

Bolstering Funding and Practices for Resilient Elections

Sustainable Funding and Models of Success
at the State and Local Level

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ROBERT J. DOLE
INSTITUTE OF POLITICS
The University of Kansas



Acknowledgements

The Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the United States Senate and the Robert J. Dole Institute of Politics thank the contributing authors for their insight, research, and work committed to bolstering resilient elections.

Support for this project was provided by the Election Trust Initiative.

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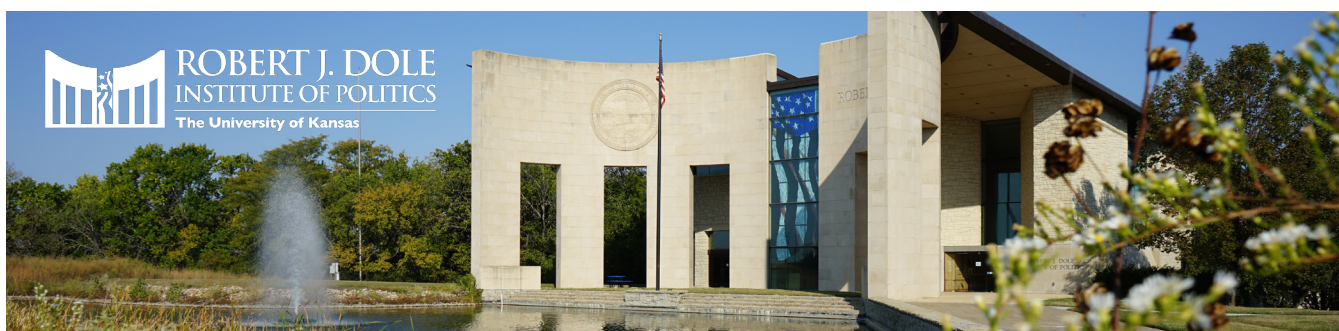
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Preface

Adam Hinds, Chief Executive Officer, Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the United States Senate

Audrey Coleman, Director, Robert J. Dole Institute of Politics

Free and fair elections are the bedrock of representative democracy. The U.S. elections system, as disperse and complicated as it may be, has reflected the will of its citizens and promoted peaceable transfers thousands of times via federal, state, and local elections.

Today, this essential foundation is under stress. Election administrators continually lack the support and resources needed to efficiently administer electoral processes. The public servants that staff local election offices work well over a year to facilitate candidate filings, procure and test voting equipment, and communicate important information to voters.

Low budgets, limited staff, outdated equipment, and ever-increasing public scrutiny have placed historic strains on our election system. Moreover, jurisdictions often compete for high-demand resources, and technology infrastructure costs continue to grow.

In our federal system of government, the responsibility of determining the “time, place, and manner” of elections lies with the states. Decentralization is a feature not a bug: election results tabulated locally keep voters closely involved in their own democratic process and limit the possibility for widespread manipulation. Election work is so vital that in 2017, the Department of Homeland Security officially designated elections as a critical infrastructure. But just as local needs, based on the unique composition of their own populations, vary wildly, so do the various combinations of funding streams.

In February 2024, our institutes invited administrators and policy experts to join us at a symposium to examine why understanding how the more than 8,000 election jurisdictions across the country are funded is such a complex issue. The good news is that it doesn’t have to be. As the researchers, practitioners, and experts in this report show, increased funding improves efficiency in administering an election.

The leaders our institutes are named after demonstrated time and time again how a prominent Republican and Democrat could come together to pass reasonable yet essential legislation on a bipartisan basis. The people of Kansas and Massachusetts continued to support them as their elected representatives, not because of the party they were affiliated with, but because they tackled the difficult issues when nobody else would.

That same leadership is needed today to address the challenges in administering our nation’s elections. This anthology report is a first step toward spurring that leadership.

INTRODUCTION

Bolstering Elections Initiative: An Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the United States Senate and Robert J. Dole Institute of Politics Collaboration

Tammy Patrick, Senior Advisor, Bolstering Elections Initiative

Well-funded, well-run elections do not make headlines. When voters have a pleasant and successful voting experience, they rarely contemplate voter registration options, what it costs to maintain accurate voter rolls, how voting technology is paid for, or who paid the poll workers. The answers to those questions vary widely across the country given the localized nature of our election system. It is often difficult to give what is considered a straightforward answer when talking about election administration because the decentralized nature of this Great Experiment has manifested in the system evolving in a multitude of ways. For instance, take the simple question of “Who is your local election official?” The answer to this could be someone at the municipal level, or township level, or perhaps the parish or county level. They may be called a Supervisor of Elections, a Clerk, Auditor, Probate Judge, Registrar, Recorder, Commissioner, or Elections Director. Half of them are elected and the other half are either appointed or hired as public servants.¹



“The chapters are organized by the type of expert the author is: academic researcher, administrative practitioner, and policy expert and include a variety of perspectives.”



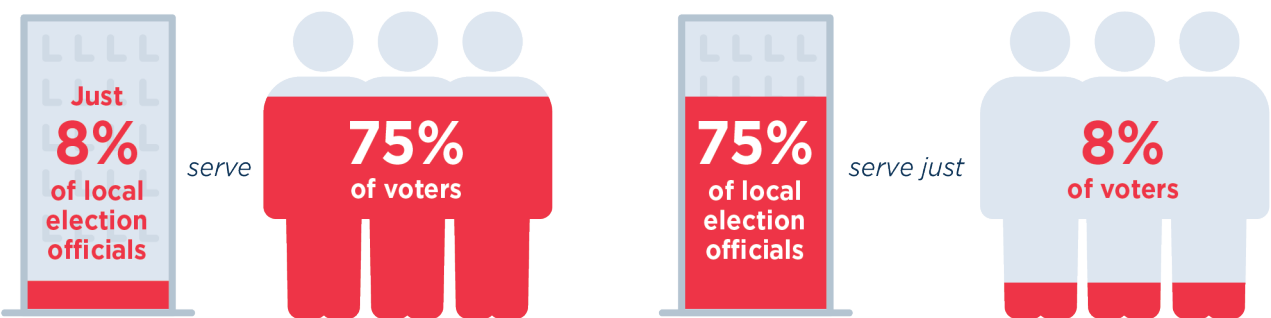
It isn’t just the name that varies—in some states, such as Florida, a single office is responsible for the full gambit of election administration: voter registration, candidate filing, campaign finance, in-person and by-mail voting, tabulation and the canvass of the election. In another state, such as Alabama, functions are divided up across a handful of government agencies. In all states the chief election official, often the Secretary of State or a State Board of Elections, is responsible for the maintenance of a statewide voter registration list. In some states, the election duties of that official do not include much more than that; yet, in other states, an official with the same title may shoulder the bulk of administrative duties. There is often a reference to “Top-Down” and “Bottom-Up” election administration, but even that distinction can vary depending on what election process is

¹ Survey of Local Election Officials, Reed College <https://evic.reed.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/2024-EVIC-LEO-Survey-Result-Report-Final-Source-File-v13.pdf>

being discussed. Voter registration may be “Bottom-Up,” with the local official adding and removing voters; but voting equipment certification may be “Top-Down” with the state official determining what equipment can be used in the state.

This complexity of the system is one of the main reasons why the study of election funding and costs has been difficult. The same titles and terminology may be used to describe different functions, appropriations can come from any level of government, there is additional support by way of corporate, philanthropic, volunteer, and in-kind donations. In the last twenty years the administration of our elections has evolved along with the technological modernization of our society—in some places, in some ways, where there have been sufficient resources. Some American voters are using state of the art voting equipment while others cast their ballot on a machine that was developed before the first iPhone. This disparity can exist not only across the country, but within a given state.

Large, urban election offices often have the staff, but not the space, to support the infrastructure necessary to provide services to hundreds of thousands, if not millions of voters. Research has demonstrated that 8% of our election offices serve 75% of the Nation’s voters—those offices will often have their own IT departments, communication specialists, and warehouse managers. Smaller jurisdictions, the 75% of our election offices who serve just 8% of the Nation’s voters, often rely on other government departments or vendors for the same areas of support.²

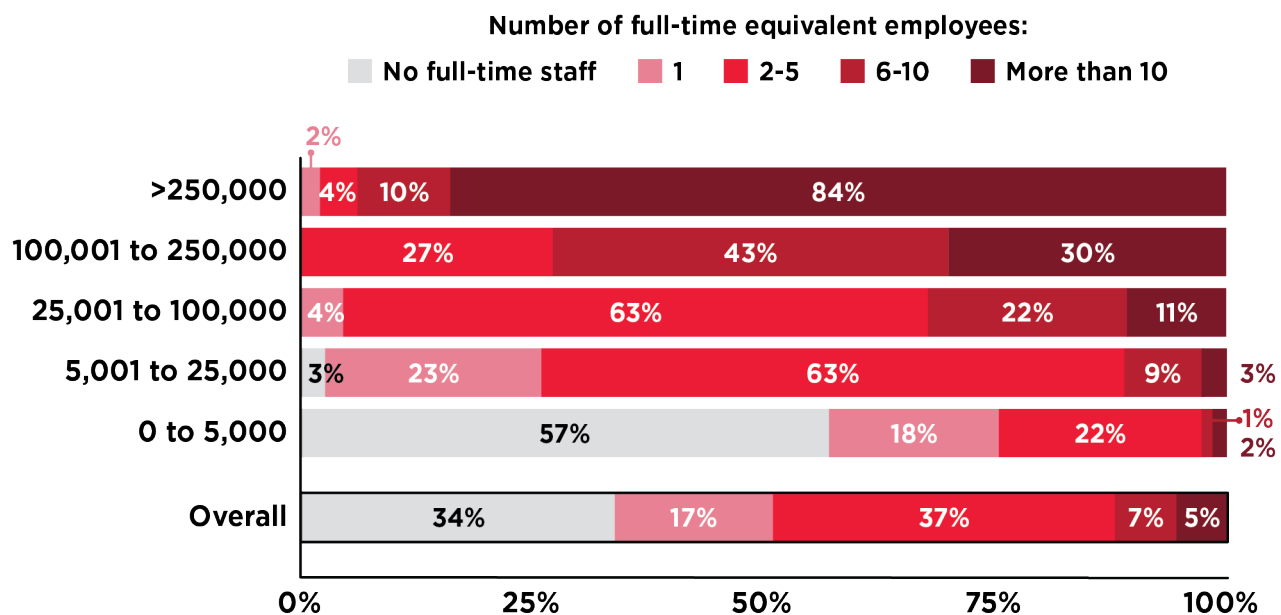


Source: 2022 Democracy Fund/Reed College Survey of Local Election Officials

2 Reed LEO study 2022

Given the staffing inequities across the jurisdictions, we can assume that the small, rural offices are dependent on other departments for support. We know that more than a third of the election offices do not have a full-time staff person designated to elections.³ The tracking of hours spent in the height of election season typical of cross-departmental management is often lacking; when it is “all-hands-on-deck,” data collection isn’t always done or may be done insufficiently to truly capture the support being provided.

The difference in staffing between small and large jurisdictions is striking



Source: 2022 Democracy Fund/Reed College Survey of Local Election Officials

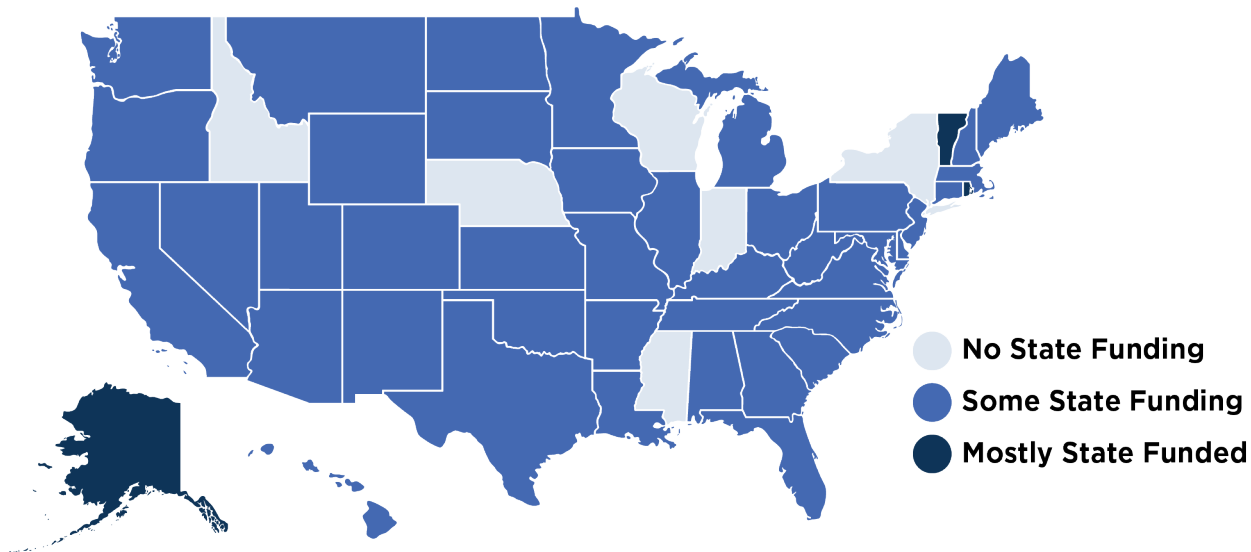
For the purposes of this report, we will consider the funding of the basic administrative duties of election professionals in two main areas: registration and voting, or the cost of conducting an election (ballot creation, distribution, tabulation, and canvassing of the results). We acknowledge that there is so much that can be considered as part of the administration ecosystem including redistricting, re-precincting, GIS, ballot access and petition processing, campaign finance, etc. The National Conference of State Legislators (NCSL) provides insight into how state statutes contemplate funding elections in their report on “Election Costs Responsibilities at State and Local Levels.”⁴ It quickly becomes apparent that state support can vary depending on what type of election is being conducted:

³ Reed LEO study 2022

⁴ “Election Costs and Responsibilities at State and Local Level-November 2024”. NCSL

Statutory Requirements for State Funding of the Administration of Elections

Some state statutes are very specific about what election administrative functions are funded by the state and for which types of elections—legislative or gubernatorial versus municipal elections for example. This map represents the states that have a statutory obligation to provide funding for the conduct of statewide elections or elections for state office.



The categorizations may not cover all labor costs or municipal election costs, which are typically borne by municipalities or counties.

Source: National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL)

State funding can take many forms not only determined by the type of election itself, but what is covered and to what degree. Some states reimburse the local authority conducting the election for all costs, others utilize a formula based on the number of registered voters or ballots printed—that amount can vary from .50 per voter (in Kentucky for voter registration and list maintenance and in New Jersey for each new registrant) to \$1.25 (in Arizona for Presidential Preference elections).⁵

Much of the financial burden of election administration rests on the shoulders of local government. They may attempt to recover some costs by charging other government entities such as the state or municipalities on the ballot as well as school, fire, water, and other districts required to hold elections for governance or bond approval. The consolidation of elections onto a single ballot has become a common approach to gaining efficiency but is not without controversy. Some argue that the smaller races and candidates get lost in the din of the better-funded campaigns, that given longer ballots there is an increase in “voter fatigue” resulting in voter roll-off down ticket; others argue it is worth it given the higher number of voters participating overall.

⁵ *ibid*

This report seeks to pull together existing academic literature and expert opinions on how our elections are currently funded, how that compares to other government services, and provide some insight into how we might bolster our elections infrastructure. The chapters are organized by the type of expert the author is: academic researcher, administrative practitioner, and policy expert and include a variety of perspectives.



“Common themes are woven throughout the report irrespective of the author’s background or party affiliation; namely, the administration of our elections is important work, albeit complicated at times.”



Academic Research Key Takeaways

- Surveys show that the general public believes elections are funded mostly by the federal government, then the state, with the local government paying the least when the reality of the situation is the exact opposite.
- Research shows that even with the local government paying the bulk of the costs, election support is roughly one half of one percent of the local budget.

Practitioner Experience Key Takeaways

- States interpret and fulfill their election responsibilities in a variety of ways, with some bearing almost all of the funding burden and others very little.
- Although more than half the states have passed laws prohibiting the use of private funds, there is only one state (Pennsylvania) that has stepped up to make appropriations they historically had not.

Expert Perspective Key Takeaways

- Episodic funding, as a reaction to the most recent election issue, whatever it may be, is untenable and our election professionals deserve better.
- All levels of government participating in the election have a responsibility to properly fund its administration.

Common themes are woven throughout the report irrespective of the author's background or party affiliation; namely, the administration of our elections is important work, albeit complicated at times. We need to ensure that it is sufficiently funded, and that our elections are supported commensurate with the importance of the task.

Tammy Patrick, CERA, Senior Advisor to the Bolstering Elections Initiative has been working in the election administration field since 2003 as a local election official, speaker, and educator. She served on the Presidential Commission on Election Administration and has testified on election administration policies in the United States Senate and House of Representatives, and in numerous state legislatures on behalf of members of both parties.



ACADEMIC RESEARCH

Facts about Election Administration Funding Are Hard to Come By. That Makes Ensuring Elections Are Properly Funded Difficult

Charles Stewart III, Kenan Sahin Distinguished Professor of Political Science, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

To understand how public policy is made and implemented, it often makes sense to “follow the money.” Unfortunately, it is a great challenge to follow the money in election administration. This is not because election administrators have something to hide. Instead, election administration is such a small slice of the state and local government pie that it is rarely accounted for separately in budget line items. Still, the elusive nature of facts about financing election administration makes it difficult for election officials to advocate on behalf of voters and for those with the purse strings to assess the merits of spending money to improve elections when the government must choose among so many competing interests.

What do we need to know about funding election administration to better grasp how this policy area functions? We can start with how much election administration costs. As Mohr, Kropf, McGowan, and Pope note, this can be divided into two parts: the cost of conducting an election and the cost of election administration.¹

Local Funding of Elections

The cost of conducting an election includes all the costs in the period immediately surrounding an election. The latter includes the costs of each election, plus spending that occurs between elections. Because local governments are primarily responsible for conducting elections, we can, in theory, focus on local costs when summing up the national cost of election administration. However, to be comprehensive, we also need to include state and federal costs.

The limited research that has been conducted on the topic suggests that approximately five billion dollars is spent by local governments to conduct elections in a presidential election year.

To provide perspective, the 2022 Annual Survey of State and Local Government Finances conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau found that total annual local government general revenues amounted to almost \$2.2 trillion in 2022, the most recent year for which figures are

¹ Zachary Mohr, Martha E. Kropf, Mary Jo McGowan, and JoEllen V. Pope, *A Republic, If You Can Afford It: How Much Does It Cost to Administer Elections?* New York, Cambridge University Press, 2024, p. 9.

available. This places election administration at approximately 0.23% of local government spending.

The cost of election administration is so small in percentage terms that it is unaccounted for separately in most local budgets. Costs of conducting elections are often subsumed within the operating budgets of superior officials, such as town clerks. The Census Bureau's annual survey of state and local government finances does not inquire about spending to conduct elections.

Balancing what is spent on elections is the revenue to pay for them. Spending to conduct elections is supported almost entirely by local general funds derived primarily from property taxes. These local expenditures support basic capital and major operational expenses of running elections—printing, salaries, rental for polling places and back-office operations, and postage. Aggregate state expenditures are significantly less than local expenditures and often focus on technology purchases and the operation of statewide voter registration systems.



“Approximately five billion dollars is spent by local governments to conduct elections in a presidential election year.”



Federal Funding of Elections

The federal government provides only a tiny portion of spending for elections. From 2003 to 2020, federal contributions to state and local governments for election administration amounted to a little more than 4% of all spending. The largest federal contribution to election administration was a \$2.6 billion appropriation in 2003 under section 251 of the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) to help meet HAVA's equipment upgrade requirements. Since then, the only significant federal appropriations have been \$380 million appropriated in 2018 to improve state and local election security, \$425 million in additional security appropriations in 2020, and \$400 million in the 2020 CARES Act to assist with election expenses arising under COVID.²

Even though the federal government has contributed a pittance to election administration in recent years, most attention to the spending issue seems focused at the federal level. A major push by voting rights groups resulted in President Biden proposing \$10 billion

² Charles Stewart III (2022). (rep.). *The Cost of Conducting Elections*. Retrieved February 2025, from <https://electionlab.mit.edu/sites/default/files/2022-05/TheCostofConductingElections-2022.pdf>, pp. 4–5.

over ten years for state election administration grants in his FY 2023 budget. This was in addition to \$5 billion over ten years to the U.S. Postal Service to support vote-by-mail. These grants were never included in the appropriations bills or continuing resolutions passed by Congress. With the change in administration following the 2024 election, it is unlikely that substantial election administration grants for state and local governments will be forthcoming, notwithstanding the \$15 million for election security included in the March 2025 continuing resolution.

Whether and how the federal government should provide grants to state and local governments for the conduct of elections is an open question in the minds of some. Even among those who agree that the federal government should play some role, there is no consensus about the basis for such support.

The argument against federal funding for elections is simple: The Constitution leaves it to the states to set the basic parameters (*time, place, and manner*) of elections, and the lack of federal funding means that states can maintain the autonomy the Constitution assumes.

Arguments favoring some degree of federal financial support for elections are more numerous. First, the Constitution mandates that states hold elections for federal offices, particularly for Congress. In addition, the federal government mandates certain features of election administration that impose costs on the states. Thus, elections constitute an unfunded mandate on states that, the argument goes, the federal government should rectify. Second, federal elections draw more voters than state and local elections. Perhaps the federal government owes something to the states to recognize the extra burden federal elections place on states and localities. Finally, over the past decade, it has become clear that elections constitute a major attack surface for foreign cyber threats. The nature and extent of foreign threats are beyond what state and local governments can address alone.



