

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# ASSESSING AND VERIFYING ELECTION RESULTS

## A DECISION-MAKER'S GUIDE TO PARALLEL VOTE TABULATION AND OTHER TOOLS



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**Submitted To:**

USAID

**Prepared By:**

Glenn Cowan  
Evan Smith  
Claire Robertson  
Caroline Sahley (USAID)

**Contractor:**

Democracy International, Inc.  
7600 Wisconsin Avenue, Suite 1010  
Bethesda, MD 20814  
Tel: 301-961-1660  
Email: [info@democracyinternational.com](mailto:info@democracyinternational.com)

**Cover Credit:**

Stephanie Funk, USAID  
Voting underway in Malawi's 2014 election.

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TABULATION AND OTHER TOOLS

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# UNDERSTANDING THE TOOLS

## INTRODUCTION

Elections put power in the hands of citizens by giving them the ability to choose and replace their leaders. They are a potent tool for holding leaders accountable and peaceably resolving political and societal conflict. Because elections determine political winners and losers, however, electoral processes—from voter registration through results reporting—have long been targeted for manipulation by unscrupulous regimes and political actors. Such manipulation—or sometimes the mere threat of it—weakens public confidence in democratic processes, erodes the legitimacy of governments, and undermines the will of the people. Suspicions of electoral fraud can catalyze polarization or trigger conflict.

For these reasons, USAID and other donors work to build public confidence in elections by improving the performance and accountability of electoral management bodies, strengthening meaningful and peaceful political competition, and supporting citizen oversight of electoral processes. Robust citizen oversight of elections is critical not only because it can help deter and detect electoral malfeasance, but also because it helps to engage citizens in democratic processes and build trust in election outcomes.

USAID's manual, *Assessing and Verifying Election Results: A Decision-Maker's Guide to Parallel Vote Tabulation and Other Tools*, provides USAID Democracy, Human Rights and Governance (DRG) officers, donors, and other development stakeholders with information about activities designed to analyze, verify, or otherwise assess the credibility and legitimacy of election results. This Executive Summary provides key conclusions from the full manual. DRG officers and other donors are encouraged to refer to the full guide for more extensive discussion and guidance on using these tools.

## TOOLS FOR ASSESSING AND VERIFYING ELECTION RESULTS

This guide discusses three tools for assessing and verifying election results:

- **Parallel vote tabulation**
- **Exit poll**
- **Election forensics**

Assessing election results refers broadly to an activity that independently evaluates the credibility and legitimacy of election or referendum results. These activities include exit polls, election forensics, and other quantitative tools and approaches that can assess election results with greater or lesser degrees of accuracy and reliability. Verifying election results refers to methods that provide a stronger basis of evidence to substantiate the results or to call into question their validity. Parallel vote tabulation (PVT) is the only tool discussed in this guide that is designed to verify results. However, a PVT's ability to verify election results is limited to the tabulation process.

Election results assessment and verification tools are an important component of election oversight. There are six primary goals associated with tools for assessing and verifying election results:

- **Detect electoral fraud.**
- **Deter electoral fraud.**
- **Build confidence in electoral processes.**
- **Provide a projection of results.**
- **Build local capacity for oversight.**
- **Verify official results.**

It is important to note that these goals are not mutually exclusive and that a single initiative can support multiple goals. Also note that not all discrepancies revealed by these tools are due to fraud; they may instead reveal mistakes made in the process.



Poll workers fill out election forms after polls close for Zambia's presidential election held on January 20, 2015.

Carol Sahley, USAID

## ASSESSING AND VERIFYING RESULTS AS PART OF ELECTION OBSERVATION

Election observation is an important norm developed over the last three decades that serves many important functions. Properly conceived and implemented, election monitoring can provide an objective assessment of a country's overall electoral process and identify areas for reform. In appropriate contexts, election results assessment and verification tools can augment comprehensive election observation efforts to independently assess and draw evidence-based conclusions about the results of an election.

Long-term comprehensive observation is the foundation of an effective electoral oversight support strategy. The widespread use and effectiveness of PVTs have made it more difficult for regimes to directly manipulate the vote count without detection. As a result, it is more common now for regimes intent on manipulating an election to begin slanting the playing

field in their favor well before election day, although they may continue to do so on election day and into the post-election period if necessary. This creates an unfair environment that puts the opposition at a disadvantage.

