

THE PRICE OF DEMOCRACY: SPLITTING THE BILL FOR ELECTIONS

Introduction



Elections are in the news, and it is not just the upcoming midterm elections.

Questions about security, in particular whether our elections systems protect us from bad actors at home and abroad, are making headlines.

How much influence Russians and others may have had during the 2016 campaign period is very much on the minds of those concerned about the security of our voting systems. As well, questions persist about what efforts—thwarted though they were—were made to tamper with voter registration systems and elections more broadly.

The news on cybersecurity breaches is still evolving. It has legislators, the key decision-makers on elections policy, taking notice. They're focused on security, of course, but also on election administration more generally: Who runs elections, and by extension, who pays for elections? The short answer is that the states and territories run elections. The answer to who pays for them is more complicated. In the sections below, NCSL's new report, "The Price of Democracy: Splitting the Bill for Elections," offers 10 key takeaways about election costs for legislators and other policymakers.

Executive Summary

"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."

—Joseph P. Harris, Ph.D., "Election Administration in the United States," 1934

This new NCSL report, "The Price of Democracy: Splitting the Bill for Elections," is the result of two years of studying all things related to elections and costs, addressing questions such as: What are the costs associated with running elections? What state policy choices relate to costs? What funding mechanisms are in use in the states? Can money buy security?

Perhaps the biggest takeaway from our work on election costs is this: **Money matters.**

Not that money is the only factor when making decisions about election policy. There's also turnout, reliability, accessibility, accuracy and a host of other values. Democracy is not a place for cutting corners.

Below are 10 more takeaways for legislators and other policymakers:

- 1. Elections aren't priceless—it's just that no one has put a price on them yet.** Does the United States spend a billion dollars a year running elections? \$10 million? No one knows. States know how much they spend on roads, health care, education and other big-ticket items, but no one knows how much they spend on elections, the backbone of democracy. State budgets typically do not include a dedicated line item for election expenses. Instead, they may be folded into the budget of the chief election official or other state agencies. At the local level, some election administrators, especially those who seek reimbursement for services they provide to other entities, may have a good cost analysis, but others may not. Good research on election costs is slim; data collection efforts are just beginning. States can facilitate collection of data that will help with comparisons within a state, and perhaps someday, across state lines.
- 2. States are in charge of elections.** The U.S. Constitution gives states the right to regulate elections. Two caveats: historically, states have authorized local jurisdictions to run elections, although that is changing. And, over time, federal requirements have set the framework for elections.
- 3. Funding can come from different levels of government.** Funding can, and to some extent does, come from three levels of government: local, state and federal. None of these is flush with cash. In 2002, with the enactment of the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), approximately \$3 billion was provided by the federal government to the states for upgrades to registration and voting systems. That money is largely gone, and state and local governments are figuring out a new plan. Each state has a somewhat different approach.
- 4. Tech (and security) needs are the current drivers of election costs at the state level.** While elections technology costs are just one part of the overall costs of elections, they are the driving cost in policy conversations, at least at the legislative level. That's because most states are looking to replace their equipment before the 2020 presidential election.
- 5. Security requires good protocols, well-trained staff and adequate funding.** In any IT environment, security is a big component. Elections systems require protection as good as—or better than—any other government or business process or service.
- 6. States maintain and secure voter registration databases.** The list of voters is kept at the state level, though the state works closely with local jurisdictions to update and maintain it. Security is an increasingly important consideration here, though much of the cost falls to states.

- 7. States provide resources or assistance in other ways, too.** Election costs can be broken down into many categories, some obvious and some less so. On top of sharing costs between different jurisdictions, paying for technology and voter registration databases, at least some states pay for:
- Statewide voter information
 - Training for local election officials
 - Compensation for local election officials
 - Ballots or other supplies
 - Polling places
- 8. Policy choices on how elections are conducted can affect overall costs.** Legislators decide whether to maintain traditional Election Day, precinct-based elections, or to move toward alternatives such as using more pre-Election Day voting options—vote by mail, early in-person voting—or vote centers. The choices legislators make can affect the bottom line, even if it is often hard to make apples-to-apples comparisons.
- 9. States have choices on where to look for money to fund elections.** These include direct appropriations, statewide bond measures and dedicated revenue streams.
- 10. Recently, states have used task forces to scope out their elections needs and options.** Because elections are a shared responsibility, legislatures are asking that task forces—including legislators, executive branch administrators and local election officials—work to develop solutions for funding elections technology, approaching security and considering new options on how to run elections.

1. Elections aren't priceless—it's just that no one has put a price on them yet.

“The overarching concern on all of the election issues is finances. New election equipment is going to be a huge fight, because historically the state hasn't paid. Counties run elections but now have limited budgets. Counties are looking at their outdated equipment and ... can't afford continuing the elections as they've been doing them. But there's no one solution which works best for every county and is currently cost realistic.”

—Wyoming Representative Dan Zwonitzer (R)

Elections are complicated processes, with many players and a non-negotiable timeline. Local election officials need to find people to staff the polling places and count ballots; identify polling locations for voting; produce ballots; provide security for Election Day and throughout the year implement cybersecurity practices; procure and maintain technology to help count ballots and facilitate the voting process; and maintain the back-end offices, software and equipment.

And that's merely to vote. Add in the costs associated with maintaining accurate voter registration databases, and the cost of communicating with voters both to confirm registration status and send out information about how to engage in the process. It's a lot.

Coming up with a concrete number of how much it costs to run an election is tough. Political scientists are mostly interested in election outcomes, not election administration. State budgets typically do not include a dedicated line item for election expenses. Rather, election-related expenses the state assists with are often absorbed into other agency budgets.

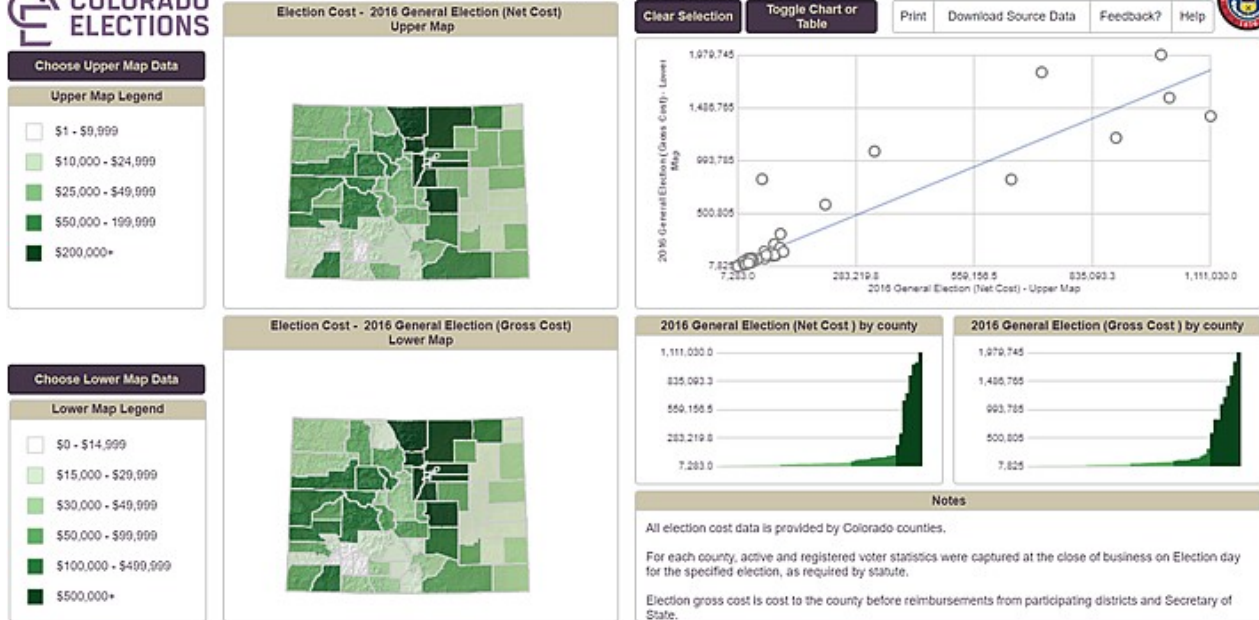
State Policy Choices

- Require local jurisdictions to collect and report cost information data in a uniform and systematic way.
- Hold a hearing to gather information on data collection in your state.

