

THE COST (SAVINGS) OF REFORM:

An Analysis of Local
Registration-Related Costs
and Potential Savings Through
Automatic Voter Registration

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INTRODUCTION

Few election policy issues have captured more recent attention at the state and local level than voter registration. Across the nation, legislatures and local election offices are transitioning to a greater use of technology to assist voters with creating and updating their registration records – whether via portals for online voter registration (OVR) or programs, known as automatic or automated voter registration (AVR), whereby eligible voters are added to the rolls based on motor vehicle or other government data. The trend follows a strong endorsement for registration reform by the Presidential Commission on Election Administration – and in several states has emerged as a bipartisan compromise aimed at both expanding voter rolls and making them more reliable and secure.

Typically, however, these issues are framed in the context of whether they will increase participation and/or create issues regarding the integrity of the voter rolls. Often lost in the discussion is any recognition of the fiscal impacts of registration reform; namely, the degree to which moving away from a predominantly paper-based registration system could result in reduced costs for state and local election offices.

To that end, we constructed and fielded a simple survey, intended to assess what the current landscape looks like for local election offices regarding costs for voter registration. The results suggest that while costs vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, the data is consistent with arguments that, in addition to other benefits like making elections more secure, moving away from paper-based registration is a reform that can save states and municipalities resources.

METHODOLOGY

After reviewing previous studies of voter registration and consulting with election officials across the nation, we built a simple survey using Google Forms with the following questions related to paper-based voter registration costs in 2016:

- How many registrations did you process in 2016?
- What were your costs for (full-time) staff related to data entry of paper registration forms?
- What were your costs for staff time, postage and paper needed to follow up on missing information or errors on registration forms?
- What were your costs for paper registration forms (layout, printing, etc.)?
- What were your costs for temporary workers and overtime pay for additional voter registration data entry and other duties close to Election Day?
- What were your costs related to issuing, counting and notifying voters about provisional ballots necessitated by registration issues?
- What were your costs for duplicate mailings related to duplicate registration entries?
- What were your postage costs associated with forwarding registration forms to the proper recipient (Secretary of State, neighboring jurisdiction, etc.)?

The survey was sent to 420 recipients representing localities in 49 states and the District of Columbia.¹ Using Election Assistance Commission data from the Election Administration and Voting Survey, the pool was chosen from jurisdictions with the largest, median and smallest number of registered voters in each state (“largest 3”, “median 3,” smallest 3”) and was compared to data on demographics and other characteristics (e.g. minority-language designation under Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act and Census data on race and ethnicity) to ensure that it was a generally representative list of jurisdictions.²

Targeted jurisdictions received the initial survey invitation, along with three follow-up emails seeking and encouraging their responses. To encourage responses from a larger number of states, some jurisdictions received follow-up phone calls as well. Ultimately, we received 66 responses from 34 states broken down as follows:

- 25 from “largest 3” jurisdictions
- 19 from “median 3” jurisdictions
- 22 from “smallest 3” or “smallest with at least 1k or 2k” jurisdictions

Many jurisdictions simply did not respond to the survey, and three declined to participate.

Detailed analysis of these responses is provided below.

¹ North Dakota was excluded as it does not maintain voter registration rolls.

² In 16 states with very small jurisdictions (i.e. where the smallest jurisdictions had less than 1,000 registered voters), we sent surveys to additional jurisdictions with at least 1,000 and 2,000 registered voters. The very smallest jurisdictions (i.e. those with less than 500 registered voters) in those states were excluded altogether.

A NOTE ON COVERAGE AND COMPREHENSIVENESS

A constant challenge in any effort to survey the field for election costs is the lack of any common “chart of accounts” that makes comparisons difficult. Consequently, many of the respondents informed us either that they did not track registration costs at all or that there was no way to break out the categories included in the survey response.

In addition, the wide variation in data policies across the nation made obtaining data difficult in some jurisdictions.

A few localities treated our survey as a request for public records requiring a formal application and/or a fee.³ Any such request was treated as “declined to respond.”

