The Cost of Delivering Voter Information: A Case Study of California

Although Americans increasingly are turning to e-mail and the Web to find answers to everyday questions, many states continue to rely solely on U.S. mail to deliver voting information, including polling place locations and sample ballots. For states and counties facing major fiscal challenges, these mailings are expensive—and inefficient. States can significantly reduce the expense of sending important election information to citizens—without reducing voters' access to it—by making better use of technology and rethinking their outreach practices while maintaining paper mailings for those who need them.

This case study is part of a research series commissioned by the Pew Center on the States examining costs associated with specific aspects of election administration.

This case study, commissioned by the Pew Center on the States, examines the costs of disseminating voter information in California's 58 counties. It identifies opportunities for counties to reduce spending, use technology and adopt state practices to save more than 10 percent of their total election costs.

The Real Cost of Delivering Voter Information

While many states are facing historic budget shortfalls, California's fiscal troubles are particularly daunting. With a budget deficit of $25 billion projected for 2011–12, the state has had to cut many key services to narrow this gap,

causing nearly all areas of government to feel the pinch. County election offices are no exception.

As election officials seek ways to cut costs without cutting essential services, they can reduce the expense of providing voter information. California law requires the secretary of state's office to mail each registered household a paper election information guide for each statewide election. However, every county currently mails a paper sample ballot and notice of

polling place location to every registered voter—sending out individual copies even if multiple voters live in one home. In the November 2008 general election, the mailing of paper sample ballots cost counties 11 percent to 46 percent of their total election costs (Exhibit 1). Los Angeles, California's largest county, spent nearly $6 million—approximately 14 percent of total expenditures for that election—on this mailing alone.

Better Access at Lower Cost

Despite technological advances in recent years, California counties continue to rely solely on postal mail to transmit voter information—just as they did 50 years ago.

Private and public sectors have demonstrated more cost-effective methods for sending information to consumers that could be applied to the dissemination of voter information. Using cost data from the 2008 general election for California's 58 counties and further data on potential savings from a sample of 15 counties, this study shows how twenty-first century technology and proven reforms can help counties save money while delivering the same or better service.[1]

Paperless Voter Information

One option for reducing costs is to give voters the opportunity to opt out of paper-based voting information and,

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Exhibit 1

Estimated Sample Ballot Costs for the November 2008 General Election

County	Sample Ballot Cost	Percentage of Total Election Costs
AMADOR	$25,729	20%
CONTRA COSTA	$931,870	17%
DEL NORTE	$19,079	46%
FRESNO	$560,731	29%
KERN	$291,061	14%
LOS ANGELES	$5,949,199	14%
MADERA	$73,202	20%
RIVERSIDE	$636,105	14%
SACRAMENTO	$454,031	11%
SAN DIEGO	$2,077,839	16%
SAN FRANCISCO	$1,312,424	16%
SAN LUIS OBISPO	$115,411	17%
SAN MATEO	$426,455	11%
SANTA CRUZ	$244,768	16%
VENTURA	$558,477	18%

SOURCE: Each of the above counties reported their total expenditures for the November 2008 general election, including the cost of sample ballots.

instead, receive it electronically. Such an option is now available to counties since a 2010 state law allows jurisdictions to develop procedures for voters to choose not to receive these mailings.[2] While cost savings depend on the number of voters who opt out, the research estimates that counties could cut back up to 9 percent of their election expenses if a portion of their voters agreed to cancel paper mailings.[3]

In Fresno County, for example, if 15 percent of registered voters opted out of paper delivery of voter information, the county would save an estimated $84,000, or 4 percent of its total estimated election costs. San Francisco County could save more than $197,000, or 2 percent of its total election costs, if the same percentage of voters received only electronic mailings. Los Angeles County could save an estimated $1.19 million if 20 percent of its voters opted out of paper information (Exhibit 2).

