

# **The Problem of Selection Bias in OSCE Election Observation Methodology**

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## Abstract

One of the biggest problem in OSCE election observation methodology concerns the selection of polling stations where the observation is conducted: in practice, polling stations that are visited by observers are disproportionately urban and located in or around the national capital and in regional centers. Because visited polling stations are not representative of all polling stations, the observation mission risks getting an unbalanced picture of the shortcomings in the election. In this article, we present findings from original research that shed light on the scope of the problem of distortion in the selection of polling stations, and discuss potential ways to overcome the problem.

## Keywords

OSCE election observation; methodology; selection bias

Election observation by OSCE/ODIHR has come under increased scrutiny in recent years.<sup>1</sup> While the methodology of OSCE/ODIHR election observation is perhaps the most elaborate among organizations that are active in election observation, it has essentially remained unchanged since the late 1990s, and leaves room for improvement in a number of areas. This article addresses one such area – the issue of the selection of polling stations that are visited by observers.

Ideally, an election observation mission (EOM) is able to obtain a picture of an election that in accurate proportions reflects the different shortcomings of an election process. One of the biggest, persistent problems in OSCE/ODIHR election observation, therefore, is that the polling stations that are visited by observers are not collectively representative – and often far from that – of all polling stations in the country of observation. As we will demonstrate, distortion in the selection of polling stations that are observed occurs on two different levels. First, the plans according to which observers are deployed across the country are often such that disproportionately large numbers of observers are deployed to the capital city and surrounding areas, as well as to regional capital cities rather than to more remote localities. Second, observers whose Area of Observation (AoO) includes polling stations in both rural and urban settings disproportionately select ‘urban’ polling stations to conduct the observation.

Taken together, the observation ends up being skewed in favour of urban polling stations located in central areas of the country. As there are likely to be differences between different types of polling stations (urban and rural, centrally located and remote) in the kinds of shortcomings of the election process that can be observed, the picture of the election that arises from the election observation risks being unbalanced. Problematically, a less than balanced picture may affect the descriptive representation of the quality of the election process in the post-election preliminary statement and final report of the EOMs. Moreover, it may affect the percentages of polling stations with a negative assessment from observers that are reported in the preliminary statement and final report of every EOM. To make things more problematic, the level of distortion that results in an unbalanced picture of the election varies greatly from election to election. The percentages of ‘bad’ or ‘good’ polling stations therefore cannot be credibly compared across elections.

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1 E.g. Max Bader, ‘The Challenges of OSCE Electoral Assistance in the former Soviet Union’ in Security and Human Rights, 2011, Volume 22 No. 1; Peter Eicher, ‘Improving OSCE election observation’ in Security and Human Rights, 2009, Volume 20 No. 4; Frank Evers, ‘OSCE Election Observation. Commitments, Methodology, Criticism’, in IFSH (ed.), OSCE Yearbook 2009, Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2010; Hans Schmeets (ed.), International election observation and assessment of elections, The Hague: Statistics Netherlands, 2011.

In this article, we first present findings from original research that shed light on the scope of the problem of distortion in the selection of polling stations where observation takes place.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, we discuss potential ways of (partially) overcoming the problem. The findings are based on four Election Observation Missions: to the presidential election in Ukraine in 2010 (first round), the legislative election in Azerbaijan in 2010, the legislative election in Russia in 2011, and the legislative election in Armenia in 2012. From election to election, the nature and scope of the problem may be different depending on a number of factors, including the share of polling stations that observers manage to visit. As table 1 shows, the four cases vary from missions with relatively few observers to missions with many observers, and from missions where observers were able to visit only a very small share of polling stations to missions where half of all polling stations were visited.

Table 1. Election Observations Missions.

