User Notes

The data provided on this site stem from a longitudinal dataset of actual Elections Costs as they were reported by the participating California Counties. This project began in 2014 and provides online questionnaires that fiscal staff from the respective counties filled out for each election that is covered by this project.  The project collects data for every statewide Primary, General and Special Election from 2004 onwards.  At the writing of this document, the project covered ten years of elections but the goal is to continue data collection indefinitely for statewide elections going forward.

There are three separate survey instruments that were developed for this project. The Direct Cost survey, which contains the vast majority of the questions, the Election Profile, which asks questions that are contextually important to each Election, and finally a short Technology survey about system use and cost. The survey instruments were developed in collaboration with the Grant Oversight Committee, which included CACEO leadership, and were based on financial documents that had been collected from a sample of California counties of different sizes. Draft instruments were circulated to all counties for feedback and tested. For 2004 to 2014, there were no changes in the questions. Going forward, changes in Election law may prompt for some questions to be added. Our goal is to provide a longitudinal dataset that is comparable over time, and any future changes will be documented.

The dataset is more complete for more recent elections with higher county participation for the most recent General Election and dropping off gradually for older elections. There are various reasons for this. One, county participation is voluntary and there is no payment or cost reimbursement for the time spent filling out this survey. For many counties, this presents a significant challenge because resources are extremely tight and some elections offices do not have dedicated fiscal staff available that could be assigned to this project. In some offices, the task of filling out the survey fell onto the Registrar of Voters who, of course, in many cases serves in other positions as well (Clerk-Recorder, etc.). Finding time and means to participate was not trivial even for those that were very enthusiastic about this project. Being conscious of these issues, the research team asked the counties to start their work on the project with the most recent election and consequently, most participants adhered to that request and worked their way backwards. Due to grant deadlines and because data analysis had to begin, counties were given target dates by which to compete their submissions. Most participants completed as much as possible by those dates and then stopped.

Two, the availability of data, as counties worked their way back through older elections, became increasingly less. We found that many counties had changed their financial systems at some point during the past ten years, and cost or billing information was archived and very difficult to access. In some counties, information was simply unavailable for the older elections.

Three, we found that while higher level, summary data, were available for most of the participants, the more detailed items were only available to some. The way that financial data are collected and indexed by counties is mostly driven by a need to use it in certain manner. For larger counties, more detail is often necessary because of the need to bill many more jurisdictions than smaller counties. Additionally, as labor costs are concerned, larger counties are able to assign staff to specific tasks simply due to having more work and more employees, while in smaller counties one staff person may have many tasks and time commitments are not tracked by task detail. We asked the counties not to estimate their costs by guessing what portion of time, for example, may have been dedicated to a specific task 8 elections ago, but rather only to provide what was available even if that mean foregoing some detail.

Finally, it is important to note that virtually none of the counties keeps their data in the way they are asked for in the Direct Cost survey, though for some it may be more similar than for others. Every county has to pull financial documents and summarize items or find detail in invoices or complete the survey. This can take a considerable amount of time.

While we did our best to provide assistance with filling out the surveys, mostly via email or phone calls, and also by providing explanations on what we wanted respondents to provide for each item, there are surely some differences in how questions were interpreted and answered. We attempt to clarify and correct answers as we become aware of problems. Likewise, there are some typos in the dataset that are also fixed as we find them.

As you are using this dataset, please let us know if you encounter problems or have results that do not seem to make sense. We are happy to verify the underlying data and give feedback about what may drive a particular finding. Also, if you find any data point that is an obvious and nonsensical outlier or that seems wrong, we would appreciate it if you would let us know so we can investigate and correct it.

Thank you for your interest in this project!