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The Real Cost of Voter Registration

An Oregon Case Study

Introduction

Voter registration costs are difficult to determine due to variations in state laws and the manner in which election administration responsibilities are divided between state and local election officials. This case study, conducted by the Pew Center on the States with the assistance of Oregon state and local election officials, is the first publicly available, detailed compilation of state voter registration costs.

The study found that voter registration in Oregon cost more than \$8.8 million during the 2008 election, a cost of \$4.11 per active registered voter or \$7.67 per voter registration transaction (adding new or updating existing voter records). Using this analysis as a model, other states will be able to better estimate their registration expenses and therefore identify opportunities for reform.



How Much Does Voter Registration Really Cost?

As election officials continue to offer voters new and innovative ways to participate in elections, evaluating administrative costs has become a challenging but important exercise.

The operating budget of a typical elections office in America today generally includes funding for two major responsibilities—voter registration and voting.¹ Nearly all elections expenses are incurred in one of those categories. It would be simple to determine registration costs if administrators organized their budgets accordingly. In most elections offices, however, employees typically perform duties related to both registration and voting, which makes it more complex to ascertain the individual costs.

Additionally, two landmark pieces of federal legislation, the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) in 1993 and the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) in 2002 shifted some responsibilities for voter registration from local jurisdictions to states. HAVA, in particular, mandates that each state maintains a statewide voter registration list.² Thus, expenses for voter registration, which fell mainly on local jurisdictions prior to HAVA, are now split between state governments and their counties, cities, towns or townships, disbursing the costs to multiple levels of government.

The purpose of this case study is to assess all voter registration costs, at every level of government, in a single state—Oregon. Such a review will inform discussions regarding possible improvements to the system by which state and local governments register voters and maintain this data. To consider the impact of any proposed change to the voter registration system, the cost of the current system must be known. This first-ever, detailed public analysis also provides a methodology for other states to consider in determining the costs of their current voter registration systems.

Oregon's Voter Registration System

The Secretary of State (SoS) serves as the chief state elections official in Oregon.³ The Secretary's Division of Elections interprets and enforces the voter registration laws that 36 county clerks are required to follow when they determine each voter's qualification to vote in their respective county. The Secretary's office prints and distributes official voter registration forms, including large-print and Spanish language versions. A voter registration form is also included in the official Voter's Pamphlet, which the Division of Elections distributes to each household in Oregon before each statewide election.⁴

Voters may return completed forms to any official voter registration office, including the SoS, county elections

offices and agencies required by the NVRA to offer clients an opportunity to register to vote. All completed voter registration forms are distributed to the appropriate county where personnel enter the data and scan each one into the system to preserve a record of the original form, including the voter's signature. The system also maintains a voting history as part of each voter's record.⁵

In accordance with HAVA, the Secretary of State's office assumes responsibility for creating and maintaining the statewide voter registration list through the Oregon Centralized Voter Registration (OCVR) system. The system includes management functions such as signature verification and ballot preparation that are necessary for a county to conduct a vote-by-mail election, and for state and local governments to validate signatures on petitions.⁶

Various election management functions of the system are accessible only to particular state and county personnel. The Secretary's Elections Division and the county clerks grant and manage access to the system to ensure the security of voter data. Any changes to an individual voter record are recorded in an audit trail that is available to system administrators. Governance of the system includes a Change Control Board, which is composed of 12 county and state personnel. The board advises the Secretary on prioritizing enhancements or changes to the system.

Oregon's Voter Registration Profile for 2008

The 2008 Democratic presidential nomination was highly competitive in the state and resulted in an unusual amount of voter registration activity—including voters changing their party affiliations—prior to the May 20 primary election. The high level of voter registration activity continued through the November general election.⁷

The Secretary of State's Elections Division reports that 2,153,914 Oregonians (about 80 percent of the state's voting-eligible population) were active, registered voters in November, 2008, an all-time high.

