

Institute *for* Responsive Government



The Cost of Better **REPRESENTATION**

A Framework for Understanding the Financial Impact
of Proportional Representation on State Elections

Executive Summary

For elected officials and policymakers, the question of electoral reform is often two-fold: Will it improve our democracy? and Can we afford it? While Responsive Gov believes the short answer to the first question is, “yes,” this report addresses the second question, analyzing the financial realities of moving U.S. state legislative elections to a **proportional representation (PR)** system — specifically, an “open list” system with larger, multi-member districts.¹

The bottom line? Shifting to proportional representation is not necessarily a cost addition; it is more accurately a cost trade-off. While investing in voter education and changes to ballot design and tabulation is necessary, these costs are significantly offset by the potential to eliminate other expensive administrative burdens, such as complex redistricting debates and litigation and run-off elections, as well as the option to move away from state-run primaries. In some scenarios, a shift to proportional representations could even result in overall savings. This framework outlines both potential increases and decreases in election administration costs, providing a roadmap for budget authorities and legislators considering this shift.

¹This document does not look at other variations of proportional representation systems, such as: closed party list using a single statewide district; closed party list using sub-state districts; open party list using a single statewide district; mixed system - parallel; or mixed system - mixed-member proportional. Such systems would have similar, but not identical, process and cost implications.

What is Proportional Representation?

Before diving into the budget, it is important to understand the policy. Almost all U.S. elections currently use a “First-Past-the-Post” or “Winner-Take-All” system: One person is elected per district, and whoever gets the most votes in each single-member district wins.

This often produces situations with distorted results: a party can earn a substantial share of the vote across many districts, yet end up with few or no seats, or win a majority of the state-wide vote but a minority of seats in the legislature. A great deal depends on how district lines for single-member districts are drawn.

Proportional representation (PR) is designed to fix this situation. Under PR, seats in a legislature are awarded in proportion to the votes each party receives. If a party receives 30% of the vote, they should get roughly 30% of the seats in the legislature. This approach sharply reduces the impact of gerrymandering, avoids uncompetitive districts, and ensures that nearly every voter helps elect someone they support.²

There are several types of proportional representation. This report analyzes one type known as “open list.” An open list system has the following features:

Bigger Districts

Instead of many tiny districts with one winner each, the state is divided into a smaller number of larger districts.

More Winners per District

Each large district elects a group of representatives (for example, 5–10), not just one person.

Parties Run Several Candidates

Each party puts forward a list of people running in that district. Selecting this list can be the result of an internal party process or a primary.

Voters Choose People, Not Just Parties

You pick the candidate you like best. Your vote counts for both the candidate and their party.

Seats Match the Vote

If a party gets about 30% of the votes in a district, it gets about 30% of the seats, filled by its top vote-getting candidates.

² For more general information about proportional representation, please see [Protect Democracy](#) and [New America](#).

Cost Savings of Open List Proportional Representation

REDISTRICTING & DATA MANAGEMENT

Moving away from single-member districts to larger multi-member districts makes the redistricting process much less high stakes and expensive.

REDISTRICTING

The Process Shift: With large multi-member districts, gerrymandering becomes almost impossible. Instead of drawing complicated, squiggly district lines to favor one party in each district, the state can use simple, existing geographic boundaries like counties or clusters of counties for multi-member districts. Each district elects multiple representatives, so even if one party is slightly stronger in part of the district, it can't fully block other parties from winning seats through gerrymandering. In addition, after a census, there's no need to significantly redraw the map — in many cases, you just adjust how many seats each multi-member district gets based on population changes. This makes the redistricting process much easier, much harder to manipulate, and less susceptible to long, expensive fights.

The Financial Impact: An easier redistricting process eliminates a massive chunk of the work for redistricting authorities and significantly lowers legal fees.

- **Commission Savings:** Ohio estimated that a redistricting commission costs over **\$3 million** to operate. Reducing their workload by two-thirds (since the process of drawing state House or Senate maps would be much easier) could save as much as **\$1 million** in staffing and research.³
- **Legal Savings:** Redistricting lawsuits are costly. North Carolina recently spent over **\$2.9 million** on redistricting lawsuits, while Ohio estimated **\$2.6 million** for the same. Large, multi-member districts based on county or regional lines eliminate the main source of these disputes, potentially saving millions each decade.

³ This estimate does not assume that reducing the work of the commission by two-thirds would also reduce the cost of the commission by two-thirds. While staffing and research-related costs would clearly be reduced, additional cost reductions in other areas (e.g., commissioners, IT equipment, office space, etc.) are less readily apparent.

⁴ See, e.g., U.S. Election Assistance Commission, Local Election Official's Guide to Redistricting (2021): https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/2021-08/LEO_Guide_to_Redistricting.pdf

STREET FILE MAINTENANCE

The Process Shift: "Street file maintenance" is the laborious work local officials do to figure out what houses belong in which electoral district. Currently, if a district line cuts through a neighborhood, officials must manually assign voters house-by-house.⁴

The Financial Impact: With larger multi-member districts generally aligning to county or regional lines, street file maintenance work virtually disappears.

