recently, 'process and results verification for transparency' (PRVT). Parallel vote tabulations are part of a wider toolkit that can be used to promote electoral integrity.

Table 1. What a PVT does and does not involve

A PVT Involves	A PVT Does Not Involve
• Selecting a representative sample of polling stations. • Observing the voting process at the sample stations during the whole of election day. • Recording the vote count at the sample stations. • Statistically projecting the overall result from the sample.	• Tabulating the results from every polling station. • Surveying voters (as with opinion polls or exit polls). • Recording how individual voters voted. • Using results from regional or central counting centres.

Box 1. PVTs vs Exit Polls

PVTs are not the same as exit polls. While both PVTs and exit polls aim to predict the results of an election, they do so using different methodologies.

Exit poll predictions are based on interviews with a sample of voters as they leave the polling station. These voters are asked who they voted for. Some voters may not feel comfortable answering honestly and so exit poll predictions can be unreliable.

By comparison, PVT predictions are based on observations of the actual voting, counting, and tabulation process.

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[1] This explainer is aimed principally at states and foreign agencies who have an interest in supporting the electoral process but who are not technical elections experts.

Why Conduct a PVT?

There can be different reasons for conducting PVTs, depending on the context. For example, a PVT may be used to deter and detect electoral fraud or to verify official results. Clearly defining the purpose for conducting a PVT is important. Without a clear purpose, PVT implementers can face problems in the "end game", such as deciding what to do with the PVT projections and deciding how and when to publish them. Table 2 sets out what a PVT can and cannot be used for.

Table 2. What a PVT can and cannot do

What a PVT Can Do	What a PVT Cannot Do
Deter fraud To help deter electoral fraud, a PVT must be well publicized and conducted in a transparent manner by a credible and independent organization.	**Replace traditional election observation**[2] Unless used in conjunction with traditional observation of the entire electoral process, a PVT may just project the results of a flawed process.
Detect fraud A PVT can help to detect fraud by identifying inconsistencies between official results and the PVT projection (either nationally or at polling station level).	**Directly overturn official results** A PVT projection is just a projection. Where there is a discrepancy with official results, it could encourage a political challenge, an appeal, an audit, or a recount. But it is not a second set of official results.
Project results quickly Delayed publication of official results can sometimes lead to instability. Timely PVT projections have the potential to mitigate this instability, providing that the PVT process is trusted and understood.	**Determine the results of a close election** If the results of the election are particularly close (i.e. within the PVT's margin of error – see below for more information), the PVT cannot be used to determine the true winner(s).
Boost confidence in official results In contexts where trust in elections is limited, a PVT can bolster confidence in the official results, providing that the two sets of results are broadly in line.	
Encourage better election observation By focusing on only a sample of polling stations, PVTs encourage election observers to allocate resources efficiently and use a more rigorous election observation methodology.	

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[2] Traditional election observation involves teams of international and/or domestic observers monitoring the quality of the entire electoral process, leading up to and including the election day itself. Observers may assess the legal and regulatory environment, the conduct of political parties during the campaign, the quality and fairness of media coverage, the integrity of digital and printed information, and the technical execution of the voting, counting, and tabulation processes on election day (among other things).

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Who Conducts PVTs?

PVTs are usually conducted by domestic citizen observation groups – non-partisan, independent, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are officially accredited to observe elections. These can range from specialized election observation organizations, human rights monitors, community organizers, or faith-based groups. On rare occasions, PVTs are implemented by media companies, political parties, or electoral authorities. Domestic groups are often given assistance or guidance from international democracy groups such as the National Democratic Institute (NDI).

Essential Prerequisites

For a PVT to be successful, several important prerequisites need to be in place:

Access to data
A PVT implementor must have access to data on the voting population, polling stations and the vote counts submitted by the polling stations.

A permissive legal framework
Laws and regulations must allow for election observation and reporting of findings.

Credibility with stakeholders
PVT implementors must have, or be prepared to cultivate, credibility with stakeholders in the country. Implementing organizations must be non-partisan and have a strong track-record in PVT implementation (or high-quality election observation if conducting a PVT for the first time).

Adequate resources
A PVT implementer must have significant human, technical, and financial resources. The more complex the electoral system, the more resources are required to conduct a robust PVT.

Risks

PVT is a powerful tool. If not implemented for the right reasons, with methodological rigor and organizational discipline, it can have damaging, unintended effects. Depending on the context, risks could include:

Legitimizing the results of a flawed process
If election observers focus only on the tabulation of results, they risk ignoring the quality of the broader electoral process (for example, whether opposition parties can campaign freely). In such cases, a PVT projection confirming the official results can lend legitimacy to a flawed election.

