

NCSL-Democracy Fund Project Elections 2020: Policy, Funding and the Future Nebraska

A team of Nebraska legislators, legislative staff and state and local election officials convened in Omaha on Apr. 11, 2016 to discuss elections-related technology. Topics included voting by mail, the cost and maintenance of voting machines and potential funding for new machines in the state.

A Profile of Elections in Nebraska

- Turnout: 61 percent in the November 2012 General Election.¹
- Registered voters: 1,161,999.²
- Equipment: paper ballots and optical scanners, both precinct-based and centralized, and ballot-marking devices for ADA compliance. ES&S is currently the sole provider for voting equipment in Nebraska. ES&S also provides ballot programming services to most of the state, and is the vendor for Nebraska's statewide voter registration database.
- Overall rank on The Pew Charitable Trusts' 2012 [Elections Performance Index](#): 14.

Tour of ES&S

Election Systems and Software (ES&S), based in Omaha, is one of three major providers of voting system hardware in the U.S. The other two companies are Dominion Voting Systems and Hart InterCivic. Many other companies also provide software solutions for voting systems, as well as software and services for peripheral systems such as e-poll books, ballot-on-demand printers, online ballot delivery systems and election night reporting systems.

Participants received a tour of ES&S facilities, including the warehouse, manufacturing and order fulfillment, repair, testing and quality check of equipment. The visit also included a presentation of the equipment currently used in Nebraska and a preview of newer equipment that is now available, as well as a discussion of potential financing options for new equipment.

Douglas County Election Commission

The Douglas County Election Commission presented its processes, including voter registration, early and absentee voting, using GIS software to map where absentee voters are dropping off their ballots, ballot programming, printing ballots and counting/tabulation.

- When Douglas County receives voter registration applications electronically through the online voter registration system or from the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), there is a verification process that takes place before an applicant is added to the voter rolls. When applications come from the DMV they come with a digital signature, which saves the county time because it is not necessary to scan in a paper document.
- If the county receives information that a voter has moved, they send a mailing asking if the voter is still at that address. If there is no response, that voter stays on the list for two federal elections before being removed.

¹ Percentage of voting eligible population, courtesy of The Pew Charitable Trusts' [Elections Performance Index](#)

² Voter Registration Statistics Report, Nebraska Secretary of State's Office, April 1, 2016.

- On Election Day, Douglas County has a “midday pickup” of ballots from polling places to speed counting.
- Douglas County is the only county in Nebraska that prints its own ballots; the others use a vendor. The county purchased a ballot printer in October of 2006 for \$215,000. This was purchased with county funds and it paid for itself in the first presidential election. It is now 10 years old and may soon need to be replaced.
- The state purchased eight high speed central count ballot scanners and 300 ballot-marking devices for ADA compliance for Douglas County in 2005, using federal funds from the Help America Vote Act (HAVA).
- In 2014 Douglas County purchased a newer model high speed central count ballot scanner for \$104,000. The newer model is more efficient and can count folded ballots. Folding the ballots allows the county to save postage costs when sending out absentee ballots.
- The state pays for equipment maintenance for all counties. Initially this was paid from HAVA funds, but since 2012 there has been an appropriation from the legislature for each election cycle.

A Conversation on Election Technology and the Future of Nebraska Elections

The conversation was kicked off by presentations on the national state of voting systems and considerations for new voting systems. The discussion was facilitated by Merle King from the Center for Election Systems at Kennesaw State University, and the following questions were considered:

What are Nebraska’s priorities for election technology?

- Nebraska can replace existing equipment with newer versions of the same equipment, or it can look at other options. It could decide to examine the entire election process and those decisions could determine what equipment to buy.
- Cost is an overarching consideration, but especially for smaller counties which may not have the budgets to be able to afford new voting equipment without assistance.
- The question of who pays for the system is also important.
- The anticipated timeline of implementation may drive the decision about what equipment is ultimately purchased. It takes time to make a decision, test the new equipment and train election officials on its use. Learning a new system takes time, which may be especially true if it is significantly different from the old system. And, this is usually best done in a year without major elections.
- For smaller counties, the most expensive item in the budget is printing ballots. Paying for poll workers is also a very large expense.

How important is uniformity?

- Using the same equipment in each county may or may not be desirable.
- While there are some advantages to having a uniform system, smaller counties with different processes may benefit from different equipment. For example, the last time equipment was purchased in Nebraska, smaller counties purchased precinct-based optical scanners and larger counties purchased high-speed central count optical scanners.
- On the other hand, using the same equipment in each county makes it easier to obtain contingency equipment from other counties in case of a natural disaster or equipment malfunctions, and also provides a career path for IT staff who can advance to other offices in the state without having to learn the ins and outs of a new system.
- Another aspect of uniformity is using the same vendor throughout the state. This increases the likelihood that different parts of the system, from the statewide voter registration database to the tabulation system, will work well together. But, it can also make jurisdictions overly dependent on the vendor.
- The state should establish its goals and priorities for a voting system, and let that drive the decision toward uniformity or not.

Thoughts for moving forward:

- An idea surfaced to conduct a survey of counties to estimate when their equipment might expire, and whether or not there is a plan for funding new equipment at the county level.
- In estimating the potential longevity of the current machines, it may also help to look at the machine failure rate and availability of consumables and spare parts to keep the system going.
- Regional structures, such as county consortiums, for funding new equipment and administering elections were discussed.
- Since a new voting system will last 10-15 years, possibly longer, it may be helpful to think about how Nebraskans are likely to vote in the next 20 years—can the chosen system adapt?
- When considering new equipment, it is also important to keep the following in mind: accessibility, usability of the system for all voters, changing demographics of voters, future availability of polling places and the impact of a new system on poll workers.
- This is an opportunity to look at the model and process of voting in Nebraska, and that will frame the discussion of what equipment will ultimately be purchased.

Resources

- Ask NCSL if you would like to see the presentations from this meeting.
- NCSL's [Election Technology Overview](#)
- NCSL's [Elections Technology Toolkit: Voting Machines and Beyond](#)
- NCSL's [Elections 2020: Policy, Funding and the Future](#)
- NCSL's [Election Tech Funding News](#)
- NCSL's [Funding Elections Technology](#)
- NCSL's [Voting Equipment](#)
- Articles from NCSL's election administration newsletter The Canvass:
 - [Election Funding for 2020 and Beyond](#)
 - [Elections Technology: Nine Things Legislators May Want to Know](#)
 - [Burning Questions at NCSL's Policy and Elections Technology Conference](#)
 - [Internet Voting - Not Ready for Prime Time?](#)
 - [Internet Voting: Creeping Our Way?](#)
 - [All About E-Poll Books](#)
 - [Voting Technology: Current and Future Choices](#)
 - [Voting Technology Standards: What Legislators Need to Know](#)
- NCSL offers technical assistance, testimony and other in-person help as needed, and can provide research on any topics useful to Nebraska policymakers.
- The U.S. Election Assistance Commission's (EAC) webpage on [Voting Technology Procurement](#)
- EAC'S webpage containing [Voting System Reports](#)
- EAC's webpage on [Managing Election Technology](#)
- EAC'S [Quick Start Management Guide on Technology in Elections](#)
- The Brennan Center's [America's Voting Machines at Risk](#)
- The Brennan Center's [Guidance for Election Officials with Aging Voting Equipment](#)

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