- **Labor Reduction:** A mid-sized California county (approx. 125,000 voters) spends about **400 staff hours** on this task — we estimate that to cost around \$8,000. A Pennsylvania county of 75,000 voters spends about **40 hours** on street file maintenance, costing approximately \$600. While these individual amounts are small, they aggregate across the state, and this labor can be redirected to more pressing tasks.

POTENTIALLY ELIMINATING STATE-RUN PRIMARIES

Open-list proportional representation gives parties the option to select their own lists of candidates internally, without the need for a primary. While the state could still require a primary or a party could still choose to hold one, in some scenarios with open-list the state will no longer need to pay for and administer a separate primary election for legislative seats, resulting in cost savings. For states that choose to forego a primary, they could expect to see the following cost savings.

CANDIDATE REGISTRATION

The Process Shift: Election offices currently process paperwork and verify signatures for every primary candidate. Under the new system, this phase could be handled by the parties internally.

The Financial Impact: A mid-sized local election office in California (~125k registered voters) estimated spending **roughly 200 hours** in staff time on signature verification in a typical election with roughly 40 candidates across all contests. Assuming this was conducted by relatively low wage employees, 200 hours at \$20/hr. (CA minimum is \$16.50/hr.) equals \$4,000. Removing legislative primaries has the potential to reduce this workload by roughly **15%**.

BALLOT DESIGN & PROGRAMMING

The Process Shift: Staff currently design and test specific ballot layouts for every primary race.

Assuming there would be party-led processes to select candidates, the new system would eliminate the need for state-run state legislative primaries. This would eliminate the need for state and local election offices to design or program that part of the ballot, as well as reduce the number of ballot styles needed during primary elections.

The Financial Impact: A once-a-cycle cost savings of vendor contracts and staff time. State and local election offices would experience cost savings associated with ballot design and voting system programming, including reduced staff time used to determine ballot content and reduced contracted vendor support and staff time for ballot programming and testing.

Local election offices with high numbers of ballot styles (e.g., more populous jurisdictions, those that offer ballots in multiple languages, etc.) are likely to see greater cost savings, as removing 1-2 contests in primary elections would exponentially reduce the number of ballot styles needed.

RECOUNTS & AUDITS

The Process Shift: If an open-list proportional representation system where the state and the parties choose not to hold primary elections, there are also savings on primary recounts and audits.

The Financial Impact: Recounts are rare but extremely costly. Eliminating the possibility of a primary recount for state legislative races saves the contingency budget.

Pew estimated the costs of high-profile statewide recounts in Washington (2004) and Minnesota (2008) as \$1.2 million and \$460k, respectively. Statewide recounts in Pennsylvania have cost between **\$525,000 and \$1.1 million**. While recounts in individual districts would cost less than a statewide recount, avoiding even one of these is a significant relief to the budget.

Likewise, when it comes to audits, state and local election offices would also experience cost savings, as fewer races in the ballot means fewer races to audit.

BALLOT PAPER & POSTAGE

The Process Shift: Assuming there would be party-led processes to select candidates, the new system would eliminate the need for state-run state legislative primaries, therefore resulting in reduced ballot content. That means shorter ballots.

The Financial Impact: While often neutral, financial savings occur if the shorter ballot drops the weight of the mail-in package to a lower postage tier.

- **Postage Math:** If a ballot package drops from 3 ounces to 2 ounces, a county saves **\$0.28 per ballot**. For a jurisdiction with 100,000 mail-in voters, that is **\$28,000** in savings.⁵

Additionally, for voters casting primary ballots by mail, ballot content and voter guides would be shorter in situations where there are no state legislative primaries on the ballot, saving voters and elections workers time in ballot tabulation time for both mail ballots and for ballots cast in-person. A reduction in tabulation time allows for staffing resources to be allocated elsewhere.

NO MORE RUN-OFF ELECTIONS

The Process Shift: The potential to forego state-run state legislative primaries would also eliminate the need for run-offs of state legislative primaries in states with run-off requirements. Similarly, in states with these requirements, a shift to proportional representation would avoid the need for a run-off in general elections where no candidate reaches 50%.

The Financial Impact: In states that require a majority to win, expensive run-off elections are triggered when no candidate hits 50%. These have historically low turnout but cost just as much to run as a standard election.

Proportional representation would obviate the run-off requirement, allowing for legislative seats to be filled in a single election. The mechanics of the system ensure winners are declared without a second trip to the polls, instantly saving millions in states that currently utilize run-offs.

⁵ First Class Rates as of January 2025 are: \$0.73 per letter-size mail piece up to 1 ounce; \$1.01 per piece up to 2 ounces; \$1.29 up to 3 ounces. USPS Mailing Standards (703 Nonprofit USPS Marketing Mail and Other Unique Eligibility) state that "Outbound Ballot Mail (i.e., ballots sent from election officials to voters) may be sent at First-Class Mail or USPS Marketing Mail prices." Note that some election offices use flat-size mail piece for their outbound mail-in ballot packages, which have a higher cost.

