The Library of Congress is giving $15 million to eight institutions to preserve a range of electronic material, including Web sites relating to the 2003 California gubernatorial recall election, digital maps, sound recordings and decades' worth of social science data.

The grants, to be announced today, are part of a $100 million multiyear program, established by Congress and administered by the library, aimed at archiving resources that are increasingly born digital - that is, as a Web site or an electronic database.

"This is material that is of critical importance to our cultural heritage or public policy," said Laura Campbell, associate librarian for strategic initiatives at the Library of Congress.

Ms. Campbell said the material to be preserved includes not just Web sites but also digitally rendered cartographic data and census material. Public opinion polling data that currently exists only on punch cards will be digitally preserved.

The eight recipients will match the awards with cash, hardware, software or consulting services. The University of Michigan, for example, will work with partners to preserve social science data, including opinion surveys on politics, aging, health care, race relations, women's rights and employment.

Myron P. Gutmann, a history professor at the University of Michigan and director of the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research at the university's Institute for Social Research, said much of this data has not been properly archived. It resides on the computers of individual researchers and research institutions, on Web sites, and even in storage boxes filled with punch cards.

"Without aggressive activities to locate and preserve it, it will disappear for good," Dr.
Gutmann said. "Our goal is to assure that the material remains accessible, complete, uncorrupted and usable over time."

For the punch card data, that will mean converting it to an electronic form first.

"We'll be buying a punch card reader," said Amy Pienta, acquisitions director of the consortium.

Emory University in Atlanta, with several partners, will preserve digitized documents and other information relating to the Civil War, the civil rights movement and slavery.

North Carolina State University in Raleigh will collect and preserve digital cartographic material, such as tax assessment and zoning maps, from counties across the nation.

"These are things that we used to have in tangible form, on paper," Ms. Campbell said of the maps. "Now they are generated digitally and we don't have the analog equivalent."

Steve Morris, head of digital library initiatives at North Carolina State, likened the digital map project to the Sanborn Fire Insurance maps, a collection dating to the mid-19th century and depicting the commercial, industrial and residential sections of some 12,000 cities and towns in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

"We're looking at these as being a current analogue to those," Mr. Morris said. "Someone wanting to do research down the road would want to get to this data to see where things were."

The problem of preserving digital collections is complex. Merely archiving digital material isn't enough; the Library of Congress and its partners are wrestling with the problem of finding an effective means of preserving it.

Digital archives can be more vulnerable than their acid-free-paper counterparts, because computer hardware and software quickly become obsolete, and the durability of magnetic storage media like tapes and disks is limited.

Web-based documents that are filled with links pose yet another preservation problem because keeping a Web site vital means keeping its links accessible.

The University of California, for instance, will preserve Web sites connected to the 2003 gubernatorial election in which Arnold Schwarzenegger was elected.

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign will lead an effort to preserve digitized sound recordings, many of which reside at the National Gallery of the Spoken Word, an online database of spoken word collections that span the 20th century. The collection includes some of Orson Welles's performances, early recordings of John Philip Sousa and Raymond Massey's reading of Lincoln's Gettysburg address.

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