



June 2025

Conservation District Elections in Washington State: *Final Report*

The 2023 Washington State Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) to conduct a study on the costs of conservation district (CD) supervisor elections in Washington. Specifically, WSIPP was tasked with summarizing election costs, funding sources, and voter turnout under current law and projecting costs if these elections were instead held on the general election ballot in each county under two specific alternative policies. WSIPP was additionally tasked with investigating non-monetary costs and benefits associated with these policies.

A preliminary report, published in November of 2024, provided background on CDs and their elections and an outline of our plan for analyzing supervisor election costs. This final report contains our analysis of CD election costs under current law and the alternative policies. [Section I](#) reviews the legislative language; [Section II](#) describes CD election costs under current law; [Section III](#) details how election procedures would change were CDs to hold elections on the general ballot; [Section IV](#) presents our estimates of CD election costs under the alternative policies; [Section V](#) summarizes potential non-monetary impacts of including CD elections on the general ballot; and [Section VI](#) concludes with takeaways and opportunities for further study.

Summary

This final report on CD elections in Washington documents election costs under current law and estimates costs under the alternative policies in the legislation for this study. Under current law, the median total election cost among CDs is \$2,500, but costs vary widely. Turnout is less than 1% of voters in nearly all districts.

Over the 2020–2024 period, we estimate that the first alternative policy would have led costs to increase by a median of roughly 200% across districts if two supervisor positions were to appear on the general ballot and 250% for three positions. If primaries were included, costs would have been roughly 570% and 650% higher for two and three positions, respectively. The second alternative policy would also lead to higher costs than under the current law, but it would be less expensive than the first alternative policy.

CD supervisors and personnel hypothesized more non-monetary costs than benefits from the alternative policies in their responses to questionnaires. Many thought that going on the general ballot could lead to higher election turnout but questioned whether it would be to the benefit of districts. The majority of districts feared that the alternative policies would be detrimental to their work, diverting resources from conservation programs and politicizing their role in local government.

Suggested citation: Briar, C., & Johnson, A. (2024). *The cost of conservation district elections in Washington State: Final report* (Document Number 25-06-4102). Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

I. Background

The preliminary report in this series describes the role of conservation districts (CDs) and their history. CDs are independent, non-regulatory local government agencies. They work to promote conservation and resource management by offering voluntary, incentive-based programs and services to landowners in their jurisdiction. These programs and services may include technical assistance for project planning, reimbursement or grant funding for environmental initiatives, and connecting landowners to conservation specialists.

There are 45 CDs in Washington. Historically, their boundaries were defined by natural features such as watersheds, but many closely follow county boundaries. Many CDs contain cities, reservations, or other areas that are excluded from their jurisdiction.

CDs are overseen by a board of five volunteer supervisors. The registered voters of the district elect three supervisors; these elections are conducted by CDs independently of county auditors and the general ballot. The remaining two supervisors are appointed by the Washington State Conservation Commission (SCC), the state-level coordinating agency for CDs. At least two of the elected and one of the appointed supervisors must own land within the district. Paid district managers also lead CDs. Many have additional paid staff and volunteers.

For more information on conservation districts and their history, see the preliminary report in this study.¹

The legislative assignment for this study is given in [Exhibit 1](#). The legislature tasked WSIPP with describing CD election costs and funding in part A, as well as cost per ballot and turnout in part B. Parts C and D of the assignment direct WSIPP to estimate costs to CDs were they to go on the general ballot under two alternative policies. In addition to placing elections on the general ballot, the policy in part C lengthens supervisor terms from three to four years and staggers them such that they align with the elections of other officials. Under the policy, all five supervisor positions would be elected, rather than two being appointed by the SCC. The policy in part D builds on part C, including all the same changes, but additionally requires that CDs divide themselves into five separate zones, with supervisors running to represent a single zone. Finally, part E tasks WSIPP with investigating potential non-monetary costs and benefits of each of the alternative policies in C and D.

Originally, the assignment called for a preliminary report to be published in December of 2023 and a final report in June of 2024. These dates were both adjusted one year by WSIPP's Board of Directors. The preliminary report, which contains background information on CDs and a plan for our analysis, was published in November of 2024.

¹ Briar, C., & Johnson, A. (2024). [Conservation district elections in Washington State: Preliminary report](#) (Doc. No. 24-11-4101). Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

Exhibit 1

Legislative Assignment

[... 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.*

A preliminary report which contains any available information to date must be completed by December 1, 2023. A final report must be completed by June 30, 2024, and submitted in accordance with RCW 43.01.036 to the standing committees of the house of representatives and the senate with jurisdiction over elections and conservation district issues.

*Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 5187
Chapter 475, Laws of 2023*

II. Conservation District Election Costs Under Current Law

First, in this section, we describe the costs of CD elections under current law.

RCW 89.08 governs all aspects of CDs in Washington, including certain requirements of how elections must be conducted. However, the law provides CDs with some flexibility. Resultingly, CDs administer their elections in a variety of ways, using by-request ballots, in-person voting, or distributing mail-in ballots to all registered voters. CDs vary widely in terms of population, population density, geographic size, and transportation access. Taken together, these factors mean that the cost of running an election is highly dependent on the CD. Thus, while we present summary statistics that describe average outcomes across CDs, it is important to remember that they may not be representative of all CDs.

[Data](#)

Before discussing our results, we describe our data sources for the analysis of election costs under current law. There is no centralized location or database where information about CD elections is collected and stored. To obtain cost and funding data for this analysis, we reached out to managers and staff at all 45 CDs in Washington individually. The amount and precision of available cost data vary from district to district.

Some were able to provide us with five or more years of fully itemized cost data. Others had data on total cost but could not itemize it. Still, others were only able to provide estimates of total election costs from a recent or typical year. Throughout this section, we present all information made available to us but note when it was estimated. Given the number of years of data typically available, we restrict our analysis of election costs to the last five calendar years (2020–2024).

Until 2021, CDs were not required to hold elections if a supervisor candidate was running uncontested. A total of 32 CDs did not have contested supervisor positions in 2020 and hence did not hold elections. This further restricts the amount of available data on election costs.

We supplement the cost data with complete voter turnout data for each CD in Washington from the SCC. These data allow us to evaluate turnout and cost per ballot cast.

To contextualize election costs and voter turnout, we estimate the total number of registered voters in each CD. The precise number of registered voters is not known for many CDs since they do not follow county boundaries and often exclude municipalities or other areas. We combine data from the Office of the Secretary of State (SOS) and the US Census Bureau (Census) to compile estimates on costs per registered voter for these CDs (see [Appendix III](#) for details).

Results

Next, we describe election costs, funding, turnout, and cost per ballot.

Election Costs

After assembling the cost data, we separated costs (where possible) into the following commonly itemized categories:

- Labor costs,
- Printing and mailing costs,
- Advertising costs (to publicize elections, such as by running ads in local newspapers), and
- Other (for all other costs associated with elections).

Not all districts provided estimates for each of these categories, and some provided additional itemizations (which we grouped into our "Other" category).

A direct comparison of the costs of elections across CDs is not necessarily informative because of how greatly districts vary by population and geography.

For instance, the median election cost in the most populous district (King CD) over the study window exceeds \$350,000, while in smaller districts, it is estimated to be less than \$1,000. Likewise, the sources of costs enumerated above will vary by district size.

Exhibit 2 provides summary statistics of the cost data obtained from conservation districts. The total cost ranged from a low of \$50 in Mason CD's 2020 election (where the only cost was advertising in local papers) to King CD's 2023 election at nearly \$422,000. The median cost for an election across districts was \$2,500.

To provide further detail, we divide districts based on the estimated number of registered voters. If districts have less than 15,000 registered voters, we designate them as "small"; districts with more than 75,000 registered voters are designated as "large"; "medium" districts are all those in between. We also separate King CD because its election costs are an order of magnitude greater than all the others.

Exhibit 2

Summary of Election Costs (2020–2024)

Cost (# of CDs)	Minimum	Median	Max
Total election cost (45)	\$50	\$2,500	\$421,606
<i>Small CD (16)</i>	\$112	\$884	\$6,923
<i>Medium CD (18)</i>	\$50	\$2,417	\$10,825
<i>Large CD (10)</i>	\$667	\$2,970	\$29,000
<i>King CD (1)</i>	\$253,800	\$369,353	\$421,606

Notes:

Some CDs were only able to submit estimates of total or itemized costs. This information is included with equal weight to actual cost data.

Even within these categories, there is substantial variation across districts, as shown by the second through fifth rows of [Exhibit 2](#). While it is generally true that the cost of CD elections is higher in districts with more registered voters, this is not consistent for all districts. For instance, note that the lowest election cost among large districts is less than 10% of the maximum cost among small districts. Additionally, the median election in a large district is only \$550 more than the median cost in a medium district.

Twenty-nine CDs were able to provide us with itemized cost information for their elections. Labor was the largest expense in most CDs, followed by advertising costs. The average contribution to the total election cost of each cost factor enumerated above is depicted in [Exhibit 3](#). These shares of total election cost should be interpreted with some caution, however, as they only represent the 29 CDs that were able to submit itemized cost information. As such, they may not reflect all those who did not submit itemized cost information.

Average total election costs for all CDs can be found in [Exhibit A1](#) in [Appendix I](#).

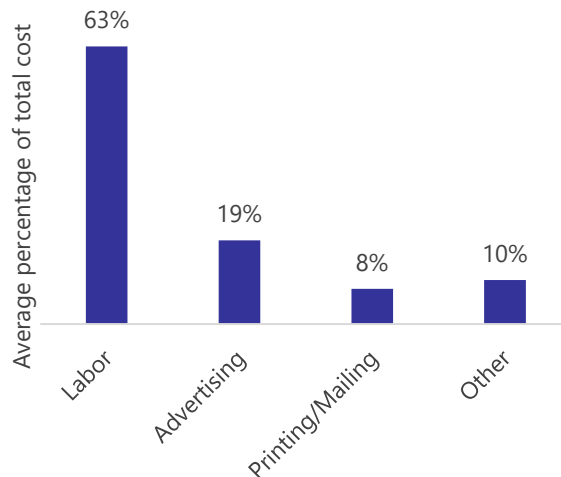
Election Funding

As discussed in the preliminary report, much of the CDs funding comes from grants approved for specific conservation programming and is not generally available to help cover the cost of elections. CD personnel communicated that grants to cover the cost of elections are typically not available, though a small portion of some grants may be used for overhead.²

As such, the only source of election funding for most CDs is the Technical Assistance/ Implementation Grant bestowed to each CD annually by the SCC. Eighteen of the 45 CDs also have access to rates and charges from their county auditor, obtaining a small annual flat fee from each parcel in their jurisdiction. CD personnel emphasized that these revenue sources must also be used to cover overhead, such as office rent and utilities.

Exhibit 3

Average Contribution of Expenses to Total Election Costs (2020–2024)



Notes:

Of the 45 CDs in Washington, 29 were able to submit itemized cost data.

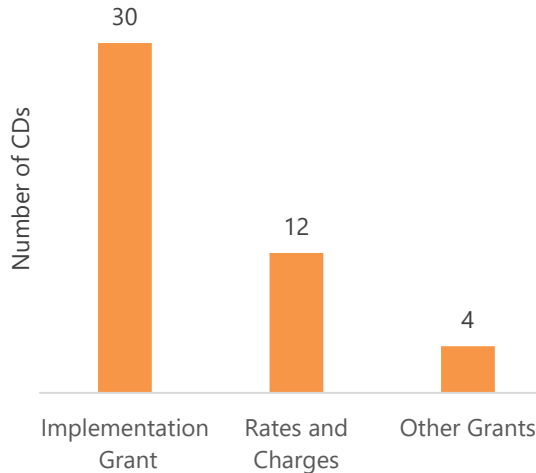
Averages were first calculated within districts across multiple years, then across all CDs.

Percentages do not add to 100% due to rounding.

² A few CDs indicated that they obtain some amount of election funding from the overhead portion of grants.

In our outreach to CDs to request election cost data, we also asked them to share details about funding. While staff were able to indicate which funding sources were used for elections, they were generally not able to report the share of election costs covered by each funding source. All CD funding is generally combined into a single fund to support operations, and it is not typically possible to say which source is most responsible for funding elections. As such, we are only able to summarize the frequency with which different funding sources are used for elections. These are depicted in [Exhibit 4](#). One district, Columbia CD, also obtained election funding from the Bonneville Power Administration.

Exhibit 4
Frequency of Funding Sources for Elections
(2020–2024)

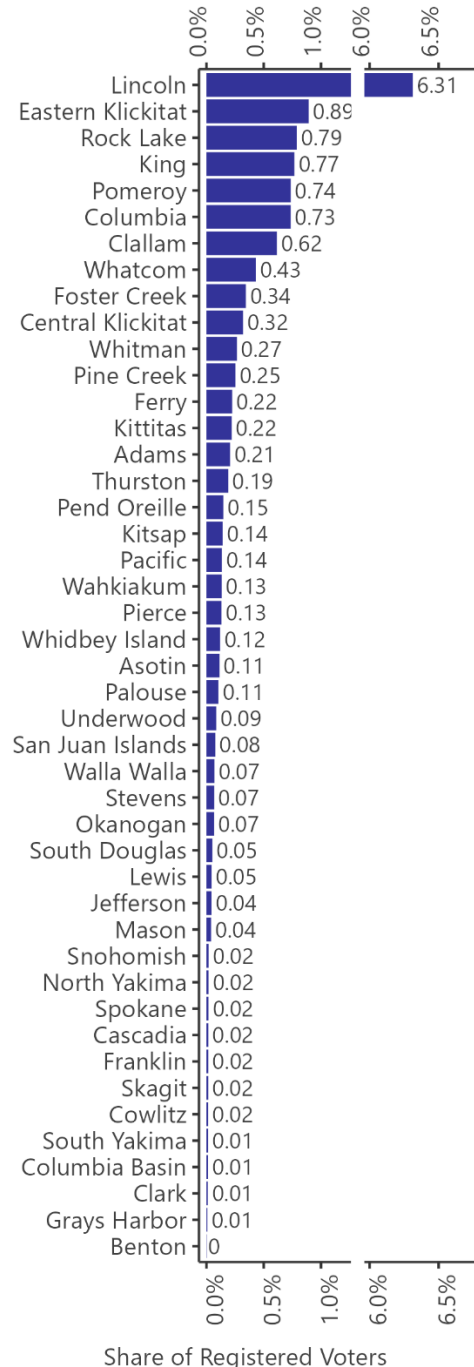


Note:
Many districts use multiple funding sources for their elections.