But we know it's not free to administer an election. The administrative costs have to fall somewhere. One option for legislators looking to implement any of the above policy options is to:

- **Require local jurisdictions to collect and report cost information data to identify areas that could be made more efficient, as Colorado has done.** In terms of making policy decisions and improving the administration of elections, more and better data would always be helpful. By collecting cost data in a systematic way, jurisdictions can identify the most expensive aspects of elections and identify ways to reduce costs. For example, if a jurisdiction finds that its highest cost is personnel, it may make sense to move to a vote center or all-mail model to reduce this cost. If a jurisdiction finds it is spending a lot of money on processing provisional ballots from voters who moved between the registration deadline and Election Day, the legislature could consider changing the voter registration deadline. Cost considerations, though, must always be balanced with other considerations, such as ensuring the integrity of the election and access for all eligible voters.

Election Cost Statistics



Additional Information

- States that collect statewide cost data include [California](#), [Colorado](#), [North Dakota](#) and [Wisconsin](#).

2. States are in charge of elections.

“The Constitution gives state legislatures the power to regulate elections. The federal government has generally received election services without the responsibility for funding or administering those elections. Meanwhile, in most of the United States, state and local election officials collaborate together to create the magic of elections.”

—New Mexico Senator Daniel Ivey-Soto (D)

The U.S. Constitution (Article I, Section 4, Clause 1) gives state legislatures the power to regulate elections. That means that if something goes wrong, the state is accountable. Think of the controversy surrounding the 2000 election. Few people say, “Palm Beach County had an election problem.” They say, “Florida had an election problem.” States have a vested interest in ensuring their counties and localities run elections effectively and efficiently.

Most policies that affect election administration in states are the result of policies established by state legislatures. Two caveats, though. First, historically, states have authorized local jurisdictions to run elections on their behalf following state-specified rules. The entities that do the rubber-meets-the-road functions of running an election are typically on the county or city/town level. This means there are more than 10,000 jurisdictions that have primary responsibility for running elections in the country, and that’s not counting the subdivisions within those jurisdictions.

Those subdivisions may include municipalities that run municipal elections, school boards that run school board elections, and special districts such as fire districts or municipal utility districts (MUD) that run elections from time to time, too. Sometimes the county has a role in running the elections for these subdivisions; other times it doesn’t.

In recent years there has been some movement toward centralization at the state level, in part because it behooves a state to provide equal and consistent access from one corner to the other.

The second caveat is that, over time, the U.S. Constitution and federal statutes have seen several major additions that set the framework within which states run elections.

In the early years of the nation, elections were an occasional responsibility of a county official. Elections were clerical in nature, didn’t happen frequently and weren’t time-consuming. Officials would announce an election and voters would come and vote. Voters weren’t required to register ahead of time and voting was done orally.

A series of changes to the election process in the late 1800s made it a more complex undertaking, requiring more time and attention:

- The electorate expanded. The population grew, and there was also an expansion of the franchise to those who were not previously eligible to vote.

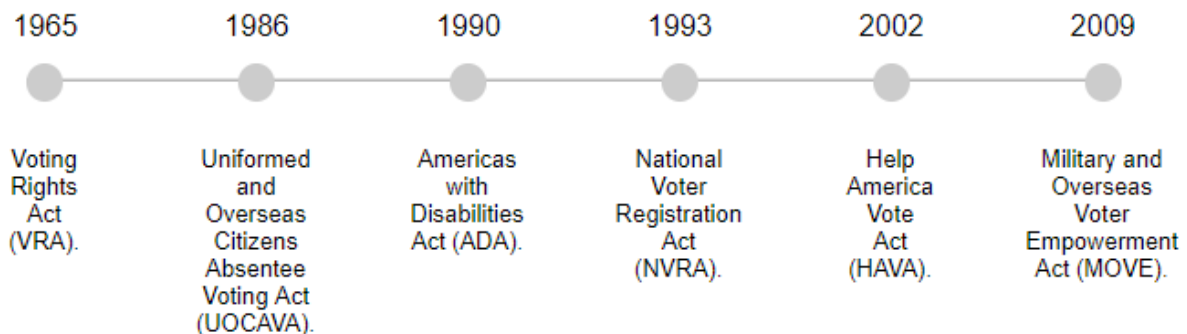
- The adoption of voter registration required election officials to receive voter applications and maintain lists of voters.
- The move away from ballots provided by parties to a secret ballot provided by local election officials required additional preparation and resources.
- The move toward using voting machines, which needed to be stored and maintained.

Legislatures began more and more to formalize election administration policy in statute, seeking to provide some degree of uniformity within the state. With this came a need for state election offices to interpret these increasingly complex procedures and help manage growing technology needs.

State Policy Choices

- Ask state election officials for more information on the services their office provides.
- Revisit your centralization/decentralization structure.

A series of federal laws in the last 50 years have put more of the responsibility, and therefore the cost of, elections on states, rather than local jurisdictions. This transition began with the civil rights legislation of the 1960s, but accelerated in the 1990s and 2000s.



The National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) of 1993, commonly referred to as “motor voter,” required state election offices to work with state departments of motor vehicles and other agencies to offer voter registration.

After the controversial 2000 presidential election, Congress passed the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) of 2002. Among other things, it required states to establish centralized statewide voter registration databases, consolidating the voter lists of its various counties and jurisdictions. This gave state offices a duty that many did not previously have. HAVA also provided funds for replacing voting equipment and improving election administration. States were charged with developing state plans for disbursing these funds, and to this day are more involved with procuring voting equipment than they had been before HAVA.

Two federal laws involving military and overseas voters, the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act of 1986 and the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act (MOVE) of

2009, also gave state offices additional responsibilities in aiding registration and voting for overseas citizens.

As a result of these laws, and especially since 2002, additional election-related duties and responsibilities have fallen to state election offices. The role that state offices play in election administration has expanded, as has the state's share of costs in some cases.

Even so, the structure of election administration in the states today is still largely decentralized and contains a great deal of variation, although far less so than it was a century ago.

Additional Information

- NCSL's webpage on [Election Administration at State and Local Levels](#)

3. Funding can come from different levels of government.

“All governmental levels need to come together to create a coherent business model for election administration. When government makes changes, they need to do it in the context of making it understandable to voters. If they don’t know their voting options, they can’t take advantage of them.”

