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## OBSERVATION OF VOTING AND COUNTING



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- Decide on the scale and nature of the observation to be conducted
- Ensure observers are trained in election procedures, reporting formats, and the code of conduct
- Ensure that full logistical and methodological support is provided to observers at all levels
- Establish a coherent reporting structure
- Ensure a timely return and analysis of report forms

Almost every established domestic observer group has attempted to observe voting and counting, often with great success. However, the mobilization of thousands of volunteer polling-station observers can absorb a huge amount of human resources both nationally and regionally, sometimes at the expense of other observation activities. It is therefore essential that a domestic observer group is clear about what is to be observed on election day and how best to observe it.

The following questions should be considered as early as possible, preferably during the needs assessment:

- ▶▶ Should observers be deployed to every polling station or to a random sample of polling stations?
- ▶▶ Should observers be “static”, observing voting and counting in one polling station all day?
- ▶▶ Should observers be “mobile”, observing voting in a number of polling stations?
- ▶▶ Should static observers be deployed in all polling stations in “hot spots”?
- ▶▶ Should the aim be to observe and record the results in every polling station?
- ▶▶ Should the aim be to observe and record the results in a random sample of polling stations?
- ▶▶ What human and financial resources are available?
- ▶▶ What is the right balance of resources between long-term observation prior to polling day and recruiting and training observers for polling day?

## A. OBSERVATION OF VOTING AND COUNTING

Ideally, observers should work in teams of two when observing voting and counting, both for reasons of security and because two observers working together are able to check and compare their observations with each other. However, it may be that, for reasons of resources, a domestic observer group decides that it will deploy observers individually.

Observers should be fully prepared before undertaking their monitoring duties. In particular, they should attend a training programme, be aware of the election law and additional rules and regulations, and understand how to complete and return the observation report forms prepared by the domestic observer group. It is essential that they agree to abide by the code of conduct. They should also be familiar with the area in which they are observing and be aware of the location of polling stations and count centres.

If observers are posted to a single polling station, they should remain at the station throughout the voting process and the counting process if it takes place at the polling station. If observers are part of mobile teams, they should spend at least thirty minutes in every polling station visited. It is quality, not quantity, of observation that counts! At the completion of the count in a polling station, observers should attempt to obtain a copy of the result protocol and accompany the results, ballot papers, and other voting materials to the tabulation centre.

Observers should maintain strict impartiality at all times and at no time express any bias or preference in relation to political parties, candidates, or the authorities or with reference to any issues connected to the election. They should also not wear or display any partisan symbols or colours. Observers should undertake their duties in an unobtrusive manner and not interfere with any aspect of the electoral process. If they notice any irregularity, they may bring it to the attention of the polling-station officials, but they must never give instructions or countermand decisions of the officials. All conclusions should be based on well-documented, factual, and verifiable evidence.

Observers should be courteous at all times while conducting their duties and remember that they are representing the domestic observer group responsible for organizing the observation programme. When entering a polling station, they should ensure that they introduce themselves to the chair/president of the station and other polling-station officials. In addition to speaking to polling-station officials, observers should also try to speak to any

observers present representing parties or candidates; international observers, if present; and voters themselves to assess their confidence in the process and listen to any reports of irregularities. All opinions should be considered as long as their credibility is assured. Observers should remember that some persons may try to manipulate information for their own purposes and should therefore use their judgement to ascertain a balanced assessment of a situation. It is a good idea to speak to a cross section of people from each group wherever possible.

When observing the voting and counting processes, the following issues should be considered:

→ ***Polling-station environment:***

- Is the polling station easy to find?
- Is access to the polling station difficult?
- Is there any sign of campaign materials or campaign activity in, on, or around the polling station?
- Is there any evidence of intimidation, bribery, or a disturbance?
- Are any unauthorized persons present in the polling station?
- Are security personnel behaving in an appropriate manner?
- Are voters being offered any inducements to vote in a particular manner?

→ ***Election officials:***

- Do polling-station officials appear to be well trained and familiar with the voting and counting procedures?
- Do officials appear to be free to talk about their duties?
- Do they perform their duties impartially?
- Are all appointed members present, or have any been prevented from serving on the polling-station commission?

→ ***Materials:***

- Are there sufficient polling materials?
- Have polling materials been securely stored between delivery and the opening of the polling station?
- Are the ballot boxes located in full view of polling-station officials?
- Are ballot papers easy to use? How many ballot papers were initially received by the polling station?

→ *Voter list:*

- What is the total number of voters on the voter list, and how many voters have actually voted? (This will give some idea of the turnout trends.)
- Does it appear that large numbers of eligible voters have been omitted from the voter list?
- Does it appear that there are too many names on the voter list?
- Do all voters appear to be residents in the electoral area?