For that reason, one cannot treat the following figures as a reliable estimate of costs in all jurisdictions but rather as a snapshot of certain jurisdictions that can provide background for discussions about the costs and benefits of registration reforms.

SUMMARY OF COSTS - OVERALL

| OVERALL | Minimum | Maximum | Range | Median | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|--|-----------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| How many registrations did you process in 2016? | 2 | 564,232 | 564,230 | 8,492 | 65,321.3 | 109,755.0 |
| What were your costs for (full-time) staff related to data entry of paper registration forms? | \$0.00 | \$857,524.41 | \$857,524.41 | \$26,995.75 | \$113,445.64 | \$196,615.79 |
| Per unit cost | \$0.0000 | \$31.3391 | \$31.3391 | \$1.9103 | \$3.5378 | \$5.7436 |
| What were your costs for staff time postage and paper needed to follow up on missing information or errors on registration forms? | \$0.00 | \$93,000.00 | \$93,000.00 | \$1,000.00 | \$10,076.84 | \$22,475.08 |
| Per unit cost | \$0.00 | \$5.00 | \$5.00 | \$0.06 | \$0.51 | \$1.09 |
| What were your costs for paper registration forms (layout printing etc.)? | \$0.00 | \$55,500.00 | \$55,500.00 | \$0.00 | \$1,432.11 | \$8,043.70 |
| Per unit cost | \$0.0000 | \$1.1100 | \$1.1100 | \$0.0000 | \$0.0604 | \$0.1922 |
| What were your costs for temporary workers and overtime pay for additional voter registration data entry and other duties close to Election Day? | \$0.00 | \$263,000.00 | \$263,000.00 | \$2,000.00 | \$33,514.62 | \$60,345.00 |
| Per unit cost | \$0.0000 | \$8.0000 | \$8.0000 | \$0.0763 | \$0.6709 | \$1.4282 |
| What were your costs related to issuing counting and notifying voters about provisional ballots necessitated by registration issues? | \$0.00 | \$450,137.00 | \$450,137.00 | \$0.00 | \$12,740.55 | \$71,953.83 |
| What were your costs for duplicate mailings related to duplicate registration entries? | \$0.00 | \$20,520.00 | \$20,520.00 | \$0.00 | \$1,182.71 | \$4,052.94 |
| What were your postage costs associated with forwarding registration forms to proper recipient (Secretary of State neighboring jurisdiction etc.)? | \$0.00 | \$88,916.00 | \$88,916.00 | \$20.00 | \$3,113.84 | \$14,783.69 |

³ One jurisdiction even estimated that the request would take 8 hours to fulfill at a total cost of over \$100.

“LARGEST 3” JURISDICTIONS IN EACH STATE

| “LARGEST 3” JURISDICTIONS (25) | Minimum | Maximum | Range | Median | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|--|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| How many registrations did you process in 2016? | 6,063 | 564,232 | 558,169 | 95,412 | 150,287.0 | 131,146.1 |
| What were your costs for (full-time) staff related to data entry of paper registration forms? | \$0.00 | \$857,524.41 | \$857,524.41 | \$140,000.00 | \$229,783.26 | \$252,826.32 |
| Per unit cost | \$0.0000 | \$9.2374 | \$9.2374 | \$0.7696 | \$2.3577 | \$2.8086 |
| What were your costs for staff time postage and paper needed to follow up on missing information or errors on registration forms? | \$296.00 | \$93,000.00 | \$92,704.00 | \$10,000.00 | \$26,893.91 | \$32,084.30 |
| Per unit cost | \$0.0065 | \$1.2690 | \$1.2624 | \$0.0736 | \$0.3193 | \$0.4309 |
| What were your costs for paper registration forms (layout printing etc.)? | \$0.00 | \$55,500.00 | \$55,500.00 | \$0.00 | \$3,777.03 | \$13,426.47 |
| Per unit cost | \$0.0000 | \$1.1100 | \$1.1100 | \$0.0000 | \$0.0760 | \$0.2765 |
| What were your costs for temporary workers and overtime pay for additional voter registration data entry and other duties close to Election Day? | \$0.00 | \$263,000.00 | \$263,000.00 | \$63,000.00 | \$82,259.85 | \$75,611.43 |
| Per unit cost | \$0.0000 | \$4.6667 | \$4.6667 | \$0.4899 | \$0.7758 | \$1.0425 |
| What were your costs related to issuing counting and notifying voters about provisional ballots necessitated by registration issues? | \$0.00 | \$450,137.00 | \$450,137.00 | \$359.00 | \$27,173.41 | \$105,649.33 |
| What were your costs for duplicate mailings related to duplicate registration entries? | \$0.00 | \$20,520.00 | \$20,520.00 | \$0.00 | \$3,073.10 | \$6,412.28 |
| What were your postage costs associated with forwarding registration forms to proper recipient (Secretary of State neighboring jurisdiction etc.)? | \$0.00 | \$88,916.00 | \$88,916.00 | \$800.00 | \$7,370.15 | \$22,650.66 |