Turnout

Voter turnout for CD supervisor elections has historically been very low. Since elections take place in March rather than in November when most other elections happen, the public is generally not aware of CD elections unless they regularly interact with supervisors or staff.

Exhibit 5
Average Turnout as a Share of Registered
Voters (2020–2024)



Notes:
The scale on the horizontal axis has a scale break to accommodate Lincoln CD.

[Exhibit 5](#) shows the average turnout rate in supervisor elections by CD from 2020 to 2024. Only Lincoln CD had an average turnout exceeding 1% of registered voters. Lincoln CD began mailing ballots to all registered voters in 2023. Their turnout jumped from an average of 19 ballots in 2020–2022 (0.2% of registered voters) to 879 in 2023 (10.4%) and 1,239 in 2024 (14.4%). Around half of the CDs had an average turnout of less than 0.1% of registered voters.

Cost per Ballot Cast

The legislation for this study requires WSIPP to report on the cost to districts per ballot cast under current law. We calculate this by dividing the total cost by the number of ballots cast for each year in which data are available for each CD. Cost per ballot by district is summarized in [Exhibit 6](#), using the same definitions for small, medium, and large districts as above. The average cost per ballot cast was lowest in Lincoln CD over the study window, the CD with the highest average turnout. The average cost per ballot cast was highest in Grays Harbor CD, though data were only available for 2024.

Many districts have significant variations in cost per ballot from year to year. Especially when turnout is low (as it often is in CD elections), small changes in the number of ballots cast can lead to relatively large changes in cost per ballot, even when nothing in the way a CD conducts an election has changed. As an example, in Asotin CD in 2022, the total election cost was \$952, and four people cast ballots, leading to a cost per ballot of \$238. The following year, the total election cost was virtually unchanged at \$925. However, 16 ballots were cast, leading to a cost per ballot of only \$58, or roughly a quarter of the cost in 2022. So, while considering the cost per ballot cast, it is important to note the sensitivity of this calculation to turnout.

Cost per ballot information is available for all districts in [Exhibit A2](#) in [Appendix I](#).

Exhibit 6

Average Cost per Ballot Cast (2020–2024)

Cost per ballot cast (# of CDs)	Minimum	Median	Max
Total election cost (45)	\$4	\$145	\$5,412
<i>Small CDs (16)</i>	\$6	\$91	\$1,143
<i>Medium CDs (18)</i>	\$4	\$104	\$5,412
<i>Large CDs (10)</i>	\$5	\$43	\$759
<i>King CD (1)</i>	\$30	\$36	\$41

Notes:

Some CDs were only able to submit estimates of total or itemized costs. This information is included with equal weight to actual cost data.

Summary of Current Cost Results

One key takeaway from our analysis of the costs of CD supervisor elections under current law is that districts are very different from one another. While the cost of elections generally appears to increase with the number of registered voters, the relationship is not strong; election costs in small districts can easily exceed those in large districts. CDs differ in their election process, voters, and many other factors, all of which contribute to different election costs.

Similarly, districts differ in how they fund elections. Most districts use Implementation/Technical Assistance funding from the SCC to administer their elections. About a third of districts also have access to rates and charges and will additionally or exclusively use that funding. Finally, a small number of districts reported using the overhead portion of certain grants for conservation work to fund elections.

Turnout in CD elections is generally very low, with only one district having an average turnout of more than 1% of registered voters; half of the districts have an average turnout of less than 0.1%. Under these circumstances, the cost per ballot cast in each district is extremely sensitive to turnout and is not a reliable metric to make comparisons about the cost-effectiveness of elections between districts or years.

The differences between CDs are explored further in [Section IV](#), where we report our estimates of general ballot costs.

III. Changes to Elections Under Alternative Policies

As discussed previously, CDs currently hold their elections in a variety of ways. If they were to instead hold elections on the general ballot under the alternative policies, many changes would have to be made to their election processes. In this section, we briefly discuss these changes. A complete comparison of current CD election laws under [RCW 89.08](#) and how they would change under the alternative policies and [RCW 29A](#) can be found in [Appendix II](#).³

For the sake of clarity, we will refer to the alternative policies specified in the legislative assignment by shorthand names. We will refer to the first alternative policy, in part C of the assignment, as the **general ballot policy**. We will refer to the second alternative policy, in part D, as the **zoning policy**. The details of these policies are described in [Exhibit 7](#).

Procedural Changes

The alternative policies would lead to procedural changes in elections, including their frequency and the potential need for primaries. Currently, elections for CDs are initiated by the board of supervisors. To appear on the general ballot, county auditors would be the ones to initiate elections.

Exhibit 7

Alternative Policies from Legislative Language

The **General Ballot Policy** is enumerated in part C of the legislative language for this study. It involves the following changes to CD elections:

- CD supervisor elections would be held on the general ballot in each county under RCW 29A;
- All supervisor positions would become elected positions; and
- Term lengths would be lengthened to four years and staggered to align with other elected positions.

The **Zoning Policy** comes from part D of the legislative language and involves all of the changes from the general ballot policy. It additionally requires:

- CDs must divide themselves into five separate zones.
- Supervisors run to represent a single zone rather than the district at large.

Under both alternative policies, the term lengths of supervisors would be lengthened from three to four years. All five board members would become elected rather than appointed positions. Their terms would be staggered to align with the elections of other officials. This also means that CD elections would take place in November rather than in the first three months of the year under current law.

³ Citations of the Revised Code of Washington (RCW) relevant to each point can also be found in [Exhibit A6](#) in [Appendix II](#).

If more than two candidates file for a single supervisor position, then that contested position would also need to appear on the primary ballot. These elections would take place in August, as with other elected offices. CDs could request to be assigned a blanket provision, however, to never require a primary.

Changes for Supervisor Candidates

The alternative policies would also lead to new requirements for CD supervisor candidates. Under RCW 29A, prospective supervisors would need to file for candidacy with whichever county contains the majority of the registered voters of their district (or zone, under the zoning policy). A \$10 filing fee or the signatures of ten registered voters would be required at that time.

Under RCW 29A, candidates for public office are restricted to appearing only once on the primary and general ballots. This would mean that supervisor candidates could not run for another office in the same year. Supervisor candidates would also be newly subject to campaign finance reporting requirements, political advertising and electioneering requirements, and campaign limitations if their CD (or zone) contains more than 5,000 registered voters.

Additionally, supervisor candidates would need to be registered voters in their respective jurisdictions. Currently, the only restriction on supervisors' residency is that two of the elected and one of the appointed supervisors must own land within the district. They themselves do not need to actually reside in the district.

Under the general ballot policy, they would be required to live in their district; for the zoning policy, they would be required to live within their zone.

Neither of the alternative policies specifies whether the requirement of landownership by three of the five supervisors would change. Under current law, special-purpose districts for which landownership is a prerequisite for holding office are not required to hold nonpartisan elections. Since only three of the five supervisors of a CD are currently required to own land in the district they represent, it is unclear whether CD supervisor positions could become partisan or not.

Changes in Districting Procedures

Under the zoning policy, CDs could be required to redistrict periodically. Specifically, RCW 29A requires jurisdictions with internal subdivisions to redistrict in response to the most recent federal decennial census such that each subdivision contains an equal share of the total population, as nearly as possible. However, jurisdictions with a landownership requirement for elected officials are specifically exempt from this process. Under current law, some but not all CD supervisors are required to own land in the district they represent. As such, current election law is ambiguous as to whether redistricting would apply to CDs on the general ballot.

If redistricting were required, CDs would have to revise their zones every ten years to contain an equal population. This could have implications for the eligibility of supervisors to continue in their positions if the landownership requirements remain. For instance, if zones were changed such that an active supervisor no longer resided in the zone they were elected to represent, they would be ineligible for that office under RCW 29A.

CDs would be required to inform the public of the redistricting plan, publish the draft plan, and hold a meeting with notice and public comment within ten days of publishing and at least one week before adopting the plan.

Costs to Conservation Districts to Appear on the General Ballot

In accordance with [RCW 29A.04.410](#), county auditors apportion the total cost of running general and primary elections to every jurisdiction appearing on the ballot in a manner proportionate to their contribution to those costs. All counties use the same formula to do this.

First, each county totals all of its election-related expenses (including salaries and wages, benefits, supplies, and other charges). Each jurisdiction is then charged a minimum fee of \$50 (\$300 in Adams County) to appear on the ballot. The total of these fees is subtracted from the total county expenses to obtain the election costs to be allocated to jurisdictions.

Next, each jurisdiction is assigned a weighted registration factor based on the number of registered voters in that jurisdiction and the number of positions being run by that jurisdiction. Specifically, this weight is equal to the number of registered voters times one for the first position and 0.2 for each additional position. For example, if there were three positions, the weight would be the total number of registered voters multiplied by 1.4 ($1 + 2 \times 0.2$). Each jurisdiction is then designated a share of the total election costs. This is calculated by dividing the weight of a jurisdiction by the sum of all jurisdictions' weights. Finally, 15% is added for overhead.⁴

CDs would also have to cover the cost of appearing in the voters' pamphlets for both primary and general elections that they appear in. Most counties create their own local voters' pamphlets that are distributed to registered voters independently of the statewide pamphlet; these counties would charge districts as part of the election cost allocation mechanism described above. Sixteen counties combine their voters' pamphlets with the statewide pamphlet for the general ballot, incurring extra costs to the county auditor. These extra costs are also allocated to jurisdictions on the ballot according to the formula described above (except that no minimum fee is charged). If the cost to appear in the pamphlet would cause undue financial hardship, CDs could petition the county to waive this requirement.

⁴ We detail this process further in [Appendix III](#) and when discussing our methodology for estimating CD's general elections costs in [Section IV](#).

IV. Cost of CD Elections Under the Alternative Policies

In this section, we estimate the costs that CDs would incur if they were to hold their supervisor elections on the general ballot in each county as specified by the two alternative election policies in the legislative language for this study. We begin with an overview of our methodology and key assumptions before presenting our resulting estimates for each policy.

General Election Cost Methodology

To estimate the cost of holding CD elections on the general ballot, we combine county election cost data from the SOS with our estimates of the number of registered voters in each CD for each year. The SOS provided us with complete county-level election cost data for all general elections from 2020 to 2024. Unfortunately, the cost data for primaries are only available for 2022 and 2024. We use these years as a proxy for all years in the sample. Additionally, we obtain the cost to counties of appearing in a combined voters' pamphlet with the state from the SOS.

We use these data to redistribute county election costs in the years 2020–2024 as if CDs had been on the general and primary ballots in the appropriate counties. There are several important assumptions we make to do this.

First, we hold the total election cost in each county and year fixed. County auditors that we spoke with relayed that the inclusion of CDs on the general ballot in each county would likely have an insignificant impact on the total cost of administering elections.⁵

Additionally, general election costs for CDs will be impacted by the number of supervisors running in a given year. Both alternative policies specify that all supervisors will be elected in staggered terms to align with the terms of other elected officials, allowing them to appear on the general ballot. We assume that this means that in each CD, there will be two or three supervisor candidates running every biennium. For instance, if two candidates ran in 2020, then three would run in 2022, two in 2024, three in 2026, and so on. The same logic applies if elections in a district take place in odd years. This also means that districts will only need to hold elections every other year rather than every year, as in the current system.

With these general assumptions in hand, we rerun the cost formula used by each county auditor to apportion costs to jurisdictions on the ballot as described in [Section III](#). For CDs in counties that combine the general election voters' pamphlets, we include the cost of appearing in the pamphlet in the general ballot cost.⁶

⁵ Auditors also communicated that there would be a one-time cost associated with setting up CDs with the general election process. However, it would be nearly impossible to

estimate these costs for each county without existing data. As such, we do not consider this cost.

⁶ The state does not combine with these counties for primaries.

Exhibit 8

Summary of Change in Average Election Costs per Biennium Under General Ballot Policy (2020–2024)

Election	2 Positions			3 Positions		
	Min	Median	Max	Min	Median	Max
Primary	(76%)	290%	11,619%	(73%)	340%	12,970%
General	(88%)	208%	8,986%	(86%)	249%	10,136%
Combined	(64%)	571%	20,704%	(59%)	659%	23,207%

Note:

Numbers in parentheses represent decreases in election costs.

In addition to our cost analysis, we sent a questionnaire to each CD manager asking them about the cost impacts of each alternative policy. We summarized their feedback about potential additional expenses that would be incurred were the two alternative policies implemented. We also asked CD to share whether each alternative policy would lead to non-monetary costs and benefits; these are explored in [Section V](#).

For more details on how we estimate general ballot costs under each alternative policy, see [Appendix III](#).

General Ballot Policy Costs

We begin by investigating the costs of going on the general ballot under the general ballot policy (in part C of the legislative language).

