

# Enhancing Security and Integrity Through Rethinking Election Funding

By Ryan Williamson



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## Introduction

Elections cost American taxpayers approximately \$2 billion per year—a figure that may grow to \$5 billion in the near future.<sup>1</sup> This total may seem eye-popping, but there are approximately 10,000 unique election jurisdictions in the United States, each requiring a team of election administrators to register voters; maintain voter lists; find and staff polling places; conduct public education and outreach; facilitate candidate filings; create ballots; test and secure voting equipment; and tabulate and audit results.<sup>2</sup> And these administrators often operate in a hostile environment with too few staff and outdated technology.<sup>3</sup>

Elections in many jurisdictions are insufficiently funded. States typically devote a small percentage of their budget toward election administration, and funding from the federal government appears at irregular intervals, often with strings attached.<sup>4</sup> Most state budgets are stretched thin, and local governments struggle with a shrinking tax base or restrictions on revenue sources.<sup>5</sup> While some private actors have tried to fill in gaps, philanthropic funding for elections creates its own set of problems.<sup>6</sup>

This paper outlines how elections are currently funded and how that funding can be bolstered while balancing other budgetary priorities and maintaining local control of election administration. It builds off previous work that identified an ongoing need for election funding and seeks to offer consensus on how best to provide this funding.<sup>7</sup> Improved funding models can not only provide reliable resources, but also bolster security, integrity, trust and satisfaction.

## The Current State of Election Funding and Security

Election administrators across the country regularly bemoan resource scarcity.<sup>8</sup> It is essentially impossible to know how much elections cost—given the complexity of election systems and overlapping responsibilities of federal, state and local governments—but the best estimate is at least \$2 billion annually.<sup>9</sup>

Despite Congressional, constitutionally enumerated powers to oversee elections, the federal government has appropriated election funding just three times in the last decade (2018, 2020 and 2022), totaling just \$880 million—less than 9 percent of the estimated cost of elections during this time.<sup>10</sup> Remaining funds come from states and localities, which must divide responsibilities and balance competing priorities. All states manage the voter registration process at the statewide level, and a few states even bear the entire cost of elections.<sup>11</sup> Others split costs with local governments or reimburse counties up to a set amount. Unfortunately, many jurisdictions, whether funded by state or local governments, struggle to keep up with the ongoing cost of elections, resulting in outdated voting equipment that threatens election security and integrity.

Regardless of its source, funding should be disbursed at regular intervals, in a predetermined amount and within a useful pre-election time frame. State and local governments need time and certainty to budget, plan and prepare. Being able to pilot and modify changes for increased



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effectiveness instead of on-the-fly, unsustainable, patchwork solutions will make for much more efficient and effective spending.

In fact, spending money on elections may actually reduce wasteful spending as inadequate funding creates inefficiencies. For example, spending \$100 on a \$500 problem does not save \$400 if the problem remains unresolved. Instead, that \$100 is a stopgap, and \$500 will still be needed, assuming the problem does not worsen and the cost of the solution does not increase. Budget writers at all levels of government can save money by allocating funding with the future in mind.

To use a real-world example, in 2020, the federal government disbursed \$2 million in election funding to Pennsylvania—a state with over 12 million residents across 67 counties.<sup>12</sup> While \$2 million can buy quite a few voting machines in a handful of counties, that funding was distributed across the entire state, and some jurisdictions ultimately received only a few thousand dollars—too little to solve any major problems. Despite the seemingly significant sum, the funding inadequacy proved marginally helpful at best, allowing expensive problems to fester.<sup>13</sup>

Election administration funds must be provided in a swift and timely manner. It typically takes months for the federal government to release funds to the states, and it can take even longer for states to allocate those funds to local jurisdictions.<sup>14</sup> Once funds are received, the procurement process can be lengthy, particularly when the funds are set aside for specific purposes. From there, the implementation of new programs or processes requires even more time before the public benefits from the new spending. In the end, election workers often have to operate on truncated timelines, leading to inefficiencies, delayed projects and dissatisfied voters. Therefore, when funds are provided from any level of government, appropriators should do so well in advance of an election and prioritize expediency in allocation so that administrators have as much time as possible to use the funds effectively.

Finally, appropriators should not necessarily view funds leftover from previous allocations by states and local governments as a sign of adequate funding. Given the irregular and insufficient funding currently allocated for elections, local election administrators may choose to save their funding for inevitable future needs because they cannot rely on federal or state government to provide stable support.<sup>15</sup> Ironically, many election administrators are being punished for not engaging in more wasteful spending purely to demonstrate need.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, rethinking how elections are funded can allow administrators to better prepare for and respond to both short- and long-term security challenges.