“MEDIAN 3” JURISDICTIONS IN EACH STATE

| “MEDIAN 3” JURISDICTIONS (19) | Minimum | Maximum | Range | Median | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|--|-----------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| How many registrations did you process in 2016? | 2 | 41,876 | 41,874 | 5,018 | 10,678.4 | 14,252.2 |
| What were your costs for (full-time) staff related to data entry of paper registration forms? | \$0.00 | \$57,742.00 | \$57,742.00 | \$15,958.00 | \$23,153.80 | \$22,230.76 |
| Per unit cost | \$0.0000 | \$31.3391 | \$31.3391 | \$1.5943 | \$5.1325 | \$9.2353 |
| What were your costs for staff time postage and paper needed to follow up on missing information or errors on registration forms? | \$0.00 | \$5,000.00 | \$5,000.00 | \$95.47 | \$1,303.11 | \$1,778.49 |
| Per unit cost | \$0.0000 | \$0.4710 | \$0.4710 | \$0.0394 | \$0.1049 | \$0.1492 |
| What were your costs for paper registration forms (layout printing etc.)? | \$0.00 | \$3,500.00 | \$3,500.00 | \$0.00 | \$278.07 | \$899.31 |
| Per unit cost | \$0.0000 | \$0.2157 | \$0.2157 | \$0.0000 | \$0.0261 | \$0.0610 |
| What were your costs for temporary workers and overtime pay for additional voter registration data entry and other duties close to Election Day? | \$0.00 | \$85,000.00 | \$85,000.00 | \$0.00 | \$9,218.89 | \$21,682.81 |
| Per unit cost | \$0.0000 | \$4.0236 | \$4.0236 | \$0.0000 | \$0.6992 | \$1.1957 |
| What were your costs related to issuing counting and notifying voters about provisional ballots necessitated by registration issues? | \$0.00 | \$5,000.00 | \$5,000.00 | \$0.00 | \$687.50 | \$1,751.28 |
| What were your costs for duplicate mailings related to duplicate registration entries? | \$0.00 | \$500.00 | \$500.00 | \$0.00 | \$102.86 | \$189.89 |
| What were your postage costs associated with forwarding registration forms to proper recipient (Secretary of State neighboring jurisdiction etc.)? | \$0.00 | \$1,000.00 | \$1,000.00 | \$25.00 | \$152.22 | \$321.97 |