	Number of Observers <sup>3</sup>	Number of Polling Stations Visited During Voting	Total Number of Polling Stations	Share of Polling Stations Visited
Armenia 2012	350	951	1982	50%
Azerbaijan 2010	405	1134	5274	22%
Russia 2011	325	1346	95250	1%
Ukraine 2012	800	1987	33572	6%

### The Practice of Election Observation

In a typical OSCE/ODIHR EOM, the core team of experts who arrive some time before election day, and who remain located in the capital city, draw up a deployment plan that specifies what numbers of short-term observers (STOs) will be deployed to the different regions of the country. In large and diverse countries, such as Russia, it is often the case that not all regions can be covered, so that a first selection must be made from among the regions. Considerations that may play a part in the selection of regions and the number of observers to be deployed to those regions include logistics, security, past experience with observation, as well as the desirability of selecting diverse regions. In more compact countries, such as Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia, observers typically go to all major administrative regions where the election is held. Inside the regions, the long-term observers (LTOs), who are deployed some weeks before the STOs arrive, select the districts (rayony in a Russian-speaking context) where STOs will work. When STO teams arrive in the region, they are assigned to an AoO that in most cases corresponds with one administrative district. The administration of the election in districts is supervised by what is most often referred to as a District Election Commission (DEC) or a Territorial Election Commission (TEC).<sup>4</sup> AoOs, then, in most cases coincide with a DEC area. Among DEC areas, a distinction can be made between those that are exclusively urban, exclusively rural, and mixed urban/rural. In the case of the latter type, the DEC area is comprised of a town or city, where the DEC is located, and a number of smaller settlements. STO teams receive a list of polling stations in their AoO. Anecdotal evidence suggests that STO teams observe voting procedures to a disproportionate degree in polling stations in cities or towns, where distances are shorter and road conditions better, and

<sup>2</sup> A more comprehensive study by these authors containing more data and comprising a larger number of case studies is forthcoming.

<sup>3</sup> Data are from the final reports of the OSCE/ODIHR EOMs.

<sup>4</sup> Hereafter, we will refer to this tier of election commissions as the District Election Commission (DEC).

disproportionately also observe counting procedures in the city or town of their AoO, where often both their hotel and the DEC are located.

In polling stations, STO teams fill out forms which they submit by fax, scan or manual deliverance (if observers are located in the capital city) to the core team at least two different moments during election day. The forms for the opening, voting, counting and tabulation contain dozens of questions about election procedures and the possible shortcomings of the election process. The most crucial question on the forms asks observers to give an overall assessment of the quality of procedures in the given polling station with four options: very bad, bad, good, and very good.<sup>5</sup> The share of polling stations that have been rated positively ('good' and 'very good') and negatively ('bad' and 'very bad') is reported in the preliminary statement and final report of the EOM separately for voting procedures and counting procedures, and represents one of the most important and visible pieces of information coming out of the mission. The preliminary statement of roughly ten pages is published and presented on the day after the election; the more extensive final report is published some two months later.

Almost all post-election reports from OSCE/ODIHR observation missions since 1996 mention the percentage of polling stations that have been assessed in negative terms by observers both with regard to voting and counting procedures. Prima facie, these figures seem highly appropriate for comparing the quality of election procedures across different elections in particular countries, or across elections in different countries.<sup>6</sup> One may, for instance, want to compare the quality of election procedures in the 2011 and 2012 elections in Russia by comparing the percentages of negatively assessed polling stations as reported by OSCE/ODIHR. Or one may, for instance, want to use the percentages to compare the electoral performance of different countries in the South Caucasus. As noted, the percentages, however, cannot be credibly compared. From EOM to EOM, the level of distortion from a situation in which visited polling stations are collectively representative of all polling stations in the country varies. Moreover, there is likely to be a variation in the degree to which the distortion specifically affects the reported percentages of negatively assessed polling stations: in some elections, there may be little difference in the quality of election procedures between different types of polling stations (urban and rural, centrally located and remote) and in the likelihood that these different types of polling stations will be differently assessed by observers. In other elections, however, rural polling stations, for instance, may get much more negative ratings on average than urban polling stations. In an election in which this is the case, and in which rural polling stations are underrepresented among polling stations that have been visited by observers, the percentage of negatively assessed polling stations that is actually reported in OSCE/ODIHR reports, naturally, is lower than the percentage that would have been reported if visited polling stations would have been representative of all polling stations.