—Alysoun McLaughlin, deputy director of the board of elections in Montgomery County, Maryland

While states hold responsibility for elections with local assistance and a federal framework, the same is not true of who pays for elections. All three levels can and have played a role. Traditionally, elections have been administered and paid for at the local level—and that is still the most common process.

In most jurisdictions in the country elections are administered by counties, though in some states elections are run at the city or township level. It is these local jurisdictions that are primarily responsible for the cost of elections.

However, funding could, and to some extent does, come from multiple levels of government: federal, state, local, or a combination of all of these. Often additional subdivisions, such as municipal utility districts, school districts or municipalities, will pitch in as well. None is flush with cash.

State Funding

While there are some states that pay for virtually everything, it is much more common for the state to take responsibility for some elements of election management, and not others. Here are some examples of ways that states help out:

- **Pay for all elections.** Alaska and Delaware have centralized election administration. The state department of elections is responsible for conducting elections, and bears the cost of election administration almost completely.
- **Pay for a portion of all elections.** In Kentucky and Rhode Island, the state bears a portion of the costs of all elections. 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.
- **Pay for state candidates or issues.** In Alabama, Colorado, Hawaii and Louisiana, the state will pay all expenses of the election if there are only statewide candidates or issues on the ballots, or a portion of the expenses if there are other local issues on the ballot as well.
- **Pay for statewide special or primary elections.** Many states choose to pay for special statewide elections that don’t coincide with regularly scheduled elections, or for statewide primary and presidential primary elections. Some states pay a portion of costs for any statewide candidates or issues that appear on the ballot, regardless of the election type. This is usually,

though not always, done as a reimbursement. Counties pay for the election initially and later submit a reimbursement request to the state.

State pays all expenses for federal or state elections	State bears a portion of election costs	State pays for statewide special elections or statewide elections that don't coincide with regularly scheduled elections	State pays for primary elections (statewide, presidential, or both)
Alaska Delaware	Alabama Colorado Hawaii Kentucky Louisiana Rhode Island	Arkansas Florida Iowa Michigan Missouri New Jersey North Dakota Ohio Oregon Pennsylvania Tennessee Washington West Virginia	Arizona Arkansas Idaho Kansas Michigan Minnesota Missouri South Carolina Tennessee Texas Virginia Washington

Subdivisions Within a County

Local jurisdictions often run elections that include municipal, school and special district races, or ballot questions. Those same ballots are likely to include state and federal races and questions, too. In some states, the cost of running elections is shared by all the entities that have races or questions on the ballot. States can require this type of cost-sharing arrangement, and dictate how costs are allocated. Here are a few examples of how states currently operate:

- Shared costs based on formulas.** In Arkansas, for school elections that are combined with other county elections, the school district pays for expenses incurred for poll workers at individual polling places. The share of the total is determined by the number of votes cast in the school election as a proportion of the total number of votes cast in the election. In Louisiana, if there are both state races and ballot questions as well as local candidates or questions on the ballot, the state pays for half of the election expenses. The other half is shared pro rata by the local entities by “real estate” on the ballot. The share that local entities pay is determined by dividing the entity’s number of offices, propositions or questions on

State Policy Choices

- Provide funding when introducing new legislation, and avoid unfunded mandates to locals.
- Provide state funding for a portion of elections based on ballot “real estate” or a formula per registered voter.
- Require political subdivisions to reimburse counties for a portion of election costs.
- Petition Congress for additional funding.
- Apply for federal grants if they come open.

the ballot by the total number of all offices, propositions or questions on the ballot. In Missouri, when more than one political subdivision has candidates or issues on the ballot, they share costs based on the number of registered voters in that subdivision as a percentage of the total number of registered voters eligible for the election.

- **Shared costs at discretion of county.** In Colorado, counties conduct a coordinated election if more than one political subdivision—state, county, municipality, school district or special district—holds an election on the same day in November. In these cases, there is a “reasonable sharing of the actual cost,” which does not include the cost of maintaining the county election office. It is left to the discretion of counties to determine exactly how to divide the costs. If there is a statewide ballot measure, the state pays its typical rate, which is 90 cents per active registered voter for counties with 100,000 or fewer active registered voters or 80 cents per voter for counties with more than 100,000 voters. Montana political subdivisions bear a proportional share of the costs as determined by the county governing body
- **Fees for using voting equipment.** In Delaware, cities or towns may use county voting machines if they pay all costs and expenses associated with their use. New Jersey counties may charge up to \$5 per voting machine for municipalities that rent them for elections. Wyoming counties may charge subdivisions a fixed fee per day to use voting machines, which then goes back into the county fund used to acquire and maintain voting machines
- **Reimbursement of personnel expenses.** In Indiana, most expenses for municipal elections are the responsibility of the county, but the county may charge a municipality for the wages of extra people employed to provide additional assistance related to the election. In Oklahoma municipalities, school boards or other entities that authorize an election to be conducted by the county must pay the county upfront for compensation and employer’s share of benefits for poll workers involved in the election. The county may request reimbursement later for other expenses incurred during the election.

Federal Funding

What about HAVA, which injected \$3 billion in federal dollars into the states to upgrade elections? Doesn’t that give the feds a key role? It was intended as a one-time fix, not an indicator of federal fiduciary responsibility. Pundits have been saying for years that “there is no sign of more federal money on the horizon.” That is still true, although, with security for elections a major concern, bills to provide more funding have been introduced in Congress in 2017 (U.S. HR 794, HR 1398).

Additional Information

- NCSL’s webpage on [Election Costs: What States Pay](#)

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

“Elections aren’t just a local expense anymore and that needs to be taken into consideration when thinking about how we pay to upgrade our equipment.”

—Devra Smestad, auditor/treasurer for Ward County, N.D.

The Help America Vote Act, which provided \$3 billion in federal funds for the states to upgrade their voting systems, changed the landscape of voting technology drastically. It shifted the country away from lever and punch card voting machines. By providing states with funds to replace these systems with new ones all at the same time during the mid-2000s, however, it also made several other significant changes. For one, it put more of the responsibility for purchasing new voting systems on the state, where previously this cost had primarily been a responsibility of local jurisdictions.



Second, the nationwide equipment purchases over a decade ago means that a majority of the country’s machines will need replacement around the same time. Previously replacements occurred on a rolling basis. In its [2014 report, the Presidential Commission on Election Administration \(PCEA\)](#) identified the “impending crisis in voting technology” as a key recommendation for improving the American voting experience. A whole generation of county commissioners has come of age in an era when they haven’t had to budget for voting equipment and they sometimes react with surprise when faced with squeezing it in among other priorities.

The number of states considering new voting equipment has grown from one in 2013 to eight in 2017 (see [Appendix II](#) for a summary of states that have purchased new equipment). And that’s just on the state level. Local jurisdictions in almost every state have replaced or are looking at replacing equipment in the coming years. And as we approach the next presidential election, that number will surely increase along with public demands for a secure and reliable voting infrastructure.

States share the cost of voting equipment in a variety of ways:

- **Statewide purchase of voting equipment.** Some states have chosen to purchase all voting equipment at the state level, which is often referred to as a “uniform voting system.” Alabama, Alaska, Connecticut,

State Policy Choices

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

Delaware, Georgia, Hawaii, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Utah and Vermont all had uniform systems after HAVA. Arkansas and Colorado are moving in this direction gradually. Purchasing everything at the state level was a viable option with HAVA funds, but now that equipment needs to be replaced, states are not always able to stick with the same equipment statewide.