***“Most Americans believe that the states
and the federal government foot the bill for election
administration, not local taxpayers.”***



Even if it can be agreed that the federal government has a proper role in providing financial support for the conduct of elections, deciding how much the federal government should provide and in what forms is an open question. Until now, the federal government has been the crisis funder of last resort for election administration, coming up with funding when operational, security, and public health emergencies have threatened to overwhelm the system. The ad hoc nature of federal support has resulted in a hoarding mentality among

some state and local governments, defeating the purpose of this crisis-based approach and making some members of Congress doubt whether federal assistance is really necessary. Many state and local election officials look forward to a less crisis-driven basis of federal funding, even if it means lower levels of support.

Without a solid theory undergirding why the federal government should fund state and local elections and firm facts about how much is currently spent to conduct elections—and on what—it is hard to see the federal government moving beyond the crisis funding model.

Public Opinion on how Elections are Funded

Another factor that limits regularized federal support for elections—and even expanded state and local support—is public opinion. The personal experience of almost all voters with the voting process is very positive. They simply lack direct evidence that election administration is underfunded.

What little public opinion research that exists confirms that the public does not believe that election administration is underfunded. Nor do they understand that funding election administration is mostly a local matter.

A recent MIT Election Data and Science Lab (MEDSL) study sheds some light on this issue. The survey asked a representative sample of respondents to report whether the \$5 billion spent to administer a presidential election was too low, about right, or too high and asked similar questions about five other local government services.³ Nearly half of respondents (48%) responded that the current amount spent to administer a presidential election was “too high,” and a slightly lower fraction (44%) responded “about right.” Of the six categories of local spending asked about, election administration was by far the category respondents thought to be excessive.



“The average response placed the contribution distribution for elections at 44% federal, 33% state, and 23% local, when the actual distribution is closer to 5% federal, 10% state, and 85% local.”

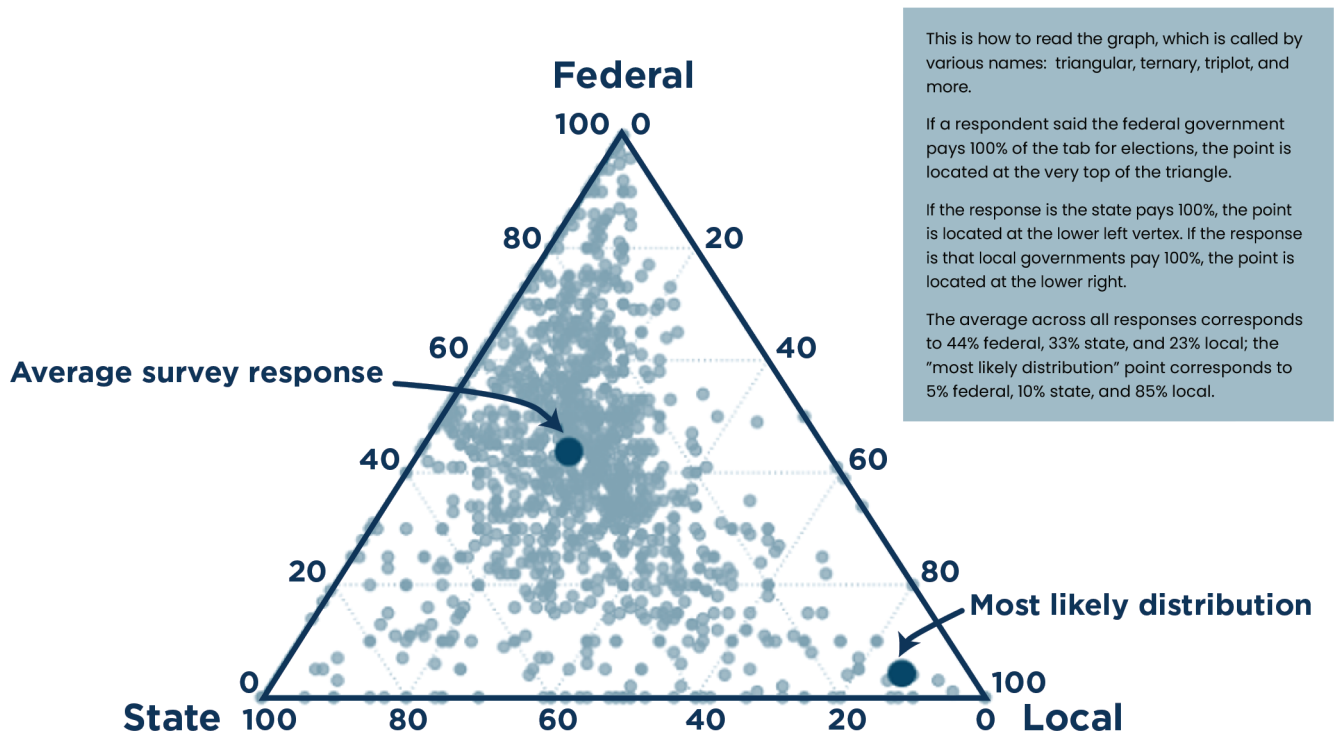


3 Joseph Loffredo, Alejandro Flores, and Charles Stewart III, “The Cost of Electoral Confidence,” paper presented at the 2023 annual meeting of the Election Science, Reform, and Administration Conference, Athens, Georgia, May 31 – June 2, 2023, https://esra-conference.org/files/election-science-conference/files/cost_of_electoral_confidence_-_joseph_loffredo_-_joseph_loffredo.pdf. These additional services were \$11 billion to operate libraries, \$34 billion for parks and recreation departments, \$1.8 billion to operate public parking facilities, \$110 billion to operate police departments, and \$599 billion to operate schools. These amounts were taken from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Survey of State and Local Government Finances.

Furthermore, most Americans believe that the states and the federal government foot the bill for election administration, not local taxpayers. This is illustrated using data from the same MEDSL study just referenced. Respondents were asked to indicate the percentage of total funding provided for elections by each level of government.

As illustrated in the figure below, estimates were all over the place. Still, the average response placed the contribution distribution for elections at 44% federal, 33% state, and 23% local, when the actual distribution is closer to 5% federal, 10% state, and 85% local.

Figure 1:



In this context, mobilizing the public to support more robust funding for election administration seems unlikely. This puts the onus back on public officials to make the case for proper funding of election administration. To accomplish this, elected officials with their hands on the purse strings need to know not only what is currently spent but also what should be spent to achieve the goals of access and security in election administration. Until that happens, election administrators will find themselves responding to crises rather than strategically maneuvering to improve the process for all.

Charles Stewart III is the Kenan Sahin Distinguished Professor of Political Science at MIT, where he has taught since 1985, and a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His research and teaching areas include American politics congressional politics, elections, and American political development.



ACADEMIC RESEARCH

Level Setting: An Overview of Election Administration Landscape as a Pre-cursor to Understanding Election Funding and Finance Issues

Mitchell Brown, Professor of Political Science, Auburn University

Kathleen Hale, Executive Director, The Election Center

U.S. elections are conducted at the state and local levels, but even this basic statement comes with an explainer about how election administration is different from so many other government services. Our surveys of local election officials shed light on variation across the country and the complexity of our election system.

Complex National and Sub-National Structure

Election administration doesn't exist in a vacuum; it is part of our complex intergovernmental arrangement (see Figure 1). We then must overlay this with our pluralist system, which provides a space for other interests to become involved (*non-profits, advocacy organizations, political parties, funders, etc.*), the for-profit vendor community that supports elections, the media, and increasingly, the influence of other countries. And while it is tempting to look at other countries' systems that are much simpler than ours and ask why not us, a big reason is our inherent complexity across federal, state, and local government systems (*not to mention how hard it is to pass an amendment to our Constitution*).

It is logical to wonder "why can't we streamline this?" The answer rests in the national, state and local sovereignty invested in each of the various layers of government. Although that sovereignty exists in every policy area, for election law and policy, this sovereignty is embedded in the U.S. Constitution, creating countless authority relationships that have be untangled. The myriad combinations of government offices actions make generalizable holdings practically impossible. Additionally, changes that require a Constitutional amendment must clear several high hurdles, including ratification by three quarters of state legislatures.



***It is logical to wonder "why can't we streamline this?"
The answer rests in the national, state and local sovereignty
invested in each of the various layers of government.***



Figure 1. National Intergovernmental and Elected Office Landscape

FEDERAL LEVEL	STATE LEVEL	LOCAL LEVEL
3 Branches of government	50 States + DC and territories	3,000+ Counties
100+ Federal courts	50+ Governors, legislatures, judicial systems	19,400+ Municipalities
150+ Departments, agencies, regulatory and advisory commissions	5,500+ Administrative agencies	16,500+ Town and townships
540 Elected officials	1,150+ State-created types of special districts and authorities	35,000+ Special districts
	20,000 Elected officials	13,500+ School districts
		506,000 Locally elected officials

One estimate says there are approximately 8,000 election officials (*not including temp or poll workers*),¹ with something like 177,000 precincts, 132,500 polling places, and over 775,000 poll workers.² These offices vary from having a single office with a single leader or a board, to multiple offices in the same county coordinating activities across them with different leaders, and across all of these structures some of the office leaders are appointed and some are elected. Cutting across this are differences in registration procedures, rules, types of elections, timing of elections, and equipment used, and perhaps more importantly for our purposes here, different fiscal years—even within the same state.

Auburn Cost Studies

We have conducted two studies looking at costs associated with these offices, one looking at office budgets and the other a pilot study looking at office costs. In our study of county budgets, we collected budget information from all counties in ten states. We then compared the election budgets to the overall county budgets, and found a significant range, with an average of 0.54% of the overall county budget.³ We further broke this out by registered voter size. Comparing overall county budget to number of registered voters, those counties with the smallest offices ranged from 0.13% to 12.4% of the total budget and the largest from 0.59% to 2.5%.

¹ Paul Gronke and Paul Manson. 2023. "Today's Election Administration Landscape." Reed College. https://evic.reed.edu/2023_leo_survey_report/

² US Election Assistance Commission. 2023. "Election Administration and Voting Survey 2022 Comprehensive Report." Washington, DC. https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/2023-06/2022_EAVS_Report_508c.pdf

³ Kathleen Hale and Mitchell Brown. 2020. *How We Vote: Innovation in American Elections*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

In our pilot, the goal was to collect cost information for comparison in order to make fiscal and operational improvements, and ultimately to support their ability to advocate for greater funding. We looked at internal operation costs, funding and types of supports, individual position information, professionalism and training, and demographic questions. At the time, we chose not to publish from these data for several reasons: first, we piloted the instrument with Election Center members, introducing inherent selection bias and limiting our ability to generalize; second, at the time several states had recently conducted “cost per voter” studies and faced significant political backlash targeted at the counties where “cost” was higher; and third and related, it became clear to us that when engaging in cost reporting, not all jurisdictions use the same terms or include the same measures, thus obscuring our ability to make useful comparisons.



“We compared the election budgets to overall county budgets, and found a significant range, with an average of 0.54% of the overall county budget.”



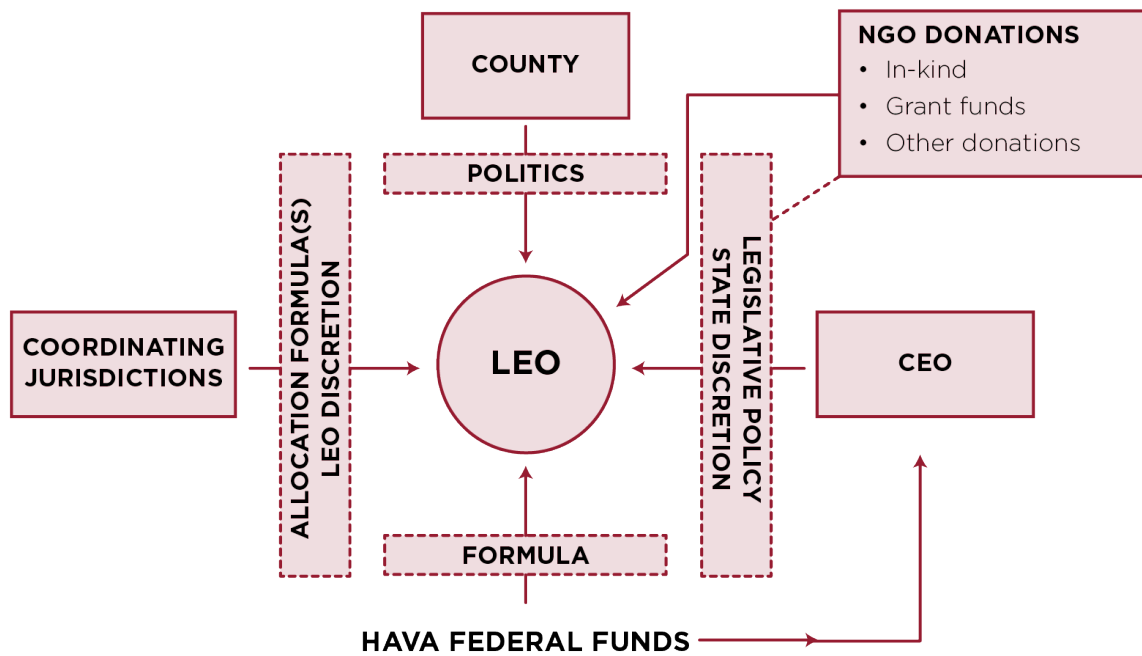
Among the responding offices, we received data from officials in 30 states, with over 1,100 open survey responses but only 179 fully completed. The size of the responding offices ranged from an FTE equivalent of half a person on one end to over 500 on the other. The office budgets ranged from \$100,000 to over \$20 million, with a mean of \$2 million and a median of \$1.2 million. The salary average of respondents was \$68,000 with a range from less than \$10,000 – \$155,000. We asked election officials whether they felt that they were paid more or less than people in other counties from their state in the same position and most said about the same. We also asked how their pay compared with people in comparable (*but not election administration*) positions in their county, and a majority stated that they were paid less.

We also asked about local revenue streams (see Figure 2). These include jurisdiction allocations, any coordinating jurisdictions,⁴ state reimbursement, state grant funds, other state supports, federal grant funds, local reimbursement (*school board, city, etc.*), candidate filing fees, other filing fees, and other sources. The most typical were jurisdiction allocation, followed by local reimbursement and then state reimbursement. Note that state reimbursement practices vary widely on many dimensions including the expenses that are

4 Coordinating jurisdictions here can mean a number of different things depending upon the state. For example, in some places it might be a city or township, or in other places a school or water district, or some combination of these. This holds for most states but for some states, particularly Michigan, the relationships are quite different and sometimes inverted.

reimbursable and the conditions under which reimbursement will apply including type and year of election. Local reimbursement practices (*for government units that cannot/do not run their own elections*) also vary.

Figure 2. Local Election Office (LEO) Revenue Streams



Model of Local Election Jurisdiction Funding Streams / Kathleen Hale and Mitchell Brown
Modified from *How We Vote: Innovations in American Elections* 2020 Georgetown University Press

We had some states follow up with us to discuss terminology. One of the things that came out of these conversations is that in addition to having different fiscal years across counties within some states, complicating the study of election budgets, how counties classify and term expenditures varies across counties as well, further complicating the study of election budgets. We then delved into this from seven counties in one state (see Figure 3). Note here that while all counties have salary and benefit expenditures, where they captured these in their budget terminology differed.

Figure 3. Differences in Budget Classification Schemes and Terminology: One State, Seven County Comparison

Expenditure Category	County							%
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Capital Outlay	■	■	■	■	■	■		71%
Non Operating Expenditures						■		14%
Operating Expenditures	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	100%
Operating Supplies	■							14%
Personal Services			■	■	■	■	■	43%
Reserve for Contingency	■							14%
Salaries and Benefits	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	57%

Conclusions

In sum, the U.S. intergovernmental context is remarkably complex, heterogeneous, and intractable, and overlaying differences in budgeting on top of the array of election approaches makes comparisons across states inherently suspect. Even when we focus within one state, comparative cost studies are further complicated by size of jurisdiction, fiscal year starts, and types and timing of elections. What election officials often really want from these kinds of studies is the ability to advocate for more funds. There is also political danger in making comparisons; election officials use comparative cost studies to advocate for additional funding support, but related conversations can and have been politicized.

Mitchell Brown, PhD, is the Curtis O. Liles III Professor in the Department of Political Science at Auburn University and Director of the Institute for Election Administration Research & Practice.

Kathleen Hale, JD, PhD is the Executive Director of the Election Center (National Association of Election Officials) and Professor Emerita of Political Science at Auburn University.



Kansas Election Administration Funding Overview

Zach Mohr, Associate Professor, University of Kansas School of Public Affairs and Administration

Kawon Song, Doctoral Student, University of Kansas School of Public Affairs and Administration

In regard to election administration, Kansas is like most other states in the Midwest and West, which often use county clerks to conduct elections. Of the 105 counties in Kansas, the county clerk is the official responsible for conducting elections in 101 of them. Only the four largest counties of Johnson, Sedgwick, Wyandotte, and Shawnee have appointed election administrators. For the purposes of this analysis and primarily because of data availability issues, we are focusing on the 101 smaller counties that only have county clerks. Analysis such as this one is important because studies of election cost and election funding tend to focus on states with more populous counties like California and North Carolina.



“Counties that fund election administration with general sources have been shown to force tradeoffs between election administration and other services that are often more visible.”



We used the annual financial reports (AFRs) of the 101 counties and analyzed them for election cost in 2022 and the revenues that were associated with the election. We focused on the revenue because there was a wide variety of revenues that were noted as funding election administration in the AFRs. The research questions that guided this analysis were: What were the revenues that supported election administration in Kansas counties? While a quick scan of some of the AFRs showed that a lot of different types of revenue were listed, most had some proportion of revenue coming from property tax and several did not show any revenue, which indicates that those counties that did not have dedicated revenues were getting them from the general taxes of the county such as property taxes and sales taxes. Our next question was: What are the most common types of revenue from those that listed other revenues in their AFR? Finally, are the listed revenues sufficient to cover their expenditures?

Of the 101 counties, there were 78 that listed expenditures for election administration,^{1, 2} and

¹ Because these are clerk counties, it is often common to have the clerk's office absorb the cost of election administration and not report election administration separately.

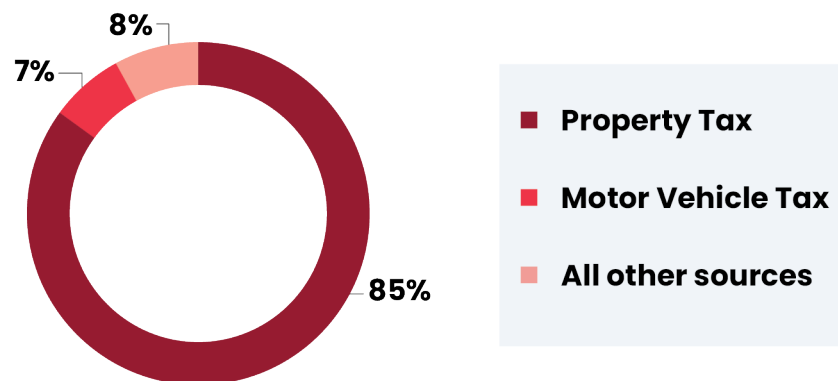
² Mohr, Z., Kropf, M. E., McGowan Shepherd, M. J., & Pope, J. V. (2024). *A Republic If You Can Afford It: How Much Does It Cost To Administer Elections?* Cambridge University Press.

of the 78 that listed expenditures only 35 listed some revenues. This is slightly less than half but it does give us good descriptive variation. Also, amazingly, we found that in these 35 cases there were 21 different sources of revenue that supported election administration in Kansas.³ All of them noted property taxes and motor vehicle taxes as a source of revenue for election administration. The eight other most common sources of revenue were Recreational Vehicle Tax, Delinquent Tax, 16/20 M Truck Tax, Commercial Vehicle Fees, Watercraft Tax, Neighborhood Revitalization Rebate, Reimbursements, and Miscellaneous. Others included filing fees, payments in lieu of tax, and excise taxes. Interestingly, only one county had revenue that came from a grant source in 2022 and there were no counties that we examined that had dedicated sales taxes.

Analysis

The analysis of the types of taxes shows there to be wide variation in where Kansas counties get their funding for election administration. However, when we examine the total funding for election administration, we see that it comes largely from property taxes as we would expect. In fact, over 92 percent comes from property and motor vehicle taxes that are general sources of revenue for the counties. We suspect that those that do not note their revenues have a similar reliance on property taxes as the primary source of funding.

