

Why GAO Did This Study

Since the enactment of the Help America Vote Act of 2002, there have been notable changes in how states and local election jurisdictions conduct key election activities, such as registration and voting. States regulate some aspects of elections, but the combinations of election administration policies can vary widely across the country's approximately 10,500 local election jurisdictions.

GAO was asked to examine the benefits, challenges, and other considerations of various election administration policies. This report addresses the following questions: (1) What are the reported benefits and challenges of efforts to collect and share voter registration information electronically? (2) What is known about the effect of selected policies on voter turnout? (3) What is known about the costs of elections?

To address these three questions, GAO reviewed and analyzed relevant literature from 2002 through 2015. GAO identified 118 studies that examined the effect of selected policies that have been or could be implemented by state or local governments on voter turnout. GAO reviewed the studies' analyses, and determined that the studies were sufficiently sound to support their results and conclusions. In addition, GAO conducted visits and interviewed state and local election officials from five states that had implemented efforts and policies relevant to GAO's research questions to varying degrees, and provided geographic diversity. The results from these five states are not generalizable, but provide insight into state and local perspectives.

View [GAO-16-630](#). For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or gambler@gao.gov.

ELECTIONS

Issues Related to Registering Voters and Administering Elections

What GAO Found

According to GAO's literature review and election officials interviewed, the benefits of collecting and sharing voter registration information electronically include improved accuracy and cost savings; while challenges include upfront investments and ongoing maintenance, among other things. For example, establishing infrastructure for online registration requires time and money, but can generate savings and enhance accuracy by, for instance, reducing the need for local election officials to manually process paper registration forms. The upfront costs of online registration are generally modest and quickly surpassed by savings generated after implementation.

GAO reviewed research to identify 11 election administration policies that had each been studied multiple times in connection with voter turnout and found varying effects. For example:

- The majority of studies on same day registration and all vote-by-mail found that these policies increased turnout.
- Vote centers (polling places where registrants can vote regardless of assigned precinct) and the sending of text messages to provide information about registration and elections have not been studied as much as some of the other policies, but almost all of the studies reviewed on these policies reported increases in turnout.
- Some studies of mailings to provide information and no-excuse absentee voting also found that these policies increased turnout, while other studies reported mixed evidence or no evidence of an effect.
- Most studies of e-mail and robocalls to provide information reported no evidence of an effect on turnout.
- Most studies of early in-person voting reported no evidence of an effect on turnout or found decreases in turnout, while the remaining studies reported mixed evidence.

Distinguishing the unique effects of a policy from the effects of other factors that affect turnout can be challenging, and even sufficiently sound studies cannot account for all unobserved factors that potentially impact the results. Additionally, research findings on turnout are only one of many considerations for election officials as they decide whether or not to implement selected policies.

States and local election jurisdictions incur a variety of costs associated with administering elections, and the types and magnitude of costs can vary by state and jurisdiction. Further, quantifying the total costs for all election activities is difficult for several reasons, including that multiple parties incur costs associated with elections and may track costs differently. Although some parties' costs can be easily identified in cost-tracking documents, other costs may be difficult to attribute to election activities. Additionally, voters' costs can also be difficult to quantify because each voter's costs vary based on factors such as method of voting, or time required to travel to polling places, among other things.

The Election Assistance Commission did not have any comments on this report, and GAO incorporated technical comments provided by state and local election officials and DMV officials as appropriate.