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No one knows how much it costs to run elections in the United States.

For that matter, it’s a rare state that knows how much election administration costs within its own borders due to the complexity of elections and the involvement of several levels of government.

And yet, the U.S. Constitution (Article I, Section 4, Clause 1) gives state legislatures the power to regulate elections, and election problems in any corner of the state make the whole state look bad. In other words, states have a stake in ensuring that elections are well-run. That takes money.

It takes money for personnel, polling place locations, ballot printing, voter information dissemination, cybersecurity protection and keeping up with changing state legislation regulating elections. Historically, states have authorized local jurisdictions (counties or cities/townships) to run elections on their behalf following state-specified rules, and have expected local jurisdictions to pick up most of the bill.

Elections don’t just happen in November of even-numbered years. Most jurisdictions hold at least one, if not several, elections every year. These include municipal and school board elections, as well as elections for political subdivisions such as fire districts or municipal utility districts. And, voter registration and maintaining the voter list is a year-round operation.

Even though federal races appear on the ballot every two years, the only time the federal government has made a significant financial contribution to election administration was through the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) of 2002, in response to the “hanging chad” controversy during the 2000 presidential elections.

Did You Know?
• Four states provided funding for voting equipment purchases in 2017.
• The last time the federal government provided funding for elections was the Help America Vote Act of 2002.
• Funding for elections can come from multiple levels of government: federal, state, local and smaller political subdivisions.
Since 2014, New Mexico and Rhode Island have used devices that assist voters in completing their paper ballots are used. The equipment purchased with it is nearing the end of its life cycle.

State races and ballot questions also appear on locally produced ballots. Some states pay for their share of “ballot real estate,” but most do not. In recent years, the trend has been toward states bearing more of the responsibility (and costs) of running elections through a number of options.

State Action

All states help pay for elections in one way or another. At the very least, all states manage the statewide voter registration system.

As for direct election expenses, in highly centralized states, such as Alaska and Delaware, the state department of elections is fully responsible for conducting elections and bears the full cost.

In other states, expenses may be shared in a variety of ways. In Kentucky, the state reimburses counties for the cost of elections at a set rate of $225 per precinct annually, and in Rhode Island the state pays for everything other than poll workers and polling sites, which are the responsibility of municipalities. In Alabama, Colorado, Hawaii and Louisiana, the state pays all election expenses if there are only state candidates or issues on the ballots, or its share of total expenses based on its share of the ballot races and questions.

Many states pay for special statewide elections that don’t coincide with regularly scheduled elections, or for statewide primary and presidential primary elections. Some states assist local jurisdictions by paying rental fees for polling places, printing ballots, or peripheral supplies such as forms, security seals, ballot boxes or envelopes.

One of the most expensive items in an election administrator’s budget is the equipment used to cast and tabulate votes. Even though states and localities are increasingly moving to paper ballots, high-tech optical or digital scanners are required to tabulate them, and sometimes ballot marking devices that assist voters in completing their paper ballots are used.

Since 2014, New Mexico and Rhode Island have both replaced voting equipment statewide through direct appropriations from the legislature, and Maryland leased voting machines statewide, splitting the cost 50-50 between the state and counties. In 2017, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada and Utah provided some funding to replace voting equipment. Many more states are looking at options to help pay for some or all of replacement costs.

Almost every state assists in some way with training local election officials. These trainings may take place in person, online, or both. For example, Virginia requires local officials to receive training before their first election, and the state provides standardized training materials online.

Some states are required to produce and distribute information to voters, often requiring a costly mass mailing. To save money, California permits voters to opt for emailed or texted information on election dates, deadlines and other information. All states provide voter information online as well.

For states that do help with election funding, the money can come from a direct appropriation. In cases where policy choices increase costs for local jurisdictions, such as implementing early voting or enhanced post-election audit procedures, states may fund the new mandate. Some states require political subdivisions such as municipalities, school board districts or utility districts that use county election services to reimburse the county or other election entity. And some states have created an ongoing revenue stream for election expenses based on fees generated by providing voter lists (Maine, West Virginia), election-related maps (Louisiana), filing fees for candidates (Nebraska), or annual fees imposed on limited liability companies (Mississippi).

The California Legislature considered (and rejected) a statewide bond measure to fund elections technology in 2017, and this year is debating a direct appropriation.

Federal Action

Federal legislation to help fund elections is introduced periodically, but since the Help America Vote Act of 2002, no new measure has gathered broad support. With new concerns about cybersecurity, the Secure Elections Act, introduced this year, is a bill to watch. It would provide grants for states to upgrade voting technology for enhanced security.