- **Pay for a portion of voting equipment.** In Maryland, the state pays for 50 percent of the purchase cost and counties pay for the other 50 percent. In Mississippi, 50 percent of the state's Elections Support Fund goes to counties to assist with acquiring, maintaining and upgrading voting equipment. In 2017, Nevada and Minnesota both established grant funds to help local jurisdictions replace aging voting equipment.
- **Provide funds to help upgrade or update equipment when needed to comply with policy measures adopted by the state.** For example, Montana [enacted post-election audits in 2009](#) and made funds available to counties for equipment updates associated with the new law's implementation. Idaho passed an [election consolidation bill in 2009](#) that included an appropriation for voting machine upgrades, if necessary to implement the law. California has a process to reimburse counties for the cost of new state mandates, though funds have not been available to do this in recent years. (More details can be found in California Forward's report, [Investing in California's Democracy: Building a Partnership for Performance](#)).
- **Assist with voting equipment maintenance or technical support.** In Wyoming, a state plane is available on Election Day to fly troubleshooters from the state's main voting system vendor to counties that need technical help. Both Indiana and Connecticut use local universities, Ball State University and the University of Connecticut, respectively, to help test voting machines and provide technical support.

Additional Information

- NCSL's webpage on [Funding Election Technology](#)

- **Invest in cybersecurity personnel.** Hiring cybersecurity consultants or more IT staff may be useful. It can be helpful to work with outside experts, since they may be better prepared to find security holes than internal staff.
- **Coordinate with others.** Sharing information within the state, between states, with federal agencies, and even between private entities can be the difference between discovering security holes and not. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has offered cybersecurity assistance to election officials, and there are organizations that help share security information between states as well, such as the [Multi-State Information Sharing & Analysis Center \(MS-ISAC\)](#). Some states have established partnerships with the National Guard to assist with protecting election systems from cyberthreats. Private companies such as Google have also made commitments to providing assistance to state and local election officials.
- **Training.** Beefing up security can be as simple as providing training to state and local election officials on things like requiring strong passwords, activating existing security software that may be built into their systems, updating software as the vendor suggests, and teaching staff to avoid phishing efforts. Overall, states must create a culture of security within election administration.
- **Resiliency.** Scary as it sounds, it may not be a matter of if election systems are targeted, but when. It's important for state and local officials to be able to monitor their systems, detect threats, respond, and then recover. What happens if the voter registration database is changed? Are there backups? Do state laws permit a "fail-safe" option for those who attempted to register but were thwarted by a cyberattack?
- **Choosing secure equipment.** Many states and jurisdictions are looking at purchasing new elections equipment in the next few years. In doing so, security and resiliency of the systems can be a top-of-the-list priority. What is the backup in case of an attack on these systems? Is there a paper record that can be audited?

State Policy Choices

- Hold an informational hearing on election security and invite your state and local experts to explain their processes.
- Visit a local election official's office and ask them to walk through their process and security procedures.
- Review state requirements for voting technology for out-of-date language.
- Review state laws on pre-election logic and accuracy testing of voting equipment, and post-election audits.
- Review what personal information for voters is required or held private.
- Provide security-specific funding. While many security efforts don't require purchasing new hardware or software, staff may be required to train local officials, or to implement best practices.
- Take a role in deciding if DHS should be invited to review your states' systems.

Additional Information

- NCSL webpage | [Post-Election Audits](#)
- NCSL webpage | [Election Security: State Policies](#)

- Articles from NCSL's newsletter The Canvass:
 - [Election Security: A Priority for Everyone](#)
 - [Security and Elections: What Legislators Need to Know](#)

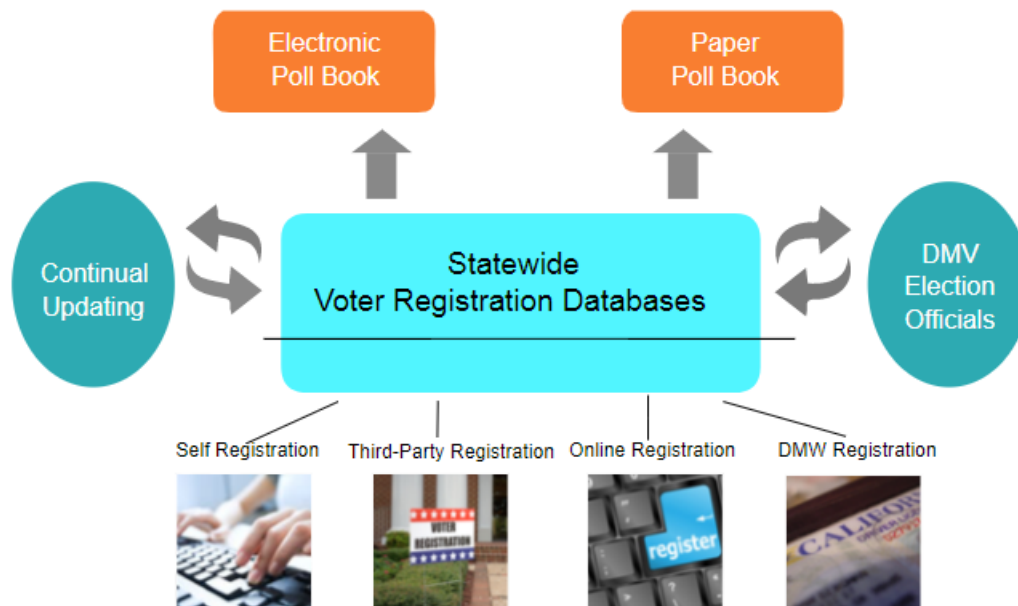
6. States maintain and secure voter registration databases

“One of the things that the board has done that I think is very helpful is implementing and utilizing the Election Registration Information Center (ERIC).”

—Councilmember Kenyan McDuffie, Washington, D.C.

Much of the news in the last year has revolved around malicious actors “scanning” voter registration databases. If the general public weren’t aware of these election-related systems before, they are now.

Centralized voter registration databases were required by HAVA. Previous to HAVA, voter registration information mostly was kept at the local level, in a local 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.



Some of these statewide voter registration systems (SVRS) are top-down systems, in which the state maintains the system with information supplied by counties. Others are considered bottom-up systems, in which counties have their own lists and provide them to the state at regular intervals. And some states use a hybrid of both approaches. For example, in Texas, 215 of the 254 counties directly use the Texas statewide voter registration system to manage their data, and another 39 counties manage their own voter registration data and exchange data with the statewide database every night.

The U.S. Election Assistance Commission’s ([EAC snapshot of voter registration systems](#)) has detailed information on these centralized systems and how they work.

Some states built their own voter registration systems through the state's IT department or other internal mechanisms, and others used vendors to build and maintain their system. Although there is not a direct link between voter registration databases and the devices that are used for casting and tabulating votes, infiltrating a voter registration database can still cause chaos. If a malicious actor erased or changed voter records, either strategically or en masse, it could cause mass confusion and long lines on Election Day. And since these databases contain voters' personal information, they can also be a target for plain old run-of-the-mill identity thieves.

State Policy Options

- Provide funding for upgrades of a voter registration system, especially in light of emerging security threats.
- Work with state election officials on policies to ensure accurate voter lists.
- Work with state election officials, and the federal government if appropriate, and other security experts to ensure the security of statewide voter registration databases.

