County of San Joaquin
Registrar of Voters

Admin Procedures

Election Cost Methodology Overview

for Cities and Districts

January 2026

Notes:

Background

San Joaquin County has long maintained a transparent and legally compliant process for recovering election costs from participating jurisdictions. Each election involves cities, school districts, and special districts that share in the overall cost of conducting the election. While the County's prior billing practices fully complied with California Elections Code, in 2024 the Registrar of Voters undertook an independent review to ensure our methodology continued to reflect current best practices and evolving industry standards.

Independent Review and Findings

The Registrar of Voters partnered with *The Election Center* — a nationally recognized, nonpartisan organization specializing in election administration — to evaluate how San Joaquin County's election costs were categorized and allocated.

The review confirmed that the County's existing billing practices were legally compliant, transparent, and reasonable. However, it also identified opportunities to strengthen consistency with statewide and national standards.

Key findings included:

- **Clarity in Cost Classification:** Certain operational costs could be more precisely defined as "direct" (specific to a single jurisdiction or contest) versus "shared" (benefiting all jurisdictions equally).
- **Refinement of Allocation Methods:** Shared costs could be distributed more consistently using a standard formula based on each jurisdiction's percentage of registered voters.
- **Improved Transparency:** Documenting how costs are sourced, verified, and allocated makes the process easier for both the County and jurisdictions to understand and review.

These adjustments were not corrections to prior work — they simply modernized our approach and aligned our methodology with those used by other large California counties.

Why We Updated Our Methodology

Our decision to refine the methodology was guided by three goals:

1. **Alignment with Industry Standards:** Following recommendations from The Election Center and peer county models ensures our process remains consistent with recognized best practices.
2. **Transparency and Understanding:** Jurisdictions can more easily see how costs are calculated and allocated, making the process simpler to explain and review.
3. **Administrative Efficiency:** The revised approach keeps the County fully compliant with California Elections Code sections governing cost recovery, while also improving the clarity and auditability of election billing.

How Election Billing Works

- Each election involves a combination of **direct** and **shared** costs:
- **Direct Costs** are specific to a jurisdiction — for example, candidate statement printing or the cost to print a measure specific to a city. These costs are billed directly to that jurisdiction.
- **Shared Costs** are election-wide expenses, such as labor, printing, supplies, or equipment that serve all participants. These are distributed proportionally based on the number of registered voters in each jurisdiction.

This ensures that no single agency pays more than its fair share and that all billed costs are backed by verifiable data from financial systems, vendor invoices, and certified voter counts.

Impact on Jurisdictions

For most cities, school districts, and special districts, the revised methodology produces only minor adjustments to final billing totals. In fact, the updated approach is generally **more cost-effective than the legacy method**, providing modest savings to jurisdictions compared to prior billing cycles.

Importantly, this update **does not change the actual cost** the County incurs to administer an election. The resources, staffing, and equipment required to conduct elections remain the same. What has changed is **how those existing costs are grouped, which portions are included or excluded in the final billing calculation, and how the shared portions are distributed** among participating jurisdictions.

The revised format provides a clearer explanation of what each charge represents and how it was calculated, while slightly reducing the total amount billed in most cases.

In short, the new model enhances transparency, fairness, and efficiency — all while maintaining full compliance with California law and providing cost benefits to local jurisdictions.

Commitment to Transparency

The Registrar of Voters remains committed to clear communication and open collaboration with all jurisdictions we serve. Each billing cycle includes a full cost review, and the County continues to provide supporting documentation upon request. Our goal is to maintain the highest level of confidence in how election funds are managed and reported.