



## The Few Decide for the Many – Executive Summary

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Cook County Treasurer Maria Pappas

For local governments in Illinois to enact major property tax increases, issue costly bonds or adopt additional taxing powers, they must get voters' approval through referendums.

But low voter turnout means a distinct minority of voters make those decisions, leaving the few to decide for the many, a Treasurer's Office study found.

From 2020 to 2023, seven out of 10 property tax-related referendums passed, with an average of less than one in three registered voters participating. In nearly half the referendums, less than 25% of voters weighed in.

As a result, voters gave school districts, cities and villages, park districts and other local governments authority to:

- Proceed with 27 bond issues that created \$1.16 billion in new debt
- Exceed caps on tax levy increases by more than \$59 million across 11 taxing districts
- Increase tax levies for two school districts by \$5.2 million above the amount allowed to pay off bond debt they were allowed to issue without going to referendum
- Adopt home rule powers — which give municipal officials greater power to impose new or higher taxes — in three suburbs

Referendums passed most often — 83% of the time — in even-year primary elections, when only about one in four voters took part.

That's something for voters to keep in mind. At the time of this publication, the March 19, 2024 primary is near. There will be at least 13 property tax-related referendums on that ballot:

- five to issue bonds totaling \$152.3 million
- four to exceed tax-increase limits by a total of more than \$8.6 million
- two to grant suburbs home rule authority
- one to increase a south suburban township's taxes to provide additional mental health services
- one to dissolve a northwest suburban fire protection district that stopped operating in October 2023
- and the Bring Chicago Home referendum to significantly increase the transfer tax charged on property sales of more than \$1 million

Given historically low turnout for primary elections, it's highly likely that those issues will be decided by the few, on behalf of the many.

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