## Role of the Federal Government

### Addressing Security Threats

Threats from foreign adversaries are ever present. The Director of National Intelligence explicitly stated that “[f]oreign intelligence entities likely view U.S. elections as an opportunity to undermine confidence in our democratic institutions and processes, sow divisions in our society, weaken our alliances, and promote their political, economic or ideological agendas.”<sup>17</sup> Many states and local jurisdictions do not have a large enough tax base to fund elections adequately, and others do not have access to best practices or other guidance to address these threats. Without the safeguards of cyber-navigators, updated software and hardware, and robust cyber hygiene and training, elections become vulnerable. Furthermore, given the nature of foreign threats, the federal government is responsible for helping states and localities address these problems and overcome funding shortfalls. Therefore, control over election administration should remain at the state and local level, but the federal government has a role to play as outlined in the Elections Clause and in light of unfunded mandates set forth in various pieces of legislation such as the National Voter Registration Act, the Voting Rights Act and the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act.<sup>18</sup>

### Overcoming Insufficient Funding

Unfortunately, just like election funding at the state level, federal funding has been insufficient and inefficient. A recent report found that “federal contributions to the conduct of elections between 2003 and 2020 amount to a little more than 4% of all elections spending during that period.”<sup>19</sup> Additionally, we know that current levels of funding are not adequate to ensure safe and secure elections. Indeed, more than 75 percent of election workers encompassing all political identities would like the federal government to increase its support for elections.<sup>20</sup> The public also appears to have an appetite for increased Congressional election funding. The federal government has allocated approximately \$500 million in each of its emergency election packages, and a recent study

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## ELECTIONS

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found that 63 percent of people supported offering \$500 million per year to state and local offices to fund elections.<sup>21</sup> Though identifying an exact price tag is beyond the scope of this paper, it is clear that the federal government needs to invest more in state and local election security.

Importantly, more funding does not require the expansion of the federal government. The U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC), established in 2002, is tasked with disbursing and auditing funds allocated through the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) and with providing information and guidance to state and local election workers.<sup>22</sup>

Increased funding need not mean an increase in taxes. There is no shortage of inefficiencies in the federal budget. For example, the 2022 defense budget included \$25 billion more than the Pentagon requested.<sup>23</sup> Though this is a commonly cited source of inefficient spending, it is not the only problematic area. There are several other programs—such as the Agriculture Risk Coverage and Price Loss Coverage programs—that, if changed or eliminated, could free up taxpayer funds.<sup>24</sup> More broadly, the federal government’s regular inability to meet funding deadlines has normalized the passage of continuing resolutions, which are emergency stopgap budgets put in place until full funding agreements can be reached. These stopgap funding bills waste resources and decrease accountability.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, Congress can improve funding for elections without increasing spending by reducing waste and meeting funding deadlines.

When Congress does appropriate funds, it should use broad language with the fewest strings attached. Using broad language is important, as many states recently had unspent HAVA funds because it was unclear whether they could use the funds for their most pressing need: physical security.<sup>26</sup> Although the Government Accountability Office (GAO) eventually ruled that the funds could be used for that purpose, confusing funding requirements cost state and local governments time that election workers could have used to plan for and implement improvements.<sup>27</sup> Shortened time windows for procurement and implementation can potentially lead to increased costs, as decision-makers may have to prioritize expediency over savings. Shortened time frames can also create confusion and frustration for voters—as seen during the 2020 cycle—which can then, in turn, threaten the perceived integrity of elections.<sup>28</sup> There are also more direct security concerns. Implementing new systems or technologies requires training and contingency planning. Reducing the amount of time administrators have to engage in these important measures can lead to vulnerabilities.

## Conducting Oversight

Additionally, there should be clear oversight and audits to guard against any misuse or other impropriety.<sup>29</sup> Currently, the EAC Office of the Inspector General conducts audits to ensure that requirements, such as state-funding matches and appropriate expenditures, are met.<sup>30</sup> This process should be continued and expanded to ensure the funding is used appropriately. These audits also identify potential loopholes or ambiguities in the use of federal funds and preempt more problems by updating the relevant statutes on an ongoing basis. This can also help the EAC identify best practices within certain states that can then be shared with all other states to improve security and integrity across the country. Lastly, strong oversight can serve as a deterrent against fraud and abuse, which helps preserve the perceived security and integrity of all elections.