Where Proportional Representation Requires Investment

Implementation of modernized systems like proportional representation requires upfront and recurring investment. These are the key areas where new costs will appear.

BALLOT CHANGES AND PRINTING

The Challenge: While proportional representation may make primary ballots shorter, the general election ballot will get slightly longer. Instead of one Democrat and one Republican, voters might see lists of 5-10 candidates per party.

- **Paper Costs:** Ballots may need to be larger or printed on multiple pages. A mid-sized local election office in California with around 125,000 registered voters reported using a minimum of two sheets of ballot paper per election. Adding a sheet would increase its ballot paper costs by roughly a third.⁶
- **Postage:** Heavier mail-in ballots cost more to mail. If a ballot package jumps from 2 ounces to 3 ounces, postage costs for the election office rise by roughly \$0.28 per ballot. For a jurisdiction with 100,000 mail-in voters, that is a \$28,000 increase. Local election offices that pre-pay for the return of mail-in ballots would incur additional new costs when the increase in mail-in ballot weight requires a new mail rate cost category. For example, from 1 ounce (\$0.73 per letter-sized First Class mail piece) to 2 ounces (\$1.01 per mail piece).
- **Design Complexity:** Designing a ballot that is easy to read with so many names requires professional design work and testing, which adds to vendor contracts.
- **Ballot Design & Voting System Programming:** While having fewer total contests reduces the administrative burden of determining ballot content, these savings are likely offset by the time required to design the more complex ballot layouts. Ultimately, this area incurs a net cost increase, as the rigorous testing required to validate the new voting systems outweighs the time saved on initial programming.
- **Candidate Registration:** By encouraging more parties and candidates to compete, the new system will increase the administrative workload for processing filings and verifying signatures. While the added paperwork burden is minor, the labor-intensive nature of verifying signatures for an expanded field of candidates will result in notable new, once-a-cycle staffing costs.

⁶ The 2003 California gubernatorial recount ballot is a helpful comparison. The ballot style used by Orange County fit the 135 candidates, plus the recall question and two ballot measures, across four columns on one side of a sheet of ballot paper (reportedly sized 8.5 × 21"). See sample ballot: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sample_ballot_for_CA_recall.png.

Today's voting systems can now accommodate up to 8.5 × 22" ballot papers, so perhaps 150 candidates should be viewed as a general maximum that can fit on one side of one sheet of ballot paper. This scale of candidates is certainly possible with open-list proportional representation using sub-state districts (e.g., a 15-member sub-state district with 10 parties contesting).

VOTER EDUCATION: THE MOST CRITICAL INVESTMENT

The biggest hurdle to any new system is confusion. Any shift to a new system like proportional representation would benefit from voter education efforts to familiarize voters with the voting process, reduce ballot marking errors, and contribute to public trust of the new system and the results it produces.

The Cost: Educational campaigns are not cheap. When Nevada and Hawaii shifted to vote-by-mail systems, they spent between \$1.1 million and \$1.5 million, respectively, on voter education.

The Strategy: Expect to budget for TV ads, mailers, social media campaigns, and community outreach. This is a vital “new cost” to ensure the legitimacy of the first few election cycles.

TABULATION AND RECOUNTS

Counting the Votes: While current machines can scan the ballots, the “translation” of votes into seats requires new software or processes. This is a marginal cost (it can technically be done with a secure spreadsheet), but it requires staff training and transparency protocols.

Recounts: Because proportional representation systems have more candidates, in some situations there may be closer margins for the final seat in a district, resulting in increased recounts. Pew estimated that a statewide recount can cost between \$500,000 and \$1.2 million depending on the state size. For further consideration, four recent statewide recounts in Pennsylvania cost between \$525k and \$1.1 million.

Voted Ballot Processing: The larger or multi-page ballots required by the new system will slow down tabulation for both in-person scanners and mail-in ballot processing teams. This will create new costs, as election offices must hire additional staff or extend hours to handle the same volume of votes.

General Election Audits: While standard audits would remain largely unchanged, Risk-Limiting Audits (RLAs) will become more labor-intensive, as the tighter margins inherent to the new system necessitate pulling a larger number of ballots for verification. This increased workload will drive new costs primarily through the additional staff hours required to manage the expanded audit scope. However, the Kentucky state election office reported incurring marginal costs (only \$464) beyond existing staff time (totaling roughly 90 hours) to conduct its 2023 statewide RLA pilot that pulled 1,065 ballots.

Conclusion

Switching to proportional representation is often framed as an abstract academic ideal, but for state governments, it would require a practical operational shift. While opponents of change might try to cite the “complexity” and cost of new ballots and education, these arguments ignore the countervailing savings from such a shift, including more streamlined redistricting, street file maintenance, and (potentially) reduced costs from fewer primaries and run-offs.

The decision to adopt proportional representation should be viewed as a reallocation of resources rather than an absolute cost. In some cases, the shift will simply move taxpayer money away from lawsuits and redundant elections, and invest it instead in voter education and a more accurate, representative democracy.