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Reflections on Practice
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Reflections on Private Funding of Elections

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The April 2024 acceptance by California's Shasta County Board of Supervisors of a \$1.5 million Alliance for Election Excellence grant from the Center for Technology and Civic Life marked a complete reversal of fortune in what had been a multiyear journey filled with misinformation, false accusations, and general chaos surrounding the issuance and acceptance of grants for election administration.

The Shasta County example is of great interest because the same board of supervisors voted to eliminate the use of electronic tabulators more than two years ago, insisting future elections be hand-counted. Less than 60 days before Shasta County would have had to execute on this scheme, California's state legislature stepped in and passed Assembly Bill 969 to prevent hand counting on such a large scale and limiting hand counts to elections with fewer than 5,000 voters and only in certain circumstances. A good portion of the \$1.5 million grant went toward the expenses associated with the cancellation of the original tabulator contract and the costs of a new contract. This is an unfortunate waste of money when you consider how much value could have been derived from that grant to provide a balanced blend of additional security and accessibility measures.

At almost the same latitude 2,900 miles to the east, in my own jurisdiction of Greenwich, Connecticut, a similar story played out. Connecticut does not have county government, and elections are administered at the municipal level. Two co-equal registrars of voters representing the two major parties work together to register voters, hire poll workers, administer elections, and certify the results. The successful collaboration of admittedly partisan individuals working together on a bipartisan basis is among the reasons we were selected as an example of excellence in the field. As one of the first 10 members of the Centers for Election Excellence, as chosen by the U.S. Alliance for Election Excellence, we were pleased and surprised when we found out this designation would also come with a \$500,000 grant.

It is important to note the initial applications for membership in the Alliance for Election Excellence made no mention of grants. Our desire to join was because we enjoy sharing best practices and learning from others across the country. Anticipating the addition of early voting to our duties in 2024 and adjustments to absentee ballot eligibility in 2025, we were excited to learn from others who had already administered elections with these opportunities.

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As is part of the normal process for the acceptance of any unanticipated gifts or grants, we put the matter on the agenda for the 230-member nonpartisan Greenwich Representative Town Meeting (RTM). The RTM is a unique successor to the traditional New England town meeting. As Greenwich grew to a large town of 60,000 people, having everyone come together annually for debates on ordinances and the town budget became unworkable. The RTM was instituted to keep the tradition alive through robust debate with a low barrier to entry. These 230 representatives provide a diversity of expertise and opinions.

As soon as the grant was published on the RTM's agenda, I received a stunning series of phone calls. I was asked if I had run the acceptance of this grant before my local party representatives. The then-chairwoman of the party called me and demanded the withdrawal of the item. I explained that in my 14 years administering elections I had never asked permission or previewed any decision with my party, and my oath of office requires impartiality.

In the few weeks leading up to the vote on the acceptance of the grant, I found myself cut off from communication with people whom I had supported for years. I was removed from private chat groups. Potential candidates were identified and approached to challenge me for my party's nomination. Local "patriot" groups used their blogs to accuse us of accepting a bribe. Freedom of information requests were received from across the country. One of the national parties sent potential talking points to the people challenging the acceptance of the grant proposal. We received an unusual request to participate in an out-of-cycle cybersecurity review, and the cybersecurity firm asked us to discuss the grantor. We were asked if by using grant money for security upgrades we would be required to give the grantor a key.

The RTM passed the measure in a close 104-101 vote. Immediately following the vote, those opposing the grant questioned the accuracy of the tabulation equipment used to conduct the vote. They insisted on a re-vote, which left the acceptance of the grant in limbo for two months until the next meeting. During this time the accuracy of the voting system was criticized, and my fellow registrar and I continued to be pilloried. The grants were referred to as "blood money." Photos of us were doctored and distributed by email. My weight and appearance became fodder for a local blogger. Advocates in other states were using Greenwich as an example of how to make it as uncomfortable as possible to accept this funding. Yet, in a historic vote, the RTM defeated the attempt to rescind the grant's acceptance. The attempt to rescind a vote had only occurred twice before in its 90-year history. Support actually swelled, and the margin of victory went from three votes on the original acceptance to 20 votes on the rejection of the attempt to rescind.

Fast forward to today. After reviewing the actual spending plans for the grant money—which included security cameras, additional secure storage areas, a new handicapped-accessible counter, and the replacement of aging equipment—the Greenwich Board of Finance approved the spending unanimously, and the RTM approved the spending with 180 in favor and five against. A second and third tranche of spending has also been approved.

What has changed? I would attribute the change in attitude in Greenwich and Shasta County to two factors. First, the scrutiny associated with the grants provided an opportunity to provide more education to the public about our process. Shasta County continued to have a robust observation process, and in Greenwich, where observers are limited due to state laws, we created an Election Academy to allow interested individuals to participate in the same training delivered to our poll workers as well as observe logic and accuracy testing and participate in numerous question-and-answer sessions directly with election administrators.

Second, the grants have truly been demonstrated to have no strings attached outside of the requirement that they be spent for the purpose of running elections. The grantor has made no requests for specific actions, suggested no usages for the funding, and offered no hint of influence on how money is spent. Ironically, the same Shasta County supervisor who last year spearheaded the effort to eliminate voting machines in his county recently stated, “[I]t is free money with no strings attached.”

Many will say, especially those in places that have banned private donations, that the juice is not worth the squeeze. I can understand that. It is part of the reason why so many colleagues have exited the field of elections. However, as a fiduciary of taxpayer dollars, it is important to remember that we have an obligation to conduct due diligence to ensure purchases best address the needs of the public. Outside pressure should not make independent election officials shut down a process which rightfully belongs in the hands of the policy makers.