Figure 1: Sources of Election Funding

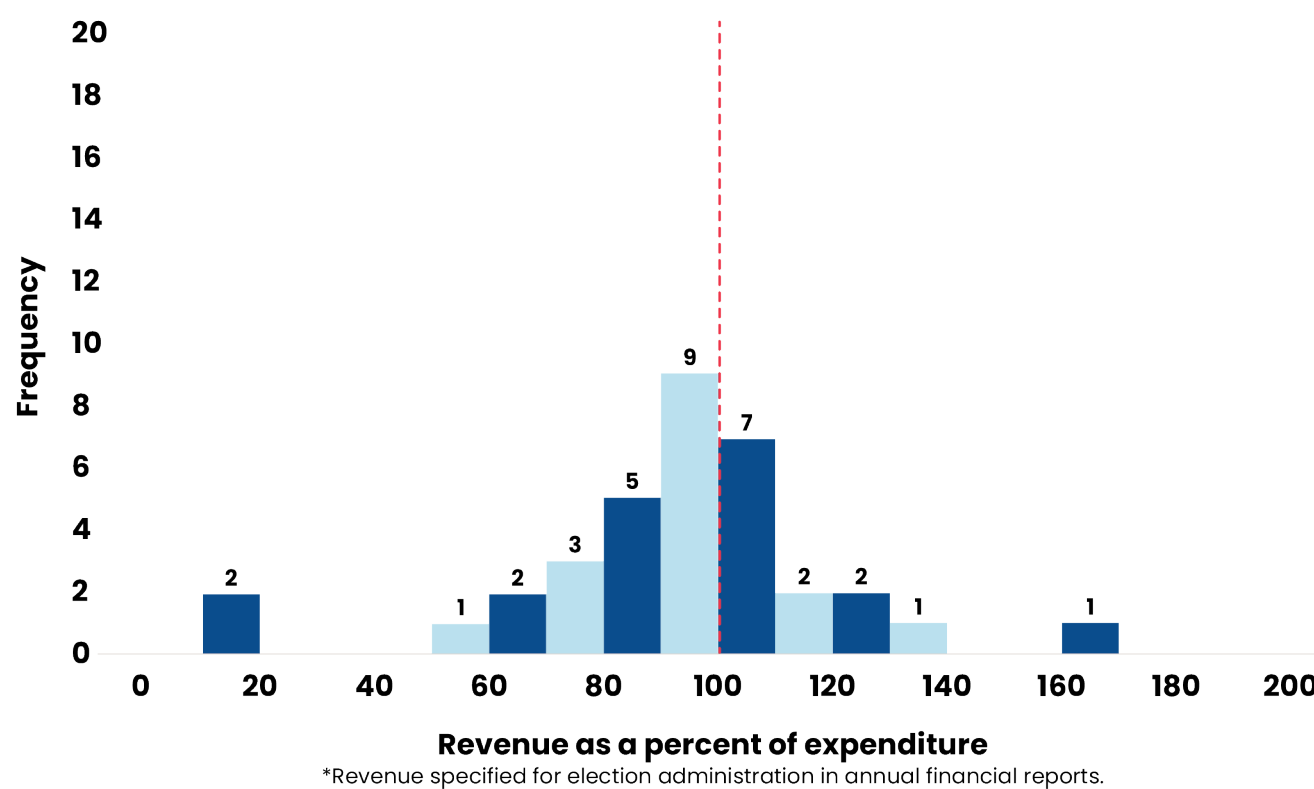


When it comes to funding adequacy, we see that revenues as a percentage of expenditure are clustered around 100% (Figure 2). However, there are a few that have significantly less than 75% funding. This is normatively not good as we would like to see that all jurisdictions have sufficient funding for their election administration. However, since these are the

³ Kansas is a state with strong home rule and a history of little involvement for funding election administration. So, it is not surprising that the states have found so many ways to financially support election administration.

retrospective amounts that were spent it could show that counties were willing to spend in excess of their revenues for this important service. Perhaps also interesting are those counties that have significantly more revenue than expenditures. One county had 136% revenue to expenditures and another had over 160% of revenue to expenditures. The counties significantly budgeted more than they spent, which may also be good or bad depending on the circumstances. However, overall it is probably a sign of fiscal stress and need for further election administration funding that we see only 13 of the 35 counties (37.1%) had revenues that covered all of their election administration expenditures.

Figure 2: Revenue as a Percent of Expenditures in KS Counties – 2022



Counties in Kansas have also historically not been funded significantly by the state for local government services like election administration. In 2022 only one county reported receiving a grant. Going to the Governor’s budget for 2023 to find the actual amounts spent in 2022, we see that the state did not issue any grants to the counties. In fact, the state spent 100% of its 2022 HAVA funding on the statewide voter registration system, cyber and physical security and communications.⁴ However, in 2024 Kansas Secretary of State Scott Schwab announced \$1.9 million in grants that will help Kansas counties with their election security.

⁴ Schwab, Scott. Narrative Letter to Kinza Ghaznavi, Grants Director, U.S. Elections Assistance Commission on the State of Kansas’ Expenditure of 2022 HAVA Election Security Grants, April 27, 2022 https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/paymentgrants/narrative2022/KS_2022_ES_State_Narrative_Budget.pdf

Conclusion

While many counties in Kansas have multiple sources of revenue for election administration, most of that revenue, over 92%, comes from property taxes. Most counties that reported revenue did not have more revenue than expenditures signaling a constrained fiscal environment. However, most counties did not report specific revenues for election administration, which indicates that election administration in Kansas counties fund election administration with general tax sources. Counties that fund election administration with general sources have been shown to force tradeoffs between election administration and other services that are often more visible.⁵ So, the picture that emerges when examining the revenues and expenditures of Kansas local governments is that 1) revenues are often constrained, 2) election administration must compete with other county departments for resources, and 3) there has been little historical support from the state for local election administration.

Dr. Zachary Mohr is an Associate Professor in the School of Public Affairs and Administration at the University of Kansas. He studies the cost of cost of election administration at the local level and recently published the book A Republic if You Can Afford It: How Much Does it Cost to Administer an Election?

Kawon Song is a Ph.D. student in Public Administration at the University of Kansas. Formerly a Senior Research Associate at the Korea Development Institute, she specializes in urban sustainability, governance, and public finance, focusing on policies that drive sustainable development and community growth.

⁵ McGowan, Mary Jo, JoEllen V. Pope, Martha E. Kropf, and Zachary Mohr. "Guns or Butter... or Elections? Understanding intertemporal and distributive dimensions of policy choice through the examination of budgetary tradeoffs at the local level." *Public Budgeting & Finance* 41, no. 4 (2021): 3-19.



North Carolina Funding and Transparency

**Martha Kropf, Professor of Political Science and Public Administration,
University of North Carolina at Charlotte**

North Carolina and Its Elections

North Carolina is one of the most rapidly growing states in the United States. From July 1, 2023, to July 1, 2024, North Carolina was the 4th fastest growing state, with a population of 11,046,024.¹ As of November 5, 2024, 7,839,911 of those individuals were registered to vote.

In considering funding for North Carolina elections infrastructure, one should know that the primary responsibilities for conducting elections lie within the 100 counties, each with a bi-partisan, appointed, five-member Board of Elections and a professional Election Director.² Each county board administers elections, candidate filing, and campaign finance. They also certify the results in their county.³

Budgeting for Elections in North Carolina

North Carolina's fiscal year runs from July 1 through June 30. For example, the fiscal year that begins in the middle calendar year 2024 is Fiscal Year 2025. In effect, this means that for a November election, expenses span two fiscal years (*set up costs, primary election in first fiscal year and general election costs in second fiscal year*). That is spending for the 2024 election began in FY2024 and ended in FY2025.

North Carolina has had an ongoing budget transparency initiative for the state and local governments since 2016.⁴ Although North Carolina is known for having robust publicly available data around elections, detailed data on how elections are funded—what mechanisms the counties leverage to raise the funds—is lacking.

What we do know is that County Commissions fund elections within their counties as part of their normal budget process. The North Carolina State Board of Elections supports the counties and the conduct of elections in several ways but does not provide direct funding to the counties for election administration.

1 Michael Cline, (December 20, 2024) "North Carolina Now Home to Over 11 Million People." *NC Office of State Budget and Management*. <https://www.osbm.nc.gov/blog/2024/12/20/north-carolina-now-home-over-11-million-people>, last accessed February 25, 2025.

2 North Carolina General Statute § 163-33. Powers and Duties of County Boards of Elections, available at https://www.ncleg.gov/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/HTML/BySection/Chapter_163/GS_163-33.html, last accessed November 29, 2024.

3 North Carolina State Board of Elections, (2024) <https://www.ncsbe.gov/about-elections/county-boards-elections>, last accessed November 29, 2024.

4 Jon Elliston, (March 18, 2016) "Money Trail: NC Budget Transparency Push Slated for April 1." *Carolina Public Press* (<https://carolinapublicpress.org/24566/money-trail-nc-budget-transparency-push-slated-for-april-1/>), last accessed November 29, 2024.

According to the National Association of Counties, after Intergovernmental Revenues, the largest source of revenue for North Carolina counties comes from property taxes.⁵ It is highly likely that some counties receive funding from cities within their borders to fund municipal elections, but scholars know very little about these inter-local agreements.

County Expenditures on Elections

Information concerning North Carolina county election expenditures are easily accessible⁶ on the State Treasurer's website, with Annual Financial Report (AFR) information posted from every county which submits a report.^{7,8} The reports separate out capital outlay for construction and purchases from operating expenditures. Unfortunately, expenditures do not specify the source of the election funding (*grants, State Board pass-through grants or county commission*). Rather, they only specify how much is spent.

*A Republic if You Can Afford It: How Much Does it Cost to Administer Elections*⁹ argues that using the AFR, the actual amount spent on elections throughout the year, is preferable to budgeted amount comparisons as a more accurate reflection of the realities of what is necessary to conduct elections. In doing so, one captures the impact of unexpected expenses that required funding in order for the election to be conducted.



“Although North Carolina is known for having robust publicly available data around elections, detailed data on how elections are funded is lacking.”



5 “North Carolina County Government Overview,” (2022) *National Association of Counties* https://www.naco.org/sites/default/files/event_attachments/DRAFT_NorthCarolina_012022.pdf, last accessed November 29, 2024.

6 Local Fiscal Management, *North Carolina Department of State Treasurer*. <https://www.nctreasurer.com/divisions/state-and-local-government-finance/lgc/local-fiscal-management>, last accessed March 10, 2025.

7 In the case where the data are not available on the State Treasurer's website, I obtained data from county financial reports, available on their websites. Some financial reports are not available either way: FY2020 and FY2021: Edgecombe County's report is not available. In FY2022 Caswell, Edgecombe, Montgomery, Northampton, and Richmond County reports are not available. In FY 2023, Caldwell, Caswell, Cherokee, Edgecombe, Graham, and Onslow are not available. I am able to obtain an estimate for Cherokee County using its FY2023 budgeted amount, though the reader is cautioned that the amount listed in the budget report is not necessarily audited.

8 North Carolina counties are required by state law to submit the Comprehensive Financial Annual Reports. North Carolina state law requires that local jurisdictions of all types follow the “The Local Government Budget and Fiscal Control Act.” See https://www.ncleg.gov/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/PDF/ByArticle/Chapter_159/Article_3.pdf. According to Zachary Mohr and colleagues, “ACFRs are the audited financial reports of local governments that comply with Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP). An ACFR is one type of AFR. Annual Comprehensive Financial Reports were formerly called Comprehensive Annual Financial Reports.”

9 Zachary Mohr, Martha Kropf, Mary Jo McGowan, and JoEllen Pope. (2024) “A Republic if You Can Afford It: How Much Does It Cost to Administer Elections?” *Cambridge University Press*, 9-10.

Spending per registered voter varies substantially between counties.¹⁰ Table 1 shows the highest and the lowest levels of spending by counties for each year. More study is necessary to understand the cause of the variation—research indicates that it may be political decisions on the part of county commissions, the bodies that fund county election boards,¹¹ but we also know that county government faces trade-offs among budgetary needs, so these decisions are difficult for political bodies.¹² We have not studied whether weather events or last-minute litigation affects funding levels among counties.

Table 1: Lowest and Highest Amounts Per Registered Voter

FISCAL YEAR	HIGH PER RV	# OF REG VOTERS	LOW PER RV	# OF REG VOTERS
2019	\$34.04	2,189	\$4.24	115,801
2020	\$39.95	2,257	\$4.89	123,393
2021	\$39.95	2,256	\$4.89	128,760
2022	\$32.29	2,290	\$5.22	148,871
2023	\$36.76	2,304	\$4.49	134,730

North Carolina State Election Board Budget

The State Board has several responsibilities including supervision, oversight, and training of county boards, maintaining the state election information management system (SEIMS) as well as supervising county voter list maintenance, and maintaining the state’s campaign finance reporting system. The Board certifies voting systems for use in the state and maintains security of the IT platforms used in various aspects of election administration. Finally, the state has staff who investigate allegations of fraud.

The State Board is funded by North Carolina General Assembly appropriations supplemented by federal grants as they are available. In Table 2, one can see the amount appropriated to the State Board for the past 11 years.¹³

¹⁰ *Ibid.*
¹¹ Zachary Mohr, JoEllen V. Pope, Martha E. Kropf, and Mary Jo Shepherd. (2019) “Strategic Spending: Does Politics Affect Election Administration Expenditure?” *American Journal of Political Science* 63(2): 427–438.
¹² Mary Jo McGowan, JoEllen Pope, Martha Kropf and Zachary T. Mohr. (2021) “Guns or Butter... or Elections? Understanding intertemporal and distributive dimensions of policy choice through the examination of budgetary tradeoffs at the local level” *Public Budgeting & Finance* 41(4): 3–19.
¹³ Prior Certified Budgets By Fiscal Year. *North Carolina Office of State Budget and Management*. <https://www.osbm.nc.gov/budget/certified-budget/prior-certified-budgets>, last accessed November 22, 2024.

Table 2: The Amount Appropriated to the State Election Board in the Certified Budget of North Carolina

FISCAL YEAR	APPROPRIATION
2014	\$5,302,373
2015	\$5,854,059
2016	\$6,764,842
2017	\$6,513,363
2018	\$6,624,283

It is important to note that these data are not expenditures, but budgeted appropriations.^{14,15}

Concerning the state funding, recently State Board Director Karen Brinson Bell has lobbied the North Carolina General Assembly for more funding, particularly for modernizing North Carolina’s SEIMS, which dates to 1998. “Brinson Bell, who likened the system to an Atari gaming system from the 1980s, said they have received about \$5 million of the \$8 million in funding they requested to complete the modernization.”¹⁶ Bell also asked the General Assembly to provide more field support specialists—moving the state from six field support specialists to eight. She was not successful.

The state received Help America Vote Act security funds in 2018, 2020, 2022, and 2023.¹⁷ The state also received CARES Act funds in 2020.

Unexpected Stress Tests to North Carolina’s 2024 Election Resources

In mid-September 2024, the North Carolina Supreme Court ruled that Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.’s name had to be taken off the state’s ballots. Ballots already printed had to be reprinted. According to Voting Rights Group Democracy North Carolina, “over 2.9 million

14 The numbers are also different from those listed on the North Carolina State Board of Elections, 2023-24 Budget Presentation, (February 9, 2023) Available at https://www.johnlocke.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/FY2023-24-Budget-Presentation_State-Bd-of-Elections_2023-02-09.pdf, last accessed November 29, 2024.

15 One can see expenditures from the 2024 and 2025 fiscal years at North Carolina’s open budget website: <https://www.nc.gov/government/open-budget>, last accessed November 29, 2024.

16 Theresa Opeka, (April 19, 2024) “NCSBE Report Leaves Questions about Early Voting Site Deadline Change.” The Carolina Journal <https://www.carolinajournal.com/ncsbe-report-leaves-questions-about-early-voting-site-deadline-change/>, last accessed November 29, 2024.

17 The Election Security grants “provides states with additional resources to improve the administration of elections for federal office, including to enhance technology and make certain election security improvements.” <https://www.eac.gov/grants/election-security-funds>, last accessed November 29, 2024.

ballots had been printed, and now they must be reprinted at the counties' expense, costing approximately \$1 million.”¹⁸

Just about six weeks before Election Day 2024 and about one month before early voting began in North Carolina in 2024, Tropical Storm Helene hit North Carolina. The General Assembly passed a “Disaster Recovery Act” which committed \$5 million for emergency election measures in the 25 counties initially declared a disaster area. The State Board of Elections also received funds from FEMA and the State Emergency Management Office funded temporary tents, lights, and other necessities needed to enable those in western Carolina to vote.¹⁹

These two situations exemplify two important points. First, using actual expenditures is a more accurate reflection of the costs of election administration and what is necessary to successfully administer an election. However, we simply cannot know how much money is necessary for an ideally-run election. Expenditures can often be very different than what the county commission initially budgeted. Second, election officials are often required to do extraordinary things under extenuating and difficult circumstances. Rising to meet those challenges requires the support of many, in a variety of ways.

Dr. Martha Kropf is a professor of Political Science and Public Policy at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She has authored or co-authored three books and more than 50 articles and book chapters about voting and elections and recently served on the Steering Committee for the North Carolina Commission on the Future of Elections.

¹⁸ “NC Supreme Court Ruling on RFK Ballot Lawsuit Hurts Local Election Funding.” (September 10, 2024) Democracy NC, <https://democracync.org/news/nc-supreme-court-ruling-on-rfk-ballot-lawsuit-hurts-local-election-funding/>, last accessed November 29, 2024.

¹⁹ Author interview with Karen Brinson Bell, North Carolina Director of Elections (January 7, 2025)



ACADEMIC RESEARCH

When Policy Stability Leads to Policy Drift — The Oregon Case: What We Learn From Listening to Election Officials

Paul Gronke, Professor of Political Science, Reed College

Paul Manson, Research Assistant Professor with the Center for Public Service, Portland State University

Executive Summary

Oregon became a fully vote-by-mail state in 2000 and, as a result, was insulated from many of the dramatic shifts in election administration and technology that swept across the nation after the passage of the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA). However, the very stability of Oregon's election system, combined with a unique public revenue system, created the conditions for "policy drift" – a type of policy change where on-the-ground realities fall out of sync with codified laws, rules, and budgetary models. A detailed case study of workforce and staffing, conducted across 34 of 36 Oregon counties from 2022–2023 demonstrates this drift.¹ For policymakers interested in bolstering elections, the lesson learned from Oregon is that crafting policy solutions requires more information than just the laws, rules, and budgets that are "on the book." For researchers, the lesson learned is that in-depth case studies and personal interviews provide important details about how the actual implementation choices are made by local election administrators.



"Policy drift is a theory of policy change that focuses on how implementation commitments fail to keep up with changing conditions."



Policy Drift as a Model of Policy Change

Policy drift is a theory of policy change that focuses on how implementation commitments fail to keep up with changing conditions. Policy drift at its core is the idea that implementation can fall short of meeting shifting demands and match them with appropriate outcomes, thus slipping out of sync with changing political or social environments. Policy drift is a "subterranean" change, resulting from responses by administrators who are searching for new solutions as policy "drifts" away from current

¹ To learn more about this case study, visit: <https://evic.reed.edu/evic-news/new-evic-report-on-oregon-local-election-official-staffing/>

needs.² Policy drift is often evident in political, administrative, and legal environments where change is constrained by a dense structuring of interests or by situations where those who control the legal and administrative rules sit in different places than those engaged in day-to-day implementation.³ A classic example of policy drift is minimum wage law. Federal minimum wage is fixed and hard to revisit. The wage rate quickly moves out of sync with economic conditions. Some states work to avoid this drift problem through indexing wages to inflation. Policy drift is powerful for policy analysts as it focuses not on how new policies emerge and are adopted, but rather how well policy systems work to keep policies up to date.

In-Depth Interviews as a Research Method: “Letting the Stewards Speak”

The research summarized here was initially produced for the Oregon Secretary of State’s Division of Elections.^{4, 5} The office engaged us to conduct a staffing assessment in order to understand the needs of county offices struggling to respond to legal changes in the state, and that had increased workloads during a time of budget strain. We chose to use in-depth interviews with 34 of 36 counties and provided a novel snapshot of election administration in an entire state. In-depth interviewing is a powerful research method for understanding the policy decisions made by local election administrators because it allows for a deeper exploration of their perspectives, motivations, and contextual factors influencing their choices. Qualitative methods are particularly valuable for capturing the diverse realities of local jurisdictions, thereby informing more effective, grounded policy analyses and recommendations. “Letting the stewards speak,” a term we coined in previous work, was instrumental to the research and we argue is a requisite in a policy area as diverse as state and local election administration.⁶

Documenting the Workforce and Staffing Challenges in Oregon

During our interviews, county offices shared their election staffing levels.⁷ For some offices, this is an easy question because they have dedicated election teams separated from other duties associated with the county Clerk’s Office. In other counties, Clerks and election directors integrate team members across service categories, allowing for recording and election staff overlap.

A notable finding in our work was the wide range in staff size at the county level, even when compared within registered voter size bands. These ratios are reported in Table 1. The smallest offices have either only a fraction of a position allocated or none at all. The

2 Galvin, Daniel J., and Jacob S. Hacker. 2020. “The Political Effects of Policy Drift: Policy Stalemate and American Political Development.” *Studies in American Political Development* 34(2): 216–38.

3 Rocco, Philip, and Chloe Thurston. 2014. “From Metaphors to Measures: Observable Indicators of Gradual Institutional Change.” *Journal of Public Policy* 34(1): 35–62.

4 Manson, Paul and Paul Gronke 2024. Policy Stability and Policy Change: Understanding Staffing Challenges in Oregon’s Local Elections Offices. *Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy*. <https://doi.org/10.1089/elj.2023.0042>

5 Manson, Paul and Paul Gronke. 2023. *Oregon County Election Staffing Research Study*. Report issued by the Elections & Voting Information Center at Reed College for the Oregon Secretary of State, Division of Elections. <https://evic.reed.edu/evic-news/new-evic-report-on-oregon-local-election-official-staffing/>

6 Gordon, Grace, Paul Manson, and Paul Gronke. 2022. ““The Stewards Speak: ‘One Change’ to Improve American Election Administration.” Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southern Political Science Association.

7 We provided a staffing worksheet, and tried to have respondents discriminate between elections-only staff, recording staff, and staff that shared duties.

largest offices are as large as nine to 12 people. Across the counties, each staff position serves 27,000 voters on average. In the least populated counties, this ratio is as low as 1,000 voters but ranges as high as 63,000 voters per staff member. We consistently heard across counties that staffing levels today are at or below levels from five to 10 years ago, and that staffing levels have not changed despite increases in total registered voters following the implementation of automatic voter registration (AVR).

