



May 1, 2024

The Honorable Patty Murray
Chair, U.S. Senate Committee on
Appropriations
154 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Tom Cole
Chair, U.S. House Committee on
Appropriations
2207 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Susan Collins
Vice Chair, U.S. Senate Committee on
Appropriations
413 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro
Ranking Member, U.S. House Committee on
Appropriations
2413 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Chris Van Hollen
Chair, U.S. Senate Appropriations
Subcommittee on Financial Services and
General Government
730 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable David Joyce
Chair, U.S. House Committee on
Appropriations Subcommittee on Financial
Services and General Government
2065 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Bill Hagerty
Ranking Member, U.S. Senate
Appropriations Subcommittee on Financial
Services and General Government
251 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Steny Hoyer
Ranking Member, U.S. House Committee on
Appropriations Subcommittee on Financial
Services and General Government
1705 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chair Murray, Vice Chair Collins, Chair Cole, Ranking Member DeLauro, Chair Van Hollen, Ranking Member Hagerty, Chair Joyce, and Ranking Member Hoyer,

On behalf of the 52 undersigned organizations, we write to strongly urge you to allocate robust funding for Election Grants in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 budget. Specifically, we urge you to fund the cornerstone of American democracy—elections—at a level of \$5 billion over 10 years, with \$1.625 billion allocated in FY25. This much-needed appropriation would represent the largest investment in election infrastructure since the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) was originally authorized in 2002 – more than 20 years ago. Decades-old election infrastructure in the U.S. is ever more vulnerable, just as demands on and threats to election administration are

increasing, all at a time when voting is getting harder, especially for communities of color.¹ State and local election administrators desperately need federal resources to ensure they can conduct safe, secure, accessible elections. We urge you to treat our elections as the critical infrastructure they are and fund them robustly and consistently.²

Elections are the heart of American democracy, yet today our elections and election workers alike are facing unprecedented challenges: influence campaigns led by hostile foreign governments;³ rampant mis- and disinformation aimed at confusing voters, especially voters of color;⁴ declining trust in the democratic process and institutions;⁵ increasing threats to and attacks, both cyber and physical, on elections infrastructure and election workers;⁶ new election laws that create additional responsibilities for, and in some cases complicate, election administration and make it harder for some communities to vote;⁷ the rise of generative AI and its potential to upend campaigns and elections;⁸ to name a few. At the same time, the decades-old infrastructure our elections take place on is aging, and much-needed repairs and modernizations are not keeping up.⁹

To effectively confront these known challenges, prepare our election infrastructure to withstand those yet unknown, and ensure all eligible voters can cast a ballot that counts, state and local election administrators need robust, reliable funding. Yet year after year, these public servants charged with safeguarding and shepherding the democratic process are starved of such funding and expected to run elections on a shoestring.¹⁰ As detailed in this letter, that's because the way we currently finance our elections is insufficient and inequitable. But Congress can help remedy this problem. As Congress itself has found, the federal government has a duty to promote the exercise of the fundamental right to vote;¹¹ serving as a reliable partner in adequately funding our elections is one of the best ways the federal government can fulfill that duty.

Existing Funding Schemes Lead to Chronic Underfunding of Elections

By and large, elections are run by local election officials and administrators.¹² Yet even though these local officials are responsible for successfully conducting all of our elections—local, state, and federal—their work is financed primarily with local funding.¹³ These dollars often come from a locality's general fund, which supports a range of government functions, from schools and libraries and parks to emergency services and law enforcement – meaning election funding must compete with a host of critical government services for limited dollars.¹⁴ The reality, more often than not, is that there simply are not enough local dollars available to cover the cost of administering elections year after year.¹⁵

States also allocate resources in support of local election administration, though in most places, state contributions make up a very small share of local election budgets.¹⁶ State spending on elections also varies greatly, and requests from local election officials for state funding to support effective election administration sometimes go unanswered.¹⁷ Further, in some places, including a number of Southern states, states are passing election laws that create new responsibilities and complications for local election administrators with no accompanying funding for implementation.¹⁸

