



2026 Intergovernmental Roundtable:

Effective Election Administration

February 19-20
Washington, D.C.

Hosted by the National Association of Counties with support from the Election Trust Initiative

Introduction

Effective election administration is a shared undertaking across county, state and federal governments. Counties are the primary operational engine, states set the legal and policy framework, and the federal government provides standards and security support.

County governments in particular play a crucial role in upholding our nation's democracy by administering and overseeing most local, state and federal elections.

In 36 states, counties hold primary responsibility for implementing elections, overseeing more than 100,000 polling places and managing over 630,000 poll workers each election cycle, which serves more than 200 million eligible voters.

In recent years, election administration has become increasingly complex and contentious. In addition to increased technology and cybersecurity requirements, implementation of voter registration and ballot-casting reforms have strained the capacity of county election departments of all sizes.

On Feb. 20, 2026, the National Association of Counties (NACo) convened election leaders in Washington, D.C. for the Intergovernmental Roundtable for Effective Election Administration (IREEA). County election officials, secretaries of state, congressional staff, federal agency leaders and election experts from across the country met to discuss persistent challenges, share resources and develop collaborative solutions. This report summarizes the roundtable discussions and identifies actions that county, state and federal partners can take to strengthen election administration at every level.

Key Takeaways



Early and continuous **intergovernmental coordination** can help avoid disruption of elections



Ongoing **cybersecurity** protection practices and intelligence sharing can defend against attacks and improve public confidence in election processes and results



Advanced **disaster preparation** that maps authority, tests plans and pre-positions resources ensures resilient election systems before and during crises



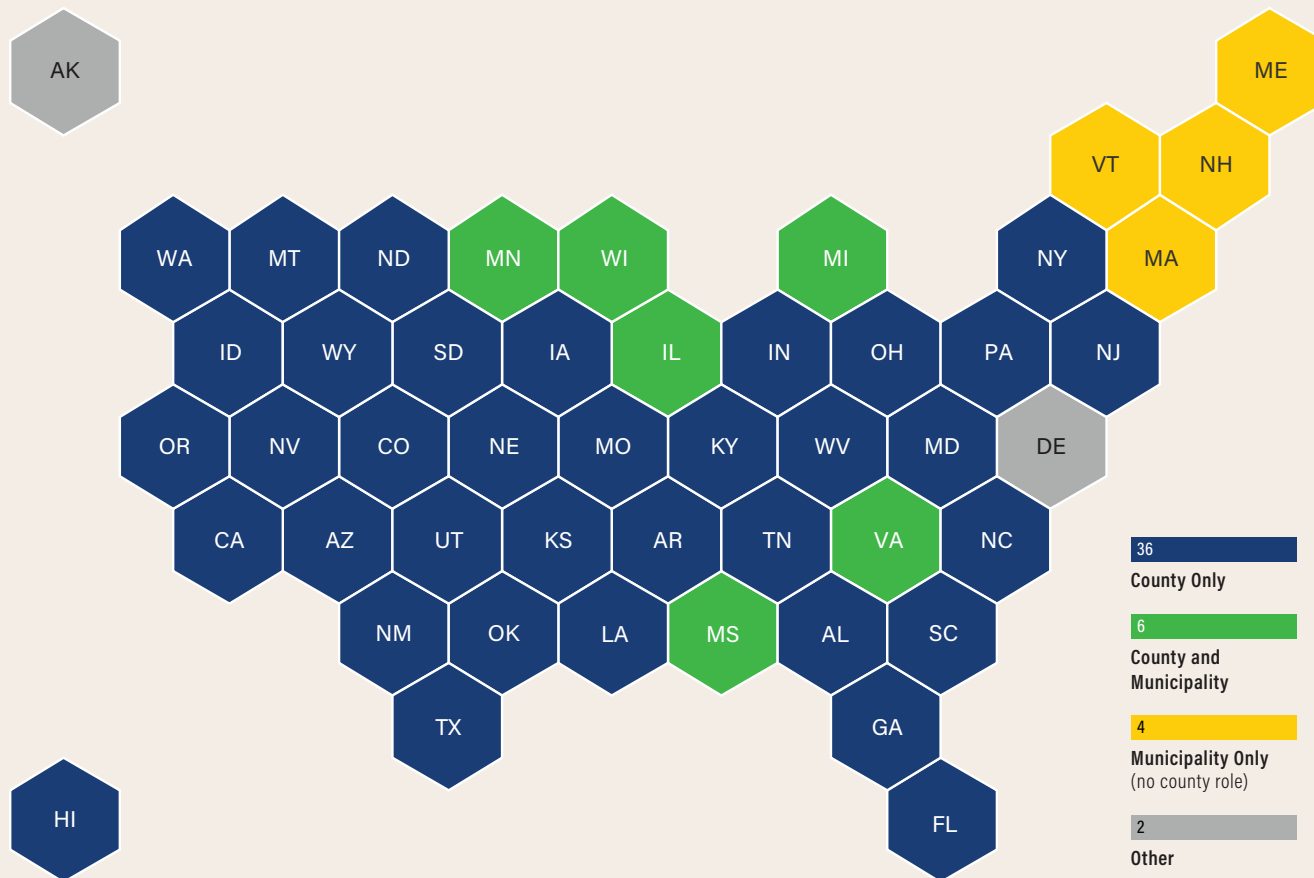
Election administration is increasingly complex, high-stakes and public-facing, deserving of appropriate **workforce** compensation and supportive human resources