Table 1: Staffing Levels and Voter to Staff Ratios

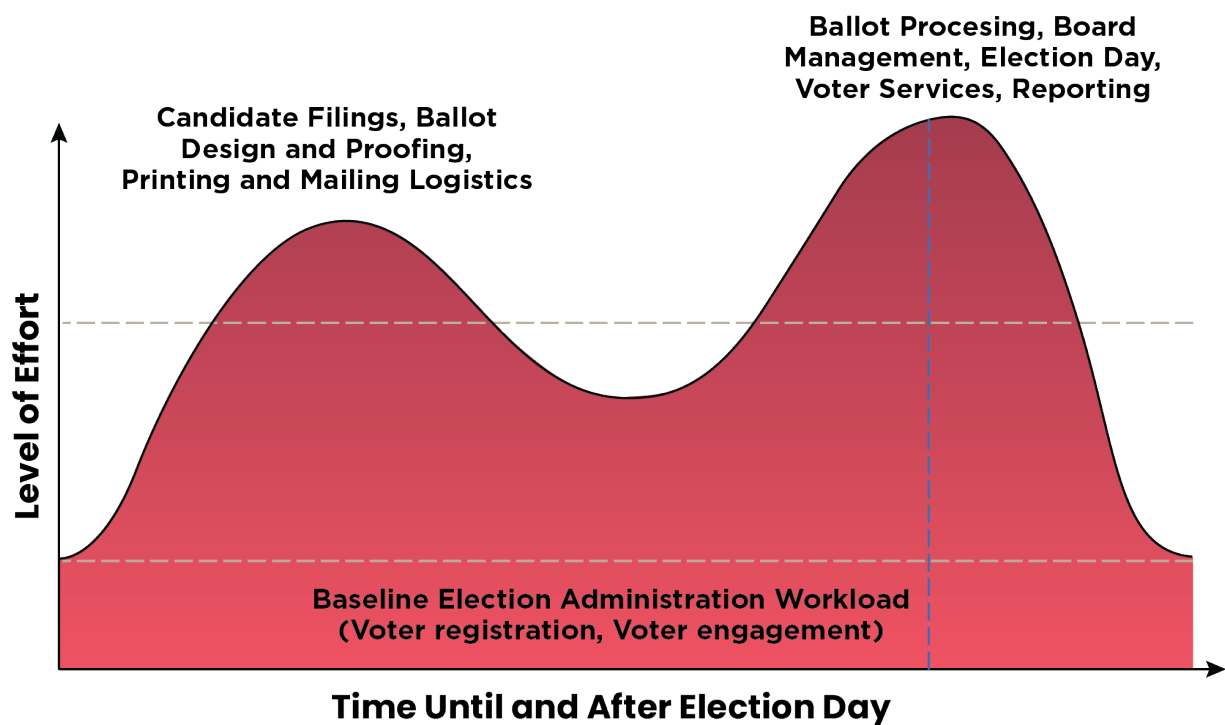
COUNTY SIZE	FULL-TIME STAFF COUNTS			VOTER TO STAFF RATIOS		
	AVERAGE	MAXIMUM	MINIMUM	AVERAGE	MAXIMUM	MINIMUM
Large	6.7	12.0	2.5	46,914	63,971	30,364
Medium	1.7	5.8	0.1	25,015	73,760	2,126
Small	1.0	1.0	1.0	1,322	1,460	1,075
Overall	2.7	12.0	0.1	27,433	73,760	1,075

Pay and compensation were reported as a frequent challenge for hiring and keeping election staff. Clerks noted that they competed with other departments within their counties, or even with fast food restaurants, for staff because county government wages were so low. Many shared that some jobs shared similar responsibilities with those in the Assessor or Sheriff’s office, and that those departments were able to pay more. These internal challenges for local election officials were often tied to issues of job classification within the county, and we learned that many position descriptions had not been reviewed for years.

The changing nature of elections work and workload was a second challenge for Oregon election clerks and staff. New rules and new technology have made the work of elections far more complex, and skills in communications and outreach are priorities for new hires. Another source of change is the length of the election “season.” Many shared that there is rarely a down period at this point. Generally, the peak of election activity starts with candidate filings, about 100 days prior to the election, and then tapers off two to three weeks after the election. This means that the active election season is approximately four months long and in even-numbered years, this means there may be eight months of intense election work.

Figure 1 graphically presents this workload dynamic in a general schematic and represents the reality that most clerks and their staff are beyond “normal” capacity in election periods. We have found a very similar pattern of elections staff reporting they are “overcapacity” in national local election official surveys.⁸

Figure 1: A Stylized Representation of the Vote by Mail Workload



Not surprisingly, given what we just reported, most offices shared persistent recruitment challenges. Many said that applicant pools often had only one qualified candidate, or none at all, requiring searches to remain open. Offices had mixed experiences with the human resources offices in their counties. In some cases, these relationships are fruitful and supportive, but in other cases, HR offices did not fully understand the mix of qualifications, demands, and stressful political environment surrounding elections.

A consistent message across all offices is that training for elections has gotten much more complicated. It takes four years to be fully trained in election tasks, because that period of time spans all types of elections a staff member needs to experience. Most offices did not have formalized training programs and most have developed mentoring and on-the-job training. State association meetings were cited by many as a key resource for training,

8 Gronke, Paul and Paul Manson. 2023. "Today's Election Administration Landscape. Findings from the Elections & Voting Information Center's 2023 LEO Survey." https://evic.reed.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/EVIC_2023_LEO_Survey_Report.pdf

but for smaller offices, these meetings are hard to attend either because of a lack of travel budget or because staff sizes are too small to have one or more members gone.

The final challenge that came up in many interviews was the budget for administering elections. In Oregon, the county bears almost all the costs of administering federal, state, and local elections. While Oregon law requires that the costs of elections be paid from the county general fund, in practice many counties rely upon recording fees from real property transactions to support elections. When these fees drop due to macroeconomic forces, election offices are faced with staff cuts.

This shift in funding from the general fund to a dependence on the recording fees is important to understand. County Clerks, with their dual recording and election administration roles, allow for these services and funds to be combined in smaller offices. The challenge is that recording fees are driven by the level of real estate transactions in a county. In years with increasing home prices, and low interest rates, the volume of property transactions in Oregon generates enough recording revenue to fully fund elections. However, when housing starts and refinancing declines, recording activity can drop precipitously. Here, the stagnation of policy responses to the public finance model for counties has resulted in an unintended dependence on real estate transactions to guarantee elections are run. For one Oregon county, a reduction in recording activity because of a slowdown in the housing market in 2023 resulted in a \$600,000 budget shortfall requiring staff layoffs just as the 2024 election season began.

Broader county public finance challenges also confront election administration in Oregon. The legacy of tax limitation measures passed in the 1990s also ripple through counties. In 1997, Oregon voters amended the state constitution to move all local governments away from levy systems to permanent rates based on the most recent fiscal year. This locked rates into the fiscal realities of the 1990s. For many counties, this era represented the collapse of federal timber payments to counties (*which had allowed for lower property tax levies*). These federal payments largely dried up with environmental protections that reduced timber cuts. Counties are locked into a public finance reality that no longer exists. Not every county faced this challenge – a handful of counties are experiencing sudden increases in property tax value driven by logistics centers, data center operations, and renewable energy facilities.

Why Do We Use Policy Drift to Describe Change in Oregon's Election Administration Policy Space?

Our research led us to conclude that the Oregon local election administration policy landscape – and we suspect election policy landscapes in other states – shows policy drift. Local election administrators are primarily tasked with serving voters and reporting election results and operate within a legal and administrative landscape primarily established by federal and state statutes. LEOs operate in a second, related policy arena: policies surrounding public finance and public employment. Budgets are also not generally in their

control – they are controlled by county commissioners and other elected officials.⁹ Human resource policies are also often controlled by other parts of county government. This kind of dense, intersecting policy network with local officials administering a policy that is established and funded at a different level of government often sets up the preconditions for drift.

We find that Oregon is a particularly apt case for policy drift because its adoption of voting by mail in 2000 insulated the state from many changes that swept over elections administration offices from 2000–2016. As the policy space changed across the country, Oregon’s policies were left in place. Things shifted in Oregon around 2016, as an activist state legislature passed a series of pro-voter measures (*AVR in 2015 and “postmark by Election Day” in 2020*). Voter rolls, turnout, and ballot processing workload increased, yet were not accompanied by any increases in revenue or investments in the county elections infrastructure. Second, the state’s inflexible revenue system meant that clerks, and counties, had to be creative as they tried to continue to deliver democracy in a growing and diversifying state.

Our interviews captured a common story across all counties and one we expect will resonate with observers in many states. Election administration in Oregon is based on staffing, budget, and administrative policies that are out of sync with the ongoing pressures and changes around all elections in the U.S. Policy drift in this context is the changing types of work needed to conduct elections, and the need to reexamine outdated laws, policies, and budget models.

Paul Gronke is Professor of Political Science at Reed College and Director of the Elections & Voting Information Center. Gronke also is a Senior Fellow at the Center for Public Service at Portland State University.

Paul Manson is a Research Assistant Professor with the Center for Public Service at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon. He is also the Research Director for the Election & Voting Information Center, where he administers the annual Local Election Official Survey.

9 Mohr, Zachary, JoEllen V. Pope, Martha E. Kropf, and Mary Jo Shepherd. 2019. “Strategic Spending: Does Politics Influence Election Administration Expenditure?” *American Journal of Political Science* 63(2): 427–38.

Does Increasing Spending on Election Administration Matter?

Lessons from Philanthropy, Government, and Election Administration

**Christian Grose, Professor of Political Science and Public Policy,
University of Southern California**

Introduction

The 2020 U.S. election was administered amid a global pandemic that strained public resources and endangered frontline workers, including local election officials. In response, private philanthropy stepped in to fill the financial and logistical gaps that government funding alone could not meet. Nonpartisan grants from the USC Schwarzenegger Institute, the Center for Tech and Civic Life (CTCL), and the Center for Election Innovation and Research (CEIR) enabled local and state election officials to open new polling places, expand early voting, bolster election administration infrastructure, and improve access for millions of voters.¹ This article summarizes how nonpartisan philanthropic funding enhanced election administration in 2020, details the backlash that followed in some states, shows there is bipartisan support for increasing budgets for election administration, and engages lessons from the 2020 philanthropy to chart new research and policy questions regarding right-sizing public and philanthropic spending to make nonpartisan election administration better for voters.

This article argues there is a sustained need for public investment in election administration that avoids inefficiency. The article also raises new research questions about government funding of election administration, many of which emerged from my direct experience administering the USC Schwarzenegger Institute nonpartisan democracy grants.

Philanthropy Enhanced Local Election Administration and Voter Access

One of the most consequential yet underrecognized stories of the 2020 election was the role of private, nonpartisan philanthropy in supporting local election officials and nonpartisan local election administration. Three nonprofit organizations led the effort: CTCL, CEIR, and the USC Schwarzenegger Institute. CTCL and the USC Schwarzenegger Institute provided direct nonpartisan grants to local election administrators to bolster operations during the pandemic; and CEIR provided nonpartisan grants to states. Because the USC Schwarzenegger Institute grants were administered at a university, research efforts are now underway to learn more about the impact of increasing spending on nonpartisan election

¹ Karen Brinson Bell and Christian R. Grose. 2023. "Philanthropy and Election Operations." *Journal of Election Administration Research & Practice* 21:24-31; Matt Vasilogambros and Carrie Levine. 2020. "Wealthy Donors Spend Big to Expand Voting Access." *Pew Stateline*. <<https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2020/10/26/wealthy-donors-spend-big-to-expand-voting-access>>.

administration on a variety of governance and voting outcomes.

The USC Schwarzenegger Institute awarded approximately \$2.5 million to counties previously covered by Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act. These nonpartisan democracy grants funded over 200 new early voting sites and additional Election Day polling places in states such as Alabama, Arizona, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia. In total, these grants supported election administration in counties with 3.5 million registered voters. Research shows that the increase in spending in these jurisdictions led to an increase in voter turnout.² Every eligible county that applied for funding received it.

The Center for Tech and Civic Life, primarily funded by the Chan-Zuckerberg Initiative, disbursed over \$300 million nationwide to support a wide range of election needs, including hazard pay, ballot-processing infrastructure, and the opening of new vote centers. The CTCL funding was associated with an increase in voter turnout in the counties funded.³ Every county that applied for funding received it.

These interventions directly improved voter access. For example, in Cameron County, Texas, philanthropic funds led to the creation of three new early voting super centers. These sites reduced crowding on Election Day, increased turnout, and provided safer options for voters during the pandemic.⁴ Local election officials credited the grants with making high-turnout voting possible, and these new early voting centers were continued via public funding in subsequent elections.



“The motivation for local officials to seek philanthropic support was rooted in budget needs, not partisanship.”



Backlash to Philanthropy: Can Government Fill the Funding Gaps in Election Administration?

The motivation for local officials to seek philanthropic support in 2020 was rooted in significant budget needs for local nonpartisan election administration. As one local election official in a jurisdiction that applied for USC Schwarzenegger Institute nonpartisan grants told me, “Elections are always last on the list. My county funds police, schools, and other critical needs first and we are often forgotten.”

2 Christian R. Grose. 2025. “Increased Spending on Election Infrastructure Causes Public Administrators to Open More Polling Locations and Increase Voter Turnout.” Working manuscript, University of Southern California.

3 Ibid.

4 See, for instance: “Voting Rights: Progress Gained, Miles to Go.” 2022. 92nd Street Y Webinar. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fgGjvWgjaQ&t=3222s>>.

The nonpartisan philanthropic interventions into the U.S. election were significant and allowed for a number of counties and localities to increase their budgets for the 2020 elections. However, there is a brewing backlash to the private philanthropic interventions in nonpartisan election administration to make it easier to vote and to modernize election infrastructure. Some elected officials have publicly criticized the role of private philanthropy in helping boost infrastructure and support for the 2020 election. Some have gone so far as to criticize the philanthropic grants as being part of a conspiracy to interfere in the election – even though all organizations gave funds to every single eligible jurisdiction that applied – which has given rise to personal threats and frivolous complaints.⁵

As of 2022, some state legislatures have passed bills placing restrictions on voting, including Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas.⁶ Several of these legislatures have effectively banned nonpartisan philanthropic efforts to local counties as part of omnibus legislation to create new and more restrictive rules around voting.⁷ With the exception of Pennsylvania, these statewide interventions banning nonpartisan philanthropic funding do not come with state appropriations for nonpartisan local election administration. Thus, the legislative backlash in each state makes philanthropic funding quite challenging or impossible. In all states, but especially those that banned philanthropic direct funding on election infrastructure, it is therefore critical to engage in more robust public funding via state, local, and federal sources.



“Support for increases in election administration funding at the local level crosses party lines.”



Election Administrators’ Support for Seeking Increases in Election Funding

A representative survey of local election administrators conducted in spring 2020—before COVID became politically polarized—shows that concerns over COVID strongly predicted whether jurisdictions applied for and received philanthropic funds. Among administrators concerned about COVID’s impact on turnout, 39.3% applied for and received philanthropic funding, compared to only 18.3% of those who were not concerned.⁸ The pandemic directly

5 Since 2021, I have been subject to several online or other threats for my role in the USC Schwarzenegger Institute nonpartisan grants initiative. CTCL staff have been threatened with frivolous complaints and threats. And of course, local election administrators have faced increasing backlash and threats – including those who applied for the nonpartisan philanthropic funding. See Amanda D. Clark, Christina S. Barsky, and Monica A. Bustanza. 2023. “Heavy Lifting: Emotional Labor and Election Administration.” *Administration & Society* 55:2:308–25.

6 Other states have passed laws endorsing the use of nonpartisan philanthropy in the operations of elections, such as Michigan.

7 Grose, Christian R. 2024. “How Private Philanthropy Supercharged the 2020 Election: The Audacious Story of the USC Schwarzenegger Institute and the Center for Tech and Civic Life in Local Election Administration.” In Paul Gronke, et al., eds., *Local Election Administrators in the United States: The Frontline of Democracy*, London: Palgrave MacMillan/Springer, pp. 219–39 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-70227-3>; Tran, Dari S. 2024. *Pandemic at the Polls: How the Politics of COVID-19 Played into American Elections*. Lanham, MD: Lexington, <https://doi.org/10.5771/9781666933543>.

8 For more on this survey, see Grose, 2024, “How Private Philanthropy Supercharged the 2020 Election.”

led to infrastructure reductions in elections.⁹ This 2020 philanthropic funding sought to offset these reductions to election administration and infrastructure.

Interest in larger budgets for nonpartisan election administration has support across parties. While election administration at the county level is nonpartisan, we also asked in the anonymous survey if election administrators leaned toward a particular party. Many said they were independent. Interestingly, though, Democratic-leaning, Republican-leaning, and politically independent election administrators all have interests in increasing election administration budgets. In a representative survey conducted in 2020, I asked local election administrators whether they applied for nonpartisan election administration funds from either CTCL or the USC Schwarzenegger Institute. In the same representative survey, I also asked local election officials if they identified as Democrats, Republicans or independents. This allows for me to measure if there was a partisan divide in the local election administrators who sought funding from the private, philanthropic sources. This survey promised anonymity so that local election administrators could answer questions honestly and truthfully.

Intriguingly, and supporting the idea that there is bipartisan support from local election administrators for increases in local budgets to administer elections, there is no statistically significant partisan difference in election administrators and their willingness to seek funding from CTCL or the USC Schwarzenegger Institute for election administration. The table below shows the percentage of Democratic local election administrators; the percentage of Republican local election administrators; and the percentage of independent local election administrators who do not identify with any major political party who sought funding from CTCL and/or the USC Schwarzenegger Institute.¹⁰

Table: There is no partisan difference in local election administrators who sought nonpartisan philanthropic funding from CTCL and the USC Schwarzenegger Institute

	% of local election officials who applied for and received nonpartisan philanthropic 2020 grant
% of local election administrators who identify as Republican who sought CTCL or SI funding in 2020	41.2%
% of local election administrators who identify as Democrat who sought CTCL or SI funding in 2020	37.0%
% of local election administrators who identify as independent who sought CTCL or SI funding in 2020	37.2%

9 Curiel, John A. and Jesse T. Clark. 2021. "Disparities in Poll Closures in the Age of COVID-19." *Election Law Journal* <https://doi.org/10.1089/elj.2020.06>.

10 These data are from the survey and based on self reports of party identification from local election administrators.

In fact, election administrators who identify as Republican were slightly more likely than election administrators who identify as Democrat to seek funding from CTCL and/or the USC Schwarzenegger Institute to administer elections (41.2% of election administrators who identify as Republican sought philanthropic funding while 37.0% of those who identify as Democrat sought philanthropic funding; and 37.2% of those who identify as independent sought philanthropic funding). However, there is no statistically significant difference between Republican, Democratic, and independent local election administrators. These results suggest that support for increases in election administration funding at the local level crosses party lines. These results at the local level also comport with state-level findings from Zachary Mohr, Martha Kropf, Mary Jo McGowan, and JoEllen Pope that show no correlation between state partisanship and levels of government election funding.¹¹ In short, the need to fund elections is bipartisan; and there is little evidence of differential spending or interest in seeking additional funding by the party of election administrators or of state governments. Partisanship did not have any effect on who is most interested in receiving greater funding.

Toward a Smarter Public Investment Strategy in Election Administration and Toward a Scholarly Research Agenda on Election Funding

Going forward, if states and the federal government are to fill the gap left by private philanthropy, they must do so wisely. Increased spending on election administration has been shown to improve voter and administrative outcomes, especially in jurisdictions that lacked sufficient infrastructure prior to increases in funding. State and local governments are likely interested in learning more about the impact of increased election spending on many outcomes. At the same time, there is significant academic and policy interest in learning more about the impact of both philanthropic and government spending on nonpartisan election administration. Research that can inform both scholarship and practice on nonpartisan election administration spending is critically needed.

Several key questions remain unanswered or less explored:

1. What role should philanthropy play in election administration funding?

The 2020 election witnessed some of the most novel and exciting nonpartisan interventions in election administration.¹² These philanthropic interventions allowed for significant increases in nonpartisan election administration spending. Since 2020, a number of states have passed laws banning or scaling back nonpartisan philanthropic partnerships with local jurisdictions and states. Yet there are still opportunities for universities, nonprofits, and nonpartisan philanthropy to engage in improving election administration. Future research and practice should consider ways that philanthropy can be mobilized to improve the

¹¹ Mohr, Zachary, Martha E. Kropf, Mary Jo McGowan, and JoEllen Pope. 2024. *A Republic if You Can Afford It*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

¹² Grose, 2025. "Increased Spending on Election Infrastructure Causes Public Administrators to Open More Polling Locations and Increase Voter Turnout."

administration of elections, and understand how backlash to and bans of philanthropy in some states changed the administration of elections. Academic-practice partnerships at universities can fill the gap left by bans in philanthropic spending directly on election administration.

2. How can philanthropy be re-engaged to expend funding on localities and jurisdictions, and make it clear that such funding is open and transparent to all who apply?

Since 2020, perhaps due in part to threats, there has been a pullback in direct philanthropic funding of election administration – especially infrastructure, polling locations, and other methods of voter access. Research is needed to examine opinions of elected legislators and voters at the state and local level to determine the roots of support and opposition for philanthropic funding. Are there ways to communicate to elected officials of both parties about the importance of enhancing nonpartisan election funding from philanthropy? Especially given that philanthropic efforts release cost pressures on states and localities, future work should engage with how an open philanthropic process could be re-engaged for future elections. Policy regarding philanthropic funding could then be shaped for future elections based on research findings.

3. What are the thresholds at which additional spending no longer produces meaningful improvements in voter access or administrative quality?

