



November 2024

## Conservation District Elections in Washington State: *Preliminary Report*

The 2023 Washington State Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) to study the costs of conservation district supervisor elections in Washington. WSIPP was tasked with describing these elections under current law in terms of cost, funding sources, and voter turnout in all 45 conservation districts. Next, WSIPP was directed to estimate costs at the district level under several alternative election policies, all of which include placing conservation district elections on the general ballot in the county that the majority of each district falls within. Finally, WSIPP was directed to investigate non-monetary costs and benefits associated with changing elections to the alternative policies described in the assignment.<sup>1</sup>

This preliminary report describes Washington's conservation districts' function, history, and elections under current law. We then summarize data received to date and describe our plan for analysis in the final report to be published by June 30, 2025.

[Section I](#) provides a background on conservation districts and their elections in Washington State. [Section II](#) describes election cost, funding, and turnout data received to date. [Section III](#) outlines our plan to analyze election costs in the final report. [Section IV](#) concludes with takeaways and next steps.

### Summary

This preliminary report provides a background on conservation districts in Washington State, describing their function as independent, non-regulatory local government entities. We also provide a brief history of conservation districts and a description of district supervisor elections under current law.

Next, we summarize data obtained to date for the final analysis of this study. As of the publishing of this report, we have received historical election cost and funding data or estimates from 35 of the 45 conservation districts in Washington. We obtained additional data on conservation district election turnout and general election costs from several state government agencies.

Finally, we detail our plan for our analysis of conservation district election costs, turnout, and funding in the final report.

Suggested citation: Briar, C., & Johnson, A. (2024). *Conservation district elections in Washington State: Preliminary report* (Document Number 24-11-4101). Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

<sup>1</sup> Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 5187, Chapter 475, Laws of 2023.

# I. Background on Conservation Districts

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## Overview of Conservation District Functions

Conservation districts (hereafter referred to as conservation districts or districts) are independent, non-regulatory local governmental bodies that focus on protecting natural resources within their boundaries.<sup>2</sup> They engage with landowners by providing voluntary, incentive-based conservation programs and services. Examples of programming include technical assistance for project planning; cost reimbursement and grant funding for environmental initiatives; and connecting landowners to partnerships and resources for topics ranging from land irrigation, crop rotation, the introduction of anti-erosive plant species, and other similar measures.<sup>3</sup> The type of programming offered varies by district and district personnel or volunteers who administer it.

Conservation district boundaries have historically been defined using waterways and other natural landmarks rather than population-based county lines.<sup>4</sup> However, this has changed over time, and boundaries now generally align with county lines, as shown in [Exhibit 1](#). The district boundaries are delineated by dark borders, with the colored shaded areas representing county shapes.

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<sup>2</sup> Washington State Conservation Commission. [What are conservation districts?](#)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> These correspond to the Quinault Indian Nation and a portion of Olympic National Forest. Both areas have been excluded from the district since it was originally formed in the 1940s.

There are districts spanning multiple counties (such as Underwood Conservation District, spanning all of Skamania County and part of Klickitat County) and counties split into multiple districts (such as the four districts in Whitman County). Also, the Grays Harbor Conservation District does not contain two sections of Grays Harbor County.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, many cities within the outer boundaries of each district are not included in their respective district.

A board of five supervisors leads each conservation district. Two of these supervisors are appointed by the Washington State Conservation Commission (SCC), and the remaining three are elected by eligible voters within each district. At least one of the appointed and two elected supervisors must be landowners or operators of a farm within the conservation district.<sup>6</sup> All five supervisors serve three-year terms as volunteers and do not receive compensation.

Conservation districts are coordinated and overseen by the SCC. The districts receive an annual implementation grant from SCC, which constitutes most of the overall funding for most districts.<sup>7</sup> The SCC provides districts oversight and support regarding finances, operations, programming, and elections.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Washington State Conservation Commission. [Local elections & appointments.](#)

<sup>7</sup> Districts also receive funding by applying for independent grants to support specific projects. Some districts also have authority over rates and charges in their respective counties and receive flat fees from all parcels in their boundaries.

<sup>8</sup> Washington State Conservation Commission. [About the commission.](#)

## History of Conservation Districts in WA State

The idea for conservation districts emerged at the national level. Following the 1930s period of topsoil degradation and drought in the Midwest, known as the Dust Bowl, the federal government recommended that all state governors implement the Standard State Soil Conservation Districts Law of 1936.

