**Fiscal Facts: Districts Approve Most Referenda even as “Retry” Efforts Increase**

A majority of school district referenda across this year’s February and April elections were approved by Wisconsin voters.

Larger dollar amounts and more operating questions are being asked of voters each year. And this time, many efforts were also second, third, or fourth attempts by districts to get a similar measure approved – attesting to the financial and political pressures faced by Wisconsin school districts.

Across 94 ballot questions in the February and April elections, unofficial results show Wisconsin voters approved 53 school district referenda. These ballot initiatives ask voters to raise their own property taxes to pay for district operations, or to pay down debt for building and renovation projects.

The 56.4% rate of approval represents a slight increase over the 54.9% of referenda approved in 2023; approval rates tend to be lower in odd-numbered years when midterm and presidential elections are not on the ballot.

Though the passage rate of referenda this year is an increase from 2023, it is otherwise the lowest in a non-presidential or midterm election year since 2011. This marks the continuation of a trend toward lower approval rates since they peaked in 2018 and 2019.

Of the 10 largest referenda by dollar amount this spring, only three passed: those in Oshkosh, Racine, and Port Washington-Saukville. Arrowhead, Kenosha, Sheboygan Falls, Beloit, and Fond du Lac were among the larger districts in which voters rejected referenda.

The 94 questions asked of voters this year, however, is the most in an odd-numbered year since 2007, and the 62 operating referenda are the most in an off-year since 2001. This follows a record-setting 148 operating referendum questions posed to voters in 2024.

Wisconsin Policy Forum analysis also shows that 36 – or more than one-third -- of this year’s referenda were “retries” of previously failed questions. We define a referendum “retry” as an instance in which a district’s ballot measure fails, and the district goes back to referendum within two years for the same purpose.

Ultimately in 2025, for the 16th straight year, a majority of school district referenda in Wisconsin passed. Over time, more of these questions have focused on operations, as districts contend with budget pressures that include inflation, state-imposed revenue limits, the disappearance of pandemic aid, and now a more uncertain economic future.

Despite lower overall approval rates for these ballot questions, more initially unsuccessful referenda are being retried and a significant number are eventually passing – a sign of the ongoing financial pressure on districts.

A key question now is how Evers and lawmakers respond in the next state budget, and whether they will seek to raise revenue limits or related aid or find ways to help districts control their costs. Without some action at the state level, referenda – and retries – are likely to remain a relatively common feature on Wisconsin ballots.

*This information is a service of the Wisconsin Policy Forum, the state’s leading resource for nonpartisan state and local government research and civic education. Learn more at* [*wispolicyforum.org*](https://wispolicyforum.org/research/state-tax-burden-up-but-overall-burden-still-falling/)*.*