
Surviving at the Margins: Election Budgets and Marginal Funding Decisions in North Carolina

In North Carolina, elections are funded at the county level and organized by county board of elections (CBOE). This funding provides everything in elections from voting machines and staff to office supplies and voter outreach. We reviewed budgets from 40 counties and interviewed 12 election officials to understand the trends and identify the issues.

These are the highlights from our 2023 report, “Surviving at the Margins: Election Budgets and Marginal Funding Decisions in North Carolina.”

- Over the last six fiscal years, a majority of sample counties have generally increased the funding of CBOE. A number of counties, however, have seen a consistent decline in funding, either in absolute terms or as a share of the total county budget.
- County governments often seek to cut budgets, forcing CBOE directors to use their discretion on what is and is not worth fighting for in their budgets.
 - The most commonly cut line items include operating costs (most commonly office supplies) and new staff positions.
 - Directors said their top priorities include their own office space, voter outreach and education, replacing voting machines, increasing poll worker pay.
 - Underfunding is likely caused because election administration lacks “a natural constituency to advocate for it in county governments and because the outcomes from funding or underfunding are only observed intermittently.”
- Technology has become a new backbone to local elections, but underfunding prevents hiring full-time specialists.
- The ongoing election denial and high-octane rhetoric surrounding elections has also created ongoing difficulties for election workers.
 - Directors say funds would allow for greater outreach and information for voters to develop relationships and trust, as well as connections with parties.

Suggestions for future advocacy and research:

- Most pressing needs for CBOEs are lack of own office space and understaffing due to low, non-competitive salaries;
- Training for individual directors varies greatly- an informal, safe program for older, more experienced directors to mentor younger staff and smaller counties could be helpful;
- Identify county parties and organizations that could provide more direct advocacy and political support for CBOEs; and
- Examining ways the State Board of Elections or the county can provide live and remote tech support where funding does not allow for hiring a new, full-time specialist.