Sustainable **funding** ensures counties can continue to improve election administration through investments in staffing, equipment and cybersecurity resources that strengthen vulnerable and low-capacity areas

FIGURE 1: COUNTIES OVERSEE ELECTION ADMINISTRATION IN 36 STATES

Election Administration, by Level of Government

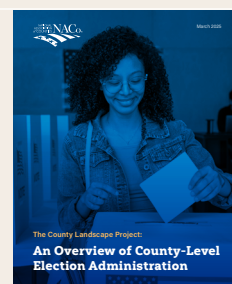


Source: NACo Research and Landscape Project

Note: Counties and municipalities administer elections in six states: Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Virginia and Wisconsin. Municipalities administer elections in four states: Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Vermont. Alaska and Delaware have state-managed oversight with collaboration between election officials and an election board.



Scan QR code to learn more about elections administration in NACo's *County Landscape Project: An Overview of County-Level Election Administration*.



Intergovernmental Roles and Coordination

The United States has a decentralized system of elections. Secure elections depend upon each level of government discharging their respective duties in coordination with each other. Generally, election administration roles include the following:

- **County governments** are the primary operational layer of American elections. County duties span the entire election lifecycle: pre-election activities such as maintaining voter registration rolls, recruiting poll workers and preparing voting equipment; election day operations including opening polls and processing voters; and post-election responsibilities such as canvassing ballots, conducting audits and certifying results before transmitting them to the state.
- **State governments** set the legal framework. They establish the laws and policies that determine how elections are structured and administered within each individual state. These decisions set which local administrative models are permissible, canvassing requirements and

certification procedures. States also play a financial role, often reimbursing counties for some of the costs of state and federal races, special elections and certain statewide ballot measures.

- The **Federal government** role for federal elections is primarily regulatory. Its authority over state and local elections is limited, extending mainly to civil rights protections under the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Small federal grant funding is generally provided to states, which then allocate resources to counties.

Collaborative relationships and strong communication processes at every administrative stage are essential for secure elections. Intergovernmental partners can coordinate early and often to help surface issues before emergencies arise, agree on policies that reflect operational realities and target resources where most needed.

Idaho: State-County Communication



Idaho's 44 counties span a wide range of population sizes, geographies and administrative capacity. Some urban jurisdictions have dedicated election staff, while rural county clerks may manage elections alongside many other responsibilities. Idaho's approach to bridging those differences was shaped by state leadership with prior county election administration experience. This deep familiarity with local election administration has kept county operational realities at the center of statewide decision making. One replicable outcome of this state-to-counties collaboration is [Voteldaho.gov](https://www.voteldaho.gov), an award-winning statewide election website that provides consistent, trusted information for voters and election administrators while still accounting for local differences across the state.

Intergovernmental Communication and Coordination

NACo Elections Initiative

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Moderator: Dr. Lindsey Forson
Deputy Executive Director,
National Association of
Secretaries of State



Hon. Phil McGrane
Secretary of State,
Idaho



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Hon. Kathy Ackerman
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Kristin Muthig
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U.S. Election Assistance
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Idaho Secretary of State Phil McGrane, Clerk Kathy Ackerman (Idaho County, Idaho) and Kristen Muthig of the U.S. Election Assistance Commission serve as panel discussants on intergovernmental coordination.

“Strengthening relationships across jurisdictions remains foundational to effective election administration.”

