

The Cost of Statewide Recounts

A Case Study of Minnesota and Washington

The Pew Center on the States supports policies, practices and technologies that help achieve the highest standards of accuracy, cost-effectiveness, efficiency and security of U.S. elections. As part of this work, Pew has commissioned a research series examining the costs associated with specific aspects of election administration. This report is included in that series.

Statewide recounts are intense, high-stakes dramas that grab headlines and can take months to resolve. Yet while the horserace typically garners the most attention, recounts are equally noteworthy for their price tag—especially when states and counties do not anticipate the costs.

Twenty-five statewide recounts have been undertaken since 1980, and the close, contested races of the 2010 general election indicate that there could be more to come.¹ States and localities need to consider the potential for the costs, which are often unexpected and particularly burdensome as governments deal with shrinking budgets.

As part of its work to help build high-performing states, the Pew Center on the States commissioned this case study on two recent, high-profile statewide recounts that took place automatically following initial tallies, as required by state law.² A focus on counties' costs in the 2004 Washington gubernatorial and 2008 Minnesota U.S. Senate recounts offers valuable insights that can help states and localities identify opportunities to cut costs and optimize limited resources.³



The Real Cost of Recounts

As states brace for potential recounts, an analysis of the two cases in Minnesota and Washington supplies useful lessons by highlighting the differences in state laws and practices that affect total costs. In 2008, Minnesota was required by state law to conduct a recount of the U.S. Senate race between Al Franken (D) and Norm Coleman (R). This highly publicized procedure came just four years after a similarly notable recount in the Washington State gubernatorial race between Christine Gregoire (D) and Dino Rossi (R).

\$1,160,000

▲ Estimated total cost to counties for Washington's 2004 gubernatorial recount.

\$460,000

▲ Estimated total cost to counties for Minnesota's 2008 U.S. Senate recount.

In Minnesota, the study estimates that the state's 87 counties spent, on average, more than 15 cents per ballot on the manual recount, with total costs surpassing \$460,000.⁴ In Washington's gubernatorial race, the state's manual recount cost 39 counties an average of more than 30 cents per ballot, with total costs just over \$900,000. Washington counties also spent more than \$260,000

to conduct an initial machine recount, increasing total recount costs for local jurisdictions to over \$1.16 million.

In both cases the states reimbursed the counties a share of their costs. According to the report estimates, Washington covered nearly 40 percent of its counties' total recount costs while Minnesota covered almost 20 percent.

Key Similarities

Both Minnesota and Washington have laws that automatically trigger a recount in statewide contests with slim margins of victory.⁵ And in each state's counties, which were tasked with carrying out the re-tabulation of votes, the vast majority of costs—90 to 100 percent in most cases—were for the labor of manually counting the ballots.

A focal point for each recount was dispute over absentee ballots, and in both cases, the candidate with the most votes on election night did not emerge as the winner after the final tally of ballots and resolution of all court cases. Interestingly, both states took almost the same amount of time to reach an official conclusion, approximately seven months.

The states also had similar voter turnout. In Minnesota, there were 2.92 million ballots cast out of 3.7 million registered voters, while in Washington, there were 2.88 million ballots cast out of 3.5 million

registered voters. The final margin of victory involved a mere 312 votes in Minnesota and only 133 in Washington.

Key Differences

Despite the similarities, Washington spent more than double the amount of money that Minnesota spent.

One major factor contributing to the cost disparity was that Washington counties were mandated to conduct two separate recounts, beginning with a machine re-tabulation of the votes followed by a hand tally. In Minnesota, only one manual recount was involved.

State laws in Minnesota and Washington also differed significantly in their procedural approaches. In Minnesota, legal responsibility for conducting statewide recounts fell upon the secretary of state. Rather than transporting 2.9 million ballots to the secretary of state's office, however, the secretary deputized county election officials to carry out the manual tally. Challenged ballots were then sent to a centralized state board, streamlining the dispute resolution process. Conversely, in Washington the legal responsibility to conduct a statewide recount fell to the counties. In this case, counties had to manage the time-consuming and contentious process of resolving disputed ballots individually.