“SMALLEST 3” JURISDICTIONS IN EACH STATE⁴

| “SMALLEST 3” JURISDICTIONS (22) | Minimum | Maximum | Range | Median | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| How many registrations did you process in 2016? | 10 | 15,604 | 15,594 | 307 | 2,415.3 | 4,159.9 |
| What were your costs for (full-time) staff related to data entry of paper registration forms? | \$0.00 | \$120,000.00 | \$120,000.00 | \$300.00 | \$19,463.88 | \$42,278.29 |
| Per unit cost | \$0.2545 | \$7.6903 | \$7.4359 | \$3.3113 | \$3.5606 | \$2.6913 |
| What were your costs for staff time postage and paper needed to follow up on missing information or errors on registration forms? | \$10.00 | \$1,000.00 | \$990.00 | \$200.00 | \$246.10 | \$298.70 |
| Per unit cost | \$0.0192 | \$5.0000 | \$4.9808 | \$0.5263 | \$1.2540 | \$1.8130 |
| What were your costs for paper registration forms (layout printing etc.)? | \$0.00 | \$250.00 | \$250.00 | \$0.00 | \$22.56 | \$65.55 |
| Per unit cost | \$0.0000 | \$0.5263 | \$0.5263 | \$0.0000 | \$0.0809 | \$0.1738 |
| What were your costs for temporary workers and overtime pay for additional voter registration data entry and other duties close to Election Day? | \$0.00 | \$4,900.00 | \$4,900.00 | \$0.00 | \$472.06 | \$1,262.13 |
| Per unit cost | \$0.0000 | \$8.0000 | \$8.0000 | \$0.0000 | \$0.5196 | \$1.9963 |
| What were your costs related to issuing counting and notifying voters about provisional ballots necessitated by registration issues? | \$0.00 | \$1,800.00 | \$1,800.00 | \$0.00 | \$173.84 | \$496.98 |
| What were your costs for duplicate mailings related to duplicate registration entries? | \$0.00 | \$199.00 | \$199.00 | \$10.00 | \$48.23 | \$69.99 |
| What were your postage costs associated with forwarding registration forms to proper recipient (Secretary of State neighboring jurisdictions etc.)? | \$0.00 | \$100.00 | \$100.00 | \$0.00 | \$14.67 | \$29.61 |

⁴ This includes target Smallest 3 and Smallest 3 with at least 1k or 2k voter jurisdictions.

TAKEAWAYS FROM THE DATA

Based on this data, it is possible to draw some general conclusions:

1. The biggest potential cost saving involved in a move away from paper-based registration is the savings in staff time necessary to handle such registrations.

This makes sense given how labor-intensive reading, keying and processing these registrations can be – but it is worth noting that some jurisdictions report most if not all of their costs under labor because they don't break out other costs separately. Whatever the reason, however, the results here suggest localities can save an

average of about \$3.54 in labor costs per registration by moving away from paper to another registration method. This carries forward to those localities reporting costs for temporary staff to process registrations close to Election Day; the data suggests that the jurisdictions spent about \$0.67 on average per registration to cover such costs.

2. Some cost savings may not amount to much because localities are only incurring a little cost (or none at all) in some categories under the current system.

A good example of this is the costs associated with printing and layout of registration forms; most respondents reported little or no associated costs because those forms are provided to them for free by the

state. Thus, while there may be some state-level savings resulting from reducing or eliminating such forms, those savings do not seem to flow to the local level.

3. Because of smaller volume, median-sized and smaller jurisdictions are seeing higher per-piece costs and thus might benefit disproportionately from a reduction in such costs.

One clear trend in the data is that smaller jurisdictions are seeing higher per-registration costs, which usually results from reported costs being divided across a small number of registrations. For example, median-sized jurisdictions reported costs of over \$5.00 and smaller jurisdictions reported a cost of over \$3.50 per registration (compared

to about \$2.25 apiece in larger jurisdictions). As a result, while the total cost savings associated with moving away from paper-based registration might be lower in these median-sized and smaller jurisdictions, the relative “bite” of such spending is likely to be disproportionately higher.

4. Even modest per-piece costs add up given the number of registrations involved.

If you total all the costs reported by the 66 respondents to this survey, you get over \$6.58 million – suggesting that there are significant cost savings to be realized by moving away from traditional paper-based registration