Federal funding for election administration has varied considerably over the last two decades. After a significant initial investment in 2003 alongside the enactment of the Help America Vote

Act (HAVA), federal funding to states for election infrastructure and security has been a patchwork, including several years with no federal funding at all. In FY18 and FY20, Congress stepped back into its responsibility to help fund elections by sending \$380 million and \$425 million, respectively, in HAVA Election Security Grants to states. In 2020, Congress sent an additional \$400 million in CARES Act funding to support election officials to run safe, secure, accessible elections during COVID-19. However, federal funding since that time has been severely limited: \$0 in FY21, \$75 million in FY22 and FY23, and just \$55 million in FY24.¹⁹

Election officials, especially those running elections at the local level, need much more. As Jackson County, OR, county clerk Chris Walker said of the FY24 level, “The funding is hugely inadequate. Although appreciated, anything that has been passed down to the lower levels is just really inadequate, especially coming into this large election cycle.”²⁰ The Jackson County department is facing such severe funding constraints that they recently had to cut staff heading into a presidential election cycle. Jackson County is not alone; local election officials across the country are facing similar constraints and hard choices that impact voters and our democracy due to the chronic underfunding of our elections. Congress can and must help by sending significantly more money to states and localities in this and future fiscal years.

Current Funding Mechanisms Lead to Inequitable Outcomes for Voters and Fail to Protect Election Workers

The current approach to election financing is also often inequitable. General fund revenue is usually derived from local property and sales tax revenue,²¹ meaning affluent communities have greater resources available for election administration than low-income communities. This reality leads to significant disparities in local spending on elections and can, in turn, impact voting access. The dearth of resources in low-income communities—including many rural communities and jurisdictions with large populations of color—have led election officials in some jurisdictions to make decisions that restrict voter access, such as consolidating polling places or cutting back on voter access programs.

For example, an analysis of the Election Administration and Voting Survey and data from the Census Bureau and local and state voting agencies found that polling places are being closed and consolidated at much higher rates in urban areas and other areas with large populations of color.²² Officials cite the inability to pay for the sites, as well as staffing shortages—also a budget issue—as leading reasons for the closures. And in Coconino County, Arizona, limited funding means County Recorder Patty Hansen will have to limit the voter outreach efforts her office has conducted in the past. In 2020, the office ran radio ads to expand voter outreach, but Hansen reports that “It’s sad that we won’t be able to do that as much this year... We’re trying to do as much as we can, but counties don’t have a lot of money.”²³

In addition, this lack of resources can impede efforts to address growing threats to election administration, including harassment of nonpartisan election workers – the everyday Americans who help to keep our democracy running but are increasingly at risk. According to a recent survey, nearly 1 in 3 local election officials have personally experienced threats, harassment, or abuse because of their job.²⁴ Approximately three-quarters of election officials feel that these threats are increasing, and over half are concerned about how these dangers will affect recruitment and retention of vital staff and volunteers.²⁵ Given these issues, election

administrators need additional federal support to help them invest in providing a safe and secure working environment.

These inequitable and unacceptable dynamics are not only baked into current funding schemes but are exacerbated by the fact that funding appropriated under HAVA goes to states, for them to use as they see fit and to pass along to localities, or not, at their discretion.²⁶ While some states regularly subgrant HAVA funding to local jurisdictions, in others, that federal funding never makes its way to the people who need it most – local election workers running our elections.²⁷ Isaac Cramer, Executive Director of the Charleston County Board of Voter Registration and Elections, testified to Congress last month that “Numerous counties in South Carolina are unable to upgrade election infrastructure, including the security of their elections buildings, provide 24/7 camera surveillance, or have adequate space to prepare and test election equipment,” yet “South Carolina is one of several states that does not distribute HAVA funds to the local county level.”²⁸ In urging Congress to appropriate more election funding, Cramer flagged that “those funds also must get down to the people who run the elections day to day. All federal funding should be administered in coordination with or made available directly to counties.”²⁹

