WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

VOTER ENTHUSIASM WANES FOR SCHOOL REFERENDA

Wisconsin voters in 2026 approved most K-12 referenda but showed greater skepticism for increasing property taxes to fund schools. The year also brought a record share of referenda put to voters to fund school operations. Growth in K-12 operating costs has outpaced revenue growth in recent years as the state has limited school funding. Yet voters battered by inflation appear less willing or able to support repeated rounds of referenda.

Wisconsin voters in 2026 approved 90 of 155, or 58.1%, of referenda to boost funding for their local school districts. While a slight increase from last year's 56.4% passage rate, it marks a decline from recent even-numbered years. (Approval rates – and the number of referenda on ballots – tend to be higher in even-numbered years, when midterm and presidential elections are on the ballot.)

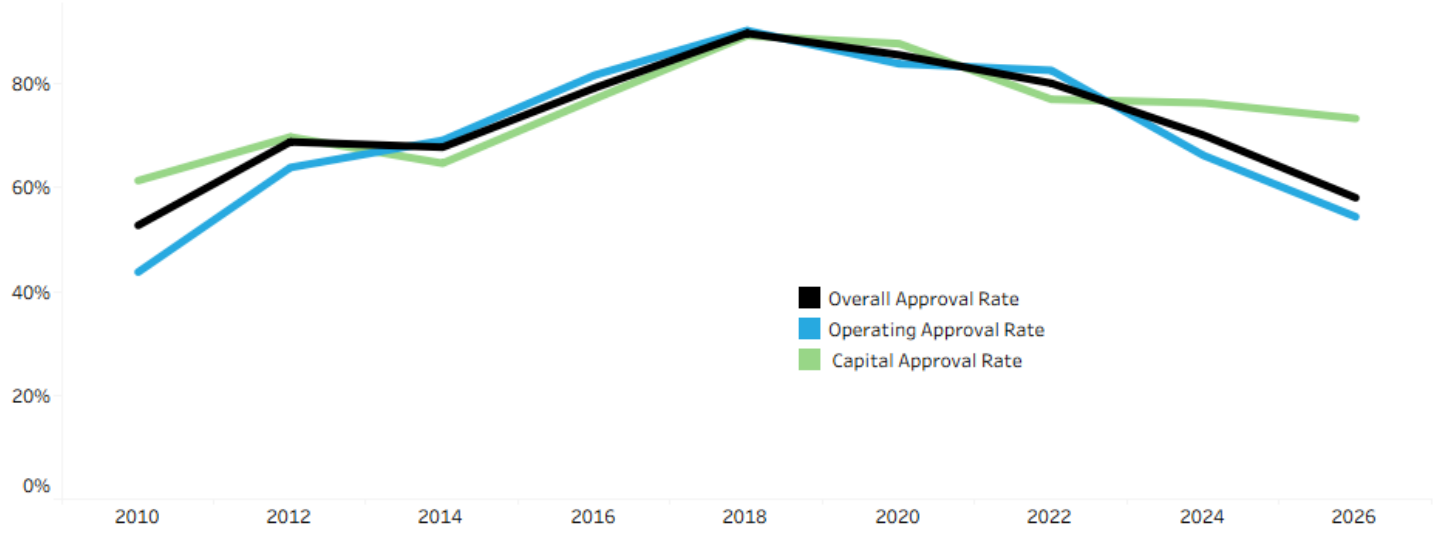
The 2026 passage rate, which includes results from this year's April, August, and November elections, was down from a 70.1% passage rate in 2024. It also was the lowest for an even-numbered year since 2010, in the aftermath of the Great Recession (see Figure 1). After approving 46 of 75 referenda in the April election, for a 61.3% approval rate, voters rejected one referendum in the August primary and approved 44 of 79 referenda in November for an overall 55.0% fall pass rate. Like 2026 as a whole, this was the lowest fall approval rate in an even-numbered year since 2010.

These ballot questions ask voters to raise their own property taxes to pay for school district operations – either on a temporary or permanent basis – or to issue debt to finance building and renovation projects.