A variation in the degree to which visited polling stations are (non-)representative of all polling stations hinges on two factors: the deployment plan according to which the number of observers per region is determined, and the degree to which observers disproportionately visit centrally located polling stations in mixed urban/rural AoOs (which in turn may vary according to, among other things, the size of DEC areas, and geographical factors). In the following two sections, we will present data that show the extent to which deployment plans and the selection of polling stations by STO teams contribute to distortion from a situation in which visited polling stations are collectively representative of all polling stations, in four different elections.

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5 Hans Schmeets 'Analysing observer report forms: an overview. In: Schmeets, H. (ed.), International election observation and assessment of elections, The Hague: Statistics Netherlands, 2011, 142-164.

6 E.g. Max Bader, 'Trends and patterns in electoral malpractice in post-Soviet Eurasia' in Journal of Eurasian Studies, 3, 2012.

## Deployment Plans

With respect to deployment plans, we focus on three issues. The first is the extent to which polling stations in the capital city of the country are disproportionately visited by observers. We calculate the relevant disproportionality measure by dividing the share of visited polling stations that are located in the country's capital city by the share of overall polling stations that are located in the country's capital. If, for instance, twenty percent of all visited polling stations are in the capital, while only ten percent of all polling stations in the country are located in the capital, then polling stations in the capital have been disproportionately visited by a factor of two.

## Capital Cities

In the 2011 legislative election, Moscow was home to 3,374 polling stations out of a national total of 95,250, or equal to 3.5% of all polling stations. Of the polling stations that were visited as part of the ODIHR EOM, 23.7% were in Moscow. Correspondingly, the capital city was overrepresented among visited polling stations by a factor of 6.8 times.<sup>7</sup> In the first round of the 2010 presidential elections in Ukraine, the share of observations in the capital city Kyiv was 3.8 times more than would have been proportionate. In the 2012 legislative election in Armenia, 59% of polling stations in the capital city Yerevan were visited. For the rest of the country, the equivalent number was merely 44%. Yerevan polling stations were disproportionately visited by a factor of 1.2 times. Finally, in the 2010 legislative election in Azerbaijan, the capital city Baku accounted for 31% of observations, while the city only has 15% of polling stations nationwide: consequently, Baku polling stations were visited a little over twice more often than would have been proportionate.

## Regions

A second issue with regard to deployment plans that we are interested in concerns the extent to which polling stations in different regions of the country are disproportionately visited by observers. Due to the small number of observers and the size of the country, most regions were not visited at all by observers in the 2011 legislative election in Russia: out of the 83 subjects of the Russian Federation, only 27 were subject to ODIHR election observation. In the 2010 presidential election in Ukraine, the region with the highest number of observations (next to Kyiv itself) relative to the number of polling stations in that region was the Kyiv region which encircles the capital city: observers disproportionately visited polling stations in the Kyiv region by a factor of 2.6 times. At the other end of the spectrum, the Ternopil region was underrepresented in the tally of visited polling stations by a factor of over two times. A variation in the extent to which different regions have been visited has been somewhat less pronounced in the 2012 legislative election in Armenia. Outside Yerevan, 37% of polling stations were visited in the region with the lowest coverage, against 49% for the region with the highest share of visited polling stations.