It is imperative that local election officials have access to federal funding, as well. As Walker, Cramer, and so many other election officials have pointed out, it is nearly impossible for federal funding to make it to locals when the initial pot is so small, so increasing the funding levels is a first order priority. However, Congress can take additional steps to ensure federal funding is available for local election administrators by directing a portion of federal funding to localities themselves. Given the local nature of election administration in the vast majority of states, we urge you to institute a pass-through requirement such that two-thirds of the allocated funding are sent directly to local election officials responsible for administering elections.

Absent Sufficient Public Funding, Restrictions on Private Funding Exacerbate Problems

The problems created by insufficient, inequitable funding schemes are exacerbated by a growing trend among states to prohibit local election administrators from accessing funding from private sources to fill the gaps. This effort has spread quickly over the last three years and is largely driven by mis- and disinformation about a nonprofit, nonpartisan grant program that provided a lifeline to local election administrators ahead of the 2020 elections.³⁰ Since 2021, at least 27 states have enacted laws prohibiting, limiting, or regulating private funding for election administration.³¹ Most recently, voters in Wisconsin banned private funding for election administration by ballot initiative.³² There is also a bill in Congress that would institute a nationwide ban on this lifeline for local election administrators.³³ An election clerk in Biron, Wisconsin—whose 2020 private grant allowed for the purchase of equipment to help with absentee ballot drop boxes, a security camera, printer cartridges, light bulbs, and other essential items—reacted to the ban: “to even consider cutting funding or not allowing funding for municipalities to administer some basic rights for people to vote... is incredibly wrong.”³⁴

Elections should be fully and robustly publicly funded in a well-resourced, well-functioning democracy. Unfortunately, that is not the democracy we are living in at present; year after year, we underfund our elections and leave local election administrators scrambling to keep our democracy afloat. Funding from nonpartisan third-party sources has played an essential role in filling the gaps and shoring up our elections. The only appropriate conditions under which to

limit private funding of elections is full replacement of those displaced dollars with state and federal funding; the absence of such replacement funding in virtually every state that has passed such a ban only underscores the need for robust, regular funding from the federal government.

There is Bipartisan Precedent and Support for Robust Federal Election Funding

There is a strong, bipartisan precedent for robust federal funding to support state and local election infrastructure. Federal grants to support election security and administration were originally authorized by the Help America Vote Act of 2002, landmark legislation passed to support states to replace aging voting machines after problems emerged during the 2000 election and, more generally, to improve the administration of federal elections.³⁵ Through that law, which enjoyed significant bipartisan support, Congress sent \$3 billion to the states over three years for a major overhaul of their election infrastructure and made additional funding available for improving accessibility, encouraging civic participation, and recruiting poll workers.³⁶ More recently, bipartisan majorities in Congress appropriated \$380 and \$425 million for election security grants in FY18 and FY20, respectively.

There is also bipartisan agreement among the public that the federal government should play a greater role in funding our elections. According to a 2023 poll from the bipartisan election reform organization Issue One, 69% of Americans—74% of Democrats and 66% of Republicans—believe the federal government should be equally, or more, responsible for election funding than local and state authorities.³⁷ Just one in ten (11%) Americans believes that local municipalities and states should be solely responsible for funding elections.³⁸ When it comes to funding for elections, there is cross partisan consensus that the federal government should take more responsibility than it currently does.

* * *

There are few government responsibilities more vital in a democracy than protection of the fundamental right to vote. And that right is under assault today, especially in communities of color. Just as each level of government in our federated system bears responsibility for protecting the right to vote, so, too, must each level of government contribute to financing the election infrastructure that makes that right real. As the House and the Senate negotiate next year's government funding bill, we strongly urge you to fully fund the White House request for \$1.625 billion for HAVA Election Grants to state and localities. Because the bulk of election administration happens at the local level in the vast majority of states, we further urge you to direct two-thirds of the grant funding to local election administrators.