The SVRS is an essential link in the chain. Regardless of what type of system a state uses, there are costs associated with maintaining it. Many of these costs are borne by states, in conjunction with local jurisdictions.

- **Personnel.** States must dedicate personnel time to maintenance and security of the SVRS.
- **Training.** It is typically a state responsibility to train local election officials on how to use the statewide system.
- **Vendors.** Some states contract with a vendor to provide this system, in which case the state pays for the service and maintenance contract. This could include licensing fees, servers, maintenance agreements and periodic updates.
- **Development costs.** Whether a state uses a vendor or the system is home-grown, there are development costs and personnel time to consider, as well as a plan for updating the system.
- **Security.** Statewide voter registration databases are not connected to the voting systems, where votes are cast and captured. Even so, security protocols for all large-scale databases should be in place. Recent events have shown that these systems are potentially vulnerable, and while states may have more resources than local jurisdictions to combat large-scale cybersecurity threats, providing sufficient funds to combat these types of threats at the state and local levels remains an issue.
- **Voter list maintenance.** All states take steps to keep their voter registration rolls accurate and up-to-date with the goal of preventing ineligible people from voting and preventing anyone from voting twice. Many voter list checks are completed at the state level and information sent to individual jurisdictions for updates. These checks are comparisons of different databases against the voter list to identify potential duplicate records, deceased voters, felons and people who have moved. They require personnel time to process and ensure that local jurisdictions are in

compliance, as well as the time and effort required to work with other agencies to do database comparisons and exchanges to support these checks.

- [Electronic Registration Information Center \(ERIC\)](#), a consortium of states that compares data from participating states looking for duplicates and inaccuracies on voter rolls. ERIC provides reports to member states, who then take action as appropriate under their state laws.
- **Upgrades or replacement of system.** As with many election technologies, many states need to soon replace or upgrade their SVRS. Most states established these systems in the early 2000s and are facing aging systems that aren't as flexible or compatible with other systems and they could be.

Additional Information

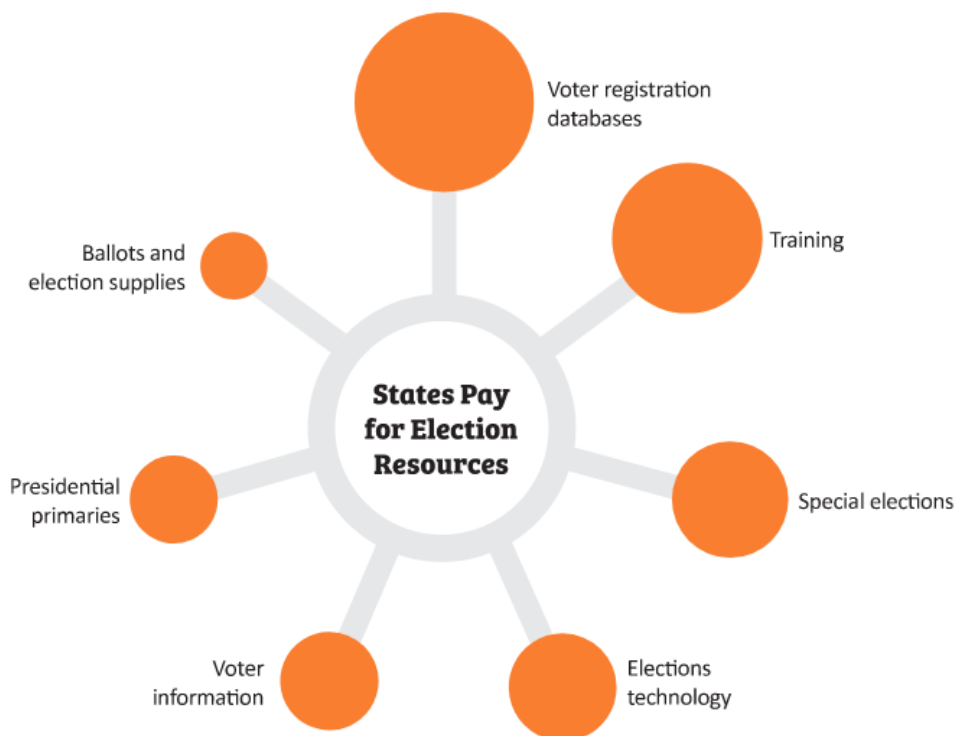
- NCSL's webpage on [Voter List Accuracy](#)
- In 2016 the EAC issued a [Checklist for Securing Voter Registration Data](#) to help state and local jurisdictions grapple with security.

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

“Small counties have limited funds. Having ballot-on-demand and not having to print ballots would be a huge saving to small counties. You never know how to prepare for voter turnout. Do you print ballots for 50 percent or 80 percent of your registered voters and just throw away the extras?”

—Joyce Oakley, county clerk, election commission and register of deeds for Nemaha County, Neb.

In addition to the big costs—paying for portions of some elections, paying for equipment and maintaining statewide voter registration databases—states devote resources and help bear the costs of elections in other ways, too.

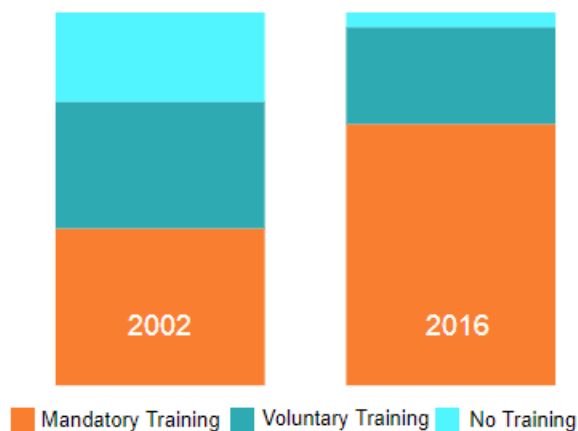


Training for Local Election Officials

Almost every state assists in some way with training local election officials, the county clerks, registrars or election boards that conduct elections on the county—or in some cases township—level. Election officials in the U.S. are often elected and may or may not have an elections background, so providing guidance or training to newly elected or appointed officials is especially important. But so is keeping track of the election law changes each year, and ensuring that election officials have the most up-to-date information on how elections should be administered so that elections are uniform across the state.

States take a variety of approaches to assisting local election officials and have played an increasingly important role in training these officials since the passage of HAVA in 2002. The options include:

- **State-mandated certification program.** Some states require election officials to attend a certification program, typically a series of state-provided classes over a period of a year or two. These classes may be offered online or in person, or a combination of the two, and state law usually gives election officials a set period of time from their election/appointment to complete the certification courses. After certification is obtained, an official typically must take a required number of continuing education courses to maintain certification.
- **State-mandated training.** Even if a state doesn't have a formal election official certification program, it may require election officials to attend state-provided training annually or biannually. This is most common in more centralized states where the state election office plays a larger role in election administration, but is becoming increasingly common.
- **Voluntary state training.** If a state doesn't require election officials to attend training, it may still offer periodic training with the understanding that officials may need some extra assistance, especially when new legislation is passed that substantially changes procedures.



What do the numbers on the left represent?

