

How Much Are We Spending on Election Administration?

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Just after the presidential election of 2000, Caltech and MIT did a series of reports on causes and consequences of electoral failure and one of those reports Voting: What Is What Could Be gave the first ever estimate of the cost of conducting elections in the United States. Based on the budgets for election administration in the year 2000, this report pinned the cost of elections at \$10/voter or at about \$1 billion for the entire country. The report noted that this was an estimate and that additional data were needed on the cost of elections. As elections administration and public budget researchers, we were curious if we could find data on the cost of elections and wanted to know if the costs had changed since 2000. We wanted to get an updated answer to the question: how much does it cost to conduct elections in the United States?

In 2017, the MIT Election Data and Science Lab provided to us a grant to collect data on this question. Our approach was designed to be different than the original study. First, the Caltech-MIT study used the budget for election administration in various states throughout the country. While little research has been done on the topic of election costs in the US, there was research in the UK that showed that election budgets and actual election spending systematically vary. This budget variance can happen because other pressing priorities can crowd out election spending or because the election budgets contain contingency reserves. So, we wanted to collect actual spending from the annual financial reports of the local governments that were providing elections to get an actual spending amount. We also wanted to collect spending data over time. Such over time data increases our ability to make valid inferences about how cost affect election administration outcomes. We have already collected data over time for all of the counties in North Carolina and preliminary analysis shows that resources are associated with different election outcomes. However, to generalize beyond North Carolina, we really need to have data from multiple states. Collecting actual data over multiple periods gives us the best estimate of election administration expenditure available.

Our graduate assistant, Madison Esterle did the heavy lifting of collecting the financial reports and coding them for election costs. We were thrilled when she collected cost data for 27 states. The amount of missingness and detail from these states varies significantly. At the high end, we found data from states like New York that have 100% of counties over a 20 year period. Other states like Maine and Massachusetts have only 2% and 1.5% collected, respectively. This is a limitation of our data collection procedure but we think that even in the limited collection states the cost information is valuable. Overall, the data provide the first look over time at election administration costs in a majority of US states.



We see from the dataset that the cost of election administration from 26 states is \$8.10/per voter. (We left out Wisconsin because the Wisconsin data come from a different source and likely do not measure the total cost of election administration—that is, including “between election” costs). The total for election administration in the United States is estimated at about \$2 billion per year. We conclude that this is likely a lower bound estimate. The estimate may not include the cost of resources paid for by other levels of government and/or for resources that are provided in other funds of the same jurisdiction such as secure server space for election registration housed in the Sheriff’s office. Future work will need to untangle these detailed cost issues. In the next six months, we will also make the cost dataset available to researchers worldwide and we are excited to see the many ways that the cost data are used to understand the impact of resources on elections.