With questions or for additional information, please contact Laura Williamson, Senior Policy Advisor for Voting Rights at the Southern Poverty Law Center Action Fund, at laura.williamson@splcenter.org or 301.875.1631.

Sincerely,

Southern Poverty Law Center Action Fund
Campaign Legal Center
Common Cause
League of Conservation Voters
League of Women Voters
Service Employees International Union

Advancement Project
American Civil Liberties Union
The American Association of People with Disabilities
American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees
Asian Americans Advancing Justice – AAJC
Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote (APIA Vote)
Association of Assistive Technology Act Programs
Autistic Self Advocacy Network
Center for Popular Democracy
Church World Service
Defend the Vote Action Fund
Democracy SENTRY
Demos
End Citizens United // Let America Vote Action Fund
Fair Elections Center
Hip Hop Caucus Action Fund
Interfaith Alliance
Interfaith Power & Light
Jewish Council for Public Affairs
LatinoJustice PRLDEF
The Leadership Conference on Human and Civil Rights
MALDEF (Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund)
Mi Familia Vota
NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF)
National Action Network
National Community Action Partnership
National Council of Jewish Women
National Disability Rights Network (NDRN)
The National Network for Arab American Communities
National Urban League
Native Organizers Alliance
NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice
New Disabled South
N.Y. Elections, Census & Redistricting Institute
The Partnership for Inclusive Disaster Strategies
People Power United
Pride at Work

Public Citizen
Sierra Club
Sojourners-SojoAction
Southern Coalition for Social Justice
Stand Up America
Unitarian Universalists for Social Justice
United Church of Christ
Verified Voting
Voto Latino

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⁷ Natalia Galicza, “New election law adds new financial costs for some Florida counties,” WUSF, October 15, 2021, <https://www.wusf.org/politics-issues/2021-10-15/new-election-law-adds-new-financial-costs-for-some-florida-counties>. See also Emma Hurt, “Why Local Election Officials in Georgia Take Issue With Many Parts of New Law,” NPR, April 16, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/04/16/987825440/why-local-election-officials-in-georgia-take-issue-with-many-parts-of-new-law>.

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⁹ “50 States of Need,” Election Infrastructure Initiative, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6083502fc0f6531f14d6e929/t/61f836e405feca3722d63b9d/1643656990641/50-States-Of-Need.pdf>.

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¹¹ 52 U.S.C §20501

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¹⁷ “Election Budgeting: A Deeper Dive Into the Cost of State Elections,” All Voting Is Local, 2023, 10, <https://allvotingislocal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023-Election-Budgeting-01fLM.pdf>.

¹⁸ *Supra* note 7.

¹⁹ Election Administration: Federal Grant Funding for States and Localities, Congressional Research Service, May 8, 2023, Table 2, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46646>.

²⁰ Justin Papp, “County election officials call for more funding, better security ahead of 2024 elections,” Roll Call, February 12, 2024, <https://rollcall.com/2024/02/12/county-election-officials-call-for-security-ahead-of-2024-elections/>.

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²² Mark Nichols, “Closed voting sites hit minority counties harder for busy midterm elections,” USA Today, October 30, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2018/10/30/midterm-elections-closed-voting-sites-impact-minority-voter-turnout/1774221002/>.

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²⁶ *Supra* note 19.

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³⁰ *Supra* note 23.

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³⁴ *Supra* note 23.

³⁵ 52 U.S.C. §21007

³⁶ *Supra* note 19, at 2.

³⁷ “Overwhelming public support for federal funding of elections,” Issue One and Citizen Data, April 19, 2023, <https://issueone.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/IO-ElectionsPollingMemo2023.pdf>.

³⁸ *Id.*