## SUPPLEMENTING COMPREHENSIVE ELECTION OBSERVATION

In most cases, DRG officers should support comprehensive election observation as the primary electoral oversight activity because it includes monitoring of the legal and political environment, pre-election and election-day processes, and post-election activities. Tools for assessing and verifying election results should supplement comprehensive election observation activities.

# PARALLEL VOTE TABULATION (PVT)

## WHAT IS A PVT?

- Parallel vote tabulation, sometimes called a quick count, is an independent tabulation of polling station results—using data from all stations or a representative sample of them—for the purpose of projecting election results and/or verifying their accuracy. To be credible, a PVT should be conducted by trained observers who observe and report on the entire process at the polling station on election day.
- PVT observers collect the reported results from the polling stations and use their data to independently tabulate the election results. Discrepancies between the PVT results and the official results may suggest manipulation or reveal mistakes in the tabulation process.
- Independent, domestic civil society groups often implement and manage PVTs. USAID and other international donors often fund PVTs, while international democracy assistance organizations may provide technical assistance to local observer groups.
- To be credible, PVTs should be accompanied by a systematic evaluation of polling station processes, including opening of polls, voting, and counting, by the PVT observers in addition to collecting posted results. Data on voting and counting processes can be used to determine if pre-count fraud has occurred, which could call into question the validity of the polling station vote count upon which the PVT results are based. It is thus recommended that DRG officers fund PVT efforts that include process data collection.
- As originally conceived, a PVT was a comprehensive exercise to collect results data from every polling station. Comprehensive PVTs pose serious logistical and methodological challenges, however. Thus, in current practice, most PVTs collect data from a representative sample of polling stations.

## HOW DO PVTs VERIFY ELECTION RESULTS?

When the context is appropriate and local capacity permits a properly implemented PVT, it is the preferred tool for verifying election results. A properly implemented PVT can accomplish the six important election results verification goals discussed earlier:

**Detecting fraud:** By collecting polling-station results data, PVTs can definitively detect manipulation of the tabulation of polling station results at the district or national level on election day when such manipulation exceeds the PVT margin of error.

**Deterring fraud:** PVT activities typically include civil society involvement, broad outreach campaigns, and countrywide coverage. The presence of PVT observers can serve to directly deter polling station fraud while the knowledge that a PVT is being implemented can deter tabulation fraud.

**Building confidence in the electoral process:** PVTs can build confidence in the electoral process when their results match official results. Process data that supports the results data can affirm a credible election-day process and allows a group to know that PVT results can be trusted.

**Projecting results:** Where permitted by law, PVTs can provide the public with projected election results, which can preempt and dissuade a government from releasing false or manipulated results. Projected PVT results can also defuse political tensions when election officials are slow to issue results.

**Building local capacity for oversight:** PVTs can build the capacity of local civil society organizations (CSOs) and empower them to play a more active role in both immediate and future elections and in civic and political processes more broadly.

**Verifying official results:** Because PVTs are able to detect manipulation of vote count aggregation at the district or national level with a high degree of accuracy, PVTs are the only tool discussed here that can be said to verify official election results. Comparing these results to official results can reveal possible manipulation of the vote count (at the aggregate level or at a specific polling station). A PVT's ability to verify election results is limited to the tabulation process.

Kenyan election observers from domestic observation group, ELOG, are trained on the PVT results database designed to receive text messages sent by election observers in the field. ELOG received technical assistance from NDI in the implementation of a PVT during Kenya's 2013 presidential election.

Jef Karang'ae, USAID/Kenya



## WHAT ARE THE KEY CONSIDERATIONS AND CHALLENGES OF USING PVTs?

PVTs can be a useful and important supplement to election observation efforts, but it is important to be aware of their limitations and contextual challenges.