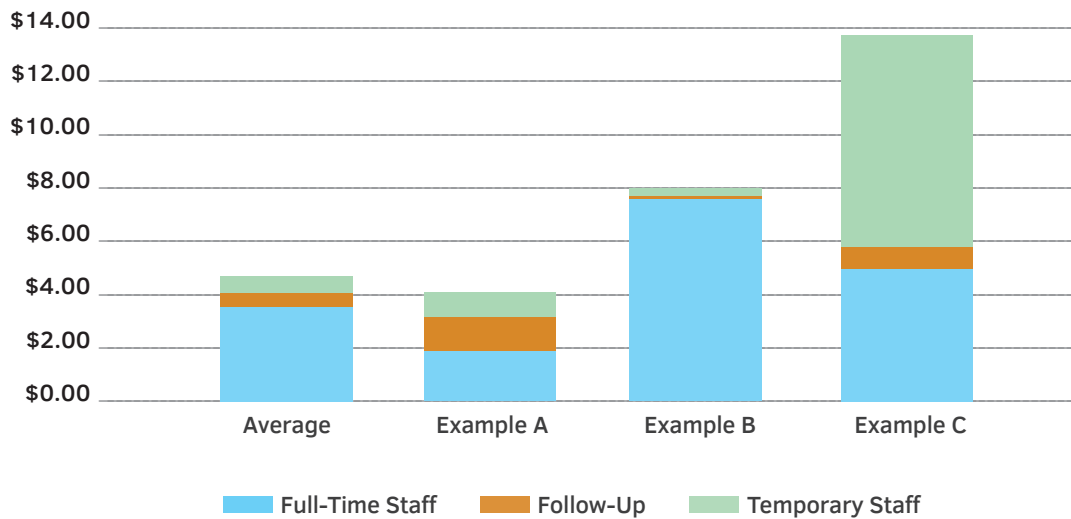
in more than 3,000 localities nationwide. Some of these savings are as small as pennies (or fractions thereof) per piece – but given the registration volume involved these numbers can add up quickly.

COSTS PER REGISTRANT FOR PROCESSING REGISTRATION FORMS

The most promising area for realizing cost savings by transitioning away from paper-based voter registration appears to be in reducing the staff time needed to process the paper forms. Our survey collected data on how much election offices spent per registrant on full-time and temporary staff to process forms, as well as following up on forms with missing information or errors. The table and chart below show how much surveyed jurisdictions reported spending per registrant in 2016 on average in these areas and provides three anonymized jurisdictions as examples to show how these costs can affect different jurisdictions.⁵ Registrations processed online or automatically by the DMV or other government agency should be expected to reduce the number of paper-based registration forms processed and introduce savings to local election offices on a per registrant basis.

| | Full-Time Staff | Follow-Up | Temporary Staff | Total |
|---|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|
| Average | \$3.54 | \$0.51 | \$0.67 | \$4.72 |
| Example Jurisdiction A (~500k registered voters; ~75k registrations processed in 2016; urban; South) | \$1.91 | \$1.27 | \$0.89 | \$4.07 |
| Example Jurisdiction B (~70k registered voters; ~15k registrations processed in 2016; sub-urban/rural; Northeast) | \$7.69 | \$0.02 | \$0.31 | \$8.02 |
| Example Jurisdiction C (~2k registered voters; ~250 registrations processed in 2016; rural; Midwest) | \$5.00 | \$0.80 | \$8.00 | \$13.80 |

COSTS PER REGISTRANT FOR PROCESSING REGISTRATION FORMS



⁵ The data provided represents real jurisdictions' responses to our survey. The jurisdictions' names and other identifying information have been excluded, as we told respondents that their data would not be published to encourage responses.

COSTS FOR REGISTRATION-RELATED MAILINGS

Many local election offices incur mailing costs related to voter registration that could be reduced by transitioning away from paper-based systems and improved accuracy of the voter rolls. Our survey collected data on how much election offices spent in 2016 on mailings related to duplicate entries in the voter rolls, as well as forwarding registration forms to the proper recipient (e.g. the state election office or neighboring jurisdiction). The table below shows how much surveyed jurisdictions reported spending in 2016 in total in these areas and provides four anonymized jurisdictions as examples to show how these costs can affect different jurisdictions. Registrations processed online or automatically by the DMV or other government agency should be expected to reduce duplicate mailing costs due to improved accuracy and reduce forwarding costs by decreasing the number of paper registrations submitted.