E-mail offers a simple way for voters to receive election information if they opt out of the paper system. While few California counties currently collect

Exhibit 2

Estimated Cost Savings When Voters Opt Out of Paper Delivery of Information

| County | NOVEMBER 2008 GENERAL ELECTION | | ESTIMATED SAVINGS | | | |
	Registered Voters	Cost per Mailing	5% Opt Out	10% Opt Out	15% Opt Out	20% Opt Out
AMADOR	21,462	$1.20	$1,288	$2,575	$3,863	$5,151
CONTRA COSTA	539,903	$1.73	$46,702	$93,403	$140,105	$186,806
DEL NORTE	12,681	$1.50	$951	$1,902	$2,853	$3,804
FRESNO	414,411	$1.35	$27,973	$55,945	$83,918	$111,891
KERN	311,139	$0.94	$14,624	$29,247	$43,871	$58,494
LOS ANGELES	4,111,642	$1.45	$298,094	$596,188	$894,282	$1,192,376
MADERA	54,003	$1.36	$3,672	$7,344	$11,017	$14,689
RIVERSIDE	838,716	$0.76	$31,871	$63,742	$95,614	$127,485
SACRAMENTO	684,588	$0.66	$22,591	$45,183	$67,774	$90,366
SAN DIEGO	1,488,157	$1.40	$104,171	$208,342	$312,513	$416,684
SAN FRANCISCO	477,651	$2.75	$65,677	$131,354	$197,031	$262,708
SAN LUIS OBISPO	161,256	$0.72	$5,805	$11,610	$17,416	$23,221
SAN MATEO	389,718	$1.09	$21,240	$42,479	$63,719	$84,959
SANTA CRUZ	148,306	$1.65	$12,235	$24,470	$36,706	$48,941
VENTURA	425,968	$1.31	$27,901	$55,802	$83,703	$111,604

SOURCE: Lauren Hengl, "Mailbox, Inbox, Ballot Box: Delivering Information to California Voters in the 21st Century," March 2011, www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/CA_voterinfo_report.pdf. Data provided by counties. Estimated cost savings calculated by Lauren Hengl.

e-mail addresses, this untapped resource provides a significant opportunity to inform voters more efficiently. Of the 42 counties that enter e-mail addresses into their voter registration databases, only 25 can report the number of registered voters who have an active e-mail address. Others lack the capacity or capability to manage and monitor their e-mail lists. Thirty-one counties reported at least some e-mail communication efforts with voters; in many cases, however, this communication was limited to select populations, such as military and overseas voters.

San Francisco County already has demonstrated the potential ease and effectiveness of using e-mail to communicate with voters. For the November 2008 election, the Department of Elections sent eNewsletters—providing information and useful links—to 58,000 voters, resulting in an estimated 17.5 percent increase in the average number of visits to its website. If these 58,000 citizens also were sent their official voting information only by e-mail, the county would have saved almost $160,000.

Online and Accessible

A key to encouraging voters to choose the option of receiving election materials electronically is ensuring that the information is easily accessible online. In 2008, the Pew Center on the States completed an assessment of state election websites. The study found that election offices with an informative online presence

Existing California County Website Services

Percentage of Counties
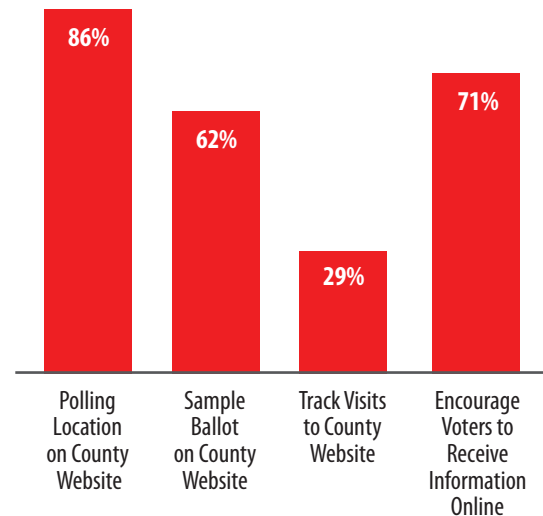
SOURCE: Lauren Hengl, "Mailbox, Inbox, Ballot Box: Delivering Information to California Voters in the 21st Century," March 2011, www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/CA_voterinfo_report.pdf.

can save $10 to $100 per transaction each time a voter uses the county's website instead of calling or visiting an office in person to get basic information.[4]

Many California counties already have invested in using the Web to share voter information (Exhibit 3). By further employing online technologies, counties can provide voters with more resources than mail delivery allows—and at a lower cost. For example in the 2008 presidential election, Pew partnered with Google, Inc., 10 states and Los Angeles County to offer an official polling place lookup tool, which was used by more than 10 percent of voters across the country. In 2010, Pew partnered with 19

states and the District of Columbia to make more easily accessible election information available online to voters.