→ *Voting procedures:*

- Is the secrecy of the ballot ensured?
- Are voters required to show identification before being allowed to vote?
- Is the distribution of ballot papers to voters efficient and secure?
- Do ballot papers bear an official stamp specific to the polling station and/or the signature of a polling-station official(s)?
- Are those eligible to vote allowed to do so?
- Are any persons ineligible to vote allowed to do so?
- Are voters voting illegally outside the polling booths?
- Is “family” voting (more than one person in the booth) permitted?
- Are voters given more ballot papers than they are entitled to?
- Is there any evidence of ballot-box stuffing?
- Do voters appear to be aware of voting procedures?
- Are voters who require assistance helped in the appropriate manner?
- Are there excessive delays in administering the process?
- Is the process well managed by polling-station officials?
- Are agents or proxies of parties or candidates present allowed to observe voting and counting as prescribed by law?
- Are agents or proxies experiencing intimidation or harassment?
- Are agents or proxies attempting or actually interfering in the election process or attempting or actually inducing or intimidating voters to vote for a specific party or candidate?

Particular attention should be paid to **special voting procedures**, which include early voting, mobile voting, and voting by soldiers, prisoners, and hospital patients:

- Is early voting sufficiently regulated, secure, and transparent?
- Is use of the mobile ballot box properly regulated?
- If a supplementary voter list for sick and elderly voters voting at home is in use, is there an unusually high number of names on this list?

- Has sufficient campaign material been provided to soldiers, prisoners, and hospital patients in order for them to make an informed choice?
- Have special voter registration arrangements been provided for soldiers, prisoners, or hospital patients?
- Have adequate provisions been made for soldiers, prisoners, or hospital patients to vote by secret ballot, free from intimidation?
- Are soldiers required to vote in front of their officers?
- Are officers instructing soldiers how to vote?

→ ***Counting procedures:***

- Is the vote count conducted in a transparent manner?
- Are observers, agents, and proxies of parties and candidates able to witness all aspects of the count?
- How does the number of registered voters recorded as having voted compare with the number of ballots actually cast?
- Are the ballots counted in an orderly and secure manner?
- Are unused ballots secured, cancelled, or destroyed after being counted?
- Do election officials make any marks or notations on ballot papers?
- Are invalid ballot papers properly and consistently adjudicated and segregated from the other ballot papers?
- Does the number of invalid ballot papers seem inordinately high?
- Are complaints handled satisfactorily?
- Are any agents or party proxies attempting to interfere or actually interfering with the counting process?
- Are any unauthorized persons present, and, if so, what role do they play in the process?

→ ***Results completion and transportation:***

- Are the result protocols correctly completed at the end of the count and signed by all authorized persons?
- Are observers and party/candidate proxies and agents able to obtain copies of the result protocols at the end of the count?
- Are the results publicly announced and a copy of the result protocol publicly displayed?
- Is the transport of protocols, ballot papers, and voting materials to the superior election commission transparent and secure?
- Are these election materials transported directly to the location of the superior election commission or are they redirected to another place?

Previous experience of observing voting and counting, combined with an analysis of election-day procedures, should enable a domestic observer group to determine which aspects of the voting and counting processes require particular attention. Past experience might show, for example, that multiple voting has been a significant problem in certain places or that election materials have been arriving late at polling stations.

These requirements should be reflected in the report forms developed for observers to complete when monitoring voting and counting. Most importantly, report forms should be clear, concise, and easy to use. Long checklists that have large numbers of open-ended questions take a long time to enter into a computer and are very difficult to analyse. They may also result in an overload of paper once the forms are returned, as well as an overload of the communications system. In developing the report forms, the designers must remember that they should be easily understood by observers. In view of this, it would be advisable prior to election day to test the forms on a number of observers to see how easy they are to comprehend and complete.

A report form should provide questions that require “yes” or “no” answers and additional questions that quantify problems if they occur. An example of this approach is shown below:

**Example 1:  
Quantitative  
questions**

Did you see anyone vote more than once?

YES

NO



If YES, how many times did you see this happen?

\_\_\_\_\_

*(In figures only)*

Where possible, open-ended questions like “How did the election commission deal with people who were not on the voter lists?” should be avoided. Large amounts of text are very difficult to analyse, particularly when there are thousands of report forms to read. If open-ended questions are to be used, then observers should be given a number of predetermined answers rather than solely relying on their written comments. An example of this is shown on the next page:

**Example 2:  
Pre-coded  
questions**

**Why did the polling station not open on time?** *[please tick appropriate answer(s)]*

- Election materials not present?  Threat to the security of the polling station?
- Election Commission not quorate?  Election Commission could not access building?
- Other (please write in)? \_\_\_\_\_

A third type of question that may be useful is to ask observers to give a judgement on a problem by selecting a statement that best reflects what they have observed. An example of this type of question can be seen below. This can be particularly useful in making an overall assessment of a polling station. In general, form designers should avoid an odd number of statements or asking for an assessment on a three- or five-point scale, as experience shows that observers will tend to opt for the middle point of the scale.