The vision was to create "locally established soil conservation districts" with "broad power to plan and execute erosion control projects."<sup>9</sup> In 1939, the Washington State Legislature passed legislation establishing conservation districts.<sup>10</sup> Eight districts were originally established, but the number increased over time, at times numbering more than 80, before settling at 45 in the state today.<sup>11</sup>

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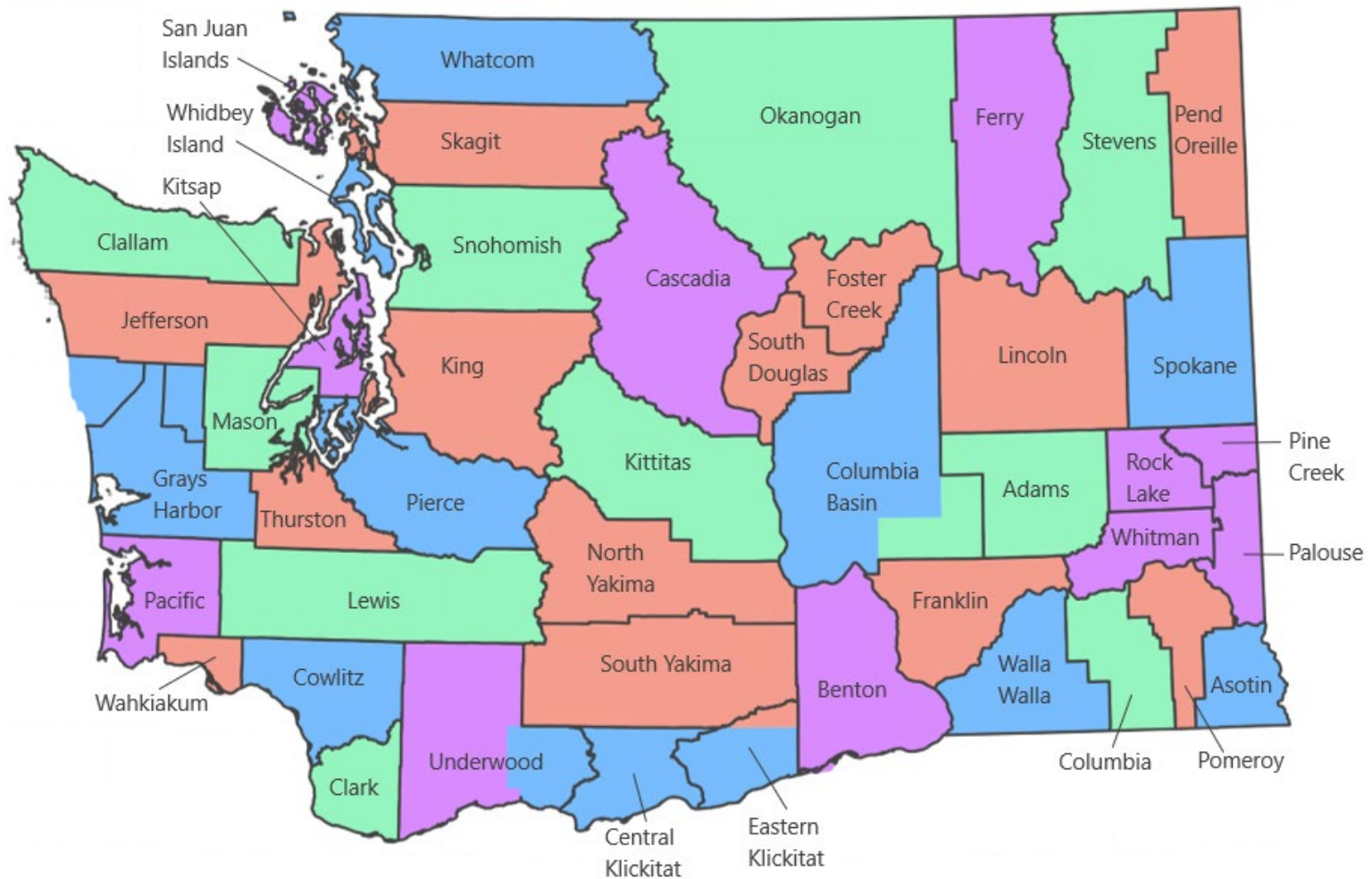
<sup>9</sup> Wilson, M.L. (1990). *The preparation of the Standard State Soil Conservation Districts Law: An interview with Philip Glick*. Economics and Social Sciences Division (NHQ), Soil Conservation Service, United States Department of Agriculture.

<sup>10</sup> RCW 89.08.

