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PARALLEL VOTE TABULATION (PVT) AND ELECTION CREDIBILITY

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■ Introduction

The Parallel Vote Tabulation (PVT) methodology for election observation has become a powerful tool for citizen observer groups to monitor, in real time, developments on Election Day. Significantly, PVT enables citizen groups to independently analyze the integrity of voting and counting processes and verify the accuracy of the official election results declared by election management bodies (EMBs).

The PVT methodology is not an entirely new phenomenon in domestic election observation. It was first used in the Philippines where the National Citizens Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) employed it during the 1986 elections. In recent times, however, the PVT has been employed, to varying degrees, successfully by domestic observer groups in a number of countries in Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean. In Africa, it has been implemented in Malawi in 2008, Sierra-Leone in 2007, Zimbabwe in 2008, Ghana in 2008, Kenya in the 2010 constitutional referendum, Zambia in 2011, and Nigeria in the recent (2011) general elections.

The focus of this paper is to examine the usefulness of the PVT as a tool in promoting election integrity. I begin by unpacking the PVT technique, especially its methodology and applications. This is followed by an analysis of the potential value of the PVT in promoting election integrity. I argue that the PVT assists observer groups to provide timely, precise, systematic and representative information about the polls on the same day an election takes place; and because of its ability to estimate official results through scientific processes, it enables citizen observation groups to independently verify the accuracy of the official results declared by EMBs. Next, I discuss the PVT's potential

contribution to the prevention and reducing of post-election violence, followed by a short conclusion.

■ Understanding PVT

Also known as the 'Quick Count', the PVT is an advanced form of a domestic Election Day observation instrument, which employs statistical principles in the deployment of election observers to the field and reporting on the quality of the electoral process. The PVT makes it possible for the deployment of observers to a nationally representative sample (often several thousands) of polling stations. This enables real time reporting of developments in the field on Election Day, and facilitates rapid collation and verification of the accuracy of the total valid vote count as may be declared by an EMB. The verification of the accuracy of total valid vote count is possible because of the ability of the observers to collect information about the votes cast from aforementioned randomly selected sample of polling stations. The official vote count received from the observers at the deployed polling stations are aggregated to estimate the results.

The PVT methodology is similar to the traditional method of domestic election observation in the following respects: it involves recruitment, training, and deployment of accredited non-partisan observers to keep watch over the voting and counting processes at selected polling stations. It departs, however, from the traditional approach to election observation in the following ways: deployment of observers to a nationally representative sample of polling stations to collect data on the voting process and also

provide information on the official vote count for each polling station; transmission of recorded data via specially formatted mobile text messaging (SMS) to a computer database at a central location. In sum, the PVT is characterized by:

- √ using statistical principles to deploy observers
- √ deploying observers to a nationally representative random sample of polling stations; and
- √ application of ICT tools, in particular SMS, to rapidly transmit observation reports (although it can be conducted using the manual checklist)

Hence, PVT is an enhanced form of domestic election observation. It is important to note, however, that the following does not apply to the PVT:

- √ It is not an exit polling, neither is it a political opinion research. PVT records the actual vote count as announced by the EMB polling officials at the polling stations;
- √ It does not give any group other than the EMB the right to announce or declare election results. Indeed, EMBs have the sole mandate to declare election results. Therefore any other group that attempts to declare election results would be usurping the exclusive powers of EMBs¹.

■ PVT and Election Integrity

The PVT methodology for election observation has all the advantages associated with the traditional election observation (i.e. detecting and deterring fraud, improving citizen participation, promoting election transparency and credibility etc.). Properly deployed, PVT has the following additional benefits to the promotion of election integrity.

- √ The potential to reduce tensions among candidates, supporters and voters associated with elections through the timely release of information on the conduct of the polls. The use of text messages to transmit field observer reports to the national information center dramatically decreases the time it takes for filing and collating reports on the opening of polls, the voting process, and the polling station

environment. Furthermore, this method enables the instantaneous transmission of the vote count at the sampled polling stations to a central information collation point - a vast increase in the speed of information delivery compared to the traditional approach. Consequently, non-partisan citizen observer groups are therefore able to independently report on every stage of the polling process, and also issue preliminary statements on the conduct of the elections soon after the close of polls.

- √ Second, the PVT provides an effective device to assess in a more representative manner the overall quality of the electoral process. Through the sampling technique embedded in the PVT, all electoral areas and/or constituencies are covered. This enables citizen poll observer groups to deploy observers to cover the entire country. It also enables groups to evaluate the overall quality of the polling process. This contrasts with the traditional observation technique where deployment is unsystematic and is commonly 'trouble-area' driven, therefore susceptible to skewed judgments on the election quality across the country. Receiving reports from a representative sample of polling stations selected on the basis of time-tested statistical principles allows election observation groups, to provide both qualitative and quantitative information on the conduct of the elections. The methodology allows the observer group's report to truly reflect the conduct of the elections in the entire country, not merely in a region.

- √ Third, PVT has a superior ability to deter electoral malfeasance on Election Day. Deployed observers are stationed and remain at the polling stations on Election Day, unlike the traditional approach where observers move around to visit various polling stations in order to cover a wider area. Past experience in election observation across a number of countries has shown that the presence of observers at polling stations throughout the polling period reduces the level of violence, intimidation and electoral fraud as the presence of observers

¹ Sometimes PVT undertakers are forced to make their projections publicly known ahead of the EMB. This is especially true when groups suspect that EMB's delay in announcing or declaring results is related to an effort to manipulate those results in favor of a particular political party. However, PVT undertakers are obliged to exercise good judgment in all the actions they take, even if the action is aimed at ensuring that the outcomes of the polls reflect the will of the people.

deter would-be trouble-makers from causing trouble.