— Roundtable participant

Thomas
Hon. Thomas Hicks
U.S. Election Assistance Commission

Cybersecurity: Protecting Election Operations, Data and Public Confidence

Cybersecurity threats can affect election administration even when voting equipment and systems themselves are protected. The most frequent targets are the administrative systems counties use throughout the year and not just during election periods. Vulnerable systems include voter registration databases, electronic poll books, election office websites and county email systems.

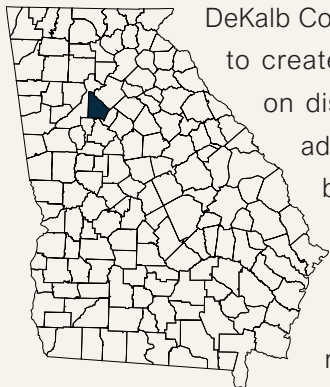
According to roundtable participants, recurring threats include phishing targeting election staff and ransomware that can take local systems offline and require costly recovery. Another concern is distributed denial-of-service attacks, which maliciously flood online systems with overwhelming internet traffic to disrupt public-facing websites and lookup tools that help voters review their registration status. Cyber actors may also seek to steal or expose voter data or amplify false claims about election security. Even when vote casting and tabulation are unaffected, disruptions to these other systems can slow service delivery, increase costs and erode public confidence in the electoral process.

Foreign actors and cybercriminal groups continue to develop and refine techniques targeting government systems. An emergent concern is that artificial intelligence will increase the speed and scale of some of these threats. With the recent defunding of federal Elections Infrastructure Information Sharing and Analysis Center, roundtable participants emphasized the importance of strengthening interstate communication channels for sharing threat analysis and response strategies across jurisdictions.



Executive Director Isaac Cramer of the Charleston County Board of Elections and Voter Registration (S.C.) and NACo Election Subcommittee Chair moderated the roundtable event.

DeKalb County, Ga.: Cybersecurity Preparedness



DeKalb County worked with the Election Security Exchange to create a cross-department working group focused on disruption planning. The effort brought election administration, IT and other county partners together before an emergency occurred to clarify roles, establish repeatable protocols and test scenarios. The effort resulted in not only technical tools but also cybersecurity preparedness built on relationships and clear decision-making authority.

“Preparedness is the cornerstone to running a successful election. Our efforts are anchored in training and adherence to clear protocols that govern elections in Georgia.”

— Keisha Smith, DeKalb County Election Director

Although states and counties vary widely in cybersecurity capacity, roundtable participants underscored the urgency of coordinating counties, states and federal partners to develop protective measures before incidents occur.

- **Counties can** strengthen cybersecurity by treating protective measures as a year-round operational responsibility with cross-department teams. Key actions include maintaining clear incident response contacts, using multifactor authentication, training staff on phishing, patching system vulnerabilities, backing up data offline and testing continuity of operation plans. Regular communication with state and federal offices can help to share and access threat intelligence and assistance proactively and ensure staff know who to contact during an incident.
- **State election offices can** establish regular guidance and information sharing between state and county staff to clarify reporting expectations, offer available resources, and share statewide response protocols and structured ways to flag security challenges before they become crises.
- **Federal agencies can** proactively share information on threat intelligence, response and investigations, especially of incidents arising from international, non-state and criminal actors. The U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) and the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) provide vital preventative and response resources and could offer additional cybersecurity and other technical assistance to states and counties before crises occur.

Key Elections Security Resources

- **Cybersecurity Toolkit and Resources to Protect Elections** (CISA and Joint Cyber Defense Collaborative): toolkit of free services and tools intended to help state and local government officials, election officials and vendors enhance the cybersecurity and cyber resilience of U.S. election infrastructure
- **Election Infrastructure Cybersecurity Readiness and Resilience Checklist** (CISA): prepares election personnel and IT teams to assess current cybersecurity practices and response
- **Election Infrastructure Incident Response Communications Guide** (CISA and EAC): core components of an incident response playbook for effective communication during an incident, with customizable templates
- **Election Security Preparedness** (EAC): links to multiple resources, including self-assessments, non-voter election technology, procurement, remote voting and election audits
- **Election Security Risk Profile Tool** (CISA and EAC): tool to assess range of risks and prioritize mitigation efforts

Disaster Preparedness and Continuity of Operations

Election continuity faces risks from a wide range of disruptions arising from natural and man-made disasters. These incidents can prevent voters from reaching polling places, disrupt staff deployment, interrupt public communication or limit access to ballots and equipment. During disaster events that impact elections, counties are responsible for local response across polling place operations, staffing, ballot security and interdepartmental coordination with county IT, emergency management and public safety teams. With advance planning and clear authority structures, counties can successfully work with state and federal partners to manage or avoid disruptions.

