



THE COST OF DEMOCRACY:

An Overview and Analysis of the Cost of
Elections to Nebraska Counties

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Executive Summary

A Primary election is a pre-election process for choosing candidates for the general election. In Nebraska (for all but a few municipal elections), the primary occurs in May, preceding the general election in November.

Nebraska conducts non-partisan primaries (legislative, many local races) and partisan primaries (statewide, federal, and some local races). Any registered voter can vote on the non-partisan primary ballot. To receive a partisan primary ballot, a voter must be registered (with some exceptions) with the party whose ballot they receive. Parties must specifically open their primaries to non-affiliated voters if they wish for them to be able to vote on their primary ballot.

Elections are administered primarily at the county level in Nebraska, with each county having an election commissioner (in smaller counties, the county clerk serves in that role). In this paper we look only at the costs to counties for conducting elections, and compare costs of primary elections vs. general elections.

While primary elections are typically participated in by voters at a much lower rate than general elections, the cost of administering the primary election in most counties costs all taxpayers as much as or more than the general election.

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Introduction and Background

In 2022, the citizens of Nebraska enacted Initiative 432 (Nebraska Secretary of State, 2022) by close to a 2:1 margin at the polls. The initiative created a new constitutional requirement for voters to show photo identification before voting.

This, in turn, triggered a requirement for the Nebraska Legislature to pass legislation during the 2023 legislative session so that procedures could be in place before the 2024 primary and general elections.

The Legislature passed, and the Governor signed, LB514 during the 2023 session. Senator Tom Brewer, the Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee chair, sponsored the bill. It had a lengthy hearing, which included those who thought the bill went too far and those who thought it didn't go far enough (Brewer, 2023).

Once it reached the floor, the bill was filibustered by one of the sponsors of the original initiative petition because she believed it didn't go far enough and was inconsistent with the initiative's intent.

As the second in a planned series of three white papers looking at Nebraska's election system from different angles, this paper looks at the cost of administering elections in the counties of Nebraska. One of the arguments against voter ID in the past had been the costs to individuals and counties for acquiring and checking additional identification.

That argument—considering the passage of Initiative 432 and LB514—made a case for this paper exploring the fiscal cost to counties for elections to establish a baseline for comparison post-implementation. The estimated cost to the state to generate additional official IDs and provide information to voters about the new requirements was defined in the fiscal note to LB514. This paper looks only at costs to counties.

Methods, Part 1

NACO collected costs of elections from 71 of Nebraska's 93 counties for each primary and general election since 2016. The cost data was not universally consistent across counties and across time. Some counties did not have readily accessible data available for all years; some appear to have combined election costs for both primary and general elections in some of the years.

The author categorized the counties on a 7-point scale for population and area, with 1 representing the largest in those two categories and 7 representing the smallest.

Population Categories

Category	Number in Category	Definition of Category Population
1	3	Metro (Douglas, Lancaster, Sarpy)
2	8	Non-Metro population > 30,000
3	5	15,000-29,999
4	20	7000-14,999
5	20	2000-6999
6	6	1000-1999
7	9	Less than 1000

Land Area Categories

Category	Number in Category	Definition of Category Square Miles
1	1	Cherry (6009 sq. miles)
2	4	2000-2999
3	7	1000-1999
4	8	800-999
5	10	700-799
6	24	500-699
7	17	200-499

The cost to counties for each ballot cast and each registered voter was calculated by county, using the canvassing books for each primary and general election from 2016 to 2022. The canvassing books were accessed on the Nebraska Secretary of State’s website. Those numbers varied widely, but the aggregated statewide numbers are found below.

Average Cost per Ballot Cast in Primary Elections (Statewide)—Table 1

Year	Cost (Average/Median)	Voter Turnout
2016	\$11.73/\$10.25	32.4%
2018	\$13.17/11.18	33.2%
2020	\$8.78/\$7.53	48.9%
2022	\$13.71/\$10.50	40.5%

Average Cost per Ballot Cast in General Elections (Statewide)—Table 2

Year	Cost (Average/Median)	Voter Turnout
2016	\$4.78/\$4.27	72%
2018	\$6.63/\$5.42	59.3%
2020	\$5.59/\$4.57	78.2%
2022	\$8.40/\$6.47	58.4%

Average Cost per Registered Voter in Primaries (Statewide)—Table 3

Year	Cost (Average/Median)	Voter Turnout
2016	\$3.73/\$3.06	32.4%
2018	\$4.14/\$3.25	33.2%
2020	\$4.30/\$3.57	48.9%
2022	\$5.69/\$4.44	40.5%