This year, ballots arrived after statewide gross K-12 property taxes saw their largest single-year increase in more than three decades (7.8%) on tax bills mailed out in December 2025. Earlier this year, Gov. Tony Evers and GOP lawmakers tried but failed to enact legislation to increase state aid to schools and provide property tax relief, which left school districts' fiscal pressures largely unaddressed heading into the November election.

Figure 1: Referenda Approval Rate Continues to Decline in Even-Numbered Years

Wisconsin public school district referendum passage rate by type of question, 2010-2026, even-numbered years only



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

OPERATING REFERENDA REFLECT DISTRICT NEEDS

The total of 155 school referenda on ballots statewide this year was lower than the record-breaking 241 in 2024 but was still the fourth highest since 2002.

Recent years have produced large numbers of operating referenda. In 2026, there were a total of 125 school operating referenda, the second most on record after 2024. In addition, 80.6% of all school referenda in 2026 were for operations, rather than for debt to finance capital projects – by far the largest share on record. This marks a shift from prior decades, when the split typically was more even; from 2000 through 2020, operational referenda made up 50.8% of all K-12 referenda on ballots. (See Figure 2.)

The turn to operational referenda signals the fiscal stress that some school districts are facing. It arises from multiple sources, including increased staffing to meet rising student needs, declining student enrollment, and a tight labor market and especially high inflation after the pandemic's peak.

State policy also has played a primary role. When voters approve a school operating referendum, they are voting to increase their school district's revenue limit. These state-imposed limits cap the combined amount of revenue that districts may collect in property taxes and state general school aids – districts' largest and most flexible funding sources. The caps were originally based on each district's spending level in 1993, the year they were first adopted.

Each state budget since has determined how much the revenue limit changes, if at all. Since revenue limits were decoupled from inflation in 2009, these increases approved by lawmakers and the governor have not kept pace with the rise in consumer prices. A referendum offers districts their only way of increasing revenue limits without state action. Districts have responded to their fiscal pressures by using referenda to authorize operating revenue increases.

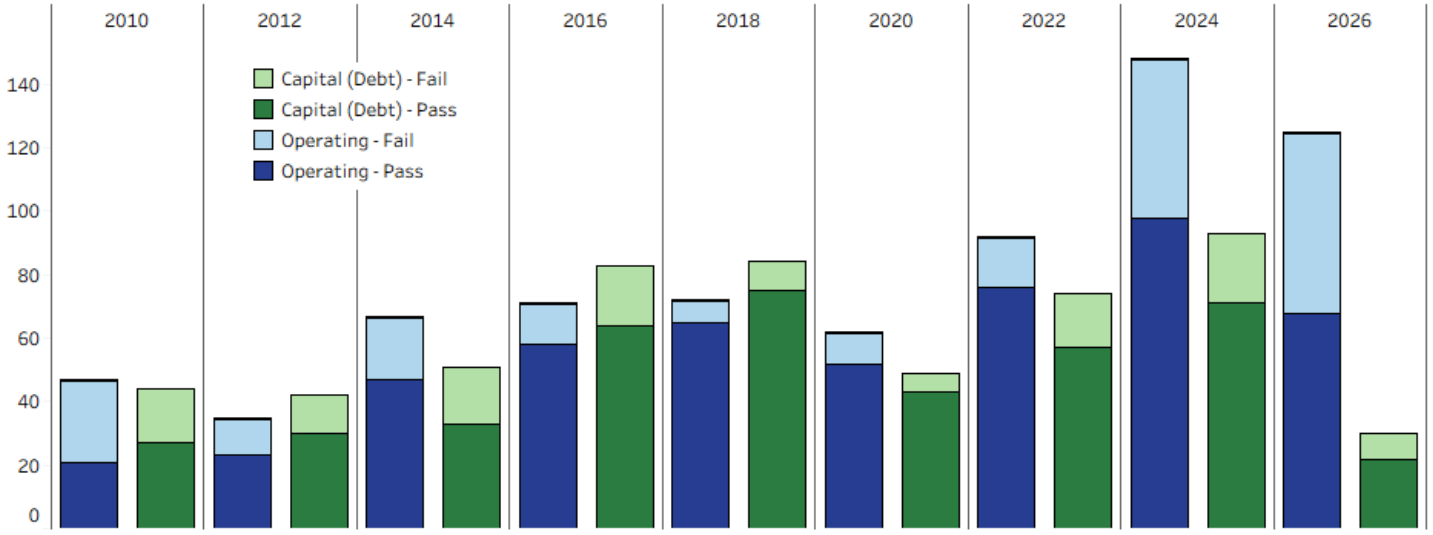
In 2024, districts also sought capital referenda in high numbers (93). In 2026, however, the number of referenda for debt to finance capital projects plummeted to 30 – the lowest number in an even-numbered year since 1990. This drop likely reflects how many districts recently sought debt financing and therefore do not need to return to voters again. It also suggests that districts prioritized their operational needs this year in the face of wavering voter support and perhaps the effect of declining student enrollment as school officials consider how to adjust their footprint.