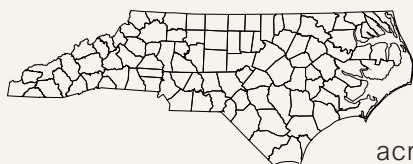
Preparation is essential to effective mitigation. Before a disruption occurs, all entities involved in election continuity need to know whom to contact in emergencies and the division of authority for decision making and implementation. Running joint tabletop exercises before every election cycle can test continuity plans for power



Auditor Sheri Lund (Lincoln County, S.D.) participates in county, state and federal election leader discussions.

outages, cyber incidents, severe weather, mail disruptions or facility damage. Ongoing coordination across polling place operations, staffing and ballot security ensures counties can manage disruptions when they arise.

North Carolina: Elections Continuity During Hurricane Helene



Ahead of the 2024 presidential election, Hurricane Helene damaged roads, power, internet and communication systems across multiple North Carolina counties.

The State Board of Elections worked with county boards and emergency management partners to maintain operations throughout the disruption. The State Board strategically pre-positioned across the state Attack Response Kits that included mobile internet units and laptops. When disaster hit, these kits allowed counties to stay connected, protect election materials and continue election operations. Roundtable participant Karen Brinson Bell's warning not to meet in a crisis underscored the importance of building relationships, clarifying authority and testing emergency procedures before crises disrupt election operations.

“Don’t meet in a crisis.”

— Karen Brinson Bell, former Executive Director of the North Carolina State Board of Elections and Principal and Co-Founder of Advance Elections LLC

Roundtable participants discussed several ways in which counties, states and the federal government can prepare for disasters to ensure elections are not interrupted.

- **Counties can** map backup polling locations, maintain up-to-date contact lists and clarify internal authority for approving emergency changes to polling locations, hours, communication methods or resource deployment. In advance of the voting process, counties can ensure that key staff know who to call during a crisis for legal guidance, technology support, emergency management, public safety and voter communication.
- **State partners can** build county input into continuity policy design processes so that resulting emergency plans reflect local conditions for staffing, geography and vendor availability. By including county experiences into the policy

setting processes, states can better direct flexible funding and resources to the highest-priority risks and most urgent local needs.

- **Federal agencies can** pre-position technical assistance and share severe weather or other threat intelligence before crises occur. Federal advance action can enable counties and states to develop mitigating supports and prepare response resources for deployment in advance of an emergency. Federal disaster response agencies can continue to host listening sessions with state and county counterparts to identify mechanisms for increasing efficiencies, coordination and productive relationships.

Workforce: Recruiting, Retaining and Protecting Election Staff

County election workers administer high-stakes, technically complex operations under intense public scrutiny with little margin for error. Cybersecurity demands, new technology, expanded voter communications and legislative mandates have increased workloads. At the same time, rising threats and harassment against election workers have created safety risks that were far less common a decade ago.

Many election positions are not compensated in line with their complexity, demands and personal risks, making it difficult for state and local governments to compete with the private sector or other public agencies for skilled staff. Roundtable participants noted that these conditions contribute to burnout and complicate recruitment and

“It should be taboo to attack a public servant.”

— Commissioner Donald Palmer (2019-2026), U.S. Election Assistance Commission

retention. When governments cannot fill or retain key roles, they become more dependent on temporary workers, lose institutional knowledge through turnover and struggle to keep pace with evolving needs in technology, security and voter services. Lengthy hiring timelines, civil

service requirements and limited salary benchmarking across jurisdictions further compound these challenges, especially for IT and cybersecurity roles that are highly competitive in today’s labor market.

“They are our neighbors and they are serving our country.”

—Commissioner Thomas Hicks (2015-2026), U.S. Election Assistance Commission



Gauri “Gee” Rege of the American Institutes for Research moderates a panel featuring Commissioner Thomas Hicks and Commissioner Donald Palmer of the U.S. Election Assistance Commission on recruiting, retaining and protecting election staff.

Roundtable participants noted that supportive workplace culture, mentorship, clear career pathways and compensation that reflects the technical demands of election work can help address workforce challenges. They also stressed the need for targeted communication

with local communities to better protect election workers by monitoring media channels, correcting misinformation quickly and underscoring the essential role election workers play in preserving democratic processes.