The research on election administration and spending shows that increasing spending in local jurisdictions improves election outcomes. More election administration spending causes higher turnout, increases the number of polling locations in jurisdictions, and is associated with increased confidence in elections.¹³ Yet spending on election administration faces severe constraints. Ideally, from a public policy standpoint, we need more research that analyzes the optimal level of spending on elections. At what point are diminishing returns seen by increasing election spending? New research examining best practices for cost-effective hiring, equipment procurement, and infrastructure upgrades can build on existing public administration scholarship such as that by Kathleen Hale, Robert Mountjoy, and Mitchell Brown.¹⁴ It is critical to assess optimal levels of election spending in local and state jurisdictions. Further, the research must not focus purely on a precise dollar amount in just one time period or just one election, but also must consider that some administrative choices are costly in the short term though highly impactful and cost effective over the long term (such as investments in new infrastructure). Further, costs will vary across jurisdictions and states given geographic size, population size, existing public infrastructure,

¹³ Grose, 2024, “How Private Philanthropy Supercharged the 2020 Election”; Mohr, Kropf, McGowan, and Pope, 2024, *A Republic If You Can Afford It*.

¹⁴ Hale, Kathleen, Robert Mountjoy, and Mitchell Brown. 2015. *Administering Elections: How American Elections Work*. Palgrave MacMillan; and David C. Kimball and Martha Kopf, 2006. “The Street-level Bureaucrats of Elections.” *Review of Policy Research* 23:6:1257–68.

security demands, staffing costs and cost of living, outreach and voter access costs due to multilingual populations, needs for legal compliance and litigation threats, and more. Therefore, it is important to determine the optimal amount of spending though this will vary across jurisdictions given these and other varying costs. Public investment and spending on election administration that goes beyond one election and shapes long-term infrastructure, sustains trust over multiple elections, and creates permanent security guardrails may be valuable even if the policy outcomes and payoffs may not be observed until after several election periods.

4. How do local administrative structures and leadership (e.g., partisan vs. nonpartisan oversight, professionalization levels) affect levels of and effectiveness of spending on election administration?

While some research demonstrates that there are local political influences on election administration spending, other work shows that there is little partisan impact of election administration.¹⁵ More work is needed to analyze how governance structures interact with resource allocation to affect outcomes. Excellent research has assessed differences in election administration across local and state jurisdictions, but little of this work examines election administration spending or funding.¹⁶ Answering these questions will require collaboration between election officials, political scientists, public administration scholars, policy practitioners, philanthropists, and other social scientists. It will also require improved theorizing about the incentives of election administrators and the principals who oversee their budgets, and greater data availability regarding local election budgets and spending patterns.

Conclusion

The 2020 election demonstrated the critical role that targeted, nonpartisan funding can play in strengthening American democracy. The combination of private philanthropy and public service helped avoid disaster in an unprecedented year. But the backlash that followed threatens to undermine those gains.

Going forward, sustained investment in local election administration may come from the public sector—but informed by the lessons of these 2020 philanthropic interventions. In addition, philanthropy should look for new ways to support nonpartisan election administration. Future research and future efforts should investigate safeguards that can allow the inclusion of direct philanthropic spending for election administration infrastructure, and in doing so should work with legislators of both parties to reduce pushback from states who had concerns over such philanthropy. Future scholars should

¹⁵ Ferrer, Joshua, Igor Geyn, and Daniel M. Thompson. 2024. "How Partisan Is Local Election Administration?" *American Political Science Review* 118:2:956–71; Mohr, Zachary, JoEllen V. Pope, Martha E. Kropf, and Mary Jo Shepherd. 2019. "Strategic Spending: Does Politics Influence Election Administration Expenditure?" *American Journal of Political Science* 63:2:427–38.

¹⁶ Gronke, Paul, David Kimball, Thessalia Merivaki, Mara Suttman-Lea, Christian Grose, and Bridgett King. 2024. *Local Election Administrators in the United States: The Frontline of Democracy*. London: Palgrave MacMillan/Springer.

also work with practitioners to embed randomized controlled trials and experimental interventions at the local and state level to conduct policy evaluations of nonpartisan election administration spending.¹⁷

The goal should not be maximal spending, but smart spending that ensures access, security, and sound administrative decisions. Much more research is needed to learn how increasing election administration spending, and at what levels, optimizes voter access and election operations. The audacious philanthropic interventions of 2020 showed that well-timed, well-spent dollars can supercharge voter participation and yield other positive, nonpartisan outcomes. The 2020 experience shows that more spending on election administration is critical for improved nonpartisan voter and election operations outcomes. These experiences demonstrate that local, state, and federal governments – and from philanthropy – can improve our democracy by supporting funding of election administration in the future.

Christian Grose is Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at the University of Southern California. He received his BA from Duke University and his PhD from the University of Rochester.

¹⁷ Grose, Christian R. and Abby K. Wood. 2019. "Randomized Experiments by Government Institutions and American Political Development." *Public Choice* 185:3-4:401-13.



PRACTITIONER EXPERIENCE

Elections in Pennsylvania: Matching Local Investment with State Funding Stabilizes Elections Administration

Al Schmidt, Secretary of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

The year 2020 was unprecedented in Pennsylvania elections, for two key reasons.

First, counties were required to replace their Direct-Recording Electronic (DRE) voting machines, which recorded and tabulated votes electronically, with new voting systems that maintain a voter-verifiable paper record of each voter's ballot. This reform allowed Pennsylvania to join the majority of states that had already implemented voting systems capable of producing a verifiable paper trail, allowing for meaningful post-election audits that can confirm the accuracy of election results.

Second, voting by mail increased dramatically, spurred by a pre-pandemic change in Pennsylvania law as well as the practical effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Act 77 of 2019, enacted by a bipartisan majority of the Pennsylvania legislature before the spread of COVID-19, brought sweeping election reforms that gave Pennsylvanians more voting options. Where Pennsylvania law had previously allowed voters to vote absentee with sufficient justification (*such as a disability or their absence from their home municipality*), Act 77 permitted any eligible voter to request a mail-in ballot with no reason required. This "no-excuse mail voting" was first available to Pennsylvania voters in 2020, and because of the unexpected onset of COVID-19, a large number of voters used this option, viewing it as a safer alternative to voting in person during the pandemic. As a result, demand for the new mail-in voting option increased quickly and dramatically; Pennsylvania's counties received ten times as many mail ballots in the 2020 primary as they had in the 2016 primary.¹

Thus, at the same time as counties were implementing and operationalizing changes related to voting by mail and replacing their DRE voting machines, they were also suddenly faced with new and unforeseen challenges, both in terms of protecting public safety and processing the large volume of mail ballots prompted by the pandemic. County elections offices needed personal protective equipment, additional temporary and permanent staff, machinery to help them process the large volume of mail ballots, additional voting system tabulators to enable them to count ballots faster, and resources to educate voters on the recent election reforms.

Several counties raised these challenges—and the resulting significant financial burdens—with the Pennsylvania General Assembly throughout 2020. But at the time, Pennsylvania did not provide funding to counties specifically for election administration. Election costs

¹ Rachel Looker, (2020, November 23). Pennsylvania mail-in ballot count was 'just all hands on deck.' <https://www.naco.org/articles/pennsylvania-mail-ballot-count-was-just-all-hands-deck>

were borne entirely by the county, appropriated annually by county authorities and raised from local levies. And because, as County Commissioners testified to the Pennsylvania legislature in June of 2020, they operated on calendar-year budgets set at the end of the prior year, counties had been unable to plan for the extraordinary and unforeseen issues that emerged during the 2020 election cycle, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The federal government recognized the urgent need for resources in election administration and in March 2020, Congress passed the CARES Act, which included \$400 million in emergency election funding, of which \$14.2 million was allocated to Pennsylvania. The PA Department of State distributed \$6 million of that funding directly to the counties through block grants, which were allocated based on the number of registered voters as of April 13, 2020.



“The Pennsylvania Department of State and the Wolf Administration agreed that the conduct of free and fair elections is the responsibility of the Commonwealth and a core function of government. But without a dedicated state funding stream, county elections officials who already work with limited resources would be unable to fully fund the administration of elections.”



One election director reported that his county had already spent its CARES Act allocation and predicted it would likely run out of its federal Help America Vote Act (HAVA) allocation by the end of 2020, even though those funds were intended to last through 2022. Deputy Secretary of Elections for the Pennsylvania Department of State, Jonathan Marks, suggested in testimony before the legislature that they consider using an existing model for providing grant money to counties and authorize a reimbursement-based grant to address the immediate needs of counties in 2020.² He also stressed that Pennsylvania could not continue with the existing model for elections funding, where counties bear 100 percent of the cost, because another unforeseeable crisis like COVID-19 could put a future election in jeopardy.³

Nevertheless, additional state funding was not made available. Instead, nonprofit organizations stepped up to meet urgent needs in every county that requested funding.

2 Jonathan Marks, Public hearing on PA Senate Bill No. 982; and House Bill No. 2044; Testimony delivered to the Pennsylvania Senate State Government Committee, April 11, 2022, <https://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/legis/CMS/ArchiveDetails.cfm?SessYear=2021&MeetingId=2227&Code=41&Chamber=S>.

3 Ibid.

These nonprofit organizations enabled a third of Pennsylvania's counties to pay for additional staff or purchase expensive specialized mail processing and ballot processing equipment. The amount of financial support numbered in the tens of millions of dollars. But the use of outside funds proved politically controversial. Following the 2020 General Election, several bills were introduced in the General Assembly to prohibit the third-party funding of elections. The Pennsylvania Department of State and the Wolf Administration agreed that the conduct of free and fair elections is the responsibility of the Commonwealth and a core function of government. But without a dedicated state funding stream, county elections officials who already work with limited resources would be unable to fully fund the administration of elections. This was echoed by county commissioners, election workers, and stakeholders. As the bills moved through the legislative process, conversations continued to focus on dedicated annual funding from the state to the counties.

In July of 2022, the Pennsylvania General Assembly passed and Governor Wolf signed into law Act 88 of 2022, providing that elections must be funded solely from "taxes, fees and other sources of public revenue," offering limited exceptions to accept the use of a polling place without paying rent, services provided without remuneration, and goods with a value under \$100. The legislation established criminal penalties for violations of the ban on private funding, including a fine of up to \$5,000 and two years' imprisonment.

The central piece of the legislation was a \$45 million Election Integrity Grant Program to be appropriated annually to counties that apply based on their percentage of registered voters in the Commonwealth. The statute specified nine acceptable uses of the funding:

1. Payment of staff to canvass and pre-canvass ballots
2. Physical security and transparency for the canvass and pre-canvass
3. Post election procedures required under the Pennsylvania Election Code
4. List maintenance activities required under Pennsylvania Law
5. Printing of ballots
6. Training costs for district election officials
7. Payment of staff at the polling places
8. Preparation, transportation, storage and management of voting apparatuses and materials
9. Costs related to processing voter registration applications

Counties must also meet other requirements as a condition of receiving the grant including beginning their pre-canvass at 7 a.m. on election day, beginning their canvass at 8 p.m. on election day, and continuing without interruption until finished. They must also post the unofficial number of mail and absentee ballots received on their website, and report outcomes of post-election audits to the PA Department of State to be posted publicly.

The Department views the funding to counties under Act 88 as an important initial investment. Nearly every county has accepted the funding and applied to the grant program. In 2024, only two did not apply (*out of sixty-seven*). The money has allowed counties to purchase new equipment to speed up the processing of ballots on election night allowing for results to be known earlier, increased pay and training for poll workers that are responsible for helping our citizens to vote on Election Day, and enabled counties to hire extra staff to complete the critical tasks that make up election administration. While the funding has been crucial, Secretary Al Schmidt has identified one potential improvement: counties should be required to maintain the level of funding for their election departments established pre-Act 88 so the state grant funding is supplementing local funds, and not just replacing them. As elections continue to increase in complexity and local governments face litigation risks, counties need to increase their funding for election administration in addition to the state funding now provided.

Sec. Al Schmidt serves as the Secretary of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Prior to his appointment, Schmidt was president and chief executive officer at the Committee of Seventy and served for 10 years as a Philadelphia City Commissioner. Since first being elected as city commissioner in November 2011, Schmidt worked to modernize election operations, improve efficiency, and bring greater integrity to the election process.



Colorado Case Study: Modernizing State Funding

Hilary Rudy, Deputy Elections Director, Colorado Department of State

Beginning with the 2024 presidential election, Colorado will transition from a per-voter reimbursement to a reimbursement based on a percentage of actual costs directly attributable to conducting the election.¹ Previously, counties only received reimbursement from the state in a November election with a state ballot measure and a presidential primary.² The reasons for the shift in reimbursement are those that underly nearly every discussion about the funding of elections.

Colorado law provided for reasonable cost sharing by coordinating jurisdictions but set the state reimbursement at a rate per active voter. This type of formula fails to account for cost variables, including drastic changes in election supply costs like printing, the amount of content certified by the state, and legislative changes that increased county costs like additional voter services and security measures. Moreover, election costs have increased drastically in recent years due to supply chain challenges and other unforeseen factors.



“Election costs have increased drastically in recent years due to supply chain challenges and other unforeseen factors.”



In 2020, Colorado conducted the first presidential primary election in two decades. As part of the implementing legislation for the ballot initiative that reinstated the election, the reimbursement was set at full actual costs.³ This laid a blueprint for developing a new cost reimbursement process. It also highlighted several implementation challenges, including forecasting costs for an accurate budget appropriation, timely receipt of documentation that was not previously required, and increased workload to audit county documentation.

Forecasting costs for a presidential primary election was incredibly difficult considering that the election was to be held under the new semi-open primary process and the 2018 state primary was the first statewide election under that model. For previous November reimbursements, the state was able to reasonably forecast the active voter count to estimate the per-voter reimbursement amount. This meant that the budget line for county reimbursement remained relatively steady and increased incrementally over time as the

¹ The reimbursement for presidential primary election is based on full actual costs, all other state and federal elections will be reimbursed based on a percentage of actual costs. Sections 1-5-505.5 and 24-24-104.5(2), C.R.S.

² The reimbursement for November elections with a state ballot measure was based on a rate of \$0.90 per active voter for counties with fewer than 10,000 voters and \$0.80 per active voter in the remaining counties that was paid from the Department of State cash fund.

³ Proposition 107 was passed in 2016 and SB17-305 was enacted in 2017, establishing full reimbursement of actual costs from the state general fund.

registered voter numbers for the state increased. While the state had collected cost data from the counties for November elections in which there was a state reimbursement since 2014, the state had never collected primary cost data and the reimbursement form prior to 2018 made no distinction between costs that would be reimbursable as directly attributable to conducting the election and those costs that were annual costs borne by the county regardless of the number of elections conducted. In an effort to collect better cost data, the state revised the form and requested counties provide actual costs for conducting the 2018 primary election. The state then revised the requested appropriation amount based on the updated cost data.⁴

Following the 2020 presidential primary election, counties submitted their reimbursement requests along with invoices and receipts supporting the expenses. State staff audited each submission before providing reimbursement. This process required several cycles of communication with each county to obtain the correct documentation. During the process, the state determined that the revised appropriation amount was insufficient and needed to seek additional funds to fully reimburse counties.

There are a few reasons for this, first budgeting for a presidential primary under a new model is inherently difficult with voter turnout impossible to predict. And the estimate was built around unaudited, self-reported costs, which resulted in a fair amount of both under and overestimating. During this process, the state determined that the previous method of collecting cost data and reimbursement forms was impractical. The process was done through email and the form was a simple form built in excel. Each form had to be manually data entered into a consolidated spreadsheet, creating opportunity for data entry error. And when counties submitted their documentation, the files were large and difficult to send over email.

The state began evaluating other options for managing the requests and documentation. And ahead of the 2024 presidential primary the state implemented a reimbursement form with document collection folders for each county in the county reporting tool, which was previously developed and used to collect the counties' election plans and documentation.

Following the 2024 presidential primary, the state again audited the county submissions. The processes still required several cycles of communication with each county, but the county was able to update the request form online and upload additional documents to the site, making the process more straightforward than in 2020. In anticipation of the November 2024 reimbursement, the state revised the form to include more instructions and numbered sections, leveraging conversations with the counties about how to better organize documentation. The form collects information on both reimbursable and non-reimbursable costs.

⁴ Initial cost estimates to implement Proposition 108 were provided by the counties ahead of the 2016 general election.

Reimbursable costs are broken down into eight categories – election staff compensation, election judge and canvass board costs, printing, VSPC location costs, security, election notice printing and publication, and mailing costs.

- Election staff compensation includes election staff overtime and temporary staff costs.
- Election judge and canvass board costs include poll worker and canvass board compensation, training materials and other poll worker costs.
- Printing costs include costs for programming and printing ballots, envelopes, voter instructions, forms and correspondence, and “I voted” stickers.
- Ballot services costs include layout, and insertion costs as well as onsite vendor support.
- VSPC location expenses include costs related to voting centers, including rental expenses, ballot and equipment delivery, remote connectivity costs, and supplies.
- Security costs include incremental video surveillance storage, seals, background checks, and on-site security.
- Election notice printing and publication costs include the expenses for the statutory notice of election.
- Mailing costs include shipping and mailing costs for ballots and voter notices, undeliverable ballot and insufficient postage costs, and inter-county ballot transfer costs.

Non-reimbursable costs include annual voting systems and other annualized costs and expenses billed only to local coordinating jurisdictions. Although the state reimbursement is based on reimbursable costs, collecting non-reimbursable costs helps build a more complete picture of election office costs. And the state collects information on costs billed to local coordinating jurisdictions to respond to an annual request from the state Joint Budget Committee as a part of the office’s budget submission.



“Although the state reimbursement is based on reimbursable costs, collecting non-reimbursable costs helps build a more complete picture of election office costs.”



As the state looks ahead to the next fiscal year the budget must include reimbursement for two statewide elections – an odd-year November and a June primary. The reimbursement costs continue to be difficult to estimate for a number of reasons.

First, voter turnout is a significant driver of costs related to poll workers as well as ballot printing and postage, and turnout is inherently unpredictable. Each election is also different in terms of costs and cost sharing. Where odd-year November elections may include multiple coordinating jurisdictions, the June primary generally does not.

Paper, printing, and supply costs also vary widely from election to election, and applying a traditional inflationary measure doesn't always adequately estimate cost increases. And changes to the election laws can have a significant effect on county costs. In advance of the 2024 general election, the state hired an additional full-time staff whose primary job duties will be reviewing and auditing county reimbursement submission. And the state continues to work closely with counties to update estimates for future elections. It is likely that the state and counties will need a full four-year cycle to fully understand the cost variances between elections and the primary drivers of those variances.

Hilary Rudy is the Colorado Deputy Elections Director and has been with the Colorado State Elections office since 2006 and works closely with county election officials to implement new processes and procedures. In addition to her work as Deputy Election Director, she chairs the Committee on Ethics in Practice and is a member of the Council of State Governments Overseas Voting Initiative.



The Federal Election Funding Landscape: Insights from the National Association of Counties (NACo)

Paige Mellerio, Legislative Director, National Association of Counties

Counties play a pivotal role in the funding and administration of local, state and federal elections, overseeing more than 100,000 polling places and managing over 630,000 poll workers. In 36 states, election administration is primarily the responsibility of county governments, meaning that counties play a key role in voter registration, the process of voting itself, and the tabulation and auditing of ballots in line with federal and state guidelines. More than 200 million Americans register and are eligible to vote in jurisdictions where counties play a significant role in election administration. Given this robust county role in election administration and management, securing dedicated federal funding to assist counties in strengthening election administration and security is a top federal policy priority for the National Association of Counties.

Due to the highly decentralized nature of elections, counties across the country face unique challenges in election administration. Although there is variability among states and counties in how elections are administered, shared challenges among counties include workforce recruitment and retention, the security of election infrastructure and general adherence to federal and state laws and regulations. These challenges are heightened by insufficient resources and funding constraints, often leaving counties mandated to administer statewide and national elections without the necessary supports.



“Challenges are heightened by insufficient resources and funding constraints, often leaving counties mandated to administer statewide and national elections without the necessary supports.”



While county governments are the primary administrators of elections in most states, the cost of administering elections is generally shared among states, counties, municipalities, and the federal government to varying degrees. The allocation of election-related expenses in the United States depends on the administrative structure within each state and local jurisdiction, but counties often pay for elections involving county-level offices or positions, while states cover election costs for state and federal races. In addition to federal and state elections, counties also often administer elections for other political subdivisions, such as cities, townships, special districts, and school districts. These political jurisdictions

are typically responsible for funding their own elections, but counties frequently bear the up-front cost and are reimbursed later, based on a rate determined by the county clerk.



“Discrepancies between funding models make it difficult to tabulate the exact cost to counties of administering elections, but local election departments are estimated to spend between \$1–2.6 billion to operate and administer elections.”



These discrepancies between funding models make it difficult to tabulate the exact cost to counties of administering elections, but local election departments are estimated to spend between \$1–2.6 billion to operate and administer elections. But since the enactment of the Help America Vote Act (HAVA; Pub. L. No. 107–252) in 2002, which authorized a \$3 billion federal investment in state and local election administration through the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC), the cost of administering elections has increased. The causes of this increase include technological advances, the national and domestic security landscape, and evolving federal and state laws and regulations. For example, a rise in misinformation and disinformation has at times resulted in threats and harassment towards election officials, prompting the need for costly enhanced safety and security measures. As such, the actual costs borne by local governments across the nation to administer elections could be higher than estimated and continue to grow.

Since HAVA, Congress enacted the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment (MOVE) Act of 2009 (enacted as part of Pub. L. No. 111–84), which provided the EAC funds in federal fiscal year (FY) 2010 to make grants. The U.S. Congress did not invest in state and local election administration again until FY 2018, when \$380 million was appropriated as HAVA-authorized “election security grants” to assist state and local governments with security improvements following the attempted foreign interference in the 2016 elections.

FY 2020 marked the largest federal investment in our nation’s elections since HAVA, with a total of \$825 million. Election security grants were funded in the amount of \$425 million through the annual appropriations process, and \$400 million in additional emergency spending came from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act (Pub. L. No. 116–136) to address the immediate public health emergency.