Snapshot of Oregon Voter Registration Activity, 2008⁸	
Estimated eligible voters	2,687,000
Total registered for the May 2008 primary	2,008,957 (74.8% of those eligible)
New registrants from Jan. 1 - April 29 (primary registration deadline)	76,337 (2.8% of those eligible)
Party affiliation changes from Jan. 1 – April 29 (primary registration deadline)	71,720
Total active, registered for November 2008 general	2,153,914 (80.2% of those eligible)
New registrants between primary and general	144,957 (5.4% of those eligible)
Party affiliation changes between primary and general	51,000
Total 2008 new registrations	220,243 (8.2% of those eligible)
Total 2008 updates to existing registration records	932,418
Total 2008 transactions (new registrations + updates)	1,152,761

About 70 percent of Oregon's electorate resides in the seven largest counties. The three largest counties, Multnomah, Washington and Clackamas, cover the Portland metropolitan area. The four additional counties are Marion (Salem area), Lane (Eugene-Springfield area), Jackson (Medford area) and Deschutes (Bend area). The other 30 percent of the active registered voters reside in the remaining 29 counties, which range in size from Douglas County's 66,137 voters to Wheeler County's 898 voters.⁹

Methodology

County Expense Estimates

The Pew Center on the States asked Oregon's 36 county clerks to isolate their voter registration expenses from other costs related to conducting elections for 2008. The year was selected because the significant engagement in the presidential election provided a "high water mark" for registration activities and expenses.

Pew worked first with Multnomah County, Oregon's largest local elections jurisdiction with approximately 400,000 registered voters, to list and categorize costs related to voter registration. About one of every five Oregon voters, or 20 percent of the electorate, lives in Multnomah County.

Tim Scott, Multnomah County Director of Elections, created a spreadsheet that categorized registration costs as follows:

- Printing and postage: costs for all mandated federal and state notices to registered voters, including confirmation notices sent to newly registered voters or voters who updated their registrations with address changes or other new information
- Staff costs: an estimate of how much time each staff (full and part-time) person, including the county clerk, spends on voter registration duties and the appropriate apportioning of salary and benefit costs for each of them
- Facility and support costs: office space, information technology (IT) support, telephones, etc. for staff who work on voter registration and any internal IT support charges the elections office pays to the county

All 36 county clerks used the spreadsheet as a tool to calculate their respective county's costs in a uniform manner.¹⁰

State Expense Estimates

The Oregon Secretary of State's office also provided 2008 voter registration cost data. The office's role in managing and supporting various election administration activities and the involvement of other state agencies render a complex cost analysis.

The Secretary of State's Elections Division included the following registration costs in their estimate:

- Maintaining the OCVR system
- Printing and distributing voter registration forms, as well as assisting voters with registration questions and activities
- Receiving and distributing completed registration forms to the counties
- Training and assisting other agencies, including the Oregon Driver and Motor Vehicle Services (DMV) and health and social services agencies, to comply with NVRA
- Providing a toll-free call center service to answer questions from the public regarding all elections-related matters, including voter registration (The office provided an estimate of the number of voter registration-related calls received.)

Voter registration expenses are also incurred at the state level by the Driver and Motor Vehicle Services Division (DMV), a branch of the state Department of Transportation, and the Department of Human Services (DHS). Both agencies provided costs related to NVRA (Motor Voter) compliance.

County and State Total Estimates

The cost estimates of the counties, Secretary of State's office and state agencies were added together to determine a total statewide cost. This total cost was divided by the number of registered voters for the 2008 general election to determine the cost per voter, and the total number of voter registration transactions (new registrations and registration updates) recorded in the state's centralized system to determine a cost per transaction.

While this precise methodology may be challenging to implement in some states due to legal and administrative differences in how they manage elections, it should provide an effective road map (with some adjustments) for states that are interested in collecting and measuring voter registration costs.

Breaking Down the Costs: The Counties

Costs incurred by Oregon counties to register voters and maintain the voter list included: mailings and notices to voters; full-time and part-time staff; facilities and county administrative support; telephones; faxes and desktop computers.¹¹

Cost Data—All Counties	
Total costs for all counties	\$6.47 million
Total active registered voters	2,153,914
County cost per active registered voter	\$3.00
Cost Data— Most Populous Counties	
Total costs for seven largest counties	\$3.83 million
Total active registered voters	1,501,066
County cost per active registered voter	\$2.55
Cost Data— Least Populous Counties	
Total costs for 29 remaining counties	\$2.63 million
Total active registered voters	652,848
County cost per active registered voter	\$4.03

These preliminary numbers potentially indicate that economies of scale in the voter registration process result in a lower per-voter cost in the larger counties. The per-voter personnel costs tend to run higher in small counties, partly due to the fixed expenditures for such items as facilities, administrative support and computer systems.