## Role of the States

Before discussing what states should do, it is worth considering what they currently do. One report revealed that while current local government spending on elections amounts to \$2 billion per year nationwide, the cost of elections over the next decade could grow to approximately \$5 billion.<sup>31</sup> Regrettably, the current level of election funding from local governments is not enough.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, as noted in the report, “a consensus exists within the election administration community that elections are underfunded nationwide, even if they are more underfunded in some places than others.” Election administration is largely done at the local level, and for states to maintain their role as the primary overseers of elections, they must safeguard this institution and fund it adequately.

In most states, the money spent on elections is raised through property and sales taxes at the local level.<sup>33</sup> This means that less affluent districts are especially ill-equipped to support the cost of elections in their jurisdiction. The first step states can take to better fund elections is to elevate election funding on their list of priorities, particularly for lower-income areas. Increased state funding should supplement local funding.

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For some states, however, this does not have to mean raising taxes or abandoning other important programs. Inefficiencies in current electoral processes could be resolved to free up funds that can be better spent. For example, 11 states currently use runoff elections, often in low-turnout primaries.<sup>34</sup> These statewide elections cost millions of dollars that could otherwise be reallocated to something else (e.g., new technologies, physical security, additional workers).<sup>35</sup> If those states adopted instant-runoff elections using ranked choice voting (RCV), costly follow-up elections would be unnecessary.<sup>36</sup>

States should also consider moving away from legislature-based redistricting in order to reduce costs and provide additional support to election administration. Legislative-drawn maps are often subject to protracted legal battles that can cost millions of dollars.<sup>37</sup> Instead, redistricting commissions reduce the amount of racial gerrymandering that has been the focus of numerous legal challenges in decades past. Paying commissioners to draw maps does create an additional cost, but so do the special sessions that state legislatures use to draw their maps—and the commission maps are less likely to be subjected to legal challenges.<sup>38</sup> There are currently 26 legal challenges that have been filed against new congressional maps on the grounds of racial discrimination.<sup>39</sup> Of those 26, only one was not drawn by political actors. Legal challenges in Louisiana and Ohio have already cost taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars and are set to exceed \$1 million before the issues are resolved.<sup>40</sup>

Retaining existing election workers is another way to reduce costs and facilitate better funding. Losing talent is costly, creating added expenses for hiring and training replacements.<sup>41</sup> The loss of experience and institutional knowledge from departing election workers may increase inefficiencies and mistakes, which could cost the state even more money. This is especially important because recent reports show that election workers are leaving in droves.<sup>42</sup> Workers primarily cite threats received as a result of misinformation and increased demands on their work that are not matched with increased resources as reasons for exiting the profession.<sup>43</sup> As some scholars assert, “I haven’t seen much in elections that couldn’t be resolved by a healthy infusion of cash.”<sup>44</sup> An infusion of cash from the state and federal government could be used to provide increased physical and technological security, combat misinformation and provide greater support for election workers to perform their duties, all of which could increase retention and facilitate the recruitment of new workers.

With these facts in mind, we will now analyze hypothetical scenarios that consider how the federal government’s \$500 million annual allotment, if applied thoughtfully, might improve the current paradigm in two states: Alabama and New York.

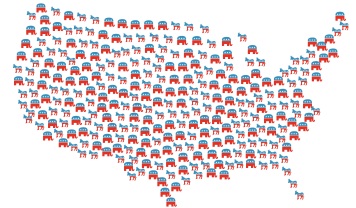
### Case Study: Alabama

Consider how election funding in Alabama might look over the next decade if the government were to implement some of the suggested measures. If the federal government allocated \$500 million annually—the approximate amount currently provided in emergency circumstances—for states to conduct elections, under the formula employed by the EAC with respect to the 2020 HAVA funds, Alabama would receive about \$8 million in funding each year, amounting to \$80 million total over the course of a decade.<sup>45</sup>

Suppose Alabama adopted RCV with instant runoffs for primaries. Primary runoffs have become more of the norm than the exception in Alabama, and the 2022 Senate runoff cost \$5.5 million.<sup>46</sup> The move to RCV would require a one-time expense for upgrades to software and hardware, education initiatives for voters and other related items, but RCV elections themselves do not cost more than other elections and may even be less expensive in some jurisdictions.<sup>47</sup> Most notably, they eliminate the need for multimillion-dollar runoffs.

Furthermore, suppose an independent commission were responsible for the decennial redistricting process instead of the State Legislature. Alabama’s 2021 special session redrawn maps were almost immediately challenged as racial gerrymandering, and the case has made it all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.<sup>48</sup> With such a long, protracted litigation history, this redistricting challenge is undoubtedly costing the state a substantial amount of money.