[Exhibit 8](#) reports the median, minimum, and maximum percent increase in election costs across CDs to appear on the primary and general ballots, given two or three supervisor positions being open across a biennium. Under the general ballot policy, elections would take place every two years. However, under current law, elections take place every year. Hence, we compare costs under the general ballot policy to twice the average election cost under current law.

The general ballot policy would have resulted in an increase in biennial election costs in 38 of 45 CDs in years with two supervisor positions on the ballot and 43 of 45 CDs in three-position years. With primaries, biennial election costs would have increased in 44 CDs in both two- and three-position years. As reported in [Exhibit 8](#), the median increase in election costs across districts would have been 571% and 659% in two- and three-position years, respectively.

Across districts, election costs under the general ballot policy were higher if districts contained most or all of the registered voters in the county, if relatively few other jurisdictions appeared on the ballot, or if overall countywide election costs were high. Cost increases were especially larger in districts that had relatively low election costs under current law, given the number of voters in their jurisdiction.

As an example, Snohomish CD would have seen the largest percentage increase in cost under all scenarios. Currently, Snohomish CD personnel estimate election costs to be around \$1,500 per year, or \$3,000 per biennium (relatively low given its estimated 390,000 registered voters).

Appearing on the general ballot with two supervisor positions would have cost the CD an average of \$272,600 per biennium over the 2020–2024 period, an 8,986% increase. Adding on the average cost of participating in the primary over this time, \$351,600, would bring the total election bill to \$624,200, or a 20,704% increase compared to current law.

On the other end, Eastern Klickitat would actually see a reduction in election costs of 88% per biennium from going on the general ballot with two supervisor positions. With the inclusion of a primary, this decrease in cost shrinks to 64%, still representing a substantial decrease in election costs. Despite containing less than 10% of the voters in Klickitat County, Eastern Klickitat has relatively high election costs under current law. These factors, taken together, explain why their general ballot election cost would be so low compared to the current system.

In most districts, the average cost of appearing on the primary ballot exceeds the average cost of appearing on the general ballot. This is because jurisdictions are not required to participate in primaries unless more than two candidates are running for a position. As a result, the primary election in each county and year will usually have fewer jurisdictions to allocate the total county election cost to than the general election, and so a greater share of those costs will be allocated to CDs in primary elections.⁷ Like all other jurisdictions, however, CDs need not appear on the primary ballot if two or fewer candidates run for each supervisor position in a given year.

⁷ There is no clear pattern in how the total costs of primaries compare to the total general election cost within counties and years.

Some districts and county auditors that we reached out to in the course of our research communicated that they expected there to be a difference in general election costs depending on whether the year was even or odd. Since even years typically have more jurisdictions on the ballot, they reasoned that the countywide total election cost would be split between more entities, leading to a smaller share being apportioned to CDs. However, in looking at our general ballot cost estimates for CDs over the 2020–2024 time span, we found that even years were less expensive for only about half of the districts. Additionally, while average costs were significantly different between even and odd years within districts, those averages were only based on a few years of data (a maximum of two for odd and three for even). Because of these limitations, we do not create separate estimates for even and odd years.

Average costs for all CDs under the general ballot policy can be found in [Exhibit A3 of Appendix I](#).

[Feedback from CD Personnel on Costs of the General Ballot Policy](#)

We read through responses to the questionnaire, both from written submissions and recorded in meetings, and coded them based on prevailing themes. More information on the analysis methodology can be found in [Section A3 of the Appendix](#).

CD personnel in each district generally thought that each of the alternative policies would increase, decrease, or have a minimal impact on election costs.

CD personnel overwhelmingly believed that switching to the general ballot would result in increased election costs. 31 of 36 (86%) responding districts indicated they expected increased costs. Some of the costs that staff mentioned are included in the previous estimates (e.g., the cost of printing and sending ballots to all registered voters in a district). However, there are additional costs that CD personnel discussed (e.g., vetting a district's candidates or coordinating with multiple counties) that our estimates are unable to account for.

In their responses, personnel predicted increased costs due to the resources required to carry out an election, including printing, legal advertising, and labor. Some CDs also believed that switching to the general ballot under this policy would increase the administrative burden on their districts to run elections.

Many of these CDs expressed concern for the financial viability of their district, were the general ballot policy to pass, noting that costs could exceed available funding to pay for elections. Specific quotes from questionnaire responses on each of these themes are explored in [Exhibit 9](#).

Some districts indicated that they were uncertain how costs might change under this policy. One district discussed potential fluctuation in election costs depending on whether elections were held in even or odd years. Other districts expressed cost variation depending on whether CDs were required to participate in primary elections in addition to the general election.

Two districts felt that switching to the general ballot would decrease election costs. One district expressed that switching to four-year terms and staggering supervisor elections specifically will result in reduced costs by freeing staff in non-election years from needing to coordinate all the associated election tasks.

We now investigate the costs to CDs of appearing on the general ballot under the zoning policy.

Our outreach to CD personnel revealed a number of options for how to divide CDs into zones. However, as discussed in [Section III](#), RCW 29A would require each zone within a CD to contain, as nearly as possible, an equal share of registered voters. Therefore, we assume that CDs would divide themselves such that each zone contains an equal number of registered voters.

Exhibit 9

Reasoning for Additional Increased Costs from the General Ballot Policy

Theme	Quotation(s)
Increase the administrative burden of running elections	<p><i>"The other issue that may increase cost is determining the eligibility of people who want to run as a supervisor. We have statutory requirements that [three] positions must meet specific landowner/operator criteria. The county elections office does not know how that would work for them. The District may be in a position of vetting their own elected officials before they can run, increasing costs and creating a conflict of interest."</i></p> <p><i>"To complicate matters even more, [the] boundaries exclude the cities and portions of the urban area... If District elections were held on the general ballot, we would have to coordinate with two counties or change our boundaries."</i></p>
Costs would exceed available funds to cover elections and take away from conservation programming	<p><i>"The only grant that covers these costs is our implementation grant, which is for our district operations. We already struggle to stay within budget on this, especially when emergency building repairs and such come up."</i></p> <p><i>"The only discretionary spending [we] have is our Rates and Charges...The rest of our budget is controlled by other agencies...The [rates and charges] we collect annually...must be approved by the County Commissioners, and they do it to support natural resource issues within [the] County. It is unreasonable and inappropriate to direct the District to spend ALL of that money on election costs."</i></p> <p><i>"It does not make sense to use that kind of money [on elections] when we need it in the field."</i></p>

Notes:

Quotes are edited for brevity and to protect participant privacy.

Administrative burden was included as both a monetary and non-monetary cost due to the quantifiable impact of labor costs and non-quantifiable effects on staff.

Zoning Policy Costs

We construct our election cost estimates similarly to the general ballot policy, except that we only include 40% of estimated registered voters in years where two supervisor positions are on the ballot and 60% in years where three supervisor positions are on the ballot. Ostensibly, this policy should result in lower costs compared to the general ballot policy since the fraction of total countywide election costs paid by jurisdictions is dependent on the number of registered voters.⁸

[Exhibit 10](#) summarizes the change in the cost of elections under the zoning policy as compared to current law for an average biennium. Once again, we estimate the greatest increase in cost to be in Snohomish CD and the greatest decrease to be in Eastern Klickitat CD.

The zoning policy would have resulted in an increase in biennial election costs for 27 CDs in two-position years and 12 CDs in three-position years. With primaries included, election costs would have increased in 39 and 43 CDs in two- and three-position years, respectively.

The zoning policy would have led to lower election costs for all CDs and years than the general ballot policy. In two-position years, total election costs would have been, on average, 56% lower for the general election. With primaries included, costs would have been 55% lower. In three-position years, general election costs would have been 36% lower on average and 35% lower with primaries included. However, as reported in [Exhibit 10](#), biennial election costs under the zoning policy would still be substantially higher than under current law for many districts.

Average costs for all CDs under the general ballot policy can be found in [Exhibit A4 of Appendix I](#).

Exhibit 10

Summary of Change in Average Election Costs Per Biennium Under the Zoning Policy (2020–2024)

Election	2 Positions			3 Positions		
	Min	Median	Max	Min	Median	Max
Primary	(89%)	72%	5,517%	(83%)	188%	8,843%
General	(95%)	37%	4,069%	(91%)	127%	6,696%
Combined	(85%)	205%	9,687%	(74%)	398%	15,639%

Note:

Numbers in parentheses represent decreases in election costs.

⁸ It should be noted, however, that there would be a cost associated with subdividing CDs into zones, including the costs of planning, geographic surveying, review, public

comment, and other related factors. We do not consider these costs in our estimates.

Exhibit 11

Additional Reasoning for Increased Costs from the Zoning Policy

Sub-themes for Increased Costs	Quotation(s)
Increase the administrative burden required to focus specifically on deciding on, creating, and coordinating the zones for elections	<p><i>"This change would not likely decrease the overall cost or the cost per vote, as the process is more complicated for the county to administer. In our discussion, the auditor did not suggest that alternating zone-based elections would be any less expensive. We would also need to pay for or produce a detailed zone map to provide to the county, with periodic updates."</i></p> <p><i>"Creating zones, subzones, and recruiting board members for each of those zones/subzones would greatly increase our workload to source candidates and come at a tremendous cost to the community in staff time and [third-party] fees."</i></p> <p><i>"We see absolutely no benefit to creating five zones in our district. What would they be based on? How will we come up with the zones and boundaries? Who will track which landowners/voters/residents are in which zone?"</i></p>

Notes:

Quotes are edited for brevity and to protect participant privacy.

Administrative burden was included as both a monetary and non-monetary cost due to the quantifiable impact of labor costs and non-quantifiable effects on staff.

Additional Feedback from CD Personnel on the Costs of the Zoning Policy

Similarly to the general ballot policy, CD personnel overwhelmingly believed that the zoning policy would increase their election costs compared to the current law. Seventeen of 36 responding districts mentioned that their election costs would increase due to the zoning changes.

Districts noted that the zoning policy could lead to additional costs that are not captured in our estimates. Many districts stated that developing the zones could have associated costs related to surveying and maintaining them. Staff felt that counties' administrative costs to run district elections could increase and be passed on to the district. Others felt there would be significant labor and redistricting costs associated with the zoning policy.

Exhibit 11 provides quotes from questionnaire responses on these themes amongst districts that believed the zoning policy would increase costs.

Four districts felt that the zoning policy would decrease their total election costs. Personnel from one felt that while the zoning approach may result in savings, it does not align with "the goals, purpose, and needs" of their district. Other districts did not provide explanations as to why they felt costs would decrease.

Discussion of Alternative Policy Cost Results

Once again, our analysis emphasizes the differences between CDs across Washington state. A small number of districts may see substantial cost reductions as a result of going on the general ballot. Others would see astronomical increases. Overall, both of the alternative policies would have resulted in a substantial increase in the cost of elections for the majority of districts compared to their current election procedures. The zoning policy would have been the less expensive of the two but would have still resulted in significant election cost increases in the majority of districts.

Even without access to these estimates at the time of answering the questionnaire, many CD personnel feared that going on the general ballot under either of these alternative policies could financially jeopardize their districts. Unfortunately, due to a lack of detailed financial accounting data, we cannot compare the costs of either alternative policy to the available budget of CDs.⁹

However, when speaking with CD personnel, many communicated that most of the funds that would be available to pay for elections under these policies are already put to use for programming and administrative overhead. When biennial election costs could increase by several hundred percent in the median district under each of these policies, it is not hard to see where concerns about the financial viability of districts under these policies come from.

CD supervisors, managers, and other personnel also communicated that they expected many other changes to result from the two alternative policies outside of monetary costs. These are explored in the following section on the non-monetary costs and benefits of the alternative policies.

⁹ CDs are not required to submit revenue information to the State Auditor's Office in an itemized format, and so we are

unable to determine what portion of total CD income would be available to pay for elections.

V. Non-Monetary Costs and Benefits of Alternative Policies

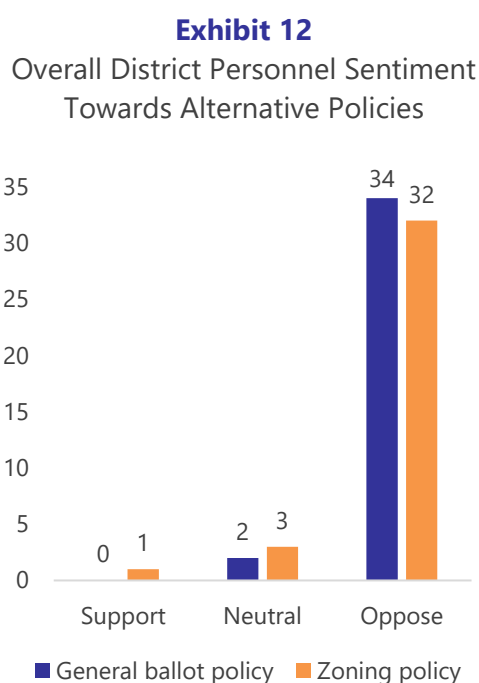
Part E of the legislative assignment directs WSIPP to investigate the “potential non-monetary costs and benefits” of going on the general ballot under the alternative policies in parts C and D. To highlight these potential non-fiscal impacts, we rely on the feedback we received from CD personnel and managers via the questionnaire, which 36 out of 45 districts responded to. We additionally sent out a brief survey to CD supervisors asking them to share how the alternative policies would affect them in their role, receiving 76 responses out of approximately 225 supervisors. Further information on the analysis methodology can be found in [Section A3](#) of the Appendix.

For both questionnaire and survey responses, we established common themes and sentiments and recorded their frequency across districts. We report on these below. It should be noted that while we attempted to distinguish feedback on the zoning policy from the general ballot policy, some respondents did not provide separate feedback on each.