## Regional Capitals

The third and final issue that we look at concerns the extent to which polling stations in regional capitals are disproportionately visited by observers relative to polling stations that are located outside the capital cities in those regions. This issue has been relatively insignificant in the elections in Armenia and Azerbaijan, mainly for two reasons. The first reason is that, since the countries are relatively small, observers can easily be deployed to many different localities. The second reason is that, outside the national capital, there are barely any major cities in Armenia and Azerbaijan. The issue has been more significant with respect to the 2010 presidential election in Ukraine: in the EOM to this election, the polling stations of regional capitals were visited 1.8 times

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<sup>7</sup> Next to Moscow, Saint Petersburg also saw a disproportionately large share of observers: considering the number of polling stations in the city, its polling stations were overrepresented among visited polling stations by a factor of 5.9 times.

more often than would have been proportionate considering the number of polling stations in these cities. The Zhytomyr and Vynnytsya regions top the list: the capital cities in these regions have been overrepresented among visited polling stations by a factor of 3.4 times and 3.1 times, respectively. In the 2011 election in Russia, polling stations in regional capitals were disproportionately visited by a factor of 2.3 times.

Altogether, it appears that deployment plans especially tend to relate to much distortion in the selection of polling stations in large and diverse countries. Much of this has to do with geographical factors: in small Armenia, it is feasible for an EOM to deploy observers to all regions and districts of the country. Still, even in Armenia the deployment plan brought about imbalances: the capital city was overrepresented, and there was a clear variation in the extent to which the polling stations of different regions were covered by observers. At the other end of the spectrum, the deployment plan brought about extreme imbalances in the 2011 election in Russia. Given the small number of observers, it was unavoidable that many regions would not be visited by observers. In the relatively small number of regions that were visited by observers, the overrepresentation of polling stations in Moscow and regional capitals among visited polling stations was such that one would be hard-pressed to argue that the EOM obtained a balanced picture of where the shortcomings in the election process were.

### Selection by Observers

Observers contribute to the distortion from a situation in which visited polling stations are collectively representative of all polling stations, by disproportionately visiting polling stations in a city or town rather than polling stations in villages whenever they have the option of visiting either type of polling stations. It might not matter much whether observers visit urban or rural polling stations when there is little difference between these types of polling stations. In all four elections studied here, however, rural polling stations have a significantly higher turnout, a higher vote share for the ruling party or regime candidate, and a smaller number of registered voters. Moreover, as turnout and vote share for the incumbent candidate have been found to be related to fraud,<sup>8</sup> there is at least the suspicion that the incidence of fraud is on average higher among rural polling stations than among urban polling stations. Considering that the EOM aims to obtain a balanced picture of the election process and the shortcomings in that process, it is important that rural and urban polling stations be visited roughly proportionate to their numbers.

In most post-Soviet states, between a quarter and a half of all DEC areas visited by observers are exclusively urban. A small number are exclusively rural. The remainder comprise a city or town in which the DEC is located, plus typically smaller towns or villages in the surrounding area.

We have looked at the difference in turnout and the vote share for the regime candidate or party between urban and rural polling stations for all mixed urban/rural DEC areas where at least one polling station was visited by observers. As there is no obvious criterion for distinguishing between rural and urban polling stations per se, we have specifically compared polling stations located in the centre of a DEC area with polling stations located outside the centre of a DEC area. Given that polling stations in DEC area centres are with few exceptions in towns or cities, and that polling stations outside DEC area centres are predominantly in more rural settings, the distinction of polling stations inside and outside DEC area centres closely matches the

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8 E.g. GOLOS, Vybory v Rossii 4 dekabrya 2011 goda. Analiticheskii Doklad, available at: <http://www.golos.org/news/4567>, 2012; Policy Forum Armenia, Armenia's 2008 Presidential Election: Select Issues and Analysis, 2008, available at: <http://www.pf-armenia.org/document/armenias-2008-presidential-election-select-issues-and-analysis>; Shpilkin, S. 'Statistika issledovala vybory', available at: [http://www.gazeta.ru/science/2011/12/10\\_a\\_3922390.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/science/2011/12/10_a_3922390.shtml).

urban-rural distinction. In order to determine whether a polling station is or is not located in the centre of a DEC area, we have consulted information on the websites of the Central Election Commissions or lower-tier election commissions of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, and Ukraine. At least for recent elections, the electoral management bodies of these countries, unlike the electoral management bodies of most other countries in the post-Soviet area, provide information containing the exact addresses of all individual polling stations in elections.

