

Vote Centers and Election Costs: A study of the Fiscal Impact of Vote Centers in Indiana

Prepared by The Indiana Fiscal Policy Institute in collaboration with Growth Economics, Inc.

Executive Summary

This study, sponsored by the Indiana Secretary of State, seeks to understand the potential fiscal impact of Vote Centers on all 92 Indiana Vote Centers. Using information from reports by the clerks in pilot counties, interviews with election officials and publicly available election data, a fiscal model was developed to identify possible cost savings associated with Vote Centers and to estimate the fiscal impact of those centers in each county.

This model estimates the Election Day costs in five critical categories: poll workers' pay, poll workers' meals, poll workers' training, equipment transportation and poll-book printing. These categories represent the typical and significant costs of elections in each county as currently conducted.

Vote Centers have been tried on a pilot basis in three Indiana counties for two election cycles. This report considers the fiscal considerations associated with vote centers on an expanded scale.

Tables are included to compare the cost of conducting an election with Vote Centers in each county to the cost of using the current precinct-based process. These tables compare the costs overall and on a per-vote basis.

Key Findings

The major finding of this study is that Vote Centers would produce significant savings for all counties that implemented them and give local election officials more flexibility to anticipate voter turnout and deploy staff more appropriately. Such savings are particularly noticeable in counties with a low number of registered voters per precinct. Counties that already co-locate precincts also would experience significant cost savings.

The study also finds that implementation of Vote Centers could significantly reduce the number of voting machines necessary to conduct an efficient election, thus further reducing the election costs to counties.

This study finds that in many cases counties that choose to establish Vote Centers could realize significant cost savings both immediately and long-term.

Cost per vote is a key measure of election administration. The objective for each county is to provide efficient, convenient and fair polling at the least possible cost. With precincts, the number of locations and the level of staffing are fixed. County officials can

do little to reduce cost per vote. With Vote Centers, election administrators can anticipate turnout and modify the number of locations and the level of staffing to suit the need.

Moderate-sized counties are best able to bear the administrative burden of converting to vote centers, including redesign of the process, locating appropriate locations and purchasing the electronic poll book. Further, counties using direct record electronic machines will avoid possible complications caused by the need to store multiple ballots on each machine.

Drivers of potential savings

Electronic poll books can provide counties substantial pre- and post-election savings: Electronic poll books, required for Vote Centers, replace traditional paper voting rolls.

Voting machines are a large expense and are often underutilized: Voting machines cost about \$4,000 each and are replaced after about 10 years of use. When counties experience low voter turnout, the voting machines are underused. Evidence suggests this could be an area where counties could realize significant savings.

Some Indiana counties have very high numbers of registered voters per precinct: Cost savings from optimal location and size of Vote Centers /precincts are best achieved by providing local officials with maximum flexibility.

The combination of Vote Centers and satellite voting offers further potential savings: Election practices in Indiana are evolving. As early voting gains in popularity, election resources can be used on several days rather than one.

Scenarios Considered

The Indiana Fiscal Policy Institute considered many varying scenarios to weigh multiple factors that could impact elections. The report shows illustrates how Vote Centers would drive savings in each of these scenarios:

Scenario #1: Allowing co-located precincts to operate as Vote Centers with a single entry line and all machines programmed for all co-located precincts.

Scenario #2: Low turnout elections yield strong savings to all counties due to fewer staff being necessary to conduct an election.

Scenario #3: Even when Vote Centers are staffed for high turnout, counties will save money compared to precinct-based elections.

Scenario #4: Following Indiana's current Vote Center pilot which sets minimums for the number of Vote Centers per registered voters.