<sup>11</sup> Washington State Conservation Commission. *What are conservation districts?*

## Exhibit 1

### Conservation Districts and Counties in Washington



**Notes:**

Conservation district borders are given by the dark boundary lines and counties are shown via the colored shaded regions.

Source: Shapefiles for district boundaries provided courtesy of Washington State Conservation Commission; Walker, K., & Herman, M. (2024). *tidycensus: Load US Census Boundary and Attribute Data as 'tidyverse' and 'sf-Ready Data Frames* [R package version 1.6.6].

## Conservation District Elections

### Current Conservation District Election Law

Currently, RCW 89.08 codifies district election processes, differentiating them from general elections and other special-purpose districts.<sup>12</sup> Districts are required to hold their elections during the first quarter of the year. The three elected supervisors run to represent the entire district at large, and their three-year terms are usually staggered such that only a single election takes place each year.<sup>13</sup> Districts are not required to mail ballots to all registered voters within their boundaries. Consequently, many districts only mail ballots upon request; others may hold in-person elections.

Turnout in most conservation district elections represents only a fraction of eligible voters.<sup>14</sup> For instance, in 2024, only 16,000 ballots were cast in district elections statewide despite there being nearly five million registered voters in Washington. About a third of districts had ten or fewer ballots cast.<sup>15</sup> Many supervisors also run uncontested, leading to a lack of choices for voters. Other issues have been raised concerning the informal election procedures in many districts and accountability for public funds.<sup>16</sup>

## The Current Study

Parts A and B of the legislative assignment for this study (presented in [Exhibit 2](#)) direct WSIPP to investigate the costs, funding sources, and voter turnout of district supervisor elections under current law.

The legislation directs WSIPP to investigate expected election costs if district elections were instead held on general election ballots under RCW 29A. Parts C and D of the assignment specifically enumerate two alternative policies to be investigated. Part C delineates a policy that switches all supervisor positions to be elected and increases term lengths from three to four years, staggering terms to align with elections for other government officials on the general election ballot. The policy described in part D includes the changes from part C and requires that districts divide themselves into five zones with supervisors running to represent a single zone rather than at large for the entire district. Finally, part E of the legislative assignment tasks WSIPP with examining the potential non-monetary costs and benefits of the policies described in parts C and D.<sup>17</sup>

Switching district elections to the general ballot has been previously studied in Washington. In 2011, the League of Women Voters of Washington published a report on conservation districts, which discussed low voter turnout under the election procedures described by RCW 89.08 and SCC and the costs associated with going on the general ballot.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> [RCW 29A](#).

<sup>13</sup> [RCW 89.08](#).

<sup>14</sup> Shultz, A. (2015). *Conservation district elections budget proviso report*. Washington State Conservation Commission.

<sup>15</sup> District election turnout data provided courtesy of SCC; Washington Secretary of State. (2024). *Ballot return statistics*.

<sup>16</sup> Shultz (2015).

<sup>17</sup> A preliminary report was originally due to the Legislature by December 1, 2023, and a final report was due by June 30, 2024. In June 2023, the WSIPP Board of Directors voted to shift the deadlines to December 1, 2024, and June 30, 2025.

<sup>18</sup> League of Women Voters of Washington. (2011). *Washington State conservation districts*.

## Exhibit 2

### Legislative Language

*[... An appropriation] is provided solely for [WSIPP] to examine the costs associated with conservation district elections under current law, and the projected costs and benefits for shifting conservation district elections to be held on general election ballots under Title 29A RCW. The examination must include, to the extent that the data allows:*

- (A) An analysis of the amount of money that each conservation district spends on holding elections for supervisors under current law, and a description of the funding sources that each conservation district utilizes to fund its elections;*
- (B) Information about voter turnout in each conservation district supervisor election in at least the past six years and up to the past 20 years, if the conservation district has such data, as well as a calculation of the total cost per ballot cast that each conservation district spent in those elections;*
- (C) A projection of the costs that would be expected to be incurred by each county and each conservation district for its supervisor elections if the district were to hold its supervisor elections on general election ballots under the processes and procedures in Title 29A RCW, including:
  - (I) Switching all supervisor positions to elected positions; and*
  - (II) Changing term lengths to four years, with terms staggered such that elections are held every two years, to align with the elections for other local government officials;**
- (D) A projection of the costs that would be expected to be incurred by each county and each conservation district for its supervisor elections if, in addition to the changes described in [part (C)] of this subsection, the conservation districts were divided into zones such that each zone is represented by a single supervisor, rather than electing each supervisor at-large throughout the district; and*
- (E) An overall description of potential nonmonetary costs and benefits associated with switching conservation district supervisor elections to the general election ballots under Title 29A RCW and incorporating the changes described in [parts C and D] of this subsection.*

[Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 5187](#)  
[Chapter 475, Laws of 2023](#)

The SCC released another study in 2015 at the direction of the Washington State Legislature in conjunction with the Washington Association of Conservation Districts (WACD), the Office of the Secretary of State (SOS), and the League of Women Voters.