A [study from The Pew Charitable Trusts' electionline.org](http://www.pewcharitabletrusts.org/electionline.org) in 2002 and an update in 2016 from NCSL research shows the growth in training programs over the past 14 years. Even states that indicated they did not conduct local election official training in 2016 noted that the state election office is involved with local election official association meetings and typically presents on changes to the statewide voter registration database processes or changes in election law. (See Appendix III for state-by-state information on training programs).

Although the state plays a central role in offering training courses in many states, local associations of election officials may also assist greatly with this process. They may offer mentoring programs for new election officials, for example, or their yearly meetings may contain a training component that is conducted by an experienced election official.

Compensation for Local Election Officials

In most states, it is up to the counties or local jurisdictions to employ and compensate election officials, but some states assist counties by paying for some personnel costs associated with elections. Personnel costs, including poll workers for Election Day as well as temporary employees to assist with everything from entering voter registrations to working overtime to get ballots counted on election night, are typically the largest line item in a local election official's budget. States assist with personnel costs in a variety of ways:

- **Paying personnel costs for specific functions or elections.** In Hawaii, the state provides mandatory training and stipends for Election Day poll workers. The state may also pay for overtime costs for local election officials if it is strictly related to state responsibilities. In Louisiana,

the state pays the salary of permanent and temporary employees who perform election duties and for law enforcement officers to maintain order for gubernatorial, congressional and presidential primary elections, unless local candidates or questions are on the ballot, in which case the state pays half. In New Jersey, counties receive reimbursement for compensation for members of district boards of elections. In Oklahoma, the state reimburses counties for the county chief election official's salary.

- **Paying a portion of personnel expenses.** In Kentucky, counties are reimbursed from the state for personnel costs up to \$0.50 per registered voter per year.
- **Offering incentive programs for local election official and poll worker training.** In Alabama, poll workers who attend a precinct election official training school are entitled to an additional \$25 per day in compensation from the state. In Tennessee, all election officials must go through training provided by the state, but they may choose to take a certification exam as well, which qualifies them for a higher salary rate if they pass. In Florida, election officials who go through a certification program qualify for a higher salary rate. Local election officials in Louisiana may choose to complete the Louisiana Voter Registration Administrators' Certification Program, through Auburn University and the Election Center, to receive an increase in salary.

Statewide Voter Information

Some states are required to produce and distribute information to voters, particularly voter information pamphlets, information on state candidates or ballot measures, or sample ballots. This often requires a mass mailing to every voter in the state, an expensive undertaking. Every state election agency also has a website that provides information for voters, though the information and services contained on these websites vary greatly (see the report, "[Voter Information in the Digital Age: Grading State Election Websites](#)"). While local jurisdictions also provide information, the state-level information dissemination is a state-covered cost.

- **Publishing election notices.** In Louisiana and South Carolina, for example, the state pays for notices of elections to be published in local newspapers. In other states, published notices are often the responsibility of local jurisdictions.
- **Publishing information on constitutional amendments and ballot questions.** In West Virginia, the state publishes constitutional amendments in a newspaper in every county. Ohio pays the entire cost of advertising in newspapers for statewide ballot issues, explanations of those issues, and arguments for or against them from the secretary of state's ballot advertising fund.
- **Publishing and distributing voter information pamphlets on ballot measures.** In Idaho and Montana, the secretary of state's office is required to publish a voter information pamphlet that is mailed to every household in the state. In Nebraska, the secretary of state is required to prepare a pamphlet that is distributed to county clerks and election commissioners, who must make them available in their office and additional public locations. Wyoming requires the secretary of state to print a "reasonable" number of voter pamphlets and provide them upon request to any person or organization.

- **Publishing and distributing voter information pamphlets with candidate information.** In a handful of states, the voter information pamphlets include information on ballot measures, and also detailed information on candidates and much more.
- **Providing sample ballots.** States may require sample ballots to be posted in polling places, published in newspapers, printed and distributed on request, or printed and mailed. In some cases, the state will pay outright or reimburse local jurisdictions for expenses associated with this. For example, in Arizona the state reimburses counties for printing, labeling and mailing sample ballots for statewide elections, and Maine provides jurisdictions with sample ballots.

States Providing Ballots or Other Supplies

Some states, especially those in New England, provide ballots or other polling place supplies to local jurisdictions. For example:

- **Providing ballots.** The state provides ballots for local jurisdictions in Delaware, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont. In Oklahoma, the state prints ballots for general elections, statewide primaries, runoff primaries and special elections. In Hawaii, the state pays a portion of polling place supplies, including printing ballots. Pennsylvania reimburses local jurisdiction \$0.60 per ballot for preparing, mailing, counting and storing absentee ballots for military and overseas voters.
- **Providing other supplies.** In Connecticut, the state provides peripheral supplies for voting tabulators, such as forms, certificates and security seals. Maine and Massachusetts provide secure ballot boxes to each voting district. In Michigan, the state furnishes localities with two voter information displays for each precinct, ballot box seals, envelope and ballot package seals, and forms for returns of the canvass.
- **Statewide contract for purchase of election supplies.** In Minnesota, the secretary of state may enter into a statewide contract from which any county auditor may purchase ballots, forms or other election supplies. In Ohio, the state may enter into agreements for the bulk purchase of election supplies in order to reduce costs.

State Policy Choices

- Review statewide voter information requirements and decide if they are appropriate to today's communication needs. For example, moving from publishing in a newspaper to publishing online or allowing voters to receive information by email instead of by mail could save money.
- Consider increasing requirements for training for election officials or poll workers to protect the quality of elections throughout the state.
- Consider providing online learning modules for local election officials.
- Provide incentive programs, such as a bump in salary or continuing education grants, to assist election officials who wish to complete professional programs.
- Pay a portion of personnel expenses for local jurisdictions.
- Centralize purchasing options for ballots or other supplies.

States Paying for Polling Places

Polling places can be a large expense for counties, especially those that rely heavily on traditional polling places on Election Day rather than early voting or vote-by-mail options. Although jurisdictions typically try to find government buildings or other facilities that have minimal (or no) rental fees, finding polling places can be difficult and expensive. Hawaii and Louisiana, for example, pitch in to help local jurisdictions pay for polling place location rental fees.

Additional Information

- NCSL's webpage on [Voter Information: Varied State Requirements](#)
- NCSL webpage on [Election Costs: What States Pay](#)

8. Policy choices on how elections are conducted can affect overall costs.

“I’m pleased that we have brought efficiencies to elections. We’ve moved low-turnout elections from February to November to get the largest turnout of voters for those elections, in a sense, eliminating ‘stealth’ elections since there are important questions decided at every election.”

