

Statement of Zachary Mohr, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, Public Budgeting and Financial Management
School of Public Affairs and Administration
The University of Kansas

February 7, 2024

Full Committee Hearing of the Committee on House Administration
“American Confidence in Elections: Confronting Zuckerbucks, Private Funding of Election Administration.”

Principles for Funding Election Administration

Thank you, Chairman Steil, Ranking Member Morelle, and Members of the Committee, for the opportunity to testify on the important topic of funding elections.

My name is Zach Mohr and I am an Associate Professor at the University of Kansas. I teach public budgeting and financial management, but I am here today to talk about the important but niche, academic topic of election administration funding, which is a topic that I have studied for eight years with my colleagues from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte Martha Kropf and MaryJo McGowan. We have written several articles about the cost of elections administration, and we are currently finishing up a book entitled *A Republic if You Can Afford It: How Much Does it Cost to Administer an Election?* that we hope will be coming out very soon.

This research guides my comments today. First, I want everyone to recognize that local election administration is often underfunded and to understand why it is underfunded. Secondly, most of us in the election administration community would also agree that local election jurisdictions would benefit greatly from federal funding. To improve the discussion on this topic, I sketch out three principles that I think would be helpful in guiding discussions of funding for elections administration.

Background

It surprises most people to realize how large and varied the election system is in the United States. In federal elections, there are over 8,000 local election jurisdictions that are responsible both legally and financially for conducting elections. Cities, towns, villages, townships and two states are the local units of government that conduct elections. Who conducts elections and how elections are conducted vary significantly by the state.

Likewise, the funding of these election jurisdictions varies dramatically. Most use regular local sources like property tax and sales tax. Some have dedicated tax sources and some have charges for local governments. A few states provide reimbursements and cost sharing for their local governments. There have been very few studies into the financing of election administration because it is such an arcane and idiosyncratic topic.

One thing that most of us that study this topic agree on is that elections administration is underfunded. Why is elections administration underfunded? First, local political leaders have to make tradeoffs in the face of constrained and limited local government resources. Some services like education and public safety are often more popular and more visible than elections administration. Secondly, most people only go to the polls every two or four years. This makes the services that have immediately visible impacts, like schools and roads, more likely to get funded. We can see in our data that elections administration spending when we adjust it for inflation has not risen significantly and is responsive to the economic cycle. The sad truth is that local financing underfunds election administration. What is needed is regular, equitable, and meaningful funding for elections.

Principles for Federal Funding of Election Administration: Regular, Meaningful, and Equitable

For most of its history, the United States funded elections through its local governments. This was probably as much a fact of pragmatic necessity as it was part of its governing theory. Until the 20th century, many states and local governments were better funded than the federal government. However, in the 21st century, the federal government has funded elections administration four times in 2003, 2018, 2020, and 2022.¹ I would argue that this funding should be *regular and consistent* so that the local governments can count on it and that market forces can adjust accordingly.

The amount of federal funding also needs to be *meaningful*. Although cost estimates vary based on who is included and how the dollars are counted, academic research puts the amount spent by the local election jurisdictions on election administration is in the range of \$1.5 billion to \$5 billion per year.² Ideally, the federal government would pay a meaningful share of this cost. While federal offices may appear on the ballot every other year, the reality is that the cost of maintaining voter registration lists, training, and maintaining equipment happen every year and these costs do not go away in the years where no federal office is on the ballot.

Finally, the funding for elections administration needs to be *equitable*. One surprising fact from our research into election administration cost is that the highest costs are often in the rural areas. The reasons for this are simple. There are high fixed costs of voting equipment and fewer people. There are many ways that the federal government could split the cost of election administration with state and local governments but in recent years I have heard some in the election science and election administration community just say to keep it simple for legislators. Let them hear the need and ask for even a dollar per voter or a dollar per registered voter. Keep it simple and get a regular commitment for these underfunded local jurisdictions. My suggestion here is that we really need to keep the cost structure in mind. In a large local government that is spending only three or four dollars per voter, one dollar per registered voter might be appropriate. In smaller local governments that do not have large economies of scale, the federal government should really increase its funding on a per voter basis to be roughly proportional to the funding for larger governments.

Conclusion

While this proposal is light on the details of the cost structure for local election jurisdictions, how costs vary across the country and over time, I hope that the principles articulated here might be helpful in guiding this committee in how it might think about local election administration funding. It is probably true that private financing of elections is not an ideal way to fund elections. However, if states are going to ban private support from local election jurisdictions, then the federal government will likely need to step in to provide additional support.

These comments build on comments that I plan to make at the Rober J. Dole Institute at the University of Kansas next week. I will build on these comments and flesh out these ideas further. I want to thank the Dole Institute and its partner the Edward M. Kennedy Institute for beginning this

¹ First, the federal government gave \$3.2 billion dollars in the first Help America Vote Act funding to help local election jurisdictions replace outdated and error prone election equipment. Then in 2018 there was recognition of election administration as critical infrastructure and the need for security that led to \$380 million appropriated. In 2020 during the pandemic, \$825 million was given to local governments through two appropriations, and in 2022 the federal government appropriated \$75 million. Clearly, the trend is for the federal government to recognize the vital needs of this critical infrastructure and to fund it more. Source Underhill, W. (2022) The Help America Vote Act: 20 Years Later National Conference of State Legislatures <https://www.ncsl.org/state-legislatures-news/details/the-help-america-vote-act-20-years-later>

² This depends on who, what and how it is counted. For a discussion of the range of estimates see Stewart, C. (2022). "The Cost of Conducting Elections." Technical report. <https://electionlab.mit.edu/sites/default/files/2022-05/TheCostofConductingElections-2022.pdf> For a discussion of how the accounting matters see Mohr, Z., Kropf, M., Pope, J., Shepherd, M. J., & Esterle, M. (2018). Election Administration Spending in Local Election Jurisdictions: Results from a Nationwide Data Collection Project. <https://esra.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1556/2020/11/mohr.pdf>

conversation. I have been thinking about the election cost structure and how it is changing for years, and the invitation to discuss election funding from this bipartisan group is extremely welcome. I want to encourage you all to follow the lead of these two institutions and approach this topic in a bipartisan manner. It really is an important but a historically neglected topic.

I also want to thank my academic research team that has worked on our research and our book for many years with me: Martha Kropf, MaryJo McGowan, and the students that have worked to collect and analyze data. I also want to thank the election science and election administration community that has also put me in touch with important ideas and people for me to better understand this topic. I am keenly aware that I do not know it all and these people have helped me immensely. Of course, any problems or limitations of my analysis are my own.

I hope you find these comments useful and I am happy to take any questions that you may have.