

What does a citywide election in San Francisco cost?

An analysis by the Center for Voting and Democracy, June 2003

There has been much confusion and controversy surrounding the question of what a citywide election in San Francisco costs. Part of this confusion results from the fact that some citywide elections cost more than others – a citywide runoff election with one or two races on the ballot will cost less than a citywide election like the March 2002 primary election with multiple local, state, and federal races on the ballot.

This confusion also has been fueled by the fact that the Department of Elections historically has provided no figures breaking down election costs, or separating those specific elections costs from the fixed, ongoing costs of running the department itself. The City Controller estimated in 2001 a citywide runoff election to cost \$2.1 million. The mayor's budget for 2003 estimates the cost for a citywide runoff election to be \$1.8 million.

The Real Costs. Recently the Elections Commission released the figures below as the cost for the Department of Elections over the last few years. An analysis of these numbers appears to indicate that a citywide election, even a stand-alone runoff with one or two races on the ballot, costs far more than \$2 million. **The more likely figure appears to be anywhere from \$3.8 million to \$5.7 million.**

Given the numbers below from the Elections Commission, you would have to push the fixed, ongoing costs to \$7 million per year before you get a per election cost under \$2 million. Yet the entire Departmental budget before the use of the Optech Eagle on was only \$4.4 million, so clearly fixed costs are a great deal lower than \$7 million. For the purposes of this analysis, \$3 million was used a reasonable amount for the fixed, ongoing costs of the department, yielding per election costs in the range of \$3.8 - 5.7 million.

Data from the Elections Commission. Here are the numbers released by the Elections Commission, expenditure by year, and the elections held during that year. All numbers have been rounded

2000-2001 original budget: \$10.6 million supplemental: \$2.9 million total: \$13.5 million
Elections: November 2000 election (citywide, local, state, and federal races), December 2000 runoffs (local, in 9 of 11 supervisorial districts)

2001-2002 original budget: \$11 million supplemental: \$3.3 million total: \$14.3 million
Elections: November 2001 election (citywide local races), December 2001 runoff (citywide, local, city attorney), and March 2002 primary (citywide, local, state, and federal races)

2002-2003 original budget: \$9 million supplemental: 0 total: \$9 million
Elections: November 2002 election (citywide, local, state, and federal), and December 2002 (local, runoff in two supervisorial districts)

Analysis: We derived the cost per election by subtracting the approximate fixed, ongoing costs (\$3 million) from the total budget and dividing by the number of citywide elections for that year. That analysis gives:

Year /	Total budget /	Fixed costs /	# Elections	/	Cost per election
2002-2003 /	\$8,900,000 /	\$3,000,000 /	1.18	/	\$4,992,308
2001-2002 /	\$14,300,000 /	\$3,000,000 /	3.00	/	\$3,766,667
2000-2001 /	\$13,400,000 /	\$3,000,000 /	1.82	/	\$5,720,000

Conclusion: The availability of better data from the Department of Elections or the Elections Commission would help to refine the analysis. But no matter how you work the numbers, it seems highly improbable that a citywide election could cost as little \$1.8 million, as the mayor's budget does, or even \$2.1 million as the controller calculated in 2001. Instead, based on past costs for elections provided by the Elections Commission, it appears that the range of approximate cost per citywide election is \$3.8 million to \$5.7 million.