Breaking Down the Costs: The State

State costs include personnel at the Secretary of State's office, personnel at NVRA agencies such as the DMV and the DHS, support and maintenance of the centralized voter registration system, printing and distribution of voter registration cards, maintenance of a Web site where voters can check the status of their voter registration and a variety of other expenditures. The technology costs principally involve maintenance and support of the centralized voter registration system.¹²

Costs Reported by the Secretary of State's Office and State Agencies	
OCVR personnel	\$278,912
Elections Division personnel	\$117,106
EDS support contract	\$750,000
DMV data	\$4,776
AMVAA data	\$22,000
Eugene data center	\$21,600
Burns data center	\$4,800
Network/Phone	\$129,600
Hardware maintenance	\$103,000
NCOA	\$6,000
Rent/Office Supplies	\$41,900
Printing	\$200,000
Equipment replacement	\$115,800
Toll free call center services	\$50,000
DMV NVRA compliance	\$77,838
DHS NVRA compliance	\$458,303
Total	\$2,381,635

Notes: EDS is the company that built the OCVR. AAMVA is the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators. NCOA is National Change of Address.

Costs Reported by the State

Total State of Oregon costs	\$2.38 million
Total active registered voters	2,153,914
Cost per active registered voter	\$1.11

Combining state and county data provides a more comprehensive estimate of real voter registration system costs.

Cost for Oregon's Voter Registration System

Total State of Oregon costs	\$2.38 million
Total costs for 36 counties	\$6.47 million
Total of all costs	\$8.85 million
Total active registered voters	2,153,914
Total registration transactions	1,152,761
Cost per active registered voter	\$4.11
Cost per transaction	\$7.67

Voter Registration Modernization

Aside from illustrating a means of compiling comprehensive state voter registration cost data, this study suggests a more cost-effective solution to register eligible voters and maintain voter lists. Oregon's paper-based system locks the state into costly expenditures on paper, printing, personnel and data management – costs that could be reduced, while achieving more accurate state voter rolls.

States that have implemented pieces of a modernized system are already reporting considerable cost savings. Delaware was able to reduce labor costs by \$200,000 annually due to its eSignature system that requires every visitor to the Division of Motor Vehicles to register to vote, update their registration or decline to do so, and then electronically syncs that data with the state election

office.¹³ Thanks to the eSignature application, Delaware anticipates moving to a fully paperless registration system, which the state estimates will save more than \$100,000 over a four-year period.¹⁴ In Maricopa County, Arizona, a paper registration form costs at least 83 cents to process, versus an average of 3 cents for a registration completed online.¹⁵

Canada's experience of implementing a modernized system for federal elections, which creates a list of eligible voters from government data sources, suggests that cost savings could be significant. Canadian taxpayers paid \$6.4 million (CAD) for their federal system in 2008 or about 26 cents (USD) per voter—far less than the \$4.11 per voter in Oregon.¹⁶

In March of 2010, Oregon will take a step toward modernization by offering a new online voter registration system similar to what has already been implemented in Arizona and Washington. Oregon counties, in particular, should see direct time and cost savings as the path to registration is streamlined. The time of county personnel assigned to voter registration duties can be reallocated to other areas of the election process, and the need to hire seasonal employees could be reduced. Savings, based on the Maricopa County experience, could be in the tens of thousands of dollars. Additionally, a modernized system that reduces the need for paper registration forms should reduce the \$200,000 cost Oregon spends on production and printing of paper registration forms in a busy election year.

To further reduce voter registration costs, states must leverage modern technology and innovations to bring their outdated systems into the 21st century. States, including Oregon, could significantly increase the accuracy, cost-effectiveness and efficiency of their voter registration systems by implementing reforms that use multiple official databases to better automate voter registration updates and populate the rolls; make voter registration records more portable for individuals who move or change status; and establish a failsafe mechanism to allow eligible voters who are omitted from the rolls to cast a ballot. Pew is working with election officials, technology experts and scholars to explore options for how states may implement such a system.¹⁷

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Contact Us

Please contact John Lindback, senior officer with the Pew Center on the States, at jlindback@pewtrusts.org with any questions or comments about this report or if you are an election official looking for more details on how a similar study could be conducted in your state.

We welcome your advice and participation. For more information on Pew's Election Initiatives, please visit our Web site at www.pewcenteronthestates.org or contact:

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¹ This includes the costs of registering voters, processing updates to voters' registration records, maintaining voter data on a voter registration list and all related expenses; and the costs of conducting an election, including operations of polling places, distributing ballots in person or through the mail, processing ballots, counting votes and all related expenses.

