

WISCONSIN SCHOOL REFERENDA RISE ABOVE ECONOMY, POLITICS

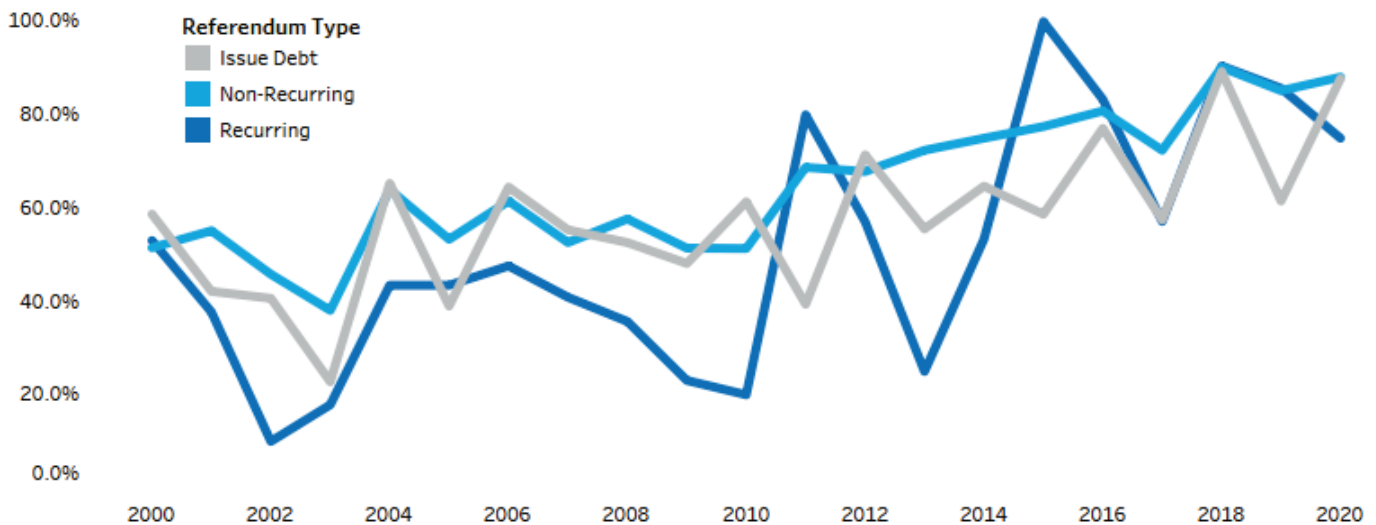
Despite the highest unemployment rate on record earlier this year and the absence of tens of thousands of students from school buildings since March, unofficial results show Wisconsin voters approved school referenda this month at near record rates. The results speak particularly loudly given that they happened in a high-turnout election and in both red and blue communities.

On November 3, voters cast their ballots in favor of 43 out of 51 (84.3%) school referenda totaling nearly \$946 million. Combined with April’s results, Wisconsin voters approved 95 total referenda in 2020; the subsequent 85.6% passage rate for the year is the second-highest since at least 1993 (see Figure 1).

The successful referenda will put upward pressure on property taxes but be welcomed by school officials coping with the pandemic’s disruptions, falling enrollments, and potential losses in state aid ahead.

The results were remarkable given that they came despite high unemployment, virtual schooling in some districts, and a series of other referenda that have passed already at many of these districts in recent years. In fact, since 2016, 280 out of 422 (66.4%) public school districts in the state now have passed at least one referendum. Also notable was the extent to which support for these ballot questions transcended the partisan political divide, as they performed well in communities carried by both presidential candidates.

Figure 1: School Referenda Approval Rate Continues to Rise, Despite Economy
Wisconsin school referenda approval rate by type, 2000 to 2020



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction



Madison Metropolitan School District was the largest district to approve referenda in the November cycle. Voters approved both a referendum to issue up to \$317 million in debt for a series of building projects that include extensive renovations of the district's four high schools; and one to raise property taxes permanently for school operations by an amount that would equal up to \$10 million in year four and total up to \$33 million over the four-year phase-in period. Both referenda passed with over 75% of the more than 158,000 votes cast, at a passage rate nearly 10 percentage points higher than any other referendum.

Of the eight referenda that failed in November, five still managed to garner at least 48% of the vote. A \$5.5 million non-recurring referendum in the district encompassing the entirety of rural northern Florence County failed by just 56 votes, and a \$155 million debt referendum in Wausau – which would have been the second largest in dollar amount terms – failed by a margin of about 2,500 votes.

REFERENDA RESULTS INSULATED FROM ECONOMY

In 2018, we [noted](#) that the share of referenda approved by voters and the number placed on ballots “has dipped during economic downturns and their aftermath but overall has increased since 1999.” The upward trend in referenda passage in Wisconsin is still evident, but the effect of the economic downturn now seems more muted than during the previous two recessions, when the number and passage rates of referenda fell.