OPERATING REFERENDA APPROVAL DOWN MORE SHARPLY

Even as school districts have made their case for needing more funding for operations, voters are showing signs of their own financial strain, as exhibited by the declining approval rates.

Figure 2: Operating Referenda Surge in Recent Years

Total number of school district referenda held by type and result, 2010-2026, even-numbered years only



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

Voters ultimately approved 68, or 54.4%, of the 125 operational referenda put before them this year. This was the lowest approval rate for such referenda in an even-numbered year since 2010. Of the 30 debt referenda placed before voters, 22, or 73.3%, were approved. This was the lowest approval rate for debt referenda in an even-numbered year since 2014 (see Figure 1 on page 1).

Approval rates of both types of referenda have declined from a peak in 2018. Notably, however, approval rates for operating referenda have declined more sharply than for debt referenda.

While referenda approval rates have declined in recent years, they remain near, or in some cases still above, historic levels of voter approval. Forum records dating to 1990 show that the average pass rate for all school referenda during this period was 58.6%. Operating referenda had an approval rate of 57.9% over the same period, and debt referenda had a pass rate of 59.2%, below 2026 levels.

Still, the recent decline is marked and may have been surprising for political observers expecting to see a wave of school referenda approvals as part of Democratic gains in November 2026. The pass rate for fall referenda suggests referenda no longer outperform Democrats in the way they did in 2020 and is a far cry from the high pass rates seen in the majority of years under Wisconsin's Republican trifecta.

Instead, the same voter concerns about affordability widely seen as a major factor in sweeping Democrats into power appear to have played a material role in depressing referendum approval rates. The Marquette Law School Poll regularly asks respondents: "Which is more important to you: reduce property taxes or increase spending on public schools?" The share of respondents who prioritized increasing school spending over reducing taxes peaked at 63% in 2018 (the same year in which referendum approval rates peaked) and has dwindled since.

In the most recent Marquette poll in October, 40% of respondents prioritized increasing school spending, matching a record low. Meanwhile, 59% prioritized reducing property taxes, a near-record high for that share in the poll, which began asking voters this question in 2013.

Even as approval rates for operating referenda have declined, voters in three Wisconsin communities this year approved some of the largest non-recurring operating referenda ever placed on the ballot in our state. (Non-recurring referenda increase revenue limits, and thus property tax levies, for a fixed period of time. A minority of operating referenda are recurring, meaning that the levy increase is permanent if approved.) These included voters in the Green Bay Area Public School District, who approved a $158 million referendum; Middleton-Cross Plains Area School District, where voters approved a $119 million referendum; and Janesville School District, where voters approved a $98 million referendum.

The Green Bay referendum is the fourth-largest non-recurring school operating referendum ever put to voters in Wisconsin. All three rank in the top 10 largest-ever non-recurring school referenda in our state's history.

In 2026, Wisconsin districts placed on ballots statewide a combined total of $1.35 billion in operating referenda and $1.33 billion in debt referenda. Voters ultimately approved a total of $955 million in operating referenda and $834 million in debt referenda.

URGENCY IN REFERENDUM RETRIES

Previous Forum research found that a significant number of districts were making second, third, or fourth attempts at referenda after voters rejected an initial referendum attempt. In 2026, 16 districts placed referenda on the ballot this spring, had them rejected by voters, then returned to voters later this year with another ballot question. Fifteen of these were operating referenda.

