



When it comes to running an election, one thing is certain: money matters.

BY WENDY UNDERHILL

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Count the Costs

The security of our elections has grabbed everyone's attention—whether it's Russians meddling in voter registration databases or electronic voting equipment not recording votes as they were cast. Americans want to know that our elections are secure, accurate and fair, and that each ballot is counted, once.

But security is challenging and expensive, and just one of the costs that go into conducting elections. The U.S. Constitution gives states the authority to run elections, but doesn't specify which branch of government should pay for them.

Along with security costs are those associated with hiring and paying people to identify polling locations, produce ballots, maintain voter registration databases, procure and maintain equipment and technology, educate voters, staff polling places, count ballots and maintain the back-end offices, software and equipment.

That can add up to a lot, but exactly how much is unknown. The complexity of elections and the involvement of all levels of government make calculating total costs difficult.

Money isn't the only factor to consider, of course. There's also turnout, reliability, accessibility and accuracy to name just a few. Still, money is the big one. Reflecting the feeling of many lawmakers, Wyoming Representative Dan Zwonitzer (R) says, "The overarching concern on all of the election issues is finances. But there's no one solution which works best for every county and is currently cost realistic." That's why states conduct and pay for elections in a variety of ways.



Representative
Dan Zwonitzer
Wyoming

The Big 10

So, what do we know about the costs of running an election? How do policy choices affect costs? What funding mechanisms are states using? Can money buy security? A new NCSL report, "The Price of Democracy: Splitting the Bill for Elections," is the result of a two-year study to answer those very questions.

The report contains 10 takeaways for legislators and other policymakers to ponder.

1. Good decisions come from good data.

We know it's not free to administer an election, but does the United States spend \$10 million a year? \$1 billion? No one knows. States know how much they spend on roads, health care, education and other big-ticket items, but not on elections, the backbone of democracy.

Although the role state offices play in election administration has expanded, along with the state's share of the costs in some cases, state budgets typically do not include a line item for election expenses. Instead, those costs often are folded into the budget of the chief election official or other state agencies.

Systematically collecting good cost information could help localities identify the priciest aspects of elections and ways to reduce expenses. But good research on election costs is slim; data-collection is just beginning. To encourage greater efforts, states may choose to require local jurisdictions to uniformly collect and report cost information.

2. States are in charge of elections.

The U.S. Constitution authorizes states to regulate elections, and, often, "state and local election officials collaborate together to create the magic of elections," says New Mexico Senator Daniel Ivey-Soto (D). A series of federal laws in the last 50 years, however, has put more of the responsibility on states.



Senator
Daniel Ivey-Soto
New Mexico

This transition began with the civil rights legislation of the 1960s but accelerated in the 1990s and 2000s, with more and more responsibility going to state election offices. Even so, the structure of election administration in the states today is still largely decentralized and varies greatly, though far less than a century ago.

3. Funding can come from all levels of government.

Traditionally, elections were administered and paid for at the local level. That is still common practice, but all three levels of government—local, state and federal—now contribute funding. With the enactment of the Help America Vote Act in 2002, the federal government offered about \$3 billion to the states for upgrades to registration and voting systems. That money is largely gone now, and state and local governments are figuring out a new plan.

Each state has a somewhat different approach. Some states pay for all or part of elections. Others pay only for primaries, special elections or elections that have only statewide candidates or issues.

4. Tech (and security) needs are driving election costs.

Most states are looking to replace their voting equipment before the 2020 presidential election. State legislators have some choices to make on how to go about doing that. They will have to decide whether to:

- Move to a statewide uniform voting system.
- Provide funds for statewide acquisition of voting equipment.
- Split the costs of new voting equipment between the state and localities.
- Create a grant program to help localities buy new equipment.
- Centralize voting equipment maintenance and support.
- Provide partial funding attached to a new policy initiative.

5. Security requires good protocols, well-trained staff and adequate funding.

Election officials are always mindful of security—both physical and cyber. Election systems require protection equal to or better than that for any other government or business process or service. Hiring cybersecurity consultants or more IT staff, or sending staff out for training, may be useful. Investing in training for state and local officials may pay off, too. “We want the public to have confidence in the integrity of the results,” says West Virginia Delegate John Shott (R),

“and we try to minimize the opportunities for fraud and abuse.”

Legislators can use the power of their office to make sure security is always a priority. If a bill comes up addressing early voting, e-poll books, vote centers or any other topic, lawmakers should always ask, “What will this bill mean for elections security?”

The bottom line is this, says Nebraska Senator John Murante (NP): “The integrity of elections is a state responsibility. Part of that responsibility is ensuring that all voters have modernized election technology. Secure and accurate elections should be a priority to all policymakers, and states should lead the way.”



Delegate
John Shott
West Virginia



Senator
John Murante
Nebraska

6. States maintain voter registration databases.

Before the Help America Vote Act, voter registration information mostly was kept at the local level, in a database or on paper forms. Now, all states are required to have a centralized database at the state level that contains all valid voter registrations. Most states work closely with local jurisdictions to maintain them. The security of this information is increasingly important, with much of the cost again falling to states.

7. States provide resources or assistance in other ways, too.

Election costs can be broken down into many categories, some obvious, some less so. On top of sharing costs among jurisdictions and paying for technology and voter registration databases, at least some states also pay for:

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

8. Policy choices can affect costs.

“The choices legislators make can affect

the bottom line, even if it is often hard to make apples-to-apples comparisons,” says Minnesota Senator Mary Kiffmeyer (R). Legislators can choose whether to maintain traditional Election Day, keep precinct-based elections or move toward alternatives, such as pre-Election Day voting (vote by mail, early in-person voting) or vote centers. All come with costs.



Senator
Mary Kiffmeyer
Minnesota

9. States have choices.

States can fund elections through direct appropriations, statewide bond measures or dedicated revenue streams. Election administration is not often thought of as a revenue generator, but states have created new ways to pay for election expenses by selling election-related products (precinct maps, election jurisdictions), charging for certain election-related services or applying filing fees.

Legislators may also want to create a grant program or revolving fund to help localities update their technology.

10. Task forces can study election needs and options.

Because elections are a shared responsibility, legislatures are forming task forces that include legislators, executive branch administrators and local officials to work on funding election technology, improving security and considering new ways to run elections.

It's Up to States

Concerns about the expense of elections are nothing new. In 1934, in his landmark book, “Election Administration in the United States,” political scientist Joseph P. Harris wrote, “The cost is one of the most important aspects of the problem of election administration. It is, of course, secondary to honesty, accuracy and the convenience of the electors, but nevertheless is of great importance.”

His words are as valid today as they were 84 years ago.

🔗 Look for “The Price of Democracy: Splitting the Bill for Elections” at ncsl.org/magazine.