

COST AND FINANCE OF ELECTIONS

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WHAT DO ELECTIONS COST?

First, let me tell you that it is very hard to get a handle on what elections cost in America. There are 3,141 counties in the United States and thousands more cities, townships and villages conducting elections. In some cases, such as Oklahoma and Hawaii the State is responsible for most election costs.

In the November 2000 election, I have estimated that there were 192,142 polling places and about 1.4 million poll workers. The cost of renting these polling places ranges from nothing to more than several hundred dollars each. Similarly, poll workers are paid as little as \$35 dollars per day to well over \$100 per day. So even when you have lots of numbers and empirical data, it is hard to extrapolate anything approaching an exact cost.

With all of that said, I used Sacramento County cost data and if my costs are representative of the county, the November, 2000 Presidential election cost local jurisdictions more than \$300 million. This does not take into account any voting equipment costs.

WHO PAYS FOR ELECTIONS?

Except as noted earlier, local government pays for most of the costs of conducting elections. Funds that are allocated for conducting elections come from the same pool of funds that are needed to operate the libraries, maintain parks, fix the roads, provide health and welfare services, enforce law, protect adults and children and the whole host of local services.

In some States there are some funds available from the State. Here in California, for instance, the State must pay for the costs of any programs that it mandates. As a result, counties are reimbursed for some of the postage costs associated with mail registration and postage, materials and labor costs associated with absentee voting.

At the Federal level, the only financial help comes from being able to use franking privileges for mailing military and overseas ballots.

HOW ARE COSTS CALCULATED?

In California there are 58 counties and 58 ways of calculating costs and 58 ways of conducting elections. While there are lots of similarities, there are lots of uniquenesses as well.

For example, some election department budgets include the costs of personnel benefits; some do not. Some budgets include facility costs (including utilities) some do not. Some include the costs of other county services like ground maintenance, attorney costs, security, even shared meeting room costs; and others do not.

HOW ARE COSTS ALLOCATED?

In California, the Elections, Government and Education codes allow counties to charge cities, school and special districts for their share of conducting elections. In allocating total election costs to these jurisdiction there are two basic methods.

ADD ON COSTS

Using this method the county would charge only for the costs of adding a jurisdiction to the ballot.

SHARED COSTS

This method allocates costs based on the number of candidates and/or measures, the number of ballot positions, the number of pages in the sample ballot, the number of polling places where the jurisdiction's questions appear and on a variety of other criteria.

In either of these methods indirect and overhead costs may be added, or not.

Some counties use actual costs and some use an averaging method, both of which are permitted under California law.

In Sacramento, we use the averaging method and charge jurisdictions on a fee for service basis. These fees are illustrated in the handout, Specialized Services, that I have provided. As you can see, costs are based on the number of voters, the number of issues and number of pages in the sample ballot. Average costs, based on historical data, provide the basis for the fees.

WHO SHOULD PAY FOR ELECTIONS?

It seems to me to be reasonable to expect each level of government involved in an election to pay its fair share of the costs. Using Sacramento County's November 2000 data as an example, the Federal Government would have paid \$398,000 for its share of my November 2000 election costs. The State would have paid \$428,000 for its share. These costs are out of a total cost of \$1,970,000. The county's share, by the way, would have been \$287,000. I was able to bill the other jurisdictions on the ballot total of \$864,000. On a second handout, I have provided a list of costs for the November election, broken down by jurisdiction, which shows how much each city and district were billed.

Again, if my data is representative, the Federal Government's share of the total \$300 million cost of conducting the November, 2000 election, which would have included President, Vice President and members of Congress, would have been approximately \$59,700,000.