It should also be noted that many of the potential non-monetary costs and benefits explored in this section likely have financial impacts on CDs. Without more details on how these would be implemented, however, or the degree to which they would affect each district, we are not able to explicitly estimate the financial impacts.

Overall Opinions

The research team recorded whether a conservation district respondent appeared to support, oppose, or feel neutral about each alternative policy, which can be seen in [Exhibit 12](#).¹⁰



Note:

Counts are out of 36 total districts that replied to the questionnaire.

¹⁰ Among supervisors, three respondents supported, 50 were opposed to, and seven felt neutral about the general ballot policy (N=61). Among supervisors, three respondents

supported, 40 were opposed to, and five felt neutral about the zoning policy (N=51).

Potential Non-Monetary Costs and Benefits of the General Ballot Policy

Potential Benefits

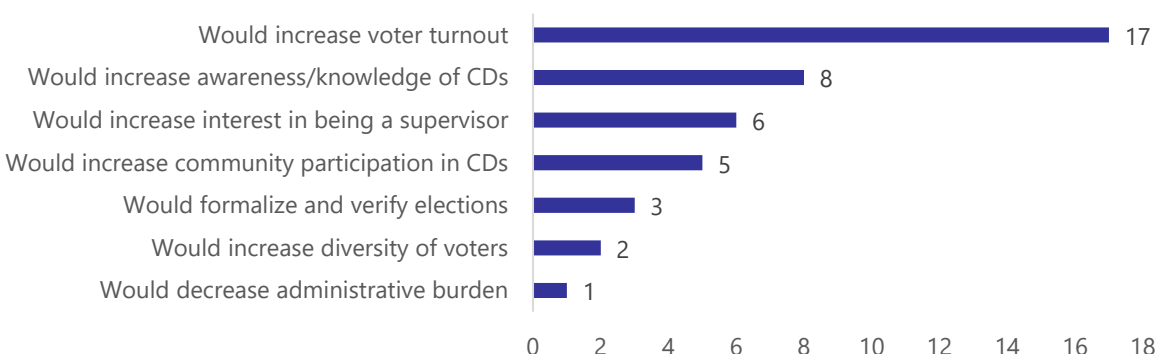
Exhibit 13 portrays the frequency with which CD personnel communicated potential benefits of the general ballot policy. These are explored more in depth below.

Increase Turnout (N=17). The most frequent among the non-monetary benefits mentioned was that of increased voter turnout from appearing on the general ballot. Notably, half the districts that felt voter turnout would increase by going on the general ballot expressed doubts that this increased turnout would lead to increased public knowledge of or engagement with districts. Others felt the opposite, with two managers thinking the general ballot could increase the diversity of voters in district elections because being required to send ballots out to all registered voters would then include people who aren't already familiar with conservation district operations.

Increase Awareness of, Access to, and Interactions with Districts (N=10). Most districts currently do not mail ballots to all registered voters, opting instead for in-person voting or providing ballots on a by-request basis. Respondents noted that appearing on the general ballot could increase general community awareness about conservation districts, a benefit that most managers expressed whether they supported the alternative policies overall or not. Some hoped that being on the general ballot would likely generate at least some curiosity about districts and that community members might learn about and want to engage with the district, including being interested in running to be supervisors. However, an equal number of personnel expressed a concern that appearing on the general ballot would not increase awareness of, or community participation in, conservation districts. Further reasoning for these sentiments is examined in potential costs.

Exhibit 13

Perceived Non-monetary Benefits of the General Ballot Policy



Note:

Counts are out of 36 total districts that replied to the questionnaire.

Alleviate Labor and Improve Upon the District Election Process (N=4). One district manager felt that appearing on the general ballot would transfer much of the overhead election operations that districts currently undertake to the county and could decrease the amount of time and labor district staff must dedicate to elections. Some managers expressed a dislike for the current election process, stating that it disenfranchises voters and that elections currently take up a significant portion of district staff work.

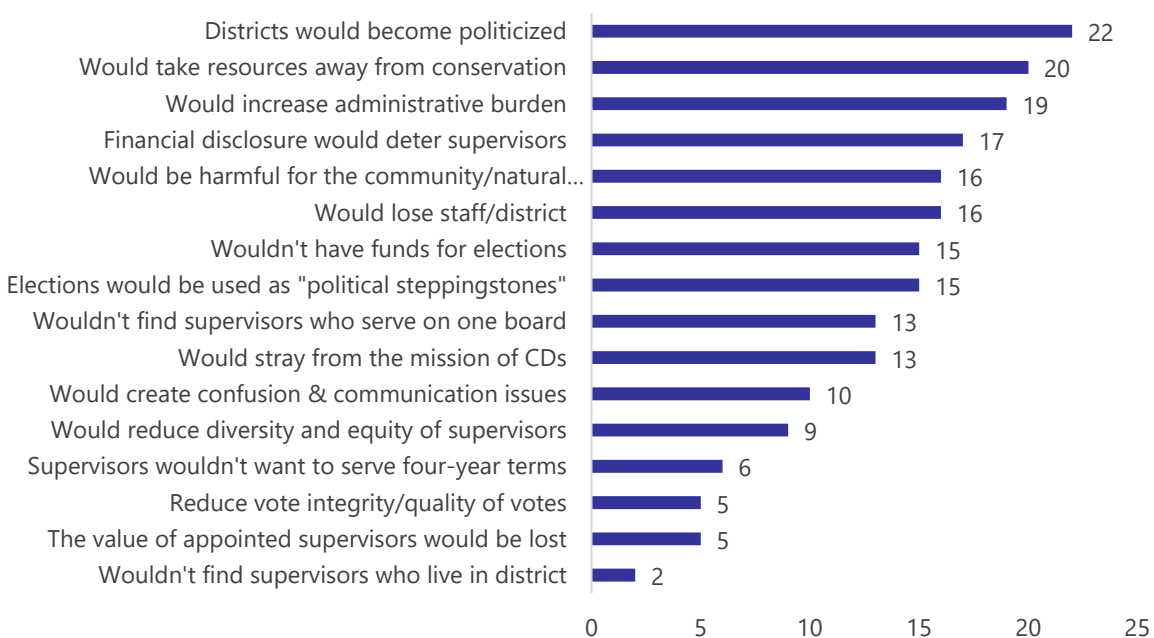
Potential Costs

Exhibit 14 reports the frequency with which CD personnel communicated potential non-monetary costs. As before, we discuss each in the following paragraphs.

Political Shifts to the Detriment of Districts (N=25). Respondents expressed concern that moving to the general ballot could make district elections subject to partisan politics. Personnel noted that historically, the work of CDs brings people together across ideological lines to prioritize the most pressing conservation issues in their region. They feared that increased involvement of political parties could interrupt this dynamic, even if CD supervisor elections are officially nonpartisan.

Others expressed concern that politicized supervisor elections could affect who ultimately chooses to run to be a supervisor. Most current supervisors work full-time due to both the position being voluntary and the requirement that at least three out of five supervisors in each district be landowners or farmers. Consequently, supervisors under current law may not have time to conduct activities associated with campaigning for office.

Exhibit 14
Frequency of Districts that Mention
Potential Non-monetary Costs of the General Ballot Policy



Note:
Counts are out of 36 total districts that replied to the questionnaire.

Supervisors also voiced this concern in their responses to the survey. Nineteen supervisors echoed this sentiment, with some stating that they do not have time to fundraise, appear in “get to know your candidates” forums or be involved in other outreach strategies that could become the norm if districts are required to appear on the general ballot. Some district staff added that this could reduce the diversity of those able to run as a supervisor on the general ballot, as people with language barriers, financial limitations, or limited overall time would face higher barriers to running. Many also feared that the politicization of supervisor elections could encourage candidates to run solely to bolster their political resumes without knowledge or interest in the roles of CDs in their communities.

Finally, questionnaire respondents emphasized the value of appointed supervisors, who often bring technical expertise and diversity of representation to CD boards. Some argued that the elimination of the appointed supervisors under these policies could decrease diversity and expertise on the board. Four supervisors reiterated this theme.

Staffing and Operational Burdens (N=27).

Respondents expressed concern that the alternative policies would lead to more time, labor, or other administrative burdens on district staff, including working with multiple counties for elections and both understanding and enforcing financial disclosure requirements. Staff acknowledged that these compounding concerns would ultimately cause energy, funds, and resources to be diverted towards elections and away from direct conservation, further distancing CDs from their intended purpose.

One manager stated that should the alternative policies take place, they would choose to resign. Supervisors agreed, with 21 respondents mentioning increased administrative burdens from appearing on the general ballot.

Due to the cost impacts of the general ballot policy, personnel at several CDs felt they would be forced to cut staff salaries or lay off staff, further reducing their capacity to provide environmental services.

Difficulty in Finding Supervisor Candidates (N=25). Many CDs communicated that the general ballot policy would make it harder to find willing supervisor candidates. For a start, the requirement of living in the district would disqualify many existing supervisors who may live outside the district they represent. In general, landowners are increasingly choosing to live in cities near their land, irrespective of CD boundaries. Particularly in rural areas, this could make it harder to find eligible supervisors.

Additionally, CD staff communicated that many supervisors also hold elected offices or other positions in their communities. Going on the general ballot would make it impossible for them to run for multiple positions in the same year. In small communities, where the number of residents willing to participate in local governance is limited, this could further deter potential supervisor candidates from running, particularly since the position is unpaid.

Another barrier brought up from the questionnaire responses is that increasing terms from three years to four would make it more difficult to find supervisors willing to run because it is already difficult to find people who can commit to three-year unpaid terms.

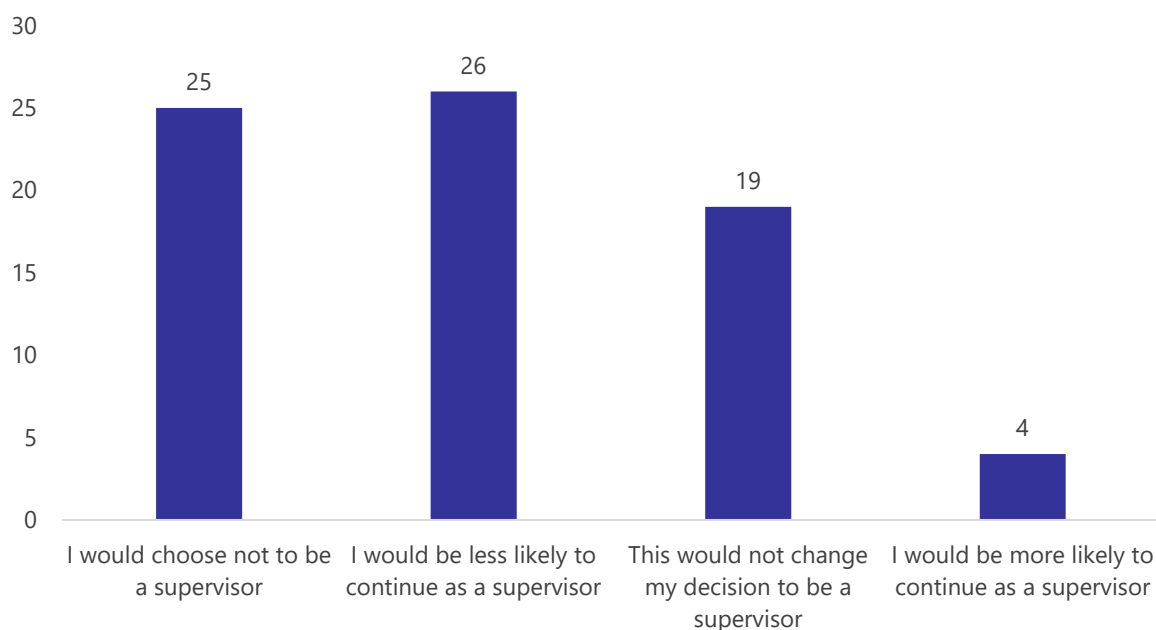
As described previously, we surveyed current CD supervisors about how the alternative policies would impact them and their decision to be supervisors. In total, 76 supervisors from 39 districts replied to the survey.¹¹ The distribution of their responses with respect to the general ballot policy is reported in [Exhibit 15](#).

Under the general ballot policy, 51 total supervisors (69%) felt that they would be less likely to continue as, or would choose not to be, a supervisor. Twenty-three (31%) stated that the alternative policies would not change their decision to be supervisors.

Finally, district staff expressed that the financial disclosure process will be time-consuming for supervisor candidates, will violate people's privacy in an unpaid position, or will be otherwise unpalatable to supervisors. Supervisors echoed this sentiment, with 17 respondents mentioning financial disclosure as the reason they would be less likely to continue in their role.

Exhibit 15

Likelihood of Continuing as a Supervisor Under Alternative Policies



Note:

Out of 76 respondents, 74 answered this question.

¹¹ There are 225 supervisor positions across Washington CDs. However, many CDs currently have vacant supervisor

positions; therefore, we are unable to say what share of supervisors replied to our survey.

Questions about Increasing Voter Turnout as a Goal (N=18). Staff from many CDs questioned the purpose of the alternative policies. If increasing public awareness and voter turnout is the goal, many districts stated that they would prefer funds and energy to be focused more on outreach and engagement with the community rather than paying to be on the general ballot.

Respondents also noted that elections alone are not guaranteed to increase public awareness and engagement with districts since constituents may not take the time to learn about CDs before voting. Likewise, voters may skip unfamiliar issues or offices when submitting their ballot.¹² Relatedly, some CDs questioned whether more turnout is really better if voters are remaining uninformed about issues.

Losing the Purpose and Viability of CDs (N=13). A number of questionnaire respondents worried that switching to the general ballot would lose the original purpose of CDs: to work with landowners to protect natural resources. They worried that voters are uninformed about this purpose, and that going on the general ballot could instead make CDs responsive to the needs of voters rather than landowners and the environment.