- **A PVT cannot project a winner when the results of an election fall within the margin of error.** For example, if the top two candidates are separated by 1% of votes but the margin of error for a PVT is  $\pm 2.5\%$ , the PVT cannot project a winner.
- **A PVT on its own does not speak to the quality of the entire electoral process.** PVTs cannot detect all of the wide range of electoral manipulation that may occur before, during, or after election day.
- **PVTs risk legitimizing a flawed outcome when there is extensive manipulation of polling-station results, though this risk can be significantly mitigated by the collection of process data.**
- **PVTs may not count ballots that are cast before election day.** In countries with a significant number of such ballots, a PVT may lack important data.
- **PVTs require a high level of technical and organizational capacity as well as political and organizational will.**
- **Large countries, difficult geography, and conflict situations present significant logistical challenges for PVT implementation.** A PVT requires data from a statistically representative sample of polling stations to produce valid results.
- **Legislative and subnational elections with numerous electoral districts present a unique set of challenges.** To be effective, PVTs must report a statistically representative result for each constituency or district that observers are monitoring. This makes PVTs for such elections harder for groups to implement effectively and adds to both complexity and cost.
- **In politically charged and fiercely contested elections, PVT results can become a flashpoint for tensions.** For these reasons, it is essential that PVTs be implemented with uncompromisingly high standards and statistically valid methodologies.
- **PVTs may not be feasible in restrictive political environments.** In countries where observer access may be limited, a PVT may not be possible.
- **PVTs are often relatively expensive to implement.** PVTs often require substantial technical, communications, and capacity-building investments.

## PVTs IN SUMMARY

PVTs can provide strong evidence of vote tabulation fraud with a high degree of accuracy, but they require significant capacity to implement. In most cases, PVT is the preferred tool because it can accurately project election results and measure manipulation in the aggregation of results.

# OTHER TOOLS FOR ASSESSING ELECTION RESULTS

## EXIT POLLS

- An exit poll is a survey of voters from a random sample of polling stations conducted as voters are leaving the polls after casting their votes on election day. It uses random sampling to select polling stations within electoral districts and voters within polling stations. Interviewers outside each sampled polling station select voters to interview at specified intervals as voters exit the polling station.
- Exit polls can generate important information about voters' perceptions of how elections were run and any problems that may have occurred. Exit poll data are not as comprehensive with regard to polling station processes as data collected by trained observers.
- Unlike PVTs, which are implemented by observer groups, exit polls are generally implemented by survey research firms.
- Exit polls can include a range of questions designed to yield important information about voter decision-making. These data can also be used to inform wider DRG programming, including future activities to encourage political parties and elected officials to pay more attention to citizen concerns and to help parties to better understand their electoral performance.
- Exit poll survey responses are sometimes aggregated to project election results. These projections are broadly indicative of voter intent and can be compared to official results. Because of the degree of uncertainty inherent in using data reported from voters, exit poll results can be used to assess but not conclusively verify results.

## HOW DO EXIT POLLS ASSESS ELECTION RESULTS?

Exit polls use a fundamentally different approach than do PVTs for assessing election results. Essentially, exit polls bypass the polling station results and directly reach out to voters to estimate results. This can be helpful in environments in which polling station fraud is expected or in restricted political environments where observation may not be conducted freely.

**Detecting fraud:** Exit polls provide data that is generally indicative of how people voted. A discrepancy between the aggregated choices reported by voters and the official results may suggest, but not prove, that results have been tampered with.

**Detering fraud:** Exit polls can deter fraud at the national level when publicized before an election. Exit polls, however, are conducted outside polling stations, minimizing the deterrence effect on polling station officials.

**Building confidence in the electoral process:** If the results of an exit poll match the official results, an exit poll can help boost confidence in electoral processes. However, the inherent limitations to the accuracy and reliability of projections make it risky to implement exit polls in politically volatile environments.

**Projecting results:** Exit polls may provide early projections of results with greater or lesser degrees of accuracy and precision. This tool faces particular challenges with reliability, particularly in transitional, post-conflict, or developing countries. Exit poll projections may differ from official results and, depending on the closeness of the election result and the level of understanding of exit polls among citizens, they may heighten rather than soothe political tensions.

**Building local capacity for oversight:** Exit polls may build local capacity for oversight. Typically, exit polls are conducted by professional survey research firms or media organizations that have robust survey research capabilities. In cases in which conducting or analyzing exit polls involves universities, research organizations, or think tanks, exit polls may build local capacity for election oversight.

**Verifying official results:** Exit polls do not provide sufficient evidence to refute or challenge official results, either at the national level or for individual polling stations.