Of these cases, 11 of the attempts were rejected a second time that year, while five succeeded. The five that succeeded – Brillion, Dodgeville, Iola-Scandinavia, Whitefish Bay, and Winter – all did so after reducing their request to voters on their second attempt. For Dodgeville, it was the fourth consecutive referendum attempt since November 2024.

While it is not unprecedented for districts to return to voters within months after having a referendum fail, this is an additional sign of the pressure facing some districts in funding their operating expenses.

These retries accentuate a point made in an April Forum report. There, we found that referendum approvals and failures have contributed to a widening gap between school districts receiving the most and least funding under state revenue limits. For districts going to referendum multiple times in quick succession, there appears to be a gulf between what the existing school funding system supports and what district officials feel they need. It becomes up to voters to decide whether they help bridge that gap.

VOTERS SOUR ON MUNICIPAL REFERENDA

An additional category of referenda asks voters to raise their property taxes to fund operations for their municipality or county. In 2026, 19 of these questions were on ballots across the state. Eight of them were on November ballots.

Voters approved seven of the 19 overall (36.8%) and two of the eight (25.0%) in the November election. Both of these figures represent a marked decrease from 2024, when voters approved 23 of 38 (60.5%) of municipal or county referenda.

Of these 19 referenda in 2026, 15 had language stating that tax revenue from the measure, if approved, would fund (at least in part) public safety services such as police, fire, or emergency medical services. Five, or 33.3%, of these measures passed in the following communities: the city and town of Hudson, the city of Wausau, the village of Rochester, and the town of Delafield. Ten measures failed across Marinette County, the cities of Muskego, New Berlin, Plymouth, and Sun Prairie, the villages of Somers and Weston, and the towns of Grand Rapids, Hayward, and Waldwick.

The remaining four referenda stated that the additional revenues would go toward other services. Two passed: the village of Nelsonville passed a measure to fund parks and maintenance services, and the city of South Milwaukee passed a measure to fund its public library.

CONCLUSION

The past year saw elevated numbers of school referenda – driven by operating referenda – going before voters as districts struggle with the impact of inflation and state limits on their funding.

But amid rising consumer prices, voters face growing financial pressures of their own. This may be influencing approval rates for these referenda. Rising property tax bills due to passage of past referenda, limited or no increases in general school aids in recent years, and increases in revenue limits may be playing a role.

Municipalities and counties face challenges of their own, including a lack of local revenue options and state-imposed limits on their property tax levies that have lagged the rate of inflation in recent years. The relatively low passage rate for referenda further accentuates this challenge.

In the current school funding climate, examples are emerging to show what can happen if a district repeatedly fails to win voter approval for an operating referendum. The Hustisford School District unsuccessfully sought referendum approval for five consecutive years. In November, a state board affirmed the district's dissolution — the first in Wisconsin since 1990 — with its entire territory to be absorbed by the Dodgeland School District in July.

The stakes may be especially high in rural districts. Their smaller size and geographic isolation leave them with fewer available economies of scale and fewer viable options for adjusting to declining enrollment and diminishing resources. Officials in districts like Gillett and Siren are warning of dramatic cuts directly impacting the quality of students' education – if not the existence of the district entirely. Yet with property taxes projected to jump again on December 2026 tax bills, voters may be no more willing to support referenda in 2027 than they were in 2026.

Districts' fate may rest with the state. Governor-elect David Crowley and many newly elected legislators ran on "fully funding" Wisconsin schools. The precise meaning of this slogan may be up for debate, but it is likely to translate to an increase in state aid to school districts and potentially revenue limits. The magnitude of such an increase remains uncertain and subject to factors including the state's revenue outlook and the many competing funding priorities that await Crowley and an incoming Democratic legislative majority.

Still, the structural challenges facing our state's K-12 sector – the foremost of which is declining enrollment, as well as aging school buildings and rising student needs – are not going away. These and other factors have prompted a growing number of districts to take their case to voters in recent elections. Whether these dynamics shift significantly due to new leadership in the state Capitol remains to be seen.