**Example 3:  
Four-point-  
scale  
questions**

**How would you rate the overall conduct of voting in this polling station?**

*[please circle the answer that best represents your opinion]*

- |               |                               |                          |                       |
|---------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| No violations | Some insignificant violations | A few serious violations | Many major violations |
|---------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|

During training, it should be emphasized that it is essential that observers complete report forms clearly and return them to the appointed person or place before going home.

If a domestic observer group is particularly ambitious, a more complex system of reporting can be developed to provide additional information. For example, separate forms could be used for the opening of a polling station, observation of voting in the morning, observation of voting in the afternoon, and for the count. If this approach is taken, then a domestic observer group must be sure that it has the capacity to deal with the increased number of report forms and data to be processed.

Information from the report forms should be entered quickly and precisely into a computer database by a team of trained personnel under supervision of a data analyst. If a domestic observer group does not have the capacity to design its own analytical software, a good social scientist or statistician should be consulted. Ideally, the data analyst and the report-form designer should work together to ensure that the maximum amount of information can be gained from the minimum number of questions on the report forms.

A domestic observer group may also decide to provide its observers with complaint forms. These can be used by citizens and observers to lodge official complaints with the polling-station staff. Observers should send copies of any complaints lodged to the central office so that any action taken can be monitored. Alternatively, observers can provide details of serious irregularities during local debriefings. This will enable information about the type, frequency, and location of significant problems to be compiled.

The information from local debriefings, analysis of complaint forms, and observation of voting and counting forms should be provided in time for the preliminary statement, which ideally should be issued within 48 hours of election day. In some circumstances, it may not be possible or practical for the data-entry team to enter data for every polling station observed in time for the preliminary statement. Under these circumstances, a representative sample of observer reports should be analysed for the preliminary statement and the complete set analysed for the final report.

## B. PARALLEL VOTE TABULATION<sup>16</sup>

The purpose of a parallel vote tabulation (PVT) is to provide political parties, candidates, and the public with credible information to help assess the legitimacy of the results. An early decision on whether to embark on a PVT is vital because its organization will have an impact on the deployment of observers around the country.

Although there may be an attraction to organizing the collection of all polling-station results, in practice, the enormous demand on personnel and communications systems may be prohibitive. Should this be the case, a scientifically designed random sample of polling stations can be highly accurate and, if properly designed, provide a domestic observer group with credible predictions of the overall results.

<sup>16</sup> For more information on parallel vote tabulation, see *The Quick Count and Election Observation. An NDI Guide for Civic Organizations and Political Parties*, published by the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) in 2002.

A domestic observer group should consult a competent social scientist, statistician, or public-opinion polling organization when determining the size and design of the random sample. Experience shows that where there is little demographic data and the population is quite diverse, the tendency is to use a relatively large sample, such as 10 per cent of polling stations. Where the opposite is true, a smaller sample can be used and provide sufficiently credible and accurate results for national elections. If municipal elections or elections based largely on constituencies using a majoritarian voting system are being observed, then particular care should be given to sample size and design at a constituency or district level because local nuances will need to be taken into account.

To prepare a computer program and choose the polling stations to be included in the random sample, a PVT design team will need accurate information about the number, location, and size of electorate in all polling stations. Results from the polling stations selected for the PVT should be accurately recorded by observers on a simple single-sheet report form.

If legislation does not provide domestic observers with the right to observe counting of votes in polling stations, then a domestic observer group may ask its observers to record the polling-station results from copies of the results displayed outside the polling stations. Alternatively, it may be possible to obtain copies of the results from members of the polling-station commission or political party/candidate proxies present in the polling station during the count.

A domestic observer group may find it useful to test its reporting/communication systems in advance of conducting the actual PVT. This can provide confidence in the methodology and demonstrate the group's capacity to mount a credible PVT and thereby deter election fraud. As the timing of the release of the results of a PVT is critical, a domestic observer group should decide in advance when this should happen.

## SERBIAN DOMESTIC OBSERVERS CONDUCT PARALLEL VOTE TABULATION IN HOSTILE CONDITIONS

Between 1997 and 2000, CeSID, a Serbian NGO, was prevented by the authorities from observing elections in Serbia. In view of this situation, CeSID decided to organize a parallel vote tabulation during the federal elections in September 2000 by placing volunteers outside polling stations to access party agents and results as they were publicly posted after the count.

Following a raid on their headquarters and subsequent raids on regional offices by police in the weeks prior to polling day, and with the safety of their volunteers at issue, CeSID decided that preparations for the parallel vote tabulation would have to be undertaken discreetly. A complex but extremely secure method of communication via phone and Internet was established with backup servers. Final instructions and forms were only delivered shortly before polling day.

Despite attempts to undermine its work, CeSID managed to release results from just over 1,096 polling stations by 4:30 of the morning after polling had taken place. These results predicted a victory for Koštunica and contradicted the results issued by the Federal Election Commission showing that Milošević was ahead and that a second round would be required. The Serbian public did not accept the Federal Commission's results, and the Commission subsequently announced a second set of results with Koštunica winning the presidency.