- √ Finally, because of its ability to estimate official results through a systematic process, the PVT enables election observation bodies to independently verify the accuracy of the official results as declared by EMBs. It makes reliable and scientific projections based on the aggregated official vote counts from a nationally representative sample of polling stations. It, thus, contributes to enhancing public confidence in the electoral process and the official results announced by the EMB. Indeed, a well mounted PVT and the EMB's official results should in all cases, converge, to a large extent, if EMBs do their work professionally.

■ Can PVT help Prevent Post-Election Violence?

PVT is an Election Day activity. Therefore, it is not primarily a mechanism for preventing pre-election violence. Though advance knowledge of PVT can help build confidence and lessen tensions before election day, thereby reducing chances of pre-election violence. The PVT however, can contribute to preventing or reducing the chances of post-election violence. By its nature and method, the PVT makes it possible to detect errors made in tabulating the votes. Consequently, PVT has an inbuilt mechanism to prevent Election Day and post-election conflicts. It also has a trust building role in the vote tallying process. Lack of trust in election results is a major source of post-electoral violence in most emerging electoral democracies, and manifests in the post election period.

By adopting the SMS method, the PVT facilitates the speedy transmission of information to citizen observer groups about threats of or real acts of violence at polling stations. Citizen groups are then able to transmit such information to appropriate security agencies for immediate redress. In fact, the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO) employed the PVT methodology as an electoral conflict prevention mechanism in the 2008 polls. Furthermore, by using the SMS technique, and the statistical sampling approach for deploying election observers (in a manner representative of the entire country) to report on the quality of the electoral process at specific time intervals during polling, the PVT can contribute to averting serious challenges that can shake the political foundations of the nation.

The PVT's ability to statistically project accurate results with a very narrow margin of error reduces the likelihood

of tabulation process manipulation. Accordingly, the PVT methodology strengthens confidence in the official results as declared by the EMB, therefore enhancing overall public acceptance of the results by all stakeholders. This, undoubtedly, can help reduce the likelihood for post election violence.

Notwithstanding the above mentioned positive effects of a PVT driven observation project, it must be pointed out that the PVT, if not properly implemented, may not be able to prevent post election violence. To begin with, if the methodology is not properly designed to ensure a nationally representative sample, the PVT projections on the official results will be largely biased. Using projections based on biased estimates to verify the accuracy of official results released by EMBs (who would have discharged their responsibilities credibly) would lead to erroneous conclusions. Because of these concerns, much effort is channeled to ensuring that the sample is truly representative and that data is collected from all sample polling stations.

Furthermore, if the PVT project does not have in-built mechanisms to check inaccuracies and inconsistencies in the data transmitted by observers, analysis and projections may be imprecise. Inaccurate data transmitted by observers, be it intentional or unintentional, can bias the PVT projections and therefore provide non-credible information to citizen groups to corroborate or contradict the true account of polling and vote counts. As a result, sophisticated databases are used to ensure accurate transmission of PVT data, and all PVT data is checked repeatedly to ensure that it accurately reflects the official results from sampled polling stations as announced by election officials.

Indeed, the objective of the PVT is undermined if observers do not display independence and non-partisanship in their observation and reportage. If the leadership of citizen observer groups in charge of the central information gathering point get caught up in an overly partisan conduct leading to manipulation of correct data sent by observers, PVT estimates and conclusions drawn could be biased and potentially become a source of post-election security risk. Therefore cautious steps are taken in the recruitment and training of observers involved in the PVT. And the leadership of the observer groups and observers must all sign a pledge of neutrality.

Finally, PVT data must be used cautiously to ensure it helps promote electoral integrity. Because the PVT result can be generated within 24 hours after close of polls, there could

be a temptation on the part of the leadership of the observer group to release information ahead of EMBs. In contexts such as Ghana where there is a tradition of successful elections, this can lead to confusion in the political environment and violence can be the result if there are underlining societal tensions².

■ Conclusion

Increasingly, the PVT methodology for domestic election observation is being applied in various countries to enable citizens scale up the quality and impact of their election observation efforts. Specially trained and deployed observers record the information on polling day using standardized forms and communicate their findings via SMS to a central point. The data is analyzed and the quality of the findings evaluated to enable non-partisan citizen groups

to generate accurate and timely account of the Election Day processes, including the integrity of the official election results.

The advantages of the PVT methodology including speed and accuracy of transmitting election results, contribute to reducing post-election tensions, consequently enhancing citizen confidence in the electoral process and outcomes. The statistical principles it applies allows for systematic nation-wide evaluation on the conduct of the opening of polling stations, the voting process, closing of voting and the counting of ballots, as well as the official vote tally based on reports from a nationally representative random sample of polling stations. Thus, when properly and professionally implemented, the PVT helps to reinforce public confidence in the election process, fosters election integrity and contributes to election peace.

² The experience in Zimbabwe during the 2008 presidential elections is an example of PVT data being released in advance of the EMB. The Zimbabwe Election Support Network's (ZESN) release of PVT data contributed in halting an attempted manipulation of the results in favour of the incumbent during the first round.

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☞ *CDD-Ghana Briefing Papers are generated from commissioned research on topical issues, as well as presentations at round-table discussions at the Center.*

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