Provisional ballot issues also factored heavily in the Washington recount but played no role in Minnesota.⁶ Washington

focused much attention on addressing 600 provisional ballots that were improperly handled at various polling places in several counties.

While the majority of costs to counties in both states went to labor, the breakdown of these costs varied significantly. Some counties relied primarily on permanent staff, with higher salaries, to conduct the recount. Others relied more on temporary staff, which lowered costs.

Most notably, in King County, Washington, home to Seattle and nearly one in three of the state's 3.5 million registered voters in 2004, a number of factors drove that county's recount cost to more than 60 cents per ballot—nearly double the statewide average. Labor-intensive processes, including presorting ballots, coupled with redundant manual tally procedures over a two-week period, spiked recount staffing costs. High costs associated with security and the need to lease a large facility to conduct the recount also contributed to the escalation of expenses.

The Cost to Counties

In both cases, the counties assumed the initial costs and received a reimbursement determined by the state's chief election official. The Minnesota secretary of state established a cost-reimbursement formula of three cents per ballot recounted—ultimately covering less than one-fifth of the costs. In selecting this rate the secretary based the amount localities were reimbursed on a previous recount.

In Washington, following the election, the secretary of state surveyed the counties on actual costs associated with both the machine and manual recounts and then sought reimbursement from the legislature for the more costly manual recount. Subsequently, state lawmakers allocated funding to compensate the counties for approximately half of the manual recount cost, which made up approximately 40 percent of their total recount costs.

Conclusion

Both Minnesota and Washington have their own laws and regulations governing the recount process, and these differences have greatly varying effects on the costs to states and localities. Multiple factors, including where and how ballot disputes are resolved, how many and what types of recounts are

conducted and what labor costs are incurred all play a role in determining how much a state spends to conduct a statewide recount.

Too often, states lack guidelines on managing the costs and procedures for a recount. Neither Minnesota nor Washington, for example, had laws governing reimbursement, let alone a cost formula for the amount that states would reimburse counties. As a result, localities were left to absorb the majority of the costs.

As more recounts take place in years ahead, this case study provides helpful examples and guidance about the real costs of recounts. This can help election officials, policy makers and taxpayers identify opportunities for developing a more efficient and effective elections process.

Notes

This brief is based on the report “Re-counting the Vote: What Does it Cost?,” prepared for The Pew Charitable Trusts by Conny McCormack, former Los Angeles County registrar-recorder/county clerk.

1 Since 1980, 25 statewide recounts have been conducted in 13 states, averaging almost one statewide recount every year. During this 30-year period, several states experienced multiple statewide recounts, including five in Washington and two in each of the following states: Alaska, Minnesota, Vermont and Virginia.

2 There are typically two scenarios that can prompt recounts in statewide races: (1) Twenty states have laws that call for automatic recounts in state and federal elections based on specified thresholds. In most of these cases, the state and local governments—not the candidates—shoulder the costs of conducting the recount. (2) Recounts also can be requested by candidates or individual voters at their own expense. In the rare instance where a recount overturns an electoral outcome, the funds paid by the requestor are typically reimbursed.

3 Cost data on the two statewide recounts, as well as total costs to conduct those elections, was primarily collected through surveys of local election officials in Minnesota’s 87 counties and Washington’s 39 counties.

4 Fifty-one of Minnesota’s 87 counties responded to the survey, representing almost three-quarters of the ballots cast statewide. The recount cost for non-responding counties was projected based on the percentage of the average cost per ballot of the responding counties. See the full report for more details.

5 Minnesota and Washington are among the eight states where an automatic recount is triggered if the difference in vote totals between the top two candidates in a statewide or federal contest falls within a .5 percent margin of victory.

6 Minnesota does not use provisional ballots, an exemption allowed under the Help America Vote Act when a state permits Election Day registration, as Minnesota does.

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