A few respondents worried about the viability of districts under the general ballot policy. They anticipated the cumulative financial and logistical impacts of the alternative policies of going on the general ballot to be so high that their CDs would be at risk of completely dissolving.

[Exhibit 16](#) provides some example quotes from questionnaire responses that speak to each of the points outlined in this subsection.

¹² As noted in [Section III](#), however, Lincoln CD saw a jump in turnout from less than 1% to over 14% of registered voters two years after they began mailing ballots to all voters.

Exhibit 16

Example Quotes for Non-Monetary Costs of the General Ballot Policy

Sub-themes for increased costs	Quotation(s)
Political shifts to the detriment of districts	<p><i>"Our purpose and work, by design, is apolitical, non-partisan and non-regulatory. Working with landowners on a voluntary basis requires public trust and rapport. As soon as the board positions become politicized, we lose that characteristic that is inherent in the conservation district mission, structure, and success."</i></p> <p><i>"CDs will become politicized. The power of CDs lies in their ability to do streamlined, efficient work on the ground—with all community members...Even running as non-partisan offices, the ultimate result will be partisan advocacy and campaigning if on the general ballot. This dilutes and disrupts the very intent of CDs."</i></p>
Staffing and operational burdens	<p><i>"This makes it extremely difficult to budget and plan, and the costs of the general ballot would consume a significant portion of our operating budget funding, forcing us to reduce jobs and services at the CD."</i></p> <p><i>"The severe impact on funding would result in laying off staff and increased risk to our financial health as a public entity."</i></p>
Difficulty finding supervisors	<p><i>The only people able to participate are those who have the luxury of meeting the additional candidacy requirements, generally excluding underserved people.</i></p> <p><i>"Many of the candidates are full-time workers or farmers, running businesses with full lives, families and volunteer for many other things...They often do not have time to campaign."</i></p> <p><i>Successful general ballot candidates are often those who have strong financial influence. This would eliminate many community members looking to voluntarily serve their local communities, including non-native English speakers who may be uncomfortable in a high-profile general ballot race.</i></p>
Questioning voter turnout as a goal	<p><i>"The lack of public knowledge about CDs points to...being perpetually underfunded and unable to afford discretionary spending on broader marketing and community engagement efforts. These efforts would be reduced further...by general ballot elections due to the cost."</i></p> <p><i>The proposed changes could have some impact on voter turnout, but not as much as funding for a robust advertising campaign promoting voter participation would.</i></p>
Losing the purpose and viability of CDs	<p><i>"Changing the pipeline of candidates will water down the strength and effectiveness of CDs and diminish the knowledge base we rely on to build community relationships and strong conservation initiatives."</i></p> <p><i>"The point of the conservation districts is to conserve our land and waters. This is the priority. If we are doing this good work, then that's all that matters."</i></p>

Note:

Quotes are edited for brevity and to protect participant privacy.

Italicized comments are quotes, while non-italicized comments are paraphrased.

Potential Non-Monetary Costs and Benefits of the Zoning Policy

Because the zoning policy includes all the changes to elections in the general ballot policy, much of the feedback obtained in the previous subsection is also applicable to the zoning policy. In this subsection, we outline feedback we received that we could determine was specific to the zoning policy.

No questionnaire responses were discussing any projected benefits of zoning. The number of CDs that discussed certain non-monetary costs in their questionnaire responses is given in [Exhibit 17](#). These are explored further below.

Added Difficulty Finding and Retaining CD Supervisors (N=22). In addition to the difficulty in finding supervisors due to going on the general ballot, respondents relayed that splitting districts into five zones would also create challenges in finding people willing to run. Finding candidates willing to run is already a challenge for many districts; staff emphasized that finding willing candidates in five separate geographic areas would be even harder.

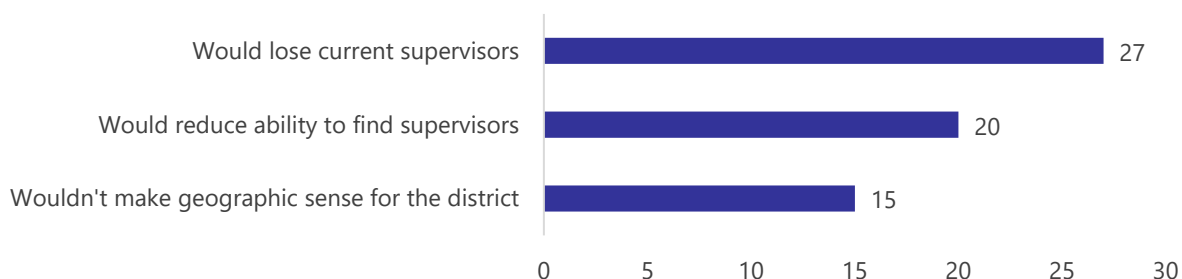
Staff from 21 districts felt that the zoning alternative policy could cause current supervisors to quit or choose not to run again.

The supervisor survey also asked current supervisors how the zoning policy would impact their choice to continue as a supervisor. Some supervisors appeared to compare the zoning policy to the current law in their responses, as was intended. However, others seemed to compare the zoning policy to the general ballot policy. Since we cannot precisely determine how supervisors answered the survey, we do not report their reactions to the zoning policy.

Staff from some CDs expressed a concern that, due to the increased eligibility requirements, zoning restrictions, and loss of appointed supervisors, the zoning policy would create more barriers to entry for people who want to be supervisors and could ultimately undemocratize conservation districts. District supervisors responding to the survey supported this concern, with 26 survey respondents mentioning that zoning would make it harder to find supervisors.

Exhibit 17

Frequency of Districts that Mention Potential Non-Monetary Costs of the Zoning Policy



Notes:

These non-monetary costs reflect unique impacts specifically from the zoning alternative policy. They should be interpreted as an additive to the total non-monetary costs discussed in the general ballot policy.

Counts are out of 36 total districts that replied to the questionnaire.

Geographic Challenges (N=15). Since CDs' mission is to work with landowners to preserve and protect regional natural resources, their boundaries are often based on different natural resources, watersheds, or other natural geographies. CD personnel expressed frustration at the proposal to divide districts by voters rather than by these factors under the zoning policy. They noted that voters are often concentrated in a single region of each CD, particularly in rural areas. Dividing rural CDs by equal population would inevitably mean that one or two zones would end up with most of the land area of the district.

Additionally, given that landowners are increasingly moving to cities, they could easily end up being put into a different zone than their property. This would mean that supervisors could potentially not be accountable to landowners whose land they represent in their zones. Ultimately, some felt that the zoning policy steers districts further from their intent and purpose. Supervisors agreed; 17 mentioned that zoning in their districts would not make geographic sense.

Finally, some respondents felt that the zoning policy would add unnecessary complication to the election process. Voters could be confused about which zone they vote for, and additional verification would be needed to ensure that they do so correctly. This could contribute to the administrative burden of going on the general ballot.

Example quotes from questionnaire responses pertinent to each of these points are explored in [Exhibit 18](#).

In their responses to the questionnaire and survey, CD personnel and supervisors offered a number of recommendations on how to improve the current system of CD elections. We summarize these recommendations in [Exhibit A5](#) in [Appendix I](#).

Exhibit 18

Example Quotes for Non-monetary Costs of the Zoning Policy

Sub-themes	Quotations
Added difficulty finding and retaining supervisors	<p><i>"...[W]e currently have two supervisors that live next door to each other. One has been on the board for more than 20 years, serving as our auditor, and has a background in education while owning forestland and rangeland...The other has been on the board for more than 10 years, serving as the chairman and operating a livestock ranch. Creating zones would immediately result in the loss of one of these supervisors."</i></p> <p><i>"One of the biggest concerns we have is someone wanting to serve as a supervisor not being able to due to election rules...We have a small community and few people who are engaged in agricultural activities and natural resource conservation. We already struggle to find people to serve as voluntary, non-paid supervisors, and this has the potential to decrease the pool further."</i></p>
Geographic issues	<p><i>"...[T]his would detract substantially from our mission/success since conservation needs do not often fit neatly into political boundaries...Would each zone have a similar geographic size or similar population? If zoned by voter density, it leaves the critical agricultural and rural/wildlands underrepresented. If by geography, it gives the townspeople little voice."</i></p> <p><i>"The [district] population is relatively densely located in a fairly small portion of the county, which could mean that if districts were determined with roughly equal population, one representative is meant to speak to the interests of hundreds of thousands of acres, while another may be just 1000 acres."</i></p> <p><i>"...[I]ndividual farmers own or operate land across broad swaths of the county...This would lead to a situation where a landowner would have a voting interest in several districts and would have a larger influence than other citizens, or, being as their primary residence is only in one district, would be unable to vote for representatives that actually influence their livelihood, located in another district."</i></p>

Notes:

Quotes are edited for brevity and to protect participant privacy.

These non-monetary costs reflect unique impacts specifically from the zoning alternative policy. They should be interpreted as an additive to the total non-monetary costs discussed in the general ballot policy.

VI. Conclusion

Our study of conservation district supervisor election costs is the most comprehensive investigation to date into the election costs that conservation districts face. We gathered cost data from all 45 districts, as well as the informed opinions of district personnel and supervisors from the majority of districts. We were also able to assess the cost and non-monetary impacts of two alternative policies that would place CD elections on the general ballot and considerably change district election processes. This section reviews our analyses and concludes with limitations and opportunities for future research.

Key Takeaways in this Report

Elections Under Current Law

CDs face disparate election costs under current law. Over the 2020–2024 period, election costs ranged from less than \$100 to over \$420,000 across districts. The median total election cost over this period was \$2,500. Costs are generally higher in districts with more registered voters, but this is not consistent: election costs in less populated CDs in some years far exceed costs in more populated CDs.

CDs fund their elections using a combination of the implementation grant received from the Washington State Conservation Commission, rates and charges levied by the county (for districts that have access to them), and the overhead portion of grants to conduct specific conservation projects.

The implementation grant was most frequently reported as a funding source by district personnel. Districts emphasized that many of these funds are also used for overhead and staff pay, leaving little room for additional election expenses.

CD elections have historically had very low voter participation. Over the 2020-2024 period, only one CD had an average turnout exceeding 1%. Under low turnout, the election cost per ballot cast can change wildly from year to year despite minimal change in election procedures or costs. Hence, the cost per ballot is not a reliable metric of the cost-effectiveness with which CDs conduct elections.

Election Costs Under the Alternative Policies

The legislative assignment for this study specifies two alternative CD election policies that place supervisor elections on the county general election ballot. Our analysis finds a disparate financial impact of these policies across districts.

Looking back to the 2020-2024 period, the general ballot policy would have led to cost increases in 38 CDs in biennia, in which two supervisor positions appeared on the ballot and 43 CDs when three appeared on the ballot. The median increase in biennial election costs across districts would have been 208% for two positions and 249% for three positions; with primaries included, the median biennial increase in costs would have been 571% and 659% for two and three positions, respectively.

CD staff anticipated additional administrative and labor costs to set up and maintain the systems to hold elections on the general ballot. Some even doubted that their districts could financially survive these collective cost impacts.

The zoning policy would have been less expensive than the general ballot policy in the 2020-2024 period. However, it would still have resulted in a median increase in costs of 37% and 72% in two- and three-position biennia, respectively (205% and 398% with primaries included). CD personnel communicated that they expected additional costs associated with the redistricting required under the zoning policy.

Non-monetary Impacts

District personnel and supervisors from most CDs expected more non-monetary costs than benefits from the alternative election policies in this study.

Some districts thought both policies could lead to increased turnout in elections and engagement with CDs. However, many also questioned whether going on the general ballot would be the best way to achieve those goals.

Staff from the majority of districts worried that going on the general ballot would lead to politicization of CD elections to the detriment of district priorities. Further, most believed that the administrative burden on staff and available funding would take resources away from conservation programming.

Many also believed that the policies would make it harder to find supervisors. Our survey of supervisors corroborates this point: 69% of respondents stated that they would be less likely to continue as or would quit being a supervisor.

CD personnel had additional concerns about the zoning policy, stating that it would make it even harder to find supervisors for each zone. Others stated that dividing their districts into zones would not make geographic sense: landowners could easily own land in a zone they do not reside in, preventing them from voting for a supervisor to represent their interests. Additionally, the requirement of an equal population in each zone could lead to a single supervisor representing the majority of the land within a district if registered voters are concentrated in a single city unless exemptions were carved out for CDs. This is particularly a concern for rural districts.

Limitations and Opportunities for Further Research

Several key limitations apply to our analysis of election costs. First, our analysis of election costs under current law is limited by the availability of detailed cost data from each district. While some districts provided years of fully itemized election cost information, others were only able to share an estimate of the total cost for an average year. If more comprehensive data were available, even for a single year in all districts, a more thorough investigation of the costs and sources of cost in CD elections under current law could be conducted.

As noted throughout our analysis of the alternative policies, we are not able to estimate certain costs associated with the alternative policies, such as the cost of maintaining a database of registered voters in each district or dividing districts into zones. These additional costs to CDs could be significant and further strain CDs' limited resources. Future work could analyze how other special-purpose districts have dealt with these costs and provide estimates of their magnitude.

Finally, many of the non-monetary costs and benefits explored in this report would likely have monetary costs associated with them. For instance, increased administrative burden and staff time could lead to higher labor costs. Likewise, recruiting supervisors to fill the roles of those who quit or are made ineligible to serve by these policies could be new expenses to CDs. Future work could seek to estimate these costs.