## What are the key considerations and challenges of using exit polls?

Exit polls directly estimate voter intent (through interviews), which is particularly important in contexts in which polling station results are not expected to be credible due to ballot box stuffing or manipulated turnout numbers, and thus where PVTs are not likely to produce reliable data. Exit polls also face considerable methodological limitations.

- **Exit polls are conducted outside of polling stations and gather data from voters after they have left polling stations.** As such, organizations implementing exit polls do not directly observe the voting and counting process, which limits their power to supplement their results data with analysis and perceptions of trained observers.
- **In some settings, voters may not respond accurately to survey interviewers.** This “falsification error” occurs because voters do not trust the motives of the interviewer or they fear reprisals for reporting their vote. Rather than accurately reporting how they voted, voters might provide the response they think is “correct” from the point of view of an authority.
- **Because voters have to agree to participate, exit polls suffer from “nonresponse error,” a specific selection bias caused by voters unwilling to take part in the survey.**
- **Exit polls also are subject to many of the same challenges that face PVTs.** On their own, exit polls do not speak to the quality of the overall electoral process, and they can risk legitimizing a flawed outcome, especially when voters hide their true preferences from interviewers. They do not include votes cast before election day or out of the country. Their quality can suffer in large countries or in those affected by conflict or with difficult geography; they are complicated by elections with numerous electoral districts; and they can also become focal points in politically charged environments or where election results are contested.
- **Due to these methodological limitations, donors and implementers face a significant risk when using exit polls in developing or transitional countries, especially those with deeply polarized politics and a history of, or potential for, electoral violence.**

## ELECTION FORENSICS

Election forensics is an emerging field that involves post-election statistical analyses of results and other official data to identify possible irregularities. Originally developed by

academics to conduct post-election analysis, local observation groups are increasingly using election forensics to supplement their efforts. Researchers and election monitors can use election forensics to detect potential electoral manipulation. Statistical analysis can reveal abnormalities in rates of voter turnout, ballots cast, and voter preferences.

Importantly, election forensics often requires the availability of official election results data at the polling station level. This tool is therefore critically constrained when polling-station level results are not made available on a timely basis—or never released at all. The findings of election forensics analysis often come too late to meaningfully affect the electoral process. Conversely, because these activities use official results data, they do not require additional independent data-collection efforts. This can be beneficial in an environment in which collecting data on election day is not possible.

## How can election forensics be used to assess election results?

Election forensics in its current practice remains a limited tool used primarily to detect anomalies that may indicate fraud once election results are available. The ability of forensics to detect fraud is context- and data-specific, and the findings serve as indicators of potential manipulation rather than as definitive evidence.

Election forensics may be particularly useful when it is not possible to conduct either a PVT or exit poll. It may also be instrumental when the overall goal is specifically to analyze data in the post-election period—for example, the initial or diagnostic stage of a post-election recount or audit—or as part of research regarding voting patterns.

## CONCLUSIONS

**PVT** is the preferred tool for verifying election results where the context and local capacity permit. **Exit polls** can collect important data for understanding voter intent, providing insight into political and social dynamics, and informing wider DRG programming. However, they provide limited hard evidence of manipulation. **Election forensics** can provide information to aid understanding of voting patterns over time or to identify voting anomalies, but often take weeks or months after an election to be completed.

# DECIDING WHETHER TO USE A TOOL FOR ASSESSING AND VERIFYING ELECTION RESULTS

A central goal of this guide is to assist USAID DRG officers in making sound decisions on incorporating methods for assessing and verifying election results into their electoral assistance portfolios. The activities discussed here should be used in conjunction with other monitoring tools. Comprehensive, long-term election monitoring should provide the foundation for any electoral oversight effort.

In some environments, election results assessment and verification tools can be a useful and appropriate complement to existing election observation plans. In others, a pattern of pre-electoral manipulation of the legal framework and constrained political environment may make the accuracy of the official results virtually irrelevant. It is important to objectively and systematically evaluate several key factors to determine whether or not conducting activities

to assess and verify election results makes sense in a given context.

This guide introduces six discrete steps that decision-makers can use to consider whether these tools are appropriate to a specific context. For a detailed discussion of each step, see the complete *Assessing and Verifying Election Results* guide. The text box below summarizes these steps.