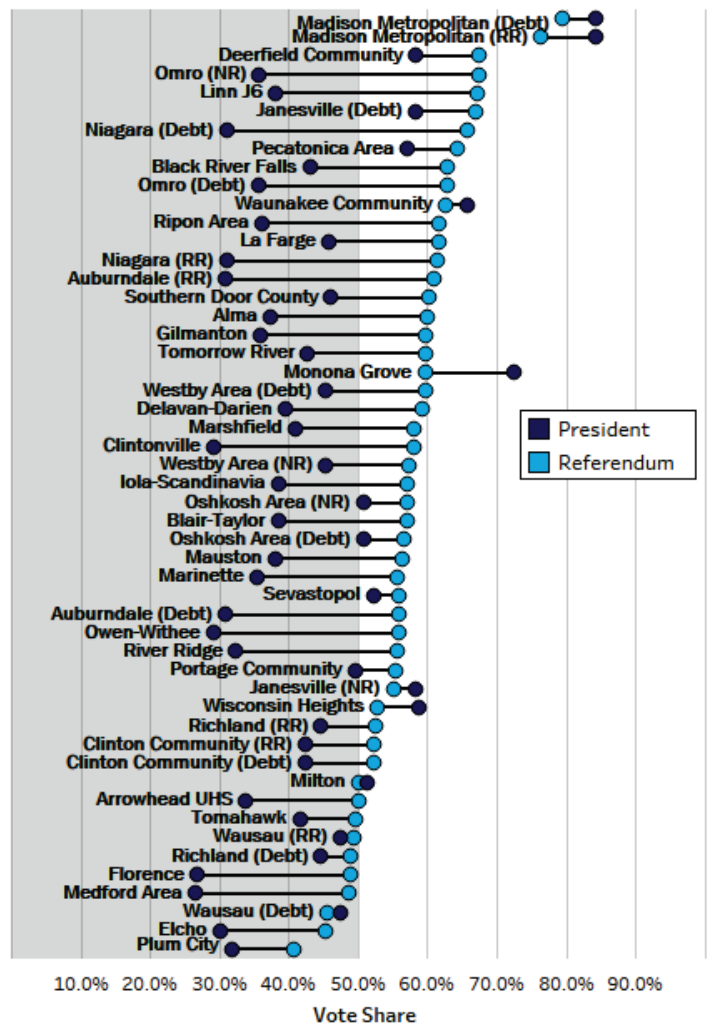
On the one hand, the 111 total school referenda posed to voters in 2020 were the fewest in a midterm or general election year since 2012 – a trend that might indicate hesitation by school officials to schedule referenda because of concerns about the present downturn. On the other, the fact that more than two-thirds of all districts have already passed one or more referenda in recent years also may have limited demand for them.

A notable finding is that the referenda that were put to voters did exceptionally well across the state and even among its hardest-hit communities. The two referenda in Door County districts, for example, both passed despite the heavy blow that COVID-19 has delivered to areas dependent on tourism.

The election margins and polling from the Marquette University Law School suggest that voters remain concerned about the funding available for their local schools at a time when state-imposed caps have [limited the revenues available](#) to districts that do not pursue referenda. The approval rate for school referenda in Wisconsin has hit 70% just four times in the last 20 years, and all four have come since 2016. The latest results were also remarkable given that some districts such as Madison have been holding only virtual classes since March and have no immediate plans to return to in-person teaching.

Figure 2: Wisconsin Referenda Outperform Democratic Presidential Candidate

2020 vote shares in favor of passing school district referenda versus in favor of President-Elect Joe Biden*



Source: Wisconsin county clerks (see <https://elections.wi.gov/clerks/directory/county-websites>)
 * as a share of voters who chose either Joe Biden or Donald Trump; vote totals in school referenda do not correspond precisely to totals in presidential race.



results of all voters in municipalities that had at least some percentage of voters with a referendum on their ballot. For that reason, readers should interpret these results cautiously, particularly in the case of individual referenda, since the boundaries of a given school district often includes large parts of some municipalities and much smaller parts of others.

Where possible, the analysis looked at ward-level data to provide more precise results, but in general that was not available. That said, there are multiple reasons to believe these broad trends hold, including the fact that in many of these districts the vote margins in the presidential race did not differ greatly between neighboring communities.

As seen in Figure 2, the vote share for President-Elect Joe Biden (the total votes for Biden out of all voters who chose either Biden or President Donald Trump) ran behind referenda approval votes in 43 of the 51 referenda races. Five of the eight districts where that was not the case were located at least partially in Dane County, a dark blue part of the state that gave Biden a margin of more than 50 points overall.

Four referenda we analyzed had a difference between their vote share for Biden and in favor of the referendum of at least 30 points: both in Niagara, as well as Omro's non-recurring referendum and Auburndale's recurring referendum. Twelve referenda had a gap between 20 and 30 points, and an additional 14 had a margin greater than 10 points. Though the actual gap for only referenda voters would be somewhat different, the broad trend is notable.

Referenda were approved in every corner of the state, from northern Marinette County to the Madison and Janesville region. That said, seven of the eight referenda that failed were in districts located in the northern half of the state (see Figure 3).

CONCLUSION

In a time when politics is often nationalized, these referenda results are a reminder that voters can be moved by local issues and concerns. They also may merit the careful attention of state and even national leaders given Wisconsin's status as a key swing state.

As a challenging state budget approaches, the results suggest voters remain concerned about schools; and that they are willing – in the case of their local district,

at least – to take on some additional taxes to fund public K-12 education despite the economic downturn. In a larger sense, the elections show that despite increasing polarization, the electorate may be more unified around some issues of local importance. Perhaps that example might serve the state's leaders as they seek consensus of their own in the Capitol during the difficult months ahead.