Appendices

Conservation District Elections in Washington State: *Final Report*

Appendices

I. Additional Tables	34
II. Changes to CD Elections Under Alternative Policies	40
III. Methodology	46

I. Additional Tables

Exhibit A1 reports average election costs and the share of that cost due to certain factors under current law for all CDs over the 2020–2024 period.

Exhibit A1

Average Election Costs by CD Under Current Law (2020–2024)

CD	Years available	Avg. total cost (\$)	Avg. labor cost (%)	Avg. printing/mailling cost (%)	Avg. advertising cost (%)	Avg. other cost (%)
Adams	1	\$872	67.3	1.1	31.5	0
Asotin*	5	\$897	79.4	0	20.6	0
Benton	4	\$757	64.5	0	35.5	0
Cascadia	5	\$5,173	63.7	30.6	0	5.7
Central Klickitat*	1	\$2,500	—	—	—	—
Clallam	5	\$3,323	83	13.5	2.3	1.2
Clark*	5	\$3,696	80.8	19.2	0	0
Columbia*	1	\$500	—	—	—	—
Columbia Basin*	1	\$2,000	—	—	—	—
Cowlitz*	1	\$4,000	—	—	—	—
Eastern Klickitat*	1	\$2,500	—	—	—	—
Ferry*	1	\$1,505	79.7	0.3	19.9	0
Foster Creek*	1	\$1,500	—	—	—	—
Franklin	4	\$902	77.5	0	22.5	0
Grays Harbor	1	\$3,847	—	—	—	—
Jefferson*	1	\$2,600	76.9	3.8	19.2	0
King	5	\$356,750	2.9	0	55.8	41.3
Kitsap*	1	\$29,000	44.8	0	0	55.2
Kittitas	5	\$2,776	40.9	0	45.2	13.8
Lewis	5	\$1,530	75.5	24.5	0	0
Lincoln	5	\$2,844	0	63.2	22.7	7.8
Mason	5	\$1,353	61.8	3.4	46.8	0
North Yakima*	1	\$2,000	—	—	—	—
Okanogan*	1	\$2,520	73.4	0	6.7	19.8

CD	Years available	Avg. total cost (\$)	Avg. labor cost (%)	Avg. printing/mailling cost (%)	Avg. advertising cost (%)	Avg. other cost (%)
Pacific*	1	\$3,250	100	0	0	0
Palouse*	1	\$1,900	78.9	5.3	15.8	0
Pend Oreille*	1	\$1,600	62.5	0	37.5	0
Pierce	1	\$25,962	0.6	19.5	5.5	74.4
Pine Creek*	1	\$648	89.7	0	10.3	0
Pomeroy	5	\$232	0	0	100	0
Rock Lake (2025)	1	\$874	58.8	2.9	3.4	34.9
San Juan Islands*	1	\$2,500	—	—	—	—
Skagit	1	\$1,503	82	0.1	0	17.8
Snohomish*	1	\$1,500	—	—	—	—
South Douglas*	1	\$500	—	—	—	—
South Yakima*	1	\$2,500	—	—	—	—
Spokane	5	\$1,626	96.3	3.7	0	0
Stevens*	1	\$5,000	80	0	20	0
Thurston*	4	\$11,176	—	—	—	—
Underwood	5	\$3,927	85.8	1.2	0	0
Wahkiakum*	1	\$4,000	—	—	—	—
Walla Walla*	1	\$6,250	36	28	32	20
Whatcom	5	\$8,714	69.1	14.4	16	0.4
Whidbey Island	5	\$1,212	69.8	4.7	0	25.5
Whitman*	1	\$500	—	—	—	—

Notes:

* Data submitted to WSIPP was an estimate of past years' expenses.

— Signifies that itemized cost data were not available.

Election data for Rock Lake CD was only available from the 2025 supervisor election.

Exhibit A2 reports the average election cost per ballot cast in all CDs under current law over the 2020–2024 period.

Exhibit A2

Average Election Cost per Ballot Cast (\$) by CD (2020–2024)

CD	Avg.	Min	Max	CD	Avg.	Min	Max
Adams	291	—	—	Okanogan*	180	—	—
Asotin*	110	58	238	Pacific*	41	—	—
Benton	344	156	759	Palouse*	83	—	—
Cascadia	1,414	255	5,412	Pend Oreille*	160	—	—
Central Klickitat*	278	—	—	Pierce	20	—	—
Clallam	18	4	55	Pine Creek*	108	—	—
Clark*	213	44	371	Pomeroy	15	6	20
Columbia*	16	—	—	Rock Lake (2025)		—	—
Columbia Basin*	286	—	—	San Juan Islands*	107	—	—
Cowlitz*	364	—	—	Skagit	13	—	—
Eastern Klickitat*	192	—	—	Snohomish*	45	—	—
Ferry*	125	—	—	South Douglas*	357	—	—
Foster Creek*	150	—	—	South Yakima*	45	17	95
Franklin	587	147	1,143	Spokane	238	—	—
Grays Harbor	1,924	—	—	Stevens*	32	27	36
Jefferson*	173	—	—	Thurston*	814	145	2,102
King	32	13	41	Underwood	500	—	—
Kitsap*	36	—	—	Wahkiakum*	625	—	—
Kittitas	77	25	102	Walla Walla*	21	4	54
Lewis	169	20	284	Whatcom	33	5	63
Lincoln	11	6	17	Whidbey Island	71	—	—
Mason	93	71	105	Whitman*	180	—	—
North Yakima*	154	—	—				

Notes:

All numbers are in dollars.

* Data submitted to WSIPP was an estimate of past years' expenses.

— Indicates that a CD only submitted a single year of cost data or estimates (such that max = min = average).

Exhibit A3 reports our estimates of the cost for each conservation district to appear on the general ballot under the general ballot policy.

Exhibit A3

Average Estimated General Ballot Costs Under the General Ballot Policy, 2020-2024 (in \$1,000s)

CD	2 Positions		3 Positions	
	Prim.	Gen.	Prim.	Gen.
Adams	1.5	1.3	1.8	1.5
Asotin	14.6	5.5	16.2	6.3
Benton	62.5	60.0	70.9	68.4
Cascadia	45.8	34.4	51.9	39.3
Central Klickitat	8.3	4.7	9.5	5.5
Clallam	49.3	34.1	55.4	38.7
Clark	119.2	102.2	135.7	117.2
Columbia	6.2	6.3	7.0	7.2
Columbia Basin	19.7	20.3	22.1	23.0
Cowlitz	15.1	18.1	17.4	20.8
Eastern Klickitat	1.2	0.6	1.4	0.7
Ferry	5.4	3.5	6.1	4.0
Foster Creek	3.2	2.8	3.7	3.2
Franklin	14.8	9.6	17.2	11.1
Grays Harbor	22.7	16.8	25.7	19.2
Jefferson	31.1	18.2	35.0	20.7
King	3,059.7	2,645.9	3,307.6	2,948.1
Kitsap	59.0	135.6	179.5	154.7
Kittitas	19.5	17.2	21.8	19.4
Lewis	18.3	17.0	20.8	19.4
Lincoln	8.1	5.8	9.1	6.6
Mason	22.5	20.3	25.5	23.2
North Yakima	37.3	27.9	42.1	31.8

CD	2 Positions		3 Positions	
	Prim.	Gen.	Prim.	Gen.
Okanogan	12.1	11.5	13.8	13.1
Pacific	10.4	8.5	11.8	9.8
Palouse	20.4	17.3	23.0	19.7
Pend Oreille	11.6	9.1	13.1	10.4
Pierce	3,515.2	386.2	3,868.8	430.6
Pine Creek	1.5	1.3	1.7	1.5
Pomeroy	1.8	1.3	2.0	1.5
Rock Lake	1.3	1.1	1.5	1.2
San Juan Islands	17.6	14.2	19.9	16.3
Skagit	44.8	36.5	50.8	41.6
Snohomish	351.6	272.6	392.1	307.1
South Douglas	23.7	20.8	26.9	23.8
South Yakima	13.1	10.1	14.8	11.5
Spokane	157.2	129.6	177.2	147.2
Stevens	16.7	18.7	18.9	21.2
Thurston	88.1	140.6	100.4	157.2
Underwood	11.4	10.0	12.6	11.3
Wahkiakum	10.0	7.0	11.0	7.8
Walla Walla	11.3	10.1	12.9	11.6
Whatcom	191.7	133.3	209.5	150.0
Whidbey Island	23.4	25.4	26.7	29.1
Whitman	2.0	1.7	2.2	1.9

Notes:

For CDs in counties that combine general election voters' pamphlets with the state, pamphlet costs due to districts are included in general election costs.

Prim. = Primary.

Gen. = General.

Exhibit A4 reports our estimates of the cost for each conservation district to appear on the general ballot under the zoning policy.

Exhibit A4

Average Estimated General Ballot Costs Under the Zoning Policy, 2020-2024 (in \$1,000s)

CD	2 Positions		3 Positions	
	Prim.	Gen.	Prim.	Gen.
Adams	0.6	0.5	1.1	0.9
Asotin	7.1	2.5	11.2	4.1
Benton	27.8	26.1	46.1	43.8
Cascadia	20.4	15.0	33.8	25.1
Central Klickitat	3.6	2.0	6.0	3.4
Clallam	22.9	15.1	37.1	25.1
Clark	52.5	43.7	87.5	74.0
Columbia	2.9	2.8	4.7	4.6
Columbia Basin	9.1	9.1	14.7	15.0
Cowlitz	6.3	7.6	10.8	13.0
Eastern Klickitat	0.5	0.2	0.9	0.4
Ferry	2.5	1.6	4.1	2.6
Foster Creek	1.4	1.2	2.4	2.0
Franklin	6.1	3.9	10.5	6.8
Grays Harbor	10.2	7.2	16.8	12.2
Jefferson	14.5	8.0	23.4	13.4
King	1,714.5	1,276.4	2,498.6	2,024.5
Kitsap	72.2	59.1	118.4	99.0
Kittitas	9.2	7.8	14.8	12.8
Lewis	8.2	7.4	13.5	12.4
Lincoln	3.8	2.6	6.1	4.3
Mason	10.1	8.9	16.6	14.9
North Yakima	16.8	12.2	27.7	20.4

CD	2 Positions		3 Positions	
	Prim.	Gen.	Prim.	Gen.
Okanogan	5.3	5.0	8.9	8.4
Pacific	4.7	3.7	7.8	6.2
Palouse	9.3	7.6	15.2	12.6
Pend Oreille	5.3	4.0	8.6	6.7
Pierce	1,794.0	186.2	2,758.9	295.3
Pine Creek	0.7	0.6	1.1	1.0
Pomeroy	0.8	0.6	1.4	1.0
Rock Lake	0.6	0.5	1.0	0.8
San Juan Islands	8.1	6.1	13.2	10.3
Skagit	19.9	15.9	33.0	26.6
Snohomish	168.5	125.1	268.3	203.9
South Douglas	10.5	9.0	17.5	15.2
South Yakima	5.9	4.4	9.7	7.4
Spokane	71.9	57.5	117.4	95.4
Stevens	7.4	8.3	12.3	13.7
Thurston	38.5	67.4	64.4	107.0
Underwood	5.5	4.6	8.7	7.5
Wahkiakum	5.2	3.4	7.9	5.4
Walla Walla	4.8	4.3	8.2	7.3
Whatcom	101.4	61.7	52.8	100.1
Whidbey Island	10.0	10.9	16.9	18.4
Whitman	0.9	0.7	1.5	1.2

Note:

For CDs in counties that combine general election voters' pamphlets with the state, pamphlet costs due to districts are included in general election costs.

An overall sentiment expressed by many districts, regardless of overall opinion on the policies, was that many people are not aware of, or do not understand, the role conservation districts play in protecting and preserving natural resources and that there is a desire for more people to know about districts and the important work they do. Throughout the responses to both the district manager questionnaire and the supervisor survey, recommendations and requests arose regarding the alternative policies despite the questionnaire and survey not explicitly requesting this information. These recommendations are summarized in [Exhibit A5](#). It should be noted that the number of districts expressing these sentiments in the questionnaire may not be indicative of the true prevalence of opinions.

Exhibit A5

Recommendations and Requests from District Representatives

Recommendations, requests	Description
Recommendation: Make it optional to be on the general ballot rather than required (N=7)	Certain districts are small and rural and have budgets reflecting these demographics. Other districts that are larger and more urban have higher budgets and may feel that switching to the general ballot makes more economic sense for them when considering non-monetary benefits such as decreased administrative burden or wider district representation. Districts with rates and charges have unique financial circumstances as well; where some believe they could afford to be on the general ballot, and others disagree. Requiring standardized policies for all 45 districts is not going to benefit all districts, and therefore, flexibility should be retained.
Recommendation: Follow the Joint Commission on Elections (JCE) recommended policies (N=4)	This recommendation stems from a desire for policy efforts to be focused on issues identified by conservation districts themselves. The Joint Committee on Elections and the WA Association of Conservation Districts (WACD), on behalf of the WSCC, represented a variety of districts whose purpose was to evaluate different potential policy changes to conservation district elections, culminating in recommendations. Recommendations included but were not limited to conducting elections every other year rather than every year, extending supervisor terms from three-year terms to four-year terms, centralizing district elections to take place throughout one month rather than over one quarter, and allowing districts the option to be on the general ballot. Financial disclosure for supervisor candidates was excluded from these recommendations, although when an amended bill included the disclosure, the bill lost support from the minority caucus and died in committee.
Request: Make extra funding or grants available if these alternative policies are to take place (N=6)	Many districts expressed that they could not afford to participate in the general ballot unless they were provided increased financial assistance or waived election costs. The 2001 general election lends support to this request, as multiple districts took years to pay off their debts. There are examples of other states (including Oregon) that pay for their conservation districts to appear on the general ballot.
Request: Retain some at-large positions for district-wide projects (N=6)	This request highlights both the value of appointed supervisors and the importance of district-wide projects to the conservation work that districts engage in. Historically, the balance of appointed and elected supervisors was created to preserve technical expertise and lived experience on the board while maintaining the democratic representation of public funds and stewardship. With all positions elected, district representatives expressed concerns that districts could lose the expertise that appointed positions bring. Lastly, participants noted that projects are prioritized based on natural resource needs in each district and that sometimes there aren't neat borders to contain these efforts from each other.

