



INSIDE THE BUDGET

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Down for the Count? The New York City Board of Elections

The 2000 presidential election contest revealed that counting votes can be an imprecise business. When the margin of victory is slim, the result is likely to be delay, confusion, and uncertainty about the legitimacy of the outcome. Here in New York City last November, a particularly close state senate election was plagued by ballot mistakes, and seven weeks passed before a winner could be declared. More serious problems—caused by underfunding, a shortage of trained poll workers, and ancient voting machines—could occur in just nine months, when city voters will go to the polls to choose among nearly 200 candidates in what will be—due to term limits—the most contested city races in memory.

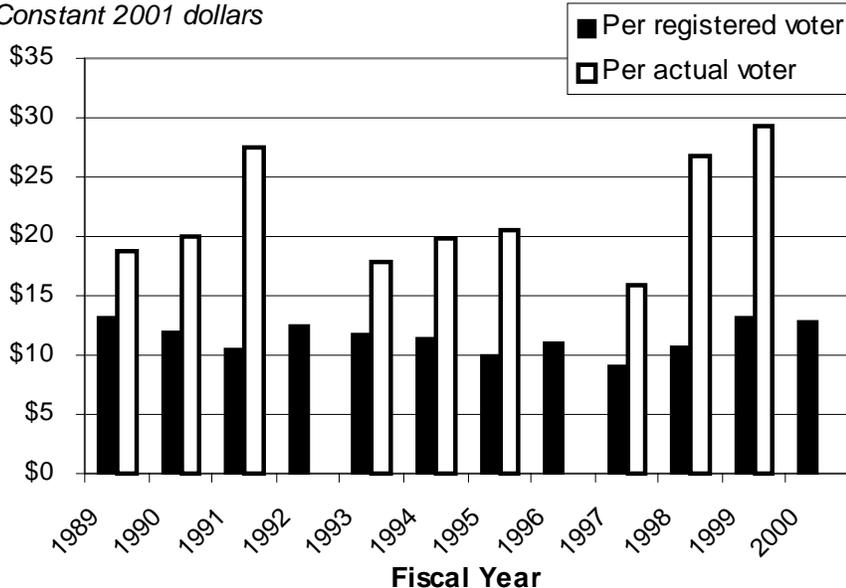
Counting the Vote: The Board of Elections

The Board of Elections consists of 10 commissioners, appointed by the leaders of the two largest parties in each borough. The commissioners are supported by a professional staff of 312, headed by a Board-appointed executive director. The Board is responsible for all aspects of running elections in New York City. It validates candidate petitions, registers voters, coordinates all Election Day activities, and processes election results.

The five borough offices employ three-quarters of Board staff and perform much of its day-to-day work: they register voters; store, maintain, prepare and test the voting machines; verify candidates' petitions; locate and lease poll sites; process voter history and address changes; and handle mapping changes throughout the year. The borough offices are also responsible for recruiting, assigning, training, and paying Election Day poll site staff, and for voter outreach programs. Additionally, the borough offices provide non-election services, such as assistance in locating people (for example, fathers sought for overdue child support payments).

Board of Elections Spending Per Voter

Constant 2001 dollars



SOURCES: Independent Budget Office; NYC Financial Management System.
NOTE: Budget numbers for November 2000 elections based on Fiscal Year 2001 Modified Budget, not actual spending.

How much does it cost to run an election?

Funding for the Board of Elections has increased from \$18.1 million in fiscal year 1984—the year Mayor Koch appointed a blue-ribbon panel to study overhauling the city electoral system—to \$44.2 million in fiscal year 2000. Adjusting for inflation, this is a 45 percent increase. The

number of registered voters has increased by 38 percent over the same period. Again adjusting for inflation, spending per registered voter has remained fairly steady at between \$10 and \$13. Spending per actual voter has fluctuated more, depending on the number of elections in a given year, the type of election, and turnout, but has averaged about \$22 per voter.

In fiscal year 2000, the Board spent \$44.2 million to run four elections. Last year's budget included \$12.3 million for staff, \$8.8 million for poll workers, \$6.2 million to print ballots, \$1.3 million for mailings, \$1.0 million for trucking contracts to transport machines, and \$330,000 for voting machine repairs.

In January 2000, the administration proposed a budget of \$33.5 million for fiscal year 2001. Since then, \$9.2 million has been added to the Board's budget, much of it to cover shortfalls in the costs of administering the September primaries and the November general election—bringing the current 2001 budget to \$42.7 million. The mayor has proposed a budget for 2002—which includes the primary and general elections for all city offices—of \$41.5 million.

Assistance Act, Ballot Reform Act, Local Law 29, and the State Voter Outreach initiative in the Election Law. Under the federal Motor Voter Bill, for example, the Board prepares, distributes, and then processes voter registration forms from other public and non-profit agencies.

- The Board now prints election materials and provides polling site interpreters in four languages (Spanish, two dialects of Chinese, and a limited amount of Korean).
- An expanding number of parties, which results in higher ballot printing and mailing costs and increased responsibility for processing candidates' ballot-qualifying petitions.
- Stipends for poll workers rose from \$85 in 1999 to \$130 currently.
- Increasing costs associated with technology upgrades, including purchase of an automated paper tally system.
- The Board's phone bank has been upgraded to include an integrated voice response system and a toll-free number. The number of calls has doubled since its installation.

