*Fiscal Facts by Wisconsin Policy Forum*

**Wisconsin school referendum results rise above economy, politics**

Despite the highest unemployment rate on record this year and hundreds of school buildings empty since March, Wisconsin voters approved school referendums this month at near-record rates. The results speak particularly loudly given that they happened in a high-turnout election and in communities carried by both presidential candidates.

On Nov. 3, voters accepted 43 out of 51 school spending questions totaling nearly $946 million (of the eight referendums that failed, five still managed to garner at least 48% of the vote). Combined with April’s results, Wisconsin voters approved 95 total referendums in 2020, the 85.6% passage rate for the year marking the second-highest since at least 1993.

The results were remarkable given that they will put upward pressure on property taxes at a time of high economic insecurity, and virtual schooling in some districts coping with the pandemic, falling enrollments, and potential losses in state aid ahead. Further, many of these same districts have already passed referendums in recent years: Since 2016, 280 out of 422 (66.4%) public school districts in the state now have passed at least one referendum.

These ballot measures are winning at high rates despite the fact that the last two presidential elections in the state were both decided by less than one percentage point (pending a possible recount this year). In such an environment, referendum votes could not enjoy such success without a substantial measure of bipartisan support. Communities associated with 30 of the 43 districts (69.8%) with successful referendums approved those measures while voting for the Republican presidential candidate, which may sometimes — but certainly not always — be an indicator of how a community views higher taxes and spending.

In a time when national politics are increasingly polarized, these referendum results are a reminder that voters can be moved by local issues, such as school spending. As a challenging state budget approaches, state leaders might consider that example as they work toward their own consensus in the Capitol during the difficult months ahead.

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