I. Changes to CD Elections Under Alternative Policies

Exhibit A6 presents an overview of the changes to CD elections under current law that would change under the alternative policies in the legislative assignment.

Exhibit A6

Changes in CD Supervisor Election Procedures to Appear on the General Ballot Under the Alternative Policies

Topic	Current policy under RCW 89.08	Proposed alternatives under Title 29A/ESSB 5187	Policy shift summary
Election processes—appointment/ election of supervisors, filing eligibility and rules, landownership requirements	<p>RCW 89.08.190 <i>"Each year after the creation of the first board of supervisors, the board shall by resolution and by giving due notice, set a date during the first quarter of each calendar year at which time it shall conduct an election[...]. Names of candidates nominated by petition shall appear in alphabetical order on the ballots, together with an extra line wherein may be written in the name of any other candidate. The commission shall establish procedures for elections, canvass the returns and announce the official results thereof."</i></p> <p>RCW 89.08.160 <i>"Appointment of supervisors—Application to secretary of state. If the commission finds the project practicable, it shall appoint two supervisors, one of whom shall be a landowner or operator of a farm, who shall be qualified by training and experience to perform the specialized skilled services required of them. They, with the three elected supervisors, two of whom shall be landowners or operators of a farm, shall constitute the governing board of the district."</i></p>	<p>Candidates would have to file their declarations of candidacy (RCW 29A.24.031) with the county auditor of whichever county contains the largest share of the district's registered voters (RCW 29A.24.070) either in person, by mail (RCW 29A.24.081), or online (RCW 29A.24.040), during the period between 8:00 AM on the first Monday in May and 5:00 PM on the Friday of that week (RCW 29A.24.050). Filed candidates would have until 5:00 PM on the following Monday to withdraw their candidacy (RCW 29A.24.131).</p> <p>RCW 29A.24.091 <i>"(1) A filing fee of ten dollars shall accompany the declaration of candidacy for any office with a fixed annual salary of one thousand dollars or less[...]. (4) A candidate who lacks sufficient assets or income at the time of filing to pay the filing fee required by this section shall submit with the candidate's declaration of candidacy a filing fee petition. The petition shall contain not less than a number of signatures of registered voters equal to the number of dollars of the filing fee. The signatures shall be of voters registered to vote within the jurisdiction of the office for which the candidate is filing."</i></p> <p><i>Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 5187, Chapter 475, Laws of 2023, pages 586-87</i></p> <p>Part C(I) of the legislative assignment specifies "[S]witching all supervisor positions to elected positions[...]"</p> <p>RCW 29A.24.075 <i>"(2) Excluding the office of precinct committee officer or a temporary elected position such as a charter review board member or freeholder, no person may file for more than one office[...]. If a person elected to an office must be nominated from a district or similar division of the geographic area represented by the office, the name of a candidate for the office shall not appear on a primary</i></p>	<p>The board of supervisors would no longer initiate the election processes; the county auditor would do it.</p> <p>There would be a filing fee of \$10 to run for the supervisor position. There would be the possibility of submitting a petition bearing 10 or more signatures of registered voters in lieu of the fee.</p> <p>It is uncertain if/how the landowning requirement would change—i.e., if it would still be a requirement that at least three of the five supervisors be landowners or operators of a farm*</p> <p>All five supervisor positions would now be elected positions.</p> <p>CD supervisors could no longer run for another district office if the elections were to occur within the same election cycle.</p> <p>If a person were a landowner in a district but did not live in that district (or in a district's zone) and would therefore not be registered to vote in that district, they would be ineligible to run.</p>

Topic	Current policy under RCW 89.08	Proposed alternatives under Title 29A/ESSB 5187	Policy shift summary
		<i>ballot for that office unless the candidate is, at the time the candidate's declaration of candidacy is filed, properly registered to vote in that district or division."</i>	
Primary election	N/A	<p>RCW 29A.52.220</p> <p><i>"(1) No primary may be held for any single position in any nonpartisan office if, after the last day allowed for candidates to withdraw, there are no more than two candidates filed for the position[...](2) No primary may be held for the office of commissioner of a park and recreation district or for the office of cemetery district commissioner."</i></p> <p>RCW 29A.52.210</p> <p><i>"[...]Primaries for special purpose districts, except those districts that require ownership of property within the district as a prerequisite to voting, shall be nonpartisan."</i></p>	<p>CDs would be required to participate in (and pay for) a primary for each supervisor position on the ballot when more than two candidates run for the same position.</p> <p>Districts could request to be assigned the blanket provision in RCW 29A.52.220.2 to never require a primary.</p> <p>CDs would be considered special-purpose districts and would, therefore, be nonpartisan.</p>
Term lengths	<p>RCW 89.08.200</p> <p><i>"The term of office of each supervisor shall be three years and until his or her successor is appointed or elected and</i></p> <p><i>qualified, except that the supervisors first appointed shall serve for one and two years respectively from the date of their appointments, as designated in their appointments. In the case of elected supervisors, the term of office of each supervisor shall be three years and until his or her successor is elected and qualified[...]</i>Supervisors shall serve without compensation, but they shall be</p> <p><i>entitled to expenses, including traveling expenses, necessarily incurred in discharge of their duties."</i></p>	<p>Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 5187, Chapter 475, Laws of 2023, pages 586-87</p> <p>Part C(II) of the legislative assignment specifies <i>"[C]hanging 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[...]"</i></p>	<p>Terms would increase from three years to four, and elections would be held in alignment with other elections on the general ballot (assuming no turnover, with two candidates up for reelection one cycle and three the next).</p>
Zoned districts	<p>RCW 89.08.190</p> <p><i>"An alternate method of dividing the district into three zones may be used when requested by the board of supervisors and approved by the</i></p>	<p>Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 5187, Chapter 475, Laws of 2023, pages 586-87</p> <p>Part D of the legislative assignment specifies dividing conservation districts <i>"[...]into zones such that each zone is represented by a single</i></p>	<p>Districts would be split into five zones. Voters in each zone would then only vote for the candidates running to represent that zone rather than voting for candidates at large.</p>

Topic	Current policy under RCW 89.08	Proposed alternatives under Title 29A/ESSB 5187	Policy shift summary
	<i>commission. In such case, instructions will be to vote for one in each zone. The candidate receiving the most votes in a zone shall be declared elected.</i>	<i>supervisor, rather than electing each supervisor at-large throughout the district."</i>	
Ballot-related expenses	CDs cover election costs either through parcel fees assessed by the county auditor, the Implementation grant received from the SCC, other grants or district-specific revenues, or some combination thereof.	<p>RCW 29A.04.410</p> <p><i>"Whenever any county, city, town, or district, or the state holds any primary or election, general or special, on an isolated date, all costs of such elections must be borne by the county, city, town, or district concerned, or the state as appropriate. The purpose of this section is to clearly establish that the county is not responsible for any costs involved in the holding of any city, town, district, state, or federal election."</i></p> <p>RCW 29A.40.010</p> <p><i>"Each active registered voter of the state, overseas voter, and service voter shall automatically be issued a mail ballot for each general election, special election, or primary."</i></p>	Districts would be required to send a ballot to all eligible voters instead of districts choosing how to send out their ballots (such as sending out upon voter request or holding in-person voting).
Voters' pamphlet	N/A	<p>RCW 29A.32.220</p> <p><i>"(1) Not later than ninety days before the publication and distribution of a local voters' pamphlet by a county, the county auditor shall notify each city, town, or special taxing district located wholly within that county that a pamphlet will be produced...If the required appearance in a county's voters' pamphlet of the offices or measures of a unit of local government would create undue financial hardship for the unit of government, the legislative authority of the unit may petition the legislative authority of the county to waive this requirement. The legislative authority of the county may provide such a waiver if it does so not later than sixty days before the publication of the pamphlet and it finds that the requirement would create such hardship.</i></p> <p><i>(3) If a city, town, or district is located within more than one county, the respective county auditors may enter into an interlocal agreement to permit the distribution of each county's local voters' pamphlet into those parts of the city, town, or district located outside of that county."</i></p>	CDs would have to pay to appear in the voter's pamphlet (and for some CDs, for pamphlets in multiple counties) or, if it would create an undue financial hardship, they would need to petition the county to waive the requirement.

Topic	Current policy under RCW 89.08	Proposed alternatives under Title 29A/ESSB 5187	Policy shift summary
Boundary lines and redistricting	<p>RCW 89.08.180</p> <p><i>"Territory may be added to an existing district upon filing a petition as in the case of formation with the commission by twenty percent of the voters of the affected area to be included. The same procedure shall be followed as for the creation of the district.</i></p> <p><i>As an alternate procedure, the commission may upon the petition of a majority of the voters in any one or more districts or in unorganized territory adjoining a conservation district change the boundaries of a district, or districts, if such action will promote the practical and feasible administration of such district or districts.</i></p>	<p>RCW 29A.76.010</p> <p><i>"(1) It is the responsibility of each county, municipal corporation, and special purpose district with a governing body comprised of internal director, council, or commissioner districts not based on statutorily required land ownership criteria to periodically redistrict its governmental unit, based on population information from the most recent federal decennial census as adjusted by RCW 44.05.140[...].for redistricting its internal or director districts.</i></p> <p><i>(4) The plan shall be consistent with the following criteria:</i></p> <p><i>(a) Each internal director, council, or commissioner district shall be as nearly equal in population as possible to each and every other such district comprising the municipal corporation, county, or special purpose district[...].(5) During the adoption of its plan, the municipal corporation, county, or district shall ensure that full and reasonable public notice of its actions is provided. Before adopting the plan, the municipal corporation, county, or district must:</i></p> <p><i>(a) Publish the draft plan and hold a meeting, including notice and comment, within ten days of publishing the draft plan and at least one week before adopting the plan."</i></p>	<p>Under the zoning policy, CDs may be required to consider redistricting according to population.</p>
Rates and charges/tax levies	<p>RCW 89.08.405</p> <p><i>"(1) Any county legislative authority may approve by resolution revenues to a conservation district by fixing rates and charges. The county legislative authority may provide for this system of rates and charges as an alternative to, but not in addition to, a special assessment provided by RCW 89.08.400[...].If included in the system of rates and charges, the maximum annual per acre rate or charge shall not exceed ten cents per acre. The maximum annual per parcel rate shall not exceed five dollars, except that for counties with a population of over four hundred eighty thousand persons, the maximum annual per</i></p>	<p>RCW 29A.36.210</p> <p><i>"(1) The ballot proposition authorizing a taxing district to impose the regular property tax levies authorized in RCW 36.68.525, [...]A park and recreation service area may impose regular property tax levies in an amount equal to sixty cents or less per thousand dollars of assessed value of property in the service area in each year for six consecutive yea[...].at which election the number of voters voting "yes" on the proposition must constitute three-fifths of a number equal to forty percent of the number of voters voting in the service area at the last preceding general election when the number of voters voting on the proposition does not exceed forty percent of the number of voters voting in such taxing district in the last preceding general election..."</i></p>	<p>A "majority vote" to implement rates and charges would now require three-fifths of the votes received to affirm the choice when the number of voters from the previous election didn't exceed the total turnout of 40% of the eligible voting population (which is relevant in terms of historic turnout rates of CD elections).</p>

Topic	Current policy under RCW 89.08	Proposed alternatives under Title 29A/ESSB 5187	Policy shift summary
	<i>parcel rate shall not exceed ten dollars, and for counties with a population of over one million five hundred thousand persons, the maximum annual per parcel rate shall not exceed fifteen dollars."</i>		
Financial disclosure requirements	<p>RCW 42.17A.010</p> <p><i>"Elections of conservation district supervisors held pursuant to chapter 89.08 RCW shall not be considered general or special elections for purposes of the campaign disclosure and personal financial affairs reporting requirements of this chapter. Elected conservation district supervisors are not considered elected officials for purposes of the annual personal financial affairs reporting requirement of this chapter."</i></p>	<p>RCW 42.17A.200</p> <p><i>"The provisions of this chapter relating to the financing of election campaigns shall apply in all election campaigns other than...(3) for an office of a political subdivision of the state that does not encompass a whole county and that contains fewer than five thousand registered voters as of the date of the most recent general election in the subdivision[...]."</i></p> <p>Campaign finance reporting requirements</p> <p>Political advertising and electioneering requirements</p> <p>Filing requirements</p> <p><i>"The statement must include, at a minimum, information disclosing (a) Real property interests held by the person; (b) Business interests within the conservation district boundary, whether owned directly by or in partnership with the person; and (c) Information relating to grants from the conservation district previously received by the person, if any. (2) The statement of financial affairs under this section must be filed with the commission: (a) For candidates to elected positions, by the filing deadline[...](3) The commission shall design the forms to be used under this section. The commission may add disclosures to the form in addition to those specified in this section. (4) All statements of financial affairs under this section must be posted to the appropriate conservation district's website within two business days of its receipt by the commission. (5) A person who fails to file a statement of financial affairs as required by this section shall be subject to a fine in an amount determined by the commission. (6) The commission may adopt rules to implement this section."</i></p>	<p>Supervisor candidates would be subject to campaign finance reporting requirements, political advertising and electioneering requirements, and campaign limitations <i>unless</i> the CD contains fewer than five thousand registered voters.</p>

III. Methodology

This section presents our methodology for estimating the number of registered voters in each district and estimating costs under the alternative policies. We also discuss our methodology for coding sentiments about non-monetary costs and benefits from responses to a questionnaire of CD personnel and a survey of supervisors.