Going forward, some further requirements could add to the Board's future responsibilities. First, the results of the 2000 census will greatly expand the necessity for Korean material and interpretation. More language services could be required for other communities with over 10,000 non-English proficient speakers of a foreign language. Second, a recent court decision allows for minor-party primaries for the first time, which could significantly add to the time and expense of preparing voting machines and ballot materials.

At the same time that requirements have increased, the full-time staff was cut during the

Board of Elections Spending and Budget					
<i>Dollars in Millions</i>					
Fiscal year Major Races	Actual		Planned		
	1999 Governor	2000 Various	2001 President	2002 City	
Personal Services	\$12.2	\$12.3	\$13.2	\$12.1	
Full-time staff, regular pay	8.9	9.6	9.7	9.7	
Overtime	2.4	1.9	2.9	1.8	
Temporary Workers	0.9	0.9	0.6	0.6	
Non-Personnel Expenses	\$32.2	\$31.9	\$29.5	\$29.4	
Poll workers	11.3	8.8	8.7	12.0	
Printing	7.6	6.2	7.3	3.5	
Postage	1.5	1.3	1.5	1.1	
Transportation expenses	1.5	2.1	2.1	2.0	
Computer consulting	<u>1.2</u>	<u>1.8</u>	<u>0.6</u>	<u>0.5</u>	
Total, Board of Elections	\$44.4	\$44.2	\$42.7	\$41.5	

SOURCES: Independent Budget Office; NYC Financial Management System.

A number of factors have contributed to increasing pressures on the Board's resources in recent years:

- New requirements have been imposed by federal and state laws, including the National Voter Registration Act (the Motor Voter Bill), Language

1990s, with the result that the Board has become more reliant on temporary workers, and overtime costs for full-time staff have risen. Depending on the time of year, the Board headquarters and borough offices employ from 10 to 150 temporary workers. Spending on overtime in some divisions is higher than spending on

full-time base staff salaries—in 1999, for example, overtime pay was \$2.4 million for 41 full-time staff whose aggregate base salary was \$1.7 million.

Poll Workers

The most publicly visible Board of Elections personnel are the 26,000 Election Day poll workers. There are six positions: inspector, poll clerk, information clerk, door clerk, coordinator, and interpreter. Poll clerks and inspectors are responsible for setting up machines, assisting voters with ballot questions, handing out paper ballots when necessary, and breaking down the poll sites. Coordinators must have worked for at least two years in a row and have more supervisory responsibilities. The interpreters are based in the 788 voting districts (out of 1340 total) with over 10,000 non-English-speaking residents.

Although poll workers are required to attend a three-hour training before working on site, on average, only 70 to 80 percent of those who work on Election Day have completed training.

Recruiting poll workers has become increasingly difficult. Prior to the 1980s, poll workers were recruited from local party offices. Today, the Board actively recruits workers. This has been difficult; the typical poll worker a few decades ago was someone without a full-time job, often a married woman. Now more women are in the workforce, and it is difficult to recruit among workers with full-time jobs. The incentives, meanwhile, are not strong. For a 16-hour workday (the longest in the country), poll clerks are given a stipend of \$130—or about \$8.13 per hour. Coordinators make \$200 for the day. Workers are given an additional \$25 bonus for passing a skills test after training and a \$35 bonus for working more than one election in a year. The Board has requested an increased stipend (\$250 for poll workers; \$350 for coordinators) for FY 2002. Other observers have suggested making election days a citywide holiday, negotiating with local colleges and universities to provide the day off and possibly academic credit for student poll workers, or splitting the day into two eight-hour shifts.

Voting Machines

Another challenge for the Board is the city's voting machines. The Board is responsible for 6,900 machines, all of which are 40 years old and are based on an 1869 design by Thomas Edison. The machines are no longer manufactured. From time to time the city purchases

machines that are being retired from service from other jurisdictions—for example, the Board is currently hoping to purchase 500 machines from other cities and counties.

The city retains 60 full-time voting machine technicians (VMT) to maintain the machines, and pays approximately \$300,000 a year to an independent contractor for more major repairs. Technicians are appointed by county party leaders and are paid an average base salary of about \$23,000 (although it can rise to \$30,000 with overtime).

Replacing the voting machine stock would be costly due both to the purchase price of new machines as well as higher ongoing maintenance costs.

The city entered into a contract in 1993 for the purchase of 7,000 electronic voting machines at \$6,000 each. Including other services and hardware, the total contract would have cost \$60 million. The machines were never purchased, however, because the city rejected a design submission at an early stage of the contract.

New electronic voting machines would result in significantly higher operating costs—warehousing costs are higher because the machines need climate-controlled environments; software and associated tallying hardware require extra room, and quarterly testing of the machines is required by the state. In addition, the Board would need to hire more highly trained, and certainly better-paid, technicians; current voting machine technicians are mechanics, not computer technicians.

The Board has made some advances in computer technology for counting ballots. In Manhattan, Staten Island, and Queens, absentee/affidavit ballots are counted using an optical scanning system. In Brooklyn and the Bronx they are still counted by hand. The Board expects to begin using the optical scanning technology for these two boroughs in the September 2001 primary election.

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