Misleading data leaks

When reporting results from polling stations, observers may be tempted to leak partial results. This can be dangerously misleading as partial leaks release raw, incomplete data.

Projecting results too soon

In highly charged post-election environments, PVT implementers can come under pressure to release PVT projections too early – i.e. before completing essential statistical checks.

Delaying or avoiding publication of results

If the PVT is credible, the results should be made public. Delaying or avoiding the publication of PVT projections can lead to mistrust in the election and the results. If results are too close to call, it is important to present the underlying data that shows why this is the case. Delaying or avoiding the publication of results should only be considered if the PVT was not successful (e.g. not enough data was collected).

Poor coordination among implementers and stakeholders

Competing PVTs, conducted by different organisations with different methodologies, producing conflicting results, can yield confusion and mistrust. Likewise, failure to engage constructively with electoral management authorities can lead to disagreements and raise tensions.

Political bias

Some NGOs are partisan by nature or design. Where the government is guilty of human rights abuses or non-democratic behaviour, even the most professional NGOs can become partisan. In these instances, political considerations may determine how PVT results are presented.

Capacity failures

Insufficient investment of resources or methodological rigor in a PVT can result in a flawed projection. This can damage the credibility of the implementing organization and undermine political stability.

International involvement

PVTs are often supported by international partners. In some contexts, this could lead to PVTs being portrayed as a tool of foreign interference.

Reputational risk

If a PVT goes wrong, this can have reputational consequences for both implementing and funding partners.

Conflict risk

In some contexts, releasing projections which either confirm or challenge the official results could escalate tensions or lead, even indirectly, to violence. Do no harm principles should apply.

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The PVT Process – Methodological Considerations

In-depth guidance on how to conduct a PVT (targeted at implementers, not international partners) is available in NDI's 2023 Manual.[3] International partners are unlikely to conduct a PVT themselves but may need to understand and assess the methodological decisions of implementing partners. As such, this section provides a brief overview of key methodological issues.

Sampling

Ideally, the sample should be drawn from an accurate and comprehensive list of polling stations, by selecting every Nth polling station on the list within each electoral district. If this isn't possible, for example due to access constraints, the sampling strategy should stay as close to the ideal as possible, prioritizing randomness within a geographical distribution proportional to the distribution of voters.

Accuracy and Margin of Error

Margin of error is the difference between the results from a sample of polling stations and the results from all the polling stations. Establishing a target for a specific margin of error before an election is challenging. Instead, it is better to focus on accurately calculating the margin of error after the results are collected (but before publication). The size of the margin of error depends partly on the size of the sample, but mostly it depends on the homogeneity of the results for each party or candidate. The more variety in voting patterns between different polling stations, the larger the margin of error will be (and vice versa). Margin of error calculations also need to account for the fact that the sampling unit is a cluster not an individual (i.e. a polling station not a voter). As such, the method for calculating the margin of error for a PVT is different to that used for opinion polls. For PVTs, each candidate or party will have a separately calculated margin of error.

Organisational capacity

The requirements of a PVT – to train a specific number of observers well, to deploy them to specific polling stations in the sample, and to have them accurately report the results in good time – are more challenging than those of a traditional observation effort. As a result, implementing a PVT will be beyond the technical capacity and organizational discipline of some NGOs. To identify possible problems, a full-scale simulation of the PVT in the weeks before election day is a must. However, in some cases, governments may obstruct efforts to conduct a full-scale simulation by, for example, delaying the registration of observers or denying entry to key members of staff.

Reporting and Quality Control

Observer reports from the sampled polling stations cannot be simply entered into a database to automatically generate statistical projections. PVT implementers must establish protocols to handle

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[3] Brothers, J. et al. (2023) Process and Results Verification for Transparency: A Citizen Election Observer's Guide

missing data and check for logical errors. A dedicated team should trouble-shoot inconsistencies in the data. All data should be stored securely to avoid leaks or external interference.

Communication Strategy

It is crucially important to understand how and when to communicate PVT projections. A communication strategy requires a clear purpose to be effective. PVT communication often goes wrong when the purpose of the PVT is unclear.

Results can be communicated in different ways depending on the intended audience and purpose. For example, if the purpose is to build trust in the final results among key electoral stakeholders, PVT results could be presented in private consultations with these stakeholders (ensuring equal access to all stakeholders to avoid perceptions of partisan bias). If the audience is the general public, results could be presented at a press conference. Problems at the communication stage can also come from data leaks, or a premature release of results; from fear of taking responsibility for political consequences; from a lack of transparency around methodology; or from a failure to familiarize stakeholders with the purpose, method, and reliability of the PVT.