## DECIDING WHETHER TO USE A TOOL FOR ASSESSING AND VERIFYING ELECTION RESULTS

### STEP 1 – ASSESS THE CONTEXT

- What types of electoral problems may occur?
- What type of election is being held?
- What are the characteristics of the electoral system?
- What level of electoral competition is expected?
- What is the security context in the country?
- Will all parts of the country, polling stations, and necessary information be accessible?
- What laws or regulations exist that may affect implementation?

### STEP 2 – DEFINE THE PURPOSE

- Detect electoral fraud
- Deter electoral fraud
- Build confidence in electoral processes
- Provide a projection of results
- Build local capacity for oversight
- Verify official results

### STEP 3 – ASSESS EXTENT OF LOCAL CAPACITY

- Are potential local partners viewed as neutral and independent?

- Do available local partners have the necessary operational and technical capacity?
- Is the local partner a single group or a coalition?

### STEP 4 – IDENTIFY AND ASSESS POSSIBLE RISKS

- What are the potential assessment outcomes and possible political implications?
- Is there a risk of legitimizing an otherwise flawed election?
- What is the potential for technical and other implementation problems?
- What are the goals and expectations of domestic election observation groups?
- What are the inherent limitations of tools used to assess and verify elections?

### STEP 5 – COST BENEFIT ANALYSIS AND TIMELINE

- Estimate and consider costs
- Consider timeline

### STEP 6 – SYNTHESIZE ASSESSMENT FINDINGS TO MAKE DECISIONS

# BEST PRACTICES FOR MANAGING AND IMPLEMENTING PVTs

A donor faces a number of important strategic and management decisions after deciding to support a PVT. Planning should begin by tackling the questions outlined on page 7 and should include the following strategic considerations:

- Set clear and realistic timelines.
- Determine whether an international implementing partner is needed for capacity building, technical assistance, and/or quality control.
- Plan around milestones.
- Collect both results and process data.
- Balance a PVT with other observation approaches.
- Incorporate capacity-building goals into activity designs.
- Support local solutions where capacity exists.
- Require robust and well-articulated communications strategies in proposals and implementation plans.
- Consider multiple results assessment activities with caution.
- Continuously assess the viability of the PVT.

## CHECKLIST OF QUESTIONS TO ANSWER BEFORE SUPPORTING A PVT

- Is the civil society organization (CSO) independent and nonpartisan?
- Is a statistically valid representative sample being selected?
- Will the implementing organization also make a serious effort to observe the opening of the polling station and the voting and counting process in addition to collecting results?
- Is there a plan to ensure a high rate of data collected is returned by observers to the data tabulation center?
- Will observers be trained to fully understand voting and counting procedures?
- Will trained observers be present in the polling station for the entire day?
- Is the CSO committed to releasing PVT results only after a sufficiently high response rate has been received?
- Is there a plan to test the mobile or other technology being used by observers to transmit the results?

## TECHNOLOGY REQUIREMENTS

Technology for PVTs typically serves two important purposes: (1) communication and reporting results; and (2) data aggregation and analysis. Speed and accuracy in PVT results need to be balanced with the availability of funding. Getting data for a PVT requires reliable communications technology that can securely report information in a timely fashion. Aggregating and analyzing the data from a PVT requires a database with advanced data analysis tools. These databases are often custom designed as proprietary software for organizations conducting PVTs.

## RESULTS MANAGEMENT

Because of the high stakes involved, donors, local partners, and international technical assistance providers must agree on a communication strategy that takes into account the variety of possible PVT outcomes. Scenarios and communication plans should be based on the specific election, legal framework, and political context.