In the 2012 election in Armenia, the turnout was 6.8% lower, and the vote share for the ruling Republican Party was 12.9% lower in DEC-area central polling stations than in polling stations outside the DEC area centre. In the election in Azerbaijan in 2010, polling stations located outside the DEC area centre reported a 6.9% higher turnout than DEC-area central polling stations, and a 1.4% higher vote share for the winning pro-regime candidate. Note here that the impact of the location on the vote share for the regime candidate or party was much more significant in the Armenian election than it was in the Azerbaijani election. In the 2010 election in Ukraine, the turnout was on average 6.9% lower in polling stations outside DEC area centres, while the eventual winner of the election, Viktor Yanukovich, received on average 1.0% more votes in those polling stations. His main opponent Yulia Tymoshenko, by contrast, received on average 2.6% more votes in polling stations outside DEC area centres. In the 2011 elections in Russia, the effect of the location (inside or outside a DEC area centre) was particularly pronounced: inside DEC area centres, polling stations reported on average a 9.1% lower turnout and a 9.1% lower vote share for the ruling United Russia party than outside the DEC area centres.

Finally, and crucially, we look at whether, as we suspect, observers have disproportionately visited DEC-area centre polling stations at the expense of polling stations outside DEC area centres. Again, we review all mixed urban/rural DEC areas where STO teams have observed voting procedures and/or counting procedures in at least one polling station. In relation to these DEC areas, we divide the share of DEC-area central polling stations among polling stations that have been visited by observers, by the overall share of DEC-area central polling stations in the DEC area. Consider an example of a DEC area with fifty polling stations, out of which twenty (i.e. 40%) are located in the centre of the DEC area. Assume that in this DEC area, out of ten polling stations that have been visited, eight (i.e. 80%) are located in the centre of the DEC area. If observers would have visited a number of DEC-area central polling stations that would have been proportionate to the overall share of DEC-area central polling stations, only four out of ten visited polling stations would be in the centre of the DEC, so observers have disproportionately visited DEC-area central polling stations by a factor of two times.

Table 2 contains such disproportionality measures for the four elections covered in this article, with separate measures regarding polling stations where voting procedures were observed, and polling stations where counting procedures were observed. The '2.4' in the final column of the third row of the table, for instance, indicates that, regarding polling stations where counting procedures were observed in the 2010 election in Azerbaijan, DEC-area central polling stations were visited 2.4 times more often than would be proportionate considering the number of polling stations inside DEC area centres relative to the number of polling stations outside DEC area centres.

As expected, observers in all four elections visited centrally located polling stations disproportionately often. There is, at the same time, a substantial variation in the degree to which this is the case. This variation can be largely explained from a combination of two factors: the geographical size of DEC areas and the size

of DEC areas in terms of the number of polling stations comprised in the DEC area. Where DEC areas are geographically small, the disproportionality is likely to be limited. In comparatively compact Armenia, for instance, the disproportionality is highly significant, but much smaller than in the other, more geographically stretched out countries. The circumstance that the disproportionality is most extreme in the case of the 2010 election in Ukraine is explained by the large average number of polling stations per DEC area. Many DEC areas in Ukraine comprise a few hundred polling stations with only about a dozen or so in the DEC area centre. If a relatively large number of visited polling stations are in the DEC area centre, the disproportionality measure is inevitably high.

Table 2. Disproportionality measures.