Estimating Registered Voters

Since most CDs do not mail ballots to all registered voters within their boundaries, the number of registered voters in each CD is generally not known. However, the number of registered voters in a jurisdiction is an important factor in determining the cost of going on the general ballot in each county. Therefore, we need to estimate the number of registered voters in each CD. Our general approach to this problem is to use voter registration rates at the county level to approximate voter registration rates within Census block groups. Then, we add up the estimated number of voters in each block group that geographically overlaps with each CD.

We obtained GIS shapefiles that outline the outer boundaries of Washington's CDs from the SCC. Ideally, we could link these directly to geographic voter registration data to estimate registered voters in each CD. However, this approach is complicated by a few factors. First, voter registration data is only available at the county level from the SOS, and not all CDs strictly follow county boundaries. Second, while the shapefiles give coordinates for CDs' outer boundaries, many regions inside these boundaries are excluded from the district. These include cities (based on modern and, in some cases, historical boundaries), Indigenous reservations, and other areas. As such, we pursue a more nuanced methodology.

First, we reached out to CDs to request information on which cities or other areas are excluded from their jurisdictions. Although we were not able to account for all exclusions, we were able to account for most. These exclusions are presented in [Exhibit A7](#).

Next, we obtained Census block group shapefiles via the R package `tidycensus`. We also use this package to obtain total population estimates for both counties and block groups from the Census' American Community Survey.¹³ Unfortunately, Census population estimates for the final year in our study, 2024, are not available yet. Therefore, we estimate the 2024 populations by assuming that the total population in each county and block group grows linearly. We use data from 2014-2023 for counties and 2020-2023 for block groups to establish the necessary trends.¹⁴

Using county-level voter registration data obtained from SOS, we assume voter registration rates in each block group to be the same as the county that contains them. We calculate these voter registration rates as the total number of registered voters divided by the total population of each county in each study year. Multiplying this rate by the population of each block group gives us an estimate of the number of registered voters in each block group. To turn these numbers into estimates of the number of registered voters within the outer boundaries of each CD, we assume that registered voters are distributed equally throughout each block group.

¹³ Walker K, Herman M (2025). `tidycensus`: Load US Census Boundary and Attribute Data as 'tidyverse' and 'sf'-Ready Data Frames. R package version 1.7.1, <https://walker-data.com/tidycensus/>.

¹⁴ The boundaries of block groups were significantly altered in the 2020 census, making consistent analysis between pre- and post-census time periods impossible.

Exhibit A7

Average Election Cost per Ballot Cast (\$) by CD (2020–2024)

CD	Excluded cities/areas
Adams	Lind, Washtucna
Asotin	Clarkston, Asotin, and Census Tracts 9604 and 9609
Benton	None
Cascadia	None
Central Klickitat	None
Clallam	None
Clark	None
Columbia	None
Columbia Basin	Moses Lake, Quincy, and Borden
Cowlitz	All cities excluded
Eastern Klickitat	None
Ferry	Colville reservation excluded
Foster Creek	None
Franklin	Pasco and Kahlottus
Grays Harbor	Cosmopolis and Westport
Jefferson	All cities except Port Townshend
King	Federal Way, Enumclaw, Pacific, Skykomish, and Milton
Kitsap	None
Kittitas	Ellensburg, Kittitas, and South Cle Elum
Lewis	None
Lincoln	None
Mason	None
North Yakima	Yakima

CD	Excluded cities/areas
Okanogan	Oroville, Tonasket, Riverside, Brewster, Pateros, and Twisp
Pacific	None
Palouse	None
Pend Oreille	Cusick, Metaline Falls
Pierce	Bonney Lake, Buckley, Dupont, Edgewood, Fircrest, Gig Harbor, Lakewood, Milton, Orting, Puyallup, Steilacoom, Sumner, Tacoma, and University Place are included
Pine Creek	None
Pomeroy	None
Rock Lake	None
San Juan Islands	None
Skagit	None
Snohomish	See Snohomish subsection
South Douglas	None
South Yakima	None
Spokane	Deer Park
Stevens	None
Thurston	Yelm, Rainier, and Tenino
Underwood	None
Wahkiakum	None
Walla Walla	All cities excluded
Whatcom	None
Whidbey Island	None
Whitman	None

Note:

Some additional areas of these districts are excluded that we are not able to account for. These are not included in the above table.

This means that the share of the geographic area of each block group that overlaps with a particular CD is equal to the share of registered voters from that block group who live within that CD. For instance, if a block group lies 40% in CD A and 60% in CD B, then we assume that 40% of the registered voters of that block group live in A and 60% in B.¹⁵ For CDs that correspond one-to-one with county boundaries and do not exclude cities or other areas, we use the county data on registered voters as a count of registered voters in the CD. Summing up estimated registered voters across block groups partially or completely contained by each CD's outer boundaries, multiplying each by the share of geographic overlap, gives us our estimate of the number of registered voters in each CD's outer boundaries.

Finally, we use shapefiles of the cities of Washington to remove registered voters in excluded areas.¹⁶ We overlay these shapes onto the assembled block group map of CDs and remove any block groups that are entirely covered by an excluded area. For block groups that are only partially covered by an excluded area, we remove a proportion of registered voters equal to the area of the overlap divided by the total area of the block group. For instance, if 60% of the block group lies in an excluded area, then we remove 60% of our estimated registered voters.

Snohomish CD

The above methodology works for all CDs in the state except for the Snohomish CD. Staff at Snohomish CD communicated that specific properties are included in the CD on a parcel-by-parcel basis rather than by city or area, making our general methodology inapplicable. As such, we pursue a different strategy. CD staff sent us a list of included parcels for each year, 2020–2024. We then downloaded current and historical parcel shapefiles from Snohomish County's open data portal.¹⁷ We filtered these parcels to only include those active during the study period. Next, we sort all the remaining parcels into block groups using parcels' geographic centroids to approximate their location and record the total number of parcels in each block group. Then, we filter only those parcels that are included in the Snohomish CD by matching the GIS shapes to the list of included parcels by ID number. We are unable to match about 3% of parcels in each year; we drop these from consideration. Finally, we take the ratio of the number of included parcels to the total number of parcels in each block group as an estimate of the share of the total population of each block group included in the district. For instance, if 20% of the parcels in a block group are included in the CD, then we assume 20% of the population of that block group is included in the CD. We then proceed as described above to estimate registered voters in the CD.

It should be noted that if parcels that generally contain a greater number of occupants (such as those with multifamily housing) are more likely to be in the CD, then this methodology will underestimate the number of registered voters in the Snohomish CD. Conversely, if parcels that generally contain fewer occupants (such as those with single-family homes) are more likely to be in the CD, then our method will overestimate the number of registered voters.

¹⁵ Note that for block groups that are completely contained by the outer boundary of a CD, 100% of their estimated registered voters are assumed to live within that CD.

¹⁶ Washington State Department of Labor and Industries. (January 11, 2018). [L&I–City Limits \(Statewide\)](#). Washington State Open Data Portal.

¹⁷ Snohomish County. (April 17, 2025). [All Parcels \(Past and Present\)](#). Snohomish County Open Data Portal.

Election Costs Under the Alternative Policies

As described in [Sections III and IV](#) of the report, county auditors use a formula to apportion costs to jurisdictions appearing on the general, primary, and special election ballots. The portion of costs due to a specific jurisdiction j , call this $Cost_j$, will be given by

$$Cost_j = (TC - minfee \times J) \times \frac{WF_j}{\sum_i WF_i} \times 1.15$$

where

- TC is the total cost of the election in the county;
- $minfee$ is the minimum fee charged to jurisdictions for appearing on the ballot (usually \$50, but \$300 in Adams County);
- J is the total number of jurisdictions on the ballot in the county;
- WF_j is the weight factor for jurisdiction j . This is calculated by multiplying the number of registered voters in the jurisdiction by 1 for the first position or issue on the ballot, plus 0.2 for each additional position or issue (1.2 for two positions, 1.4 for three, and so on). $\sum_i WF_i$ is the sum of weight factors across all jurisdictions appearing on the ballot, including WF_j ; and
- 1.15 is a factor adding 15% to cover the administrative overhead cost.

Under this formula, a specific jurisdiction's portion of total election costs will increase with the number of registered voters and the number of positions on the ballot. The following subsections describe how we apply this formula to calculate the costs for CDs to appear on the general and primary ballot each year.

The General Ballot Policy (Part C of the Legislative Language)

As described in [Section IV](#) of the report, our estimates of the number of registered voters in each CD and the above cost formula to reapportion costs to jurisdictions with CDs included. We make the following assumptions to do this:

- We hold total election costs (TC) fixed, i.e., we assume that the inclusion of CDs on the general ballot does not increase overall election costs.
- The elections for the five supervisor positions are split so that if two positions appear on the ballot in one year, then three will be on the ballot two years (one biennium) later, then two positions another two years (another biennium) later, and so on.

The election cost data from the SOS gives us the total cost and sum of total weight factors for:

- General elections in all counties from 2020–2024
- Primary elections in all counties in 2022 and 2024 (as described in the main text, we use these years to proxy for primary costs in all years)
- Costs due to counties that combine their general election voters' pamphlets with the states in general elections.

The same formula is used to apportion costs to jurisdictions for all of these county-level election costs.

We first calculate the weight factor for each CD and add it to the existing sum of weight factors for other jurisdictions in each county. We then apply the above formula using the newly calculated weight factor for the CD in the numerator of the fraction. Voters' pamphlet costs are divided identically amongst jurisdictions, except that no minimum fee is first charged by county auditors (i.e., we eliminate the $minfee \times J$ term in the parentheses above).

[The Zoning Policy \(Part D of the Legislative Language\)](#)

As stated in [Section IV](#) of the report, we assume that each CD would divide itself into zones such that each zone contains an equal share of the total population of the district. Under this assumption, we conduct our analysis for the zoning policy identically to the general ballot policy, with the exception that we use only 40% and 60% of our estimated number of registered voters to calculate CDs' portion of total county election costs in two- and three-position biennia, respectively.

[Questionnaire and Survey Analysis](#)

[Questionnaire Process](#)

District personnel questionnaires and supervisor surveys were loaded into ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis platform. A coder reviewed each response. First, they determined and recorded whether the particular response to the questionnaire was overall in support of or opposed to each alternative policy. Next, having read all responses, the coder established recurrent themes that appeared throughout them. Examples include those in the figures of [Section V](#), such as "would increase turnout" or "districts would become politicized." Codes were then revised as needed for clarity and uniqueness.

Questionnaire analyses were then split into both a qualitative and a quantitative analysis to discuss themes and later extract quotations for use in the report (qualitative) and derive frequency statistics for themes (quantitative). The qualitative portion was a systematic process where all quotations were exported and aligned with their coded themes and thus were able to be drawn upon to highlight direct responses from the questionnaires. Codes were also reviewed for co-occurrence, or to assess themes that were often mentioned together (e.g., voter turnout increasing but awareness and/or engagement of districts remaining the same), to discuss the results more seamlessly and in a narrative that tied related themes to each other in the report.

In the quantitative portion, duplicate themes within a district response to a specific policy were removed so that frequency could be reported at the district level. For example, if a district mentioned the politicization of districts multiple times in their response to the general ballot policy, only one sentiment per district per policy remained coded so that the result was representative of one district's perspective. Codes were disaggregated by document-groups analysis to identify statistics by each proposed policy and report on specific impacts by policy (e.g., "Document 1" described the general ballot policy, "Document 2" described the zoning policy, etc.). The analysis process was otherwise identical to the qualitative process.

[Survey Process](#)

The supervisor survey was created using SurveyMonkey, a common survey platform. We received a list of supervisors from the SCC. The survey asked respondents to address their likelihood of remaining as supervisors under the alternative policies and offered space to describe how each would impact them in their role. Summary data were then uploaded to ATLAS.ti using the software's survey analysis component, which allows for direct and efficient data uploading. From that point on, deriving summary statistics and frequency reporting used the same process as the questionnaire's quantitative analysis. At this point in the analysis, what we learned from supervisor responses only emphasized prevailing perspectives derived from the district personnel questionnaire, so we did not discuss survey themes in the report in the same way as the questionnaire. Therefore, we include supervisor summary statistics for predominant themes that arose (e.g., relating to financial disclosure) and embed those within the report.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the many, many conservation district managers, supervisors, and personnel who we corresponded with throughout the project to obtain election cost data and discuss how the alternative policies would impact their districts. Likewise, we are indebted to the handful of county auditors and staff who we spoke with to understand how costs are divided in elections.

We would also like to thank James Thompson, Shana Joy, Brian Cochrane, and all the people at the Washington State Conservation Commission who contributed to our understanding of conservation districts and provided us with turnout and GIS data to conduct our analyses. Thanks as well to Tom Salzer and Ryan Baye of the Washington Association of Conservation Districts for helping us to make contact with district personnel and inviting us to present at their annual conference.

Finally, we thank Ellis Phillips at the Office of the Secretary of State for connecting us with data on the cost of county general and primary elections.

For further information, contact:

Cory Briar at 360.664.9801, cory.briar@wsipp.wa.gov

Document No. 25-06-4102



Washington State Institute for Public Policy

The Washington State Legislature created the Washington State Institute for Public Policy in 1983. A Board of Directors—representing the legislature, the governor, and public universities—governs WSIPP and guides the development of all activities. WSIPP's mission is to carry out practical research, at legislative direction, on issues of importance to Washington State.