Since 2020, the level of federal investment has drastically decreased, with only \$75 million appropriated in FYs 2022 and 2023 and \$55 million in 2024. Counties urged the U.S. Congress to fund election security grants in FY 2025 so election officials can continue to address election security needs, however in the current federal budget environment the

timing and level of future federal investments in elections is uncertain until at least March 2025.

Other federal funds from the U.S. Departments of Justice (DOJ) and Homeland Security (DHS) can be used for election security needs but competing emergency management and public safety needs in counties often are more immediate and take priority. This ultimately leaves EAC-administered HAVA grants as the primary source of federal funds election officials can turn to for assistance. Even though there have been federal HAVA funds available in recent years, county governments are not often able to access these funds directly and must rely on state election offices to subgrant these funds. In many cases, states with more centralized election structures will use HAVA funds to purchase equipment, software and trainings for counties. When these funds are sub-granted to counties, they often are limited to certain uses prescribed by Congress or state election officials or are available through reimbursements, which requires the county to be able to make the initial purchase.

NACo urges the federal government to provide consistent, predictable and dedicated federal funding to assist counties with meeting the significant, ongoing federal requirements imposed on local governments administering elections. As the cost of elections continues to rise, direct funding would allow county governments to continue the important work of securing free and fair elections, while removing significant burdens and uncertainty in the process. This federal funding should include the input and consultation of local governments to ensure that the varying and unique needs of election administration are reflected in the funding landscape, and we continue to urge the federal government to ensure a dedicated portion of any federal election funding to be available at the discretion of local governments.

Paige Mellerio is a Legislative Director at the National Association of Counties (NACo) where she works to advance county policy priorities at the federal level related to taxation and public finance, election administration and county and tribal relations. An alumnus of James Madison University, Paige has dedicated her career to supporting local governments and strengthening the intergovernmental partnership.



Funding Decentralized Democracy in the United States: A Federal, State and Local Responsibility

Ben Hovland, Commissioner, U.S. Election Assistance Commission

Donald Palmer, Commissioner, U.S. Election Assistance Commission

With the decentralized nature of election administration in the United States, each state runs and funds elections differently with varying priorities and challenges. Notably, the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) of 2002 was the first time Congress dedicated significant federal funding for elections. Election administration and its security posture have significantly evolved to meet new and emerging threats since the enactment of HAVA over 20 years ago. With federal requirements, technological advancements, voter education, and other growing needs, elections are now harder than ever to administer and more expensive. State and federal investment in our elections is crucial to help election officials not only keep pace with evolving technology but also fuel innovation.



“With federal requirements, technological advancements, voter education, and other growing needs, elections are now harder than ever to administer and more expensive.”



The motivation for this bipartisan legislation was the 2000 presidential election, when the close margin between George W. Bush and Al Gore in Florida brought previously unprecedented attention to election administration issues (e.g. “hanging chads” and the “butterfly ballot”). In addition, the post-election litigation highlighted that there was little guidance about how to count Florida’s ballots with recount rules that were vague, inconsistent, and varied from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. The issue of how to determine the “clear intent of the voter” came before the Supreme Court in the case of *Bush v. Gore*.

Congress responded with HAVA to improve the baseline of election administration across the U.S. and establish the first major federal grant programs for general improvements in election administration. Congress made an initial investment of \$1.5 billion to the states, including \$650 million to replace lever and punch card machines, to help states adopt HAVA’s sweeping reforms to improve the voting process and to raise minimum voting system standards and testing nationwide.¹

¹ Additionally, as part of HAVA, the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) was established as an independent, bipartisan federal commission to administer federal grants, establish a testing program to certify voting systems, establish minimum voluntary voting system guidelines, and serve as a clearinghouse of election administration.

More recently, HAVA election security grants have become a vital funding resource for election administrators to respond to advancing technology and the changing demands of the field.² New and increased efforts by foreign actors to influence the 2016 election led to a January 2017 designation of “elections systems” as part of U.S. critical infrastructure by the Department of Homeland Security. Subsequently, Congress provided security grants in the amount of \$380 million in 2018, \$425 million in 2020, \$75 million in 2022 and 2023,³ and \$55 million in 2024.⁴

Election administrators have worked to address the increased cyber and physical security needs that come with the further integration of election technologies and securing the voting process against outside interference. Many offices have implemented logic and accuracy testing, post-election audits, and other processes to ensure the security and accuracy of voting systems.

Beyond securing these systems, election officials must also allocate the necessary resources to administer elections including recruiting, training, and hiring workers to staff polling locations, assist voters, and print paper ballots. Many states now provide multiple methods to vote, such as voting by mail and early in-person voting, in addition to Election Day. While this provides options for voters and adds resiliency to the process, it also means more election officials across the country are essentially running multiple elections at the same time.

In addition to annual and election-specific operating costs, cyclical replacement of voting machines is necessary to keep equipment up to date and maintain the security of voting processes. The federal government, through the EAC, is required by law to periodically update the Voluntary Voting System Guidelines (VVSG) and set new security, functionality, accuracy, and accessibility standards in the development of voting machines. With the VVSG, Congress essentially set a minimum floor of standards and rigorous testing process with nationally certified laboratories. As technology advances, the VVSG will continue to evolve, making investment in new systems a continuing requirement.

The adoption of VVSG 2.0 in 2021 has the potential to bring the nation to an even higher standard of excellence in election security, but the potential may not be fully realized without dedicated federal funding. In 2002, Congress appropriated significant funding to ensure HAVA would improve the security, accuracy, and accessibility of voting systems. Over the years, HAVA grants have funded partnerships between local, state, and federal stakeholders and remains the best vehicle for assisting states in their effort to ensure secure and accurate elections. For example, Louisiana is preparing to use HAVA funds to purchase a new statewide VVSG 2.0 voting system, showing how valuable the funds

2 U.S. Election Assistance Commission, “Measuring the Impact of Recent Grants to Election Administrators Under HAVA,” January 30, 2025, <https://www.eac.gov/research-and-data/report-measuring-impact-recent-grants-election-administrators-under-hava>.

3 Karen L. Shanton, “The Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA): Overview and Ongoing Role in Election Administration Policy,” Congressional Research Service (2023), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46949>.

4 U.S. Election Assistance Commission, “Election Security Grant,” August 26, 2024, <https://www.eac.gov/grants/election-security-funds>.

are to modernizing voting and election systems.⁵ Congressional funding will be critical to encourage a timelier and more uniform adoption of equipment built to the latest set of standards.

While the American election system will always retain its unique decentralized nature, the federal government has a role to uniformly develop voting standards, encourage security enhancements, and ensure compliance with voting laws across the country. Many stakeholders point to states matching federal appropriations as key to state-federal partnerships in election funding, but the fiscal position of each state and territory may differ in their ability to contribute to elections. HAVA grants serve as one way to provide each state with a certain amount of funding to maintain programs and compliance with federal laws, refresh technology as needed, and invest in multi-year cybersecurity and other infrastructure efforts.

When determining the necessary federal funds, assisting with the implementation and compliance of federal requirements should be considered. To properly implement mandates such as those under the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), National Voter Registration Act (NVRA), Voting Rights Act (VRA), and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), states will often use HAVA grants to hire personnel and improve voting systems, election processes, and facilities to meet these minimum requirements.⁶



“The bulk of election administration funding has always fallen on local election officials who know how their specific office runs elections and the dynamics of their communities. However, they cannot – and should not – have to meet the numerous security, legal, and operating requirements without support from the federal and state governments.”



An important goal of HAVA was to improve the accessibility of voting systems and voting locations. Using HAVA grants and other accessibility funding, election officials have acquired accessible voting systems, funded programs to assist voters with disabilities in all aspects of registration, voter information, and voting, and improved the accessibility of polling places.⁷ Without continued federal investment, jurisdictions would be required to

⁵ Andrew Greenstein, “New Voting Machines on the Way,” Louisiana Radio Network, December 27, 2024, <https://louisianaradionetwork.com/2024/12/27/new-voting-machines-on-the-way/>.

⁶ In 2024, the Wisconsin Elections Commission used HAVA funds to build and deploy about 250 major improvements to their statewide voter registration system, a key feature of registration requirements outlined by Congress. These updates included improvements to ensure the system’s functionality, cybersecurity, and accuracy of voter data when interacting with hundreds of localities in Wisconsin. For more examples of how state and local election offices have used HAVA funding, please see the annual EAC grant expenditure reports on [eac.gov](https://www.eac.gov). U.S. Election Assistance Commission, “Annual Grants Expenditure Report,” June 28, 2024, <https://www.eac.gov/grants/annual-grants-expenditure-report>.

⁷ A recent example is the Minnesota Secretary of State’s allocation of HAVA funds to enhance the accessibility and serviceability of polling locations throughout the state. These improvements include installing automatic doors, upgrading ramps, creating designated parking spaces for individuals with disabilities, acquiring accessible voting booths, replacing doorknobs for easier access, and developing accessible parking and drop-off zones.

expend additional state and local dollars to simply maintain the status quo and comply with federal laws. This may result in less capacity to fund innovations in election processes that can improve voting not only for voters with disabilities but the entire community.

Another aspect that has become expected as part of an election administrator's role is outreach and education. Voter education has become critical with unprecedented levels of foreign disinformation about the integrity of our election process. Further, the increased sophistication and use of artificial intelligence tools and technologies will make it even easier to potentially spread false information that appears legitimate across media platforms.

While many election officials focused on developing messaging and strategies for their voter communication efforts leading up to the 2024 election cycle, the need for accessible, accurate, and trusted information about election logistics, security, and administration will only grow in future elections. HAVA grants for targeted, proactive communications with voters would assist election officials in amplifying and establishing themselves as trusted sources among voters, making outreach and education efforts more effective.

The bulk of election administration funding has always fallen on local election officials who know how their specific office runs elections and the dynamics of their communities. However, they cannot – and should not – have to meet the numerous security, legal, and operating requirements without support from the federal and state governments. Dedicated, significant, and long-term funding will be necessary to allow states and election officials to maintain pace with the technological revolution and restore public confidence in the election administration process.

Ben Hovland was confirmed by unanimous consent of the United States Senate on January 2, 2019 as a member of the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) and served as Chairman in 2020 and 2024. His leadership during an unprecedented time for election administration has helped transform the EAC to better support election officials and voters across the United States.

Commissioner Donald Palmer serves on the United States Election Assistance Commission (EAC) after being nominated and approved by unanimous consent in 2019. Before the EAC, he served as Virginia's Chief Election Official and as Florida's Director of Elections. Prior to his work in election administration, he served as a trial attorney with the Voting Section in the U.S. Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division and as a U.S. Navy intelligence officer and judge advocate general.



Consistent Practices Through Consistent Funding — A Salve for American Elections

Benjamin L. Ginsberg, Volker Distinguished Visiting Fellow, Stanford's Hoover Institution

If you've ever participated in a recount or election contest, you've seen first-hand evidence that our election system can always be improved and modernized, and that a consistent stream of resources is needed to achieve that.

Recounts, contests, litigation and post-election audits are where we kick open the hood of American elections and look at the internal workings. They overwhelmingly confirm that our elections produce reliable results. But they also reinforce that our elections are not perfect and would benefit from having the resources to improve on a regular basis.

Part of the reason our election system is not perfect and needs constant upgrades is a policy choice the country made over 200 years ago – we decided our elections should be run at a very local level. In fact, our elections are so local there is no universal agreement on the number of actual voting jurisdictions in the United States. All agree the number is above 8,000. But it's not clear precisely how many and estimates have ranged to over 10,000.



***“We have fallen into the troublesome pattern
of only increasing funding for elections after a crisis.
That is a notoriously bad pattern”***



Implicit in having so many jurisdictions is the recognition that one size does not fit all, and it is part and parcel of the fierce federalism the United States practiced at its inception as a country. But that institutional design started when we had 13 colonies and roughly 28,000 votes were cast. We have grown, and the realities of what it takes to put on elections in 50 different states, five territories, the District of Columbia with over 150 million votes cast have, to put it gently, evolved.

Having so many jurisdictions today guarantees, as a matter of human nature, that there will be inconsistencies between them in the quality of the voting experience. The root of those differences lies in the reality that most election administration and funding decisions are made by various state, county and local officials. As a result, the quality of the systems and machines used to determine election outcomes are bound to vary, and those differences naturally give rise to questions of fairness and equal protection.

Those differences can be seen in the variances of voting equipment, accuracy and accessibility by election officials to voter rolls, the systems used to verify absentee ballots, the swiftness in tabulating votes, the situation where voters at one polling location have to wait in line far longer than others in nearby neighborhoods, and much more.

We have fallen into the troublesome pattern of only increasing funding for elections after a crisis. That is a notoriously bad pattern, but understandable in the sense that state and local elected officials must allocate resources to fund schools and playgrounds, pave roads and feed the hungry. Elections, which take place as infrequently as they do, seem a less immediate priority than many other items.

Because an election crisis can fuel distrust in government and its leaders, timely funding of elections is a bargain at any price. To recognize the fundamental election goal that all votes should be created equal and all eligible voters should have an equal opportunity to cast their votes and have them counted accurately requires sufficient regular funding, and perhaps a fresh look at the American electoral system.

That fresh look surely includes consistent funding. But it is also time to study whether it makes sense to have so many jurisdictions all performing the same tasks but with disparate resources. Uniformity of equipment and administration at the county level within states would go a long way to solving this issue while recognizing that one size does not fit all with election jurisdictions.

Benjamin L. Ginsberg, the Volker Distinguished Visiting Fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution, practiced election law for 40 years. He co-chaired the Presidential Commission on Election Administration and currently co-chairs the Pillars of the Community and the Election Officials Legal Defense Network, which aid the institution of American elections and election officials.



EXPERT PERSPECTIVE

Infrastructure Week, Electoral Edition

Justin Levitt, Professor of Law, Loyola Law School

It's time to talk about fiscal responsibility for maintaining our elections infrastructure.

Twenty years ago, Republicans led the way. President Bush signed into law an appropriations omnibus delivered by a Republican Congress — and in so doing, invested more than \$1.5 billion in the country's elections infrastructure.¹ That would be about \$2.6 billion in today's dollars. The same President signed the same Congress' appropriation of another \$1.5 billion the following year, in further implementation of the Help America Vote Act.

And then the national will to pay for the elections we desire and deserve vanished right along with my hairline.



“We’ve been relying on election officials to make stone soup for so long — and we’ve been luckier than we deserve in what they’ve managed to conjure, relying on charity and ingenuity — that we’ve forgotten that we’ve been running on fumes.”



That extraordinary effort of 2003 and 2004 marks the last federal foray into reliable, sustained funding of the election process. There has been some funding in the meantime, in episodic and crisis-driven fits and starts — most notably in 2018 and 2020, both before and after the onset of COVID.² And it's great news that, in 2023 and 2024, DHS required 3% of security grants to focus on elections.^{3,4,5} But while welcome, and important, this funding hasn't remotely measured up to the real need.^{6,7}

Local budgets are tightening even as election procedures have become more complex and the threat environment has expanded. At least as of November 2024, the principal

¹ Miscellaneous Appropriations Act, 2003, Pub. L. No. 108-7, Div. N, 117 Stat. 537-38.

² Karen L. Shanton, Election Administration: Federal Grant Funding for States and Localities (Congressional Research Service No. R46646, 2023), 4-7.

³ Jessica Huseman, "It's a start! A federal agency is setting aside millions in election security grants," Votebeat, March 6, 2023. <https://www.votebeat.org/2023/3/6/23624031/elections-security-integrity-federal-funding/>

⁴ "The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) Fiscal Year 2023 Homeland Security Grant Program," U.S. Department of Homeland Security, February 27, 2023, <https://www.fema.gov/grants/preparedness/homeland-security/fy-23-nofo>,

⁵ "The U. S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) Fiscal Year 2024 Homeland Security Grant Program," U.S. Department of Homeland Security, April 16, 2024, <https://www.fema.gov/grants/preparedness/homeland-security/fy-24-nofo>.

⁶ "Funding Election Security," Brennan Center for Justice, accessed January 11, 2025, <https://www.brennancenter.org/issues/defend-our-elections/election-security/funding-election-security>;

⁷ Election Infrastructure Initiative, "New Report Finds That More Than \$50 Billion is Needed to Modernize and Run State and Local Elections Infrastructure," news release, December 14, 2021, <https://modernizeourelections.org/updates/new-report-finds-that-more-than-50-billion-is-needed-to-modernize-and-run-state-and-local-elections-infrastructure>.

voting systems in 12 states are so old that the systems have been discontinued by the manufacturer; more than 44 million voters live in jurisdictions where the primary systems are more than ten years old.⁸ New threats — cyber and physical, to personnel and ballots — require upgraded defenses.^{9,10,11,12} Mailings — not just ballots, but notices and address verifications critical to maintaining accurate voter rolls for election day — need to be translated and printed and shipped. Officials need communications support to help the public understand the rules and to fight inaccurate information — and the need increases whenever there's a change. It's possible to have well-run election offices where access and security, for both physical places and systemic processes, fit hand-in-hand — but not at scale for free.

And please don't discount the human resources: in this environment, it's a struggle to recruit and retain both full-time talent and part-time help.^{13,14} That's true both for larger offices and offices where you only need the fingers on one hand to count the elections staff¹⁵ ... who may also be responsible for functions like registering businesses, recording deeds and marriages, assessing taxes, and handling adoption and probate.

We've been relying on election officials to make stone soup for so long — and we've been luckier than we deserve in what they've managed to conjure, relying on charity and ingenuity — that we've forgotten that we've been running on fumes. It's only a matter of time until we get what we pay for, in the least pleasant sense of the phrase.

And we haven't even discussed counting the results. Fast, accurate, cheap: pick any two.¹⁶ Nobody's calling for the process to be slower or sloppier.

In addressing the challenges above, partial and unpredictable one-time crisis outlays aren't the answer in elections any more than they are in public health.¹⁷ Most of the costs are recurring. Even capital improvements carry related continuing obligations for maintenance and supplies. Congress has grudgingly offered only an occasional portion of a downpayment to would-be homeowners with no means to meet the mortgage, and no prospect of more support on the horizon.

8 "Costs for Replacing Voting Equipment in 2024," Brennan Center for Justice, February 7, 2024, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/costs-replacing-voting-equipment-2024>.

9 Catalin Cimpanu, "Florida county election office hit by ransomware before 2016 presidential election," ZDNet, February 12, 2020, <https://www.zdnet.com/article/florida-county-election-office-hit-by-ransomware-before-2016-presidential-election/>;

10 Christina A. Cassidy & Ali Swenson, "Bomb threats in swing states disrupt a mostly smooth Election Day," AP, November 5, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/election-2024-voting-turnout-election-day-a8ae22f34417dcda060b430dac89bdbc>;

11 Lisa Hagen, "Ballots set on fire in three states as Election Day approaches," NPR, October 28, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/10/28/nx-s1-5168404/oregon-washington-arizona-ballots-drop-boxes-fires>.

12 Courtney Shaw, "Third-floor window of Cuyahoga County Board of Elections damaged by gunfire," ABC News 5 Cleveland, June 13, 2024, <https://www.news5cleveland.com/news/local-news/oh-cuyahoga/third-floor-window-of-cuyahoga-county-board-of-elections-damaged-by-gunfire>;

13 "Local Election Officials Survey — May 2024," Brennan Center for Justice, May 1, 2024, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/local-election-officials-survey-may-2024>;

14 Ines Kagubare, "US faces election worker shortage ahead of midterms due to rise in threats," The Hill, October 2, 2022, <https://thehill.com/policy/cybersecurity/3669329-us-faces-election-worker-shortage-ahead-of-midterms-due-to-rise-in-threats/>.

15 Natalia Contreras, "What brought down one Texas county's entire elections department? It was something in the water," Votebeat Texas, August 29, 2022, <https://www.votebeat.org/texas/2022/8/29/23325012/gillespie-county-election-staff-resigns-anissa-hererra-harassment/>.

16 Jessica Huseman, "Elections can be fast, cheap, and accurate ... but not all at the same time," Votebeat, August 15, 2022, <https://www.votebeat.org/2022/8/15/23302394/election-night-results-delays-hand-counted-ballots/>.

17 Sharon LaFraniere, "Why Mississippi, a Covid Hot Spot, Left Millions in Pandemic Aid Unspent," New York Times, February 13, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/13/us/politics/covid-public-health-departments.html>.

Charity is also not the answer. Even with bipartisan bona fides, it was never a desirable Plan A.^{18,19} And even as a second-best option, private support for basic election administration functions is no longer an option in many jurisdictions.²⁰ I would welcome that development, if it meant that public dollars stepped into the breach to cover the gap for this quintessentially public function. But vanishingly few of the states recently banning or limiting philanthropic funding of elections did so while making appropriations of their own. They've cut back the backstop without stepping up to fill in the breach.

Builders know that infrastructure needs investment: sustained and reliable funding to facilitate meaningful planning for more than just the cycle ahead. Elections infrastructure is no different in that respect from the infrastructure we've heard so much about.²¹



“Partial and unpredictable one-time crisis outlays aren’t the answer in elections.”



President Biden put his mark on many aspects of American infrastructure, but election administration was left out in the cold. President Trump will now have the opportunity to have an Infrastructure Week of his own, for the most important infrastructure project we've got: the only infrastructure project with a specific callout in the Constitution.²²

For several years, the White House put forward a budget proposing a real investment in elections infrastructure, which means that the accountants also figured out the way to pay for it. The most ambitious version allocated \$10 billion in formula grants, mostly for local elections offices, disbursed predictably over ten years to give officials real ability to plan for the future.²³ It also allocated \$5 billion for the Postal Service to use on election-related mailings (*including mailings to keep voter rolls clean and inform election-day voters*), which would further ease local budgets.²⁴ I hope that Congress rediscovers the wisdom of that approach. It'd make a great opportunity to celebrate another twenty-year anniversary that benefits everyone in the field.