Let us conservatively assume that redistricting litigation costs the state \$1 million, and Alabama has five runoff elections over the next 10 years (the same number as in the last decade) at \$5.5 million each. Assuming the price does not increase over the next decade, although it almost certainly will, the cost of runoffs would reach \$27.5 million. If Alabama instead employed an independent redistricting commission and adopted RCV with instant runoffs for primaries, the state would save \$28.5 million by 2032. Paired with \$8 million per year in federal assistance, that amounts to \$108.5 million in election-related funds over the course of a decade.



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That amount of money could greatly improve the security and integrity of elections in Alabama. Based on estimates from several reports, at that amount, Alabama could hire cyber navigators, restrict access to secure areas, employ camera surveillance and implement access control to voter registration and election management systems for the entire decade.<sup>49</sup> This money could also go to retaining and attracting new election workers; improving civic education programs; updating hardware and software; and addressing other currently unmet needs.

## Case Study: New York

Election administration in the state of New York notoriously leaves much to be desired. The New York City Board of Elections has been referred to as “a disaster,” “broken,” “one of the worst in the country” and “a national embarrassment.”<sup>50</sup> New York City implemented RCV for its mayoral primary recently, to the broad satisfaction of voters.<sup>51</sup> However, that change was not met with sufficient resources to ensure a smooth transition to the new voting system.<sup>52</sup> The reform effort drew controversy and criticism after city officials failed to remove 135,000 test ballots from the system before counting voters’ ballots.<sup>53</sup> This resulted in one reported tally being taken down and rereported with the correct figures. Though simple human error, it points to a larger problem in New York elections. As one organization points out, “[i]nconsistent and inadequate training is one of the top problems stakeholders identify with New York’s election administration system.”<sup>54</sup> This same statement identifies a lack of “staff capacity, funding, and infrastructure to meet the increasing demands of election administration.” Many jurisdictions within New York are understaffed, and many staff lack the training and other necessary resources to do the job well.

The state also empowered an independent redistricting commission to draw new legislative boundaries. But again, this change was not designed in a way that made good use of limited resources. Unlike in other states such as California and Michigan, New York’s commissioners are largely appointed by the legislature instead of a more neutral selection process, and the legislature must approve the maps produced instead of sole mapmaking authority living in the hands of the commission.<sup>55</sup> As a result, the commission was never actually independent, and the process became marred by partisan politics, leading to legal challenges and additional rounds of mapmaking.<sup>56</sup> In this case, as with the implementation of RCV, meaningful reforms were enacted, but the commission did not receive the resources needed to be truly impactful. Instead, the commission was inefficient and ineffective, but a proper investment could have made the reforms more worthwhile.

Hypothetically, with a \$500 million annual allocation from the federal government, New York would receive around \$25 million each year. Paired with ongoing efforts within the legislature, the state would then have enough money to properly implement RCV, establish a truly independent redistricting commission and provide adequate training and resources. These changes are necessary to move away from a highly partisan process and toward a nonpartisan, qualified team of election workers that can improve integrity and trust in New York elections.<sup>57</sup> Though these reforms are often not advanced with more-responsible spending in mind, the cost savings should be a part of the consideration.

Additionally, New York does not require voters to show a photo ID when voting, unless they did not provide such identification when registering to vote.<sup>58</sup> Americans overwhelmingly support voter ID laws, as they help combat in-person voter fraud, which increases confidence in elections.<sup>59</sup> If such funding were appropriated to New York, it could be used to expand the existing free ID program to ensure that everyone who is registered has a viable ID.<sup>60</sup>

In short, more spending from the state and federal government, if used efficiently and effectively, could be the difference between New York being one of the worst states when it comes to administering elections to one of the best.

## Conclusion

Elections are the bedrock of democracy. Better funding and responsible spending could resolve the myriad problems elections workers face. Our federalized system of government should be honored, with the primary responsibility of election administration remaining in sub-national hands, but both state and federal governments should prioritize election funding and improve spending efficacy and efficiency. Doing so could drastically improve the elections landscape.



### Conclusion Recommendations

- **State and federal governments should prioritize election funding to increase security and integrity.**
- **States should adopt reforms that make spending more efficient and effective, such as well-designed, independent redistricting commissions and RCV over costly runoffs.**
- **The federal government should appropriate funds with as few strings attached as possible and conduct robust oversight and auditing.**
- **Funds from state and federal governments should be appropriated in predetermined amounts, at regular intervals and in advance of Election Day to ensure that localities can plan and budget to maximize fund efficacy.**

### About the Author

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## Endnotes

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