As a rule of thumb, it is good practice to publish PVT results as soon as possible, together with an explanatory analysis and a qualitative assessment of the polling process. Partial or "rolling" PVT (i.e. projecting results in real time as data is collected) can be risky as it may confuse the audience.

Implementers must be transparent about their PVT methodology. They should be prepared to disclose the results collected from the polling stations and their statistical analysis of those results. The identity of the sample polling stations, however, should not be disclosed prior to election day because it could encourage or enable manipulation or disruption.

Where international partners are funding citizen election observation and a PVT, they too should develop a communications strategy, in case some public engagement is required. This should emphasize that they were not involved in developing the PVT methodology and that the PVT implementer acted independently. Funders should also prepare lines to take if the PVT results are not credible and cannot be endorsed.

Appendix: A Checklist for Deciding Whether to Support a PVT

In each context, supporting a PVT will entail different risks and potential benefits. The following checklist is designed to help partners evaluate these.

Policy Considerations

- **Political Context:** Are the electoral authorities credible and trusted by electoral stakeholders? If they are, is a PVT necessary or should assistance be focused on different aspects of the elections? Is there a risk of violence? If there is, would PVT projections mitigate this risk or exacerbate it? Can the implementing partner conduct a PVT safely? Would international funding of the PVT affect its credibility?

- **Fit with Strategy:** Do you have a clear assessment of the likely electoral environment/process and consequently a clear articulation of why a PVT would be beneficial? Are you engaged in a suitable partnership with other international partners who could jointly fund support for a PVT? Is there a well-coordinated international community approach to the elections, including a possible PVT, that you agree with?

The Implementer

- **Organizational Capacity:** What are the human resources and organizational structure of the implementer? Does it have the capacity to manage a large-scale operation?

- **Trust:** Does the implementer enjoy the trust of key political stakeholders? Are they perceived as non-partisan, independent, and unbiased?

- **Visibility:** Is the implementer known to the public and/or to the key political stakeholders?

- **Goal:** Does the implementer have a clear purpose for conducting the PVT?

Survey Methodology and Operation

- **Sample:** How is the sample designed? Is the sample based on principles of randomness? Does the sample include historical voting patterns that could create a sampling bias? Is the sample appropriate for the electoral system?

- **Expertise:** Who designed the sample and statistical tools? Are they receiving assistance and when will this assistance be needed and available?

- **Deployment:** What is the capacity to deploy observers to the sample polling stations? Is it clear that observers will not cover polling stations only according to convenience?

- **Observer Training and Management:** Is there a clear and appropriate training system in place? Are observer Team Leaders identified and involved in the training?

Legal Framework / Access

- **Polling Station Access:** Do observers have a legal right to observe the voting process and the vote count? Will they be allowed to observe the counting and report the results?

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- **Publication:** Are NGOs and the media allowed to publish projections of the results?

- **Duty of Care:** Are there risks that observers will be denied access to the country or detained? Does the implementer have a plan for ensuring it meets its duty of care to observers? Is the PVT designed so as to be resilient to state interference?

Data

- **Communications:** By what method will observers report the data from the polling stations? What are the backup options?

- **Quality Control:** What is the methodology to ensure quality of the observers' reports? Are there designated staff for quality control and troubleshooting?

- **IT System:** What is the IT system that will be recording and processing the data? Will there be a full-scale advance simulation, including deployment of observers to confirm access to polling stations and availability of communication networks?

Statistics

- **Rigor:** Is the implementer aware of the necessary rigor required to collect and analyse data prior to the publication of the PVT projections?

- **Accuracy:** What is the methodology for estimating the accuracy of the PVT projections? Are the appropriate margin of error formulas used?

- **Data:** How would missing data be addressed? Is there a rigorous 'Plan B' if some polling stations cannot be accessed? Can the implementer articulate how they will assess the quality of the data, the analysis, and the PVT projections?

Communications

- **Publication Plan:** What is the plan for publication of the PVT? Will the PVT be presented to the broader public or only to key stakeholders? What is the strategy for media engagement? When are the projections planned to be released? How will the PVT data be presented in relation to other observation data?

- **Scenarios:** Are there circumstances under which the implementer would not publish the data? Have they considered in advance how they would respond in scenarios where the PVT either challenges the official result, confirms the official result, or is too close to call?

- **Political Implications:** Can the implementer credibly assess the political environment in which they will implement the PVT? Have they considered the political implications of publication? Have they invested in relationships with political parties and candidates?

- **Branding:** Unless there are exceptional reasons, there should be no international partner branding.

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