	Voting Procedures	Counting Procedures
Armenia 2012	1.2	1.3
Azerbaijan 2010	2.1	2.4
Russia 2011	2.1	2.5
Ukraine 2010	3.3	5.0

Also in line with expectations, the disproportionality measure is consistently and significantly higher with regard to polling stations where counting procedures were observed than with regard to polling stations where voting procedures were observed. The reason for this is straightforward: immediately after the observation of counting procedures, STO teams travel to the building of the DEC to observe the tabulation of the voting results from all polling stations in the DEC area. In order to limit travel time between the observation of counting procedures and the observation of vote tabulation, STO teams often choose to observe counting procedures in a polling station relatively close to the DEC building, which, naturally, is located in the DEC area centre.

The differences in the disproportionality measures for polling stations where voting procedures were observed, and for polling stations where counting procedures were observed, should make one even more wary in comparing the percentage of ‘bad’ polling stations among polling stations where voting was observed, with the percentage of ‘bad’ polling stations where counting was observed. If thirty percent of polling stations where counting was observed were rated negatively while the equivalent figure for polling stations where voting procedures were observed is only ten percent, one may be tempted to conclude that counting procedures were three times more problematic than voting procedures. Our findings, however, indicate that, to some extent, counting procedures are observed in a different type of polling station (on average more urban and centrally located) compared to polling stations where voting procedures are observed. Besides, in almost all EOMs the counting process is assessed more negatively than the voting process. One straightforward explanation is that observers stay in a single polling station from beginning to end to observe the vote count, while they stay for only around thirty minutes in the polling stations where they observe the voting process.<sup>9</sup> This notion should be taken into consideration when including the often used sentence ‘the situation deteriorated during the vote count’ in the preliminary statements and final reports.

## The Way Forward

In theory at least, several options are available to limit any distortion in the selection of polling stations, or to

<sup>9</sup> In some elections in recent years, stationary teams in addition to regular observers have been deployed to select polling stations. In these polling stations, the stationary teams remained throughout election day.



ameliorate its consequences. Perhaps the simplest option would be to randomly assign the polling stations that are subject to observation. Assuming that the randomly drawn sample would be sufficiently large, the selected polling stations would be representative of all polling stations by approximation. Instead of autonomously selecting a number of polling stations for observation from a list of polling stations in the AoO, STO teams would be handed a list of polling stations in a certain area that they are expected to visit during election day. This option, however, has some obvious problems. STO teams might be able to visit fewer polling stations as preselected polling stations may be far apart or difficult to reach. Some STO teams might also not be able to visit all polling stations on the list, while other STO teams would finish their work ahead of schedule. Instead of randomly assigning polling stations, polling stations could be preselected according to criteria such as geography, the number of registered voters, and previous election results in a way that would ensure that, collectively, the selected polling stations would be more representative of all polling stations. The problems of random assignment, however, also apply to this kind of targeted assignment. The selection of polling stations in the case of targeted assignment, moreover, may be overly laborious and fraught with methodological dilemmas.

A third, intriguing option would dodge the problems of both random assignment and targeted assignment. To specifically prevent the percentages of ‘bad’ polling stations from being distorted, one could recalculate the percentages to correct the distortion in the selection of polling stations. Consider the following example. One thousand polling stations have been visited, of which six hundred are urban (or DEC-area central) and four hundred are rural (or non-DEC-area central). Ten percent of polling stations have been rated negatively by observers, amounting to a total of one hundred polling stations. Of these one hundred polling stations, thirty are urban and seventy are rural. Suppose now that, through an analysis of all visited DEC areas (of the type conducted for the purposes of this article), we know that if urban and rural polling stations would have been visited in the right proportions, two hundred urban, and eight hundred rural polling stations would have been visited. It could then be extrapolated that, if urban and rural polling stations would have been visited in the right proportions, one hundred and fifty polling stations would have been rated negatively, instead of one hundred. In that case, the percentage of ‘bad’ polling stations would jump from ten percent to fifteen percent. In this example, the ‘new’ percentage would more accurately reflect the extent to which there are problems in the electoral process. In this hypothetical example, a weighting procedure is applied: we assigned greater weight to the findings based on the underrepresented (the ‘rural’) stations, while the overrepresented (‘urban’) stations received a smaller weight. Reweighting could also be done to correct other types of distortion, such as the overrepresentation of (regional) capital cities, cities in general and areas directly around these capital cities.