18 USC Schwarzenegger Institute, “Schwarzenegger Institute Announces Democracy Grants for Voting Access & Election Administration,” news release, September 25, 2020, https://schwarzenegger.usc.edu/institute_in_action/schwarzenegger-institute-announces-democracy-grants-for-voting-access-election-administration/;

19 Michael Scherer, “Mark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan donate \$100 million more to election administrators, despite conservative pushback,” Washington Post, October 13, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/zuckerberg-chan-elections-facebook/2020/10/12/0e07de94-0c8a-11eb-8074-0e943a91bf08_story.html.

20 Karen L. Shanton, Private Funding for Election Administration (Congressional Research Service, September 26, 2023); “Prohibiting Private Funding of Elections,” National Conference of State Legislatures, updated April 9, 2024, <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/prohibiting-private-funding-of-elections>.

21 White House, “FACT SHEET: One Year into Implementation of Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, Biden-Harris Administration Celebrates Major Progress in Building a Better America,” November 15, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/11/15/fact-sheet-one-year-into-implementation-of-bipartisan-infrastructure-law-biden-%E2%81%A0harris-administration-celebrates-major-progress-in-building-a-better-america/>.

22 U.S. Const. art. I, § 4, cl. 1; *id.* art. II, § 1, cl. 2.

23 Office of Management and Budget, *Budget of the U.S. Government, Fiscal Year 2023*, app. 1246-1247, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/BUDGET-2023-APP/pdf/BUDGET-2023-APP.pdf>.

24 OMB, *Budget 2023*, app. 1308-09.

You want voting systems that are secure and reliable? That costs money. You want officials who know what they're doing? That costs money. You want a communications structure able to withstand information dysfunction? That costs money. You want an electoral process that's accessible to eligible voters, and only to eligible voters? That costs money. You want results that are fast and accurate? That costs money.

Funding local election infrastructure is a profoundly bipartisan issue. Every member of Congress got their current job through the elections process, which elects Republicans in Republican areas and Democrats in Democratic areas. The bridge every member takes to get to work is the same bridge past Congresses have stubbornly refused to maintain. Can we please shore it up before it breaks this time?

[Includes excerpts from Election Law Blog posts originally published March 13, 2023, and March 12, 2024]^{25, 26}

Professor Justin Levitt, at LMU Loyola Law School, is a nationally recognized scholar of constitutional law and the law of democracy, the inaugural Senior Policy Advisor for Democracy and Voting Rights in the White House, and a former Deputy Assistant Attorney General in the DOJ's Civil Rights Division. He has testified before federal and state legislative entities, administrative bodies, and courts, and has advised, represented, and litigated against officials of both major political parties, independents, and those whose partisan preference he does not know.

²⁵ Justin Levitt, "Show Me the Money," *Election Law Blog*, March 13, 2023, <https://electionlawblog.org/?p=135098>;

²⁶ Justin Levitt, "Funding Elections," *Election Law Blog*, March 12, 2024, <https://electionlawblog.org/?p=141935>.



EXPERT PERSPECTIVE

Elections Under Pressure: Why Federal Funding Is Key to Resilience

Rachel Orey, Director, Elections Project, Bipartisan Policy Center

Matthew Weil, Vice President, Democracy and Bipartisanship, Bipartisan Policy Center

U.S. elections are a highly local operation, administered by local and state officials who work long hours to ensure that elections are free, fair, and secure. But resource constraints underpin nearly every logistical, administrative, or perception challenge that they face.

Federal grants have eased financial strains and provided opportunities for jurisdictions that would not have been able to afford vital equipment or process investments otherwise. These grants support the aspects of elections that are widely acknowledged as essential, including secure and accessible voter registration, accurate ballot tabulation, auditable results, and safe and secure election facilities.

Despite the tangible benefits that federal funds have provided to election administration, election security is a moving target. As technology changes over time, election offices must be able to replace outdated systems and respond to new vulnerabilities on an ongoing, iterative basis. Moreover, there are potential national security consequences if modern, secure voting and election systems are not funded.

Election offices were well prepared for the 2024 presidential election, thanks in large part to the federal funding allocated to date. However, ongoing federal support is critical to their ability to address emerging challenges and maintain secure and resilient election systems for years to come.



“U.S. elections are a highly local operation, administered by local and state officials who work long hours to ensure that elections are free, fair, and secure. But resource constraints underpin nearly every logistical, administrative, or perception challenge that they face.”



To address federal funding gaps, Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC) recommends that:

- Congress should create a regular and predictable stream of federal funding for elections that supports state and local election administration. The executive branch should prioritize consistent elections funding in its annual budget request.
- Congress should reconstitute the Presidential Election Campaign Fund for election administration.

History of Federal Election Funding and the Need for Sustained Investment

Since 2000, the process of administering elections has undergone rapid transformation, driven by technological modernization and heightened public interest. These changes have put additional strain on the local offices and officials tasked with ensuring the smooth and secure conduct of elections.

According to surveys conducted by the Elections and Voting Information Center, election officials report that many election tasks—such as responding to public records requests or preparing for voting—take longer to complete than they did in the past, coinciding with rising levels of personal stress and burnout.¹

Election officials are often required to make hard trade-offs due to resource constraints, such as consolidating polling places, limiting training, using outdated technology, or hiring fewer staff. When asked what they would do with a stable, long-term funding stream, officials ranked buildings and space as their top priority, followed by training, staffing, and equipment.²

Underfunding also exacerbates the inconsistent service voters get across the nation—while some states can allocate significant resources for voter education, voter outreach, and up-to-date technology, others have only enough resources to cover essential functions.³

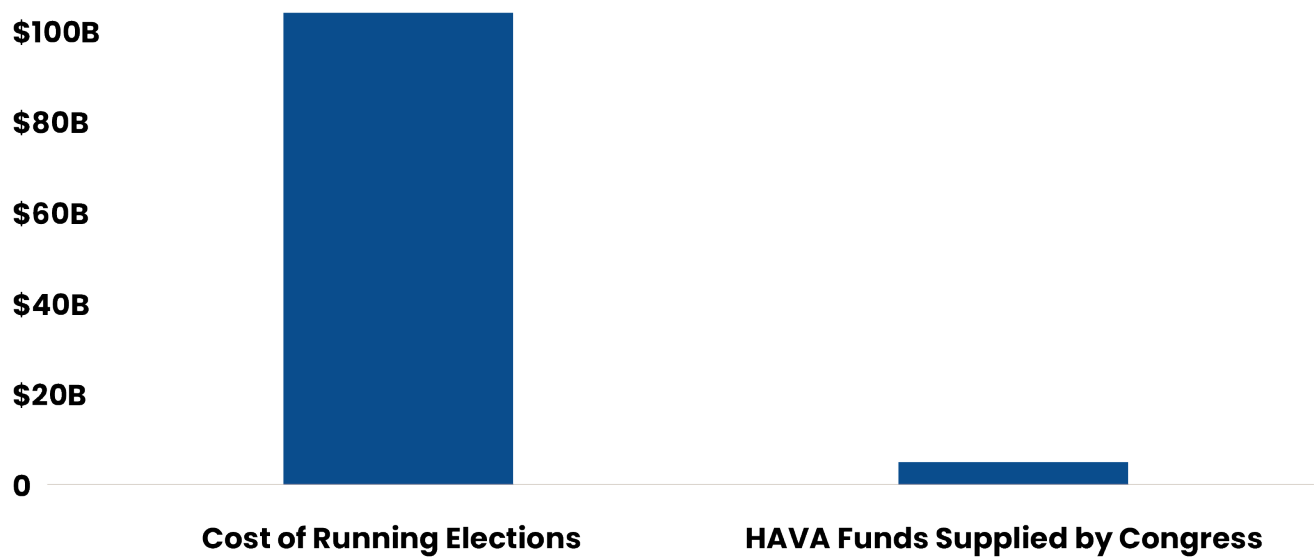
Federal funding has the potential to serve as an equalizing force, particularly for election security. The first round of funds authorized by the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA), for instance, transformed voting equipment after the 2000 election revealed accuracy issues with punch card voting systems.

¹ Paul Gronke, “The EVIC/Reed College 2023 LEO Survey Report,” Elections & Voting Information Center, last modified November 16, 2023, accessed January 21, 2025, https://evic.reed.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/EVIC_2023_LEO_Survey_Report.pdf.

² “Elections Summits,” Bipartisan Policy Center, last modified December 4, 2024, accessed January 21, 2025, <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/elections-summits/#:~:text=Election%202024%3A%20The%20Experiences%20of%20Election%20Officials>.

³ Charles Stewart, III, “The Cost of Conducting Elections,” Commonsense American: National Institute for Civil Discourse, accessed January 21, 2025, <https://electionlab.mit.edu/sites/default/files/2022-05/TheCostofConductingElections-2022.pdf>.

Figure 1: Cost of U.S. Elections since the Help America Vote Act, 2002–2024



While early HAVA funds enabled states to make large investments in new voting equipment, subsequent funding has not been sufficient to build on that progress, leaving many jurisdictions without adequate funds to cover replacement costs.

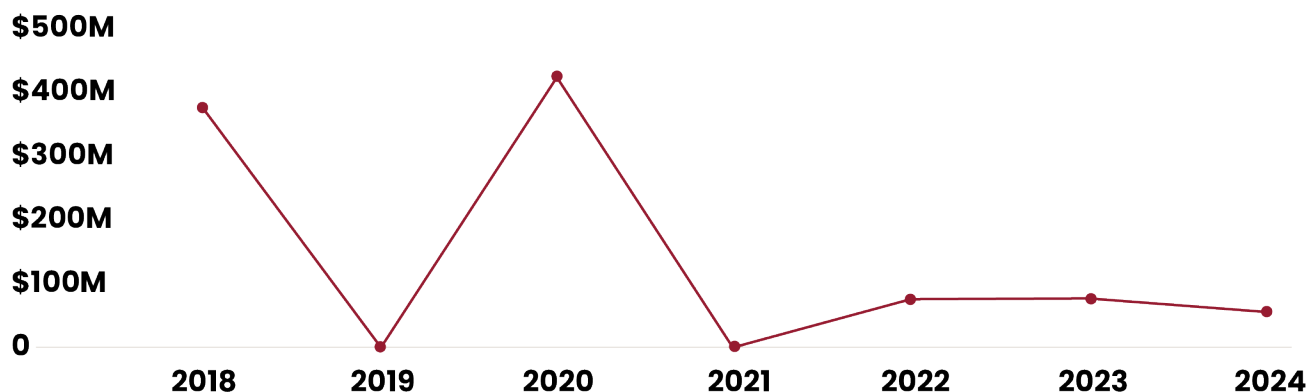
A 2018 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office observed that “much of the voting equipment that was procured by state and local election administrators with federal funds more than 10 years ago is now at or approaching the end of its designed service life.”⁴ Even when voting systems are not at the end of their designed service life, it may be worthwhile for election officials to upgrade equipment to meet new security, accessibility, and usability standards.

Federal funding to support election administration has been critical in providing election offices with resources to adapt to modern challenges, but it remains irregular, unpredictable, and insufficient. Congress has allocated \$5.005 billion in election administration funding since 2002, covering just 4.5% of the estimated total cost of running elections in this period.⁵ Making matters worse, Congress has allocated federal funding at unpredictable intervals, leaving local election offices without sufficient year-over-year foresight to plan for large expenses or offset ongoing costs.

4 Rebecca S. Gambler, “Elections: Observations on Voting Equipment Use and Replacement,” U.S. Government Accountability Office 18, no. 294 (2018), accessed January 21, 2025, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-18-294>.

5 Analysis of election funding research conducted by the MIT Election Data Science Lab suggests that the total cost of conducting elections in the United States is between \$4 billion and \$6 billion per year, or \$110 billion from 2002–2024 (\$5 billion per year for 22 years). <https://electionlab.mit.edu/sites/default/files/2022-05/TheCostofConductingElections-2022.pdf>

Figure 2: Election Security Funds Authorized by Congress



This inconsistency is a key reason initial spending rates of federal grants are often low: Election officials cannot depend on regular funding, so they must save the funds they do receive to plan for large investments. In Maine, for example, it took four years to negotiate and approve a \$1.8 million contract to establish a new voter registration system.⁶ Although the funds—authorized by the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2018⁷—were distributed to the state in 2018, the contract was not signed until 2022.

In addition to the numerous hurdles associated with approving the purchase of a system at the state level, many systems require ongoing maintenance costs, meaning long spend-down periods. In Illinois, for example, \$9 million in election security funds were used to implement a cyber navigator program as of September 2021.⁸ Another \$2 million was dedicated to covering personnel costs through December 2024.⁹

Potential Solutions to Enhance Federal Election Funding

Congress should create a regular and predictable stream of federal funding for elections that supports state and local election administration. The executive branch should prioritize consistent elections funding in its annual budget request.

There is a philosophical and partisan divide about the appropriate role of the federal government in supporting election administration, which is traditionally viewed as states' responsibility. However, an increasingly contentious political environment means that vulnerabilities in one local jurisdiction could undermine confidence in election outcomes across the nation. Furthermore, modern security challenges, including physical and

6 "Secretary of State signs contract for new Central Voter Registration system," news release, April 19, 2022, accessed January 21, 2025, <https://www.maine.gov/sos/news/2022/SecretaryofStatesignscontract.html>.

7 Consolidated Appropriations Act, Public Law 115-141 (2018), <https://www.congress.gov/115/plaws/publ141/PLAW-115publ141.pdf>

8 Election Assistance Commission, Federal Financial Report, report no. IL20101001, September 2021, accessed January 21, 2025, <https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/paymentgrants/Election%20Security/FY21%20Annual%20FFR/IL%202021%20ES%20Annual%20Financial%20and%20Progress%20Report.pdf>.

9 State Board of Elections State of Illinois, 2020 HAVA Election Security Grant: Program Narrative and Budget Submission, 2020, accessed January 21, 2025, https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/paymentgrants/narrative2020/IL_20ES_Program_Narrative.pdf.

cybersecurity threats from foreign adversaries, require planning and coordination that are beyond the scope of any single jurisdiction.

Although election systems were designated as critical infrastructure in 2017 by the Department of Homeland Security, federal investment is irregular, unpredictable, and insufficient.¹⁰ When it comes to federal support, election administrators prioritize consistent and predictable funding over any specific amount.

Elections may be primarily a state responsibility, but the evolving nature of election administration warrants a reevaluation of how the infrastructure is funded. We recommend that Congress consider a more cooperative cost-sharing arrangement that recognizes outsized threats to elections and the federal government's reliance on local election administration.

When creating a regular funding stream, Congress should ensure that:

- States have flexibility in what qualifies as a match, if a state funding match is required.
- States are incentivized to distribute a portion of funds to the local level, or to use funds in a way that has demonstrable benefits to local officials (*such as purchasing new voting systems so that the local jurisdiction does not have to*).
- States are required to report to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) on how they spend the funds, with reporting structured to minimize burdens on officials during election cycles.

Congress should reconstitute the Presidential Election Campaign Fund for election administration.

With so many competing priorities in the annual budgeting process, creating a reliable federal funding source for elections may benefit from a separate, dedicated approach. Reconstituting the Presidential Election Campaign Fund (PECF) for election administration provides one way to do that.

The PECF was created in 1974 to fund party nominees' primary and general election campaigns, with the goal of reducing the influence of money in politics and bolstering trust in the political system. Today, taxpayers are given the option to allocate \$3 of their taxes to the PECF (*or \$6 if they file jointly*), an increase from 1993 when taxpayers were given the option to donate \$1 to the fund (*or \$2 for taxpayers filing jointly*).¹¹ The fund collected nearly

10 Brian E. Humphreys, "The Designation of Election Systems as Critical Infrastructure," Congressional Research Service, last modified September 18, 2019, accessed January 21, 2025, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/IFI0677.pdf>.

11 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1993, H.R. H.R.2264, 103d Cong., 1st Sess. (Aug. 10, 1993). Accessed January 21, 2025. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/103rd-congress/house-bill/2264>.

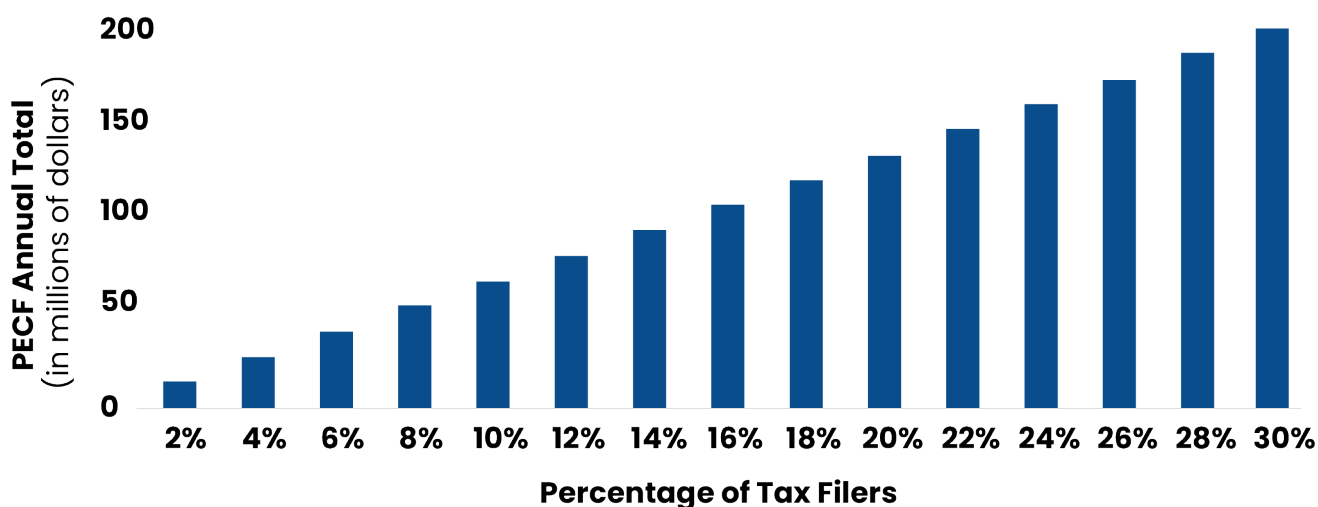
\$24 million in its first year, equivalent to approximately \$118 million in 2022 dollars.¹²

Yet candidates have opted for other fundraising strategies in recent decades, and no major party presidential candidate has utilized the PECF since 2008.¹³ The share of tax filers who check the box has also declined from 28% in 1976 to just over 3% in 2021.

Despite the decline, the fund hit a recent high of over \$445 million in June 2023. Plus, there is already precedent for redirecting the PECF for election administration.¹⁴ In its FY2024 and FY2025 funding bills, Congress drew from the PECF to provide a total of \$70 million in election security grants to state and local election administration. Congress also withdrew \$348 million for non-election administration purposes, leaving a balance of just under \$17 million as of May 31, 2025.

Reconstituting the PECF for election administration would maintain its original goal of bolstering trust in the electoral system while giving Americans a direct stake in the funding of their elections infrastructure. Furthermore, dedicating the PECF to election administration could inspire more participation than the 3.34% of tax filers who contributed to it in 2021. If 28% of tax filers checked the PECF box today, it would generate approximately \$194 million per year for the PECF. If distributed biennially, this number would approach \$400 million in the year after a federal election. Increasing the contribution options to \$5/\$10 would get closer to \$400 million per year.

Figure 3: Projected PECF Contribution
Based on 2017–2021 Average Contributions per Tax Filer



¹² "Presidential Election Campaign Fund Tax Check-Off Chart," table, Federal Election Commission, January 16, 2025, accessed January 21, 2025, https://www.fec.gov/resources/cms-content/documents/Pres_Public_Funding.pdf; "\$23,805,659 in 1976 is worth \$132,041,915.79 today," Officialdata.org, accessed January 21, 2025, <https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/1976?amount=23805659>.

¹³ "Public Funding of Presidential Elections," Federal Election Commission, accessed January 21, 2025, <https://www.fec.gov/introduction-campaign-finance/understanding-ways-support-federal-candidates/presidential-elections/public-funding-presidential-elections/>.

Unpredictable, one-time infusions of federal support make it nearly impossible for state and local administrators to invest in the long-term equipment, security, and process improvements that are needed to mitigate cross-jurisdictional threats to elections. As these threats evolve and grow, so must our response. Predictable federal funding is essential to building a professionalized, resilient election system that ensures equal access, bolsters public confidence, and fortifies security.

This report draws from the following Bipartisan Policy Center publications:

- Measuring the Impact of Recent Grants to Election Administrators Under the Help America Vote Act (*January 2025*)¹⁴
- Policy to Carry Us Beyond the Next Election (*April 2023*)¹⁵
- Reimagining Federal Election Funding (*April 2022*)¹⁶

Rachel Orey is Director of the Bipartisan Policy Center Elections Project where they are responsible for the organization's election administration policy and professionalization efforts. Their research focuses on evidence-based and data-driven reforms that create secure, accessible, and trustworthy elections. Orey currently serves as an Adjunct Professor of computer programming at Georgetown Law and obtained their Master of Public Policy and Certificate of Data Science from George Washington University.

Matthew Weil is BPC's vice president of democracy and bipartisanship, where he is responsible for the Elections Project, American Congressional Exchange, and Structural Democracy Project. He leads the organization's voting-related policy development efforts at the state and federal level, the Business Alliance for Effective Democracy, and collaborations with social media platforms to provide authoritative election information to voters.