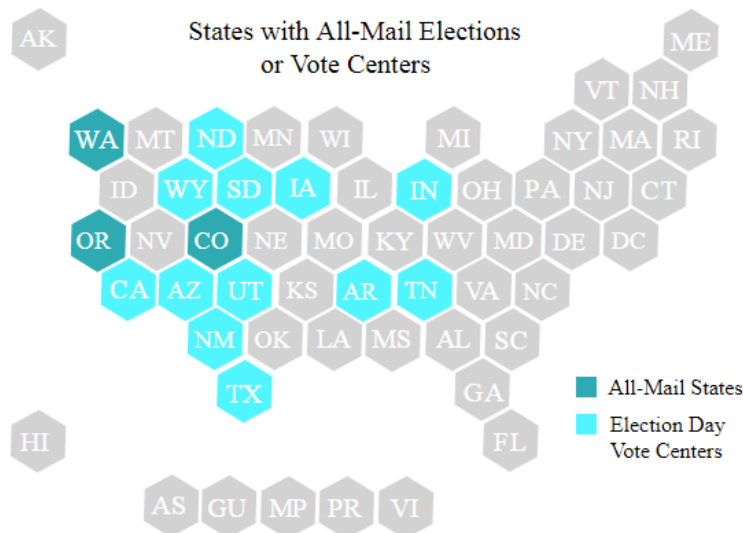
—Michigan Senator Dave Robertson (R)

One way to reduce the cost of elections is to examine how elections are administered in your state. Reducing cost is only one goal—states also aim to improve the accuracy and efficiency of election administration, and increase turnout. But there are a couple of ways that states have altered their model to help with cost considerations:

- **Look at innovations that may save the state money.** Some states have experienced cost savings by moving to vote centers, which are larger polling places that can typically accommodate any voter in a jurisdiction. Having vote centers reduces a jurisdiction’s need for precinct polling places. Fewer polling places means fewer poll workers are needed, as well as potentially fewer supplies and rental costs for polling place locations, all of which can save a jurisdiction money. All-mail elections have also had a similar effect in some states. Even though mailing a ballot to each eligible voter incurs an additional cost, jurisdictions that have moved to this model have still typically experienced savings by reducing the need for physical polling locations and their associated costs. States also have held pilot projects during smaller elections or in certain jurisdictions to test the cost savings measure of potential changes to the election model. It’s important to note that some of these innovations might have initial startup costs, but may save money in the long term.

State Policy Choices

- Consider implementing vote centers or all-mail elections. Some states have held pilot programs for these options first, to study their effects and cost implications.
- Consolidate elections to one or two dates during the year.



- **Consolidate election dates.** There is a common misconception that elections only occur in November, and only in even years. Local election officials are quick to point out that they are administering elections year-round, even in so-called off years. There are school board elections, municipal elections, special district elections, potentially unpredictable special elections, etc. Some states have consolidated the different types of elections so that smaller elections coincide with larger ones. Having fewer elections may save costs, though having more races on a ballot in a larger election could also have cost implications for local jurisdictions.

Additional Information

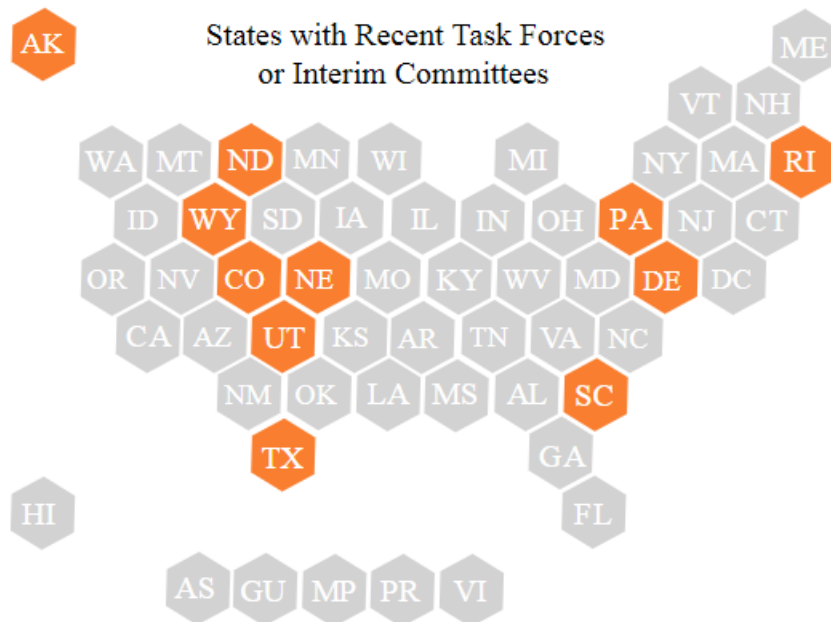
- NCSL's webpage on [Vote Centers](#)
- NCSL's webpage on [All-Mail Elections](#)
- Article from NCSL's newsletter The Canvass, [Election Dates May or May Not Matter](#)

10. Recently states have used task forces to scope out their elections needs and options.

“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.”

—Nebraska Senator John Murante (NP)

If there’s one thing universally true about election administration, it’s that coordination between the state and locals is beneficial. It is the state legislature that sets election policy, but it is local election administrators who are responsible for putting those policies into practice. It can be helpful for local election officials to hear from state legislators about what policy outcomes they are looking for, and for state legislators to hear from local election officials about potential unintended consequences of a given policy. And, more heads are often better than one when brainstorming funding options.



States that have convened task forces in recent years include:

- Colorado convened an advisory committee in 2013 to study a uniform voting system. The group included county clerks, county commissioners, legislators and interest groups. Extensive materials regarding the process are available on the Colorado Secretary of State’s [Uniform Voting System page](#).
- Alaska, Delaware, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Utah, Texas and Wyoming have all recently created committees or task forces to study the longevity of existing voting equipment in the state and possible replacement options.

State Policy Choices

- Establish a task force to examine the needs of the state. Bring in local and national experts, consider the election model as a whole, and discuss potential funding mechanisms.
- Hold an interim hearing on your state’s election technology and funding options.

Additional Information

- NCSL's LegisBrief on [10 Tips for Using a Task Force to Modernize Elections](#)

Appendix I: Methodology

NCSL's mission is to "improve the quality and effectiveness of state legislatures, promote policy innovation and communication among state legislatures, and ensure state legislatures a strong, cohesive voice in the federal system." "The Price of Democracy: Splitting the Bill for Elections" fits squarely into that mission. In this report, we have looked at a key issue facing legislators and others at various levels of government: How to pay for elections, the cornerstone of our representative government.

About five years ago, state and local election officials began considering when and how to replace elections technology. Based on that need, NCSL's elections team began developing materials, gathering information on elections tech options and convening stakeholders to share ideas within and across states. It quickly became apparent that the cost of replacing technology (and who would pay for it) was a key component, perhaps *the* key component to these efforts, from the legislative perspective.

From there, NCSL learned from its constituents that it wasn't just the cost of equipment that mattered. Legislators had questions about how much it costs to run elections overall, who pays or could pay, funding mechanisms used throughout the states, where security needs fit into the goal of running excellent elections, and the impact of policy choices such as early voting, vote centers or all-mail elections on costs.

To address these questions, NCSL took several approaches to gathering information and perspectives for this report:

- Between January and September 2014, NCSL convened meetings in eight states, each time bringing state and local election officials, legislators and legislative staff together to talk about elections technology.
- Between December 2015 and September 2016, NCSL convened meetings in six states, this time focusing on costs and funding for elections.
- Over the course of six years, NCSL interviewed 40 chairs of elections committees and 40 election administrators, to find out their concerns and interests. Their responses are represented in this report, especially since the cost of elections was the most common concern.
- In June 2017, NCSL held a national meeting for legislators, legislative staff and people in the elections field to discuss election costs, technology, what's next in election administration, and funding options for elections.
- Throughout the last five years, NCSL has provided analytical work on state statutes to understand the legal framework underpinning each state's election administration structure. This work

includes gathering information about costs and savings associated with policy options, and is shared on NCSL's website, and is available to the public.