| | Duplicate Mailings | Forwarding | Total |
|--|--------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Average | \$1,182 | \$3,114 | \$4,296 |
| Example Jurisdiction D (~800k registered voters; ~95k registrations processed in 2016; urban; Midwest) | \$0 | \$5,692 | \$5,692 |
| Example Jurisdiction E (~250k registered voters; ~80k registrations processed in 2016; urban/sub-urban; Midwest) | \$4,565 | \$6,362 | \$10,927 |
| Example Jurisdiction F (~85k registered voters; ~35k registrations processed in 2016; mostly rural; West) | \$200 | \$150 | \$350 |
| Example Jurisdiction G (~1k registered voters; ~150 registrations processed in 2016; rural; Northeast) | \$130 | \$0 | \$130 |

CONCLUSION

While arriving at a specific cost associated with any election activity – including voter registration – is difficult given wide variation in accounting and data collection across localities, the data here validates the common-sense notion that a move away from paper-based registration could eliminate or reduce registration-related costs all the way down to the local level.

Further research is required to determine the total cost savings of a transition away from paper-based registration towards greater computerization of voter registration, whether through OVR, AVR or other approaches – but the preliminary data here suggests localities should see relief – both per-registration and overall – in the level of financial effort required to manage voter registration.⁶

⁶ The authors wish to acknowledge the support for this project from Tova Wang, Director of Research and Policy for the Center for Secure and Modern Elections.

APPENDIX

GUIDE FOR STATE-BASED ORGANIZATIONS DOING THIS ANALYSIS

Step-by-step on state-specific cost analyses

1. Determine what research questions you seek to answer
 - a. Total costs?
 - b. Costs by category (e.g. labor, printing, follow-on effects like provisional ballots)?
 - c. Other?
2. Based on #1, decide on “chart of accounts” – what data items do you seek
 - a. Craft queries so separate categories are cumulative and mutually exclusive
 - b. Think about how to address data not collected
 - i. Give guidance on how to break down salary and other overhead costs
 - ii. Alternate: Ask for estimates or percentages spent on various election tasks
3. Obtain contact info for local election officials –
 - a. State election official may have detailed contact info
 - b. If not available at state, excellent resource is US Vote Foundation Election Official Directory
4. Link localities to demographics from census data, Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS)
 - a. County- and locality-level data is usually easy to match
 - i. Population data
 - ii. Ethnoracial data
 - iii. Basic election data from EAVS
 - b. Augment data to see if other factors affect cost
 - i. Section 203 minority language coverage (or state equivalent)
 - ii. Pull reports from EAVS to “reality check” reported data
5. Build questionnaire – experience suggests less than 10 questions is optimal
 - a. Keep response time minimal [Online forms are best and preferable to written responses]
 - b. If possible, provide data for them to verify
 - c. Keep requests short and factual
 - d. Open long-form requests are useful if you want unstructured feedback, but should be bonus
6. Field questionnaire – and provide deadline for response
 - a. If you are going to publish responses, say so
 - b. Even if you are not, get contact info for follow up/ ensure accountability
7. Determine how to handle responses seeking fees for data
 - a. Some counties view data requests as voter record requests
 - b. Your survey may not be subject to such costs if legal obligation to respond exists
 - c. If available, you may want to consider incentives for response – \$\$\$, recognition, etc.
8. Typical response rate
 - a. 10-15% immediately
 - b. another 15-25% with reminders
 - c. NOTE: response rate will be higher if there are legal obligations or other incentives to reply
9. Be prepared for lack of comparability between localities – not all collect this data and those that do often don’t do it the same way
 - a. Issue often isn’t “apples to apples” as much as “fruit salad” – this is nationwide issue
 - b. Getting data that’s comparable across jurisdictions is difficult
 - c. Think about how to identify common themes/ trends even when comparability < 100%
10. Don’t outrun the data – unless you have substantial coverage and comparability, be careful about drawing firm conclusions about average costs/savings
 - a. If categories aren’t exclusive and cumulative, you can’t say A+B=C
 - b. Look at responses to ensure that you have representative data
 - i. Often, larger jurisdictions are overrepresented in data
 - ii. Median/smaller jurisdictions may need more followup
 - c. Conclusions will likely focus more on the data collected vs. what the data represents
 - d. In particular, don’t assume data is representative unless you have substantial coverage