COUNTIES MATTER:
ELECTIONS

E lections in the United States are administered in a highly decentralized process through which each state shapes its own election laws, which in turn shape the roles counties play in the months and weeks leading up to Election Day. In the United States, the nation's 3,069 counties traditionally administer and fund elections at the local level, overseeing more than 109,000 polling places and coordinating more than 694,000 poll workers every two years. **County election officials work diligently with federal, state and other local election officials to ensure the safety and security of our voting systems.**

Who runs elections for counties?

The county official overseeing elections varies from state to state and may have one of several titles, including county auditor, county clerk or commissioner of elections. These officials are responsible for overseeing the allocation of voting machines and managing polling locations, as well as ensuring the integrity and efficiency of the polling process itself.

How are votes cast?

After the 2000 elections, Congress passed the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) in 2002. HAVA sought to improve the election process by promoting the latest technology and moving away from traditional lever machines. Today, approximately three out of every five counties use optical-scan technology, which employs a scanner to read marked paper ballots and record the results. Two out of five use direct-recording electronic (DRE) equipment that allows voters to make their selections via touch screen or other digital interface and records the results on a memory device. Regardless of the type used, voting machines are never connected to the internet or to each other. The transport and storage of voting machines, as well as ballots and vote tabulations, are directed by state and local protocols.

Are voting systems secure?

Preserving the integrity and security of America's elections remains a top priority for county election officials. Voting systems generally have three components: voting machines, polling places and voter registration.

Voting machines are the voters' primary focus on Election Day. While the type of machine each state or county uses may vary, every state has specific policies governing voting machine setup. For example, no state allows voting machines to be connected to a network or to each other.

Further, most states have protocols, such as establishing a chain of possession, for

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OPTICAL SCAN

Scanning devices that tabulate paper ballots. Ballots may either be scanned on precinct-based optical systems in the polling place or collected in a ballot box and then scanned at a central location.

DIRECT-RECORDING ELECTRONIC (DRE) VOTING MACHINE

A voting machine that is designed to allow a direct vote on the machine by physically touching a screen, monitor or other device. The machine records the individual votes, and vote totals are stored in computer memory, which is later collected by poll workers. Some DRE machines have the ability to produce a paper trail that can be used for audits and recounts.

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how votes are recorded and tabulated. NACo has been partnering with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to help counties access DHS resources, such as cyber hygiene scans and incident reporting centers, to further enhance what is already being done to protect voting machines.

For polling places, counties consider locations that will optimize the deployment of voting machines and poll workers. This not only ensures that voters can efficiently move through the process, but also ensures that the county is effectively using its available resources. Many counties enlist local law enforcement to conduct security sweeps of polling locations prior to Election Day. Most states also train poll workers to follow specific requirements regarding restrictions in and around polling locations.

With respect to voter registration, HAVA required states to develop centralized, computerized statewide voter registration lists. Voters in 31 states plus the District of Columbia can now register to vote online, though the traditional paper-based process still exists. Even though this component is internet-based, which increases cybersecurity concerns, there have been no known successful attempts to alter voter registration databases.

Apart from election law requirements, the security of our elections is the top priority for election officials. Despite the recent concerns about cyber attacks on voting technology, election officials are prepared for a wide range of challenges, including natural disasters like hurricanes, a fire at a polling station or other emergencies.

How much does it cost to run elections?

The cost of running elections is difficult to calculate and varies by county. According to the California Institute of Technology/Massachusetts Institute of Technology Voting Technology Project, county election expenditures were an estimated $1 billion in 2000. However, after HAVA was passed, substantial election reforms were implemented that included upgrading voting systems to ensure that voters could verify their selections before their ballot was cast. The need to upgrade voting machines increased the cost to run elections. The impact on counties has varied depending on factors like how many machines are used in the county, which vendor is selected for the machines, and if the vendor provides maintenance for the machines.

Sources: NACo analysis of U.S. Election Commission Data, 2014; National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) data on voting equipment, 2015; NCSL data on election costs, 2016.

Base cost examples:

Direct-Recording Electronic machines: $2,500 to $3,000 per unit; the number needed depends on the number of voters in a particular jurisdiction

Precinct optical scanners: $2,500 to $5,000; at least one per polling site would be needed

Central county optical scanner: $70,000 to $100,000 per unit; at least one needed per central counting location

The above figures represent just the base costs for purchasing equipment and do not include costs such as:

- transporting units to and from polling locations
- printing if paper ballots are being used, and
- maintenance of the machines on an annual basis

Are counties responsible for all costs?

While the majority of election-related costs are borne by counties, the state may contribute funds for things like maintaining the statewide voter registration databases required by HAVA, voting equipment, some election-related supplies and voter information dissemination. For example:

- In Alabama, Colorado, Hawaii and Louisiana, the state pays all expenses if only state candidates or issues are on the ballot. If other local issues are on the ballot, the state may pay a portion of election expenses.
- In Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri and Vermont, the state pays (or may pay)for a portion of the equipment used to cast and tabulate votes.
- Montana, Idaho and California provide funds to help update equipment when they pass a new state law regarding elections administration.

Counties take protecting our elections seriously because the citizen vote is the foundation upon which our democracy is built. County election officials strive to administer elections in a way that is accurate, safe and secure.

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