Average Cost per Registered Voter in General Elections (Statewide)—Table 4

Year	Cost (Average/Median)	Voter Turnout
2016	\$3.48/\$2.99	72%
2018	\$3.99/\$3.23	59.3%
2020	\$4.44/\$3.45	78.2%
2022	\$5.03/\$3.80	58.4%

Median Cost of Elections per County—Table 5

Year	Primary	General
2016	\$14,276	\$12,490
2018	\$17,115	\$14,860
2020	\$16,561	\$15,889
2022	\$18,961	\$16,882

Average Costs per Election by Population Size—Table 6

Pop. Category (# included)	Average Primary Cost	Average General Cost	Primary:General Cost Ratio
1 (3)	\$253,128	\$462,013	5:10
2 (8)	\$52,852	\$54,475	10:10
3 (5)	\$27,812	\$28,689	10:10
4 (20)	\$19,407	\$17,789	11:10
5 (20)	\$13,963	\$12,326	11:10
6 (6)	\$11,785	\$9,142	13:10
7 (9)	\$5,426	\$4,915	11:10

Discussion and Analysis

No election process is without cost to taxpayers. In a typical election, ballots must be printed, counting machines must be maintained (or procured), polling locations for precincts must be reserved, and poll workers must be trained and paid for their time at the polls.

The total population of taxpayers pays for election costs—whether they vote (or are allowed to vote) or not.

The tables above show the average (mean) and median costs for voting statewide in both primary and general elections, by vote cast and total voter registration. Tables 1-4 show both the average cost and the median cost per ballot cast (Tables 1 & 2) and per registered voter (Tables 3 & 4).

The two counties with the largest population (Douglas and Lancaster) together had average election costs exceeding the costs of the next 20 largest population counties. Hence, Table 5 represents *median* costs per county to show the central tendency between primary and general elections, rather than skewing the data with means.

Table 6 represents a simple ratio, calculating the average costs of primary and general elections for counties in the seven population categories defined. One would assume that since fewer people vote in primary elections, printing, and staffing costs might be less in the primary elections. That seems to be the case in larger counties. In smaller population counties, it might be posited that staffing costs are virtually the same, regardless of the number of voters in a particular election, but that the cost of printing multiple (and larger) ballots for primary elections adds to the fixed costs associated with elections in smaller counties, resulting in the higher primary to general election cost ratio.

Tables 1 and 2 show that the cost per ballot cast is significantly higher in the primary elections than in the general elections for the same year. There are several potential explanations for this, and while we suggest a few of them here, a definitive explanation goes beyond the scope of this paper.

- 1) Fewer people vote in primary elections, partly because they don't think it matters and because it's inconvenient (Stein & Vonnahme, 2008). Thus, fixed costs are spread across a smaller population.
- 2) Nebraska's "mostly closed" primary system prevents many non-partisan voters from being able to participate in some of the most highly contested (or at least well-publicized) races, given the dominance of the Republican party in Nebraska during the timeframe for which cost data was available. Gubernatorial primaries, especially, show a higher turnout rate in open primary states vs. closed primary states (Kenney, 1986).

Tables 3 and 4 show the average cost per *registered* voter statewide. While the cost per potential voter seems to be modestly higher in primary elections, the differences aren't as pronounced as with the votes cast in the previous two tables. While general election turnout is consistently higher than primary election turnout, that should come as no surprise, since:

- 1) There is a perception that the "real election" is the general election, inspiring more turnout and;
- 2) All registered voters can vote on the same ballot, regardless of their party affiliation (or non-affiliation).

Methods, Part 2

After sorting the counties by geographic size, calculating the average cost for primary and general elections was done similarly to that seen in Table 6 for population.

Average Costs Per Election By Geographic Size—Table 7

Geo. Category (#included)	Average Primary Cost	Average General Cost	Primary:General Cost Ratio
1 (1)	\$19,118	\$24,032	8:10*
2 (4)	\$32,162	\$27,026	12:10
3 (7)	\$19,102	\$16,525	12:10
4 (8)	\$47,932	\$57,487	8:10**
5 (10)	\$17,266	\$17,659	10:10
6 (24)	\$23,577	\$21,485	11:10
7 (17)	\$45,669	\$78,196	6:10***

*Cherry County reported multiple years as TOTAL election costs rather than splitting between primary and general costs. Cherry County uses mail-in-only elections.