- NCSL connects with elections experts from around the nation to inform all its elections work, and recognizes that the field of election administration prospers through collaboration. These consultations have proved invaluable. We thank those who have helped guide us along the way to this final product, "The Price of Democracy: Splitting the Bill for Elections."

Appendix II: Timeline of State Action on Election Equipment

HAVA provided funds for jurisdictions to replace lever and punch card voting machines with newer technology. As a result, between 2002 and 2008, the majority of jurisdictions across the country bought new equipment. Most voting machines have a life expectancy of 10 to 15 years.

Below is a timeline of state action on election equipment from 2013 to the present.

Timeline

2013

Colorado establishes The Uniform Voting System Advisory Committee. The committee incorporates the perspectives of county clerks, county commissioners, legislators and interest groups into a plan for and implementation of a Uniform Voting System in Colorado. A selection is made and jurisdictions start purchasing new equipment in 2016 (see below).

2014

New Mexico purchases voting machines statewide.

- Amount: \$12 million
- Funding source: Direct appropriation from the Legislature. Equipment purchased at the state level.

Maryland leases voting machines statewide.

- Amount: \$28 million (six-year lease with option for renewal)
- Funding source: Split 50/50 between a state appropriation and counties.

2015

Arkansas begins a matching funds program in the secretary of state's office, as state funds become available, to assist counties with purchasing new voting equipment.

Missouri's secretary of state makes \$2 million available in grant funds specifically for counties to purchase new machines, though this is not sufficient to replace equipment statewide. South Carolina General Assembly establishes a Joint Voting System Research Committee to "identify and evaluate current voting system technologies."

2016

Rhode Island leases voting machines statewide.

- Amount: \$9.28 million (eight-year lease with option to purchase)
- Funding source: Direct appropriation from the legislature. Equipment purchased at the state level.

North Dakota considers, but does not pass, funding for replacing voting equipment statewide. The introduced bill ([ND H 1123](#)) would have appropriated \$9 million.

Colorado selects a statewide uniform voting system. The secretary of state's office makes \$850,000 in leftover HAVA funds available to assist counties with the training and implementation of the new system. New equipment will be purchased with county funds.

Nebraska establishes The Election Technology Committee ([LR403](#)) to study the longevity of current election technology and feasibility of replacing the technology used in the state. Its [final report](#) outlines options for Nebraska.

South Carolina's Joint Voting System Research Committee [issues a report](#) encouraging the consideration of all options, including "acquiring the equipment in stages in order to capture the technological improvements, leasing the equipment, or maintaining the existing equipment in order to purchase a more advance technology in the future."

Delaware enacts [HB 342](#) establishing the Elections Voting Equipment Selection Task Force.

Pennsylvania enacts [SR 394](#) which directs the Joint State Government Commission to study the issue of voting system technology and to report to the Senate its findings and recommendations.

2017

Michigan provides funds to replace equipment statewide and cover long-term maintenance.

- Amount: \$82.1 million over the next 10 years
- Funding source: \$30 million in leftover HAVA funds, \$10 million through a direct appropriation from the Legislature, and the remainder to come from counties.

Nevada provides grant funds to counties for replacing voting equipment.

- Amount: \$8 million
- Funding source: Direct appropriation from the Legislature to fund a grant program ([AB519](#)). \$4.5 million was allocated to Clark County (Las Vegas), \$1.7 million to Washoe County (Carson City), and \$1.8 million to be distributed to the other counties in the state.

Minnesota creates a Voting Equipment Grant Account as part of the [State Government Omnibus Finance Bill](#) (Article 1, Section 6, Subd. 5).

- Amount: \$7 million
- Funding source: Direct appropriation to the grant account. A political subdivision is eligible to receive up to 75 percent of the cost of e-poll book equipment and up to 50 percent the cost of voting equipment.

Utah creates a Voting Equipment Grant Program.

- Amount: \$275,000
- Funding source: Direct appropriation to the grant account ([HB 16](#)). Funds are allocated based on the total number of active voters in a county.

Iowa establishes an Electronic Poll Book and Polling Place Technology Revolving Loan Fund ([HF 516](#) Section 37) to be administered by the state commission and using moneys allocated from the state election commissioner's budget and any other monies obtained for deposit in the fund.

Nebraska considers, but does not pass, [L 316](#) which would create the Election Technology Administration Fund.

Ohio considers [SB 135](#), which would transfer \$7 million from the General Revenue Fund to the Voting and Tabulation Equipment Fund. It would require the issuance of a request for proposal (RFP) for creating a unified statewide purchasing or leasing program for voting and tabulation equipment. Counties would be entitled to reimbursement for a contract to purchase or lease voting equipment that has been entered into on or after Jan. 1, 2014, at 80 percent of the county's cost. This bill has not passed as of press time.

California's Legislature considers, but does not pass, [AB 668](#), which would have placed a \$450 million bond for voting equipment upgrades on the 2018 ballot. Counties would have to match with local funds to qualify for the bond issuance.

Wyoming establishes the [Plan for Aging Voting Equipment \(PAVE\) Task Force](#), to look at the type of election equipment needed in Wyoming and the means of funding the replacement of outdated equipment. Membership includes legislators, county clerks and staff from the Secretary of State's office

Appendix III: State Training Programs for Local Election Officials

State-Run Mandatory Training Program		State-Run Voluntary Training Program	No State-Run Training Program**
Alaska Arizona* Arkansas Colorado* Connecticut* Delaware Georgia* Hawaii Illinois Indiana Iowa* Kansas Kentucky Maine Maryland Massachusetts Michigan*	Minnesota* Mississippi* Montana* Nebraska New Mexico North Carolina* North Dakota Oklahoma Ohio Oregon Rhode Island South Carolina* Tennessee Vermont Virginia* Washington* Wisconsin* West Virginia	Alabama California Florida Idaho Louisiana Missouri New Hampshire New Jersey Pennsylvania South Dakota Texas Utah Wyoming	Nevada New York

* Denotes states with a certification program.

**Note that even in states with no state-run training program, the state may publish digests, handbooks or compilations of election laws, and state officials may present on aspects of election administration during local election official conferences.

Acknowledgements

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We wish to acknowledge the contributions of the National Association of Secretaries of State, the National Association of State Election Directors and the many state election officials who provided invaluable perspectives and knowledge on election procedures in their states.

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Additional Resources

- NCSL's [Election Laws and Procedures Overview](#) links to dozens of webpages on specific election administration research topics, such as voter ID, pre-Election Day voting and vote centers.
- NCSL's [Election Technology Overview](#) links to webpages specific to election technology policy, including a "toolkit" for legislators and webpages on security and costs.
- For legislators and legislative staff, the most important resource NCSL can offer is its staff. [NCSL's elections team](#) is available to provide additional background material, customized research, testimony or state-specific questions.

Please reach out at any time:

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About NCSL

The National Conference of State Legislatures is the bipartisan organization dedicated to serving the lawmakers and staffs of the nation's 50 states, its commonwealths and territories.

NCSL provides research, technical assistance and opportunities for policymakers to exchange ideas on the most pressing state issues, and is an effective and respected advocate for the interests of the states in the American federal system. Its objectives are:

- Improve the quality and effectiveness of state legislatures.
- Promote policy innovation and communication among state legislatures.
- Ensure state legislatures a strong, cohesive voice in the federal system.

The conference operates from offices in Denver and Washington, D.C.