How much difference would recalculating the share of negative/positive assessments of voting and counting procedures make? Table 3 contains data on the share of negative assessments of voting and counting procedures in urban and rural polling stations,<sup>10</sup> and in polling stations located inside and outside the capital city, for the four EOMs covered in this study. The findings tentatively indicate that there are no significant differences in the share of negative assessments between urban and rural polling stations. For the biggest part this is also true regarding the divide between capital located stations and stations outside the capital.

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10 On assessment forms, observers indicate whether the relevant polling station is ‘urban’ or ‘rural’. The distinction between rural and urban here is based on these observers’ indications.

Table 3. Percentages of negative assessments in four EOMs.<sup>11</sup>

	Process	Total	Urban	Rural	Sign.	Capital	Not-Capital	Sign.	n
Armenia 2012	Voting	9.4	8.8	10.4	n.s.	10.0	9.2	n.s.	1,274
Armenia 2012	Counting	20.0	21.1	16.7	n.s.	11.4	23.5	n.s.	120
Azerbaijan 2010	Voting	10.6	11.5	10.3	n.s.	11.5	9.9	n.s.	1,193
Azerbaijan 2010	Counting	32.0	36.8	25.0	n.s.	32.8	31.8	n.s.	152
Russia 2011	Voting	6.3	6.2	7.0	n.s.	10.7	4.8	***	1,387
Russia 2011	Counting	32.3	32.1	35.3	n.s.	40.5	29.2	n.s.	126
Ukraine 2010	Voting	2.2.	2.0	2.8	n.s.	1.4	2.4	n.s.	2,500
Ukraine 2010	Counting	4.2	4.4	4.0	n.s.	4.8.	4.1	n.s.	192


Recalculating the percentages of negative/positive assessments to correct the distortion in the selection of polling stations, thus, would likely make only a limited difference in most cases. It is conceivable, however, that the distinction between different types of polling stations regarding the rate of negative assessments is (much) greater in some cases. The apparent lack of a significant distinction between different types of polling stations regarding the rate of negative assessments, in any case, does not take away the issue that EOMs, by disproportionately covering certain types of polling stations, risk getting a distorted image of the problems in the electoral process. Of the different options to limit distortion in the selection of polling stations, the most realistic altogether would be to put strenuous effort into devising balanced deployment plans. Rather than selected individual polling stations for observation (as in the ‘targeted assignment’ option), the DEC areas that will be visited by observers could be pre-selected in a way that would ensure that observers will visit a set of polling stations that is roughly representative of all polling stations. DEC areas should be pre-selected according to at least two criteria: previous election results, and the objective characteristics of the DEC areas, such as the ratio of urban and rural polling stations and logistical expedience. If ODIHR were to go along in this way, its reports could include a phrase such as ‘Efforts have been made to ensure that the EOM visited a representative set of polling stations on election day’. In devising the deployment plan, it could even be considered to compensate for the fact that observers disproportionately visit urban polling stations. Procedures involving overrepresentation and underrepresentation of cases with specific characteristics are common practice in sampling design methods in social surveys.

The aim of this short article has been to raise awareness of the problem of distortion in the selection of polling stations by observers in ODIHR EOMs. We have shown that deployment plans are such that the observation of voting and counting procedures disproportionately takes place in the national capital, regional capitals, areas directly surrounding these capital cities, and cities generally. We have also shown that when observers

11 n.s. = not significant ( $p > 0.05$ ). \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

can choose between urban (or DEC-area central) and rural polling stations (outside DEC area centres), they disproportionately choose urban polling stations. These distortions are problematic because EOMs risk getting an unbalanced impression of the nature and extent of shortcomings in the election process. If OSCE/ODIHR is interested in further improving the methodology of its election observation efforts, the organization should take steps to address the issue.





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