**Includes Lancaster County whose costs (due to population) raise the averages significantly.

*** Includes both Douglas and Sarpy Counties, whose total costs (due to population) are among the top 3 in the state. Excluding those counties from this calculation would have resulted in ratios closer to Category 6.

Discussion and Analysis

The brief geographic analysis is interesting but probably not something to hang policy hats on. That said (with the exception of Cherry County, which is large geographically and which has been doing mail-in-voting only for several election cycles, and those categories that include large population as seen in Table 6), it would appear that “on average” costs of primary elections are equal to or greater than the costs of general elections to the counties.

That finding seems relatively consistent across both population and geographic size categories.

Conclusions

The goal of this brief was to provide information that may spur others to discuss the way that elections are funded, who pays for elections, and whether there is a better way of ensuring that elections are both secure and fair for all voters. A few points follow, but please see the note below for more information about neighboring states' processes.¹

On the surface, the Nebraska taxpayers who have the most to complain about related to election costs are those non-partisan/independent voters who have no opportunity to vote in high-profile primary elections, absent changing their political party registration. Their choice to avoid party affiliation results in their having to pay (through taxes) for primary elections where they have little to no voice. So-called "independent voters" and their role in Nebraska politics will be the topic of the third planned paper in this series.

Partisans may argue that non-partisans shouldn't have a voice in partisan nominating processes and that if they want to, they should register with a party. While that's an

¹ Every state operates its nominating process differently. Generally (and with different names sometimes attached), they fall into the following three broad categories of "types": 1) Open and semi-open; 2) Closed and semi-closed, and 3) blanket and top-two. Open primaries do not generally require registration with a particular party to vote in a party's primary. Closed and semi-closed primaries generally prohibit voters from voting in a primary unless they are affiliated with the party. Blanket primaries put all candidates on the primary ballot, and voters choose the top two (like Nebraska's legislative races, but often also including party affiliation). Not all commentators designate all states the same way. A few states still have provisions for party convention nomination, sometimes occurring after a primary has failed to identify a majority support candidate.

Nebraska is considered a closed, or "mostly closed" primary state, meaning affiliation with a party is required to vote in a particular party's primary, *unless* the party has voted to open its primary ballot to non-party-affiliated voters.

The Democratic Party has done that in Nebraska, but only registered Republicans can currently vote in the Republican partisan races (except...for congressional race primaries, where non-partisan voters can choose to vote in any one party's primary). In Nebraska, non-partisan voters can change their registration to affiliate with a party for the primary election up to a couple of weeks before the primary election.

Among our neighbors, **Iowa's** primary is closed, but voters can change their registration on the day of the election to whichever party whose primary they want to vote in. In **South Dakota** (as in Nebraska) parties can choose whether to allow those who are unaffiliated to participate in their elections (which is also the case with **Wyoming**). **Kansas** and **Colorado** maintain hybrid systems, which require those who are registered with a party to vote in that party's primary, but voters who are unaffiliated may choose which party's primary to participate in when going to the polls.

understandable response, the real answers may be in the subjective judgments to the following questions:

- 1) Should non-partisans be forced to join with a particular political party (or parties) to have the opportunity to narrow choices through the primary elections of individual parties?
- 2) If non-partisans choose to remain non-partisan and cede the right to vote in the primary election, could a case be made that for a significant portion of the voting population, this amounts to “taxation without representation”?
- 3) Should parties that choose to maintain closed primaries be assessed for the cost of those primaries in some way in order to reduce—albeit minimally—the cost of primary elections for those who are not able to vote in many of those races?

Here’s what we know:

- 1) Significantly fewer voters vote in primary elections than in general elections, almost without fail, across the state.
- 2) Nebraska’s “mostly closed” primary system shuts nonpartisan voters out of any voice of who will likely serve in most of the partisan elected offices of this state.
- 3) Nonpartisans and third-party voters can vote freely in Legislative primaries (half of the voters in the state would have that potential every two years), as well as for local nonpartisan races, but not for local partisan races.
- 4) Except in highly populated areas of the state, the cost of administering primary elections is almost always as high as (or higher than) the cost of administering general elections, even though fewer people vote.

Our previous vote studies article, dealing with different voting methods, suggested that “representative democracy should strive for the highest level of ‘representativeness’ possible” (Platte Institute, 2023). There may be no one “right answer” to ensuring maximum representation, but seeking information and exploring alternatives that are both fiscally responsible and allow for greater participation seems a worthy goal.

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