The report developed a framework for evaluating election policy alternatives to RCW 89.08 and proposed other options, including allowing districts to go on the county general ballot.<sup>19</sup>

Various district personnel, SCC, and WACD collaborated again in 2021 by forming the Joint Commission on Elections and publishing election policy recommendations.

These recommendations closely correspond to some language in the legislation for this study, including increasing supervisor term lengths to four years, staggering terms to occur every other year, and allowing districts to hold their elections on the general ballot if they so choose.

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<sup>19</sup> [Shultz \(2015\)](#).

To come to these recommendations, the study compiled comments from the supervisors and staff of 26 districts in Washington on a series of different possible reforms to conservation district elections. The report also surveyed district election policies in other states.<sup>20</sup>

The present assignment has the most comprehensive scope of the cost of district supervisor elections in Washington to date. The final report will analyze costs, turnout, and funding for far more districts and report findings at a level of detail than previous studies could offer. Moreover, the potential impacts of dividing conservation districts into zones, with each represented by a single supervisor, have not been investigated before.

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<sup>20</sup> Shultz, R., Meyer, L., Eller, B., & Crouch, S. (2021). *Report from the Joint Committee on Elections*. Washington State Conservation Commission.

## II. Data Received to Date

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We have contacted all 45 conservation districts in Washington, asking for data on election costs, including an itemized description of the total election cost, the total cost per ballot, and the funding sources for elections. In addition, we sent a brief questionnaire to all districts to provide them a chance to describe how each of the alternative policies in parts C and D of the legislative assignment would impact their district and election costs. The questionnaire also asked districts to comment on any non-monetary costs and benefits of each alternative policy, such as impacts on voter turnout or residents' interest in becoming supervisors. We have also contacted several state government agencies for data related to district elections and county general election costs.

### Cost Data

To date, we have received election cost and funding information from 35 of the 45 conservation districts in Washington (78%). The level of detail districts could provide in terms of election cost varied widely. Some could share election costs itemized into individual expenses such as labor, printing and mailing, or advertising and outreach. Others could only share total costs for elections, while others could only share cost estimates. Conservation district staff expressed several reasons for the lack of precise data, including lack of recordkeeping, staff turnover, and transitions in accounting methods or software. The number of years for which data were available also varied by district, with some able to supply cost information for five or more years and others only able to provide a single recent year of information.

### Questionnaire Responses

In addition to the cost data, we have received responses to our questionnaire from 29 of 45 districts (64%). Reactions to the alternative policies have been varied. Some districts to submit responses so far anticipate that moving elections to the general ballot in each county would increase election costs, while others have indicated that they believe costs would remain the same. In terms of non-monetary impacts, some districts identified potential benefits, including increased voter turnout and knowledge of and participation in district activities. Questionnaire responses have also described potential non-monetary costs such as increasing administrative burden and politicizing district supervisor elections and positions to the detriment of conservation activities.

### Election Turnout Data

The Washington State Conservation Commission provided us with complete election turnout data for all district supervisor elections between 2015 and 2024. These data will allow us to summarize election turnout and calculate cost per ballot once cost data have been received from all districts. Turnout varies widely by district, with many rural districts commonly reporting fewer than ten votes per year and more urban districts reporting thousands. While we do not currently have estimates of the number of registered voters in each district, voter turnout in nearly all districts over this period is very small compared to the number of registered voters in each district's main county.



## General Ballot Cost Data

Finally, we have obtained data from the SOS on general election costs recorded by each county auditor for the last five years. These data record the total costs of each general election and the share of costs paid by each jurisdiction on the ballot in each county. It would allow us to estimate the cost to districts if they had been included in those general elections.

### III. Plan for Analysis in Final Report

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In this section, we briefly overview our plan to conduct our analysis of district supervisor election costs in our final report, which will be published in June 2025. Generally, we will use the data described in [Section II](#) to summarize and estimate costs as required by parts A – D of the legislation for this study (see [Exhibit 2](#)).

