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NSGIC Releases Best Practices for Improving America's Elections

Two-year project delivers concrete guidance for how states can increase the accuracy and efficiency of elections using geographic information systems (GIS) technology

October 2, 2019, New Orleans, LA - National States Geographic Information Council (NSGIC) released Best Practices for Geo-Enabling Elections, aimed at decision-makers in elections management across the nation, Monday. The guidance, developed in collaboration with ten states and subject matter experts from both elections and GIS fields, is the result of a two-year project focused on reducing election errors.

"You could say this project is about getting the right ballot to the right voter," says Molly Schar, NSGIC's executive director. "Even in a democracy as old as ours, this doesn't always happen. Voters are occasionally placed in the wrong voting district by mistake, and then given the wrong ballot. As a result, unfortunately, election results are questioned, sometimes with legal battles and expensive election do-overs as a consequence. Strengthening the accuracy and efficiency of our electoral system, on the other hand, will ultimately increase voters' confidence that their voices are being heard."

Geospatial technology is a solution to the problem of voters being accidentally assigned to the wrong voting district. In the same way that many of us use maps on our phones to navigate to unfamiliar locations, election authorities can "pin" voters on electronic maps, and thereby ensure voters are automatically allocated to the right voting districts or precincts and given the right ballot to vote. The technology becomes particularly valuable when voting district boundaries are redrawn, such as after the upcoming 2020 Census. With voters as "pins" on a digital map, digital renditions of the new district boundaries can simply be overlaid over those pins, and voters automatically sorted into the right district.

"Using GIS in elections is a major improvement compared to the old, non-spatial "address-file" technology which is still in use in many places today and requires a lot of manual manipulation, making it prone to producing errors," adds Schar. "At NSGIC, we are proud to play a small role in strengthening America's electoral system by making it easier for states and counties to integrate geospatial technology in their election management systems. We hope these best practices will be broadly used by elections directors, state geographic information officers (GIOs), and other decision makers around the country to help elevate states' use of GIS in elections ."

The best practices can be found in an eight-page executive summary, accompanied by a more detailed document that includes policy and technical considerations. Anyone involved in elections management, or otherwise interested in the subject of election technology can download the best practices on the project's website, elections.nsgic.org.

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The National States Geographic Information Council (NSGIC) promotes the efficient development and management of location-based information resources, and advocates for innovative, strategic use of these assets to advance the interests of states, tribes, regions, local governments, and the nation. For more information, visit nsgic.org or email Geospatial Programs Manager Jamie Chesser jamie.chesser@nsgic.org.