² See NVRA P.L. 103-31 and HAVA P.L. 107-252.

³ Oregon's voter registration system is typical of dozens of other states. The state and local jurisdictions fulfill separate responsibilities and roles. Under the requirements of HAVA, the state of Oregon maintains a centralized database of voters that is the official voter list for all elections. Local elections officials, in Oregon's case the 36 county clerks, are responsible for determining that a person who submits a voter registration form is a qualified voter. Data from each voter registration form is manually entered into the central system by personnel at county clerks' offices.

⁴ See the Elections Division of the Oregon of Secretary of State office, <http://www.sos.state.or.us/elections>.

⁵ Brenda Bayes, Deputy Director, Oregon Secretary of State Elections Division, e-mail message to author, Nov. 16, 2009.

⁶ Oregon is the only state that conducts all local, state and federal elections by mail. Washington is almost entirely vote-by-mail with just one of its 39 counties still providing poll site voting as an option.

⁷ Janie Har, "Oregon sets new voter registration record," *The Oregonian*, Oct. 14, 2008.

⁸ Total estimated eligible voters data from U.S. Census Bureau, "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2008," Table 4a, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/p20/2008/tables.html>.

All state and county total voter registration data are from the Elections Division of the Oregon of Secretary of State's office. For November 2008 general election data see: <http://oregonvotes.org/nov42008/g08stats.pdf>. For May 2008 primary data see <http://oregonvotes.org/may202008/p08stats.pdf>. New registration data, party affiliation change data, updated registration data and registration transaction data from OCVR reports received directly from the Elections Division of the Oregon of Secretary of State's office.

⁹ All state and county total voter registration data are from the Elections Division of the Oregon of Secretary of State office. For November 2008 general election data see: <http://oregonvotes.org/nov42008/g08stats.pdf>. For May 2008 primary data see <http://oregonvotes.org/may202008/p08stats.pdf>.

¹⁰ It was more challenging for some of the smaller counties to provide detailed cost data, so this is incomplete. Of the remaining 29 smaller counties, approximately half were not able to provide cost data on three or more (out of 11) data points.

¹¹ The mailings and notices include NVRA-required notices to voters that confirm registrations or confirm that changes have been made to registrations. They also include letters to voters who have failed to comply with voter identification requirements of HAVA and so called "trouble letters," which are sent to voters who fail to complete their registration card so that they can qualify to be added to the list. The staff costs include the salary and benefit costs of any full-time or part-time employee that manages the voter registration process, enters voter registration data into the system or assists voters in person or via the telephone with the registration process. The facilities and administrative support cost category covers those costs incurred by the county to provide work space and administrative support for employees who play a role in the voter registration process. The telephones, fax and desktop computers costs also are applicable to those employees who either manage the voter registration process or perform a voter registration duty. The final category covers the amount of money paid to the state for that county's share of maintenance and support costs of OCVR. The amount each county is billed is determined by a per-voter formula.

¹² They include personnel to run the system; a contract with EDS, the company that built the system, to provide help desk support, programming and other maintenance functions; payments to DMV for data to perform HAVA-required identification matching; payments to the American Motor Vehicles Administrators Association (AMVAA) for a link to the Social Security Administration to perform HAVA-required identification matching; payments to the University of Oregon and the state Department of Administrative Services for hosting redundant data sites; network and phone costs; hardware maintenance; costs to obtain National Change of Address data from the USPS; and equipment replacement.

¹³ Elaine Manlove, state election commissioner, Delaware, e-mail correspondence, February 26, 2010.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* November 25, 2009.

¹⁵ Matt A. Barreto, Loren Collingwood, Francisco Pedraza and Barry Pump, "Online Voter Registration (OLVR) Systems in Arizona and Washington: Evaluating Usage, Public Confidence and Implementation Processes," supplemental appendices. Each online registration costs \$0.33 cents to review. Only 5 to 10% are reviewed, thus costing \$0.03 on average. Forthcoming.

¹⁶ Maurice Bastarache, Associate Director of Electoral Geography, Elections Canada (email correspondence, December 3, 2009). Rennie Molnar, Associate Deputy Director Chief Electoral Officer, Elections Canada (email correspondence, December 3, 2009).

¹⁷ For further information, see the Pew Center on the States, "Bringing Elections into the 21st Century: Voter Registration Modernization," August 2009, http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/Voter_Registration_Modernization_Brief_web.pdf.



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