

Conservation District Elections in Washington: Series Recap

The 2023 Washington State Legislature tasked WSIPP with investigating the cost of conservation district (CD) supervisor elections under current law and two alternative policies that would place these elections on the general ballot. WSIPP was also directed to evaluate the potential non-monetary impacts of these alternative policies.

Background

CDs are non-regulatory local government agencies that promote conservation practices by working with landowners. Under current law, CDs hold elections for three of their five supervisors independently of other elections in the state. Under the alternative policies in this study, elections would instead be held under RCW 29A, which governs elections for most other elected officials.

Findings

- Election costs under current law are highly variable across CDs. While election costs are generally higher in CDs with more registered voters, the pattern is not consistent. The median total election cost is \$2,500, though costs range from \$50 to more than \$420,000.

Summary of Change in Average Election Costs per Biennium Under Alternative Policies from Current Law (2020–2024)

Scenario	General ballot (alternative policy 1)			General ballot with zones (alternative policy 2)		
	Min	Median	Max	Min	Median	Max
General	(88%)	225%	10,136%	(95%)	75%	6,695%
General and primaries	(64%)	651%	23,207%	(85%)	338%	15,639%

Numbers in red represent decreases in election costs compared to current law. This figure combines biennia in which two supervisor positions are up for election with biennia in which three positions are up for election.

- If CD elections were held on the general ballot under the first alternative policy between 2020 and 2024, costs would have been higher by a median of 225% per biennium for the general election alone and 651% if primaries were required.
- If CD supervisors had to run for specific zones within districts under the second alternative policy, biennial costs would have been lower by 46% compared to the first policy. However, they would still be a median of 75% more expensive than the current law (338% with primaries).

CD supervisors and staff communicated that they expected more non-monetary costs than benefits to result from the alternative policies. Many districts shared that the policies could lead to more turnout in elections and engagement with CDs, but some questioned whether this would lead to increased engagement with CDs. Most districts feared the policies would lead to increased politicization of CDs and fewer resources being devoted to conservation programming.

Assignment Details

Assigned in 2023 Legislative Session
[ESSB 5187](#), Operating budget

Links to the full reports are provided below:

[Preliminary Report](#)

[Final Report](#)

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