Roundtable participants discussed several ways counties, states and the federal government can recruit, retain and protect election staff.

- **Counties can** update job descriptions, compensation and staffing models to reflect the complexity of election work; build pathways from poll worker and temporary roles into permanent positions; and coordinate election staff safety planning with public safety, legal, human resource and communication departments.
- **State partners can** provide training, certification, peer learning and shared workforce support resources while consulting counties before implementing new state requirements that affect staffing, training or safety needs.
- **Federal partners can** continue to develop and deliver EAC training, clearinghouse resources and workforce guidance, and provide funding that helps jurisdictions recruit, retain and protect election staff.



Washington County, Wis.: Incentivizing Workers

Through its Heart and Homestead program, Washington County helps low-income homeowners access mortgage down payment assistance that participants repay through community service, including work as poll workers. By creating a structured pathway into election service, the program expands the pool of available workers while reinforcing the value of local civic participation.

Funding: Managing Rising Election Costs

Election administration costs have risen steadily over the past 20 years. In general, costs are divided between operational expenses (e.g., printing, salaries, postage) and capital expenses (e.g., voting equipment, computer systems, storage). Driving rising costs are cybersecurity needs, voting technology upgrades, facility security improvements, emergency preparedness measures, expanded voter communication and new compliance requirements.

Funding to cover these emergent costs has not kept pace, which can result in delayed equipment upgrades, reduced staff training, deferred facility improvements and increased reliance on temporary staffing. These gaps compound over time as deferred investments become larger problems and staff stretched thin during one election cycle are less prepared for the next.

Although MIT's survey data presented at the roundtable indicates that the public believes that the federal government pays for most election expenses, the reality is that elections are primarily funded by general fund revenues at the local level with very little financial support provided through federal resources.



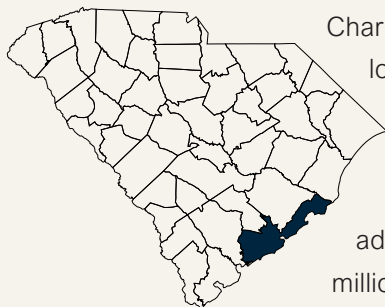
Iowa Secretary of State Paul Pate and Auditor Adam Wedmore (Cerro Gordo County, Iowa), in background, lead the election funding discussion.

Roundtable participants described several mechanisms for closing these funding gaps. Shared-service models

“Variation in funding structures and administrative models across jurisdictions underscores the need for stronger coordination and intentional platforms for sharing effective practices.”

— Roundtable participant

Charleston County, S.C.: Making the Business Case



Charleston County election leaders successfully translated operational needs into local- and state-supported budget increases to cover election administration costs. County leaders conducted voting facility tours and presented detailed budget briefings to demonstrate to candidates and commissioners how aging infrastructure and security gaps affected operations. That sustained advocacy helped build support for a budget increase from \$2 million to \$5.3 million, adding full-time staff and funding longer-term improvements.

let neighboring counties pool resources for functions like cybersecurity, IT support, equipment testing and legal counsel, lowering per-county costs while keeping administration local. This is especially useful in small or rural jurisdictions where one staffer may handle both elections and other county tech duties. Regional purchasing cooperatives and state-negotiated vendor contracts also help smaller jurisdictions buy equipment and software more affordably. Some states have created dedicated equipment-replacement funds that build up resources across election cycles, allowing planned capital spending instead of emergency appropriations when equipment fails.