¹⁴ William Adler et. al. "Measuring the Impact of Recent Grants to Election Administrators Under the Help America Vote Act: Report to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission." Bipartisan Policy Center, January 30, 2025, accessed February 10, 2025, <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/impact-recent-grants-help-america-vote-act/>

¹⁵ Rachel Orey et al., "Policy to Carry Us Beyond the Next Election," Bipartisan Policy Center, last modified April 10, 2023, accessed January 21, 2025, <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/reimagining-federal-election-funding/>.

¹⁶ Grace Gordon, Michael Thorning, and Matthew Weil, "Reimagining Federal Election Funding," Bipartisan Policy Center, last modified April 19, 2022, accessed January 21, 2025, <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/reimagining-federal-election-funding/>.



EXPERT PERSPECTIVE

How Can We Improve the Way We Fund Elections in America?

John Fortier, Senior Fellow, American Enterprise Institute

The question of funding elections is difficult for a number of reasons. One in particular is the separate issue of determining the cost of running elections. The difficulty of determining the cost of running elections has stumped scholars and practitioners alike. Our decentralized and varied ways of running elections make even concepts and definitions difficult to standardize.

So while this is a paper about improving funding for elections, not determining the cost of elections, it turns out that by implementing processes for hashing out the true needs and related costs of running elections, the prospects and process of funding can be significantly improved.

Another way of putting the problem is this: when election officials seek funds for elections, they often have difficulty describing their true needs and true costs of running an election, and the funders thus fail to grasp what is needed and why it is important. This skepticism of funders can be found at the local, state and federal level. County boards, state legislators and Congress need more information about what needs are important, how much those needs cost, and how they will be able to track that the funds are well spent.

To understand how we can improve the process for funding, let's start first with a catalogue of the obstacles to getting clear information about the functions and costs of running elections. And second, we will look at several examples of how the interaction between a. State and local government entities for election funding and b. Processes that improve information on election needs and costs with federal funding for elections that is given to states and localities.

First, why is it so difficult to determine the key functions and then true costs of running elections? The starting point is the truism that elections are notoriously decentralized. Fifty states, the District of Columbia and American territories all run their own elections. State law is often at the heart of running an election. But in important instances, federal election law has superseded state law, although the federal government does not directly administer elections. More importantly, even though state and some federal law controls elections, elections are directly administered primarily at the local level with the many thousands of counties, towns, and municipalities running polling places, sending out ballots, and ultimately serving as the most direct point of contact for voters.

Compare the U.S. to many countries around the world where there is a uniform system for running elections and a central election commission. In the U.S., the complexity of governance complicates the funding of elections. Who pays? How are costs shared across

levels of government? The opportunities for avoiding funding the true cost of elections is a real possibility as entities may try to shift costs on others and where the costs are diffuse. And building on the decentralized institutions that run elections is the varied election practices across the country. In some places, ballots are mostly cast by mail. In others, voters register in advance of the election. The hours of closing the polls differ. Overseas voters might take advantage of different rules and institutions.



“Implementing processes for hashing out the true needs and related costs of running elections, the prospects and process of funding can be significantly improved.”



And with all of these different levels of government running elections and with varied election processes, it is not a surprise that no one really knows the true cost of elections. With all of the complexity and diversity, many scholars have struggled to get beyond a broad estimate of what it costs to run elections. And specific questions across jurisdictions are hard to answer. Does it cost more to run an all-mail election versus one with polling places? What falls under election budgets? What percentage of a county’s IT budget? What about facilities costs which vary in cost and even in definition in different parts of the country? What should we say about shared costs across levels of government or between small and large counties? And even if we had similar definitions and conceptions of elections, our vast country would struggle to compare voting in rural Alaska to voting in urban St. Louis.

With all of these complexities in running and funding elections, it would not be surprising to have one of two reactions. On the one hand, we wish for what we don’t have, a simple, unified, centralized election system with one point of contact, which could dictate uniform ways of running elections and uniform budgetary rules. Or at least we could impose common budgeting rules on our various entities. In this world, funding for elections would follow, as there is transparency in the cost and running of elections, and responsible parties could see the need to fund the true cost of elections.

The other temptation is to simply throw up one’s hands at the complexity and seek funding sources for elections based on the trust system. While we are never going to know how much elections cost, what are necessary functions and how they are spread across entities. But we will simply fund elections based on what experts say they need. Few questions asked.

In reality, there are some avenues to improve the funding of elections, but they involve building on efforts that already exist which seek to provide greater accountability to the sharing of election costs across levels of government.

The funding of elections can be improved by leaning into efforts that already exist.

1. Efforts of states to help fund their localities' needs for elections.
2. Past efforts of the federal government to fund elections:
 - HAVA grants with reporting and IG oversight.
 - Constructing grants for operating vs. grants for capital improvement voting systems.
 - Accounting for federal spending.
3. Using the process for allocating state and local funding to elections as a model to improve the quality of information about the needed functions and resources for running elections.

Each state, in its own way, has a relationship with all of the localities in that state that run elections. The details of this relationship differ from state to state. But the common thread is that many state election functions are divided or shared with localities. And the local election jurisdictions often vary widely amongst themselves in terms of population, resources, urban vs. rural, etc.

Take for example, the responsibility for voter registration. In states which are labeled "top down," generally the state takes more responsibility in registering voters, updating voter registration lists, etc. In "bottom up" states, the localities have the larger share of responsibility. But in all states, there is some sharing and overlapping of responsibilities. Similarly, in the purchase of new voting equipment, or even more generally in the provision of IT resources for elections, there is some sharing of responsibility.

All of these relationships might be seen as yet another manifestation of the complexity of elections. And this complexity in theory obscures the true needs and costs of running elections. Without additional information, county boards might deal with immediate election needs in their county without considering the election needs that come from the interaction of county and state or interactions among counties. Likewise, state legislators might ignore local needs, local lack of capacity and resources, and focus merely on funding obvious state election functions.

But the complexity and intertwined nature of running elections at the state and local level also provides an opportunity. States that take seriously a process to account for the needs of state and local entities, to take stock of resources and where they lie in state and local as well as large local and small local communities, have an opportunity to provide greater clarity of election functions and their costs, and give state and local funders a better case

to fund core election priorities.

One example of this is the state of Colorado. What began as an informal conversation between state and local election officials, has developed into a much more comprehensive program for localities to document their needs and resources and for the state and localities to account for election needs, where costs should be shared, where resources are present or lacking, and dealing with in kind funding such as the free sharing of personnel, technical expertise and facilities.

No state is the same as Colorado. But each state (and their localities) would benefit from the development of a robust process that begins with simple requests for assistance but develops into a system that shows a much more accurate picture of election functions and needs and the funding necessary to carry them out.

Recommendation: Each state should strive to develop a process for assessing election functions, their costs, and where state and local resources lie. This process will assure funders of elections at the state and local level that they have a handle on what is needed to run elections and the level of funding needed to achieve those goals.



“Each state should strive to develop a process for assessing election functions, their costs, and where state and local resources lie.”



Federal Funding of Elections:

The idea that the federal government might provide funds to states and localities for the purpose of running elections is new. Before the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) passed in 2003, there had not been any general federal funding provided to states and localities, even though states run elections for federal office.

With the contentious Bush v. Gore election of 2000 and the subsequent passage of HAVA, there was a large one time infusion of election funds to states and localities. The Act created the Election Assistance Commission (EAC), and the EAC was a conduit for the funds through its HAVA grants to state and local entities for the purpose of running elections. Most of the funding was envisioned for the purchase of new voting machines as well as for the creation or upgrading of statewide voter registration systems.

After this large infusion of funds, it was unclear if the federal government would ever provide additional election funding to states and localities again. And there was a long hiatus where there was no new federal election funding. But starting in 2016, there have been several instances where Congress saw a short-term need for federal election funding (e.g. for election security, for running elections during COVID, etc). Congress provided these funds through the same general mechanism as its original grant out of HAVA. In fact, the funds allocated to states and localities under these later arrangements were still referred to as HAVA grants.

This is another instance where a strong process for identifying needs, allocating funding to a variety of jurisdictions and conducting auditing and providing transparency in how the funds were spent improves the likelihood of continued funding of elections.

There are several reasons why the HAVA grant process is important in the case to Congress of why federal election funding is needed. First, the process and the existing EAC infrastructure allowed for Congress to provide funds on a relatively expedited basis when it saw a need. If Congress had started from scratch to create a new funding mechanism, it is unlikely that it would be able to provide funds to meet perceived emergencies such as cybersecurity and COVID election funds. Second, the HAVA grant process is similar to those of formula based funding that Congress frequently employs. Elections are not the only decentralized process that Congress has funded. This sort of process meets the needs of Congress to distribute funds widely and fairly to every state and congressional district, but also to allow Congress to express its best judgment on sharing funds for richer and poorer communities or those with particular election needs. Third, the accountability process where states and localities write reports accounting for their grant spending and where these reports are audited and overseen by the Inspector General gives Congress an after spending look at the grants and a degree of transparency and accountability that they do not always see in their grants.

It is for these reasons that some version of the HAVA grant process would be an assurance to Congress for one time spending or for regular funding that election funds are well spent.

Recommendation:

Congress should continue to employ a funding structure like the original HAVA funding where the EAC provides grants for state and local election needs, the jurisdictions report on how they have utilized their grants, and these reports are audited and scrutinized by the Inspector General.

Going forward, the case for federal funding on a regular basis would also be strengthened by two additional considerations in funding.

Recommendation:

Proposals for federal funding of elections should have separate processes for funding for specific purposes and regular needs and on the other hand large capital investments for voting systems and large voting technology upgrades such as voter registration systems. Funding for these large capital long term needs should allow for states and localities to bank funding to be expended at one time in a large sum when a major voting system is acquired by states and local election officials.

Recommendation:

In addition to the accounting for HAVA grants to states and localities, the federal government should provide a much more comprehensive account of its spending on elections. Well defined entities such as the EAC and FVAP within the Defense Department already have clear budgets and missions that are seen by law makers. But a much more comprehensive accounting of the functions and funding needs of other entities from the Post Office to the Justice Department, Homeland Security and other entities that do play a role in running federal elections would provide lawmakers a clearer picture of how much the federal government spends on elections and would allow them to assess with greater confidence the election funding of the federal government.

The funding of elections is a difficult proposition. It is often hard to sell to lawmakers and local government officials on the importance of funding our elections compared to the many other functions of government. In this paper, we have argued that developing robust processes for assessing election functions and funding needs can provide real and hardheaded information. The difficulties of navigating elections in their decentralized nature can be bolstered when state and local election officials interact to assess needs or when the federal government interacts with state and local election officials.

John C. Fortier is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, where he focuses on Congress and elections, election administration, election demographics, voting (and absentee voting), the US presidency, and the Electoral College. He is also continuing his work on the continuity of government.

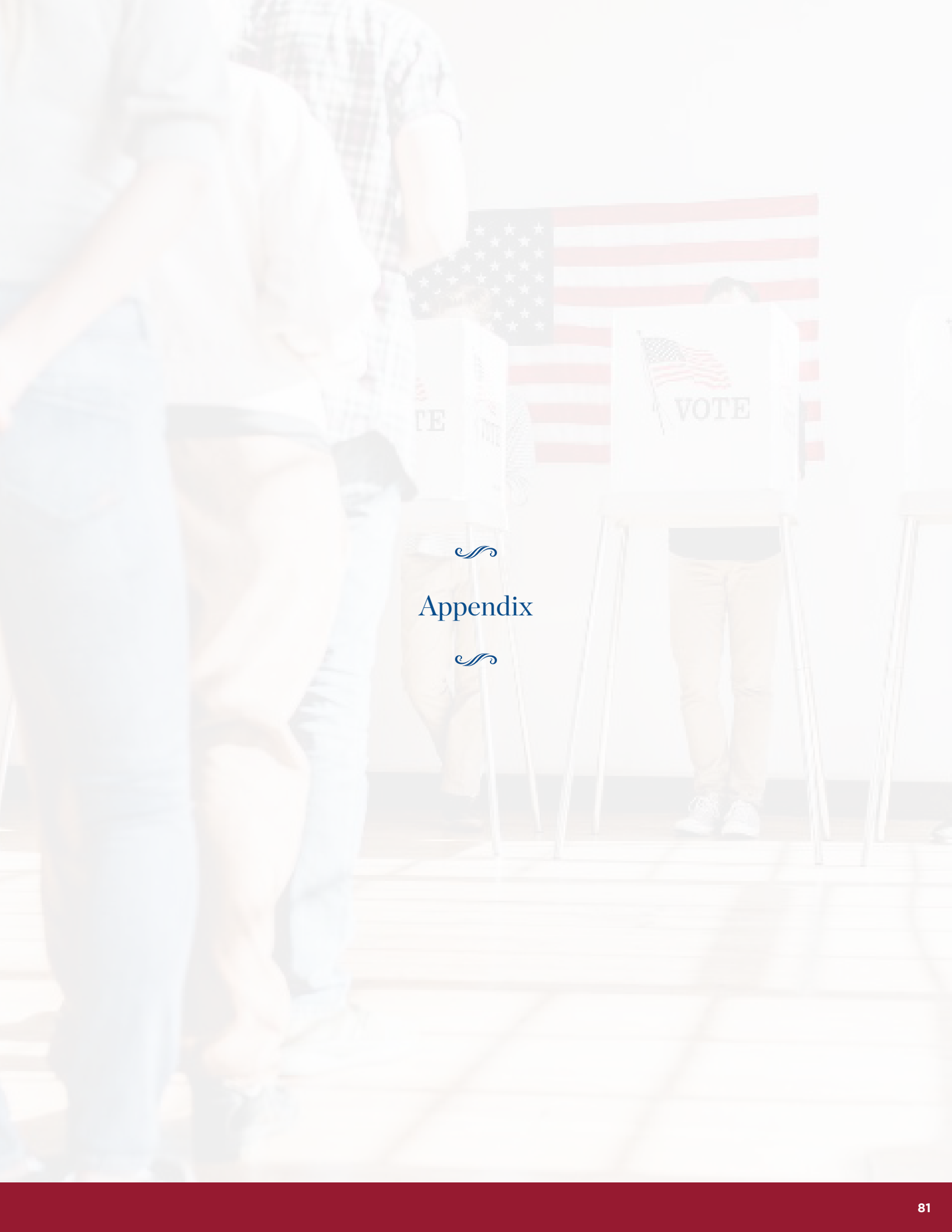
Conclusion

Tammy Patrick, Senior Advisor, Bolstering Elections Initiative

The funding of election administration continues to evolve. Since the launch of the Bolstering Elections Initiative in February of 2024 we have seen the landscape of in-kind support through partnership and collaboration by federal agencies such as CISA curtailed. Additionally, direct federal funding and grants in other areas of government have been cut back; states and localities will need to divert their already constrained resources to augment the new deficits, and this may make it even more difficult for election officials to get the attention of appropriators.

The experts assembled here, academic researchers, election administration professionals, and policy experts present a variety of perspectives on the challenges and solutions to answering not only the question “How are our elections funded?” but also “How should our elections be funded?” The path to adequate funding may vary across the country, but we can all agree that there is work to be done.

This initiative demonstrates that this work is a bipartisan concern and requires a bipartisan solution. Carrying forth that spirit of bipartisan collaboration that the legacy of the namesakes attached to it represented throughout their careers, we hope to encourage others to embrace this work—across the aisle, across the states, and across all levels of government for the betterment of American elections.



Appendix





December 8, 2022

The Honorable Chris Van Hollen
Chairman
Senate Subcommittee on
Appropriations
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mike Quigley
Chairman
House Subcommittee on
Appropriations
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Cindy Hyde-Smith
Ranking Member
Senate Subcommittee on
Appropriations
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Steve Womack
Ranking Member
House Subcommittee on
Appropriations
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Van Hollen, Ranking Member Hyde-Smith, Chairman Quigley, and Ranking Member Womack:

One of the most significant needs in election administration is [robust and consistent funding](#). Election administration is foundational to our democracy, yet public spending on elections often ranks near the bottom of spending priorities. The \$400 million appropriation being considered for state and local election departments is critical to building resilience ahead the 2024 presidential election.

The FY23 FSGG bill and report approved by House Appropriations Committee includes the following provision for election funding that merits consideration and support:

Election Security – While Congress has made significant investments in election security, the funding has been inconsistent, unpredictable, and insufficient to meet the vast need across all the States and territories. Congress must provide a consistent, steady source of Federal funds to support State and local election officials on the frontlines of protecting U.S. elections. The Committee recommends \$400,000,000 for Election Security Grants and reaffirms the commitment to providing a consistent, steady source of Federal funds to support State and local election officials on the frontlines of protecting U.S. elections. In addition to providing support to State and local election officials, the Committee has supported efforts to rebuild the Election Assistance Commission (EAC), more than doubling funding for the agency's operating expenses from fiscal year 2019 to fiscal year 2022. (H.R. Rep. No. 117-393, p. 4)

Despite being designated critical infrastructure in 2017, federal investment in elections is [irregular, unpredictable, and insufficient](#). Elections are one of America's most locally run tasks, administered by local officials who commit long hours to ensuring that elections are fair and

secure. Since the 2020 election, the jobs of election officials have gotten more complicated and more dangerous, with [1 in 4 local election officials](#) experiencing threats, harassment, or abuse.

This \$400 million investment would help close resource gaps and demonstrate solidarity to the thousands of election officials who have shouldered American democracy through one of its most difficult periods to date. Election officials are often required to make tough trade-offs due to resource constraints—such as consolidating polling places, limiting training, using outdated technology, or hiring fewer staff. While our elections are reliable and secure, chronic underfunding increases the risk of errors that become ripe ground for mis- and disinformation.

The 2020 and 2022 elections demonstrated firsthand how minor, technical glitches can undermine voter confidence—even when [quickly identified and addressed](#). Additional resources will mitigate local vulnerabilities that could have national implications if exploited. For maximum effectiveness, states should be required to disperse a portion of the funds to their local election offices to qualify for federal support.

This \$400 million dollar investment is the first of many crucial steps we must take to ensure our local election officials have the resources they need to administer trusted and trustworthy elections.

Sincerely,

Bipartisan Policy Center
Issue One
R Street Institute

CC: Members of the U.S. House and Senate Subcommittees on Appropriations



Scan QR Code or [Click Here](#) for Full NCSL Election Costs Document

Election Costs Responsibilities at State & Local Level

Updated November 2024

While elections are administered at the local—typically county—level, not all expenses for conducting elections fall on local election offices. States often pick up the tab for various aspects of elections, like voting machines or local election official training. The method of “splitting the bill” of election costs is variable across the U.S. This document outlines responsibilities at the state and local level for paying for elections as established in statute across the 50 states.

The chart is a statutory examination only, and many states don’t address all aspects of election costs/funding in their statute; it pulls together statutory language that explicitly calls out specific costs in election administration but is not inclusive of all responsibilities for expenses in conducting election. Note: This chart does not include expenses incurred by the state for duties that commonly fall to the state rather than counties, for example the establishment and upkeep of the statewide voter registration system mandated by HAVA or testing and certifying voting machines.

Broad categories of election costs to keep in mind:

- Technology
- Voter registration databases
- Statewide voter information
- Training for local election officials
- Compensation for local election officials
- Ballots or other supplies
- Polling places

State	Reimbursement or Expenses for Some Types of Elections	Personnel Costs	Voting Equipment	Ballots or Other Supplies	Other Notes/Miscellaneous
Alabama Ala. Code. § 17-2-4 § 17-3-57 § 17-4-31 § 17-8-12 § 17-11-51 § 17-16-2 to § 17-16-6	State pays for half of elections that include federal, state and county races, or an election to amend the constitution. The state pays for the total cost of an election that contains only federal or state offices. Ala. Code §17-16-2 to 17-16-6	Counties are reimbursed by the state for election officials' compensation and mileage. Election clerks & inspectors are entitled to base compensation of \$50 paid out of county treasury. In addition to that compensation, clerks are entitled to supplemental compensation paid by the state to ensure the total amount they are paid each day is \$125; for inspectors, the total amount is \$150. Clerks & inspectors who	The state adopted a uniform voting system in 2005 and bought equipment statewide with HAVA funds. Purchases of voting equipment made by a county in order to comply with the voting system guidelines established by the Secretary of State shall be approved for reimbursement from the Help America Vote Fund by the Secretary of State. Ala. Code §17-2-4(h)	State reimburses counties for a variety of supplies to support elections, including ballots, some postage costs and some publication costs. The state also provides registration forms and supplies for registrars. The state reimburses county commissioners for all postage costs associated with voter list maintenance and ½ the cost of required publication of names in newspapers before removing them from list.	All expenses & costs incurred by a county for carrying out overseas voter program will be paid by the state. Ala. Code §17-11-51



Scan QR Code or **Click Here** for Full Reimbursement Form

Reimbursement Form

2024 Presidential Election Expenses

Instructions

Please upload copies of all supporting documents, including invoices and receipts, to your county's 2024 Presidential Election document folder (located within the Reimbursement's folder) [here](#).

General tips

In order to get totals to update, select out of the final cell where value is entered, then scroll to bottom and select "Save for Later". Finally, scroll to bottom and select "Submit".

Please clearly label your documents, such as "election staff overtime" and include the number for the corresponding expense item.

If you maintain an excel spreadsheet to track your costs, please consider including that as well.

County *

Total Active Electors

Reimbursable Election Expenses Incurred for the November 5, 2024 Election

1. Election Staff

Expenses incurred between September 9, 2024 through the conclusion of canvass.

Documentation for election staff overtime and temporary staff pay should include timecards or a print out from an HR management system you use that includes staff names, the dates, hours worked and amount paid to individual. Please do not include any personally identifiable information such as social security numbers or dates of birth.

Support for this project was provided
by the Election Trust Initiative.

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INSTITUTE OF POLITICS

The University of Kansas