Increasing Cost-Effectiveness

While the secretary of state mails one copy of voting information to each registered household, historically counties have sent paper communications to each registered voter, regardless of how many voters reside at one address.[5]

If counties follow the secretary of state's example, they could save 5 percent to 18 percent of total election costs, according to data from the sampled counties. While the largest counties could see millions in savings (approximately $2.3 million in Los Angeles), smaller counties such as Del Norte could realize savings close to 20 percent of their election costs—more than $7,000 of the $41,000 it spent on the November 2008 election (Exhibit 4).

This one change would certainly reap savings, but savings would be even greater when partnered with paperless options. The combination of allowing counties to mail only one ballot to each household and also providing that household with the opportunity to opt out of receiving a paper mailing provides the opportunity to save millions of dollars.[6]

Exhibit 4

Estimated Cost Savings with One Sample Ballot Mailing per Household

| County | NOVEMBER 2008 GENERAL ELECTION | | | ESTIMATED SAVINGS | | |
	Registered Voters	Registered Households	Cost per Mailing	Reduction in Sample Ballots	Cost Savings	Percentage of Total Election Cost
AMADOR	21,462	12,278	$1.20	9,184	$11,021	8%
CONTRA COSTA	539,903	288,149	$1.73	251,754	$ 435,534	8%
DEL NORTE	12,681	7,746	$1.50	4,935	$ 7,403	18%
FRESNO	414,411	211,208	$1.35	203,203	$ 274,324	14%
KERN	311,139	175,057	$0.94	136,082	$ 127,917	6%
LOS ANGELES	4,111,642	2,511,247	$1.45	1,600,395	$ 2,320,573	6%
MADERA	54,003	30,510	$1.36	23,493	$ 31,950	9%
RIVERSIDE	838,716	467,082	$0.76	371,634	$ 282,442	6%
SACRAMENTO	684,588	381,660	$0.66	302,928	$ 199,932	5%
SAN DIEGO	1,488,157	840,395	$1.40	647,762	$ 906,867	7%
SAN FRANCISCO	477,651	288,158	$2.75	189,493	$ 521,106	6%
SAN LUIS OBISPO	161,256	88,803	$0.72	72,453	$ 52,166	8%
SAN MATEO	389,718	208,090	$1.09	181,628	$ 197,975	5%
SANTA CRUZ	148,306	81,625	$1.65	66,681	$ 110,024	7%
VENTURA	425,968	227,891	$1.31	198,077	$ 259,481	8%

SOURCE: Lauren Hengl, "Mailbox, Inbox, Ballot Box: Delivering Information to California Voters in the 21st Century," March 2011, www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/CA_voterinfo_report.pdf. Data provided by counties. Estimated cost savings calculated by Lauren Hengl.

Conclusion

As states and localities explore ways to cut election costs while maintaining the system's integrity, this research suggests some potentially simple and feasible options to consider. By employing twenty-first century technology as well as methods already in use at the state level to deliver election information, California counties could effectively save money without restricting service. Although counties may differ in how they disseminate election information, the proposed options have the potential to help those hardest hit by the recession to cut spending while enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the electoral process.

Endnotes

This brief is based on original research documented in the report: Lauren Hengl, "Mailbox, Inbox, Ballot Box: Delivering Information to California Voters in the 21st Century," March 2011, www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/CA_voterinfo_report.pdf.

1 All 58 California county election offices provided information on their election costs, voter registration databases and services through survey, e-mail and telephone interviews. To keep cost estimates consistent, counties were asked to omit labor costs for the sample ballots, due to the inability of many counties to break down the cost of internal labor for tasks such as editing. Additionally, language translation costs for the sample ballots were omitted because those costs were incurred by only a few counties.

2 California Elections Code § 13300.7, www.leginfo.ca.gov/cgi-bin/displaycode?section=elec&group=13001-14000&file=13300-13317.

3 These savings do not include the initial capital investments and administrative costs associated with providing this alternative; we expect that such administrative costs would be moderate costs that would amortize over time.

4 *Being Online Is Not Enough: State Election Web Sites*, Pew Center on the States, October 2008, www.pewcenteronthestates.org/report_detail.aspx?id=45168.

5 A registered household is defined as two or more registered voters having the same postal address.

6 Based on the assumption that single-occupant households would opt out at the conservative 5 percent rate of individual voters, California counties could have saved an estimated $340,000 statewide in 2008. This would have been in addition to the nearly $6 million the 15 sampled counties could have saved by switching to one mailing per household as demonstrated in Exhibit 4.

Election Initiatives seeks to foster an election system that achieves the highest standards of accuracy, convenience, efficiency and security.

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