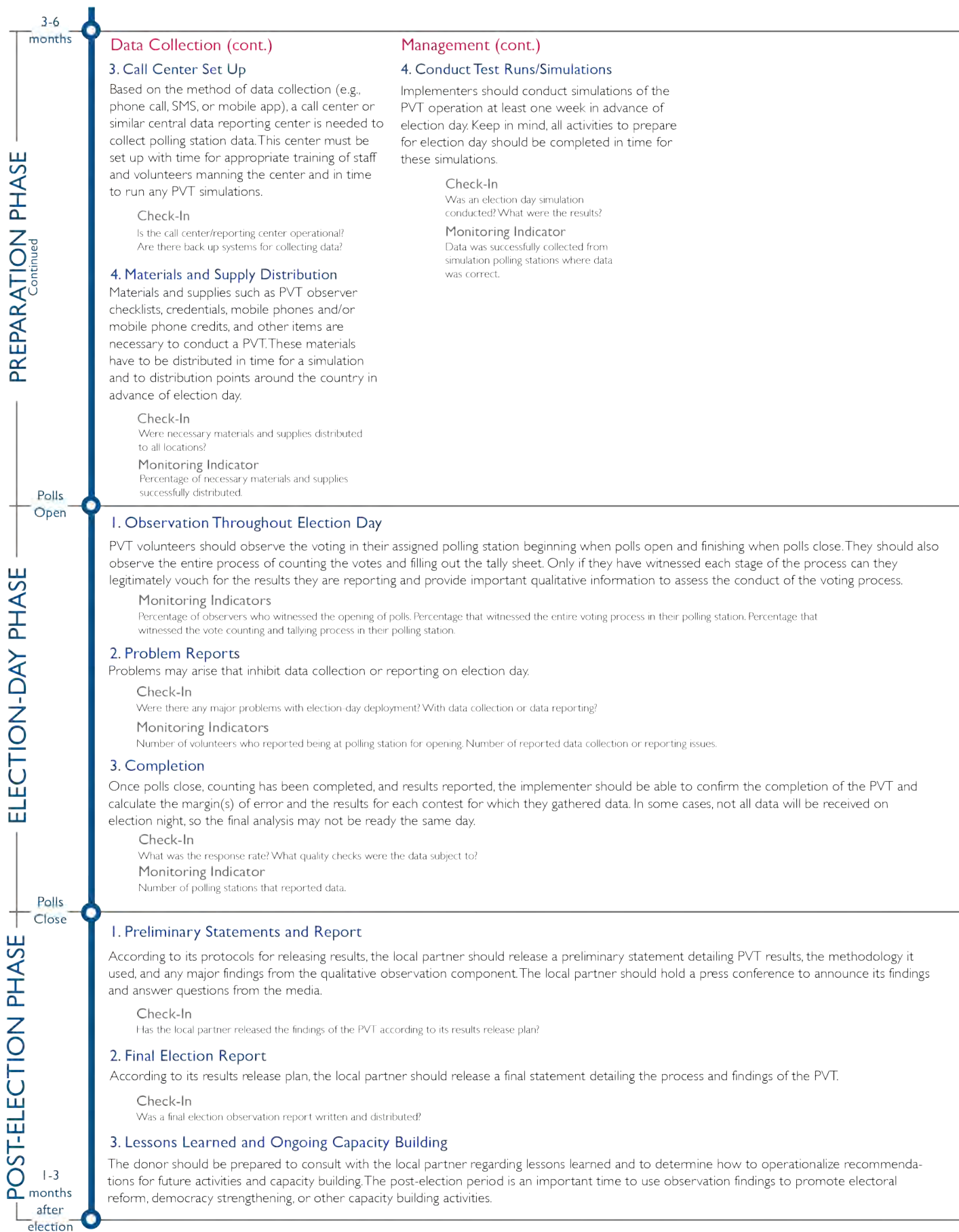
PVTs should be conducted in a transparent manner to further the credibility of the work being conducted. Information regarding specific methodology, the result, and contributing data should be made available for public examination and discussion.

## OPERATIONAL BEST PRACTICES

A successful PVT relies on the effective and timely completion of four project phases: planning, preparation, election-day implementation, and post-election analysis and learning. Although a number of management tasks continue throughout the project, each phase has **specific activities** and **routine check-in points** for the donor to assess and discuss how the PVT is progressing with its local partner(s) and international technical assistance provider(s). Some of these check-in points have **potential monitoring indicators** the donor may use to measure the state of the PVT project. The operational best practices presented in the following chart are not a comprehensive list of everything a PVT implementer needs to undertake, but instead focus on what USAID DRG officers or other donors need to know and do to effectively and actively manage PVTs and mitigate potential risk.

# PVT Planning and Implementation Timeline







**U.S. Agency for International Development**

1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW

Washington, DC 20523

Tel: (202) 712-0000

Fax: (202) 216-3524

**[www.usaid.gov](http://www.usaid.gov)**