We will use data received from each district and SCC for parts A and B of the legislative assignment, which pertains to district supervisor election costs, turnout, and funding under current law. To the extent that the cost data allows, we will report average costs and the range of costs itemized into spending categories (e.g., election costs for labor, printing and mailing). Likewise, voter turnout, cost per ballot, and funding sources will be described across districts via a range of summary statistics. Complete data for all variables and districts will be available in the appendix of the final report to the extent possible.

Our analysis for parts C and D of the legislative assignment pertains to alternative conservation district election policies and will rely on general election cost data from the SOS. Estimating general ballot costs for district elections will involve using the number of registered voters in each district. However, our outreach to district personnel and SCC has revealed that the number of registered voters in each conservation district is not generally known.

Therefore, we will estimate the number of registered voters by district using publicly available population data from the US Census Bureau.

For part E of the assignment, we will rely on information received via the questionnaire and informal meetings with personnel from individual districts, SCC, WACD, county-level governments, and other stakeholders. Our analysis of this information will be qualitative. We will summarize common themes and disagreement points repeated across entities. Where possible, we will also describe feedback quantitatively (e.g., the share of district managers that indicated that the policies in parts C and D would be cost-reducing versus the share that indicated it would be cost-increasing).

## Final Analysis Limitations

There are several important considerations to note about our final analysis. First, Washington's conservation districts differ extensively in size, population, urbanicity, and geography. These differences mean that these alternative election policies in the legislation for this study will have different impacts and costs in different districts. A policy that is cost-reducing in one district may be cost-increasing in another. The results of our analysis for any one conservation district should not be generalized to all.

Additionally, as discussed in [Section II](#), not all districts can share complete election cost data for multiple years. Some may only have a year of information available, while others may only be able to provide estimates of election costs. As such, our analysis of election costs will be limited by the amount and precision of available election cost information in all districts.

## IV. Conclusion

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This preliminary report on conservation district election costs in Washington provides an overview of district functions and history. Since 1939, conservation districts in Washington have provided voluntary, incentive-based programs to landowners to implement conservation practices on their lands. Five-member boards of supervisors administer conservation districts. The election process for the three elected supervisors is currently regulated under RCW 89.08 and falls outside the scope of general elections in each county in Washington.

The 2023 Washington State Legislature tasked WSIPP with investigating the nature of the costs incurred to districts under current election law and estimating the cost under several alternative policies that involve placing conservation district supervisor elections on the general ballot.<sup>21</sup> Similar policies have been previously studied by the Washington State Conservation Commission (SCC), the Washington Association of Conservation Districts, and others. However, the final report in this series will be the first to comprehensively investigate the impacts of such policies on all conservation districts in the state.

We have contacted all 45 of Washington's conservation districts for cost data from past elections and comments on the alternative election policies described in the legislative assignment. To date, we have received information on election costs from 35 districts and responses to a questionnaire on the alternative policies from 29. Additionally, we have received data on district election turnout from SCC and county general election costs from the SOS.

The final report in this series will use data collected via our outreach to district managers and SCC to describe the costs to districts of running elections under current law, as specified in parts A and B of the legislation for this study. Next, we will estimate costs under the legislation's alternative policies described in parts C and D using SCC and SOS data. Finally, as part E of the assignment requires, we will describe potential non-monetary costs and benefits (such as changes in voter turnout and interest in supervisor candidacy) of the policies in parts C and D based on feedback obtained from district personnel via the questionnaire. The final report will be published by June 30, 2025.

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<sup>21</sup> [ESSB 5187](#).

## Acknowledgments

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The authors of this report would like to thank the staff members at all conservation districts for their feedback on the design and implementation of this study via informal meetings and responses to the questionnaire, as well as all their efforts in assembling cost data or estimates for elections in recent years.

Thanks as well to James Thompson, Shana Joy, Lori Gonzalez, and Kate Delavan of the Washington State Conservation Commission for data on conservation district election turnout, shapefiles of current conservation district boundaries, and answers to many questions about the workings of conservation district elections in Washington. Additionally, thanks to Ryan Baye of the Washington Association of Conservation Districts for insights into the history of conservation district elections and previous efforts to study them. Finally, Garth Fell, the Snohomish County Auditor, is also due thanks for an explanation of how county auditors divide up the cost of general elections to each participating jurisdiction.

For further information, contact:

Cory Briar at 360.664.9801, [cory.briar@wsipp.wa.gov](mailto:cory.briar@wsipp.wa.gov)

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### Washington State Institute for Public Policy

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