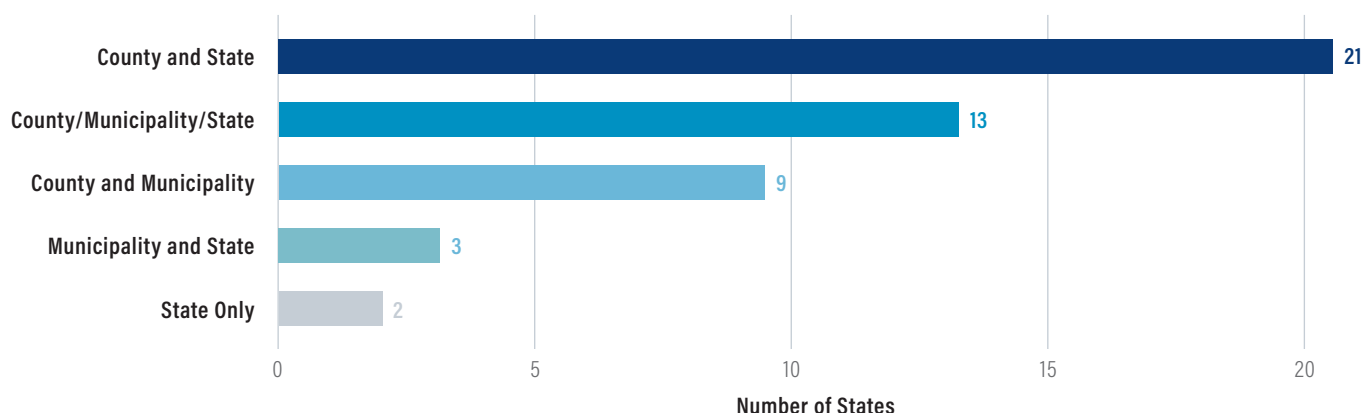
Despite these approaches, significant funding gaps remain. Smaller and rural counties face the greatest pressure, with less budget capacity, fewer economies of scale and limited access to specialized staff. Population-based funding formulas can systematically underfund these counties relative to the complexity of their operations and sparsely populated electorate across large geographies. Roundtable participants noted that declining and uncertain federal election security grants have added pressure, especially for cybersecurity investments counties can't easily defer, while unfunded mandates (new equipment standards, accessibility requirements, reporting obligations and post-election audits) continue to drive up costs.

Roundtable participants discussed several ways counties, states and the federal government can ensure that there are sufficient funds to administer fair, transparent and secure elections.

- **Counties can** connect budget requests to specific operational risks and surface funding gaps before they become crises, using facility tours, detailed briefings and direct conversations with commissioners and legislators to show decision makers exactly how funding affects election operations.
- **State partners can** bring counties into budget decisions before mandates are finalized so that cost estimates for equipment, staffing, training, facilities and voter communication are built into funding decisions.
- **Federal partners can** create dedicated, multi-year election funding streams that allow counties to maintain voting systems, replace aging equipment, support cybersecurity needs and plan beyond a single election cycle.

FIGURE 2: COUNTIES SHARE THE COSTS FOR ADMINISTERING ELECTIONS IN MOST STATES

Coverage of Election Administration Costs by Level of Government



Source: NACo Research and Landscape Project

How Elections Are Currently Funded

County: In 36 states, counties fund day-to-day election operations primarily through local general funds and mainly property taxes. These operations cover staffing, facilities, equipment and routine administration and represent the largest share of election costs nationally.

State: State support varies widely. Some states provide dedicated appropriations or reimburse counties for state and federal races; others offer little or no funding. If states do not provide dedicated funds for state-imposed requirements, counties must absorb these added costs from local budgets.

Federal: The federal government provides little financial support for elections. Congressionally authorized funding includes support through the U.S. Help America Vote Act (HAVA) of 2002 to contribute to localized efforts to modernize voting systems, election security grants in 2018 to supplement cybersecurity initiatives and the CARES Act in 2020 to help jurisdictions administer elections during the COVID-19 pandemic. These funds flow through state offices before reaching counties.

Private: Philanthropic grants helped fill funding gaps during the COVID-19 pandemic, but new state restrictions and prohibitions have made private funding an unreliable option for most counties.

Source: The County Landscape Project: An Overview of County-Level Election Administration, National Association of Counties, 2026

Conclusion

The environment in which elections are administered is evolving. New state requirements continue to emerge, sometimes without the funding or lead time needed to ensure full implementation. Federal resources are shifting, leading counties and states to build durable, locally-rooted solutions. Although election staff face rising workloads, public scrutiny and compensation that hasn't always kept pace with the job's growing complexity, these officials continue to offer dedication and expertise to administer accurate, safe, secure and accessible elections for all voters. These realities will shape the cycles ahead and point to investments and supports that can have the greatest impact.

The counties, states and federal partners who participated in the IREEA roundtable brought different responsibilities and perspectives, along with a shared commitment to

“If we can’t come together on elections, there is little we can come together on.”

— Roundtable participant



Clerk and Auditor Ricky Hatch (Weber County, Utah) joins roundtable discussions with county, state and federal leaders.

strengthening American elections. Their discussions underscored that effective election administration is built through sustained coordination, adequate investment and a clear commitment from every level of government to work together in support of secure, accessible and resilient elections.

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